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ENTREMONS. UPF JOURNAL OF WORLD HISTORY
Universitat Pompeu Fabra | Barcelona
Número 16 (octubre 2025)
www.entremons.org

Voices Beyond the Veil: Maurice Barbanell, Racialized Spirits, and the Colonial Unconscious

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Received: 4 November 2024 **Accepted:** 14 July 2025

Abstract:

This paper explores the complex and problematic nature of spirit guides in Modern Spiritualism, focusing on the frequent racialized portrayals and the psychological theories that challenge their autonomy. The study delves into the historical and cultural implications of these spirit manifestations, examining the roles they play and the perceptions they evoke. It discusses the dual nature of spirit guides as both potential subliminal creations of the medium and as entities with their own individuality, as described by notable figure Maurice Barbanell and his

[1] DOI: 10.31009/entremons.2025.i16.01
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spirit guide, Silver Birch. The paper addresses the broader implications of these phenomena, including the intersection of colonialism, cultural appropriation, and the spiritualist movement's evolving cosmology. By analyzing the works of various scholars and historical accounts, this paper provides a nuanced introduction and understanding of the racial and cultural dynamics at play in the spiritualist practices of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Keywords: Native Americans, Spiritualism, England, Canada

Resum:

Aquest article explora la naturalesa complexa i problemàtica de les guies d'esperit en l'espiritualisme modern, centrant-se en els freqüents retrats racialitzats i les teories psicològiques que desafien la seva autonomia. L'estudi aprofundeix en les implicacions històriques i culturals d'aquestes manifestacions d'esperit, examinant els rols que exerceixen i les percepcions que evoquen. Es discuteix la doble naturalesa de les guies d'esperit com a possibles creacions subliminars del mitjà i com a entitats amb la seva pròpia individualitat, tal com es descriu per la figura notable Maurice Barbanell i la seva guia d'esperits, Silver Birch. El document aborda les implicacions més àmplies d'aquests fenòmens, inclosa la intersecció del colonialisme, l'apropiació cultural i l'evolució de la cosmologia del moviment espiritualista. Mitjançant l'anàlisi de les obres de diversos estudiosos i relats històrics, aquest article proporciona una introducció matisada i la comprensió de les dinàmiques racials i culturals en joc en les pràctiques espiritualistes dels segles XIX i XX.

Paraules clau: Amerindis, Espiritualisme, Anglaterra, Canadà

Resumen:

Este artículo explora la naturaleza compleja y problemática de los guías espirituales en el espiritismo moderno, centrándose en las frecuentes representaciones racializadas y las teorías psicológicas que cuestionan su autonomía. El estudio profundiza en las implicaciones históricas y culturales de estas manifestaciones espirituales, examinando los roles que desempeñan y las percepciones que evocan. Analiza la doble naturaleza de los guías

espirituales como posibles creaciones subliminales del médium y como entidades con su propia individualidad, tal y como describen la notable figura de Maurice Barbanell y su guía espiritual, Silver Birch. El artículo aborda las implicaciones más amplias de estos fenómenos, incluida la intersección entre el colonialismo, la apropiación cultural y la cosmología en evolución del movimiento espiritista. Mediante el análisis de las obras de diversos estudiosos y relatos históricos, este artículo ofrece una introducción y una comprensión matizadas de las dinámicas raciales y culturales que intervienen en las prácticas espiritistas de los siglos XIX y XX.

Palabras clave: Nativos Américanos, Espiritualismo, Inglaterra, Canadá

Introduction

In 1920, seventy-two years after the emergence of Modern Spiritualism, Maurice Barbanell attended his first séances in East London. Initially skeptical, he found the first séance laughable, but the second marked the beginning of a lifelong commitment to Spiritualism. Over the next six decades, Barbanell became a central figure in the movement: a propagandist, founder and editor of *Psychic News*, and a trance medium in the Hannen Swaffer home circle, where he channeled teachings from his spirit guide, Silver Birch.

