

SPIRIT MEDIUMS AND THE ART OF SUGGESTING STORIES

ABSTRACT

Fredrik Barth called attention to two ways ritually transmitted knowledge gains value: knowledge he associated with the figure of the ‘Guru’ valued for being widely shared versus knowledge associated with the figure of the ‘conjurer’ or ‘initiator’ valued for the opposite reason. In this article, I argue that there is another kind of ritual knowledge-transmitter who holds an appropriately ‘in-between’ position: the spirit medium. During ‘demonstrations’, mediums in the Spiritualist tradition offer signs from the spirit world for their audiences to recognise in relation to their deceased loved ones. Whereas Gurus (in Barth’s typology) are likely to be storytellers and conjurers are not, mediums are distinct for telling what I call ‘protonarratives’. Protonarratives are character sketches joined with allusions to events or signs that suggest stories. They are not narrative in form, but can evoke stories that live in listeners’ memories.

Keywords: narrative, protonarrative, ritual, knowledge, Fredrik Barth, Spiritualism, Australia

Fredrik Barth began his Huxley Lecture for the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1989 by suggesting he would do something Huxleyan. More than a century earlier, Thomas Henry Huxley had sensed that Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution was correct, but his sense was merely intuitive, as the theory was still ‘tentative and incomplete’ (Barth 1990: 640). Yet, once Huxley committed himself to Darwin’s ideas, Barth (1990: 640) declared, ‘he proceeded to apply rigorous scholarship and creative imagination to the task of recasting received biological wisdom in its new and unproven terms’. Barth now wanted to do the same kind of thing for anthropology. He expressed scientific modesty in the standard terms of small steps and giants’ shoulders, but he was aiming high for this honorary occasion: he would ‘transform’ the field by developing an ‘Anthropology of

Knowledge’, which would ‘depict the conditions of creativity of those who cultivate knowledge, and the forms which follow’ (Barth 1990: 641). As Darwin and Huxley had transformed biology, along with Alfred Russel Wallace (on whom I will say more), so would Barth transform anthropology. He would enable the construction of a comparative framework in which ‘God is in the details, and reality is ultimately always concrete and tangible’ (as Eriksen 2015[2013]: 191 summarises).

In that lecture, published the following year with the title ‘The Guru and the Conjurer’ (Barth 1990), Barth compares two ideal types. Gurus share knowledge to gain disciples who will spread their knowledge. Conjurers, by contrast, share knowledge with a select few who are supposed to keep the knowledge secret. Barth links these ideal-typical roles to

broader social structures and values, using Bali and Bhutan as his ethnographic sites for Gurus' activities and Papua New Guinea as his point of reference for conjurers' activities.

In this article, I revisit the Guru–conjurer distinction, which, it must be acknowledged, is not among Barth's best-known or most influential works. As for all ideal–typical distinctions, it is both easy to find contrasting examples and not always productive or satisfying to do so. And, yet, there is a role that serves as a fruitful point of comparison, being neither Guru nor conjurer, but similarly invested in sharing knowledge in a particular way: the spirit medium. To clarify why this third category is more than just a 'see also' addition to a simple taxonomy, I turn to narrative. Narrative has been written about exhaustively by anthropologists, and my goal in this article is not to retheorise narrative for its own sake. Rather, I suggest that, whereas Gurus thrive in storytelling mode and conjurers of the kind Barth knew among the Baktaman do not, spirit mediums occupy a curious middle ground in which stories are continually gestured at ritually but rarely told within the key ritual frame. Mediums offer protonarratives, or suggestions of stories. These protonarratives are later developed into full stories, both by audience members and mediums themselves, shaping public expectations of what counts as effective spirit mediumship.

This article is divided into three parts. In the first, I summarise Barth's distinction between Gurus and conjurers, and I consider these roles in relation to narrative as ritual practice. I draw on two extended ethnographic treatments of each type: Kirin Narayan's *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels* (1989) for a storytelling Guru and Barth's *Ritual and Knowledge among the Baktaman of New Guinea* (1975) for conjurers. In the second part, I examine mediums who

work in the Anglophone Spiritualist tradition. I describe how mediums tell protonarratives when they give 'demonstrations' of their mediumship, verbally sketching partial character portraits of audience members' deceased loved ones with allusions to events. These portraits and allusions can inspire listeners to recall stories that give demonstrations the ring of whole truth and the pull of emotional gravity. Mediums do tell stories outside of demonstrations, and these stories are meant to illustrate how mediumship works: the embarrassing but instructive failures as well as the vertigo-inducing moments of wonder. In the third part, I describe the experience of hearing and trying to interpret protonarrative signs, focusing on one reading I received at a public Spiritualist service. Analytical attention to protonarratives, I argue, can deepen anthropological understandings of the interplay between signs, characters, and stories, in which the dead are ritually revived in acts of social recognition.

THE STORIES GURUS TELL, THE STORIES CONJURERS DO NOT TELL

'The Guru and the Conjurer' has one quirk: in most of the text, Barth does not use the term 'conjurer', but 'initiator'.¹ I mention this minor inconsistency because it throws into sharp relief Barth's rigorous consistency in detailing the work these people do.

A Guru gathers disciples. The fact that disciples can carry their new knowledge forward and gain disciples of their own means that Guru-based knowledge is exportable, decontextualisable. A base of knowledge can be expanded, as one can draw on other teachers and a wide corpus of myths, for example. Truth is foregrounded. The presentation of truth can

be done creatively, but performance style is not usually of special interest; the truth of the shared knowledge is what matters. Ultimately, for a Guru, the value of knowledge consists in giving it away.

For a conjurer (or initiator or the adept), the opposite is true. The value of knowledge consists in holding onto it. Yet, conjurers are caught in a double bind: they must ensure that their knowledge is reproduced somehow. Conjurers do not have disciples; they have short-term and ever-changing relationships with those whom they initiate. Their knowledge is not exportable. It is revealed in and relevant to the moment of initiation, and not discussed explicitly afterwards. A conjurer's knowledge is a self-contained system, not something to be expanded, although in graded initiation systems the knowledge transmitted at one level can be added to or even contradicted by that transmitted at another level. Mystery rather than truth is foregrounded. The style of revelation enhances the value of the knowledge, and a conjurer/initiator must deliver 'a spellbinding performance' (Barth 1990: 643).

Ideal-typical contrasts like these provoke readers to think of cases that do not fit. Coming up with examples that blur the boundaries is all too easy. Online conspiracy-theorist groups, for example, present their knowledge as mysterious revelation, yet aim to spread it as widely as possible. Some exponents of sacred truth think it should be limited to those smart enough to follow them. Yet, rather than focus on contrasting cases like these simply to prove anthropology's eternal truth that different people do things differently, it can be more fruitful to look at forms of practice that make us consider the categories in new ways.

