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Apparitional Economies: Spectral Imagery in the Antebellum Imagination

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APPARITIONAL ECONOMIES: SPECTRAL IMAGERY IN THE ANTEBELLUM IMAGINATION

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky

By
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Lexington, Kentucky

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2014

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

APPARITIONAL ECONOMIES: SPECTRAL IMAGERY IN THE ANTEBELLUM IMAGINATION

Apparitional Economies is invested in both a historical consideration of economic conditions through the antebellum era and an examination of how spectral representations depict the effects of such conditions on local publics and individual persons. From this perspective, the project demonstrates how extensively the period’s literature is entangled in the economic: in financial devastation, in the boundaries of seemingly limitless progress, and in the standards of value that order the worth of commodities and the persons who can trade for them.

I argue that the space of the specter is a force of representation, an invisible site in which the uncertainties of antebellum economic and social change become visible. I read this spectral space in canonical works by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman and in emerging texts by Robert Montgomery Bird, Theophilus Fisk, Fitz James O’Brien, and Edward Williams Clay. In Robert Montgomery Bird’s Sheppard Lee (1837), for example, the protagonist’s spectral transmigratory form presents a fragile financial identity, replete with the spectral wish of elusive opportunity and the embodied burden of present circumstance. The exchange and appropriation inherent in Sheppard’s inhabitation of corpses critiques the tumultuous system of antebellum currency and counterfeits and the social and legal systems of poverty and indenture.

Methodologically, Apparitional Economies moves through historical events and textual representation in two ways: chronologically with an attention to archival materials through the antebellum era (beginning with the specters that emerge with the Panic of 1837) and interpretively across the readings of a literary specter (as a space of lack and potential, as exchange, as transformation, and as the presence of absence). As a failed body and, therefore, a flawed embodiment of economic existence, the literary specter proves a powerful representation of antebellum social and financial uncertainties.
KEYWORDS: Antebellum Literature, Jacksonian Economics, Spectral Theory, Antebellum Reform, Panic of 1837

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Chapter One

Antebellum Structures: Haunted Sites and Spectral Spaces

Haunting: those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, ...
bearings...lose direction, ...the over-and-done-with comes alive; ... [the] blind spot 
comes into view.

Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*  

Two Southern Ohio antebellum houses still spark the imagination of the 
American public. Recent visitors to each have recounted signs of haunting: hazy 
images of a man standing in the front hall, an organ playing, footsteps coming up the 
cellar stairs, the soft crying of displaced souls. Both structures were built with 
deception in mind, constructed with hidden doors, concealed compartments, and 
clandestine exits: those who were welcome to the home could arrive or escape 
undetected, while those not welcome could not see their way, could not, at times, 
even find the door. The first house, the Rankin House, sits on a high hill overlooking 
seven bends of the Ohio River. Built in 1828, the modest house could be reached 
from the river by a flight of 100 steps obscured in a heavily wooded hillside.

Figure 1: View from the Rankin House to the Ohio River and KY  
Figure 2: Some of the 100 stone and wooden steps to the Rankin House.  
Images from the Ohio Historical Society
A lighted beacon from the house’s interior could communicate to those approaching from the riverside. The rear porch boards hid a trap door, and the cellar areas accessible through that entrance were frequently occupied during the 37 years that John Rankin's family lived in the house.

The second house is an 1840s home built on 118 acres. Oliver Tompkins elaborately designed the house with five false chimneys to conceal hidden staircases, storage areas, and observation windows. An elaborate duct system filtered the smoke from the two working chimneys through all seven rooftop flues, so that, from the outside, all seven issued smoke and appeared working. Concealed spaces built into walls and doors allowed covert transactions and kept the involved parties from having to meet face to face or join in the exchange at the same moment.

The proximity of the home on a high bluff allowed Tompkins an expansive vista of the Ohio River. An attic window housed candle screens that could project green or red light to signal “coast clear” to interested parties approaching from the water. The outer doors of the home were fit with specially designed locks that could be

Figure 3: The Counterfeit House. Image from postcard, Hivnor Card Co., Personal Collection.
mastered by a specific turn of the knob. A back room without doors or windows could be entered only from a trap door in the ceiling. A trap door in the floor led to a legendary tunnel “big enough for a man and his horse” that traveled one hundred yards underground to a nearby cliff.4

Many antebellum Americans saw the owners of these homes and the operations they pursued as criminal, while others viewed them as radical, or even heroic. Both broke the law. Both worked to escape detection. John Rankin, a staunch abolitionist, used his home as a station for the Underground Railroad. He proudly conducted over 2,000 African-Americans (some estimates approach 4,000) to stations farther north, claiming never to lose a passenger. His oft-recounted tale of a young mother who clutched her child as she leapt across the frozen Ohio River inspired Harriet Beecher Stowe’s famous scene of Eliza’s escape to freedom in Uncle Tom’s Cabin. In a series of interviews compiled in Ann Hagedorn’s Beyond the River, John Rankin Jr. recounts: “One Sunday afternoon, father called upon Prof. [Calvin] Stowe. There in the presence of Harriet Beecher Stowe, father told of the flight of the slave mother and her child crossing the Ohio River on the ice. [Harriet Beecher Stowe] was greatly moved by the narrative, exclaiming from time to time, “Terrible! How terrible!”5 Rankin Jr. and his brother, Calvin, accompanied the young mother to her next stop on the Underground Railroad, Calvin carrying the child because he was the elder brother. Rankin Jr. remembers, “So far as we were concerned it was only another incident of many of a similar character. Strange how this unknown fugitive mother figured into the history of this country. She had no name, no monument erected to her. We two boys had helped to make history and we were
deaf, dumb, and blind to its magnificence.”\(^6\) John Rankin Jr. came to recognize the historic magnificence of the young woman’s brave escape across the ice, but to many antebellum citizens (who would later become the readers of Stowe’s novel), the young mother was, at the moment of her crossing, only a fleeting piece of property lost to the Rankin steps, a counterfeit bill crossing borders, changing hands, passing herself as authentic, as legal, as worthy.

Oliver Tompkins was a counterfeiter. With his partner (some say his sister) Ann Lovejoy, he designed and built what has now been known for years as The Counterfeit House to produce replicas of 50-cent coins and $500 bills. Oral traditions claim that Lovejoy passed a counterfeit $500 bill in nearby Cincinnati and was followed home by a Pinkerton agent who managed to manipulate the elaborate lock system and enter the house. Tompkins allegedly beat the man to death in the home’s long interior hallway where bloodstains still mar the wall and floor.\(^7\) Tompkins purportedly buried the agent and then effected his own escape through the tunnel, which he then destroyed with explosives.\(^8\) Some accounts report that Lovejoy then faked Tompkins’ death to free him from the continued pursuit of authorities, holding a late night funeral at the home that the very-much-alive Tompkins watched from one of the hidden chimney staircases.

These houses and the stories they hold, the legends they claim, are pinnacles of imagination, replete with set constructions and action sequences worthy of a Hollywood film. The historical record and the extraordinary tales merge in a carried down history of oral traditions that are, as historian Stephen Kelley defines them, “legend...supported by fact.”\(^9\) These houses preserve their stories (the verifiable
and the conjectural) as structures of cultural memory; their sites stand today as remnants of subversion that have become legendary in the imaginations of the American public. “ Legendary” is a term often equated to a record that denies absolute veracity, but that is not the only connotation of the word that fits here. These houses and the stories they tell are also legendarily inspirational. Haunted with the objectives of Rankin and of Tompkins: their precise and intentional construction of place, their lofty goals, their disregard for law, and their defense from attack,10 these houses are immersed in the tension and discomfort of their former operations, experienced in the 1840s as outside the law, and today as a record of fearlessness, of tremendous risk, of revolution. The current proprietors of each of these structures boast stories of ghostly encounters, in part, because subterfuge sparks imagination, and the facsimile of the traditional home (that cloaks intentional architecture and whispered intentions) fuels, even from our current lens, positive and negative tensions - interest, certainly, but also a deeply seated concern that these are now and have always been spectral sites where what one sees is not necessarily what is.

When reality fails to merge with our perception, something is created -- a flutter, an echo, a slant of light, a redirection of our attention. Spectrality exists at these sites of disconnect and displacement. We tell stories about the haunted structures of the Rankin House and the Counterfeit House because they are sites of disruption; they are sites of cultural confusion and interest. Antebellum writers relied on that displacement as they wrote the underlying unsettledness of the counterfeit, of the slave escape, -- of passing and class dismantling – within the halls
of haunted places and beneath the plotline of spectral power. Spectrality serves as
the veil and the unveiling in these texts, the spectral image an identifiable
discomfort that stands in for social disruption, that blankets it and exposes it all at
once.

The haunted houses I’ve described here are remnants of the antebellum era
and enduring representations of two critical cultural crises that haunted the
American public during that time: the chaos of economic systems and the debate
over individual rights for all persons. A haunted house with its shrieks and
shimmers and creaking boards is a different sort of evidence from the literary
spectral images I explore throughout this project, yet I begin with these houses
because they are sites of American cultural memory, because they spark
imagination, and because they reside (and have always resided) as spectral sites, as
haunted representations.

To be haunted is to experience tension and discomfort and fear and
fascination. It is an emotional response to a sensory trigger; it is to hear, to see, to
feel something that crosses the boundaries of what one considers real (bodily and
materially), of what one considers actual (culturally), or of what one considers
possible (scientifically). Antebellum citizens perceived, in the act of counterfeiting
and in the act of guiding escaped slaves, this crossing of boundaries. The Rankin
House and The Counterfeit House are constructions of intricate skill, wood and brick
perimeters devised to allow freedom of movement within and permission and
access to the chosen, while cloaking, denying, and stalling that access from others.
Antebellum writers constructed similar perimeters in literature, with apparitional
characters, objects, places, and actions that hold the spectral space within. These literary representations are not as they appear. They hold secrets. They allow for movement within. They cloak and stall their position and grant access to the few who seek them.

Spectral imagery in antebellum literature is invested in the reimagining of boundaries, in part, because antebellum Americans were immersed in a culture of change. Progress in technological and medical advancements expanded the parameters of what seemed possible, and, in that expansion, the limits of the possible became less clear. This symbolic shifting of borders coincides with several border alterations of the physical United States during this time; through war, exploration, expansion, and legislation, the physical structure of the United States changed (positioning its borders and the structure of its identity, then, in the eyes of the American public, as utterly malleable, variable, and unfixed).11

Antebellum writers, I argue, used spectral imagery to reflect the uncertainty and ambiguity of their era, while, at the same time, making bold (even if apparitionally veiled) claims about their present and potential political and social realities. Apparitionality hovers at each unfixed border as the symbolic referent of potential and loss. It engages the hazy borders between fear and hope, between failure and culmination; it engages, also, an existence beyond failure, beyond death, beyond what is known. The depiction of an apparition and its supernatural qualities (including temporal, spatial, and extra-sensory manipulations) represents a space of possibility and situates the cultural condition of needing, wanting, fearing, and striving for possibility as a complexity of lived experience.
Ghostly and supernatural images have always had a role in literary representation -- one might quickly recall Mythology's transformations, Shakespeare's haunted characters and Gothic haunted castles -- yet, antebellum spectrality employs, I believe, a distinct and distinguishable purpose. Building upon Washington Irving’s ghostly legends and Charles Brockden Brown's psychological narratives, writers in the decades preceding the Civil War used spectrality to explore the specific boundaries of their social positionality, testing those parameters and ultimately examining the potential of escape from or transformation within economic identity. Ostensibly free from aristocrats and gentry, from the class-caste system that fixed many economic positions in Europe, American citizens could not help but see their social positions as potentially in flux. Historian Oz Frankel describes the phenomena as an assumption: “that economic mobility was always possible, that talent and hard work would be recognized, that modest comforts in the present were the just rewards of such previous efforts, and that the ability to secure an even better economic future for one’s children was the ultimate payoff. Yet, while prosperous times encouraged this optimism, economic downturns revealed the fragility of such beliefs.”12 Benjamin Franklin's self-made man beckoned, a looming figure of the possible, and that loom of possibility wove a liminal space where one might simultaneously exist in the “what is” and the “what might or might not be.”

I conceive of haunting (in literature, in the minds of antebellum citizens, and in the sounds and shimmers imagined in historical houses still today) as a reaction to those boundary crossings. Thinking about antebellum reactions to the counterfeit
bill and the escaped slave (and about our current reactions to structures of
deception, our fascination with the voices of trauma that cross the temporal and
spatial plane) helps me to imagine how the spectral depictions of wish and
possibility so prevalent in the Panic literature of the 1830s shifted and morphed
throughout the antebellum era into a haunting consideration of change and its
implications, the fear of the unknown, the discomfort of expanding borders, and the
tensions of progress. The counterfeit bill and the escaped slave are symbols of an
unsettled populace, distrustful and dissatisfied with the promises of market
equivalence and National equality. Like the trap doors and the false chimneys of
Ohio’s fanciful houses, antebellum literary specters are structures of measured
access: observation points hidden in plain sight, flickering signals to approach what
lies within.

**Possibility and Fragility, Longing and Dread**

Haunting is about “representation and circulation,” a way to express “how
knowledge comes together and also ...how it breaks apart...an experience that
emerges at the crossroads between what we know well and what we do not know
easily.”

Marissa Parham, *Haunting and Displacement*

Spectral images haunt antebellum texts. Like the revenants they represent,
the specters return, they recur, they “begin,” as Jacques Derrida explains, “by coming
back” – the drawn ghosts in Edward Clay’s lithographs; the hazy figures looming in
Theophilus Fisk’s speeches; the supernatural abilities and otherworldly powers in
Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Seven Gables* and Martin Delany’s *Blake*; the fading
ethereality, the moral memory of E.D.E.N. Southworth’s and Harriet Prescott
Spofford’s and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s mothers and sisters and daughters. The specters return. They begin by coming back.

I find in these recurrences a pattern of possibility and fragility, longing and dread that challenges imagination and reaches, ceaselessly toward representation. Possibility, fragility, longing, and dread fuel both hearts and markets, and it is in this crux, this confluence of immaterial identity and material value that I read the spectral image as economy and as identity. The connection between spectral representation and economic history is not directly causal nor equivalent, but something nuanced and intimate and complex. Like a shared existence.¹³

In my dissertation project, *Apparitional Economies: Spectral Imagery in the Antebellum Imagination*, I examine the ways in which apparitional images, found prevalently in antebellum discourse, reflect and critically appraise the economic and social uncertainty of the era, exposing the connections between large social and political factors and local, personal experience. My exploration of antebellum spectral imagery has revealed rich sites of interpretation in which literature and textual documentation become the space to understand the speculative fantasy and cultural risk inherent in both economic practices and individual lives. Theorist Jean-Joseph Goux explains, in his comprehensive study of capitalist exchange and its social and cultural implications, that the symbolic economy works as a metaphor for identity and human relations. Money, in other words, provides a philosophical medium for discussions of identity. Economic circulation and exchange can be emblematic of the dynamics of social representation and desire.¹⁴ *Apparitional Economies* is invested in exploring these dynamics of social representation and
desire through both a historical consideration of economic conditions throughout the antebellum era and an exploration of how local communities and cultural identities were affected by shifts in financial markets and social practices.

Interpretive tensions emerge in this project as some authors, like Edgar Allan Poe, imagine a discernable, invariant identity, a standard unchanging that looks outward at the horror of bodily manipulation and death, while others, like Robert Montgomery Bird and Nathaniel Hawthorne envision spectrality as not disparate from normality, but that which approaches the normal. The foundation of horror in Bird’s and Hawthorne’s visions is an understanding that identity is not fixed, but, rather, subject to the iterations of economic and social change, utterly variable, not a ghost story to be controlled, but a social order that cannot be. Crises of confidence plague antebellum economics, creating continual disruptions to the social order and providing a constant backdrop of potential danger to those who must find themselves worthy of investment, who must become the bearers of speculative risk.

I consider spectral power in antebellum texts as haunting that is temporally dislocated or, perhaps, temporally expanded from more traditional readings. Antebellum spectrality is speculatively positioned as a present haunted more by the future than by the past -- not by a fated future, a prognostication as Scrooge encountered in Dickens’ classic tale, but by an unscripted vastness, hazy with potential outcomes. I’m interested in the cultural ramifications of hope, in the haunting, sometimes crippling fear and dread of the not yet. I look to “what might or might not be” and its power within antebellum textual representation and economic speculation. Spectrality in either setting evokes both the limits and the limitlessness
of possibility through its supernatural power. In an era that looked continually to the future -- to the establishment of a capitalist economy, to the expansion of the West, to the resolution of the debate over slavery, to the success or failure of the democratic experiment, spectral images prove apt symbols. Spectrality imagines the limits and the limitlessness of progress, expansionism, wealth, and power: concerns that pervaded antebellum American economics, politics, and personal existence. The emerging American economy was fueled by paper currency, speculation, and credit that resulted in public economic uncertainty and crises of representation. Spectral imagery captures both in its discursive power.

My project contributes to American Studies and literary scholarship by engaging and developing discussions formulated in works such as Karen Halttunen’s *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America* (1982); Dana Nelson’s *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (1998); and David Anthony’s *Paper Money Men: Commerce, Manhood, and the Sensational Public Sphere in Antebellum America* (2009), works that imagine, through archival materials and diverse textual genres, the effects of social and political forces on antebellum persons and community connections.\(^{15}\) I work toward a temporal, spatial, and economic reimagining of the spectral that expands upon traditional readings of Gothic literature (to which many, but not all of the texts I examine could be categorized). Teresa Goddu’s *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (1997) is one of several works that have provided that foundation. I join the historical conversations of Edward Baptist and Jessica Lepler, among others, as they consider the experiences of persons affected by
economic trauma, fixing attention to personal, individual experience and to culture as a constitutive element of economic practice. Apparitional Economies challenges and reconsiders traditional temporal interpretations of spectral imagery as the fictional representation of past trauma. Grief and trauma scholarship such as Hershini Bhana Young’s Haunting Capital: Memory, Text and the Black Diasporic Body (2005) and Dana Luciano’s Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America (2007), along with other studies of loss such as Karen Sanchez-Eppler’s “Then When We Clutch Hardest: On the Death of a Child and the Replication of an Image,” (1999) inform and inspire my expanded theorization of the spectral image while anchoring its continued presence as a site of loss and mourning.

The specter is a space of potential and lack that exists in continual exchange. That exchange is desire, and the value inherent in the spectral substitution reveals much about society’s protections, its beauty and its longings. Anthropologist David Graeber notes:

Many anthropologists have long felt we really should have a theory of value: that is, one that seeks to move from understanding how different cultures define the world in radically different ways...to how, at the same time, they define what is beautiful or worthwhile, or important about it. To see how meaning, one might say, turns into desire.

Locating desire in spectral exchange reveals important aspirations and experiences of local society. And through that exploration of local experience, we may begin to understand the nuances of complex personhood and individual experience, described eloquently by Sociologist Avery Gordon in her study Ghostly Matters:

[All people...remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others. Complex personhood means that
people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles, and also transform themselves. Complex personhood means that even those called ‘Other’ are never never that. Complex personhood means that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about society’s problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward... Complex personhood means that groups of people will act together, that they will vehemently disagree with and sometimes harm each other, and that they will do both at the same time... At the very least, complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people’s lives are simultaneously straightforward and full or enormously subtle meaning.

Through Graeber’s anthropological and Gordon’s sociological views, I affirm the importance of the spectral image as an imaginative literary construct that provides access to antebellum value systems and desires. I seek, in these literary representations that hold the desire, the beauty, and the worthwhile of a past and distant culture, that which is available, that which is entangled and woven, that which antebellum imagination (and our current imagination looking back with forward thought) is reaching toward.

This pursuit of the “reaching toward” is, also, in itself, a reminder that economic influence and representation in spectral antebellum literature relies not only on the recorded economies of currency and credit and investment, but also upon the social economy, interactions with community, culture, and environment that influenced personal decision-making and measures of identity valuation, ways of thinking and processing information. Kurt Heinzelman defines this economic scope in *The Economics of the Imagination*:

[E]conomy suggests both frugality and efficiency; by extension, it applies to the management of many structures, political and domestic, commercial and aesthetic. In its largest sense, the word asserts our capacity for creating intellectual structures and for imaginatively regulating them. It indicates our
ability to discriminate between ends and means, and therefore, as a reflector of human choice, it represents the thoroughness of our self-consciousness.20

This expansion of economic scope is important to a study of the spectral representation of economic antebellum systems because the progress and movement of markets, investments, and invention challenged and changed not only the financial situation of American households, but an intellectual understanding of the world, personal investment in ideas, and paths of ethical thought. Historian Jeffery Sklansky connects this economic self-consciousness to the rise of American sociology, transcendental psychology, the shifting nineteenth-century political economy, and the social sciences.21 It is a connection acknowledged in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1860 essay, "Wealth": “The merchant’s economy is a course symbol of the soul’s economy,”22 and the correlation eloquently reiterated by British art critic and philosopher of social economics, John Ruskin, in his 1862 text, Unto This Last:

Three-fourths of the demands existing in the world are romantic, founded on visions, idealisms, hopes, and affections, and the regulation of the purse is, in its essence, regulation of the imagination and the heart. Hence, the right discussion of the nature of price is a very high metaphysical and psychical problem.”23

Access to money, the desire to acquire goods or services, the decision to purchase, the pursuit of exchange, the transaction, and the culmination: these economic practices are, for Ruskin, romantic visions, ideals, affections. To decide how to spend money, to have the ability to spend money, or, conversely, to be economically separated from one’s romantic hopes and desires – to financially regulate the imagination and the heart -- is an important aspect of antebellum culture and individuality. This consideration of the economy and its actions – of spending, investing, pricing, trading -- as a projection of self-consciousness and human
psychology is not new, nor is it yarded in the American antebellum era. But a consideration of economic representations as complicit with social and political and self-conscious interests is remarkable in this, and any, era when economic policies and technological progress fueled uncertainty and challenged confidence and conviction.

In other words, progress-driven transformations in science and technology, along with a shifting economic and social landscape, inspired supernatural literary representations of potential outcomes – of the wish and the fear of possibility – and provided an imaginative space to explore the prospects of change. Spectrality, in this usage, is a literary site of investment, an exploration of confidence and imagined power that crosses the boundaries of scientific discovery, economics, personal identity, and spirituality; it is literary speculation playing out scenarios that yield potential return, that risk profound loss.

**The Spectral Turn**

To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration.

Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

The time is out of joint.

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act I, Scene 5

Somewhere between...the Actual and the Imaginary...ghosts might enter...without affrighting us.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*
This project joins, also, an emerging trend of cultural, spectral scholarship that takes, as its inaugurative work, Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*. Derrida’s text is a call to re-see the specter of Marx, a presence that, he avows, still haunts literary and social criticism. In this pursuit, Derrida considers the moment of encounter, the specter’s onset, its arrival heralded with suspicion, with the shock of sight, with a necessary and frantic re-assemblage of thought. He asks, throughout this work, what is it to see the specter? Using the figure of King Hamlet’s ghost, Derrida positions the scholar as skeptic and as the instrument by which the specter might be read. Derrida reads Horatio’s vision of King Hamlet’s ghost as that of a scholar as spectator, one who is unlikely to believe in ghosts, who would seek to reinstate the distinction between the real and the unreal. It is a difficult distinction, one that rattles the mind: “Peace, Break thee off!” Marcellus intones at the sudden appearance of King Hamlet’s ghost.24 His exclamation is both an entreaty to hush Bernardo and to quiet his own thoughts, and perhaps, also, an acknowledgment that with the arrival, the existence, of the specter, all peace has, inevitably, been broken. Marcellus’s focus quickly turns, however, to identification and communication. Derrida reads Marcellus’s appeal, “Thou art a scholar; speak to it, Horatio”25 as anticipation of another scholar who “would finally be capable, beyond the opposition between presence and non-presence, actuality and inactuality, life and non-life, of thinking the possibility of the specter, the specter as possibility.”26 Becoming a spectator of the specter requires both discernment and expectation, the ability to draw lines of distinction while erasing the borders that limit possibility.
Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren chronicle the history of spectral scholarship and theory in “Conceptualizing Spectralities,” positioning the skepticism of Freud, Adorno, Abraham, and Torok (theorists they term “ghostbusters”) as predecessors to the illuminatingly simple redirection Derrida offers in *Specters of Marx*: the scholar may denounce the pragmatic possibility of the actual ghost to “pursue...that which haunts *like a ghost*,” that which operates with the mechanisms of the ghost or that which employs the ghost as a representational symbol.27 Blanco and Peeren reaffirm, “to believe or not believe in ghosts no longer involves a determination about the empirical (im)possibility of the supernatural,”28 and Frederic Jameson, in his response to Derrida’s text, asserts it this way:

*Spectrality does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and maybe even the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work in the living present: all it says, if it can be thought to speak, is that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be, that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us.*29

This redirection from a debate over the possibility of the supernatural to an acknowledgment of the specter’s narrative, symbolic power -- which includes, as Jameson notes, the specter’s ability to reveal, at the moment of its presence, our tenuous authority over our own living present, a power contemplated throughout the text that begins with Derrida’s declaration, “I would like to learn to live finally”30 -- is identified by some as being “The Spectral Turn,” an intervention into the established methods of spectral interpretation that inspired and produced a wealth of new scholarly attention to ghosts and ghost symbols. Blanco and Peeren are quick to point out that Derrida’s consideration of the spectral dates back to the 1970s, that he was influenced by previous theoretical scholarship, and that several
scholarly projects (which embrace the concepts of this spectral turn) pre-date Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, including Anthony Vidler’s *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (1992) and Terry Castle’s *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (1993). However, despite these evidentiary claims of spectral scholarship existing before and outside of Derrida’s text, the direct theoretical response to his work, including the edited volume, *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx* and the clear escalation of spectral scholarship that follows *Specters of Marx*’s publication delineate Derrida’s work as a pivotal moment in the theorization and cultural interpretation of the specter.

The ghost or specter, operating outside of empirical possibility, maintains an existence outside of full comprehension. Derrida states, “One does not know; not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge.” Blanco and Peeren concur:

The ghost, even when turned into a conceptual metaphor, remains a figure of unruliness pointing to the tangibly ambiguous. While it has insight to offer, especially into those matters that are commonly considered not to matter and into the ambiguous itself, its own status as discourse or epistemology is never stable, as the ghost also questions the formation of knowledge itself and specifically invokes what is placed outside it, excluded from perception and, consequently, from both the archive as the depository of the sanctioned, acknowledged past and politics as the (re)imagined present and future.

The specter, then, as an ambiguous, yet insightful space, holds the ability to reveal and to question constructs of knowledge, to challenge what has been chosen as the archive of cultural memory and to envision, through its critique of political and social systems, a revised present and future.
The scholarship that emerges from The Spectral Turn is prolific and cross-disciplinary. Ranging from the literary to the historical to the sociological, spectral scholarship theorizes the cultural stakes of memory, media, subjectivity, trauma, and place. Categories of spectral scholarship identified by Blanco and Peeren include: spectropolitics (“a politics of or for specters – designed to address how, in different parts of the world, particular subjects become prone to social erasure, marginalization, and precarity”); spectral interventions in media (considering “the telegraph...X-ray...cinema, television, radio, and the internet” and the ways in which “their invention, establishment, and global consolidation was – and to some extent remains – intimately linked with the circulation of practices and discourses of the supernatural”); spectral subjectivities of gender, sexuality, and race (“categories of social differentiation...seen as themselves spectral, in the sense that they are based on retrospectively naturalized, perfomatively ingrained distinctions that require continuous rematerialization”); spectral spaces (which demonstrate how “haunting, as a conceptual metaphor, can elucidate the way architecture, landscape, geography, and tourism mediate particular presences and absences”); and haunted historiography (which concerns “the making of history and the way this process becomes entangled...with notions of possession, the gothic and uncanny, ...the fine line that separates presence from absence, evidence from the barely perceptible”). This “constellation called spectrality” encompasses far more than literary critique and asserts the specter as “a conceptual metaphor capable of bringing to light and opening up to analysis hidden, disavowed, and neglected aspects of the social and cultural realm, past and present.” To see the specter is an
opportunity of cultural and social vision, an enhancement to established fields of scholarly investigation, the presence of an absence, a disruption, that allows the philosophical consideration of our own living present. As spectators of the specter, we may put aside skepticism to see the opportunity of the spectral space, to entreat, as Horatio: “Stay!” and then, “speak, speak! I charge thee, speak!”

**Apparitional Economies**

To be haunted and to write from that location, to take on the condition of what you study, is not a methodology or a consciousness you can simply adopt or adapt as a set of rules or an identity; it produces its own insights and blindesses.  

* Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*

*Apparitional Economies*’ examination of the literature and cultural history of the antebellum era traces, first, the literary spectral representations of American economic, social, and political policy and explores the ways in which local effects of such policy were viewed as being without (or outside of) substance or physicality or human ability or time. American fiction during this time period has been consistently characterized as being sensational and romantic. I contend that this literature is not operating as escape, but as a literary reflection of the instability and apparitionality of antebellum economic and social systems as they functioned on a local level. I am particularly interested in the intimacies required of negotiation and financial exchange in this time period when the absence of a national currency placed thousands of unique bills in circulation, when both criminal and corporate counterfeiters thrived, when speculation of the west and investment into technology
funded dreams and bankrupted households. Economic survival or success required an intimate understanding of one’s self and a perceptive understanding of others. Economic viability required presentation and control. I see these same negotiations working in the literature of the time period, sometimes in satirical polemics, sometimes in social representations of value, worth, and power, but each with an examination of how literary and social moments could exist -- could be seen -- outside of time, physicality or natural ability.

The expansion of ability, the erasure of limitation and time and physicality operates as both wish and fear within the spectral image. The space of the specter holds this potential of wish and fear, and provides a site in which to contrast human experience with supernatural representation. Sociologist Avery Gordon explains, “even those who live in the most dire circumstances possess a complex and oftentimes contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never adequately glimpsed by viewing them as victims or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents.”

Spectral imagery in literature provides an important tool to begin to glimpse the humanity and subjectivity of antebellum life experience. Haunting is at once victimizing and superhuman. To haunt or be haunted is to feel both empowered and vulnerable (as the supernaturally enabled or as recipient of the spectral gaze). To that end, literary depictions of haunting and paranormal action evoke, congruently, the fear of victimization and the wish for expanded ability, providing an affective connection between these preternaturally incited emotions and the similarly constructed fears and wishes that attended antebellum
relationships with technological progress, social representation, and financial volatility.

In effect, writers during this time were buying into ideas, investing the surface potential of scientific or technological discovery with the weight of personal equity. What could progress – as a verified or imagined expansion of limits – mean to knowledge? To spirituality? To economic distinction? To the privacy and understanding of the self? Apparitional Economies explores antebellum spectral representation, specifically its interpretive space, its temporality, and its activity within the text, and, then, the social and economic implications of that representation.

Chapter Two, “Spectral Currency: Hard Times and the Identity Economy” for example, looks at the spectral images employed in representing the financially devastating Panic of 1837. The unique spectral imagery found in Panic lithographs, speeches, and fiction, does not conjure past trauma (the expected temporal position of haunting) but the temporal positions of present lack (representing the hardship of need), and future space (as the uncertain future looming before those living in financial crisis) – these are temporal positions and textual intercessions of immateriality and imminence. This discussion moves through political pamphlets and lithographs depicting the Panic and a comprehensive reading of Robert Montgomery Bird’s anonymously published picaresque novel, Sheppard Lee.

Chapter Three, “‘I Look, You Look’: Eidola, Discernment, and the Slant Exchange,” examines the system of value and exchange that fuels spectral representation, positioning the substitutive worth of eidola, man, and specter as an
economic equation primed to re-envision the standards and simulacra of gold, currency, and counterfeit. In this chapter, I examine the antebellum public’s fascination with perceptive ability and value against the historical record of economic crises of perception and value, namely counterfeit bills and confidence men. I read these historical and cultural elements in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Poe’s “The Man that Was Used Up,” and Whitman’s spectral poems.

Chapter Four, “The Limits and the Limitless: Stakes of Progress and Spectral Power,” explores the space of the specter as a condition of near limitlessness, of undefined borders, and unknowable abilities. Set against the cultural landscape of economic recovery, industrial expansion, and technological progress, literary spectral abilities, like mesmerism, transmigration, communication with the dead, testimony of afterlife, and omniscient mirrors and paintings and daguerreotypes, encapsulate a fear of unchecked power, of the potentially limitless conditions that progress might conjure or discovery might reveal. Through the historical lens of the Fox Sisters’ claims of otherworldly communication, the rise of spiritualism and pseudo-sciences (like mesmerism and phrenology), and the prevalence of newspapers and regular publications that documented and promoted these endeavors, I read the literary representations of limitless possibility in Poe’s mesmeric tales, Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables*, and Fitz James O’Brien’s macabre short stories as precarious to the lived experience of the middle class, a distinction defined always relationally, existing as a tension between the anchored poor and the limitless wealthy. The prevalence of limitless tropes in these literary and cultural examples challenges the limits and markings of perceived class worth.
A specter exists outside space and time, and representations of economic and social existence incorporate spectrality, in part, to imagine and depict transcendence from a fixed place and time, and from conventional methods of thought and practice. The specific, fixed place and time of the antebellum era is, economically and socially, chaotic and unfixed, and it is in this unsettled space, this time of historic fiscal uncertainty, that literary and extra-literary texts express fantasy and desire, expressions of longing countered by the hard facts of economic, social, and bodily limitation or hauntingly taunted by the potential privilege of limitless power. How might the tension of fantasy and reality inform the very makeup of personhood under speculative capitalism? How might the essence of a person be changed if exchanged?

Avery Gordon contends that spectral imagery provides a glimpse of the lived experience of complex personhood in its most nuanced forms. Gordon recognizes that people are haunted by things they can't always name, and that their lives -- "simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning" -- are not easily represented. Spectrality in the novels, stories, poems, lithographs, speeches, letters, and newsprint of the antebellum era provides an imaginative possibility of that representation.
The Counterfeit House operated as a museum for many years at its location on Gift Ridge Rd., Adams County, Ohio (near Manchester). Word of mouth accounts (visitors' own observations and their conversations with Jo Lynn Spires, detailing her understanding of the history of the house and its purpose, events, and hauntings) include distance runner Brian Stark's encounter with Spires and the house during his running travels across America, reported in Brian Stark, *Getting to the Point: In a Dozen Pair of Shoes* (Bloomington: Authorhouse Self-Publishing, 2006), 67-69. Web; and a similar account, recounted by two hikers who spent time with Spires. See, "Karen and Jerry's American Discovery Trail Journal," *Trail Journals* (June 9, 2010), http://www.trailjournals.com/entry.cfm?id=315992. The Counterfeit House has also been documented in The History Channel's documentary, “Making a Buck,” Tower Productions, 2001, and in the Numismatic Bibliomaniac Society’s newsletter that updates readers on the condition and history.

The haunted aspects of each house are reported also through these sources as well as in a travel site blog, which offers additional conjecture: “[The Counterfeit House] is said to be haunted by many people, for many years. The owner’s family and friends talk of haunted sightings and of hearing an organ playing sometimes at night. As of now, the house sits cold, empty, and with no future.” Melissa Taylor, 28 Oct. 2012 http://www.roadsideamerica.com/tip/16931 4 Jan 2013.

5 Quoted in Hagedorn, Beyond the River, 139. Hagedorn reenacts the story of the woman’s escape, her crossing of the ice, Rankin House stay and her subsequent Underground Railroad journey to her eventual destination of Chatham, Ontario through the eyes of John Rankin’s sons. See Hagedorn, Beyond the River, 136-139.

The story that inspired Harriet Beecher Stowe resonated with the citizens of Ripley as well. In a series of interviews between 1886 and 1889, Frank Gregg of the Chattanooga News interviewed Ripley inhabitants who might remember the incident. His notes from his talk with John Rankin Jr. reveal this first hand account: “‘My narrative opens in my own home which sat on top of a high hill just back of Ripley, Ohio,’ [Rankin, Jr.] began. ‘I was aroused by father calling up the stairs for my brother Calvin and myself. I had answered that call too many times not to know what it meant. Fugitive slaves were downstairs. Ahead of us was a long walk across the hills in the dead of night, under a cold winter’s sky. I was only a boy at the time and like all the boys of the town had been down on the ice that very afternoon, knew the ice was rotten, with air holes and cracks extending almost across the river. So when father said the woman in our home had crossed upon the ice, I could not believe the statement until I heard the woman’s own story...’” Gregg also spoke with a Mrs. Baird, who recounted, “As it was against the law to give assistance to runaway slaves, no one ever admitted seeing them or rendering them aid. But the next morning after this woman did cross, the town was full of rumors. The poor condition of the ice was what made the people wonder how she did it and lived.” Mrs. Baird stated that the woman’s shawl was found at the riverside the following morning, as she “had dropped [it] in her flight.” Qtd. in Hagedorn, Beyond, 277.

6 Ibid., 139.

7 Historian Stephen Kelley, who visited the house in 1973, claims to have seen these bloodstains. Homren, E-sylum, par. 13.

8 Kelley acknowledges that the reports of the tunnel’s size and the claim of Tompkins’ fantastic escape do seem “far-fetched,” yet there is “evidence of a past explosion” that could corroborate the story. Homren, E-sylum, par. 15.

9 Ibid., par. 7.

10 One visitor to the Rankin House described its history as being decidedly “American” due to Rankin’s independent thinking and ferocity of purpose. “Visitor Log Book,” 6 May 2012, The Rankin House Museum, 11 August 2012. Along with the story of Tompkins’ deadly defense of his house, Rankin, in defense of his home and the fugitive slaves he protected there, offered this account of “midnight assassins” who intended to burn down his house and barn in a letter to the Ripley Telegraph,

27
September 13, 1841: “I am charged with feeding the hungry and clothing the naked; the poor man, white or black, has never been turned away empty from my door. And for this I must stand guard over my property and family while others sleep in safety... Now I desire all men to know that I am not to be deterred from what I believe to be my duty by fire and sword. I also wish all to know that I feel it is my duty to defend my HOME to the very uttermost and that it is as much a duty to shoot the midnight assassin in his attacks as it is to pray.” Qtd. in Hagedorn, Beyond, 222.

11 These physical changes include the admissions of Florida and Texas as US states in 1845; the establishment of the 49th Parallel through the Oregon Treaty of 1846; the acquisition of present day California, Nevada, Utah, and portions of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which ended the Mexican-American War in 1848; and the Gadsden Purchase of 1853 which added the southernmost portion of Arizona and New Mexico and established, through that purchase, the present day borders of the contiguous 48 states.


13 I have long been fascinated by the intimacy of the leaves outside my office window, the arching branches of the maple and the magnolia reaching in heavy arcs toward one another, leaves intermingling like finger tips glancing. The distant and distinct trunks have little to do with the folding of maple leaf upon magnolia in that framed, connective space. Leaves live there together, in the crooked path of water droplets, the intertwining of twigs and stems. They know nothing but the other. The roots and bark of their separate systems are but remote foundations, untouched and unseen sources for their growth, while their shared existence is one of relation and connection. These leaves remind me of the relations and connections I imagine here, textual moments when spectral literary representations co-exist with economic representations and everyday negotiations. The maple does not cause the magnolia. The magnolia trunk is nothing like the maple. But, here, in the frame of my window, is an intimate connection, a relation that cannot be denied.


Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 4-5.


William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 1, Line 52

Ibid., Line 54.


Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xvi.


Ibid., 19. Emphasis original.

Ibid., 20.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid., 21.


Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 1, Line 65.

Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 4

Ibid., 5.
Chapter Two

Spectral Currency: Hard Times and the Identity Economy

Thomas Paine’s 1786 treatise on banking and paper money positions the emerging American economy as a spectral “system” in which “safety and certainty is overturned, and property set afloat.” Paine specifically warns that “paper issued by an assembly as money is...like putting an apparition in the place of a man; it vanishes with looking at it, and nothing remains but the air.”¹ Antebellum depictions of economic spectrality rekindled Paine’s images of phantom ethereality some forty to fifty years later: in an 1837 pamphlet, Specie Humbug, the writer anticipates “making money out of nothing.”² and minister and public orator, Theophilus Fisk, writes that same year of the economy “floating” on an “air bubble paper money nobility.”³ For many writers, spectrality provided a viable way to represent the uncertainty -- the power and the elusiveness -- of America’s continually evolving antebellum financial system, which included not only the “vanish[ing]” paper bills that flooded the market, but also the phantom returns imagined in unregulated speculation of the West and the system of incorporeal credit and exchange that relied and thrived on the industrialization of labor and the marketability of legally dead slaves. In several discursive forms, including pamphlets, speeches, cartoons, and novels, writers conjured spectral images to simultaneously reveal and cloak these complicated, and sometimes inexplicable, elements of American economic policies and practices. Antebellum spectral images, I find, mark the grim historical realities of economic strife, critique the emerging American capitalist economy, and
reveal the imagined futures of the American public. The specter both signifies the uncertainty of antebellum currency, speculation, and racial economics and allows a glimpse into the collective imagination of antebellum writers and citizens who constructed -- apparitionally -- what they could not otherwise quantify.

Historian Edward Baptist cautions that an apparitional perception and representation of economics might not capture the very real consequences of “apparitional” markets and exchange: “what bubbles into being is anything but mere vapor...[f]or in such financial exchanges we see not only the generation and transfer of real wealth -- that is, real effects, in the social and political world -- but also that such transfers can incorporate great violence and disruption for some as the causes of great profit for others.” Baptist’s reminder is important in discerning the critique behind spectral representations of the economy. The spectral imagery in Paine’s treatise and much of the antebellum discourse that follows is critical of an emerging financial system that espouses the potential of wealth, the promise of return, and the semblance of authenticity without supporting those representations with tangible or verifiable economic practices (what economic theorists of the time referred to as the “equilibrium”5) that would establish stable financial systems under which citizens could survive and possibly thrive. These critiques not only acknowledged America’s emerging symbolic economy, but expressed concern that unregulated speculation, un-backed paper bills, and inflated credit lines would create unsubstantiated fluctuations in the economic markets, fluctuations that could appear to be one thing before revealing themselves to be wholly another -- notably losses or counterfeits or inaccessible funds that would affect citizens’ abilities to
spend, save, and invest. The apparition serves as a symbol of those ethereal fluctuations that were, simultaneously, mesmerizing and terrifying. “Splendid fortunes...float[] in every breeze,” Fisk warns, “dazzling the eye of the beholder; hundreds and thousands [leave] their farms and workshops, plung[ing] into the maddening vortex with the vain hope of growing rich in a day.” The “maddening vortex” is economic risk, and its opportunity -- its prevalence -- in the rise of markets, Western expansion, and industrialization provides, as Fisk asserts, pull and force, inescapability, and the danger of descension, inevitabilities that also exist as tropes in the narrative of haunting -- Hamlet drawn to his father’s ghost despite Horatio’s warning, the sailors lured to Fata Morgana’s castles in the air. Like their fated literary ancestors, the dazzled thousands who left their trades to pursue the apparitional “splendid fortunes” in the “inflated bubbles of artificial value,...in this cloud of airy nothing” quickly became part of something they could no longer control, something much bigger than themselves. Spectrality has long represented that unknown power -- its immensity and its immateriality, its mystery and its shimmer.

Baptist’s acknowledgment of the very real consequences of apparitionally represented economic fluctuations contextualizes Fisk’s maddening vortex and helps to explain a shift I perceive in spectral imagery produced around an important site of “violence and disruption” -- the financial uncertainty and devastation surrounding the Panic of 1837. As Baptist asserts, the trauma of hardship was anything but apparitional for those who sought jobs and shelter and food for their families in the months leading up to the Panic and the many years of depression that
followed. Yet, interestingly, the spectral image does not vanish from Panic discourse, but merely shifts in its interpretative valence. The spectral images created in Panic discourse are revenants of earlier spectral critiques that relied on the unsubstantiated nothingness of the specter to represent an insubstantial economy. Pre-Panic critiques point to the absence of material value in credit and currency, comparing, for example, paper money with an apparition to emphasize what it is not, what it is lacking. Close examination of paper currency (if we return to Paine’s critique) reveals its insubstantiality when “nothing remains but the air.” Spectrality, in such usage, devalues both the specter and its symbolic referent; the immateriality of the specter (what the specter is not) is the primary symbolic force of the critique.

The spectral images that emerge at the site of the 1837 financial crisis fare a bit differently under close examination. The tension between perception and reality shifts from a “this is not that” critique to a more nuanced configuration that commingles what is perceived and what is verifiable within a spectral image that presents elements of both. The uncertain future looming before those living in financial crisis becomes part of the spectral representation, expanding the temporal register of the specter to include not only present lack, but the potential outcome of the personal crisis – an imagined future that encompasses the hope of achieving (or regaining) personal success and the fear of suffering greater failures. The primary symbolic force of critique becomes not just present absence, but future space, not immateriality, but imminence. This usage does not devalue the specter, nor the referent, but instead inscribes each with the incredible and terrifying powers of
possibility – the haunting of an imagined future. Specters and incidents of haunting have traditionally been identified as markers of the past, as the return of a traumatic or instructive memory.\textsuperscript{10} Expanding the temporal register of representation and interpretation to include present lack and future uncertainty is particularly salient (as this chapter and Dickens’ beloved holiday tale will attest) at a moment of crisis when present lack forecasts an uncertain future.\textsuperscript{11} This is haunting at the site of trauma rather than haunting as a recollection of trauma.

Antebellum writers and readers of these images witnessed and experienced personal and social economic trauma in newspaper reports, in their own communities, and in their own homes; the “lack” they represent with the apparitional form becomes, in these images, more than political banter. The apparition’s inevitable, devastating lack (its display of what it is not) creates a space to be filled. In other words, the lack that Paine and Fisk and others perceived as a viable mode of spectral critique and a prediction of social danger is not a vacuum; the space created by that lack -- the space absented by material form and certainty – must, as it is socially actualized, be filled by the spectator of the specter, and the possibility of that encumbrance is, I believe, a site of interpretive force, a site that I’ll call the spectral imaginative.

The spectral imaginative is a space of interpretation. It is, for me, the space that opens the spectral image to a consideration of imagined perceptions and realities, revealing the sociological conditions and the fantasies of its readers and writers. The spectral imaginative is a space of fantasy, a space of wish and fear. It is the space that Avery Gordon pursues in her sociological study of haunting, \textit{Ghostly}
Matters: “that which makes its mark by being there and not being there at the same
time,” that which she acknowledges as absence: “I see you are not there.”
We find the spectral imaginative by looking at the space created by the inevitable lack of the
specter, and discerning how that space of the spectral image might be filled. The
ghost of King Hamlet, for example, represents present lack in that it is the absence of
the man, the space that was his body, his power, his presence. The space created by
that lack is young Hamlet’s emergence, the space he is drawn to fill, the immensity
of potential that can be his revenge narrative or his demise. The entrance of King
Hamlet’s ghost creates that space, and the remainder of Shakespeare’s play is
Hamlet’s attempt to fill it. The specter exists outside of time ("the time is out of
joint” Hamlet proclaims upon seeing his father’s ghost); expanding the temporal
register of interpretation to include not only past traumatic power, but also present
“lack,” and the future spectral imaginative (the potential that fills the space of the
specter’s absented form) reveals nuanced, layered readings of antebellum economic
existence in spectral images that function as sites of individual and collective
fantasy, sites that can provide a glimpse into the realm of an uncertain future filled
with fear and with hope.

The negotiation between spectator and specter relies on perception, visibility
and belief. Paine’s “paper as money,” remember, “vanishes with looking at it.” One
examines the paper currency to see beneath its superficiality and realize what is
missing. In Specters of Marx, Derrida reminds that becoming a spectator of the
specter requires both discernment and expectation, the ability to draw lines of
distinction while erasing the borders that limit possibility. The spectral images I
present here open beneath scrutiny, discernment, and an expansion of interpretive borders, revealing (“with looking at it”) the futures – both economic and personal – that lurk, that glisten within hazy form.

This chapter looks at a cluster of documents written in response to the Panic of 1837 (including the economic turmoil preceding and following the Panic event) to investigate how each employs spectral imagery to represent lack and the spectral imaginative and, through those registers, the cultural experiences of hardship and wish, the span of panic that occurred when the oft-perceived “apparitional” economy produced the very material, embodied experience of living through hardship and worry. My primary artifact is Robert Montgomery Bird’s anonymously published picaresque Sheppard Lee (1836), an entertaining novel that relies upon the hazy borders of perception and reality and provides an apt representative example of how spectral imagery could imagine potential, an escape from the weighty and seemingly inescapable constraints of poverty. Sheppard Lee is a fantasy of movement, of social mobility, within the stagnancy and embodiment of economically classed positionality. In the novel, the protagonist, Sheppard Lee, escapes his own poverty by becoming a phantom form that can enter and reanimate deceased bodies and experience their varied economic existences. Bird employs the spectral power of metempsychosis or spirit transmigration to enact one man’s fantasy of achieving national promise and personal economic dignity in a moment of national and personal trauma.

I preface my reading of Bird’s text, his essays, notes, and speeches with a look at two lithographs by Edward Williams Clay and the pamphlets of Theophilus Fisk. I
presage my approach to Bird’s fascinating treatise on perception and reality with these documents because I find in them the unique perspective of Panic texts’ political critique -- the complex representation of potential and loss, fear and hope, failure and desire within the spectral image – that is central to my analysis of Bird’s novel. I then read Bird’s text in correlation with historical evidence of the antebellum socio-economic climate and with an attention to how the novel uses spectrality to negotiate what I deem to be important social registers of the time: individual experience in the shadow of collective desire, economic experiences of the body, and the role of mental construction (or fantasy or the wish) in financial fluctuations, texts, and social representation.

In my pursuit, I rely on Jacqueline Rose’s description of fantasy, not as a private or salacious imagined desire, but as a “forging of the collective will” that frames, creates, and reveals community and communal desire. In my pursuit, I rely on Jacqueline Rose’s description of fantasy, not as a private or salacious imagined desire, but as a “forging of the collective will” that frames, creates, and reveals community and communal desire. I evoke Rose’s fantasy of the collective not to imply a universal experience or intent among antebellum writers or citizens, but to acknowledge the force of a collective desire instilled by national rhetoric and personal experience. Fantasies of personal improvement and national idealism are prevalent within the spaces of spectrality. Franklin’s self-made man still looms in antebellum culture, as do the acts of American heroes who orchestrated revolution and creation of the nation. Rose’s theory of fantasy exposes both the control and the subversion of the American ideological desire that holds success, status, and wealth as attainable through work and self-improvement. This desire and the confluence of the individual and the collective becomes, in Sheppard Lee, the power behind Bird’s use of spectral
transmigration. Sheppard’s metempsychosis works as the vehicle for both the
critique of individual experience and the consideration of collective desire.

The cyclical pattern of interpretation that I perceive moving through Bird’s
spectral depictions -- the body that wishes for the freedom of bodilessness as the
specter (through which we constantly recognize the embodiment that still wishes
for bodilessness) may find some anchor in Freud’s early discussions of fantasy.
Rose, in her consideration of Freud, asserts that “fantasy is progressive.” that it
“always heads for the world it only appears to have left behind.” The fantasy turns
back upon itself, just as the spectral revenant, Derrida reminds us, “begins by
coming back.” The fantasy is, in Rose’s consideration, a collective bond not unlike
mourning, “a tie which binds most powerfully at the very moment when, objectively
speaking at least, it has set you free.” This cyclical binding at the moment of
imagined freedom (producing the continued need for the escape of fantasy) recurs
in the spectral images I consider, the spectral fantasies that “only appear to...[leave]
behind” the burdened realities that created them. Bird’s use of metempsychosis in
the broken mind of an impoverished body attempts again and again to experience
the freedom of release only to be ensnared anew. The repeated acceptance of new
and inevitable burdens becomes the fantasy that overwhelms the repeated but
fleeting fantasy of escape. The use of spectral imagery as a discursive
representation of 1830s economic turmoil produces, then, in its hazy shadow, both
the wish of elusive opportunity and the counter-wish of managing the burden that is
represented by the body and that is the body it seeks to escape. The specter hovers
in these texts as the wish preferred, as the site of the spectral imaginative, while the
body cloaked in lack, the body we cannot help but see beneath the specter’s haze, exerts its dominant presence to reveal the counter-wish that can be neither escaped nor cloaked: the wish for economic existence and dignity within local experience.

In his consideration of Rose’s text, Donald Pease contends that “successfully produced state fantasies effect [the relationship with the national order] by inducing citizens to want the national order they already have.”19 The site of trauma that is the Panic of 1837 disrupts that relationship, displacing the public from what they “already have,” pushing the accepted fantasized order just out of reach. Economic trauma changes individual circumstance, skewing the collective fantasy and what it can return. The tension that I find in these spectral images is formulated at that site of disruption. One fantasy wishes for what was or what could be. The competing fantasy wishes for dignity and contentment within present circumstance. At this moment of national economic turmoil, the disruption to individual circumstance outpaces the correction of collective fantasy. Bird’s novel, especially, fictionalizes this breach, labeling the attempted reconciliation of circumstance and desire as madness.

The texts I’ve chosen to examine here position spectral imagery as cultural critique, as the lack and the spectral imaginative that merge experience and potential. That conflation -- experience and potential -- is, for me, a marker of the “complex personhood,” Avery Gordon seeks in her sociological study of spectral imagery and its role in storytelling and representation. Gordon notes that “the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about society’s problems are entangled and weave between what is
immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward.”

20 The spectral image is the site that holds both present position and future wish, the entanglement and the reaching toward. Lack tells present experience, its embodiment and its need. The space of the spectral imaginative is an inquiry into potential -- what is hoped for here, and what is feared? Each reveals complex personhood through the imaginative presentation of uncertainty and blame, of fear and hope, of panic and hard times that affected citizens’ families and their homes.

**The Burdened Body, The Spectral Escape**

There is no halting place – no neutral ground to be occupied – no medium – we must advance or recede – improve or deteriorate – our course must be upward and onward, or downward and backward. Theophilus Fisk, July 4, 1837 21

Two texts produced in the summer of 1837 employ the spectral image as the marker of economic potential and economic dignity: Edward Williams Clay’s lithograph, “The Times” (June 1837) and Theophilus Fisk’s speech, “Labor, the Only True Sense of Wealth,” reprinted in pamphlet form in late July of that year. Clay’s lithograph contrasts an optimistic vision of American economic prosperity (embraced and anticipated by many in the early nineteenth century) with the harsh realities of depression that followed the devastating Panic of 1837. In the lithograph, an airy visage with spectacles, top hat, pipe, and the label of “Glory” hovers above the discordant town. Glory, here, evokes Jackson’s economic promises and practices, the paternal legacy of great and prosperous men in America’s democratic experiment, and the oft-repeated rally for the populace to embrace their potential, seek their glory, and find prosperity through their own efforts.22 Glory is
potential, and, in this setting, that potential is the sun of prosperity. Clay’s sun, however, no longer functions as a bright light of hope or sustenance for the people below. The spectrality of the “sun” reveals the fantasy of authority that Jacqueline Rose identifies as a disembodiment of true power;\(^{23}\) the spectral sun grants the appearance of power, though we see no effective appearance of heat and light within the town scene. Clay’s critique is an indictment of Van Buren’s leadership and the Jacksonian policies that remain hovering above the people. The satiric “glory” of Jackson’s top hat is layered with a more wistful space, the lack, the absence of a glory that resembles salvation.

Clay’s visual organization reverses the hypotactic relationship common to European and early American landscapes -- here, the town is an overwhelmingly detailed visual horizon, dimensionally imposing, crowding itself upon the viewer, while the vast sky has become a horizon forgotten, no longer situated in the sightline of suffering, dropped gazes. The scene beneath, formerly illuminated by the supernal rays of possibility, now dwarfs the sky. A balloon bloated with the hot-air promises of “The Safety Fund” (the reserve of specie that each bank had pledged to hold as security) bursts in its Icarus-like rise, its smoke trail plummeting from unseen heights, arching away as if repelled from the unreachable rays. Those it carried fall helplessly through the air toward the Almshouse and the Bridewell debtors’ prison below. The gravity of hardship pulls everyone toward ground. A mother lies on the street with her baby as a drunken man totters above her. Unemployed men slump idly near signs offering speculative investments and money loans, while another mother and her child bend to panhandle.
The banks that require specie are empty, and the Mechanics Bank, which advertises “No Specie Payments” is mobbed by a crowd. The liquor store, the pawnbroker’s shop and the sheriff’s office are bustling, while the Manufactory is “closed for the present.” A sign beneath the American flag marks the “61st anniversary of our Independence.” “Independence” is a charged word in this setting, evoking liberty not as national freedom, but as economic dignity. Under the bridle of economic hardship, liberty, for many, has become both elusive and illusion. Possibility hovers above, behind the flag, behind the banks, no longer an agent of growth, but a haunting reminder of glory, of what is and what might or might not be.
Theophilus Fisk gave a speech on the 61st anniversary of our Independence, July 4, 1837, the very day depicted in Clay’s lithograph. Fisk’s speech, like Clay’s image, imagines the “handful of men” who continue to be “venerated and loved,” who “consecrated the altar of the public good with their most precious blood” as a “group,” a “dazzling whole in one brilliant constellation of unclouded glory.”