Silver Birch described spirit guides not merely as personalities but as "individualities" – a term he used to denote the soul's essence rather than its physical expression.[2] This distinction reflects broader tensions within Spiritualism, where spirit guides are viewed either as autonomous entities or as projections of the medium's subconscious. As Alex Owen notes, the spirits themselves remain "remarkably resilient to empirical inquiry," leaving their nature open to interpretation.[3] This article explores two interrelated problems in the study of spirit guides. First, it examines the frequent appearance of racialized spirits—particularly Indigenous American figures—in English and Canadian séance rooms. These manifestations invite scrutiny of cultural appropriation, colonial memory, and its evolving cosmology of

[2] Pam Riva, ed., *Light from Silver Birch* (Spiritual Truth Press, 2009), 90.
[3] Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, The New Cultural Studies Series (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), xiii.

Spiritualism. Second, it considers whether spirit guides are subliminal creations of the medium, drawing on theories of the subconscious and the "subliminal self" developed by Frederic Myers and others. Although the heyday of Spiritualism is often placed between 1880 and 1925, Barbanell's work in the 1930s offers a valuable lens through which to examine the persistence and evolution of spiritualist practices. His case is not an anomaly but a reflection of how Spiritualism adapted to changing cultural and psychological landscapes. Moreover, the 1930s were a period of renewed interest in psychical research and esoteric traditions, making Barbanell's mediumship a relevant and rich site for analysis.

In addressing these themes, this article also distinguishes between Anglo-American Spiritualism and Kardecist Spiritism, which developed in France and spread through Southern Europe and the Global South. Unlike Victorian Spiritualism, Kardec's tradition did not prominently feature colonial representations, suggesting that such phenomena were shaped by specific colonial and cultural contexts. Finally, while spirit guides are often critiqued for their racialized portrayals, it is important to acknowledge their empowering role for female mediums. As scholars have shown, spirit guides enabled women to speak publicly and assert spiritual authority in ways that were otherwise socially restricted.

Spirit guides also played a pivotal role in empowering female mediums within the Spiritualist movement. In an era when women were often excluded from public discourse, mediumship provided a socially acceptable platform for them to speak with authority.[4] Figures such as Emma Hardinge Britten and Leonora Piper gained prominence by channeling spirit guides who legitimized their voices and teachings. These guides, often portrayed as wise and benevolent, enabled women to transcend traditional gender roles and participate in intellectual and spiritual debates. While some critics viewed this as a form of ventriloquism or theatricality, others recognized it as a genuine avenue for female agency. The presence of spirit guides thus not only shaped the content of spiritualist messages but also influenced who was allowed to deliver them, making mediumship a unique site of gendered empowerment. To further explore how spirit guides functioned within séances—and how their identities were constructed and interpreted—it is necessary to examine the mechanics of trance mediumship.

[4] See: Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2nd ed (Indiana University Press, 2001); Amy Lehman, *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance: Mediums, Spiritualists and Mesmerists in Performance* (McFarland & Co, 2009).

Trance Mediumship and the Nature of Spirit Guides

To understand the role of spirit guides in Spiritualism, it is helpful to first consider the mechanics of trance mediumship. When a medium enters a trance, their consciousness is believed to partially withdraw from the body, creating space for a spirit to temporarily inhabit and use the medium's physical form. According to Frederic Myers, this process saw the spirit "quitting" the body to some extent, allowing an external entity to communicate through it.[5] Maurice Barbanell's early experiences with trance mediumship illustrate this phenomenon. Although unconscious during séances, he later recalled hearing every word spoken, as if the messages were replayed on a screen before sleep.[6] This vivid recollection suggests a complex interplay between conscious and subliminal awareness, a theme that recurs throughout Barbanell's career.

In Spiritualist belief, mediumship is not merely a skill but a sacred function. The primary goal is to facilitate communication with the spirit world, often through the assistance of spirit guides. Walter Meyer zu Erpen notes that every individual is believed to have at least one spirit guide to help navigate life's journey.[7] Spirit guides are sometimes referred to as "controls," reflecting their role in managing the medium's trance state and channeling messages from beyond. Their purpose is not to dictate human destiny but to offer comfort, guidance, and support. According to Sylvia Barbanell, these entities willingly delay their own spiritual progression to serve humanity.[8]

This altruistic portrayal of spirit guides, however, is complicated by their frequent racialized representations. Scholars such as Robert S. Cox and Molly McGarry have critiqued the phenomenon of "playing Indian," where mediums channel Indigenous American spirits in ways that reflect romanticized or appropriative views.[9] McGarry argues that these spirits were