A focus on narrative can help us think afresh about Gurus, conjurers/initiators, and other speakers committed to sharing knowledge

with audiences in ritualised ways. In recent decades, anthropologists have written at great length and in fine detail about narrative. Because I want to keep the focus in this article on spirit mediumship and the ritual use of narrative therein, I will not summarise the sprawling literature on narrative and its relationship to healing, memory, chronotopy, and the like, but will simply follow Kirin Narayan's (1989: 243) straightforward approach: 'narrative is in the broadest sense a means of organizing experience and endowing it with meaning'; it includes a temporal dimension, but sequences need not be linear; a 'plot' joins events and characters, implicating listeners in some way. Narayan's characterisation of narrative is a useful starting point. As I will show, the notable thing about Spiritualist mediums' narratives is that they are only hinted at during the most markedly ritualised parts of mediums' work.

In her monograph on the cheerful Guru she calls Swamiji, Narayan (1989) shows how he instructs people on moral and religious principles through storytelling. A wide variety of people come to him: fellow ascetics, disciples, interested laypeople, and local children. They come with a range of interests and motivations. The main character in Swamiji's stories is often a Guru. Sometimes he tells stories to soothe people's anxieties or give them new perspectives on challenging situations. Sometimes he seems to tell stories just for fun. He does not usually offer explicit interpretations of his stories, allowing listeners to come to their own conclusions about what they mean. He is tremendously creative, shaping his narratives to people's interests and situations, often teasingly inserting audience members' names into the stories—for example, by using foreign spiritual seekers' Indian names to represent especially gullible characters. But he denies his own creativity, because his stories come from a vast

Hindu mythic corpus and, as he puts it, 'I just tell what's already there' (Narayan 1989: 37).

Many of his stories are both funny and pointed, causing his audiences to laugh, but also realize that serious moral messages are being expressed. For example, the tale of the 'Nose-Cutters' describes a religious movement in which people have their noses cut off in order to see God (Narayan 1989: 132–145). The group prospers as it travels about, growing in number and eating good food, with initiates dancing ecstatically after having their noses cut off and proclaiming that they, too, are now able to see God. A king meets the group and is told explicitly that he cannot see God because his nose is blocking his vision. The king consults with his pandit and agrees to have his nose cut off the next morning. The king's prime minister is deeply suspicious about the Nose-Cutters, but knows he will not be able to change the king's mind on his own. He asks his grandfather for advice, and the old man offers to go to the ceremony. The next day, the grandfather approaches the king to caution him, but the king is dismissive. Then, the old man makes an offer: 'Don't wantonly cut off your nose and spoil yourself. You're my King and these are all your subjects. Let my nose be cut off first' (Narayan 1989: 137). The king agrees. The group's Guru duly slices off the grandfather's nose. And, then, instead of whispering a sacred mantra into the man's ear, the Guru essentially tells him: 'Everyone will now mock you unless you lie and say you've seen God!' But, the grandfather tells everyone the truth instead: he does not see God, he is hurting badly, and he was told to lie. Soldiers begin beating the Nose-Cutters, who now admit that they had been lying all along, as instructed.

Swamiji asserts that this tale is historically true, although Narayan points out that it is a standard bit of folklore with many variants.

She also observes that a psychoanalytic reading would interpret it as a tale of castration. She notes Swamiji's creativity, as he diplomatically compares the wise prime minister to one of his male listeners and teasingly names two of the naïve Nose-Cutters after an American and an Englishwoman in the audience. One man in the audience, Mr. Advani, is not explicitly mentioned when Swamiji tells his tale, although Narayan makes it clear she thinks he might be one of the listeners addressed most directly by the story, because he had organised a workshop for a suspiciously wealthy Guru and bragged about its success.²

Swamiji's charisma manifests in many ways. He is sympathetic, egalitarian, and generous. Like all good ascetics, he does not care about wealth. He has renounced sex. Disciples consider their Gurus to be divine humans, and Swamiji's feet, like those of all Gurus, are worshiped (Narayan 1989: 82–84). People who come to him say they feel peaceful in his presence and can sense his *shakti* or spiritual power (Narayan 1989: 93–94). And, his storytelling is evidently extraordinary, something he is especially gifted at, something in which his listeners find themselves wrapped up. Narayan (Narayan 1989: 197) points out that the morals of his stories can be summarised simply, but to do so would be to lose their force: 'When a story is spun, one is drawn into a compelling imaginative space, listening with suspense over the outcome and delighting over details. The moral does not stand naked, but swathed in texture and color, it strides through a story into an imaginative landscape'.

Swamiji perfectly fits Barth's profile of the Guru. His narrative teaching is ritualised in the sense I have developed elsewhere of ritual as the production of textual patterns articulated with an ideology of their effectiveness (Tomlinson 2014). Even by colloquial definitions of ritual,

Swamiji's teaching fits: it is highly patterned activity set apart from many of his listeners' everyday lives, designed to articulate moral and existential understandings. The knowledge he shares is meant to lead to the clarity of truth rather than the murk of mystery. He has disciples. He is creative, but his storytelling's effectiveness does not depend on stylised performance; it emerges from his enthusiasm and confidence as the holder of a wide range of knowledge that he is always ready to give away.

The conjurer or initiator stands in stark contrast to the Guru, as Barth's monograph *Ritual and Knowledge among the Baktaman of New Guinea* (1975) makes clear. Baktaman boys and men participate in a seven-grade system of initiation, which Barth refers to as a 'mystery cult'. The purpose of initiations is to reveal secret knowledge—and, yet, obscurity and deception are hallmarks of the rites, so the knowledge revealed remains confusing and inconclusive. Initiates are made to observe food taboos, are sometimes isolated, are shown symbols which remain unexplained, and are physically beaten. Barth (1975: 82) compares this method of acquiring knowledge to 'peeling the layers of an onion, or exploring a set of Chinese boxes'. He (1975: 28) gamely offers his own interpretation of the rites as 'focus[ing] on man's relation to nature, rather than to other men'. Men are symbolically reborn by passing under the legs of other men, and male sexuality is legitimised. The rites suggest the role of ancestral forces in making the natural world prosper with plentiful game and fruitful crops. The physical beatings are a painful lesson in the cost of gaining valuable knowledge.