Fisk positions the “heroes, sages, and patriots whose virtues were like the countless galaxy of the skies” as part of an imagined celestial constellation in order to contrast that potential, that spectral hovering greatness, with the “sordid, avarice, hypocrisy, and blood-sucking ambition” that characterizes the “little great men who are respected only for ...the money they are worth.”

Fisk asserts, “[i]f the star of our national prosperity is not ascending to the zenith of glory, it must be descending to the nadir of darkness and desolation.” This rise above the gravity of hardship and above the petty ambitions of “little great men” is the space of the spectral imaginative within Clay’s and Fisk’s “zenith[s] of glory.” The spectral constellation, like the top-hatted sun, represents past and presently elusive glory and the choice of future rising or desolate descent. The specters hovering in each document critique both present leadership and the individual. The hardship encountered by those below prevents them from rising, from attaining the glory of “national prosperity” that the spectral images represent. The spectral sun and the spectral constellation are but hovering stars, eidolons of the “heroes, patriots, and sages” they conjure. These images are memories of greatness; the spectral imaginative, in its absented space, seeks a new form of leadership, one that might inspire and raise the populace, rather than letting them descend further into the lack and the need, into “the nadir
of darkness and desolation.” Clay and Fisk are critical of the economic and political structures that have brought the populace to such despair; they seek, through their representation of spectral greatness, new authorities and new practices that might rise from the weighted citizens and then raise them as well. A correction to economic policy is key; escaping the weight of financial trauma must be part of the ascension.

Clay’s lithograph illustrates hardship through the buckling, bending weight of the body, the gravity of hardship anchoring each figure, holding them firm to their social spaces. Fisk also equates the burden of economic hardship with gravity, with material, with weight: “The bank edifice has tumbled about our ears crushing us to the earth -- let us no longer lay gasping beneath its rottenness and ruin, but throw off the crumbling fragments.”

Poverty crushes and holds to the earth, while potential greatness hovers above.

Robert Montgomery Bird presents this embodied burden and spectral release in a pivotal scene of Sheppard Lee, in which Sheppard, the ne’er-do-well protagonist, discovers his spectral abilities. Sheppard, at this point of the tale, has – through his own blundering endeavors – reached a criminal stage of poverty, in which “all men were resolved to punish [him]” (24). In the final days before embarking on the fantastic, supernatural journey that is the central plot of the novel, Sheppard describes himself as being “sunk so low” (32) and “rooted to the spot” (33). He dreams that his house falls down around him as he sits on a broken chair, and then, in another dream, imagines that he has found Captain Kid’s buried treasure only to be “weighed down by the mass of gold...and smothered” (35). Poverty is a heavy
burden that denies mobility and escape. Bird’s language, like Clay’s visual bending and leaning and Fisk’s tumbling banks and sucking vortexes, conveys gravity and the weight of the body as indicators of the burden of financial trauma.

In an effort to escape that trauma, Sheppard attempts to dig for the buried treasure he has seen in his dream. When a misplaced swing of his mattock causes mortal injury, he describes his escape from his body: “I was moving away from the place of my disaster...I felt exceedingly light and buoyant, as if a load had been taken, not merely from my mind, but from my body; it seemed to me as if I had the power of moving whither I would without exertion” (47). In this moment of liberation, Sheppard feels “no pain,” no “weariness and fatigue” (47). As a spirit form, he has escaped his body, his financial obligations, and his social positionality in one rising swoop. In his spectral transformation, Sheppard’s spirit rejoices in its lack, its absence of material responsibility and burden. The novel is Sheppard’s exploration of what might fill that space -- a fantasy of the spectral imaginative, of potential. Sheppard soon discovers he has the ability, in spirit form, to enter and inhabit, to reawaken and live within others’ dead bodies. With this newfound power, he embarks on a journey of economic personhood, a fantasy of social mobility that allows him to experience the wealth and social circumstances of six economically caricatured persons -- a squire, an indebted dandy, a moneylender, a philanthropist, a slave, and an entitled hypochondriac. Through this fantastical plotline, Bird answers the tension of Clay’s and Fisk’s spectral critique with one potential and scathing appraisal: rising from hardship is possible only through relinquishing and condemning the impoverished body, and imagining escape from the weight of
economic burden is akin to madness. Bird’s critique, like Clay’s and Fisk’s, is politically motivated, yet his exploration of one man’s search for individual dignity through collective experience traverses a greater philosophical spectrum. Proper explication of the novel’s relationship to antebellum economics requires an exploration of critical scenes and of the commentary implicit in the design of the novel. To that end, I approach Bird’s novel in two ways: first, I outline the text’s darkly humorous social commentary against the historical backdrop of antebellum economic and social policies, and then consider the layered narrative structure of the novel, analyzing how this technique engages lack, the spectral imaginative, and the power of mental construction to further assess the practices and policies that led to national and personal financial trauma.

The Panic of 1837

The great crisis is near at hand, if it has not already arrived.

Philip Hone, Diary, March 17, 1837

The care-clouded countenance and the anxiously hurried step of almost every man of business you may meet proclaim in language, which, if not audible, is perfectly intelligible, that the times are hard, that money is scarce.

Jason Whitman, Sermon, 1837

The Panic of 1837 exists historically as a crisis event, as a long-term financial depression (that, for some historians, lasted until the mid 1840s), and as a betrayal of economic trust and contract that affected the American public’s relationship with capitalism throughout the nineteenth century. The crisis event took place during
the months of March, April, and May 1837. These months mark a devastating progression of mercantile failures that culminated in the bank runs of May. The bank runs and subsequent bank failures effectively devalued the nation’s already perilous currency and diminished credit availability in an increasingly industrialized society. Joseph Merrell, in his 1844 encyclopedia, looked back on those panicked months as “a series of mercantile embarrassments and difficulties, which were first extensively felt in the cities of NY and NO, but soon extended to all the commercial towns in the US, causing heavy and numerous failures.”33 The financial crisis had the effect of dominoes falling, spreading out from the major US cities of commerce to small communities around the nation.34 Baptist describes the Panic as a “perfect financial storm: bringing an end to one kind of capitalist boom; destroying the confidence of the slaveholding class, impoverishing millions of workers and farmers who were linked to the global economy; demolishing the already disrupted lives of hundreds of thousands of people.”35 In the midst of such disruption, the revulsion of the economy felt, to many, like a death. One out of five households “failed outright” on their debt, Thoreau’s Walden claims that “ninety-seven in one hundred” businesses “were sure to fail,” and those failures created what one New York clerk called “an alarming increase in suicides.” Ralph Waldo Emerson writes, “the land stinks of suicide” in his 1837 journal, adding that he is “glad it is not [his] duty to preach” as he would have known little of comfort to say.36

The economic policies and practices leading up to these devastating months provide insight into the financial and social experience of those affected by the Panic. The economic climate of the Jacksonian era was charged with multiple crises
of confidence as consumers experienced the same sort of masquerade Bird imagines in Sheppard’s metempsychotic abilities: hard specie (primarily gold and silver coins), the embodiment of security and inherent worth, was replaced and represented by paper currency, only symbolically valuable and fraught with potential corruption. Representational currency and specie-backed monetary systems existed long before the early nineteenth century. In that respect, Antebellum consumer concerns with paper currency's authenticity and value could be viewed, through a long lens, as simply adaptive events on the continuum of representational currency’s history, though the proliferation of banks that emerged in the 1830s and the public's growing dependence on paper bills made unstable paper currency a particular national and local concern. Historian Daniel Feller notes that “the core instruments of our [current] economic systems -- the networks of banks capped by Federal Reserve, the corporate form of business enterprise, and the very dollars in our wallets” that we now take for granted were, in this era, a subject of controversy. Andrew Jackson and Nicholas Biddle figure-headed the ferocious bank war debates on the regulatory systems of banking and currency. Jackson prevailed, and his 1832 veto of the National Bank re-charter placed currency production in the custody of state and local banks rather than a nationally regulated bank. Consumers experienced the uncertain shift from a specie-based and specie-backed system (previous National Bank regulations had required that paper currency be issued only when backed by the bank’s reserve of hard specie) to one in which local and state banks flooded the market with thousands of unregulated paper bills, each uniquely designed, and in a variety of denominations. Historian
David Henken notes:

Banknotes appeared in a wide range of denominations (including one cent, nine cents, twelve and a half cents, one dollar seventy-five cents, and three thousand dollars to name just a few), bore a host of different historical and mythological icons ("vignettes" as they were called), and even varied in size. With over five thousand different note issues, not to mention bills of exchange, grain elevator receipts, mercantile credit instruments, postage stamps, store vouchers, and various forms of scrip that were passed as currency, the nation's paper money system was no simple index of qualitative value.\(^{38}\)

The trust and scrutiny required of economic exchange in the mid-1830s was palpable. Merchant James G. Baldwin describes the problem of accepting paper money from strangers: "Men dropped down into their places as from the clouds. Nobody knew who or what they were except as they claimed, or as the surface view of their character indicated." Swindling "was raised to the dignity of a fine art.” Banking was denounced as a “system of fraud and oppression” after the Panic months.\(^{39}\)

The proliferation of bills on the market (as mentioned -- thousands of different bills) provided counterfeiters with ample opportunity to make money through masterfully replicated forgeries or, at times, with comic shinplasters and satiric hard times tokens.\(^{40}\) As Stephen Mihm details in his biographical study on nineteenth-century counterfeiters, it was difficult to identify whether these "criminals" were heroes or villains. Their artistic replications, at times, exposed and debilitated those banks that deliberately printed and circulated worthless, unbacked bills, and for that, some heralded counterfeiters as public servants.\(^{41}\)

Jackson’s response to the currency crisis -- the enforcement of the Specie Circular, which required the use of hard specie for investments -- created an
atmosphere of economic confusion and chaos. The hard specie that remained in the market was hoarded, leaving consumers with no legal method of exchange for investment and creating a crisis of authenticity for banks that could no longer back paper currency’s value. Banks closed, businesses foreclosed, and consumers were left holding paper currency that could no longer be invested, and that, in many cases, could not be redeemed for face value. Edward Williams Clay specifically critiques Jackson’s specie circular in his 1837 lithograph, “A New Edition of Macbeth, Bank-oh’s! Ghost.” Clay positions American commerce as the ghost of a young man who, in his diminished spirit form, no longer holds the substantive power of bodily strength. In the lithograph, a haunted President Martin Van Buren stands in recoil, his arms thrown before him, as Andrew Jackson, donned (as Lady Macbeth) in a woman’s bonnet, a dress, and a sword at his belted waist, stands calmly at his successor’s side. Seated at the table before them are a southern planter, a Tammany Democrat, and, to the far right, a spirit in man’s form and dress who announces himself as “the ghost of commerce.” The ghost’s chair is pushed back slightly from the head of the table, his eyes rising to Van Buren’s animated stance, his fingers pointing to the bank failure notices that overspill his pockets. A copy of the Specie Circular cinches the specter at the neck.
The lithograph condemns Van Buren for his continuation of Jacksonian economic policies. In the panel, Van Buren attempts to rebuke the specter using the words of the fated Macbeth, “thou cans’t not say I did it,” as Jackson instructs the others to ignore “the creature” (a description which could refer to either the specter or Van Buren -- it is unclear which is intended or if, in proper Macbeth replication, the others even see the ghost): “Never mind him, gentlemen, the creature’s scared and has some conscience left – but by the Eternal, we must shake that out of him.” Is Jackson calling the men to shake the conscience from their president or from the misty specter who hopes to scare a conscience into them? Either interpretation yields an evocative image. The men at the end of the table ask no clarification, but raise a glass and call out “Down with the Bank” and “No credit, Huzza!!” What is
clear here is that the space of the spectral imaginative holds a looming threat. The specter is both the phantom of an impoverished, able-bodied man and the ghost of commerce. Van Buren reels back in fear, perhaps from the lack – the man without his body, the reminder of what has been lost to so many – before him, but perhaps also from the threat of what that level of hardship might create – an unsettled populace and the diminishment, the irreparable harm to American commerce. Clay’s critique here, as in “The Times” hinges on political partisanship, yet the threat and the desperation that fill his 1837 lithographs speak to individual experience as well as national politics.

Blame is a powerful motive in these texts. The debacle that was the American economy provoked an angry and visceral response; to this day, historians attempt to locate the appropriate artery of recrimination. Baptist considers differing explanations of the antebellum financial crisis as “fitting into [historians’] own categorical boxes.” Whether emphasis is placed upon paper credits, bank wars, the specie circular, a clash between rising industrialism and the agricultural markets, currency issues, speculation, or the liquidity of the slave market, the results of the maelstrom (that was all of these) was devastation and hard times for many. Baptist notes: “The history of financial panics reminds us that we have to integrate the study of big, impersonal forces with the study of how people shape meaning out of their individual lives.” Jessica Lepler’s study of the 1837 Panic acknowledges that “partisans of both sides...crafted a picture of national and impersonal panic that diverged from the local and psychological experience described in...letters and diaries.” The hardships of the populace, well
documented, as Lepler notes, in private forms of writing, were commonly politicized in public antebellum writing and discourse of all types -- speeches, essays, literature, and images. The political vitriol of these texts does not convey an intimacy of personal experience, yet the spectral images included in these texts can. A prime example is Bird’s skillful routing of national panic through a local (spectral) body. The spectral image allows the inclusion of intimate experience in political critique as we read admissions of need and desire (the lack and the spectral imaginative) in each image.

Lepler’s study makes an early distinction between Panic and panic (small p) to distinguish the historical perceptions of the event (often viewed through the lens of current economic models) from the experiences of the people affected by the crisis.45 Sheppard Lee was published the year before the Panic in the months of uncertainty that flowed into the five-year depression, the untold personal miseries brought on by unemployment and poverty, and the constantly shifting, reactionary policies of partisan politics. Sheppard’s anxious quest chronicles Lepler’s “pressures moving toward panic” that were apparent in the months leading up to the depression, encompassing national wish, political critique, and the local experience of a man. Bird’s use of the supernatural to fictionalize the looming crisis is appropriate. Lepler notes the prevalence of weather- and disease-related language46 used to describe the financial crisis, placing the causes and contingencies of economic hardship out of man’s realm and into the hands of a higher power. She states, “panicked people consumed cultural productions that explained the economy
in the contradictory terms of both individual sin and impersonal forces beyond their control. This contradiction between agency and victimhood raised new uncertainties about personal blame for financial failure.”  

The supernatural quality that allows Sheppard Lee to become multiple identities reflects a belief that some forces, including economic crises and transmigration, are beyond human control. 

Some orators, like the Unitarian minister Orestes Brownson, spun the Panic as the fall of capitalism and, therefore, an agent of the oppressed, while others, like the Congregationalist Horace Bushnell (in his 1837 address at Yale) saw the downturn as a moment to value character rather than worth. 

The common, public language used to describe financial downturn, however, – panic, depression, revulsion – situates an economic event in psychological terms of instability and anxiety, rather than agency and valuation for the poor. The linguistic perception of the economy as being “panicked” or abnormal and in need of cure increases the downturn’s visibility and promotes discussion and commentary regarding the most suitable approach for reinstating the market to a status that reflects security and confidence, its equilibrium. The public’s inability to gauge the scope of the problem provoked another level of unease. Lepler reminds that “[t]he people of 1837 could not visualize the system they had not yet come to call ‘the economy,’ let alone the crisis, from a macroeconomic bird’s-eye view.” Attempts to represent the crisis, then, relied, often, on specific domestic or individual scenes of hardship or, more broadly, uncertain images of spectrality and phantom power.

55
Ann Fabian, in “Speculation on Distress,” explores how a financial panic produces texts: “Panics called for textual creativity because they revealed just how markets and their ills (their manias and panics) were, like texts, mental constructions.” Fabian notes that the irrational surge of speculation that preceded the Panic of 1837 and the realization that capitalist markets had failed to “deliver on promises of rationality, growth, and employment” inspired both fictive and non-fictional texts from writers who sought to make sense of the chaotic economic climate. Robert Montgomery Bird’s text precedes the Panic, yet fictionalizes Fabian’s claim that economic markets and fantasies, like texts, could be (in fact were likely to be) mentally constructed.

Sheppard Lee

The tale of Sheppard Lee shows one man’s life infiltrated with the big, impersonal force that is spectral power, imagining what can occur when hardship condemns an existence (like Clay’s ghost of commerce) to spectrality. Specifically, Bird’s text fictionalizes public fear and concern regarding currency valuation, exchange exclusion, and speculative risk, engaging the widespread crises of confidence in exchange and commerce and the public’s impotent dissatisfaction with authority through Sheppard’s continual masquerade, his ventriloquism of the dead. Sheppard, as specter, is both need and desire, the lack and the spectral imaginative. Condemned to spectrality by his poverty, Sheppard’s phantom form ceaselessly represents what he does not have, yet Sheppard’s spectral journey is a fantasy of the spectral imaginative, a social speculation that pushes potential
beyond its natural limitations. Bird’s protagonist is a phantom representative of both the hardship of the present and the potential of the future.

Sheppard’s unlikely escape from his life of economic hardship initially brings joy, relief, and an immediate mental separation from his previously financially-burdened self. Bird’s drafting notes confirm that “Sheppard’s first cause of unhappiness in his own body is sheer Discontent and envy...He envies those who are happy or rich – in good society, distinguished.” Upon entering the dead body of the rich, distinguished Squire John Higginson, who has died in a fall conveniently near Sheppard’s excavation site, Owl-roost, the newly embodied Sheppard roisters:

God be thanked!...I am now a respectable man, with my pockets full of money. Farewell, then, you poor miserable Sheppard Lee! you ragamuffin! you poor wretched shotle! you half-starved old sand-field Jersey kill-deer! you vagabond! you beggar! you Dicky Dout, with the wrong place in your upper story! you are now a gentleman and a man of substance. (53)

The “substance” in which Sheppard now expresses his manhood consists of both material (a new body and a pocket full of money) and symbol (respect, gentlemanly status, and an unexplained, perhaps unexplainable quality, a feeling of worth).

Sheppard’s use of the third person as he laments and ridicules his former existence indicates his willingness to sever from that version of himself, to sacrifice his former connections and immerse himself in a new identity that includes, to his pleasure, a new, improved socioeconomic position. Sheppard is certain, in this moment, that his tenure in another’s body will improve his life experience and secure the nationally promised “happiness” he has been seeking. Certainty and security, however, prove elusive goals -- in Sheppard’s psyche, and in the antebellum economic landscape that Sheppard traverses.
Economic wish as a prolonged state of fantasy is both premise and plot of Bird’s novel. The spectral imaginative -- the space of his lack that must be filled -- becomes, at the moment of bodily release, the protagonist of Bird’s novel, a drifting spirit occupying a space of fantasy that is, then, serially filled or commingled with various economic lifestyles. The protagonist has entered the liminal state of the specter, has crossed that thin line, that chasm between lack and the spectral imaginative where the tensions between fantasies exist. Like Rose’s states of fantasy, Bird’s novel works at the level of desire and tension, revealing, beneath the obvious desires and tensions of Sheppard’s life and the national economic crisis, the tension that exists between the wish for an ideal escape and the wish that is economic dignity or living within means that are not escapable. This is the tension I find within each of the Panic-era spectral images I’ve presented here. It is the tension that Bird confronts in the novel’s manuscript notes, as he calls upon “ventriloquism, the magnetic and somnambulic qualities, genius – the thermometric feelings, the clockwork...which so few men possess”[^4] -- powerful, unexplainable qualities that fantasize confidence, force, voice, and skill in the shadow of impotence and impoverishment, tools that might combat the desires and disruptions of economic uncertainty.

Bird’s narrative continually poses the question of value’s location, a question that plagued the consumers of antebellum currency as they made daily decisions on what person, what company, what bill to trust. Sheppard’s spirit form inhabits the deceased person whose death has not yet been discovered by others. He prolongs the lives of bodies that have been evacuated by their souls. He interacts (using the
dead person’s voice and body) with those who see and trust that they are speaking with their friend or loved one, though that person is gone but not yet recognized as lost. Their intimate interaction is, of course, with Sheppard, the puppeteer, the master ventriloquist. Sheppard’s initiation into each body includes orienting himself to those who are to be his most familiar. Upon entering Squire Higginson’s body (his first occupation), Sheppard is told that Margaret will be so glad to see him, to which he counters, “Margaret! Who the deuse is she?” His companion answers, “Why, my poor sister, your wife, to be sure!” (70). Sheppard learns, through his subsequent awakenings, to hold his speech and wait for the wisps of memory that reside in the body and that will allow him to interact with those around him.

Awakening as Arthur Megrim (his final occupation), Sheppard yawns and considers Arthur’s family and friends, thinking to himself, “I shall know them all in good time” (379). With this premise, Bird accesses a deep and standing fear in antebellum consumers – that of being duped or taken advantage of by a charlatan. Bird’s text includes scenes of the “fine art” of the financial swindle: Dawkins’s duplicitous plan to trick his fiancé; the money lender, Skinner’s constant vigilance to hold off his scheming sons; the philanthropist, Longstraw’s financial annihilation at the hands of his partner.

While these scenes mimic the financial masquerades that could, in the experience of consumers, result in lost funds or a handful of worthless bills, Sheppard’s deceit of representation carries a far more personal and sinister implication: those closest may not be who they are perceived to be. They may not be themselves. Bird violates the trust of intimate familiarity that existed as one
bastion of security amid the uncertainty of 1830s economic exchange. Bird replicates the crises of confidence inherent in the 1830s currency system with a violation of personal confidence in intimate relationships and quotidian interaction; it is a fearful appeal that resonated with readers in earlier literature, Charles Brockden Brown’s 1798 *Wieland*; and then later in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man that Was Used Up (1839);” and Herman Melville’s *The Confidence Man, His Masquerade* (1857).55

This subversively sinister premise in the text, though important and ever present, is not as simple as I’ve made it out to be. First, Sheppard’s narrative voice consistently glosses over the fearful and the tragic undertones of the text, relaying all but the most tragic events in an easy, skipping tone. Second, Sheppard is not merely a puppeteer within the dead bodies he inhabits. He does move the body, speak for the body, interact with the body’s loved ones, claim the body’s material goods, yet Sheppard is not entirely himself within the deceased frame; he is changed by the space he inhabits. Upon entering the newly empty shell, he begins to soak in the talents, memories, affections, and inclinations of the deceased, traits that reside like a resonance, like an echo within the dead, empty frame. This pull and force, these echoes and murmurs from the past change him with each inhabitation, and that change, along with his acclimation to each new experience becomes a central feature of the novel’s acknowledgment of mentally-constructed economic positionality, social representation, and identity.

Sheppard attempts to describe the malleability of his continually fictionalized self, his acquisition of others’ traits and memories, in several colorful passages
throughout the novel. In his inhabitation of the niggardly money-lender, Abram Skinner (his third occupation), Sheppard admits to a particular connection with the body, one that he supposes might be strengthened by his (and Skinner’s) affinity with wealth. Sheppard is imbued with Skinner’s “taint of rascality,” by which he “infer[s] that a man’s body is like a barrel, which, if you salt fish in it once, will make fish of every thing you put into it afterward” (209). Skinner’s talents in speculation and stock manipulation, his calculated hoarding, and his affection for his troubled, distanced children salt and, eventually, overwhelm Sheppard’s individual sensibilities. Sheppard, who does not have children, nor the resources to invest productive capital, finds in Skinner’s life the breadth of potential gain and the depth of potential loss. Though, in previous occupations, he has felt Squire Higginson’s temper and has succumbed to the dandy Dawkins’s rakish schemes, he has never been so lost to himself, so changed:

Indeed the transformation that now occurred to my spirit was more thorough than it had been in either previous instance. I could scarce convince myself that I had not been born the being I represented; my past experience began to appear to my reflections only as some idle dream, that the fever of sickness had brought upon my mind, and I forgot that I was, or had been Sheppard Lee. (212)

The fever of sickness to which Sheppard alludes foreshadows his underlying madness and reminds the reader of his continual unreliability. It is through this unreliable voice that Bird reveals the nuances and layers of 1830s social experience. Sheppard’s commingled identity continually disturbs a Panicked desire for verifiable authenticity while also providing Bird with a platform to comment upon important social concerns such as slavery and economic manipulations of the body.
In a late and fleeting scene of *Sheppard Lee*, for example, Sheppard narrates from the body of a dead slave named Tom. Tom has been hanged for his passive participation in a violent insurrection on his master’s plantation, and has then been exhumed by young doctors just seven hours later (along with two other slave corpses) in the interest of medical experimentation. Before beginning their anatomical dissections, the young physicians and their gentlemen friends attempt to galvanize the cadavers with a battery. “The virtue of galvanism,” Sheppard explains, “is to set the dead muscles doing those acts to which the living ones had been longest habituated” (372).

When galvanized, then, the first slave, Scipio, pantomimes playing a fiddle, and the second, Sam, rams into the nearest doctor with an impressive tackle. Sheppard (as Tom) wonders what action he will perform, supposing it might be the galloping and bucking on all fours that used to entertain his youngest master. When the wires are connected, however, Sheppard relates a different experience:

The first thing I did upon feeling the magical fluid penetrate my nerves, was to open my eyes and snap them twice or thrice; the second to utter a horrible groan, which greatly disconcerted the spectators; and the third to start bolt upright on my feet and ask them “what the devil they were after?” (Bird 372-73)

It is a good question.

The scene of Tom’s galvanization comes from the fifth of Sheppard’s six metempsychotic occupations, an episode in which Sheppard reluctantly journeys into the body of a lifelong slave. This recounted scene exemplifies the layered complexities common to Bird’s plot: Sheppard inhabits and reanimates the already
dead slave, Tom, who is then, eventually, killed again, exhumed and galvanized by doctors. “Sheppard (as Tom)” I write, for how else can one describe this union in which one man brings his own thoughts and motives to a dead body, just as he gains the body’s residual memories and motivations, its temperaments and talents.

Sociologist Avery Gordon pinpoints the “echoes and murmurs” that haunt social representation as being crucial to an understanding of lived experience. She seeks out the “queer effects” that help to negotiate between what is seen and what is known. “The ghost or the apparition,” she says, “is one form by which something lost or barely visible...makes itself known or apparent to us.”

Bird’s choice to layer his narrative with Sheppard’s phantom voice; his invisible poverty; his lost, failed manhood; his mad hallucinations; and, of course, the varied antebellum voices of those he has chosen to inhabit and haunt creates layers of perspective, echoes calling back and back and back -- murmurs barely audible, but present beneath the din. Sheppard’s voice within Skinner’s voice (or I.D. Dawkins’ or Tom’s) creates a blurred soundscape of narrative subjectivity. As he negotiates his first bodily occupation, Sheppard relates “that, although I had acquired along with his body all the peculiarities of feeling, propensity, conversation, and conduct of Squire Higginson. I had not entirely lost those that belonged to Sheppard Lee. In fact, I may be said to have possessed at that time, two different characters” (59). This technique of layering allows Sheppard, as a man who has had limited social and economic experience, to feel connections he would not have had access to otherwise.

Sheppard’s absolute immersion in Skinner’s existence commands his authentic heartbreak at the attempted patricide, the mental breakdowns, and the
tormented deaths of both his (Skinner’s) wayward sons. Sheppard states it simply: “He loved them, and so did I” (212). Sheppard experiences these tragedies and losses empathetically, in a rush of feeling not common to one man’s objective, or even sympathetic consideration of another. Sheppard has made a speculative emotional investment in Skinner’s most personal acquisitions, and though his financial speculations (as Skinner) have brought great gains, the personal losses acquired here make the continued risk of “being” Skinner too great, the fall too far to endure. Sheppard’s voice -- within, beneath, and lost behind Skinner’s voice -- re-emerges in the midst of this anguish, a “blessed thought...that my very existence, as the miser and broken-hearted father, was a phantasm rather than a reality” (226). Sheppard, again, becomes visible. He takes his losses (and a few silver spoons) and runs to a new body, a new opportunity.

When Poe, a notoriously harsh literary critic, reviewed Sheppard Lee for the 1836 edition of the Southern Literary Messenger, he praised the book “as a very clever, and not altogether unoriginal, jeu d’esprit” but expressed concern regarding Bird’s choice to conflate Sheppard’s soul with each episodic body. Poe felt the social commentary would be greater if, rather than depicting a plurality of personhood, the narrative contrasted the events “upon a character unchanging — except as changed by the events themselves.”58 Poe’s criticism emphasizes an important distinction between a serial narrative account of various antebellum positionalities experienced by one personality (the alternative that Poe suggested as a correction to Bird’s technique) and the layered, commingled narration that Bird has created. Sheppard’s transmigration is, in Bird’s technical prowess, not a serial account, but a
serial defamiliarization in which Sheppard must manage his own personality, his new, antipodal talents and tendencies, and his accumulating knowledge of others within each new body he encounters. Sheppard’s defamiliarization places him continually in the unique position of being included into a new community or family but also excluded from it. He looks in while he also participates in the intimate connections that have already been created within that community.