[5] F.W.H. Myers, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (University Books, Inc., 1961), 345.
[6] Maurice Barbanell, "Who is Silver Birch's Medium?" *Two Worlds*, August 24, 1957, 3.
[7] Walter Meyer zu Erpen, "Afterlife Beliefs in the Spiritualist Movement," in *The Routledge Companion to Death and Dying* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 225.
[8] Sylvia Barbanell, *Some Discern Spirits*, 3rd ed. (Spiritual Truth Press, 2019), 22.
[9] Robert S. Cox, *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* (University of Virginia Press, 2003), 191; Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (University of California Press, 2008), 15.

often positioned as intermediaries between worlds, embodying an idealized spiritual purity while simultaneously serving as symbols of colonial erasure.[10] Cox observed that these guides were imagined dwelling on lower spiritual planes, behaving in stereotypically naive or childlike ways when confronted with modern technologies.[11] McGarry further suggests that Anglo Spiritualists' engagement with Native American spirits was neither wholly appropriative nor entirely reformist, but rather indicative of a religious worldview that shaped secular political attitudes.[12] Kathryn Troy expands on this critique, emphasizing the need to analyze Indigenous spirit manifestations as complex cultural reappropriations. Her work highlights gendered dynamics in séance performances, where powerful male "Indian" chiefs contrasted with female spirits portrayed as victims of violence.[13]

Racialized Spirit Forms and Victorian Mediumship

These gendered dynamics were part of a broader pattern in which racialized spirits—beyond just Indigenous American figures—played central roles in séance performances across the Victorian world. The presence of ethnically coded spirits in these settings was not limited to North American archetypes. Victorian British mediums such as Annie Fairlamb and Catherine Wood worked with a variety of spirit entities, many of whom were children of color. Fairlamb was known to materialize a young African spirit named Cissy, while Wood channeled a five-year-old Indian spirit called Pocky.[14] These manifestations were not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern in which racialized spirits were central to the performance of mediumship.

Elizabeth d'Espérance, another prominent materialization medium, was controlled by a range of female spirits, including Nina, a Spanish girl; Leila, a Turkish teenager; and Yolande, an Arab girl portrayed with overt sexualization.[15] As Marlene Tromp argues, these spirit forms blurred the boundaries between the medium and the colonized other, disrupting simplistic

[10] McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 12.
[11] Cox, *Body and Soul*, 193.
[12] McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 67.
[13] Kathryn L. Troy, *The Specter of the Indian: Race, Gender, and Ghosts in American Séances, 1848-1890* (State University of New York Press, 2017), 91.
[14] Marlene Tromp, *Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs, and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism* (State University of New York Press, 2006), 102.
[15] Tromp, *Altered States*, 81–82.

narratives of imperial power and identity.[16] The séance room thus became a space where colonial fantasies were enacted and challenged. The materialization of racialized spirits—often in stereotypical or exoticized forms—reflected the cultural anxieties and desires of the imperial metropole. These spirits were not merely passive apparitions; they were active participants in a complex dialogue about race, gender, and power. This phenomenon continued into the 20th century. In the 1930s, British medium Hunter Selkirk channeled Zuru, described as an elderly African spirit with a comforting demeanor.[17] Another frequent visitor to Selkirk's séances was Topsy, a "little coloured girl" whose cheerful personality was said to create harmony in the séance room.[18] Her voice, distinct from the medium's, was noted for its childlike joy. Yet, as Tromp observes, such depictions often relied on imperial stereotypes, particularly in the portrayal of child spirits.[19]

Descriptions of Topsy's materialization included references to her "coal black" face and "white teeth," imagery steeped in racial caricature.[20] She was joined by other spirits with names like Jacko, Poppy, Billy Boy, Louisiana, and Sambo—collectively referred to as the "coloured brigade."[21] These names and portrayals underscore the extent to which séance performances mirrored colonial attitudes. As Tromp notes, the ghosts of colonized peoples were materialized in séance rooms across nations, serving as symbolic reminders of imperial histories.[22] Whether in England, North America, or Australia, mediums channeled spirits from colonized regions, including Egyptian, Tibetan, and Māori figures. Ursula Roberts, for instance, worked with Tek-sek, an Egyptian spirit who claimed to have known Moses, despite Roberts' limited knowledge of Egyptology.[23] Leonora Piper's guide was initially a Native American girl named Chlorine, later replaced by a French doctor.[24] Eileen Garrett channeled Uvani, an entity of oriental origin,