For the initiates, one of the most pointed lessons seems to be that nothing is as it seems and trusting others is hazardous. Initiations cultivate 'the fearful awareness of a vital, unknowable and forbidden truth behind

the secret and cryptic ritual acts. But this is created at the cost of trust between novices and initiators' (Barth 1975: 62). Symbolism remains unexplained, as Barth (1975: 77) indicates when he suggests his own interpretation and prefaces it by saying that this 'translat[ion](...) to a verbal code' is something 'no Baktaman does and (...) I doubt (...) would ever be able and willing to do'. Yet, because the initiation system does include a final level, the seventh, there is a notional end point to the mystification, even if no final truth emerges. As Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2015[2013]: 121) puts it, a Baktaman man who is 'initiated into the seventh grade has, simply, understood more, and carries heavier and deeper secrets, than those who have not reached as far. (...) The older men are (...) key persons in Baktaman society. They can communicate with everyone, and they possess all the keys.'³

Narayan's Guru, Swamiji, has a conjurer counterpart in the leading Baktaman initiator, Kimebnok. Whatever he is like outside of the initiation rites, within them Kimebnok is not a storyteller. Although the rituals follow a sequence, it is not narrative in structure, and stories do not seem to be told as part of the process. It is possible that a micronarrative edges into the fourth initiation rite, when a song is sung about the time warriors killed an enemy woman and her child (Barth 1975: 77, 146–147). Beyond this, Barth (1975: 83) is explicit: 'No Baktaman initiation rite is accompanied by the telling of myths; and in the small corpus of myths that I found current among the Baktaman there are none that show any connection with any major segment of the initiation rites described so far'. However, Barth makes it clear elsewhere that the Baktaman case is an extreme one. In his monograph *Cosmologies in the Making*, he (1987: 5–6) observes that whereas Baktaman have 'hardly any myths', other Mountain Ok groups do have

them; indeed, Bimin-Kuskusmin ‘maintain an enormous corpus of secret myths organized in elaborate cycles, which are told as central parts of cult and initiation rites, and are also regularly commented [on], in appropriately secluded settings’. Baktaman initiation is an extreme case, then—useful as an ideal type, but not representative of broad Mountain Ok practice.⁴

To return to Baktamin territory for the purposes of comparison, initiation rituals are a profusion, a spectacle. The colour red, the qualities of water, the darkness of a temple interior, the sense of mystery, the threat of pain, the sight of bones, the sound of drums, the harvesting of taro: these become meaningful in a partial and confusing way. And (not surprisingly since it is Barth’s own ethnography), the model of the conjurer/initiator presented in ‘The Guru and the Conjurer’ fits Kimebnok snugly. Baktaman ritual is mostly a self-contained system, although Barth does acknowledge the influence of neighbours’ practices. The knowledge offered within the rites is valuable because it is kept private, not publicly shared. The rites do not aim at finding truth, but at cultivating mystery. A sense of incompleteness limns the initiation system because, as Barth (1975: 101) poignantly notes, ‘time and time again the same phrase crops up: ‘This was all our fathers told us before they died’. The style of performance directly connects to the value of the knowledge gained. Initiators do not gain disciples. Ultimately, the most valuable knowledge is that which is not revealed and can never be revealed.

The fruitfulness of ‘The Guru and the Conjurer’ is its core question: Does the value of knowledge consist in sharing it or in keeping it? In considering narrative, I have noted that Gurus tell stories and conjurers (at least the paradigmatic Baktaman initiators) do not. This makes intuitive sense: Gurus want knowledge to be shared, developed, and understood; conjurers

want knowledge to be retained and appreciated as much for its unintelligibility as anything else. Narrative lends itself more to the kind of expansion and explanation that Gurus offer rather than what conjurers offer.⁵

In the next section, I examine the knowledge generated by mediums in Spiritualist demonstrations. Before doing so, however, I want to return to Barth’s comparison of his research with Huxley’s. As mentioned, Barth suggests that Huxley’s achievement was to begin with a creative leap of scientific faith (in support of Darwinian evolution) and, then, doggedly work to update scientific understandings in its terms. In seeking to follow Huxley’s success, Barth also refers to the work of Huxley’s and Darwin’s compatriot Alfred Russel Wallace. Barth (1990: 640) suggests that ‘a kind of cultural Wallace Line’ separates Bali and its Gurus from Melanesia and its conjurers. The Wallace Line, the great biogeographical divider of southeast Asian from Australian and Oceanic species, runs between Bali and New Guinea; but for Barth (1990: 641) the point is that anthropology has no Wallace Line of its own yet—and his lecture might make a contribution in that regard, going beyond ‘myopic localism’ to enable greater comparative and synthetic consideration of ‘variable and changing humanity’.

Barth does not mention the creative leap of scientific faith that Wallace himself took, and which put him at odds with Huxley and Darwin. Wallace knew that natural selection effectively explains most biological evolutionary processes. But, he wondered, what process works on humanity’s minds and souls? He became convinced that Spiritualist mediumship was experimental work, coaxing the philosophy of life-after-death away from theology and into the realm of true science. Huxley and Darwin disagreed strongly, and declined Wallace’s invitations to séances (Raby 2001: 188–189).

TELLING THE STORY OF MEDIUMS' STORIES

Spiritualist séances today are not called séances, and they look nothing like the affairs that took place in Wallace's day. At the Canberra Spiritualist Association, where I conducted research between 2017 and 2019, regular public services are held in a rented hall on the first, third, and fifth Sundays of each month, with several weeks' summer break in December and January.⁶ The meeting site is situated within the Pearce Community Centre complex, a bland functional space which looks ready to host a school assembly or dance class. The lights are on, the plastic stackable chairs are set out in rows, and basic electronic equipment (laptop, projector, microphone, speakers, and sound mixer) ensures everyone can hear what is said and follow the lyrics of the recorded pop songs to which we sing along.

I have described Spiritualist services and the practice of mediumship in several other publications.⁷ To keep the focus on narrative in this article, I move straight to the 'demonstration', the ritual highpoint of any Spiritualist service, during which a medium works interactively with an audience to create dialogues, joining listeners with loved ones in the spirit world. Giving a demonstration is sometimes called being 'on platform'. Work on platform does not lend itself to storytelling because mediumship techniques give rise to sensations whose connections cluster around character rather than narrative. A medium sees images in her mind's eye, hears sounds, smells scents, and feels bodily pains and welling intuitions.⁸ Her job is to offer these signs, sometimes lightly interpreted, to her audience in order to see if they recognise them as fitting the profile of a deceased person they knew. If enough signs align into a constellation of character—the kind of mosaic portrait

that evokes memories of your late aunt, for example—this is considered evidence that the medium is really in touch with the spirit of that person.⁹

In present-day Spiritualist practice, mediums generally do not change their tone of voice while speaking on behalf of people in the spirit world. They do not adopt squeaky voices for children or creaky ones for elders. They speak conversationally. They also explain to audiences that it is the medium's job to pose questions and listeners' job to reply 'yes', 'no' or 'I don't know'.

A good example of a reading during a medium's demonstration comes from the Canberra Spiritualist Association (CSA) service of 16 April 2017. It was Easter Sunday, which may have limited the attendance, which was only ten people counting everyone in the room. Each service usually has one medium doing the demonstration, and on that day it was Lynette Ivory, treasurer of the CSA and wife of Norman, the Association's president.