Defamiliarization is, I believe, contrary to Poe’s opinion, the more effective method for representing Bird’s economic fantasy. The unsettling nature of uncertainty this premise encompasses depicts both the uncertainties of antebellum economic exchange and the aforementioned breach that occurs at the site of personal economic failure between what was once familiar and a newly-altered economic reality, between the previously accepted state of fantasy and a now-shifted, now-incompatible financial existence.

Sheppard, for example, narrates the enslaved Tom's plight from his position as the interloper, as both detached but biased observer and exploited victim, one who “feel[s] the magical fluid penetrate my nerves” (My nerves, Sheppard says, My) as he speaks from within the body he has borrowed for his own use, his own manipulation, his own, if inadvertent, desecration. Tom’s fate is directly tied to Sheppard’s occupation, just as Tom’s fate, as a legally dead slave, has always been tied to the external forces that surround him. Even Tom’s rebellion is not of his own making. It is Sheppard’s ability to read a found abolitionist pamphlet that allows the illiterate Tom to inadvertently rally the formerly contented slaves into a revolutionary zeal. The scenes of revolt and violence that follow are tragic and
confused, and through them Bird fictionalizes Nat Turner's legacy, the threat of revolt, and the power of slave literacy. Bird narrates the subjugation and violence of the slave experience through Sheppard’s occupation of the slave body. It is Tom’s body that is captured, Tom's body that is hanged and buried, Tom's body that is galvanized by the electric battery and that will be dissected as a contribution to medical science, yet Sheppard’s voice narrates the scene from his location within.

Sheppard informs us that galvanization produces muscular acts most familiar to the galvanized body. He readily remembers which acts Tom most habituated, but Tom’s response to the galvanic charge is not the expected, familiar motion. Tom’s body, when electrified, sees clearly and stands to question the motives of the white, privileged men around him. Tom’s dead moan vocalizes the anguish of the awakening, murdered slave, still weary, still exploited after revolt and capture and the noose have presaged rest, his apparitional emanation “disconcerting” because it seems to reunite the body and soul that were thought to be severed in death. Tom’s snapping gaze and startling “bolt upright” confront the layers of economic power and social capital at work in this meeting of slave corpses, entitled gentlemen, and one other presence between -- the transmigratory soul of Sheppard Lee. Sheppard’s presence complicates a reading of Tom’s reawakening. Are these Tom’s acts, or Sheppard’s acts moving through the muscles of Tom’s dead frame? We must read the corpse's question from both voices, just as we must pose the question back to the text: “What the devil are you after?”
Some insight into Bird’s choices here, his representations of spectral existence and the echoes of the dead body, may be found in his 1842 speech, “Apparitions.” In this detailed consideration of public conviction in and consternation of apparitional sightings, Bird considers the belief that “those who loved us in life should carry with them, beyond the grave, their memory and their affections...[and] bear with them other human feelings.” In another undated note, entitled “Metaphysics,” Bird states:

Many of our propensities and other curiosities of spirit are causes of certain peculiarities...of our physical structure. The humour may be produced by continued pain (the danger of having bad teeth (!), malignancy by deformity, etc.).... The souls of all men are therefore more in life influenced by their peculiar physiques and were an exchange of souls possible between a Socrates and a Diogenes, the souls of both must experience some changes caused by the influence of the new bodies.

Bird’s contemplation is a thought experiment in exchange. What resides in the soul? What resides in the body? How might the essence of a person be changed if exchanged? It is a salient line of questioning in the turbulent exchange environment of 1830s America.

Bird’s consideration is both metaphysical and economic philosophy: the memory-filled soul and the influential physique are a semblance of identity and economic positionality. The text equates economic position and individual success or failure as measures of identity, and Bird’s understanding of identity’s multifaceted nature and its relation to economic status engages both human psychology and a psychoanalytic reading of the symbolic economy that was emerging as a foundation of American capitalism and as a potentially damaging, possibly failing
American experiment. Both the man and his economic endeavors are failing in Bird's text, and failure is, therefore, I think, an appropriate site to consider the association of identity and economy that Sheppard Lee explores. Sheppard Lee features a failed man who becomes, in a layered parallel reading of the novel, both mad and a disembodied, constantly compromised spiritual presence; this apparition, this underlying uncertainty, this borderless, limitless soul narrates also the constant potential failure of America's experiments in democracy, capitalism, and expansionism -- potential failure that rested somewhere on the spectrum of failure to the point of annihilation and failure to the point of mediocrity. The constant threat of America's failures worked to enhance the perception of American exceptionalism as a community fantasy each time the nation (at times narrowly) escaped annihilation, and therefore, mediocrity. So too, Sheppard's continual evasion from death, his ability to retain his quest for what he felt had been nationally promised him (life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness), prolongs his fantasy of economic success and social intimacy.

Historian Scott Sandage situates failure in the pursuit of the American dream as such: “the dream that equates freedom with success...could neither exist nor endure without failure...Failure is not the dark side of the American dream; it is the foundation of it.” Sandage notes that the meaning of the word “failure” in antebellum America was shifting:

Failure conjures such vivid pictures of lost souls that it is hard to imagine a time, before the Civil War, when the word commonly meant ‘breaking in business -- going broke.’ How did it become a name for deficient self, an identity in the red? Why do we manage identity the way we run a business --
by investment, risky profit, and loss? Why do we calculate failure in lost dreams as much as in lost dollars? 64

Economic language infiltrates the lexicon of identity, on both a general symbolic level of quotidian apparitionality -- having to do with symbolic representations and questions of worth and value -- and as a shared position of failure in moments of crisis.

Jean-Joseph Goux's exploration of the symbolic economy as a metaphor for identity and human relations is instructive here. Goux notes that material currency (specie and its representational forms) has historically granted consideration of the imaginary (ideal), the symbolic, and the real long before Jacques Lacan provided language and templates for that psychological exploration. Money, in other words, provides a philosophical medium for discussions of identity. Economic circulation and exchange can be emblematic of the dynamics of social representation. This connection between material and man is evident in Marx's reading of commodity values; money, in Marx's estimation is "all other commodities divested of their shape." Money provides value identification as it "mirrors itself in the bodies of all other commodities."65 The relationship between currency and commodity is both symbiotic and symbolic. Just as Marx relegates the value identification of all goods to their general equivalency (and to an absolute commodity),66 he also claims "it is with the human being as with the commodity." Marx imagines that without a mirror or the ability "to say 'I am myself,' [man] recognizes himself as reflected in other men."67 Lacan echoes this reflection when he writes, "the sense of self identifies with the image of the other," and, in the other, "identifies and experiences itself."68
Goux further humanizes Marx’s claim of mirrored value in his consideration of social interaction:

What is he, this being who is always relative to others as different as they are numerous? Each of them reflects but a fragment of his soul. In order to know who he really is, should he appeal to each of them, seek recognition from each of them in an endless series of expressions that would never lead to unity?...he himself also plays the role of mirror.69

The mirror provides recognition, value, experience, and doubt. Inherent, then, in Marx’s philosophy and in the writings of Lacan and, later, Goux is an interest in identity as it relates to economic principle, notably the discovery of what “turns value into exchange-value.”70 Economic philosophy intertwines with human psychology to explore the identification and influence of worth, the ways in which the identity of a commodity or a man is affected by comparative value.

Goux further explains the correlation between use-value and exchange-value in terms of the body and the soul:

The difference between use-value and exchange-value, then, exposes all oppositions between body and soul....Use-value is the physical, incarnated, perceptible aspect of the commodity, while exchange-value is a supernatural abstraction, invisible and supersensible. No biologist’s scalpel has ever found a person’s soul or anima, just as “hitherto, no chemist has been able to discover exchange-value in a pearl or a diamond.”71

Goux shifts Marx’s discussion of the body’s use-value in production to a consideration of the soul’s exchange-value, the indiscernible demand that draws life to life, that allows a man to see himself in the mirror of the other, that inspires a mourning lover to seek him- or herself in the flat plate reflection of their lost love’s gaze. Exchange-value is desire, and in Bird’s text, Sheppard becomes the “invisible” and “supernatural abstraction” that desires the image of itself through others, that
seeks itself again and again. Sheppard’s narrative relies on reaching and desiring, on his pursuit of the happiness he imagines will be found in wealth and economic status. In Bird’s text, the commodification and materialization that Marx critiques as a product of market industrialization, as the production that creates wealth and status, becomes a commodification of even the deceased body forced to extend its use-value as material, as exchange-value for the bodiless Sheppard Lee.

Sheppard engages this symbolic exchange and this consideration of value when he walks through the mirror that identifies him. His sense of self not only “identifies with the image of the other,” but occupies it, becomes it. In Nancy Buffington’s study of Bird, she differentiates the narrative technique of Sheppard Lee from Poe’s suggested alternative in this way: “Poe reveals the interchangeability of categories in order to weaken and question their meanings, while Bird weakens the same categories in order to interchange them.” These interchanges, however, rather than diluting Sheppard’s personality, affirm what Marx calls “an identical essence” through equivalence. Sheppard retains his own personality, while also experiencing the nuances of another life. In Bird’s economization of Sheppard’s abilities, these seemingly unmediated encounters allow the value of Sheppard’s life to be recognized though its exchange. Bird’s mimicry of economic exchange in Sheppard’s experience serves two purposes. First, Sheppard’s metempsychosis (as an act of identity exchange) provides an opportunity to explore a limitless potential, an existence that can avoid failure by simply moving to a new existence when failure looms. Sheppard leaves each body on the brink of its failure, employing a new dead body for his use. Sheppard may continue to live through his occupation of other
identities which both inform him and reflect (as mirrors) his own experience.

Sheppard is unbound, free to escape his identity as he simultaneously discovers it.

This fictionalization of limitless exchange, however, serves to reveal the limits of his fantasy experience, which is the second factor. Sheppard's fantasy of pursuing "happiness," of attaining the wish of national promise is, all the while, preparing him to achieve the competing fantasy, the wish inscribed in the body he will not escape -- the ability to live with economic dignity.

Sheppard's eventual return to his own body completes this recurring cycle of wish, fantasy, escape, embodiment, and wish again. His experiences within the bodies that he presumed would please him (with their "happy, rich" and "distinguished" lives) reveal the struggle and failures of every existence, and allow him to reconsider his own social and economic position as one not destined for failure, but manageable with effort and focus. In the waning pages of the text, Sheppard returns to his own body and vows to make the most of his fresh start, to "acquire[] a knowledge of agriculture, and confirm[] [him]self in a new habit of industrious and active application" (417). Sheppard, unable to attain the potential of the limitless spectral imaginative, has embraced his limits, has recognized and acknowledged his own body, has succumbed to the wish for economic dignity. As an agent of symbolic exchange, Sheppard regains equilibrium at the moment that he is absented from the exchange system. Like the gold pieces hoarded by consumers before the specie circular; the National Bank’s Safety Fund; Kidd’s mythical bounty of buried coins; Skinner’s hidden, guarded reserves; and Sheppard’s pocket full of spoons – value can be held and accounted for, rather than imagined in speculative
investment, credit lines, unrecognizable currency, swindler’s promises, or Sheppard’s masquerade. Sheppard’s return to his own body, to his own, albeit improved, economic position critiques the experimentalism of the 1836 American market, a financial system that was careening toward collapse.

Sheppard’s occupation of others is not only a critique of the principles of exchange and the hope of return. Bird’s conflation of Sheppard’s spirit and the residual “humour” of the dead body expands his allegory of the confidence crises of the Panic economy to a larger critical scope: economic manipulation of the body. The body in Bird’s text holds value. It continually reminds, announces its presence. Like the lack of the spectral images in Fisk’s and Clay’s texts, Sheppard’s absent body and the vocal, echoing bodies he inhabits refuse to be ignored or assimilated. Bird’s treatment of bodies in Sheppard Lee teeters between irreverence and worship; his representation of death and mourning hold similar posts.

Like his fictionalization of the very real public fear of masquerade, Bird’s fictionalization of death and abuses to the body convey tragic and fear-filled undertones beneath Sheppard’s whimsical delivery. Dark humor both masks and reveals the underlying anguish of Sheppard’s experience. As an example, Sheppard explains, in the early pages of the text, how his father, who struggled to provide for his wife and eleven children, became wealthy: “fate sent my father relief sooner and more effectually than he either expected or desired: nine of the eleven [children] being removed by death” (9). Bird satirizes, in this passage, both the tragic prevalence of nineteenth-century child mortality and the primogeniture laws that
granted financial inheritance to the eldest male child. Sheppard becomes the eldest son through the darkly comic deaths of nine siblings in line before him. Sheppard's father receives a sort of reverse inheritance as his children's deaths relieve him of the financial burden of their care. Sheppard's father receives money from the deaths of his children, and Sheppard, the youngest of eleven children, receives the financial inheritance due the eldest son as well as his mother's legacy, the madness brought upon by her children's deaths.

Sheppard recounts each child's dark death with equally dark humor -- three are lost in an epidemic, one is strangled by oyster-tongs, two are drowned in separate instances, and one falls from the apple tree; “another...was killed by attempting to ride a pig, which running in great alarm through a broken fence into the orchard, dashed his brains out against a white-oak rail” (9-10). The ninth child was tragically killed from an hysterical affliction brought about by laughing at the “unlucky exploit of his brother.” Their mother died soon after, insane and broken from the loss of so many children (9-10). The advantageous deaths of Sheppard's siblings are the first of many manipulations of the body in Bird's text. Sheppard's serial desecration, his selfish use of unmourned corpses is, of course, a constant manipulation, but the text ostentatiously includes scenes of murder, torture, beatings, medical experimentation, galvanism, and grave desecration. The treatment of the bodies, living and dead, reads like a proclamation, a public admission of bodily oppression for the good of larger economic forces.
Bird's seemingly outrageous depictions of the frequency and brutality of bodily abuse have legitimate historical relevance. Michael Sappol's study of anatomy and self in nineteenth-century America chronicles the instances of desecration, detailing how the body's treatment after death fixes "one's moral, aesthetic, and social status," a verdict placed uneasily upon the deceased poor who might receive a pauper's burial or have their bodies donated to medical science through one of several states' Anatomy Acts. Medical experimentation in an "anatomical theater" or public preservation in an "anatomical museum" constituted a "punishment that commented on the life...a posthumous torture, a secular hell." The use of failed bodies in the pursuit of medical progress was especially difficult for family members of the deceased who sometimes exhausted savings and capital to provide proper burial and protection for the body of a loved one. As the demand for medical cadavers increased in the early nineteenth century (with the rise of the medical profession), Anatomy Acts worked legislatively to prohibit criminal acquisition of unauthorized buried or smuggled bodies and to provide a supply of cadavers to anatomical institutions, usually by remanding the bodies of criminals and paupers to society upon their deaths. Sappol notes, "the anatomy lobby assured taxpayers that dissection of indigents would reduce public expenditures for pauper burials and discourage poor people from seeking public relief. Paupers could, [in this way], posthumously repay their debt to society." The sacrifice of failed bodies to the progress of medical science is a hostile class privilege that exemplifies the economic and social divides Sheppard continually negotiates in his transmigration. This "rape of the body" and "rape of the grave" is exacerbated further by the public crowds who...
witnessed the bodily violations in anatomical theaters. Newspaper accounts of European anatomical theaters appeared in New England newspapers in the 1820s, and anatomical theaters in New York performed the animation of galvanism to American crowds in the 1830s. Sheppard’s narrow escape from Tom’s body engages this exploitative, public aspect of medical experimentation in the scene of Tom’s galvanization. Tom’s questioning bolt upright scatters the young physicians and their waiting audience, saving Tom and Scipio and Sam, at least for the time being, from the public exhibition of their mutilated bodies.

Despite the communal and, often, empathetic tone of Sheppard’s recounted tale, his possession of failed bodies (each dead at the point of his arrival) works in similar expository display. Sheppard violates the privacy and will of each occupied body by prolonging the body’s life beyond the life of its soul, by failing to reveal himself to others as an impostor, and by detailing the intimate moments of interaction he experiences in his memoir, relaying them for public consumption. Sheppard expresses some awareness of this use-value he engages. One evening, while searching for a dead body to inhabit, Sheppard laments the irrelevance of the dead, calculating the price of bodies in dollars and cents, imagining the value of decomposed bodies as compost for farmers or as spermaceti for candles. Bones into glass and blood into iron, Sheppard imagines bodies transformed into goods and services that promote their continued use-value. For soldiers, “nothing could be more natural than that those whose blood we buy with gold, should pay us back our change in iron” (230). Lovers could be converted to jewels and worn fast, held in
ways that living people cannot be, or transformed into looking glasses in which the
mourners might find the solace of their own features. The president’s body could be
boiled to soap so that his successor could scour the minds of the people. In this rare
contemplative moment, Sheppard succinctly reduces life to material and its
economic worth, but he does so to establish some merit in the bodies he now sees as
personally useful but otherwise discarded.

Bird’s depiction of bodily manipulation is complicated. On one hand, Sheppard
imagines his occupation of bodies with seemingly little concern regarding the effects
of his intrusion, the sacrilege of his occupation. Yet, Bird layers the text with other
scenes in which darkness breaks through the mask of Sheppard’s jovial narration--
multiple suicide attempts, the flogging of a debtor, a drowning, an attempted
patricide by two indebted sons, the beating of a philanthropist, the hanging of an
abolitionist, the revolutionary slaughter of a plantation family, the galvanization of a
young dead slave, the controversial physical treatment of a mentally ill man, and the
exhibition of real bodies that have become unauthorized subjects of
experimentation at the hands of the German doctor, Feuerteufel, whose interest in
medical experimentation, grave-robbing, and embalming and preservation are
present throughout the novel. These scenes, in a sort of Swiftian satire, demand
recognition, demand (or strive for) an incensed reaction to the absurd levels of
manipulation presented. Bird plays, here, with the intersection of use-value and
exchange-value. What of the body is material and destined for use? What of the
body is symbolically sacred, worthy of respectful treatment even after death? The
1830s market relied upon the domination and use of slaves’ bodies, and the
exhausting and debilitating conditions of Northern laborers. Writing in the months preceding economic tragedy, Bird questions the sacrifice of the body to economic progress, a critique that sits uneasily beside Sheppard’s ability, his choice, to relinquish his own body to escape his experience of economic hardship.

The Culmination

Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things.... The priest becomes a form; the attorney a statute-book; the mechanic, a machine; a sailor, the rope of a ship.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The American Scholar*

It is a case of haunting...of more than one story at a time...

*Avery Gordon, Ghostly Matters*

My initial interest in investigating the spectral imagery of Panic texts stemmed from my observation that the phantom images used to describe the uncertainty of the social and economic landscape also represented an anxious uncertainty regarding the present situation of hardship experienced by many citizens, as well as concern about the unknowable future that lay ahead. This is haunting *at the site of trauma*, and the most salient acknowledgment of that experience of trauma in Bird’s text is the broken mind of Sheppard Lee. Sheppard’s fantastic journey relinquishes his body for the experience of collective identity; in Sheppard’s revelation of madness, we find another kind of relinquishment, the absence of the conscious mind, the abdication of the self. Sheppard’s narrative reveals its mental
construction (and, notably, compromises its own declared authenticity) in the waning pages of the text when Sheppard reveals that, despite his aggressive claims of truth-telling (“Doubt, and be hanged!” his narrative begins), some do not believe his claims of transmigrative power and the journey that power inspired (Bird 9). Specifically, his only surviving sister, Prudence, (who has received a much smaller, but better-managed financial inheritance than he) claims that Sheppard has been mentally broken and hallucinating his transmigrations during the two years that have passed since the digging injury. With this claim, Prudence, who has watched Sheppard squander the bulk of their paternal inheritance, grants Sheppard their maternal inheritance as well: “Sheppard” was the maiden name of their mother, who died insane from the melancholy and madness his sister calls being “wrong in the upper story” (8,18). Sheppard’s madness emerges at the recognition of his poverty, at the moment when he desperately seeks to restore his father’s lost inheritance but cannot; his madness, then, as his mother’s legacy, emerges as the inheritance he has not lost, that he will not lose, his legacy. Sheppard’s madness becomes another layer of complication and understanding, working beneath the transmigration plot to ensure that the mind-breaking anguish of poverty and economic hardship is always already present in the fantasy of social intimacy and economic opportunity that Sheppard has created.

When Sheppard’s digging reveals not treasure, but more dirt, the inevitability of his failure overcomes him, creating a mental rupture that allows him to escape his inevitability through the imaginative journey of possibility, through a pursuit of happiness that reaches out from his own positionality to the imaginative constructs
of others’ lives. In his financial ruin, Sheppard lost his possible future, his place, the “me” he used to be, and the community to which he used to belong. He could not picture what “me” he could become, nor the community of which he was now a member. His familiar site of fantasy, his place within the national order, was dislodged, leaving him without a collective fantasy; in that absence, Sheppard’s broken mind creates a fantasy of collective identity.

In a drafting note slipped among the manuscript pages for Sheppard Lee, Bird planned out a scene that never made it to the published draft of the novel, a scene in which Sheppard, housed in a Philadelphia madhouse or a penitentiary like “Sing Sing” would encounter the characters of his fantasy within the confined walls of his imprisonment. He would “hear[] the stories of men ruined by devious American propensities (chiefly the rage to grow rich).” In the madhouse, he would encounter “the Abolitionist and the Slaveholder, the fanatic...the liberal pardon who is driven mad by the intolerance of Mankind, the philanthropist who is shocked with lunacy by the discovery that the world is bad as ever; and the patriot who finds Americans no purer than other people”\textsuperscript{80} and work them into his own fantasy. Bird decided on a different premise -- the prison walls morphing into Sheppard’s broken mind, and the overheard stories becoming the many newspaper stories Sheppard claims to peruse throughout his adventure.\textsuperscript{81}

As he becomes Arthur Megrim (his final occupation), Sheppard’s madness begins to break through the transmigration narrative. Sheppard, in this moment, is not yet temporally distanced from his experience as the slave, Tom, or the
philanthropist, Longstraw, experiences in which he was beaten and kidnapped, in which he saw young children flung from parapets and plantation owners shot on their front porch, experiences in which he was hunted down, hanged, buried, and resurrected for the humor of young physicians. Though Sheppard claims a sort of indifferent amnesia of these events, his possession of Megrim, I believe, works as an extension of this trauma. Megrim, a man who has everything he should need, wiles away in hypochondria, dyspepsia, and ennui. Sheppard's madness begins to reveal itself from behind the mask of his transmigration in these moments, well before his admission that others do not believe his tale. Early connections between Sheppard's treasure-digging fate and the particulars of his journey (like Squire Higginson's crippling gout in the foot that could equate to the pain of Sheppard's mattock injury while digging) hint at the conflation of narrative lines -- of the coexistence of Sheppard's transmigrative journey and his mad, homebound convalescence. Megrim's absolutely ridiculous and uncontrollable transformations, his debilitating turns that require constant watch from his sister and the doctor (who provoke images of Prudence and Dr. Feuerteufel), and the aggressive treatments meant to dispel his madness allow us to break the plane of Sheppard's imaginative ruse, to conjure images of the narrative layer beneath in which Sheppard, too, is tortured and treated electrically for his madness, to parse out the conflated voices to see Sheppard, not as occupying soul, but as imaginative author, or even, as the occupied body, the vessel in which Megrim's story now resides.

Sheppard's madness, at this point in his journey, has reached critical limits. He is now imagining himself as Megrim, who then imagines himself to be any number of
untold objects. His illness is manifesting itself in other forms as well, such as
Megrim's (Sheppard's) inability to eat or sleep. Megrim's dreams first replicate the
metempsychotic experiences Sheppard has already had-- “hanging, drowning, and
tumbling down church-steeples” -- but then hint at other possibilities, other
potential occupations and experiences that become more destructive and more
frightening:

[N]ow I was blown up in a steamboat, or run over by a railroad car; now I was
sticking fast in a burning chimney...[or] plastered up in a thick wall, with
masons hard at work running the superstructure up higher.... I was enclosed in
a huge apple-dumpling...over a hot fire, ... and again, I was in the hands
of Dr. Tibbikens and his scientific coadjutors of the village, who were
dissecting me alive. (391-92)

Sheppard's metempsychotic hallucination is spiraling out of control, stories stacking
upon stories, the possibilities of experience becoming too much to bear. In his final
metempsychotic occupation, Sheppard lives within a man who should have
everything, who should have the ability to thrive, to pursue happiness, but instead
spends his days imagining himself a teacup or a dog. In this final occupation,
Sheppard has entered himself, his own trauma, his own madness. It is a symbolic
entrance that prefaces the imaginative physical reunion with his own body at the
German doctor's medical exhibition.

Sheppard finally re-enters his own body (in a literal sense) while attending the
public display of bodies the German doctor has provided, a “wonderful proof of the
strides that science is making” that included “an infinite variety of fragments taken
from the bodies of animals and human beings,...real specimens....converted by
scientific processes” (399). In the exhibition hall, Sheppard (as Megrim) and Dr.
Tibbikens see “a dozen or more human feet, as many hands, three heads (one of
which was a woman’s with long hair and another a child’s), a calf’s head, a dog’s leg, the ear of a pig, the nose of a horse” and the perfectly intact, embalmed, and upright body of Sheppard Lee, encased in glass. Sheppard, as expected, wishes himself into his own body, steps over the now-emptyed body of Megrim, and exits the building through the astonished and fainting crowd.

Sheppard’s reclamation of the body perceived as dead, his mad dash from the exhibition hall, chased by those who felt his body was their own, is his escape, finally, from the collective identity he has imagined; his three day, three night, 180 mile flat-out run north, crossing rivers with men on his tail, mimics popular stories of slave flight, of escape to the north, to liberty and freedom. Sheppard escapes his mad imaginative journey, in part, because he must escape the trauma of becoming the American economic system that daily transformed living people into products of the market and of labor. Sheppard flees his transmigrative journey that was, in itself, a form of constantly compromised liberty -- a bodiless flight that required continuous escape and recapture, placing Sheppard in the role of both refugee and occupying force. His escape from that experience is a return to his own body and a physical escape North, to the geographic eidolon of freedom -- the journey that returned the slave bodies back to their own control, and the journey that returns him to his now more earnestly appreciated life.

Sheppard’s abandoned journey is an allegory of antebellum economic and democratic experimentation. Bird examines possibility through an escape from local, embodied experience, through a supernatural, social speculation that aptly and tragically mimics the gains and losses of antebellum financial speculation and
market exchange. His unreliable narrator and the novel’s conflicting (though merging) accounts function symbolically like the economic practices of the nation; as with speculation of the West and the burgeoning credit system, nothing is “real” in Bird’s novel, but it all has real consequences. Sheppard’s journey is fueled by the most basic American success models -- capitalistic exchange, manifest expansion, democratic choice -- yet, Bird’s thought experiment complicates the power of these national promises with Sheppard’s failures and his underlying madness. Bird’s tale positions economic exchange as a measure of liberty, playing Sheppard’s representative status against the apparitional aspects of the emerging symbolic economy, and emphasizing how national policies meant to promote capitalism and the free market created crises of exchange and trust in local communities. Sheppard’s journey expands the boundaries of identification and economic influence beyond the borders of the state and beyond the borders of self. Bird’s crossing of these borders is both playful and tragic, imagining one man’s acquisition of state power, influence, and possibility, while it simultaneously and continuously re-inscribes the local body as his inevitable, restrictive, and necessary encasement.

Sheppard has, throughout the text, sought the space of potential in his experiment of bodilessness, yet what he has encountered, in each existence, is the struggle for economic dignity. Sheppard’s desire for both the experience of dignity and the potential of imagined possibility fuels his metempsychotic journey. His desire is the place where the eidolon of his potential has existed all along, never absent from the text, always just out of reach. Perhaps it will be here, Sheppard hopes, or here, or here, but his out-of-body experience encounters his potential
most piquantly in his ability to continue to seek it. What Sheppard finds with each embodied experience is not liberty in the local body, but liberty as a process, as the pursuit and the “thriving” that lurk beneath the gloss and shine that Sheppard imagines in a “rich,” “distinguished” life. Sheppard Lee blurs boundaries and blends tragic need, the fear-filled present, the hoped-for future in his searching spectral form.

The spectral images found at the site of the Panic – Clay’s lithographs, Fisk’s speeches, and Bird’s phantom protagonist -- reveal the lack of what has absented and the potential, the spectral imaginative, that might fill that wanting space. These images represent the fantasy of escape from the constraints of bodily, economic, and social conditions (or, more accurately, the interrelatedness of each). The spectral represents inherent tensions between fact and fantasy, fear and hope in the fiscally uncertain antebellum culture. The specter is then, also, a form of cultural critique, a lens through which one might see the floating defamiliarization, the tensions of use value and exchange value. The spectral images in these texts reveal the uncertainty of economic practices and the harsh reality of social ills. They are, at once, the haunting of trauma, the hope of dignity or escape.
Spectral imagery is one of many metaphoric presentations of the 1837 financial panic. Jessica Lepler outlines the use of disease and weather-related representations, metaphors that exemplified the feeling of being victimized by an unknown force as well as the feeling of doom or impending disaster at the hands of an unpredictable calamity. See Lepler, *Anatomy*, 248.