[16] Tromp, *Altered States*, 78.
[17] Harry Emerson, *Listen My Son* (Psychic Book Club, 1945), 24.
[18] Emerson, *Listen My Son*, 29.
[19] Marlene Tromp, "Spirited Sexuality: Sex, Marriage, and Victorian Spiritualism," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 31, no. 1 (2003): 125, JSTOR.
[20] Emerson, *Listen My Son*, 37, 52.
[21] Emerson, *Listen My Son*, 43.
[22] Tromp, *Altered States*, 93.
[23] Ursula Roberts, *I Knew Moses* (Psychic Press, 1974), vii.
[24] Alan Gauld, *Mediumship and Survival: A Century of Investigations* (Paladin, published on behalf of the Society for Psychical Research, 1983), 32.

and Jai-Lin, a Tibetan lama, appeared in Toronto séances as late as the 1980s.[25] These spirit manifestations were not random; they reflected the cultural currents of Orientalism and Theosophy that shaped spiritualist beliefs. The séance room became a stage for exploring—and often reinforcing—colonial ideologies, even as it offered alternative spiritual narratives. As Tromp suggests, mediumship provided a voice for marginalized perspectives, albeit through the lens of imperial fascination.[26]

The 'Indian Question' During Maurice Barbanell's Lifetime

Maurice Barbanell's spirit guide, Silver Birch, was introduced to the Hannen Swaffer home circle as a "humble Indian," a persona the guide claimed was necessary to gain the group's trust and affection.[27] In the early séances, Silver Birch reportedly spoke broken English with a heavy accent, but this soon gave way to fluent, eloquent speech. The transformation was explained as a result of spiritual development, though it also reflected the evolving expectations of the sitters. Each séance with Silver Birch began and ended with a prayer, always concluding with the phrase: "This is the prayer of Thy Indian servant who always seeks to serve."[28] In one 1940 séance, Silver Birch reflected on his earthly incarnation, stating: "I lived once as a Red Indian, held up to children as the example of savagery. But never have I seen amongst the tribe in which I dwelt anything that... compares with the savageries practised by the civilised people of your world."[29]

Yet, the identity of Silver Birch remained ambiguous. Hannen Swaffer, who introduced the guide's teachings, claimed that Silver Birch was not truly a "Red Indian," but rather a higher being using the astral body of an Indian spirit as a medium of communication.[30] Silver Birch himself echoed this, explaining that the name and appearance were chosen to facilitate communication with the earthly realm, and that his true origins lay in a more ancient and distant

[25] Eileen Jeanette Lyttle Garrett, *Many Voices: The Autobiography of a Medium*, Collector's Library of the Unknown (Time-Life Books, 1991), 47; Joe Fisher, *Hungry Ghosts: An Investigation into Channelling and the Spirit World* (McClelland & Stewart, 1991), 18.
[26] Tromp, *Altered States*, 93.
[27] A. W. Austen, ed., *Teachings of Silver Birch* (Spiritual Truth Press, 2011), 12.
[28] Anne Dooley, ed., *Guidance from Silver Birch* (Spiritual Truth Press, 1999), 114.
[29] "Silver Birch Gives Inspiring Message to all Reformers," *Psychic News*, November 23, 1940, 3.
[30] Austen, *Teachings of Silver Birch*, 11.

civilization.[31] This ambiguity reveals the performative and symbolic nature of spirit guide identities. The choice to appear as an Indigenous American was not incidental—it was a deliberate act shaped by cultural expectations and spiritualist aesthetics. As Estelle Roberts' guide Red Cloud explained, spirit guides adopted forms that sitters could comprehend, even if those forms did not reflect their true essence.[32]

Bridget Bennett has argued that the recurring presence of Indigenous American spirits in 19th-century séances was part of a broader cultural tradition of staging the "Indian" as a spectral figure—one that carried emotional and political weight across literature, theatre, and visual culture.[33] Robert C. Thompson similarly described séances in Vermont where Native American spirits offered more vivid and tactile performances than other entities, even making physical contact with sitters.[34] Silver Birch's own explanation for his chosen form reinforced this idea: "I had to come in the form of a humble Indian to win your love and devotion... and to prove myself by the truth of what I taught."[35] This rationale, while spiritually framed, also reflects the racialized expectations of the séance room. Readers of *Psychic News* frequently questioned why so many spirit guides were "Red Indians." It was speculated that the exoticism of such figures made their teachings more palatable or compelling to audiences seeking spiritual wisdom from sources perceived as closer to nature.