To begin the third reading in her demonstration, Lynette said, 'I have a gentleman showing himself to me now who would have been in the Air Force. He's quite a tall man. He's got a dark navy uniform on, possibly an English uniform; if it's not English, then it's Australian. I don't believe it's American. I don't believe it's European.'¹⁰ By 'showing himself', Lynette means she can see an image of the man, who is invisible to everyone else in the room (unless they happen to be mediums, too, and also sense what Lynette reports sensing). She has offered her audience the first bit of evidence: this man was in the Air Force. Everyone who has a deceased relative in this category should perk their ears up, but even those who do not remember any military relatives should keep listening, because sometimes details shift in the dialogue between medium and audience. Although detail number one might not make

sense to a listener, details two, three, and four might. Lynette continues:

This was a gentleman who would be somebody's grandfather, looking at what he's showing me. He was only quite young when he passed. He passed during the war in a plane. And he was a real lad. God, he was a lad. He lived life to the fullest. He really crammed everything into his life that he possibly could, it was almost like as he was approaching his maturity, he knew that he wasn't going to live to old bones because he wanted to experience everything. Can anyone relate to a grandfather or great grandfather who would have been killed in the war?

At this point, someone in the audience apparently indicates that they might be the correct recipient, probably by raising their hand (I did not note the reactions, and nothing is audible on the recording). 'You think you can?' Lynette asks. 'Okay. Do you recognise an airman in the English air force?' Her respondent likely nods, because Lynette now says, 'Right. I don't think he would have been an officer because he didn't have a cap. He had those little—you know, little things that fold up, little beret-type thing. So, he wasn't an officer.' She adds:

Lynette: He was tall, and he was slim. He hadn't had time to—and he had a sense of humour because he says he didn't have time to get a beer gut, he didn't have enough time to drink enough beer. So, he must have liked his beer as well. Oh, and he said, 'And don't forget the food, I liked the food as well. Liked food and beer. And the girls,' he says. He's just not letting that go. Do you recognise this gentleman?

Emma: That's—I think so, yeah [inaud].

Lynette: Okay. He has pale skin. He has rather—I can only call them bony features... a bigger nose than normal, but high cheekbones and quite a strong jawline. And he loved to dance. He loved to do all things and just enjoy life. He rode a motorbike at times, he told me. He was just an all-round—I don't know what to call him. He was a fun-loving young man. And he had the time of his life. And even when he was in the forces, fighting in the war, he still had fun. And he said that was only—his attitude was what got him through the hard times, and he said there were some pretty horrid times that he was aware of. And he said he was very glad that he went quickly, he didn't have all the carry-on after that some of them had. He tells me he left behind somebody he cared a great deal for, and that was something that upset him. I'm not sure whether he was married to this lady, or whether he was going to be married to her, but he was very, very fond of her, and that was the one thing he regrets about his passing is that he wasn't able to complete that life with that lady. Does that make any sense to you?

Emma: Yes.

Lynette: You understand that? Thank you.

At this point, Lynette pauses for twelve seconds. She has already accomplished the main task of a reading: she gave evidence which 'Emma' accepted. Emma has a deceased air force veteran in her family, a man who knew how to enjoy life to the fullest. He was tall, slender and pale, had a big nose, high cheekbones, and a strong jaw. He died suddenly, and from the spirit world he

regrets the pain this caused a woman who loved him. Emma does not respond to these details point-by-point (nor is she expected to), but she affirms that over all they make enough sense for her to recognise the man with whom Lynette is in spiritual communication.

Because Emma knows who the man is, Lynette moves to the next part of a reading: delivering a message.

Lynette: He's saying to me that you're entering a time in your life where you're trying to make a decision about something. Does that make sense to you, do you understand that? No.

Emma: Think so.

Lynette: Sorry?

Emma: I think so, yeah.

Lynette: Yes, yes, there's no thinking about it. It is so. You're trying to make a choice, perhaps maybe not a decision, but there's something there where it's either/or. Does that make more sense to you? Well, he says, will you stop mucking around and just get on with it? Because things won't move until you make a choice or make a decision. It's almost like you're worried that if you make a wrong decision that things won't work out. It's, 'Oh, don't worry about things like that. Just *do*. Do what you want to do. Do what you feel is right. Worry about the consequences afterwards.' You know, like children: they go and climb a tree after being told a hundred times they'll fall and hurt themselves. They don't care. They do it anyway. And then they fall and hurt themselves. So. Doesn't matter. It's the same with decisions and choices we make,

okay. Do it. If it doesn't work out, okay, do something else. Don't sweat the mistakes, because mistakes are how you learn, okay. [If] we never made mistakes, we'd never have things like cars or microphones and stuff like that. Did you understand the relationship of this man, a grandfather or great-grandfather?

Emma: A grandfather, yeah.

Lynette: A grandfather, right.

Emma: Yeah, but I never met.

Lynette: You never met. Oh, okay, so that doesn't matter. 'I know you. And I'm watching you,' he says. 'I'm watching you because I want you to do what you want to do, okay?' He says, 'Laugh a lot more, laugh a lot more. Life is just full of wonderful things. So laugh and live and love.' And he said, with you, even though you may not have known him in the physical, he's with you, and he's put a little light above your head. He says there's a star shining above your head for you. Can I leave that with you?

After suggesting that Emma is 'trying to make a decision about something', Lynette evidently senses doubt or hesitation, because she (Lynette) pre-emptively says 'no'. But, Emma says she thinks this might actually make sense. Lynette, like most talented mediums, wants firm answers, so she suggests that Emma should not overthink her response, which should be a clear yes ('It is so').

As she delivers the message from the spirit world, Lynette confirms with Emma that this man is her grandfather. She quotes him, but does not change her voice qualities in doing

so, and there is no confusion between the 'T' of Lynette and the 'T' of the airman. The message is a pep talk, encouragement to be bold and act rather than wait in hesitation. Lynette signals that the reading is over by asking if she can 'leave that with you', meaning Emma has accepted the identification of her grandfather and will think about him and his message from now on. After a fifteen-second pause, Lynette begins her fourth and final reading of the day, bringing through the spirit of a man who was solidly built with upright posture, who avidly read newspapers, and who unshakably held his opinions.

If one were to approach Lynette's demonstration as an exercise in storytelling, like Swamiji spinning yarns to counsel and teach his listeners, one would be left with thin threads to weave. There are many details of the late man's appearance and personality, but the stories anyone except Emma can tell about him are limited: a man joined the air force, liked to carouse, and met a woman who loved him; he died in the war and left her grieving. This is the outline of a story—and a compelling one—but, the details are in the man's character rather than the narrative itself. In Elinor Ochs' and Lisa Capps' (2001: 24) terms, the challenging 'dimension' of narrative in mediums' demonstrations is its 'tellership', 'the extent and kind of involvement of conversational partners in the actual recounting of a narrative'. Mediums are the tellers—they bring forth all those bits of evidence from the spirit world—but they do yet not string them into stories. Their listeners are able to tell stories, but are limited in their responses to affirming or denying their recognition of the signs the medium offers or saying that they are uncertain.¹¹

MEDIUMS' STORIES OF MEDIUMS

Mediums speak in ritual contexts other than demonstrations. During services, they sometimes tell stories when delivering addresses on spiritual topics. For example, after a demonstration by the medium Jane Hall on 18 March 2018, which I analyse in the next section, Lynette Ivory provided an impromptu comment on it. As she began to give the church notices, Lynette said:

Lynette: D'you know, I was just sitting there thinking, when I first came into Spiritualism, giving evidence of survival in any Spiritualist group in New South Wales... just did not figure in the meetings. And when I first started to sit in a group, my very first platform performance was, mmm, woeful, to say the least. Because—

Norman Ivory: It wasn't that bad!