Some lovely and insightful recent works that position haunting as the return of past trauma and some classic works on postcolonial trauma have instructed my thinking regarding the temporal possibilities of spectral interpretation. See, Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* 1997 (Reprint: Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Hershini Bhana Young, *Haunting Capital: Memory, Text, and the Black Diasporic Body* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2006); Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to
Avery Gordon defines complex personhood as meaning that “all people...remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and

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12 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 6, 16.


14 Jacque Derrida’s *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994) provides rich texture to my consideration of the specter and its power and placement. Derrida reminds that “a specter is always a revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back” (11). Conjuring Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Derrida reads Horatio’s vision of King Hamlet’s ghost as that of a scholar as spectator, one who is unlikely to believe in ghosts, who would seek to reinstate the distinction between the real and the unreal. Yet Derrida also reads Marcellus’s appeal to Horatio as anticipation of another scholar who “would finally be capable, beyond the opposition between presence and non-presence, actuality and inactuality, life and non-life, of thinking the possibility of the specter, the specter as possibility” (13).


16 Ibid.


18 Rose, *States*, 3. Rose’s connection of fantasy and mourning is as follows: “Freud passes from fantasy to the question of how subjects tie themselves ethically to each other and enter a socially viable world. What he came up with was guilt for crimes not committed, unconscious wishes, troubled identifications which...formed the basis, the emotive binding, of social groups. Mourning was the key. No other experience captures the ambivalence of love and recrimination, allegiance and triumph, exoneration and guilt; no other condition reveals in the same way a tie which binds most powerfully at the very moment when, objectively speaking at least, it has set you free. As early as 1897, therefore, Freud links fantasy to what makes group identifications possible and impossible at one and the same time.”


20 Avery Gordon defines complex personhood as meaning that “all people...remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and
misrecognize themselves and others. Complex personhood means that people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles, and also transform themselves. Complex personhood means that even those called ‘Other’ are never never that. Complex personhood means that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about society’s problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward... Complex personhood means that groups of people will act together, that they will vehemently disagree with and sometimes harm each other, and that they will do both at the same time...At the very least, complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people’s lives are simultaneously straightforward and full or enormously subtle meaning.” Ghostly Matters 4-5.

21 Fisk, Labor, 2

22 One example includes Ely Moore’s Address delivered before the General Trades’ Union of the City of New York at the Chatham Street Chapel, December 2, 1833: “Would you enjoy the fame of those illustrious men? Then follow their example and imitate their virtues. Like them, be diligent, be honest, be firm, be indefatigable. Pursue knowledge with a diligence that never tires and with a perseverance that never falters, and honor and glory and happiness will be your reward.” Other examples of public forms of encouragement can be found in Anne C. Rose, Voices of the Marketplace (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), Chapter 3; Sean Wilentz, Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essays on “Self-Reliance” speak to the public interest in this motivational stance and the powers of the self. See Jeffrey Sklansky, The Soul’s Economy: Market Society and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820-1920 (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2002) for a detailed discussion of the emergence of transcendental thought and its relation to self-reliance.

23 Rose, States, 9, 14.

24 Fisk, Labor, 1.

25 Ibid., 1-2.

26 Ibid., 2.

27 Ibid., 32.

28 I have opted, in my analysis, to refer to the character of Sheppard Lee by his first name, Sheppard. This decision stems from the several lists of possible character names Bird created before settling upon Sheppard Lee. While a few, like Tom Sleeper, Lank Harclock, and Hugh Long, seem far from the eventual choice, Bird imagined many variations that included the name “Sheppard” as either a first or last name. Some of these include: Hugh Sheppard, Sheppard Smith, Sheppard Lee, Sheppard Forrester, Giles Sheppard, Aikins Sheppard, Hyndman Sheppard, Kirkby Sheppard, and Lukins Sheppard. Bird’s focus and interest in the name Sheppard as either a given or surname prompts my use of the name in discussion of the text. Naming notes housed in [Box 11 Folder 259] Special Collections, University of Pennsylvania. Accessed 11 May 2011.

29 Robert Montgomery Bird, Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself, 1836 (New York: New York Review of Books, 2008), 24. Subsequent citations for this work will occur parenthetically within the text. Fisk describes the social death of poverty that Bird describes in his pamphlet, “Labor...” describing the “odious aristocracy” of wealth and power that creates “artificial distinctions of society” and condemns those less fortunate to “abject submission.” (2,3). Fisk laments the small numbers of “enormously rich” who have reduced the “masses to penury and degradation.” (3).

"When we hear of a nation having been enervated by luxury,” Fisk explains, “let it be understood that about a hundredth part of it, at most, are corrupted by overgrown wealth, and all the rest are trodden down by the heel of oppression, in the dust of shame and disgrace, living in squalor and wretchedness.” (3)

30 Quoted in Lepler, Anatomy, 166.


32 Jessica Lepler notes, “Confidence brokers in 1837 had described their panic as lasting from the mercantile failures in March through the bank runs in May. Two decades later, writers recalled that the Panic of 1837 ’extended over nearly five years” 8. The historical implication of this lengthening, Lepler explains, is a diminishment of the “individual experience of panic” 8.

33 Joseph Merrell, The People’s Cabinet: Containing a Compendium upon the Subject of Natural History; Natural Philosophy; Astronomy; Constitution, Organization, and functions of the Human Body; The Mind and its Faculties: History of the United States; Government and Law, Particularly of the US, also, The Beliefs of Various Religious Denominations; and Biographical Sketches of Distinguished Characters in all Ages of the World (Boston: Joseph W. Merrell, 1844). Quoted in Lepler, 6.

35 Baptist, “Toxic Debt,” par. 5.
40 Shin plasters and Hard Times Tokens were issued in the wake of the Second National Bank’s demise in 1832. Satirical coins integrated into the market include the “Not One Cent” penny; copper and metallic coins depicting various sinking ships labeled “The Experiment,” “Constitution,” “Webster,” and “Van Buren;” a coin depicting Jackson exiting a money chest holding sword and money bag and proclaiming, “I Take the Responsibility” and “The Constitution as I Understand It;” and a coin with Jackson’s face that states, “My Substitute/My Experiment/My Currency/My Glory.” Several extensive individual collections of hard times tokens exist. For photographs and information regarding those collections, see Alan Scott Fisher’s Collection of Hard Times Tokens at www.hardtimestokens.com, accessed 3 April 2010.
41 Sheppard Lee provokes this same sort of ambiguous allegiance from readers of the text; his character is at times sympathetic, at times distasteful.
42 Ibid., par. 6.
Specifically, examples include “tornado, whirlwind, troubled waves, tempest, pressure, and storm” and “disease, convulsion, and plague” (Lepler, Anatomy, 4).

Lepler explains the impact of economic fluctuation to local citizens in an era when explanation of dramatic financial turbulence came sometimes six months after the event: “Panicked people did not see their commercial crisis as part of a predictable phenomenon; the economy remained within the province of divine control. And, as romanticism’s audience grew in America, the rational theories of political economists lost cultural power to a heightened individualism that questioned the market from the standpoint of personal agency.” Lepler, Anatomy, 4.

Sklansky, The Soul’s Economy, 33-34.

Lepler, “Pictures of Panic,” par. 11.


Historical discussions that discuss the meaning of this word as it is used in the phrase, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” interestingly traverse the initial consideration of the word “property” in place of “happiness” and trace the original usage of the term to Greek and Roman phrasing that translates more to a sense of “thiving” than a sense of contentedness. See Carol V. Hamilton, “The Surprising Origins and Meaning of the ‘Pursuit of Happiness’” George Mason University: History News Network. 27 Jan 2008 http://hnn.us/article/46460 5 June 2010.


Gordon, Ghostly Matters 8. See also Janice Radway’s “Forward” in Avery Gordon, Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), x.


Edgar Allan Poe, Review of Bird’s Sheppard Lee, from Southern Literary Messenger, September 1836. 662-667.

Tom’s inadvertent revolutionary moment is one of many complicated representations of African-American characters in Bird’s fiction and drama. Bird has been labeled a racist by some literary critics and historians who find his depictions of slave contentedness (as evidenced in his portrayal of Tom and Jim
Jumble in Sheppard Lee) to be anti-abolitionist and in concert with the familial descriptions of slavery espoused by George Fitzhugh and other slavery apologists. What complicates this reading of Bird’s work is his earlier play “The Gladiator” (1831), which dramatizes a slave revolt in Ancient Rome and, in so doing, critiques American institutions of slavery. The first act of “The Gladiator” was “as full of ‘abolitionism,’” Walt Whitman claimed, “as an egg is of meat.” Whitman went on to note that the play was “calculated to make the hearts of the masses swell responsively to...nobler, manlier aspirations in behalf of mortal freedom.” Quoted in Curtis Dahl, Robert Montgomery Bird (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1963), 58-59, 129-130 n13. Bird, himself, acknowledged, “if the Gladiator were produced in a slave state, the managers, players, and perhaps myself in the bargain would be rewarded with the Penitentiary” (qtd in Dahl, 59). These seemingly conflicting narrative depictions provide, perhaps, a more realistic depiction of the complicated ways that slavery was considered even within one author’s view. Though we might hope that a person who would promote the freedom of slaves in one context would also understand their complex psychology and mental trauma in another, the social representations of slavery during Bird’s time undoubtedly made that level of assuredness difficult for many. The distinction between abolitionist and pro-slavery espousals was, in many cases, a blurred and jagged edge. I tend to believe that Bird’s views rested somewhere on that border, and my analysis of his narrative technique and his personal notes on slavery in my unpublished essay, “‘Slavery is the Moral Cancer’: The Racial Politics of Robert Montgomery Bird’s Notes and Fictions” reveal how even Bird’s description of Tom’s contented life may be more complicated than a first reading reveals. See also Buffington, “From Freedom to Slavery: Robert Montgomery Bird and the Natural Law Tradition.” Ph.D. diss., University of Arizona, In Dissertations & Theses: Full Text [database on-line]; available from http://www.proquest.com.ezproxy.uky.edu, accessed 4 April 2007, chapters 3 and 6; Christopher Looby, “Introduction” in Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself; by Robert Montgomery Bird, 1836 (New York: New York Review of Books, 2008), xxix-xxxvi; George Fitzhugh, Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society (Richmond: A. Morris Publisher, 1854); and Joan Dayan’s discussion of Poe’s representations of slavery as partly influenced by Sheppard Lee: “Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies, and Slaves” in Subjects and Citizens: Nation, Race, and Gender from Oroonoko to Anita Hill, editors Michael Moon and Cathy N. Davidson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

Bird’s depiction of the abolitionist pamphlets inciting deadly revolution might stem from a number of events occurring concurrently or just before his writing of the novel, one being Nat Turner’s infamous insurrection in 1831. Leonard Richards describes an abolitionist pamphlet campaign of 1835 as being: “[t]he American Anti-slavery Society’s attempt to flood the country with anti-slavery tracts, newspapers, kerchiefs, medals, emblems, and even blue chocolate wrappers. The society distributed over a million pieces of literature in 1835” (“Gentlemen of Property and Standing”: Anti-Abolitionist Mobs in Jacksonian America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970) 52. In 1829 and 1830, David Walker famously smuggled his own pamphlet The Appeal (“for a brief and terrifying moment...the most notorious
document in America”) into the South by sewing it into the lining of sympathetic sailors’ clothing, so that they could then distribute the pamphlet from southern ports. David Walker died in 1830 from what has now been suggested to be tuberculosis. Before his death, a bounty had been placed - a “$3,000 reward for Walker’s head, and $10,000 to anyone who could bring him to the South alive” (“David Walker” Africans in America www.pbs.org). Bird acknowledges the Southern zeal and economic motivation for capturing and transporting abolitionists into the South in his account of Sheppard’s experience as the philanthropist, Zachariah Longstraw, who is incorrectly identified as an abolitionist and transported into the South to be redeemed for a reward before being hanged. The scene in which frenzied Virginian citizens alternate between calls to lynch Longstraw and political cheers for a simultaneous political stump speech (“Lynch the abolitionist!...Hampden Jones for ever!” is chilling (Bird 321). This economically-driven capture and transport of Longstraw is the narrative device that allows Sheppard to enter the South and, in a desperate escape, to enter the body of the slave, Tom, who has just broken his neck falling from the tall tree where he was attaching Longstraw’s noose.

63 Sandage, Born, 277-78.
64 Ibid., 2.
66 Marx explored the absolute commodity, gold, as an exchange equivalent. Goux expands that discussion to include the absolute commodities of language, father, and the phallus -- ideals upon which all other exchanges find their value. See Marx, Capital 180; and Jean-Joseph Goux, Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud Trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 13.
67 Marx, Capital, 174n.
68 Ibid., 181.
69 Goux, Symbolic Economies, 15-16.
70 Marx, Capital, 174n
71 Goux, Symbolic Economies, 19.
72 Buffington, “From Freedom,” 305 n39. Buffington’s analysis of Poe’s position differs from mine, which is discussed at greater length in Chapter 3.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid., 4.
77 Ibid., 4-5.
78 Ibid., 95.
For a thorough discussion of the antebellum economy's influence on sensational literature and male anxiety, see Anthony, Paper Money Men.


A practical force of Bird's plot is Sheppard's practice of reading the newspaper and internalizing the published stories to create his narratives. Discussed on more than ten different occasions in the text, newspapers become the mediating link between Sheppard's traumatized and imagined self. In the body of Squire Higginson (his first occupation) Sheppard tracks the details of his own body's fate in the local paper: "...the newspapers, which are the light of the age, though occasionally somewhat smoky, acquainted me with the events that followed my marvellous disappearance" (72). The rise of the daily paper in both New York and Philadelphia coincides with the time of Bird's writing, and Bird capitalizes on that "light of the age" by making Sheppard's experience as a transmigratory spirit an exercise in reading news and culture: both as a representation of the identification that occurs between reader and character and as an experience made possible by the newspapers that brought the stories of others' lives to homes across America. Reading newspaper dailies combined (sometimes) sensational accounts of life experience, opinion pieces detailing the volatile political and economic landscape, and advertising that visually replicated the textual appearance of fact and opinion articles. David Henken relates how the juxtaposition of these elements created commodities of stories and life experiences: "advertisements were not without a certain value typically associated with news. Commercial notices provided important information...about the communities their readers inhabited....In the columns of the penny press, advertising entered into the category of the 'current intelligence of the day' -- the category of the news."—Henken, City Reading, 116-117.

Sheppard’s experience, as Samuel Otter points out, replicates the process of reading, of the “degrees of identification” that occur when readers enter the perspective of fictional characters. See Samuel Otter, Philadelphia Stories: America’s Literature of Race and Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 103. For more information on the rise of the newspaper industry, see Paul Starr, The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications (New York: Basic Books, 2004), Chapters 3 and 4; William Huntzicker, The Popular Press, 1833-1865 (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999); and Henken, City Reading, Chapter 5.

The ethical concerns of dissection and display persist today, evidenced by the controversy surrounding “Bodies: The Exhibition,” a traveling exhibit of dissected bodies preserved through a process of Polymer Preservation that began its tour of American museums in 2005. The bodies displayed in the exhibit range from whole body skeletal and muscular displays, individual body parts such as unwound intestines and the lungs of a smoker, and almost entirely intact bodies, skinned and exposed in various ways, including cleaving down the symmetrical middle. The bodies used for the exhibit have been suggested to be unidentified and unclaimed cadavers acquired from the Chinese police. The explanation from the exhibit’s website states “the full body specimens are persons who lived in China and died from natural causes. After the bodies were unclaimed at death, pursuant to Chinese
law, they were ultimately delivered to a medical school for education and research. Where known, information about the identities, medical histories and causes of death are kept strictly confidential” (See “Bodies: The Exhibition,” www.bodiestheexhibition.com last revised 2011). Though the exhibit and the process of Polymer Preservation (that the website claims will preserve a body indefinitely) are praised by many for their medical and educational benefits, discomfort with the seeming absence of consent and the extreme levels of exposure have spurred boycotts of the exhibition tour and have prompted, in some states, legislative acts that debate the necessity of consent and the ethical use of bodies in medical experimentation and display after death. “Bodies: The Exhibition” began its “relaunch” tour in February 2011.
Chapter Three

“I Look, You Look”: Eidola, Discretion, and the Slant Exchange

When men do not need one another..., they do not exchange.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

And some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher, except to sell by the cartload, as they do hills about Boston, to fill up some morass in the Milky Way.

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

When Captain Ahab paces the quarter-deck, in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, his regular turns often pause to strange stances of contemplation; in these moments, he halts and fastens, “eyeing the particular object before him.”¹ One evening, “attracted by the strange figures and inscriptions stamped” upon the gold doubloon that he had fixed upon the main-mast, Ahab stands, a simulation of the coin’s “nailed firmness,” and in this “riveted glance” sees himself within the coin’s features:

The firm tower, that is Ahab; the volcano, that is Ahab; the courageous, the undaunted, and victorious fowl, that too, is Ahab; all are Ahab; and the round gold is but the image of the rounder globe, which, like a magician’s glass, to each and every man in turn but mirrors back his own mysterious self.²

Ahab’s contemplation reveals two important aspects of the desired coin posted at “the ship's navel”: money, as a symbolic object of value, operates in an image of the “rounder globe” (a greater value system); and money functions as a “magician’s glass,” a specular³ that can reveal to each seer his mysterious self – his identities, motivations, fears, and desires. The coin, then, like all money forms, offers both a macro and micro lens through which we may consider its place in a greater economy and its effect on individual persons. Individual effect is emphasized in this
scene: Ahab scrutinizes the doubloon with the aforementioned solipsism and a “certain wild longing if not hopefulness,” and then, in turn, each member of the Pequod stops to look and comment upon the fixed prize. This is a scene of discernment, of suspended exchange slowed down over time so that each potential party can weigh and consider its outcome. The doubloon is presented for scrutiny, nailed to the post, held still and in plain sight for all who wish to stop, who wish to verify. The doubloon’s authenticity, however, is not in question, as the fine piece is of “the purest, virgin gold,” agreed upon by each member of the ship to have economic value. The uncertainty in this suspended exchange is the term of receipt: is the coin reward or gift, bribe or payment, finder’s fee or return on the long investment? What is the stake of its receipt? The doubloon, as each man considers it, is a symbol of a larger trade, a greater discernment, the “get” that promises for each a distinct recompense in exchange for the one, decidedly singular pursuit: hast thou seen the white whale?

To “see” the white whale is a daunting task: it asks that one seek the ubiquitous leviathan, at once here and across the globe -- this whale, this “fabulous rumour” that does not pause nor flee, that may look at once toward both poles, that has no face. It asks that one see what can’t be known and what can’t be captured. The white whale is a specter, a “flitting apparition,” a moving hue “which strikes more of panic to the soul than the redness which affrights in blood.” I say again he has no face.

To “see” the ubiquitous and the faceless, to perceive that which can’t be known and can’t be grasped, is a pervasive and critical component of antebellum
literary texts. The scrutiny and deliberation required to see the literary specter (to glimpse the white whale) becomes a point of culture critique; the ensuing literary preoccupation with perception, with sight, and with the ability to recognize operates in these texts as the imaginative depiction of (and reaction to) chaotic and prevalent antebellum economic crises, that, themselves, relied upon perception, sight, and the ability to recognize: unknown currency, counterfeit bills, and confidence men.

The playful emphasis on exchange, valuation, and identification that I began to explore in Robert Montgomery Bird’s Sheppard Lee takes on a more profound importance in the pattern of literary examples that emerge in the 1840s and 50s. In frightful tales and psychological romances, unreliable economics and unfolding social realities inspire interrogation and re-visioning of a market promise of equivalence and a national promise of equality. These promises, foundational to the concept of American democracy and the free market, also serve as the foundation of daily interactions (financial transactions and interpersonal communications) and the aspects of life that are permitted or restricted based on a citizen’s own individual experience of rights. Though social, political, and economic freedoms have consistently been theoretically imagined, an individual’s measure of his or her own liberty is constituted, ultimately, not in theory, but in the experiences and practices of the body, in the local rather than the national. The permissions and restrictions of equality that could affect an individual’s measure of his or her own liberty include, among many experiences, the ability to own property, to vote, to have legal recourse, and, in the case of the enslaved, to be acknowledged as a person
owned by no one, not as property and not as thing. The national promise of
equality, of course, begins with the constitutional claim that all men are created
equal. Antebellum reform movements that sought expanded rights for individuals
and groups of persons questioned the scope of this claim as Americans continued to
debate the influence, the significance, and the value of race, sex, ethnicity, class,
health, behavior, and occupation in claims of equality and the opportunities they
provided.

Antebellum America’s emerging capitalist system of commodity trade relied,
as all capitalist trade, on the value of the general equivalence. Goods, services, and
currency may trade upon a perceived equivalency of value. The market corrects for
disturbances in equivalency value through consumer demand and prices. Successful
trade in the capitalist market relies upon the ability to perceive worth in goods and
services and to make choices on trade equivalencies based on that perception.
When Andrew Jackson and Nicholas Biddle’s bank wars culminated in deregulation
of a national bank and a national currency, state and local markets became
susceptible to currency of little worth. The consumer market became saturated
with worthless bills from a variety of sources: bills drawn on failed or newly created
banks, bills unbacked by specie, counterfeit bills that replicated legitimate banks or
that created banks that looked legitimate.\textsuperscript{11} Citizens who encountered these
worthless bills also encountered the absence of equivalence in their trade and
transactions.
Bird’s novel, published at the onset of the economic mayhem that defined the years of 1837 Panic to 1857 Panic to war beyond, can be read as an inception, a literary launch of spectral texts that examine discernable identity, economic discretion, and the specter as a site of value and exchange, a site in which the fluctuations of financial and social worth become visible. Value and exchange, value in exchange, exchange in value...the iterations of these intricate relationships are prevalent in works by Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and others, texts that explore the rapidly changing landscape of antebellum culture (industrialization, the rise of city populations, technological progress, financial depression and subsequent economic growth, reform, and the public debate over the social and legal worth of enslaved persons); texts that question the direction and the pace of antebellum cultural and economic development; texts that use the specter as the site of that interrogation and revision. I continue the discussion of value-laden spectrality because a more profound consideration of how the specter represents value and the value relations of exchange provides distinct insights into prevailing antebellum matters of concern, each, in their own way, intrinsically related to exchange and to value.¹²

Literary depictions of antebellum economic and social relations rely on spectral spaces because these sites can house --can hold -- diverse representations of economy, indviduation, and a growing and unsettling skepticism of national market regulation and rights dialogues (each immersed in the assignment of value), while also functioning as exchange and as value. This dual force of representation and function make the specter an ideal site to consider exchange and value and their
social influence. I pause then, pace and stand here, to look with greater scrutiny at antebellum discernment and exchange.

I return, first, to the potential and lack of the absented spectral space. My exploration of the relationship between uncertain economics, considerations of value, and spectral representation begins with the literary specter, as the specter is the site where we can see the dynamics and anxieties of financial exchange merging with the dynamics and anxieties of worth and representation. That confluence reveals, as in Panic fictions previously considered, the importance of economic conditions to the worth and representation of identity; it also acknowledges the power of exchange to determine value in both financial and social worth, creating in any site of substitution, including spectrality, the opportunity to appraise (and possibly transform) perceived or assigned value. In this chapter, I present a historical and literary record of disruptions to equivalent exchange and chronicle the concurrent literary fascination with methods of revealing and masking value: sight, discernment, discretion, imitation, disguise, and the pretense of intimate connection, methods that mark, also, the shift to a more anonymous, populated, industrialized, city-based populace. The desire of recognition, of being seen in a crowd, recognized by an old friend, of having a discernable social identity that is both distinct and distinctly valuable becomes a prevailing and complicated concern in this shifting cultural landscape; the desire for recognition is also, in itself, a desire for equal consideration, for equality. I examine spectral representations of discernable identity in works by Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville, exploring, through
their individual approaches, the spectral interrogation of social value. The spectral narrative of Whitman's poems aids my reconfiguration of value in the specter's position as substitute and referent, setting adrift the idea of value's steadfast relation to a standard. Fluctuating value becomes, then, a particularly unsettling crisis of confidence, rivaling that of counterfeiting and confidence men. To begin, we must consider how value and the symbolic agents of exchange uphold a consent to value and a commitment to commensuration that will prove an important foundation to this discussion.

Aristotle's consideration of exchange in *Nicomachean Ethics* is layered within a discussion of the just and the unjust. Acknowledging that the nature of goods is so different and the accessibility of varied goods so minimal (in other words, the shoemaker must trade shoes; the farmer, food; the builder, houses), Aristotle posits that equivalent exchange must rely on money:

All goods must therefore be measured by some one thing, as we said before. Now this unit is in truth demand, which holds all things together (for if men did not need one another's goods at all, or did not need them equally, there would be either no exchange or not the same exchange); but money has become by convention a sort of representative of demand; and this is why it has the name 'money' (nomisma)-because it exists not by nature but by law (nomos) and it is in our power to change it and make it useless.15

There is no exchange without commensurability or without desire, and money is needed to negotiate fair and desired exchange of dissimilar goods. Exchange operates as an equality function, an equation that is successful when each party agrees upon the value and the comparable quantity of the goods or services bartered. "Money, then, acting as a measure, makes goods commensurate and
equates them,” Aristotle states, “for neither would there have been association if there were not exchange, nor exchange if there were not equality, nor equality if there were not commensurability.”¹⁶ Commensurability, and therefore, exchange, relies on a commonly held measure of value. In 1691, John Locke reflected upon that value (or the absence of that value) in specie -- primarily gold and silver -- as a monetary standard. His observation echoes Aristotle’s claim that “it is in our power to change [money] and make it useless” because money is an agreed upon value construction. Locke perceives that “mankind...consented to put an imaginary value upon gold and silver....[T]he intrinsick value, regarded in these metals, is nothing but the quantity which men give or receive of them; for they having, as money, not other value, but as pledges to procure what one wants or desires.”¹⁷ That quantity of imagined “intrinsick value” functions as a standard of exchange and appraisal that orders, even to this day, the worth of goods and services and the class distinctions of those who can or cannot exchange for them.

Over time, the worth of bimetal specie is threatened by the very act of its exchange as the quantity or weight of circulating gold and silver coins can be worn away through use. Karl Marx, in Capital, notes “coins of the same denomination become different in value, because they are different in weight. The weight of gold fixed upon as the standard of prices diverges from the weight which serves as the circulating medium and the latter thereby ceases to be a real equivalent of the commodities whose prices it realizes.”¹⁸ This inevitable variance in the standard, Marx contends, opens the door to a different and symbolic circulating medium, like
paper currency, which holds also a consented upon value that allows its monetary exchange for goods and services.

In my exploration of monetary, social, and spectral value systems, I consider how the consent to value that Locke attaches to the imagined worth of gold and that Marx projects onto symbolic currency systems may be present in all value systems, in the imagined values and accepted standards of social relations, individual rights, and financial transactions, for example, that each hold and maintain a communally consented worth. In antebellum America, two concurrent economic and social concerns rely upon this communal consent to value. First, paper currency emerged as the standard of exchange in the wake of Andrew Jackson’s Specie Circular, which altered the availability of gold and silver specie for trade and investment.19 Paper currency, then, became the circulating medium that must hold a communally consented value. This measure of exchange and its consent was complicated by the absence of a regulating national bank that could grant assurance to each bill’s value. Instead, antebellum citizens encountered thousands of different bills of varied denominations.20 Second, the antebellum era was rife with social debate regarding the value of persons and groups of persons. The debate over slavery’s moral, historical, and economic conditions raged between abolitionist and pro-slavery contentions. Reform movements for women’s rights, treatment of the mentally ill, prison conditions, temperance, Native American rights, and labor conditions were brewing in public forums, private homes, and in a proliferation of daily newspapers and published pamphlets. Each of these economic and social conditions relied upon
a claim and a consent to value, value that is revealed through the process of exchange.

Jean-Joseph Goux contends that Marx’s vision of equivalence is an identical essence through which value is surmised, seen, and created: “The expression of value, transforming diverse products of labor into identical sublimates is a language of alchemy, or essence and quintessence, of distillation and sublimation.”

Value is determined by the invisible, the essence of equivalence that becomes clear at the moment of exchange. Goux’s formation examines the convergence of the standard and its stand-in, the sublimation that is, at the same moment, difference and equivalence, and extends Marx’s vision (“No biologist’s scalpel has ever found a person’s soul or anima, just as ‘hitherto, no chemist has been able to discover exchange-value in a pearl or a diamond’”22) from that of the diamond to that of the soul. Goux begins this discussion with Marx’s notion of the general equivalent, represented economically through the relationship of gold to its substitutive equivalents. Goux, then, proposes three additional standards of value, “excluded, idealized element(s) and the other elements, which measure their value in it.”