Spiritualist literature from the 1930s frequently portrayed Indigenous American spirit guides as uniquely attuned to the spiritual realm. Their perceived closeness to nature was often cited as the reason they were considered especially capable of accessing higher knowledge and serving as effective guides. One letter published in *Psychic News* suggested that Indigenous medicine men were inherently more familiar with Spiritualist phenomena than Christians, noting that clairvoyance and materializations were common within their communities.[36] Another reader echoed this sentiment, claiming that Indigenous Americans were chosen to

[31] Riva, *Light from Silver Birch*, 198.
[32] Edwin H. Turpin, Letter to the Editor, "Who is Red Cloud?" *Psychic News*, April 3, 1937, 11.
[33] Bridget Bennett, "Sacred Theatres: Shakers, Spiritualists, Theatricality, and the Indian in the 1830s and 1840s.," *TDR* 49, no. 3 (2005): 116.
[34] Robert C. Thompson, "Henry Olcott's Sensual Spirits: The American Indian as Spiritualist Spectacle.," *Ecumenica* 8, no. 2 (2015): 29.
[35] Hannen Swaffer, "Silver Birch's Teachings Now Published in Book Form," *Psychic News*, March 26, 1938, 3.
[36] Detective Albert W. Rawson, Letter to the Editor, "Psychic Red Indians," *Psychic News,* March 2, 1935, 11.

"pierce the psychic veil" due to their natural spirituality. The same letter observed that séance participants often encountered spirits of Indigenous, Hindu, Arab, Egyptian, or African origin—rarely those of white individuals.[37] This romanticized view was reinforced by advertisements and commentary. A 1935 notice in *Psychic News* promoted a lecture on "Red Indian Controls" at the British College of Psychic Science. Around the same time, American Spiritualist Frederic Harding reflected on the prevalence of Indigenous American spirits, noting that many Spiritualists were puzzled by their frequent appearances.[38] Harding explained that these spirits were drawn to Spiritualism because, in life, they had possessed an innate spiritual sensibility and a deep reverence for nature. He emphasized their belief in a universal divine power—Manitou or the Great Spirit—rather than a personified deity, and noted their lack of formal religious structures.

Yet this idealized portrayal stood in stark contrast to the historical realities of colonial violence. Harding acknowledged that Indigenous Americans had suffered greatly under white colonialism, including exploitation, cultural erasure, and the destructive influence of alcohol. Despite this, Spiritualists often chose to focus on pre-colonial Indigenous life, framing these spirits as benevolent teachers returning with love and a desire to serve. Maurice Barbanell echoed this view, writing that "these Redmen return from the Other Side with love in their hearts and a great desire to serve."[39] Historian Molly McGarry has argued that Spiritualists romanticized Indigenous Americans as pure, nature-bound figures untouched by modernity. Their voices—channeled through mediums—were seen as literal and symbolic expressions of spiritual wisdom. McGarry contends that Spiritualists appropriated Indigenous identities as ancestral guides and spiritual authorities, projecting them into an afterlife that both justified their disappearance and validated their continued relevance.[40] Crucially, the absence of living Indigenous Americans at séances allowed Spiritualists to define these spirits in ways that suited their own cultural narratives, often relying on stereotypes to do so.

The prominence of Indigenous American spirit guides in Spiritualist practice cannot be explained solely by their perceived affinity with nature, though this association was central to

[37] R.B. Gibson, Letter to the Editor, Tribute to Indian Guides," *Psychic News*, March 23, 1935, 11.
[38] Frederic Harding, *Why Red Indians Are Spirit Guides.* (New York, 1935), 3.
[39] Maurice Barbanell, "Truth About Redman," *Psychic News*, August 8, 1942, 4.
[40] McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 73.