Lynette: [Laughs.] Norman threw me in at the deep end, and I was very, very new, and knew very little about Spiritualism. I knew almost nothing about communication. I hadn't read many books. I'd seen Doris Stokes on television, but not doing a demonstration.... And all I did for the next twelve, eighteen months—'cause [Norman] made me do platform [i.e., give public demonstrations]—was give psychic readings. And one night I was going to do a service, and he said, 'Why don't you try to see somebody?' Well, y'know, big joke. And surprisingly—I could not believe it—the very last reading I gave, I saw somebody [in spirit form]. And even more amazing was the person [in the audience] recognised it [i.e., recognised her description of the

deceased person]. And, from that moment on, I have worked very hard to develop my mediumship. And I think it's so wonderful now that so many are going to really study, and to learn about Spiritualism and how to develop their own mediumship.

Lynette's brief story of failure gives her the chance to lovingly poke fun at her husband for having put her in an awkward position. It also comments on the lack of spiritual maturity in New South Wales years earlier, as mediums were stuck giving psychic readings—working telepathically with people in the audience, connecting mind to mind, but not actually communicating with people in the spirit world.¹² It also sets up a story of unexpected success when, with Norman's prodding, she tries to connect authentically with the spirit world one day and to her surprise it works vividly. Lynette's words can be heard as a commentary on the mediumship we have just seen: behind and before Jane's successful demonstration came a tremendous amount of difficult work, struggle, and doubt. Like Swamiji telling stories of Gurus, mediums' best topic is often mediums and mediumship.

THE EMOTIONAL PULL OF PROTONARRATIVES

In protonarratives, character descriptions are joined with allusions to events. To show how this work gets done, I describe one of Jane Hall's readings during her demonstration at the CSA service of 18 March 2018. Nineteen people attended that day, four of them men, close to the average numbers for a CSA service.

Jane gave four readings during the service. After the second, she said, 'Okay, let's see where I'm going now. All right.' She paused for around ten seconds. 'Ooh, okay. I have a lady that joins me.'

And as I feel her draw close to me, I know with this lady, she has a great mind. And I know with this lady that it—her mind doesn't leave her before she goes to the Spirit, but her body does. So, I know she starts to lose condition within her body, but her mind stays sharp as a tack. So, my body starts to dwindle, and I know I have a fabulous attitude to life. I know that I have an incredible passion for life. But... there is frustration with the fact that my body breaks down, and that my body can't keep up with my mind.

I know I'm connected as family to the person in here. And I know with this lady, it's a really funny thing to say, but I have to say, 'Fiddlesticks.' So, I don't know if this lady used the word [laughs] 'fiddlesticks'... it's a funny thing to do. It's almost like I have to say, 'My body deteriorates, fiddlesticks.'

So, I know her attitude is fantastic. I know that I would be living in... this is strange, I would have travelled to Florida. Florida. Florida, that's in America. Okay, can anyone understand that information?

An audience member responds, but her words are unintelligible on the recording. Jane asks, 'But you can understand America?' The woman responds, 'Not America, no.' I raise my hand to indicate that I might be the recipient. As a participant observer, I try to put all my energy into contextually appropriate action, so I am following the medium here. Yes, I do know a deceased woman somewhat like the one she has described. A connection to America? I was born and raised in New Jersey.

Our dialogue begins:

Jane Hall: Right.

Matt Tomlinson: Maybe.

Jane: I don't like maybes.

Matt: Florida [inaud]—¹³

Jane: Huh?

Matt: Florida, yes, but it wasn't that far away.

Jane: It wasn't that far away, Florida?

Matt: Well, I grew up in New Jersey, which is on the same coast.

Jane: And she went to Florida?

Matt: Maybe. Uh, yes, she might have—

Jane: Thank you! [Laughs.]

Good mediums are like good trial lawyers. They elicit 'yes' or 'no' answers. As a listener and potential respondent, I could tell the 'America' prompt meant I was a likely suspect for the role of recipient, as nearly everyone else in the room was Australian, and Jane knew I was American. In my mind, however, I had equated 'traveling' with far distances—like, say, from New Jersey to Canberra—and the woman I had in mind as Jane Hall's contact in the spirit world had not travelled so far while physically alive.

But Jane picks up the 'yes' answer and identifies it as the first correct bit of evidence, as most mediums would ('Thank you!'). Now, I mumble a few words, some of which are not intelligible on the recording, and Jane repeats 'Right'. She teases me mildly and affirms the evidence: "Kay. Might seem far to all the rest of us, but she travelled to Florida, yes or no?" I say yes. She then asks, 'And, would you understand the lady with the really sharp mind?'

I like to think most of my relatives are sharp. And, the woman I am thinking of, my mother's elder sister, must have been to Florida, because we had relatives in Key Largo. Jane repeats what she considers already proven: This woman's

'body started to deteriorate?' ('Yes.') 'And she went to Florida?' ('Yes.') 'Right,' she laughs, 'so you can take everything!' By 'take everything', she means I have accepted all of these details as identifying features of a particular deceased family member.

But, now, I push back, if mildly, 'Except "fiddlesticks,"' I say. No one in my family speaks this way. 'Right,' Jane continues. 'But, did she have a great sense of humour, attitude to life?' I say yes, and the reading continues. Over the next several minutes (a bit less than six minutes), she offers the following questions and statements, with which I agree:

'Would you understand this to be family as well?'

'You would understand that she loved having children around?'

'Would you understand her to have done a family tree, or is it you, your brother—you have a brother?' (I respond only to the first question: 'It was—my father did it, but she was very interested in it, and she wanted us to be interested in it.')

'She liked art.'

'She would have liked animals, too.'

'Do you know this lady's house when she was alive?'

'There must have been a time, also, where she lived in the country.'

'But there must have been also time where she lived in the city.'

‘But you would know that when she lived in the city, that her heart missed the country.’

‘She didn’t like the traffic.’

She also offers the following question to which I answer no:

‘Would you understand this to be grandparents?’

In addition, she offers the following statements and questions to which I answer that I do not know, or say ‘maybe’ or ‘probably’:

‘I feel like there’s a loss of a child, either for her or connected to her.’

‘If I say she had a problem with one side of her body, would you understand that?’

‘There was some Irish [heritage] coming in as well?’

‘She must have lived through a bushfire? Or there must have been a bushfire around... at one time?’