These idealities that make up Goux’s excluded idealized elements include the Father, Language, and the Phallus.24 In this way, Goux contends, “semiotic, economic, and psychoanalytic...connections could be conceived” through Marx’s economic model.25 Kurt Heinzelman makes an analogous, though less categorical observation in The Economics of the Imagination, when he states, “Economic signifiers – words such as “labor,” price,” “profit,” credit,” and “cost” – necessarily point to semantic and philosophical values which are not simply or merely commercial.”26
Goux’s expansion of excluded idealized elements creates, in his designation as standards, an order of worth and of value to which all else must be measured in commensurate value. The economic equation becomes also the social, the sexual, the communicative power. His expansion also provides some license to my own extension of economics to the social: considering consented upon value as operative to an exchange equation measuring social standards of representation (which promote a standard as having power and normative status, while ordering commensurate value to all persons who exist outside that standard). This measure of human value is affirmed in the continued existence of slavery, in the laws that denied suffrage and political representation to all but white males, and to coverture mandates that restricted women’s access to wealth and land.\textsuperscript{27} In America’s founding (as a government-based example) and history of slavery (as a populace-based example) the valued measure of persons can be seen, most obviously, in the moment of the slave sale (what Frederick Douglass refers to as “horses and men – cattle and women – pigs and children – all holding the same rank in the scale of social existence; and all subjected to the same narrow inspection to ascertain their value in gold and silver”\textsuperscript{28}) and in the three-fifths formula for valuing slaves to free men for the purposes of taxation and representation.\textsuperscript{29} Frederick Douglass responded to the three-fifths compromise with a different valuation:

A black man in a free state is worth two-fifths more than a black man in a slave State, as a basis of political power under the Constitution. Therefore, instead of encouraging slavery, the Constitution encourages freedom by giving an increase of “two fifths” of political power to free over slave states. So much for the three-fifth’s clause; taking it at its worst, it still leans to freedom, not to slavery.\textsuperscript{30}
Reform movements of the antebellum era acknowledge the economic system of value in social ordering as they revisit the language of value exchange, of the standard and normative social value and their measure against it, in their speeches and doctrines, attempting to use the discomfort of that inequity to reposition the value system. This discomfort that accompanies all failed equivalence, becomes, as I will explore shortly, the means by which the consent to value is reconsidered, and through which reform measures gain traction.

**Equations and Equivalence**

Perhaps it may even appear, after some consideration, that the persons themselves are the wealth; that these pieces of gold with which we are in the habit of guiding them, are, in fact, nothing more than a kind of Byzantine harness or trappings, very glittering and beautiful in barbaric sight, wherewith we bridle the creatures; but that if these same living creatures could be guided without the fretting and jingling of the Byzants in their mouths and ears, they might themselves be more valuable than their bridles

John Ruskin, *Unto this Last* (1860)

The emergence of a specter is always an exchange: the dead for the living, the immaterial for the material, the limitless for the limited, the simulacrum for the standard. An exchange is, likewise, the emergence of a specter. The moment of a transaction, Marx contends, creates the mysterious component of the commodity and its worth, the sensuous, labor-intensive value of goods that bear a worth greater than their material components. Marx upholds Aristotle’s insistence on commensurability, and, more importantly, makes it possible, by tracing the “value-relation of commodities” to the “dazzling money form,” positioning commensurability not in a condition of likeness (Aristotle’s dissimilar shoe and
house), but in the intangible qualities of each, the qualities that declare a value at the moment of comparison and potential trade. Exchange is the desire to possess or dispossess; it is the medium through which intangible worth is determined. The act of exchange then, is, like the specter, a space of wish and potential, lack and loss, a phantom entity that is not material and that is not money, but yet holds value. Each exchange, as Jean Joseph Goux explains, is value: “value, whether for exchange, compensation, indemnification, purchasing, or repurchasing, is implied in every replacement. Whether this exchange involves comparison, substitution – or translation and representation – value enters into it.”

Exchange without commensurability becomes something else entirely. The physical transaction of exchanging goods or services still occurs, but is re-named and re-visioned based on whether the transaction was intended, by both parties, to be commensurate. For example, exchange with commensurability is a successful trade of goods and services in which each party consents to, or is at least aware of, the value and quantity exchanged; exchange intended to be without commensurability includes indebtedness, charity, or the gift; exchange without commensurability that is unintended by at least one party includes theft, coercion, or the swindle. The specter, too, holds a value system that can be equated to the debt, the swindle, and the gift, as the specter is always an exchange, and the spectral exchange always denies equivalence. The specter is, then, an apt representation of lopsided exchange, failed equivalence, moments of the uneven and/or the unfair: worthless, unbacked currency from legitimate banks; the counterfeit bill; the
confidence scheme; the lost investment; the charitable contribution; the gift; the
debt; the slave’s own body for which others receive payment.

Aristotle positions his discussion of exchange in a larger discussion of the
just and the unjust. John Ruskin, in his 1860 collection of economic essays, *Unto this
Last*, strikes a similar tone:

When we ask a service of any man, he may either give it us freely, or demand
payment for it. Respecting free gift of service, there is no question at present,
that being a matter of affection — not of traffic. But if he demand payment for
it, and we wish to treat him with absolute equity, it is evident that this equity
can only consist in giving time for time, strength for strength, and skill for
skill. If a man works an hour for us, and we only promise to work half-an-
hour for him in return, we obtain an unjust advantage. If, on the contrary, we
promise to work an hour and a half for him in return, he has an unjust
advantage. The justice consists in absolute exchange.”

Exchange of failed equivalence is not technically a failed exchange because the
transfer of goods or services still takes place. To more accurately describe these
instances of uneven exchange (whether intended or not), I’ll refer to them as *slant.*
The moment of slant exchange becomes a state of exception, a site not of connection
and equality, but one of power and exclusion or indebtedness: a moment apart.
This disconnect is impossible to predict, is often different from what has been led or
promised, is sometimes not recognized until long after the encounter, the moment
of transaction feeling equal in the instant, but later revealing loss. Through the lens
of the slant exchange, I’ll explore, also the value spectrum of spectral exchange, the
specter’s consideration of worth (as a substitute of the living body), and investigate
the ways in which spectral literary representations come to stand for moments
when slant exchange challenges the promised equivalence of the market and the
promised equality of the democratic sovereign nation. The specter, the counterfeit,
and the confidence man all work as these moments of challenge and disruption, revealing themselves in sometimes sudden and stultifying ways (as the “exceptional circumstances” that Frederic Jameson identifies -- the betrayers to our assumptions of the “density and solidity” of our “living present”[^38]). The specter, the counterfeit, and the confidence men each present a disruption to consent to value. This disruption, as an exclusionary, isolating moment, is indicative also of the exclusions and isolations of the city, of industrialization, of labor, of the market. The moment of slant exchange is enmeshed in its moment of society, and is also a product of its culture, the unsettled distrust of promised equalities, the anonymity and facelessness of a shifting population.

What I’m proposing is this: the exclusionary moment, the disruption, the chasm of the slant exchange brings the consent to value into view: “I thought I knew this value. I thought I knew what that was worth.” And these perpetual exclusions, this constant review of value’s position and standard, open the possibility of a very different inclusionary stake – the potential success of reform movements that seek a reconsideration of the consented upon value of social groups and persons. This is an abstract connection, and not one that I imagine being theorized in the parlors and kitchens of antebellum homes. And yet, there is something in the pattern of disruption, in the perpetual reconsideration of value that reverberates in the chaotic economy, in the spectral literature, and in this language of reform. It’s a counterintuitive claim, especially as reform speeches and documents adopt the language, the equation of equivalence, either by claiming an equivalence that society doesn’t honor or by acknowledging the failure of societal equivalence and seeking
commensurability. Miss Browne, speaking at a Temperance Convention, implores the crowd to consider the rights of women, a comparison that she acknowledges must not be commensurate, but just, as in Ruskin’s and Aristotle’s example: “We do not attempt to decide if men and women are like or unlike. That is an open question...but woman asks only what she is ready to grant.”

In the second day session of the Women’s Rights Convention, 1853, an unnamed speaker reiterates Miss Browne’s call for equivalence, “By equality, we do not mean either identity of likeness, in general or in particulars, of the two sexes; but equivalence of dignity, necessity and use, admitting all differences and modifications which shall not affect a just claim to equal liberty.” Miss Browne continues, now equating the intellect of women as an undesired gem: “Could we make gold of no value? If the intellect of women is undeveloped, it is because the treasures it contains are held of little price.”

And in a speech for the Anti-Slavery Movement, Frederick Douglass offered this assessment of the rights of man, “as one genuine bank bill is worth more than a thousand counterfeit, so is one man, with right on his side, worth more than a thousand in the wrong.” These disruptions, these acknowledgements of the failed equivalence, the slant exchange, are the moments apart, the moments of recognition, of revelation, when the lacking exchange provides clarity of worth -- value’s position, and the knowledge it imparts. We recognize the stake by the conditions of exchange. We recognize the perceived worth by the limits of our loss. The stake of exchange is evident in Douglass’s explanation of the morality of his escape from slavery, written in a letter to Thomas Auld, his former master, September 3, 1848.

His balanced and careful prose provides a beautiful equation:
I am myself; you are yourself; we are two distinct persons, equal persons. What you are, I am. You are a man, and so am I. God created both, and made us separate beings. I am not by nature bound to you, or you to me....We are distinct persons, and are each equally provided with faculties necessary to our individual existence. In leaving you, I took nothing but what belonged to me, and in no way lessened your means for obtaining an honest living. Your faculties remained yours, and mine became useful to their rightful owner. I therefore see no wrong in any part of the transaction.43

What professes to be democracy (equality and equivalence) might impart the opportunity of the truly democratic in its lack. What is, at once, a moment of exclusion might open the door for societal inclusion.

When each member of the Pequod, in turn, steps to look at the fixed doubloon, each reveals the stake, the conditions of his exchange. The stake for Ahab is himself: that which he feels he has already lost, that which he seeks to return in the sighting and the capture of the white whale. The stake for Starbuck is hope, the anticipation that the sighting of the white whale might end Ahab’s quest. Starbuck’s reward would be to lift his eyes from the “dark vale” of Ahab’s oppressive rule, so that the bright sun may meet his “glance halfway.” Starbuck’s stake, then, is release from his long-endured “midnight” that detains him from the “sweet solace” of the coin’s elusive sun, from release, from hope.44 Stubbs, as watchful narrator to the others’ observations, positions his stake as a fated chance; the coin, for him, is filled with signs and wonders that playfully divine the risk and the venture of the task: that the life of a man might come full circle to end with Aquarius and Pisces— with water and the fishes. Queegueg sees the tattooed symbols of his home (perhaps, like Starbuck, the coin is a wish for another place); Fedallah makes a sign, a greeting to the coin, for what is at stake for Fedallah is always his own authority; and Flask sees the coin as money, as the actual value of the gold piece. Flask’s stake is the reward of another, future exchange: the gold doubloon for
nine hundred and sixty cigars. His stake is material, but also pleasure and expectation. The final crewmember to step to the coin is Pip. Pip’s mantra, “I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look; I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look,” resonates beyond Murray’s grammar, the repetition too confident and directed to be “getting it by heart.”45 Pip comes from the experience of his abandonment at sea, from his visit to the depths of God’s loom, from the knowledge acquired of the deep (for as Emerson reminds, “under every deep, a lower deep opens”46). Pip as madman, as savant, as prophet, works to impart, amidst his stories and his gibberish, the knowledge that Ishmael toys with throughout Moby Dick.47

What is at stake for Pip is perspective and vision, the understanding that each individual’s look at the gold coin is a distinct desire, that even the collective “we” and “they” of his mantra would yield distinctly collective results. Pip reminds us that exchange is desire, and that desire encompasses, always, more than the economic value of a transaction. Pip’s dark premonition, that the doubloon will sink, still nailed to the mast, predicts the disruption of that exchange, the failure to claim recompense for seeing and recognizing the white whale.
The Eyesight: Recognizing the Specter

What is distinctive about man as a poetic work, or as a creature who creates even himself, is his lack of limit or definition, his lack of distinction, or more precisely, his lack, as a work, of distinctive resemblance to any definite model or archetype: his being, in short, the open and ongoing work of an ‘indiscrete image’

Thomas Carlson, The Indiscrete Image

[T]he peculiar position of the whale’s eyes, effectually divided as they are by many cubic feet of solid head, which towers between them like a great mountain separating two lakes in valleys; this, of course, must wholly separate the impressions which each independent organ imparts. The whale, therefore, must see one distinct picture on this side, and another distinct picture on that side; while all between must be profound darkness and nothingness to him.

Herman Melville, Moby Dick

Literature of this era features many fictionalized moments that represent a moment of disruption, that depict the slant exchange. Some, like the story that follows, engage the disruption of currency valuation, confidence, and spectrality in one short tale. Edgar Allan Poe’s story, “The Man that Was Used Up” (1839) features an unnamed narrator who becomes fixated on celebrated military leader Brevet Brigadier General John A. B. C. Smith, a hero of the Kickapoo and Bugaboo campaigns. Enamored with the General’s voice and physique after just one encounter, the narrator details the General’s “remarkable” presence, extolling the man’s “truly fine-looking” body parts with hyperbolic precision: “I could not imagine a more graceful curve than that of the os femoris, and there was just that due gentle prominence in the rear of the fibula which goes to the conformation of a properly proportioned calf.” In these glowing terms, he presents the General from head to toe as both aesthetic masterpiece and precision construction, an arrangement of exacting representation that foreshadows the dark close of the tale.
Smitten by the statuesque man, our narrator seeks information about the General through a succession of social encounters. In each conversation -- at the theater or in the parlor, at the card table or in the church pew -- his probe is abruptly and comically interrupted, but only after three sentiments have been extolled from every tongue: an exclamation on the horror of Indian warfare, a remark concerning the inventiveness of the age, and the clear intent to reveal something about the General with the phrase, “Why, he’s the man--”. But that phrase is never completed, and the narrator remains in a curious haze. What is it about this man that appears to be perfection? Who is Brevet Brigadier General John A. B. C. Smith? In the end, our narrator realizes the horror behind the General’s façade. Calling upon the General’s residence, he is let into a room that contains a “bundle” of the “nondescript,” a pile upon the floor that speaks to him in a small and squeak-ish voice. He watches in terrified wonder as the house valet attaches legs and arms, a wig and eyes, a palate and a bosom, recreating the General from parts, each manufactured, the emerging hero boasts, by a skilled and remarkable merchant.

Poe’s story exposes the pretense of social and economic valuation through a continuum of spectral representation that denotes symbolic currency. The import of value in Poe’s tale resides in both the General as currency and the General as specter. The General is symbolic currency in that his actual form deviates from -- stands in for -- the originally presented standard of a heroic, physically gifted man; the amalgamation of manufactured products stands in for his body. The General is counterfeit in that his presentation is a deception, one that the narrator could not discern with a keen eye and could not quite glean from social interrogation. In his
capacity as a representation of currency, the General provides multiple value appraisals: he holds heroic currency in his military prowess ("a downright fire-eater" and "prodig[y] of valor"), he holds physical currency in his perfected physique ("did you ever behold a finer figure?"), and he holds social currency in the recurring phrase, "Why, he’s the man--", a phrase that trails off to any number of interpretations. 51 “Why, he’s the man--” is, like the space of the specter, a slant exchange, a space filled with lack and potential. The phrase, “Why, he’s the man--” could be completed in countless ways, though Poe provides a final assertion: The General is "The Man that Was Used Up."

The General’s “used up” bodily absence relinquishes a space, a spectral voice that is but sound and the space around it. The General’s self is now un-seeable, unidentifiable – “nondescript” – without his physical casing. The General’s spectral exchange is not one of equivalence. The squeak and whistle voice upon the floor, without body or presence, without power or force, is a diminished form of the General’s original bodied soul, clearly lesser than the man. At the same time, his new manufactured, automated limbs, his teeth and eyes and wig and palate moving about with a spectral center, thrive upon the idea of the General, an aura of spectrality that is greater than the original man, that emanates from the reputation of his deeds, the mystery of his once embattled, now constructed person. The General as a man is neither the squeak and whistle voice nor the "immortal renown." 52 He has exchanged his body for each. And yet, as value is immaterial, a social relation, the General is also, still, each of these. The General’s value, his social presence is a specter radiating from the bodiless voice, an aura that has become
greater than the man who, because of the Kickapoo and Bugaboo campaign, lost his scalp, his tongue, and his autonomy to his new automaton self. The General’s exchange of his body yielded two spectral results: the diminished, bodiless bundle upon the floor and the ideal, the emanating aura of social greatness.

In “The Man that Was Used Up,” the General’s initial worth is based on a series of perceptions, a consent to value recorded in his heroism, in his social standing, and in the narrator’s precise catalogue of his physical attributes. The General’s consent to value is made up of both social and physical perceptions – a physical makeup of perceived authenticity – “unequalled...pre-eminently endowed...perfection” -- that reflects the spectral quality of Marx’s universal standard, an accepted value by all, but a value that is untraceable, immeasurable. It is a socially consented upon value (Marx reminds that “so far no chemist has ever discovered exchange value either in a pearl or a diamond”). The General’s social presence has been assumed by all; it has been excluded from the rest of society by their own act (set apart as “the man who...”); he is described as a standard to which others may seek their value through comparison: “the perfect desperado” of “inimitable grace.” The narrator eventually perceives that the social presentation of the General has been valued based on a standard that has not held its material worth, a standard that has been replaced by other mechanisms, a standard that, perhaps, no longer exists. To return to Marx’s observation of worn coinage, the General’s social value has diverged from its consented upon standard value as his body has been worn away through use. The social and physical presence fixed upon as the standard has “diverged from the actual circulating medium” and been
replaced by a symbolic medium.\textsuperscript{57} These imbalances, these variances emerge at the moment of recognition, at the presence of the spectral squeak and whistle voice that calls from the floor, that has survived and socially replaced, the General’s body.

The spectral image, like Poe’s General, proves a rich site to examine exchange and valuation, in part, because the specter is one site in which that value standard can be isolated -- looked at in its failed equivalence -- and interrogated. That interrogation becomes clearer, for me, with the consideration of Eidola (the plural of the Eidolon) because Eidola are phantom images, substitutes, doubles, but also ideals and perhaps even fallacies, the phantom characters of Greek poets, the name Democritus gave to a sort of atomic replica that emanated from an object, that served to form its perception at the encounter of a subject: “the intermediaries that flow out of objects as the first part of the process resulting in perception.”\textsuperscript{58} Today, the word emerges in various gaming scenarios; in programming, it is experimental language that denies representation. Eidola are not present, by name in many antebellum texts. In fact, the only instance I’ve encountered is Poe’s 1844 poem, “Dreamland,” which describes an “Eidolon, named NIGHT” that exists in a “wild weird lime that lieth, sublime, out of SPACE – out of TIME.”\textsuperscript{59} Whitman’s poem “Eidolons” (using an alternative plural form) was written later in the 1870s and then positioned as one of the initial poems in the final edition of \textit{Leaves of Grass}, a textual placement that positions the poem, in that edition, as a precursor, a foundation, to Whitman’s earlier 1850s poems of spectral intimacy – specifically, “Song of Myself,” “To You (whoever you are),” and “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.”
In these earlier poems, Whitman writes himself as the specter, already dead and reaching out across time. His narrative voice proclaims its own spectrality outside his body, outside his time, outside the constraints of familiarity; it echoes, “I greet you” across more than 150 years. The spectral “I” of Whitman’s 1850s poems becomes the acolyte in “Eidolons,” encountering an altered and vast spectral power of expansiveness through the eyes of the seer. In “Eidolons,” the “I” becomes secondary to the eye. I met a seer,” Whitman’s “Eidolons,” begins:

Passing the hues and objects of the world,
The fields of art and learning, pleasure, sense,
To glean eidolons.61

The seer, as visionary, can look past the material, the intellectual, the sensual, to collect the phantom image, the apparition, the double, the idol – to glean the meaning of the eidolon that non-seers, readers -- that “we” cannot readily see. Because of the seer’s claim to notice and identify the spectral in all things and across “all space, all time,” I infer the seer’s ability to notice and identify Whitman’s earlier spectral self as well.62 In this comparative reading, “Eidolons” looks back upon the poems of spectral intimacy Whitman wrote in the 1850s, celebrating and expanding the spectral self Whitman has established.

“I met a seer,” Whitman says, evoking the crucial nature of familiarity and perception to his unending task, his cyclical pursuit that is:

Ever the dim beginning,
Ever the growth, the rounding of the circle,
Ever the summit and the merge at last, (to surely start again,)
Eidolons! Eidolons! 63

This perpetual circle and the everlasting rise and fall conjure Emerson’s call of the perpetual in “Circles,” an expansion that begins, for him, with the first circle, the eye,
that is then, expanded concentrically and “repeated without end.”64 Emerson’s vision, though similar in scope, has what I perceive to be a slightly different directionality, one of pointing forward temporally, almost tunneling through an ever-expanding cylinder toward eternity. Emerson writes, “around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep, a lower deep opens.”65 This is the temporal expansion of rebirth and natural cycles, the acknowledgement of knowledge’s depth. Whitman’s eidolons also vocalize the expanse of knowledge and the recurrence of cycles, but the visual and temporal scope of the poem is quite different from Emerson’s. The seer is not concentric expansion, but arms opening to perpetual expanse, the eye seeing all, naming, recognizing, acknowledging all, including the voice of Whitman’s spectral “I” calling always forward from his 1850s poems. The seer’s enduring call of resonance rings back passionately to Whitman’s earlier calls forward from his own spectrality:

“Song of Myself” appeals, “I stop somewhere waiting for you;”66 “To You” promises, “Whoever you are, now I place my hand upon you, that you may be my poem;”67 and “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” grants notice and affirmation:

Closer yet I approach you,
What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you – I laid in my stores in advance,
I consider’d long and seriously of you before you were born.68

Packed beneath boot treads, clinging to the rail of Brooklyn’s Ferry, Whitman’s spectral “I” calls into the future, and Eidolon’s eye answers back.

The rejoinder is, perhaps, a surprising reply, one that Whitman did not anticipate as he penned his early spectral self. In “Brooklyn Ferry,” for example, he
laments the limits of future sight: “Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me.” But the seer in “Eidolons” can see -- sees all -- including the spectral “I” that calls for intimacy, that pronounces its love through avowal:

I whisper with my lips close to your ear,
I have loved many women and men, but I love none better than you.

The avowal is the predecessor to the seer’s expansive embrace, the declaration of singular intimacy directed to a multitude of “you’s.” As the spectral “I” greets all, loves all, reaches out across time to consider and whisper, to wait and look, to form connections stronger than distance, than strangeness, than time, the seer opens and maintains the scope of that connection. In “Eidolons,” Whitman continues a first person address that does not claim its own spectral power but instead absorbs the seer’s vision, the scaffolding of the specific and the general, the elegant passing between the material and the ethereal world, creating a different connection, one that spans categorization, the breadth of society and knowledge, rather than time.

In the seer’s unfolding scope, the eidola are ever expanding, a part of man, but also something much greater, something connected to all aspects of the world. This “greater” quality, that the spectral “I” foresaw and that the seer confirms, will be the point from which we will parse out, locate, and interrogate a consent to value within spectrality, re-visioning in that space the relationship between the standard and the simulacrum that orders more than financial worth, that orders social class and individual rights and access to political and financial power.

The perception, the vision that Whitman features as the seer’s gift, holds a significant role in antebellum literature and its depiction of economic and social
existence. The seer’s gift is one of broad scope and specific detail, from the “far-born, far-dying, living long to leave, Eidolons everlasting” to “the substance of an artist’s mood or savant’s studies long.”71 The seer’s broad scope does not threaten intimacy, but instead proposes an expanded version of Whitman’s already capacious spectral reach, a relation that creates the close and connected and personal through the eidola’s even wider reach across the grandest scope of time, of space, of unfamiliarity. Whitman foresaw the seer in “Eidolons” in the 1855 Preface to Leaves of Grass. In this long prose poem, Whitman describes the American cultural landscape and the poet’s position within that grand space. Whitman’s vision of the poet, in this work, is as expansive as “Eidolons’” seer: “If he breathes into any thing that was before thought small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe. He is a seer.”72 Whitman acknowledges the power of sight again when he asks, “Who knows the curious mystery of the eyesight? The other senses corroborate themselves, but this is removed from any proof but its own and foreruns the identities of the spiritual world. A single glance of it mocks all the investigations of man and all the instrument and books of the earth and all reasoning.”73 Whitman positions sight, especially the poet’s sight, as being an almost superhuman skill of perception and reasoning. The seer in “Eidolons” positions perception and vision as the tools necessary to notice within the vastness of the world, to identify the spectral in its perpetual expanse.
When Edgar Allan Poe reviewed Bird’s *Sheppard Lee*, for the *Southern Literary Messenger* in September of 1836, he criticized Bird’s narrative technique of transmigration, a plot device that Bird used to blend Sheppard’s identity with the many other antebellum personalities his wandering spirit encountered. In effect, Poe assigned the value-based gold standard of a general equivalency market to the identity representations of the text. While Poe found the novel “clever,” “well conceived,” and “not altogether unoriginal,” he resisted Bird’s inclusion of a composite personality:

Some fault may be found with the conception of the metempsychosis which is the basis of the narrative.... The chief source of interest in such narrative is, or should be, the contrasting of these varied events, in their influence upon a character *unchanging* — except as changed by the events themselves.  

Poe’s preference seeks to redirect focus to the external events of the novel, examining how the unique identity of a character experiences the internal change of growth or demise under that external influence. What he has encountered, through Bird’s technique, is an unfamiliar, uncomfortable condition of identity variance that is not merely accommodation or acclimation, not just a change of personality over time, but something more insidious and more enveloping that threatens the very possibility of identification and recognition. Poe’s discomfort prompts him to disregard the unrecognizable as being not “the chief source of interest”, while he promotes, even in the specter, an already essentialized, dependable, invariable standard of identity.

Poe echoes this preference for a distinct, firmly valued, discernable identity in his 1846 review of William Gilmore Simms’s “Grayling; or Murder Will Out,” published in *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. The ghost figure in “Grayling” is the celebrated
Major Spencer, a Revolutionary War hero who appears in spectral form to declare his wrongful death and to keep his Tory murderer from gaining wealth and social passage with his stolen identity. Major Spencer’s identity is fixed, recognizable, and defendable even in its spectral form. Simms describes the moment when the ghost of the Major appears: “Though he stood in the shade of a thicket, and there was no light in the heavens save that of the stars, [James] was yet enabled to distinguish perfectly and with great ease, every lineament of his friend’s face.” Simms’s tale, published in a two volume collection of frontier border tales, *The Wigwam and the Cabin*, earned strong praise from Poe, who deemed it “an admirable tale, nobly conceived and skilfully carried into execution — the best ghost-story ever written by an American.” Poe’s disparagement of the unfixed Sheppard and his effusive praise of the eternally fixed Major do not, in themselves, prove a steadfast stance, yet through these preferences, we may consider Poe’s desire to affix stable value to consistent recognition. Poe’s protectiveness of identity is a claim of value. Bird’s conflation of identity devalues, and it’s in that devaluation (not through eerie situations or macabre details) that he elicits discomfort, a subtle sense of horror and fear. Bird and Simms and Poe each respond to the potentially fragile nature of identity and the social and economic power of distinction and recognition that makes value possible, that keeps duplicity at bay, what Simms describes as distinguishing “perfectly and with great ease.” Bird conflates Sheppard’s identity with those around him, making each indistinguishable. Sheppard cannot be recognized visually as himself, nor can the personality of Sheppard (or his corpse home) be a mark of distinction. Simms, conversely, maintains the force of identity
and perception even after death, creating in Major Spencer a man who has retained his recognizable self, whose specter can be easily acknowledged through his voice and the detailed lineaments of his face. These differing uses of the spectral form constitute opposing representations of how identity perception works. Is a person one recognizable identity, perhaps changed through growth and circumstance, but discernable throughout? Or is identity a fragile and shifting state, variable and, at times, unrecognizable?