their symbolic role. As one scholar noted, Native Americans were often idealized as embodiments of truth and authenticity due to their connection to the natural world.[41] Spiritualists, in turn, relied on these figures to help articulate and legitimize their evolving cosmological beliefs. This relationship, however, was fraught with contradictions. On one hand, Spiritualists expressed sympathy for the historical persecution of Indigenous peoples. On the other, they continued to enact forms of symbolic colonization within the séance room, appropriating Indigenous identities for spiritual authority. As Denise Kimber Buell has argued, the dynamics of mediumship complicate traditional colonial binaries.[42] In this context, the medium—typically passive—becomes a conduit for Indigenous voices, allowing "native" spirits to speak spiritual truths that could even critique colonial systems. Rather than silencing Indigenous perspectives, Spiritualists positioned them as sources of wisdom, though often within frameworks shaped by romanticized and stereotypical representations.

Moreover, some correspondents to *Psychic News* suggested that Silver Birch was not a single entity but a composite of many lives and experiences, presenting as one voice.[43] Others embraced the idea that Indigenous Americans were inherently spiritual, citing books like *The Gospel of the Red Man. An Indian Bible*, which portrayed Native cultures as deeply psychic and attuned to natural law.[44] However, not all Spiritualists accepted these portrayals uncritically. British medium Clifford W. Potter questioned the prevalence of "Red Indian" guides, arguing that their broken English and theatrical presence lowered the intellectual tone of Spiritualist meetings. He suggested that their popularity was driven more by public taste than spiritual necessity. [45] Barbanell responded forcefully, defending the integrity of such guides and accusing Potter of making uninformed criticisms.[46]

The debate continued in the pages of *Psychic News*, with readers offering a range of perspectives. Some defended the spiritual value of Indigenous guides, while others echoed

[41] Thompson, "Henry Olcott's Sensual Spirits: The American Indian as Spiritualist Spectacle.," 32.
[42] Denise Kimber Buell, "The Afterlife Is Not Dead: Spiritualism, Postcolonial Theory, and Early Christian Studies.," *Church History* 78, no. 4 (2009): 865.
[43] J. Bardell Smith, "Who is Silver Birch?" *Psychic News*, April 2, 1938, 11.
[44] Ernest Thompson Seton, *The Gospel of the Red Man. An Indian Bible.* (Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1937), 1.
[45] Clifford W. Potter, "Spiritualism and Its Red Indian Guides," *The London Forum Incorporating The Occult Review* LXI, no. January to June 1935 (1935): 29.
[46] Maurice Barbanell, "Valueless Criticism," *Psychic News*, January 12, 1935, 6.

Potter's concerns about sensationalism and racial stereotyping.[47] The discussion revealed deep tensions within the movement about race, authenticity, and the role of performance in mediumship. Ultimately, the figure of Silver Birch—both revered and contested—embodied these contradictions. His teachings were widely respected, yet his identity remained elusive. The choice to appear as an Indigenous American was both a spiritual strategy and a cultural performance, shaped by the colonial imagination and the expectations of the séance room. Not only were spirit guides questioned concerning their origins, but there were also debates about whether they even existed.

The Subliminal Self and Subconscious Personalities

These debates about authenticity and identity naturally lead to deeper questions about the psychological origins of mediumship itself. Did Maurice Barbanell actually channel the teachings of an evolved spiritual entity known as Silver Birch for over sixty years? Or were the words that left Barbanell's mouth during the weekly séances held in his modest London apartment his subconscious thoughts? Notions of the self and the subliminal or subconscious self-have long been studied by scholars in science, philosophy, psychiatry, and psychology. This "other" self has been described as a coexisting stream of thoughts and sensations, largely distinct from the normal waking mind.[48] Such ideas are central to parapsychological inquiry, particularly in debates over whether phenomena like automatic writing originate from the subconscious or from external, spiritual sources.