As I heard her that day, Jane Hall was sketching the character of my aunt, Carole Price. Sceptical readers will note that the correct characteristics are rather common: Who doesn’t like art and animals? And, one detail is incorrect—this is not my grandmother—while others are hazy. Bushfires? Aunt Carole was from Brooklyn, and as an adult she lived in an apartment in Manhattan and also had a home in rural northeastern Pennsylvania. Were there ever forest fires in Mehoopany? Probably, but they do not burn in my memory.

But, Jane has said things which resonate emotionally with me. Her description of the

woman living in both the city and the country is the most forceful one. It always impressed me that my aunt, who was a librarian in a public school, and her husband Frank, an income tax accountant, managed to own two homes on modest salaries. Moreover, these homes were amazing in different ways: an apartment on Hudson Street in the West Village (rent controlled, with building management desperate to claw it back and rent it to someone else at a much higher rate), and a charming A-frame on a wooded hillside above a valley of small farms.

The question of intellectual belief, too often dismissed as no longer relevant in the study of religion, surely is relevant when participation in ritual requires the gathering and evaluation of what counts as evidence (Tomlinson 2023a). But demonstrations like the one I describe here can cleave intellectual beliefs from emotional commitments. Intellectually, I am not sure whether Aunt Carole is trying to communicate with me. Emotionally, I would be excited if she did. Although we were not especially close, she is the aunt I knew best. She was conservative in her religious orientation, and I know she would disapprove of Spiritualism, unless her postmortem experience has made her change her mind. Emotional commitment is like a fishhook: once you’re on it, pulling away becomes painful. Or, to phrase it positively, there is pleasure in having a stranger—the medium, who does not know your family—highlight your family relationships for an audience of strangers. You want your family to matter to people who did not know them. Whereas Gurus offer truth and conjurers offer mystery, mediums offer social recognition, an affirmation of you and your family’s place and togetherness in the world.

With my emotional commitment to understanding this character as Aunt Carole now established, our dialogue continues:

Jane: But you would understand she would be very happy to get on the bus and get out of town.

Matt: Yes.

Jane: That was her thing: Get on the bus, get out of town. Now I know, also, there must have been quite a lot of kilometres from the... city... to... the country life that she was in. There's lots of kilometres, or it's miles, as you would say [laughs]. You would understand there's a lot of space between where she lived before and where she—like, the city?

Matt: Yes.

Jane: Like, it's not like [a] Canberra and Braidwood kind of thing.

Matt: No.

Jane: We're talking about, like [a] Canberra and Adelaide kind of thing.

Now the intellectual and emotional split becomes trying. The fact that Aunt Carole rode the bus between New York and Pennsylvania is not a minor detail for me. It's a vital part of the stories I associate with her. She resisted learning to drive for most of her adult life, and even when she learned to do so, would never drive far. Uncle Frank could drive, so he drove them between their homes sometimes; but, when Carole had to make the trip herself, she took the bus. Her long bus trips between America's biggest city and a piney outpost whose popular brand of bread was called Hillbilly always stuck in my imagination. Yet, Jane's description of the distance, like her estimation of that between New Jersey/New York and Florida, gives me pause. From Manhattan to Mehoopany is around 150 miles; Canberra to Adelaide is more than 700 miles, not quite comparable. (Canberra to Braidwood is about 50 miles.) This kind of calculation seems both necessary and ridiculous to make, and I could not help but make it.

During the demonstration, I felt committed to completing the presentation of Carole's character and remembering stories about her. So, at the time, I say 'Uh huh', and we move on despite my doubts about the mileage of those bus trips. The point is that bus trips are one of the main memories I associate with Carole, and numbers wash away in the sense of distance.

After a few lines of conversation with me, Jane then describes the trip:

Jane: 'Cause she just shows me the bus journey, and just looking out the window as the—everything goes past. And there must have been very flat—parts of that journey must have been very flat.

Matt: Parts.

Jane: Parts. That's right. 'Cause I just see there's a part where it's flat, okay, with her as well. And just have to say... family must have stayed in the country. Yes?

Matt: She had a place in both the country and the city. And, so, her husband would be with her when she was in the country.¹⁴

Jane: Right. Okay. 'Cause I just feel like I'm going back, but I know I go back to—family's, family's in the country. Okay. Right. Lucky her, huh? [Laughs.] What a great life. So, now, I also know that they must have grown, grown, grown things on the land.

Matt: Yes.

In my memory, traveling to Carole's home in Mehoopany was the opposite of a trip through a flat landscape. We passed through the majestic Delaware Water Gap, and her corner of Pennsylvania has the nickname, perhaps overstated but nonetheless evocative, of the Endless Mountains. My dispassionate mind realises that, of course, there are plenty of flat

patches along the way. But, flatness does not feel like the defining feature of the route between Carole's homes, but rather the unremarkable thing you skip past to get to those steep hills, sharp curves, and, now and then, grand views.

And, yet, the description of growing 'things on the land' offers a final emotional tug for me. Because, yes, Carole was an expert gardener, with a fruitful and well-tended patch on her Mehoopany hillside. Going to her country place was always a feast, both literally and metaphorically, as we ate great food that we did not have at home, and the smells from the garden and countryside were intoxicating. Add to this the irrelevant but somehow pressing detail that Carole was an expert on mushrooms, and Jane's statement that 'they must have grown, grown, grown things on the land' feels utterly right to me.

Our dialogue continues for another three minutes, and covers some new territory: pet dogs and other animals, Carole's quirkiness, and my own acknowledged 'craziness', of which Carole approves. But, the point for this article is simply that Jane Hall's reading, in which she persuades me I could be in communion with my late aunt, is a protonarrative. There are suggestions of stories. A bushfire burned. Carole took long bus trips between her city home and country home. She might have lost a child. Her mind remained lively as her body betrayed her. But, the full narratives live in my memory and are not expressed aloud. Neither Jane nor the audience hears the stories about trips to Picnic Rock and Mehoopany Creek, watching a summer meteor shower, sledding down the lower part of the long driveway in winter, the lighting of sparklers and whooping across the valley at midnight on New Year's—in short, stories of *how* we knew Carole. What the audience hears is a classically successful Spiritualist demonstration. The yeses outweigh the noes. I confirm that I can

recognise the person the medium describes. And, the description concludes with an encouraging message from the person in the spirit world.

Like many mediums, Jane Hall tells stories of mediumship outside of the demonstration but within the larger ritual frame of the Spiritualist service. For example, at the CSA service of 21 May 2017, she told one on the topic of identifying personal spiritual symbols. Explaining that people in the spirit world often indicate their presence to loved ones using specific symbols, Jane mentioned that when a grieving client comes to her, she will speak to the spirit world and say that the client is 'not in a head space to find that symbol now. Will you give that to me?'