In many of Poe’s own works, death and terror become accomplices to the preservation of an eternal, discernable identity. Poe parcels identity through death or dismemberment, peopling his tales with postmortem relics to stand in for lost souls – teeth, bones, a distant but unceasing heartbeat. These relics provide a symbolic or synecdochal identification that teeters between Bird’s and Simms’s techniques – it’s not that the relics are easily recognizable as the persons they once were, but they are clear representations of those distinct identities, representations that occupy the space of loss as they call for remembrance and recognition. The remains remain, and with them, recognition. The old man becomes first the eye and then the heartbeat beneath boards; Berenice is held and then spilled, 32 white teeth upon the floor; Metzengerstein becomes the horse; Fortunado is the jingle still ringing, a fifty year echo behind the mortared wall; the wife’s walled presence resonates outward as a muffled meow. Poe’s works and his critiques imply a desire to represent identity as continually and inevitably recognizable, relic-ized, preserved, or encased within spaces of social confusion.
In Poe’s fiction, as in his reviews of Sheppard Lee and “Grayling,” he imagines -- prefers -- a discernable identity, a standard unchanging that could look outward – unfragmented and complete -- at the horror of bodily manipulation and death. Poe’s horror is clean, packaged, refined, “merely the horrible” and not a glorification of the “purely disgusting or revolting,” details – “minute details of human and brute suffering -- he dislikes in Simms’s earlier works. The horror in Poe’s work is often packaged in dramatic irony. The narrator tells his tale from his own perspective, claiming, declaratively at the onset, that he is not insane. The confusion, the horror for the narrator is something ordained upon himself, something only he finds to be terror-filled, some unwavering eye or cat’s presence that pushes him to a point of violent, anti-social action. His solution to that problem, that which he finds to be a rational response, is what elicits the reader’s horror – murder, bodily desecration, live entombment. The narrator’s agitation demands a resolution; his solution is the parsing and the trapping of identity, but in that capture, death. Fixing the body within a wall, beneath a floor, the synecdochal eye, the “thirty two small white” teeth in a box, Poe relegates mourning to pieces and places, sites where identity and immobilizing death may be eternally transfixed. Bird imagines a different horror, an identity unfixed by time or space, a spectrality not disparate from normality, but that which approaches the normal. This possibility that identity could be impelled or even changed by economic or progressive social shifts is a fear and an instability that governs antebellum literature. The question of identity variance, of discernment, is a question of value recognition and stability; identity variance is the condition of the specter.
Variant identity is movement, transformation, and potential progress or regression. The fragility of identity that Bird and Poe address literally reflects the fragility of progress and economic circumstance and its effects on personal experience; as such, this theme is seen throughout antebellum literature. In particular, the transcendentalists and Nathaniel Hawthorne approach fragile selves and crises of confidence in a vein that seems to expand upon Bird’s notion of fluid identity (though in very different ways). Emerson argues in “Circles” that there is no fixed point, that all is fluid, that identity can be shifted, generating a response not of fear, but of hope. His is a consideration of the variant self as an opportunity for improvement, as self-reliance, as resilience. Hawthorne also considers the fluid self, but embraces Bird’s claim that fluidity is a source of uncertainty and fear -- not Poe’s gothic houses and buried bodies, but a form of identity that cannot be fixed, that cannot be predicted. Hawthorne’s use of the fluid self departs from Emerson’s vision of resiliency and from Poe’s vision of invariance. Hawthorne’s spectrality works as a derivative of Bird’s in that he is positioning the spectral form or the supernatural as something to be feared, as something that can create crises of confidence in identity and potentially dismantle social place and class. Hawthorne’s and Melville’s use of spectrality in The House of the Seven Gables and The Confidence Man: His Masquerade acknowledges that the communal consent to value can be challenged, that crises of perception will not allow a uniform consent. In Seven Gables, Hawthorne grants daguerreotype technology (“mak[ing] pictures out of sunshine”) the ability to expose a discernable moral physicality when the “high and honorable” Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon’s likeness shows a malevolent
expression – “sly...hard...cold as ice” while the convicted criminal, Clifford’s, appears angelic, his likeness “almost too soft and gentle for a man’s.” The daguerreotype holds perceptive ability; it can “see” what the eye cannot. The spectral power of the daguerreotype disrupts the communal consent of Jaffrey Pyncheon’s value. The Confidence Man’s constantly altered appearance and presentation is a spectral motion, evading and haunting the boat’s decks with his preternatural presence. He becomes what is discomforting, pushing other travelers to consider risky investment, to question or agree to charity, to offer financial assistance to a stranger possibly known (had there been a head injury? Or a mishap of memory?). In these texts, a variant, changeable identity is more than a disguise or an imitation; it is the potential of the standard’s variance, the standard upon which all value has been shored.

To understand that moment of recognition as something more than potential duplicity or sleight of hand, to get to the almost overshadowed reconsideration of the consent to value, we must look more closely at the specter and its absence of equivalent exchange. Spectral imagery in fiction of this era works, in part, to complicate the value systems of currency and credit and investment economies by positioning representations of the specter as both a substitutive simulacrum and ideal eidolon. Whitman’s Eidolon comprises a representational form that becomes greater than its initial reciprocal standard – a simple man. The Eidolon in Whitman’s hands moves from the local to the universal, encompassing, by the end of Whitman’s verse, the earth, space, “the noiseless myriads” and finally, “the true realities, Eidolons./Not this the world./ nor these the universe, they the universes./
purport and end, ever the permanent life of life./ Eidolons! Eidolons!” If we may imagine an eidolon (as a spectral form) that holds greater value than a man -- this universal ideal of universes and permanence -- then we have subverted the formula of exchange that Marx and the market suggests: gold > currency >counterfeit or standard> symbolic currency> simulacra. The spectral formula, eidola> man> specter, repositions the eidola to the space of the standard. Man sits between these two representational forms (as the General sat between his social aura and his squeakish voice), and this re-visioning calls into question the position of man as a traditional standard-bearer, as Goux’s father or phallus, just as Melville’s Confidence Man is more than the original revealing itself as simulacrum -- it is the original calling into question its own value. Just as Mihm’s counterfeit note, passed with confidence, holds, at that moment of exchange, the materialized value that confidence allows. The value standards are skewed throughout. It is not a stable reconsideration of value identification, but a continuum upon which value has become unshored. It is the identity variance that Poe rejects, but that represents the horror in Bird’s visions (and what makes them potentially more horrific than Poe’s) -- that identity is not fixed, but, rather, subject to the iterations of economic and social change, utterly variable, not a ghost story to be controlled, but a social order that cannot be.

The moment of perception and trust positions value. The point of potential in a moment of perception is the crux – the opening by which an eidola or a counterfeit can be laid upon the presence of a man. This is the moment that makes duping possible – to see potential rather than material reality, to see the wish and
ignore the fear. Duping is always the confusion of the man with his ideal – with a better version of himself, just as oppression and enslavement is its opposite. In Melville’s *Confidence Man*, the spectral action is a transforming specter that pretends to be a man, the lesser impersonating its referent, while the act of discernment -- the duped and misguided pawn -- sees the eidolon, the specter of opportunity that is presented as the man incarnate. The Confidence Man is described sparsely in each scene, as he becomes what each victim wants to see. He is an old acquaintance, an investor (“Don’t you recall me now? Look harder.”); he is a gentleman with gold sleeve buttons (“A project, not dissimilar to yours, was by me thrown out of the World’s Fair in London.”); and he is a merchant speaking to a beggar (“My poor, poor Sir, What can I do for you?”). The material becomes irrelevant in the line of sight, the perceptive script. It is what could be. And perhaps then, the appropriate visual for considering value is not a linear equation of diminishing value, a continuum of eidola to man to specter, but the eidola or the specter laid upon the man, the eidola and the specter laid upon the man, brushing against one another like hands passing currency and goods, grazing planes that -- for a moment -- hold the balance of equal value. It is the moment of Marx’s linen coat, a sensuous amalgamation of natural material and labor – the linen, the coat, the weaver, the tailor -- passing through hands as one commodity, brushing against its equivalent exchange currency – 2 ounces of gold or 10 pounds of tea or 20 yards of linen. It is the moment of the suspicious note that, in willing and accepting hands, in confident trust, holds the value of its claim. And it is the moment of Frederick Douglass walking from Thomas Auld’s home, his equality laid upon his
slavery -- freedom brushing against man brushing against slave; he passes in equal parts, his freedom real, realized and held in that moment, like hands grazing linen and the bill, though some might call it counterfeit.

**Turned Again to Strangers: Counterfeit Bills and Confidence Men**

Men are like open books, if looked at properly.


I know him not, and never will...how comprehend his face, when face he has none?

> Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

There is always a moment of discretion. A hand holds a paper bill; or the investment is explained; or an unfamiliar, but smiling man hails from the crowd, greeting his puzzled, half-blank, half-hearted welcome with a beseeching, “Don’t you know me?” These are moments of discernment, pressed by time, by public space and social convention, by a waiting gaze, a hand held open. Is the held bill legitimate? Is the investment sound? Is the man a faithful yet forgotten friend, or a confidence man poised to pounce upon a semblance of weakness, a glimmer of trust. Consideration of these scenarios requires discretion. Discretion is both a position of agency, the freedom to decide what to do in a particular situation, and also a position of social preservation, behaving in such a way as to avoid offense or to protect private information. The examples of public trade and interaction I’ve presented above require both nuances of discretion’s definition – the freedom of agency and the skepticism that preserves the private self. These acts of exchange
are moments of individuation, but also moments of peril. In both antebellum fictions and in the streets of antebellum communities, exchange could foster financial benefit and recovery, or terrible financial loss. The agency of the discretionary moment is a haunting encounter. The decision to trust or to retreat could be the difference between ascension and decline. This position of agency is one of primacy and isolation, the necessity of perception and acumen vital to combat the potential deception of encounter.

The possibility of losing money to economic deception made citizens justifiably hesitant in regards to which person could be trusted with a payment, an investment, or a charitable contribution. Currency remained unreliable and indiscernible throughout the antebellum period due to the proliferation of banks producing individual bills of varied appearance and denomination, a situation that created a “double economy” as Ian Baucom describes: “an economy of monetary value and an economy of trust whose foundation was the credibility, the character, the trustworthiness of the person.” Baucom asserts that “to accept a multiply circulated bill of exchange was not only to accept a form of paper money but to express trust in one’s own ability to read character and to trust in the capacity of one’s fellow citizens to do likewise.”

Stephen Mihm, in his study of counterfeitters, notes that consumers were at times safer with a counterfeit forgery that could be passed than a legitimate bill from a failing bank.

Value was not something inherent in the note, but something that materialized and became tangible when the note was exchanged, when one person put confidence in the note of another. Only then would an intrinsically worthless piece of paper – issued by a legitimate bank, a worthless bank or a counterfeiter -- come to mean something more.
Antebellum currency, that “dazzling money form” emerging in the midst of the messy political wars debating banking control and currency production, was suspect regardless of its origin. It was confidence in another person that imparted value to an intrinsically worthless piece of paper. Counterfeiters, as skilled artisans, replicated the bills of existing banks or created new bills drawn on nonexistent institutions; the vast number of individually designed bank notes in the market – thousands of different bills – made such counterfeiting possible. Mihm’s study, in part, explores how counterfeiters, “like a company of ghostly doubles” -- built “a vast shadow economy,” an economy so elaborate and skilled that “the border between the real and the counterfeit became blurry.”

The term “confidence man” was first coined in an article in The New York Herald on July 7, 1849, when the unnamed author employed the term to provide a name for a local swindler. The article describes the swindler’s methods: he presents himself to a stranger using polite and genial manners, as if he were an old acquaintance. His scheme is to ask to borrow the stranger’s watch or a small sum of money. The stranger eventually “allows him to take the watch, thus placing ‘confidence’ in the honesty of the stranger, who walks off laughing.” Melville reprises this same crime in the early chapters of Confidence-Man, when the central figure approaches a stranger with the salutation, “Don’t you know me?” and the conversation escalates to the stranger writing him a bank check. Johannes Dietrich Bergmann, in unearthing the history of the term, reveals that “confidence man” became a fixture in American language, appearing in multiple newspapers
throughout the 1850s. Readers, then, would have recognized Melville’s character as a swindler both from the title and from his first, familiar exchange: “Don’t you know me?”

The term Confidence Man resonated with readers and with writers who began to consider the greater ramifications of the term’s influence. For example, a related article in the Herald on July 11, 1849, “The ‘Confidence Man’ on a Large Scale,” considers the social implications of the idea of confidence in respect to the described swindle and other documented cases of criminal acquaintance and trust-defying schemes. The article begins with a nod to the “amusing descriptions of the transactions of a certain financial genius, who rejoices in the soubriquet of the ‘Confidence Man.’”97 The journalist then compares the “genius” who “obtained half a dozen watches” to the Wall Street brokers who have “pocketed millions of dollars.” His satiric comparison continues with suggestions for the street swindler who might set his sights on a larger pool and a larger payoff:

He should have gone to Albany and obtained a charter for a new railroad company.... He should have entered his own name as a stockholder to the amount of one hundred thousand dollars.... He should have quietly got rid of his stock; but on the faith of it got a controlling share in the management of the concern.... He should have involved the company in debt, by a corrupt and profligate expenditure of the capital subscribed in good faith by poor men and men of moderate means. He should have negotiated a loan, and taken it himself, at his own rates... He should have run the company in to all sorts of difficulty. He should have depreciated the stock by every means in his power. He should have brought the stockholders into bankruptcy. He should have sold out the whole concern and got all into his hands, in payment of his ‘bonds.’ He should have drawn, during all the time occupied by this process of ‘confidence,’ a munificent salary; and choosing the proper, appropriate, exact nick of time, he should have retired to life of virtuous ease, the possessor of a clear conscience and one million of dollars! 98
The editorial labels transactions of business -- charters, stock shares, loans, and companies -- as confidence games, meant to ply, ploy, and eventually ruin those who trust in the entrepreneurial expertise of another. The power of the swindle on this larger scale includes an understanding of the proper channels of movement, a bevy of capital to enter the scheme, and an ability to persuade others to invest in (to place trust in) the promise of relationship and return, a promise not unlike the street swindler who claims a connection and asks to “borrow” from the unsuspecting victim.

Yet this elaborate scheme was not the street swindler’s plan, and his capture and subsequent “rot” in prison occurs “while the ‘Confidence Man on a Large Scale’ fattens in his palace, on the blood and sweat of the green ones of the land...Let [the street swindler] rot...while the genuine ‘Confidence Man’ ...heads the list of benevolent institutions – sits in the grandest pew of the grandest temple.”

This critique of class criminality and the exempting skeptical business transactions from scrutiny begins to question the consented upon values of antebellum society.

Confidence is a measure by which identity may be celebrated or disguised. I consider confidence to be comprised of two complementary, yet often contradictory components: conceit and deceit. Conceit supports the expansion of the self, the belief in its abilities. Deceit masks the self and its abilities, creating fear in the unknown and vulnerability at the level of perception. Emerson worked from a stance of confident conceit, promoting the self as resilient and capable. Hawthorne’s works acknowledge both the fear of mutable selves and the danger of deceit inherent in confidence. Judge Pyncheon’s public persona is one example of such
duplicity: the honorable judge is described using the metaphor of a “tall and stately edifice...a palace!” with “splendid halls” and the “mosaic-work of costly marbles.”

Yet Hawthorne complicates the Judge's public presentation: “And beneath the show of a marble palace, that pool of stagnant water, foul with many impurities, and perhaps tinged with blood – that secret abomination, above which, possibly, he may say his prayers, without remembering it – is this man’s miserable soul!” The judge's presentation is duping, manipulative. In contrast, Hawthorne's heroine, Phoebe holds the gift of “making things look real, rather than fantastic within her sphere.” Hawthorne privileges authentic presentation in his heroine, yet his novel is filled with duplicitous presentations.

Newspapers and small printing presses regularly published counterfeit detectors that detailed visual cues to aid the discernment of authentic or counterfeit bills.

Autographical counterfeit detectors provided the authentic signatures of

Figure 6: The Autographical Counterfeit Detector, 1853.
bank representatives. Published alongside these detectors were other notices entreating public perception and discernment; newspaper ads and handbills, for example, warned against confidence schemes, detailing the physical descriptions of confidence men with accounts of their ingratiation methods and their wake of theft: one, from an 1856 edition of the New York Herald warns of a man, “six feet high” with “green glasses” who “has goods sent to a hotel...under pretense of showing them to his wife.” He claims to be “from the South, but he is a graduate of Sing Sing.”105 The prevalence of these detectors and notices only increased the anxiety of trade and exchange.

Print material described the visual qualities of counterfeit bills and confidence men to enhance recognition, though fraudulent schemes continued to pass successfully through society, undetected among citizens. The prevalence of notices, however, did raise awareness and create an alarm of present danger. The specter, as a perceived danger and as a similar problem of perception and recognition, proved an apt literary tool to consider such deceptive possibility, fueling the economic undercurrents of the fantastical stories of the gothic and the romantic. As sources of anxiety, economic ruses (and their spectral counterparts) thrived in times of devastating need when speculation or risk might improve individual economic circumstance,106 as well as in times of economic prosperity when investment and risk seemed synonymous with opportunity and wealth. Literature and economics share in the crises of perception and recognition. Kurt Heinzelman describes the symbiotic nature of the two as holding two phenomena: “imaginative economics, [or] the way in which economic systems are structured by
means of the imagination, upon what are essentially fictive concepts – including, ultimately, the economy itself; and poetic economics, the way in which literary writers use this fictive economic discourse, this body of systemized knowledge, as an ordering principle in their own work.” When exchange denies equivalence in a standard transaction, the inequity is perceived as a debt or as a cheat, as a betrayal; in response to such inequity, skepticism arises, perception becomes clouded. Literature reflects this response through a preoccupation with perceptive ability and a distrust of the gift or the donation. Melville’s *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* engages this distrust in a series of failed attempts at charity, perpetuated by the shape-shifting protagonist whose duplicitous interactions on board the Fidele make offering the gift or the charitable donation a moment of victimization. In one particular scene, The Confidence Man creates a new charity, the World’s Charity: “a society to be empowered by the various governments to levy, annually, one grand benevolence tax upon all mankind.” The World’s Charity would generate, he tells the man, eleven thousand two hundred millions. The Confidence Man finds the level of disruption for each victim. What will constitute the failed equivalence? What will ensure the slant exchange? For some, the interaction is subtle; for others, outrageous. Melville’s Confidence Man is more than a disguised con artist; he is a morphing figure, as fluid as the river he travels, capable of becoming that which his next encounter requires. He is unable to grasp, to see, to recognize, and it is in this unsettled space that Melville positions acts of charity and investment. It is in this unsettled space that Melville questions the
integrity of a fixed, recognizable identity, a question that resounded throughout
literature of the era.

Melville uses spectral power to exaggerate the problem and the conditions of
confidence and its effects on value because the spectral images work to satirize the
abilities of the confidence man by giving him supernatural abilities. Melville’s The
Confidence Man forces the strangers upon the steamboat to expose their abilities of
discernment, their resilience against deception, their position on charity and need.
Melville’s novel questions the endurance of charity and morality through a critique
of perceptive ability and the economic motivations that influence good will. The
Confidence Man preys upon the fears, wishes, and sympathies of each traveler,
revealing himself to be a master manipulator. Melville’s character is a crisis of
confidence. His choice is to continuously alter his identity, presenting multiple
selves to the world. This potential of controlled identity variance is a fear-filled
amalgamation -- manipulative control over another and the inevitable, fragile,
unbidden bending beneath circumstance.

In August of 1849, Evert and George Duyckinck provided another use of the
term “confidence” as a representative measure of morality and personal identity
when they published an editorial in Literary World regarding the Confidence Man as
street swindler:

That one poor swindler, like the one under arrest, should have been able to
drive so considerable a trade on an appeal to so simple a quality as the
confidence of man in man, shows that all virtue and humanity of nature is not
entirely extinct in the nineteenth century. It is a good thing, and speaks well
for human nature, that, at this late day, in spite of all the hardening of
civilization, and all the warnings of newspapers, men can be swindled.
The man who is always on guard, always proof against appeal, who cannot be
beguiled into the weakness of pity, by any story – is far gone, in our opinion,
toward being himself a hardened villain. He may steer clear of petty larceny and open swindling – but mark that man well in his intercourse with his fellows – they have no confidence in him, as he has none in them. He lives coldly among his people – he walks an iceberg in the marts of trade and social life – and when he dies, may Heaven have that confidence in him which he had not in his fellow mortals” 109

Here, concern lies with those who may no longer be swindled, who “cannot be beguiled into the weakness of pity, by any story.” The critique shifts the consent to value once more, imagining a society in which the charitable and the gullible would be celebrated. In an era of reform, placing belief in the need of a group of people (or in a man on the street who claims hunger) was a test of one’s perceptive abilities. Confidence was the line between charity and duping, between humanity and swindling. The duplicity of misrepresentation chronicled in Melville’s and Poe’s and Hawthorne’s texts jeopardizes the communal consent to value in persons, especially when those persons are in need of financial assistance to improve their health, poverty, or representational status.

Stephen Mihm connects the act of discerning authenticity in a bill, of creating confidence and faith in a piece of currency that could be held and investigated with that of discerning authenticity and creating confidence and faith in intangible, unseeable entities like credit or national identification. Seeing provided the opportunity to recognize authenticity and could be the vehicle for recognizing those opportunities that would equate to an improved financial situation. However, seeing, discerning, and recognizing authentic possibility were difficult tasks that held considerable risk. Economic uncertainty and financial swings provided daily, anxiety-ridden judgments.110 Which paper bill could be trusted as having value?
Which merchant’s claims, which credit could be trusted? Which person -- seemingly in need -- deserved charity? The subsequent surge of economic boon and technological innovation created still more anxiety: Which technological innovation promised profit? Which investment opportunities would offer return? Stephen Mihm chronicles the public’s crisis of discernment, not only in the “authenticity and value of money,” but in “an almost mystical faith in the credit of the country.” Mihm states that confidence relied on an “infinite number of variables” culminating in a dependence on “faith in a new abstraction.” Abstraction and uncertainty in currency and credit created a sense of unease, especially in an era of increasing scientific and technological specificity. For example, Edward Balleisen’s Navigating Failure explores the actions of middle-classed persons who filed bankruptcy in the 1840s, finding, not surprisingly, that risk-mitigation became a motive force in their future decision-making. While some continued to pursue proprietorships and business success, albeit more cautiously with less debt and fewer speculative investments, others reconsidered their vocational aspirations, pursuing independence through farming or land acquisition in the west, or giving up the autonomy and risk of self-employment for the security of a consistent paycheck. These last “redefined autonomy in terms of security and freedom from the anxieties that so often beset the owners of business ventures.” The influence of their past experience along with their desire to avoid a continued perception of failure within their community of peers brought about a change in definitions and locations of independence and autonomy.
Return, for example, to Poe’s story, “The Man that Was Used Up;” the means by which the narrator had understood confidence – discernible physical attributes and social recommendations are disrupted by the General’s mechanical presence. The progress, technological, medical, and scientific, that has allowed the General’s continued existence creates a barrier to the narrator’s abilities to discern authenticity. The spectral voice of the bundle upon the floor is, in essence, a call from beyond the grave. These texts clearly position confidence as a problem of social and economic interaction, a problem hindered by abilities to perceive and discern, and predicated on the reported dangers of what misperception might bring.

The anxiety of trusting the senses is well-represented in literature through a preoccupation with sight as a particularly faulty or acute investigative tool, through the discomfort and fascination surrounding extrasensory abilities like mesmerism and omniscient photography, and through the very presence of the specter, which is, at its core, an abomination of sight, a blur, a peripheral scene which accosts one’s senses of discernment. The specter is always most easily identified by what it is not.

When Hawthorne introduces his character Hepzibah, he introduces, also, a conundrum of perception. Our first vision of Hepzibah has her “feeling her way toward the stairs,” and then, upon her descent, pausing to look at the portrait of old Colonel Pyncheon, perusing it with “a singular scowl – a strange contortion of the brow – which by people who did not know her, would probably have been interpreted as an expression of bitter anger or ill-will.” However, Hepzibah feels no bitterness, Hawthorne tells us, only near-sightedness: “this forbidding scowl was the innocent result of...an effort...to concentrate her powers of vision, as to...
substitute a firm outline of the object, instead of a vague one.”114 Hepzibah’s scowl is a problem of perception, as others view her as an “ill-tempered old maid” when, in fact, “her heart never frowned.”115 Hepzibah’s long, solitary seclusion and her presentiment of revoked class privilege positions those outside the House of the Seven Gables, in her perception, as a threat and a source of envy. Hawthorne uses Hepzibah’s near-sightedness and others’ misconstrued perception of her personality to position Hepzibah as an endangered character, one who cannot push past the confines of her present situation. Progress is denied Hepzibah, in part, because her ability to perceive and to be perceived has been stunted.

Poe engages a fantasy of heightened perception through many of his stories. His “Tales of Ratiocination,” (which include “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Mystery of Marie Roget,” and “The Purloined Letter”) feature protagonist M. Auguste Dupin, a man of keen perception and logical skill.116 The detective story is defined by the inclusion of clues that are available to both the reader and the detective. It is not a question of accessibility, but perceptive ability – scrutiny – that allows the successful solution of the crime.117 Sight and discernment provide a quandary of perception in others of Poe’s tales: “The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether” “The Cask of Amontillado” and “The Man that Was Used Up” rely on sight clues to reinforce the pre-conceived, entrenched notions of social structure that bely the actual action of the tale. In “Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether,” this assumed, tunnel-visioned sight prevents the narrator from noticing the recent revolt at a mental asylum. In “Cask,” Fortunato’s prideful, bacchanalian musings prevent him from noticing Montressor’s murderous intent. Each of these mistaken perceptions is pre-
emptied with a presumption of social position – the mental patients speak with manners, Montressor would, of course, seek Fortunato’s expertise. The potential power of the weak or poor as well as the potential frailty of the privileged is unnoticeable behind the veil of assumed roles and assumed sight. This error in perception is similarly constructed in Melville’s “Benito Cereno”, when the visitors to the ship do not notice that the slaves on board as cargo have mutinied and possess complete control. Each of these stories engages the specter of confidence as a condition of perception. In some, perception is skewed by a character’s confidence in an assumption. In others, confidence is a deliberate, calculated violation of perception.

Counterfeit detectors, confidence man warnings, and banknotes as written promises to pay, position perception and vision as desired tools for those engaged in transactions of trade, investment, and charity. Without this sight, the consumer might not recognize equivalence and the appropriate worth of the desired exchange; without this sight, the consumer might be duped.

I Say Again He Has No Face

Hist, then. How dost thou know that some entire, living, thinking thing may not be invisibly and uninterpenetratingly, standing precisely where thou now standest?”

Herman Melville, Moby Dick

Our consideration, here, has been to the faceless: specters, disguised (or shape shifting) confidence men, carefully mimicked bills, those whom we presume to be something they are not, those whom we simply choose not to see. Through the
spectral, we may offer some correctives to this faceless glance: eidola provide perpetual expanse and precise notice; the failed equivalence of the slant exchange reveals the disruption in the consent to value so that we might see value differently; man’s value repositioned between the eidola and the specter creates an enmeshed existence, rather than a linear equation; and through that layer of eidola and man and specter, we see the conflation of value, the standard unshored, the possibility to be and to be seen outside of the value equation, outside of someone else’s consent. The defamiliarization of use value and exchange value established in Robert Montgomery Bird’s Sheppard Lee, becomes, in the literature that follows and beneath our fixed gaze, a spectrum of unshored value. The establishment of value is the struggle of Moby Dick, the meticulous parsing of the whale through the cetology chapters: tail, eye, fin. The white whale is both consumable parts (with assignable worth) and the eidolon of immeasurable value. It is the desire and the material of exchange. Exchange is desire: in success, in the slant exchange, and in failure.

Two exchanges close the journey of Moby Dick. The first is the Pequod’s encounter with the Rachel. The two captains call to one another, each the only real participant in his own solipsistic exchange. “Hast seen the White Whale?” Ahab cries. And in return, the stranger Captain: “Aye, yesterday. Have ye seen a whale boat adrift?” Ahab’s joy matches the stranger Captain’s loss, as the Captain’s quest is for his son’s missing boat, the boy conceivably lost to the sea. When Ahab boards the ship, there is no salutation, just Ahab’s incessant question, “Where was he? --not killed! --not killed!”, an entreaty that the stranger Captain must surely have interpreted differently than intended under the circumstances, must surely have registered as referring to his own lost
“he” rather than a sought-after whale, that would be, to the stranger Captain, not the sacred child, the priceless original, but just another product of routine business, one whale of many. First a request by the Captain, “For God’s sake, I beg, I conjure,” met “icily” by Ahab. Then an offer: the stranger Captain wishes to charter the Pequod for 48 hours, “you must, oh, you must, and you shall do this thing.” Ahab’s response is decisive and dismissive, “Captain Gardner, I will not do it. Even now I lose time. Goodbye, goodbye. God bless ye, man.” This is the failed exchange, the desires of each set upon unagreeable terms.