In the nineteenth century, American psychiatrists began attributing mental disorders to physical causes, such as organic breakdowns in the brain or nervous system.[49] Neurologists, however, emphasized psychological origins, viewing insanity as a disturbance of the mind rather than the body. Treatments reflected these beliefs, focusing on physical remedies like quinine tonics, bed rest, and rich diets.[50] These competing models laid the groundwork for psychical research,

[47] "Coloured Guides Attacked by a Medium Who Has One of Them!" *Psychic News*, January 19, 1935, 5.
[48] Morton Prince, *The Dissociation of a Personality: A Biographical Study in Abnormal Psychology* (Longmans, Green and Co., 1906), 18.
[49] R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 134.
[50] Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, 135.

which sought to explore the mind's alleged supernormal capacities beyond conventional scientific frameworks.[51]

The Society for Psychical Research (SPR), founded in England in 1882 by mostly Cambridge-educated men and women, aimed to bring psychical phenomena into the domain of experimental psychology. Edmund Gurney and Frederic Myers were central figures in this effort. Gurney's studies of hypnotism challenged the idea that actions under hypnosis were purely reflexive, showing that subjects often retained conscious awareness of their experiences.[52]

Frederic Myers built upon Gurney's research into hypnotism, which had demonstrated that individuals under hypnosis could retain awareness of their experiences, challenging the notion that such states were purely reflexive. Myers saw hypnotism as a valuable tool for exploring the layered nature of human consciousness. Through his investigations, he developed the concept of the "subliminal self"—a domain of mental activity that operates beneath the surface of ordinary awareness.[53] This hidden layer of consciousness, while not part of the habitual waking mind, was nonetheless fully self-aware and capable of influencing behavior.[54]

Myers believed that understanding this subliminal realm was key to unraveling the complexities of personality and psychic phenomena. Religious scholar Ann Taves has expanded on these ideas, examining how Myers, Pierre Janet, and William James conceptualized divided consciousness in spiritual contexts. James, a psychologist and philosopher, identified a form of "consciousness beyond the field" that had been overlooked in religious studies.[55] Taves argued that James was referring to coexistent states of consciousness—what Myers and Janet called "secondary selves"—rather than alternating

[51] Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, 136–37.
[52] Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 249.
[53] Oppenheim, *The Other World*, 254.
[54] Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, 149.
[55] Ann Taves, "Religious Experience and the Divisible Self: William James (and Frederic Myers) as Theorist(s) of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 2 (2003): 306.

personalities.[56] Myers rejected the notion of a unitary self, instead describing the psyche as "composite" or "colonial," made up of potential personalities that could emerge and recede.[57]

He believed that supranormal phenomena such as ecstasy and genius might manifest through the subliminal self, and that these were not necessarily pathological. James built on Myers's theory to explain how religious geniuses might genuinely feel moved by an external power—an experience that could be both scientifically and spiritually valid.[58] While James leaned toward internal explanations, Myers remained open to the idea that the subliminal self could channel transcendent forces.[59]

These theoretical frameworks offer a compelling lens through which to interpret the mediumship of Maurice Barbanell, particularly his long-standing relationship with Silver Birch. Barbanell was aware of the skepticism surrounding spirit communication, including his own. He maintained that Silver Birch was not a secondary personality but a distinct entity, though he acknowledged that the medium's mind might influence the messages. For Barbanell, spiritual development involved mastering the subconscious to minimize such interference and ensure the purity of the communication. This distinction between conscious and trance states was evident in Barbanell's own writing habits. As an editor, he frequently revised his work, often dissatisfied with phrasing and structure.[60] In contrast, he described Silver Birch's teachings as flowing effortlessly, requiring only minor punctuation edits. The vocabulary used by the spirit guide also differed from Barbanell's own, reinforcing the impression of a separate consciousness at work.

Barbanell's colleagues at *Psychic News* also noted this contrast. Roy Stemman, assistant editor at the newspaper, recalled that Barbanell preferred to dictate rather than write, often struggling to find the right words and relying on his secretary to prompt him. Yet during séances,

[56] Taves, "Religious Experience and the Divisible Self: William James (and Frederic Myers) as Theorist(s) of Religion," 307.
[57] Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 174.
[58] Taves, "Religious Experience and the Divisible Self: William James (and Frederic Myers) as Theorist(s) of Religion," 317.
[59] Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 176.
[60] Maurice Barbanell, "His Six-Month Quest that Spanned Six Decades," *Psychic News,* July 25, 1982, 5.