She continued, laughing occasionally as she told the tale:

Not always do they give it to me, but sometimes they do. I have had people [in the spirit world] say... 'I'm giving you a symbol. This is for your brother in the Spirit world, and he's showing me golf balls.' Now, the person I was bringing through, this lady's brother, was a gay man, with very flamboyant—very over the top, very loud in how he dressed. But he didn't have anything to do with golf at all. Nothing. So, she looked at me like I was slightly crazy and went, 'Okay, I'm not quite—don't think you quite got it there, 'cause he really didn't—he wasn't into sport at all. And *definitely* not golf.'

So—and I said, 'That's okay. I may be wrong, and I'm okay with that. But, just take it, just in case. Just take it, just in case, right?'

So, a few days later, I had an email, and she'd written at five a.m.... So, she'd leapt out of bed, gone straight to her computer, and written a letter. 'Oh my goodness,

I cannot believe it, I'm about to go to a family member's funeral, it's at a golf club! Oh my gosh, I just realised, my brother lived right next to a golf club! Oh my goodness, I cannot believe this!

Just because we think this doesn't fit with the person?—Spirit still has a sense of humour.... So, she knows now that her brother, who's full of life and very colourful when he was alive, has also got that still on the other side, and he wants to point that [out] to her. So, now she knows when she sees golf balls, that that is a sign her brother is around.

Here is a straightforward narrative told by a medium during a Spiritualist service in order to make mediumship more understandable to her audience. Note that its content almost sounds like a conjurer's revelation of a cultic mystery: whereas Kimebnok and his fellow initiators lead novices to understand that, for example, the colour red signifies the power of the ancestors, Jane recalls the time she told a woman that seeing golf balls would be a sign from her brother in the spirit world. But, her lesson is directed to everyone in the room: your late loved ones speak to you through signs. The sign for your deceased grandmother, for example, might be a number or flowers or a song rather than golf balls.

Narratives told outside of the demonstration but within the service can be instructional, cautionary, inspirational or entertaining. At CSA services, there are always regulars who know perfectly well how mediumship works, but there are often one or two newbies. Like Swamiji telling stories about Gurus, so, too, do mediums often enjoy telling ones about mediumship in order to instruct their listeners. This kind of full storytelling does not unfold during the demonstration itself,

but it can enhance the reputation of a medium, who learned her skills through trial and error, patience and persistence.

NARRATIVE, KNOWLEDGE, AND REVELATION

When Fredrik Barth delivered his Huxley Lecture, he mentioned his admiration for Huxley's combination of intellectual fearlessness and rigour, and suggested that his own contribution might be to establish a new Wallace Line in anthropology. Amusingly, the Wallace Line is named after Alfred Russel Wallace, who was also intellectually fearless, but applied his rigour in ways Huxley and Darwin felt were deeply misguided, treating spirit as something subject to scientific experimentation and verification. It bears mention that, at the beginning of his talk, Barth referred to another published Huxley lecture, that of Raymond Firth thirty years earlier. Unlike Barth, Firth explicitly mentioned Huxley's attitude toward religion generally and Spiritualism specifically.¹⁵

Barth's compelling insight in 'The Guru and the Conjurer' is that in some contexts knowledge is considered valuable because it is shared and in other contexts it is considered valuable because it is unshared. What, then, about the knowledge generated in a Spiritualist medium's demonstration, which is knowledge interactively expressed by a medium and her audience? Like a Guru's stories, mediums' protonarratives are meant to be useful to anyone who hears them, because the point of a medium's practice is to prove to her listeners—all of her listeners—that there is life after death. In its own way, this is a search for truth. But, like a conjurer's signs, there is something mysterious about the revelations in a medium's demonstration. Even eager listeners will usually not be able to make sense of all the signs she offers. Earlier,

I compared mediums to trial lawyers for the way they pose yes-or-no questions to get at the truth. Another comparison is an inversion: mediums are like school exam-takers, but for an exam where the student poses the questions. Whereas Gurus and conjurers have knowledge to share, mediums' audience members are the ones who have the knowledge. The medium must reveal and suggest knowledge which is complete for recipients, but unspoken and fragmentary for other audience members and the medium herself. When enough signs align to make a recognisable character take shape, that character lives in a hearer's memory through stories, 'swathed in texture and color...strid[ing] through a story into an imaginative landscape', as Narayan (1989: 197) describes stories' morals.

Mediums can gather disciples of a sort in home training circles, a subject I have not discussed here, but their primary relationship within the ritual event of the demonstration is with people they might not know or ever see again. Mediums can act creatively within their demonstrations, developing signature styles, but they do not need to deliver 'spellbinding' performances like conjurers do. Indeed, the best mediums tend to speak plainly, conversationally, suggesting that what they are doing is not remarkable at all. If any part of their work is spellbinding, it is meant to be what the revelation of knowledge points to—a realisation that someone who did not know your grandmother has just described her accurately and evocatively.

Spiritualism, like most religious movements, motivates narratives, but the ways mediums tell narratives as they do their work is notably different from the ways of Gurus and conjurers. For Gurus, following Narayan's example of Swamiji, telling stories is inherent to their ritual practice. For conjurers/initiators like Kimebnok, it is not. Spiritualist mediums like Lynette Ivory and Jane Hall tell stories about

how they learned mediumship, including their stumbles and their successes. Yet, during their demonstrations—when they carry out their core task of connecting the living and the dead—narrative is notably constricted. Mediums tell protonarratives, sketches of characters that suggest stories without telling them. In doing so, they affirm your relationships with your deceased loved ones, not only for your benefit, but also for an audience who never met the people now taking on a lively verbal presence in the room. Standing in a middle zone between Gurus and conjurers—between shared storytelling and a sheer riot of signs—mediums suggest stories that might be told, ritually evoking a vitalist cosmos in which interconnection is absolute.