Stemman observed a dramatic transformation: Barbanell spoke fluently and eloquently as Silver Birch, answering questions without hesitation or preparation. Stemman described the guide's speech as flowing with clarity and confidence, markedly different from Barbanell's usual editorial process. This shift, both verbal and physical, was interpreted by many Spiritualists as evidence of genuine possession. Silver Birch himself offered a rationale for his stylistic choices, explaining that he preferred the elevated language of the Bible because it fostered peace and beauty—qualities conducive to spiritual communication. Allen Spraggett, a Canadian religion editor, attended a Silver Birch séance in the 1960s noted changes in Barbanell's voice, diction, and even facial expression during trance, further reinforcing the perception of a distinct personality at work.[61]

Silver Birch was not the only spirit guide of Indigenous American appearance to frequent British séance rooms. In 1923, British writer H. Dennis Bradley encountered American medium George Valiantine during a visit to New Jersey. Bradley described Valiantine as an unassuming figure—modest in demeanor, with limited fluency and a regional American accent that, to Bradley, marked him as uneducated.[62] These observations became significant when Valiantine's spirit guide, Kokum, made a dramatic entrance. Kokum, described as a Canadian Indigenous spirit, spoke in French and broken English. Bradley recalled the moment vividly, noting that the voice seemed to descend from the ceiling and possessed an extraordinary power and resonance. The deep bass tone filled the room, leaving a lasting impression on Bradley.[63] This encounter, like many others involving Indigenous spirit guides, reinforced the idea that such figures were not only spiritually potent but theatrically compelling within the context of the séance.

Maurice Barbanell firmly believed that Silver Birch was not a projection of his own psyche but a distinct spiritual entity with an independent identity. At the same time, he acknowledged the inherent limitations of mediumship, recognizing that as a living person, a medium's own mind might unintentionally influence the messages received. To address this, Barbanell emphasized the importance of spiritual development, which he defined as gaining control over the

[61] "Canadian Newspaper Features Silver Birch and His Medium," *Psychic News,* July 1, 1967, 8.
[62] Herbert Dennis Bradley, *Towards the Stars*, Revised popular edition (T. Werner Laurie, 1924), 73.
[63] Bradley, *Towards the Stars*, 15.

subconscious. Through disciplined practice, he argued, a medium could learn to suppress personal biases and ego, allowing for clearer, more authentic communication from the spirit world.[64] Taken together, these observations suggest that Barbanell's mediumship—whether interpreted as authentic spirit communication or as a manifestation of the subliminal self—illuminates the porous boundaries between self and other, and the complex interplay of psychology, spirituality, and culture. The case of Silver Birch exemplifies how theories of divided consciousness, as developed by Myers, James, and Taves, can be applied to modern Spiritualist practice, offering insight into the ways individuals navigate and negotiate multiple selves.

Conclusion

The figure of the spirit guide in Modern Spiritualism remains deeply problematic and profoundly revealing. As this article has shown, spirit guides often appear in racialized forms—particularly as Indigenous American entities—raising questions about cultural appropriation, colonial memory, and the spiritualist imagination. These appearances were not limited to the Victorian era but persisted well into the 20th century, reflecting both continuity and adaptation within the movement. At the same time, the nature of spirit guides is complicated by the possibility that they are not autonomous beings but subliminal creations of the medium. The theories of Frederic Myers, William James, and others offer a framework for understanding how alternate personalities might emerge from the subconscious, especially in trance states. Maurice Barbanell's own reflections on Silver Birch suggest a tension between belief in spiritual individuality and awareness of psychological influence.

The séance room, functioning as both a theatrical and spiritual space, allowed Spiritualists to explore alternative cosmologies while also reproducing imperial tropes. Spirit guides were sometimes empowering—especially for female mediums—but they also embodied stereotypes and served as vehicles for colonial narratives. The recurring portrayal of Indigenous and Oriental spirits as wise, pure, or close to nature reflects both admiration and appropriation. These tensions—between belief and skepticism, performance and sincerity—culminate in the

[64] Barbanell, "His Six-Month Quest," *Psychic News,* 5.

central question of the movement: were spirit guides like Silver Birch real entities or psychological projections?

While this question cannot be definitively answered, what can be said is that their presence shaped the spiritualist movement in profound ways. As with all spiritualist phenomena, the reader is invited to examine the evidence, consider the cultural context, and arrive at their own conclusions—just as Spiritualism itself encourages. Studying Spiritualism presents unique methodological challenges. The movement's reliance on personal testimony, ephemeral performances, and contested phenomena complicates traditional historical analysis. Researchers navigate between belief and skepticism, performance and sincerity, while remaining attentive to the cultural and psychological contexts that shaped spiritualist practices.

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