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NOTES

- 1 ‘Conjurer’ is in the title, but only appears twice in the main text, once as a simile: a ‘New Guinea priest in a mystery cult’ is ‘like a conjurer [who] tries to *withhold* the essential truths from his audience even while he initiates them as novices’ (Barth 1990: 642, emphasis in original). In the article’s abstract, the first term he uses for this kind of person is ‘the adept’, a term which does not appear in the main text. The term Barth uses most consistently is ‘initiator’. A Guru, by contrast, is always called a ‘Guru’ by Barth, and always given a capital G, a style I follow here. In a passing reference to the Narayan monograph I discuss, he (1989: 648) allows that ‘India exhibits a confusing exuberance of Gurus of diverse kinds, from *pandits*, *sadhus* and *sannyasis* to *swamis*, *babajis*, *fakirs* and storytellers’. Notably, the phrase ‘and storytellers’, which makes storytellers sound like a separate category, is misleading; Narayan makes it clear that for many Indian Gurus, not only Swamiji, storytelling lies at the heart of their religious practice.
- 2 Narayan (1989: 139) writes of her disagreement with a man from Pittsburgh, a spiritual seeker who had taken the name Gulelal. Gulelal recalled how when he previously returned to the United States, Swamiji had warned him ‘not to cut off any noses’. Narayan was sure that Swamiji meant Gulelal should not pretend to be a Guru when he was back in his homeland. No, Gulelal said, Swamiji meant that he (Gulelal) should not challenge the followers of a Guru with whom he had grown disenchanted. Gulelal then asked Swamiji directly what he meant and, Narayan (1989: 140) reports, on this occasion Swamiji gave an explicit interpretation: ‘Don’t cut noses means don’t deceive others!’.
- 3 Like Narayan with ‘Gulelal’, Barth has a telling disagreement over meaning with his interlocutors. Observing a men’s dance in which performers wear cassowary feathers and mimic the birds’ appearance, he points out the resemblance—and is met with ‘nothing but puzzled denials’ (Barth 1975: 101).
- 4 Barth explains the variation as a result of social organisation. Baktaman are a small group; not many novices are initiated together, and they are similar in age and background. In other groups, larger numbers and a greater diversity of participants means knowledge must be made more explicit. Compared to a ‘nonverbal code’ like that used by Baktaman initiators, ‘Verbalization is so vastly more flexible, economical of time, space and equipment, and (where necessary) unambiguous, it would seem essential in orchestrating and motivating such composite performances to rely heavily on it’ (Barth 1987: 62–64).
- 5 Shameem Black (personal communication, 22 January 2024) observes that the story of the Nose-Cutters can be read as a Guru’s critique of a conjurer’s practice. Initiates bond over shared food and a painful ordeal, but the knowledge they gain is worthless and their system crumples when the Guru (i.e., the prime minister’s grandfather) reveals the truth for all to hear.
- 6 All descriptions given in this article pertain to 2017–2019. I began counting attendance at CSA services in January 2016, and from that time until the end of the research project, average attendance was between seventeen and eighteen individuals, with a two-to-one ratio of women-to-men.
- 7 Many authors who have written about Spiritualism have focused on its historical support of progressive causes (e.g., Braude 1989; Owen 1989; McGarry 2008) and its articulation with nineteenth-century technological developments in fields like telegraphy and photography (e.g., Sconce 2000; Galvan 2010). Working in the present tense, the sociologist and discourse analyst Robin Wooffitt (2016[2006]) has analysed mediums’ and psychics’ linguistic techniques, the religious studies scholar Anne Kalvig (2017) has examined the ways in which Spiritualism might or might not be considered a religion, and the anthropologists Vieda Skultans (1974) and Erin Yerby (2017) have written ethnographies of healing and embodiment in Spiritualism. Works on Australian Spiritualism include Gillen (1981), Gabay (2001), Singleton (2022, 2023), and Tomlinson (2019, 2022, 2023a, 2023b).
- 8 Because Spiritualism has historically and prominently featured women mediums, and because most of the mediums I have seen during fieldwork are women, I use feminine pronouns for general reference.
- 9 Adam Reed and Jon Bialecki (2018a: 161) refer to a general ‘non-anthropological’ understanding of character as ‘typically linked to a notion of a biographical arc and to an idea of a subject who is the source of action’, noting that such

apparent ‘constancy is a less than straightforward achievement’ (2018a: 161; see also Reed and Bialecki 2018b). They observe that the definition of character involves identifying qualities that fit and erasing those that do not; in Spiritualism, such work is accomplished as mediums offer details about a person and audience members respond by affirming some details and rejecting others. Literary scholars’ insights into authors’ constructions of character can also be useful in considering how medium–audience interaction works. For example, Rita Felski (2019: 78), writing of character in literature, argues that ‘The draw of character [for a reader] has far less to do with realism than with qualities of vividness and distinctiveness.’ In Spiritualist mediumship, however, these qualities go together: characters’ vividness (the ways they glow in respondents’ memories) and distinctiveness (the ways they are identified individually) contribute to the sense of realism that develops during an effective demonstration.

- 10 In transcriptions of speech, I smooth out false starts, minor repetitions and placeholders for ease of reading. Ellipses indicate short stretches of deleted text, and ‘[inaud]’ indicates a word or words that are not clearly audible on the recording. ‘Emma’ is a pseudonym.
- 11 Two points about Spiritualist linguistic ideology bear mention. First, because the way people talk is considered part of their character, styles of communication inform the development of protonarratives: a joker while alive, your uncle, now in the spirit world, will tease and joke with the medium. Second, mediums say they have spirit guides who help them in organising communication with people in the spirit world. In Australian Spiritualism, mediums rarely refer to their guides during services, but that does not mean mediums do not consider them a part of the process. Norman Ivory (2016: 95–96) writes that it takes time for people who have died to learn how to speak from their new location: ‘people in spirit, especially recently after passing, are often not easily able to make contact with a medium, and so they are often introduced by another person from spirit who is more experienced.’
- 12 An anonymous reader for the journal noted that psychic work (in which the psychic’s or medium’s mind communicates with the audience member’s mind) and mediumship (the medium’s mind and body communicate with a person in the spirit world) are ‘twin possibilities’ in any

demonstration. Lynette’s example is a vivid one: for nearly all of the demonstration she describes, she was communicating psychically, but with Norman’s urging, she broke through into true spirit mediumship. The question of whether protonarratives generated in strictly psychic readings differ from those of spirit mediumship—treating these practices themselves as ideal types—is one I do not take up here, but warrants further investigation. One difference is that a psychic reading is often intended to reassure a person about the current state of their life and provide advice about how they might improve their physical, emotional, financial, and romantic situation in the future. Thus, any persuasive protonarrative will resonate with the details of the respondent’s life rather than those of a deceased person.

- 13 It may seem odd that the author cannot recognise his own speech, but recording conditions at CSA services were not optimal: it is an echoey room with an overtaxed heater sometimes wheezing in the background and a noisy coffee urn asserting itself as it heats up.
- 14 Here, I am inappropriately ‘feeding’ the medium details. As a recipient, not telling stories can be hard work, when wrapped up in the ritual moment as one is.
- 15 Notably, the work cited by Huxley seems to refer to Spiritualism as a general antimaterialist philosophy and not the specific religious movement I discuss in this article. In Firth’s lecture (published as Firth 1959), he cites Huxley’s *Essays upon Some Controverted Questions* (1892), a book wherein Huxley responds to a critic who has misunderstood his work, W. S. Lilly. Lilly had published a polemic in the *Fortnightly Review*, in which he praised Spiritualism as a philosophy, but denigrated the religious movement that had taken on the name: ‘The misuse of the word Spiritualism to denote a certain sect of vulgar charlatans is unfortunate’ (Lilly 1886: 578n1). One of Lilly’s intentions was to identify Huxley as a rank materialist. While poking holes in Lilly’s funhouse-mirror image of him, Huxley (1892: 223) also wrote archly that Spiritualism’s core claim about humanity’s essentially spiritual nature was untestable: ‘For the assumed substantial entity, spirit, which is supposed to underlie the phenomena of consciousness, as matter underlies those of physical nature, leaves not even a geometrical ghost when these phenomena are abstracted’.

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