And, then, the sweeping Rachel looking looking looking for her lost boys finds still another orphan; this is the wanting, the slant exchange.
emerged for me. Seeing, perceiving the connections between literary specters and historical stance, but his description accurately describes the way that this chapter emerged for me. Seeing, perceiving the connections between literary specters and

2 Ibid., 332.
3 The etymological connection between the *spectral*, the *speculative*, to *speculate*, to *specule*, and the *specular* connects the ghostly, the unknowable, the ability to anticipate, the ability to see attentively, and the object by which one sees oneself.
4 Ibid., 331.
5 Ibid., 332.
6 This question resonates throughout the chapters of *Moby Dick* as Ahab incessantly seeks a sighting of the leviathan. Notable instances of the phrase include scenes in which the Pequod meets the Jereboam, the Samuel Enderby, the Albatross, the Rachel, the Rose-Bud, and the Bachelor. See Melville, *Moby Dick*, 195, 252, 314, 336, 375, 397.
7 The “wild” and “fabulous rumours” that surround *Moby Dick* include: “supernatural agencies;” an incredible ferocity “a thirst for human blood” that had been known to “turn round suddenly” while being chased by pursuers, and “bearing down upon them, either stave their boats to splinters or drive them back...to the ship;” “ the ability to injure, to sprain[] wrists and ankles,” to break “limbs,” and devour[] amputations; a “ubiquitous” presence, supported by having been “encountered in opposite latitudes at one and the same instant of time;” and, finally, that he could not be harmed, that he would “swim away...though groves of spears should be planted in his flanks;” that he was in fact “immortal (for immortality is but the ubiquity of time)” (152-55).
8 Ibid., 193.
9 Ibid., 160.
10 I adopt Melville’s phrase, here, in homage to contemplation of uncertainty and the unknowable. Melville says this about the whale: “I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? Much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none? Thou shalt see my back parts, my tail, he seems to say, but my face shall not be seen. But I cannot completely make out his back parts; and hint what he will about his face. I say again he has no face” (296).
11 Marc Shell identifies America as being the “historical birthplace of the widespread use of paper money in the Western world,” a distinction that spurred political debate regarding paper currency throughout the antebellum era in which “paper money men” who supported symbolic currency contended with “gold bugs,” supporters of bimetal specie. Marc Shell, *Money, Language, and Thought: Literary and Philosphic Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1982), 5-6.
12 These are not necessarily clean connections, clear evidence, exact depictions. Instead, I rely on a series of perceived connections and peripheral visions, what Alexander Nemerov refers to as “something unlooked for right there where we can never quite see it – not today, not tomorrow, not ever – that’s yet perceptible all the same.” Nemerov writes about imagining history, about confidently claiming a historical stance, but his description accurately describes the way that this chapter emerged for me. Seeing, perceiving the connections between literary specters and
economic exchange in the antebellum era is not unlike the attempt to see, to understand the faceless and the unknowable. The task is spectral in itself. See Alexander Nemerov, “Seeing Ghosts: The Turn of the Screw and Art History,” *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* Eds. Maria Del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 527-547. Specters provide a place of wish and fear, the spectral imaginative is a space of possibility – that which the spectator fills. See Chapter Two for a detailed description.


The Specie Circular is a Presidential Order signed by Andrew Jackson in 1836 that required government land to be purchased with gold or silver coins. The aftermath of the Order was a rise in inflation and prices and a devaluation of paper currency. The deregulation of the National bank left currency also unregulated, resulting in a proliferation of banks and currency notes. Historian Stephen Mihm explains: “Though only a few banks issued notes in the 1790s, close to two hundred did by 1815, and by 1830, the number climbed to 321. Ten years later, the number of banks jumped again, to 711, and after dipping in the early 1840s, skyrocketed forward. To complicate matters further, other state-chartered corporations – insurance companies, railroads, import and export firms, and canal companies – also issued notes at this time, as did numerous unchartered bankers and merchants operating in defiance of the law. By the 1850s, with so many entities commissioning banks notes of their own design (and in denominations, sizes, and colors of their choosing), the money supply became a great confluence of more than ten thousand different kinds of paper that continually changed hands, baffled the uninitiated, and fluctuated in value according to the whims of the market. “Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeitors: Capitalists, Con Men and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.
have theorized and historicized debt, gift economies, thinking regarding the slant exchange has been inspired by numerous scholars who continue to include transformation or metamorphosis, a sort of evolution from bodied to spirit form; a space of interpretation; as a metaphor of power and ability; or as the continued presence of absence. These are my own very basic distinctions for the purposes of this discussion. My thinking regarding the slant exchange has been inspired by numerous scholars who have theorized and historicized debt, gift economies, charity, swindle, and exchange.

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 1, 4.
24 In this way, Goux contends, the logic of exchange and an exploration of comparative value might unify Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Derrida’s logocentrism, and Marx’s economic philosophy.
25 Goux, Symbolic Economies, 2.
27 Fifteen states legally condoned slavery as the nation moved toward Civil War. Voting rights, which were initially reserved for white, male property owners, were extended to all white males in 1850, to African-American males in 1870, and to women in 1920. The experience of black voters – free black Northerners in the antebellum era, and all black citizens after -- reveals obstacles outside of legality. Coverture laws in the antebellum era denied married women the right to own property, to inherit wealth, or to bestow inheritance. See, Peter Kolchin, American Slavery 1619-1877 (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003); Christopher Malone, Between Freedom and Bondage: Race, Party, and Voting Rights in the Antebellum North (New York: Routledge, 2008); Ellen Carol DuBois, Women’s Suffrage, Women’s Rights (New York: New York University Press, 1998); and J. Morgan Kousser, Colorblind Injustice: Minority Voting Rights and the Undoing of the Second Reconstruction (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).
28 Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom (New York: Miller, Orton, and Mulligan, 1855), 175.
29 The Three Fifths Compromise was a negotiation of the Continental Congress. In an effort to balance the population representation of Northern and Southern states in the House of Representatives, delegates decided that black slaves in the south would not be counted as whole persons (as would benefit the southern states) and would not be excluded from the population count (as would benefit the northern states). Each slave was to be counted as 3/5 of a person for the purposes of taxation and representation. This valuation system was repealed after the Civil War.
31 Exchange is one way that spectral representation can be considered. Others include transformation or metamorphosis, a sort of evolution from bodied to spirit form; a space of interpretation; as a metaphor of power and ability; or as the continued presence of absence.
33 Goux, Symbolic Economies, 9.
34 These are my own very basic distinctions for the purposes of this discussion. My thinking regarding the slant exchange has been inspired by numerous scholars who have theorized and historicized debt, gift economies, charity, swindle, and exchange.

35 Spectral images, as simulacra, operate outside the conventional concept of capitalistic exchange -- that of Aristotle's commensuration or Marx's equivalence. By this, I mean that though the specter is an exchange, it is not the equal of the bodied soul it represents. The specter does not “count as equal” to its trade. The specter of Sheppard Lee, as another example, is a reduced form of Sheppard the man, holding spectral power but otherwise parcelled and incomplete. The specter inhabits the subtracted, vacated parts of absented souls. The exchange of bodied souls and specters does not observe the value of a universal equivalent: we cannot place a standard value upon Sheppard's spirit or the corpses he finds. The specter is exchange, yet it exists outside of equivalence and labor-valued worth.

36 John Ruskin, *Unto this Last*, 195.

37 David Graeber positions debt as a historical certainty, prevalent and heavily moralized throughout cultures and eras. "The very fact that we don't know what debt is, the very flexibility of the concept, is the basis of its power. If history shows anything, it is that there's no better way to justify relations founded on violence, to make such relations seem moral, than by reframing them in the language of debt -- above all, because it immediately makes it seem that it's the victim who's done something wrong." Graeber, *Debt*, 5.


41 “Temperance Convention,” 150.


45 Ibid., 335.

When Ishmael, as narrator, describes Pip's fall into the open sea, he laments, "the awful lonesomeness is intolerable. The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it?" Melville's ironic narrator is the other survivor of abandonment at sea, his story being told recollectively after the Pequod sinks and the Rachel saves him.


Ibid., 341-42.

Ibid., 339, 340, 341.

Ibid., 340.

Ibid., 338.

Marx, *Capital*, 177.

See Marx, *Capital*, 158.


Marx, *Capital*, 222.


Whitman, "Eidolons," 8, line 49

Ibid., 5, lines 9-13.

Emerson, “Circles,” 174.

Ibid.

Whitman, “Song of Myself,” 89, line 1346.

Whitman, “To You," 233, line 5.

Whitman, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” 163, lines 86-88.

Ibid., line 91.


Whitman, “Eidolons,” 6, lines 43, 44, 23


Ibid., 716, lines 168-71.

Simms describes the moment when the ghost of the Major appears: “Though he stood in the shade of a thicket, and there was no light in the heavens save that of the stars, [James] was yet enabled to distinguish perfectly and with great ease, every lineament of his friend’s face.” From this ghostly encounter with the Major’s perfect form, young James is able to intercept his friend’s murderer on a ship bound for England (the capture aided by numerous townspeople from the port city who are compelled by the detail of James’ sighting) and to recover the corpses of the Major and his horse in the dense woods near the apparition site, a recovery that provides the Major with a proper burial and with the marked and celebrated memorialization of his burial site. See William Gilmore Simms, “Grayling, or ‘Murder Will Out,’” *The Wigwam and the Cabin* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1845) 1-36. Web. *Documenting the American South* http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/simmscabin1/simmscabin1.html 4 April 2012.


This claim, in which Poe’s identification of personhood relies on discernable characteristics or preserved relics, could be charged as conflicting, in some ways, with his other more imaginative representations. Poe, is, of course, known for imaginative thought, evidenced by his 1849 eulogy, in which Rufus Wilmot Griswold, wrote, “[Poe’s] imagery was from the worlds which no mortal can see but with the vision of genius.” See, *Poe in His Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs by Family, Friends, and Associates*, ed. Benjamin F. Fisher (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 77-78. My intent is not to dismiss Poe’s imaginative vision, nor his hazy, ambiguous representations (for example, “Ligeia”), but to focus attention on this potential preference for discernable or relic-ized identities, voiced in his reviews of spectral literature and reinforced in several of his stories. Poe’s work can, at times, be hard to pin down, as exemplified in this discussion, and in his representations of politics, race, and gender. For further discussion regarding contradiction within Poe’s works, see David Ketterer, *The Rationale of Deception in Poe* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979); Joan Dayan, *Fables of Mind: An Inquiry into Poe’s Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Kenneth Silverman, *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009); and Heinz Tschachler, *The Monetary Imagination of Edgar Allan Poe: Banking, Currency, and Politics in the Writings* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2013).


Some examples include: “Mad I am not – and very surely I do not dream,” *The Black Cat*; “Nervous, but will you say that I am mad?” *The Tell Tale Heart*; “Men have called me mad, but the question is not yet settled,” *Eleonora*.

One example is the narrator of *The Tell Tale Heart’s* disgust with his landlord’s eye. As readers, we don’t feel the horror of its gaze or the urgency of its demise. The narrator’s reaction to his horror is to kill the old man in brutal fashion, stuffing
his body beneath the floor. His solution to his own horror is the horror of the story through the reader’s gaze.

82 This position may begin, for Hawthorne, with the disruption and supernatural nature of the Salem Witch Trials.


84 Whitman, “Eidolons,” 7, lines 53, 57-60.


86 Ibid., 46.

87 Ibid., 79.

88 Marx, *Capital*, 140.


92 Ibid., 14.

93 Johannes Dietrich Bergmann’s investigation of the origin and usage of the term “Confidence Man” is found in “The Original Confidence Man,” *American Quarterly* 21 (Autumn 1969), 560-577. Bergmann’s study considers Melville’s knowledge of the term during the years leading to his writing and publication of *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*. Excerpts of Bergmann’s essay are reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of the text.


96 Bergmann, “The Original Confidence Man,” 311.

97 Quoted in Bergmann, “The Original Confidence Man,” 306.

98 Quoted in Bergmann, “The Original Confidence Man,” 308.

99 Quoted in Bergmann, “The Original Confidence Man,” 308-309.

100 Hawthorne, *Seven Gables*, 229.

101 Ibid., 230.

102 Ibid., 297.

103 Mihm, *A Nation*, 5, 146, 187, 208-212, 236-246. Mihm notes, “while detectors promised to restore some measure of confidence to the currency, they often had the opposite effect, undermining readers’ faith in the money supply as well as playing into the hands of the counterfeitters” (246). The publishers of the detectors had a financial stake in propagating anxiety, and the details of the bank notes, while sometimes difficult for consumers to decipher, provided counterfeitters with specific models for replication.

The depression years of the early 1840s were devastating to many families. Unemployment and prices rose sharply; banks failed; personal letters depicted family struggles to secure warmth and food and shelter. Speculators roamed the streets and “every storekeeper touted get-rich deals from his door.” (Sellers 354-360).


Quoted in Bergmann, “The Original Confidence Man,” 311.


Mihm’s discussion of a new abstraction focuses upon “the nation,” a consideration “that transcended both the economy and the individuals and the corporations constituting it.” Mihm, *A Nation*, 19.


Hawthorne, *Seven Gables*, 32-33.

Ibid., 34.

Ibid.

These tales constitute Poe’s recognition as the father of the detective story, an honor that depends, in part, on his preoccupation with perception and sensory skill.

Other tales by Poe engage an interest in the importance of perception through humor or horror. “The Spectacles” follows the plight of a young man who has fallen earnestly in love with a woman he sees across a theater hall. His pursuit is a series of embarrassing social encounters that resolves with his realization that his eyesight is poor, and the woman is, in fact, elderly and frail.


Ibid., 398.

Ibid.
Chapter Four

The Limits and the Limitless: Stakes of Progress and Spectral Power

It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.

Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*

A specter does not only cause séance tables to turn, but gets heads spinning.

Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

Soon a number of raps would be heard in the direction of the table, and one side of that piece of furniture would be seen to rise about an inch from the floor. Some very naturally wanted to rush to the table and investigate the matter more closely, but Paine forbade that - the necessary “conditions” must be observed, he said, or there would be no further manifestation of spirit-power.

P.T Barnum, *Humbugs of the World*

The table that is not a table, the table that features in Marx’s consideration of commodity sensuousness, that Derrida equates to the spectral influence, that mediums manipulate in their pursuit of the dead: this table that is not just a table features also in a short story by Herman Melville, published in 1856, “The Apple-Tree Table: or Original Spirit Manifestations.” In the story, Melville’s narrator brings an old round slab table down from a dusty garret for use as a tea table or reading table in his home. At first his wife “disrelished the idea of so unfashionable and indigent-looking a stranger as the table intruding into the polished society of more prosperous furniture,” but upon varnishing and polishing, “bright as a new guinea,” the table is accepted into the cedar parlor. The narrator’s daughters are, at
once, put off by the table’s “cloven feet” and predict strange happenings; not long after, an incident does occur (“long before the time of the ‘Fox Girls’” the narrator assures us). 3 In short, the narrator, and then his family, begin to hear sounds coming from the table, tickings that the narrator cannot, at first hearing, place, for “who ever heard of a ticking table?” 4 After much speculation of spirits and possessions, the ticking reveals itself to be two opalescent bugs, hatched from century old eggs embedded in the table’s wood. Their journey through the wood and eventual cracking of the table’s surface has created the mysterious and fearful sound.

Melville’s story has been interpreted, very appropriately, as a discourse on spiritual claims and belief, 5 but I’m interested, also, in the disruption of the table (that is not just a table) to the everyday life of the narrator and his family. Before they are aware of the sound’s origin, they each neglect work and leisurely pursuits to watch the ticking table. The narrator and his wife refuse to discard the item, despite its mysterious ticking, forcing the servant Biddy (after the narrator must retrieve the table from where Biddy has fearfully hidden it in the wood-house chipping pile) to reset the table with a cloth and finery for breakfast: “Set it,’ roared I, in a passion, ‘set it, or I’ll go for the police.” 6 The wife, addressing the family in a “frightful, almost businesslike manner,” assures her husband, “I shall breakfast on no other table but this, so long as we live in this house. So sit down now that all things are ready again, and let us quietly breakfast,” and to their daughters: “My dears...go to your room and return composed. Let me have no more of this childishness.” 7 What is at stake in this family’s moment of crisis is their decorum and composure, their ability to continue in the accepted social and personal routines
of their everyday lives. The table is a disruption, certainly, but also a trial, an effort to maintain normal operations in the presence of a new potentially spiritual, (eventually scientific) condition. Melville’s Apple-Tree family is a glimpse at the moments of disruption and response that occur when individuals encounter the table that is not just a table, this material metaphor which can signify spiritual presence or spectral power or scientific explanation or commodity sensuousness or the hoax.

In this chapter, I examine a constellation of spectral figures from literary and historical sources: spirits, images, characters, and mediums from 1840s and 50s texts and serial publications that imagine the potential effects of technological and scientific progress to social and economic existence. Progress and the ability to believe in shifting realities brings moments of personal change and collective desire: the aspiration for the expanded abilities and opportunities that discovery and progress promise (and might provide), the motivation to nurture perceptive powers of evaluation that might reduce risk and yield return, and the deep fear that these extended limits of opportunity and discernment might dismantle existing economic and social constructs. In this usage, spectral images comprise a complex array of representations, including the mystique of knowledge and perception, the influential possibilities of supernatural power, and the seemingly limitless expansion of science, medicine and technology. The question of progress and its potential effects pervades each of the texts I consider. Edgar Allan Poe’s stories imagine scientific and mechanical progress through perceptive (and often spectral) skill. Fitz-James O’Brien and George Lippard create fanciful scenarios of
revolutionary spectral power, and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s economically infused plot in *The House of the Seven Gables* hinges upon the conflict between progressive (represented by the spectral) and traditional forms of legacy. The historical record of hoaxes (in Spiritualism, Poe’s ruses, and Daguerreotype technology) imagines the ways in which scientific methods might reveal the unexplained, the ways that the unexplained might mimic scientific discovery, and the ways that technological advances – pseudo or real -- might disrupt society’s collective, accepted vision of the world. In each of these texts, spectrality serves as the tool to both represent and complicate discussions of progress. These spectral representations imagine unexplainable phenomena, a variety of supernatural abilities housed in objects or in people, abilities that might breach the boundaries of the body and the mind, altering its presentation, diminishing its limitations.

In this use of spectral imagery, the inertia of the specter shifts. The spectral images considered in my second chapter (images from Robert Montgomery Bird’s novel and the lithographs of Edward Williams Clay) existed in a state of economic violence and disruption, the forced and panicked stasis of a haunted future that coincided with the economic panic and stagnation of the late 1830s. The wish of the specter imagined relief, the motion of escape, while the ever-present, financially burdened body staked firm, inescapable ground. Similarly, the spectral images of exchange examined in chapter three were long-held, fixed and still, like Ahab’s doubloon, for our prolonged consideration. The spectral powers considered in this chapter and in these texts are active. They move. Spectrality from literature of the mid-1840s and into the 1850s employs supernatural innovation, action, and ability,
forces that move plots, reveal character, create history, and consider changes in structures of power and belief across a cultural backdrop of economic resurgence and industrial motion. These dynamic spectral images include the actions of mesmeric control, communication with the dead, and spectral, scientific creation.

A primary concern operating beneath this spectral motion is, I believe, a feared reorganization of wealth and social capital that progress (substantiated or imagined) could influence. Changes in economic opportunity could shift power, rehabilitate fallen men, or expose the faults of the powerful. The effects of such changes upon life experience could be transformative, in sometimes joyous, sometimes tragic ways, and literary haunting provides this complex representation, the risk of personal experience wrapped in social economics. Avery Gordon describes the connection: “Haunting occurs on the terrain situated between our ability to conclusively describe the logic of Capitalism...for example, and the various experiences of this logic, experiences that are more often than not partial, coded, symptomatic, contradictory, ambiguous.” Gordon’s placement of haunting between logic and experience underpins my claim that spectral imagery often represents the liminal spaces of this disconnect, when the logic of economics does not equate to a consistent experience. Even as the economic conditions of the American antebellum era began to improve with the rise of industry and the progress of scientific and technological endeavor, uncertainty and anxiety remained a part of individual experience. Antebellum citizens were eager to participate in the changing economic landscape, though their endeavors of economic lift were not without risk. The tenuous nature of investment creates one scaffold of conceivable economic
advancement. The potential fraudulent duping of consumers dismantles another. The pseudo-science of mesmerism serves as Hawthorne's fictional representation of this cultural concern. His generational tale of the Maules and the Pyncheons is a battle of the traditional influence of wealth, inheritance, and social standing against the progressive power of mind control, object manipulation, and haunting (spectral representations of progressive reform measures that could reorder existing social and economic class structures).

This discussion (as I discuss it now and as I have pursued it throughout this project) relies upon an assumption that wealth and opportunity affect the social position and the social prospects of individuals, that social stratifications provide varied experiences of influence and capital as individuals interact within their societal constructs. Defining the borders and striations of class structure is a difficult task. Class, as a categorical position, is ambiguous and complicated, determined not only by wealth, but social relationships, education, cultural interests, and societal desires. Yet wealth and the opportunity to generate and maintain income, to experience culture, to leave an inheritance of money and cultural experience to future generations is a defining border, shifting, perhaps, but nonetheless, present. A second discernable border is the experience of poverty and overwhelming labor, the absence of opportunity experienced by the lower and the oppressed classes. The middle classes are a gray area, “a relational category always defined against and in tension with” these more extreme ends of the class spectrum.10
In their introduction to *Rethinking Class: Literary Studies and Cultural Formations*, Wai Chee Dimock and Michael T. Gilmore acknowledge that “the boundaries or class are unstable, that the experience of it is uneven, that it is necessary but not sufficient for the constitution of human identities.”

Dimock and Gilmore cite the work of Anthony Giddens in his premise that “class can be understood as a mediate relation between the economic and the non-economic, as a mode of structuration, a set of constitutive relays linking economic identities with social identities.”

My interaction with class structures in this examination of limits and limitlessness is not a campaign to define limits or categorize economic and social behavior, but a consideration of how an extended examination of the limits and limitless nature of science, of medicine, of technology, and of economics (as they are represented in nineteenth-century texts) affected, disrupted, forced contemplation, and challenged the composure and the decorum of economic and social identities. Any consideration of economic and social identity is also a consideration of class; my intent is to open, through an exploration of expanded limits, an understanding of the “complexity of lived experience” that Avery Gordon pursues; to explore the documented cultural investments alongside the financial investments of nineteenth-century experience; to push upon the actions of social position, the composure and the decorum the Apple-Tree mother insisted upon, for example, as they relate to scientific claims of opportunity and potential return.

What is at stake in the social decision to lay the white cloth and breakfast dishes upon the ticking table? What is at stake in the social decision to claim that ticking as a communicative porthole with the dead? Which actions preserve social position,
and which actions alter financial position? An exploration of economic progress, investment, public fascination, scientific progress, technological innovation, and the hoax will provide an interrogative space to begin.

Exploring Limits, Defining Spaces

Here is a solid body which we touch but which we cannot see. The fact is so unusual that it strikes us with terror. Is there no parallel, though, for such a phenomenon? Take a piece of pure glass. It is tangible and transparent.... It is not theoretically impossible, mind you to make a glass which shall not reflect a ray of light – a glass so pure and homogenous in its atoms that the rays from the sun shall pass through it as they do through the air, refracted but not reflected. We do not see the air, and yet we feel it.


Air, in its common condition, is a thin, transparent fluid, so subtile that it cannot be handled, and when at rest it cannot be felt. That it is a body, however, is quite obvious, because we feel its impression or force when agitated as wind, or when we feel that it is partially opposed to something; and in inhaling breath into the lungs we feel that we are drawing something through the mouth – that something is air.

Chamber’s Information for the People: A Popular Encyclopedia (1851)

There was a breath of new air, much vague expectation, a consciousness of power not yet finding its determinate aim.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Historic Notes of Life and Letters in New England

In the final five years of his life, Edgar Allan Poe published two short stories giving narrative voice to the mesmerized “dead”: “Mesmeric Revelation” in 1844 and “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” in 1845. In the first tale, the narrator mesmerizes Mr. Vankirk, a man who has been contemplating immortality and wishes to be interviewed regarding its possibilities while in a mesmeric trance, a state that he claims “enables [him] to perceive a train of ratiocination.” In the second, the narrator (with the intent of rectifying the omission of experiments
exploring mesmerism “in articulo mortis”) arranges a mesmeric date with M. Valdemar at the moment of his “approaching dissolution,” an inevitable end that has been confirmed by multiple physicians. Both mesmeric subjects are “in phthisis” (though Vankirk is less aware of his pending demise), and both texts play out as a scientific experiment or investigation: mesmerizing a dying man at the moment of his repose, allowing the intervening magnetic influence of the mesmerizer’s skill to extract words from the dead man’s tongue, truths from beyond the grave.

As M. Valdemar prepares for death, he agrees to the experiment suggested by his mesmerist (the narrator), an investigation that would permit the narrator and a few physician witnesses to begin the mesmeric passes at his deathbed, subduing him into a trance-like state. As Valdemar enters the mesmeric trance, he answers, “asleep now...I am dying.” Physical signs of life, such as faint breath on a held mirror, are still present for some time, until finally the eyes roll, the skin blanches, the lips curl back from the teeth, and the tongue swells and blackens. Valdemar no longer exhibits any vital signs. He is, by all measures, dead, and the narrator prepares to turn his body over to the nurses: but then, a vibration in the tongue. A voice, hoarse and distanced, “harsh, and broken and hollow” speaks as if from some “deep cavern within the earth” impressing the narrator “as gelatinous or glutinous matters impress the sense of touch.” The voice says simply, “I am dead.” Still without vital signs, Valdemar exists in a state of limbo; his “death had been arrested by the mesmeric process.” For seven months, the narrator and physicians visit and watch, reluctant to wake the patient from the experimental trance that has suspended his final departure. Finally, they ask him his wishes. The “same hideous
voice” pleads to be wakened or put to sleep: “quick! – waken me! – quick! – I say to you that I am dead!” The narrator performs the necessary mesmeric passes over the body as “dead! dead!” burst[s] from the tongue.” Finally the trance is lifted, and the body of Valdemar, now “shrunken, crumbled, absolutely rotted away,” becomes a “nearly liquid mass of loathsome – of detestable putridity.”20

Vankirk’s mesmeric experiment is quite different. There are no harsh or frightening vibrations, no guttural claims of existence; Vankirk’s mesmeric vocalizations are a philosophical treatise on the un-particled matter that makes up God and the place of human minds and matter within God’s presence. Vankirk’s is a detailed, yet obtuse explanation suggesting that God may be understood (“as nearly as we can conceive it”) as something other than spirit and other than matter, a presence more rare and fine than we have imagined, that “not only permeates all things, but impels all things and thus is all things within itself.”21 There is both scientific specificity and the wonder of abstraction in Vankirk’s explanations:

[A]lthough we may admit infinite littleness in the atoms themselves, the infinitude of littleness in the spaces between them is an absurdity. There will be a point – there will be a degree of rarity, at which, if the atoms are sufficiently numerous, the interspaces must vanish, and the mass absolutely coalesce. But the consideration of the atomic constitution being now taken away, the nature of the mass inevitably glides into what we conceive of spirit. It is clear, however, that it is as fully matter as before. The truth is, it is impossible to conceive spirit, since it is impossible to imagine what is not.22

This discussion of the spaces between atoms and within matter and mass serves to confirm, both the existence and the elusiveness of spirit, attempting to classify the abstraction while maintaining its inconceivability.23 Poe’s use of scientific explanation to begin to classify God represents a collective intellectual shift, a trust that advancements in science might answer impossible questions.24 Phantasmagoria
expert Marina Warner describes this trust as “a promise that the existence of a spirit dimension could be proved...under the scientific gaze.”

The antebellum scientific gaze not only aspired to “discover” the spiritual realm, but to scientifically imagine the interconnectedness of spirituality and knowledge. The experimentation and theorization of electricity and ether, for example, posited spiritual claims within scientific observation: electric energy emanating from the human body, a universal interconnectedness of ether that permeated the spaces within and surrounding us. Isaac Newton postulated the existence of a “Medium exceedingly more rare and subtile than Air, and exceedingly more elastick and active,” an ether that “readily pervades all bodies' and serves as a kind of vehicle for a variety of forces and actions including vision and gravity” as well as the human nervous system. The invisible yet pervasive existence of air and the potentially active effects of ether were themselves spirit-like, and, therefore, potential evidence of a spiritual realm, of unseen forces working constantly among us. Fitz-James O’Brien conjures air, “we do not see the air, yet we feel it,” as the basis for the scientific possibility of invisible materiality, while Emerson’s use of air as a “vague expectation, a consciousness of power not yet finding its determinate aim” conjures an atmosphere of potential always hovering. Patricia Fara asserts, “One major function of electronic aethers was to account for God’s continuing involvement in the world...they offered a reasonable account of how Christian dualism and electrical theory could be reconciled.”

Paul Gilmore, in Aesthetic Materialism, positions indeterminate science and spirituality in two scenarios. In the first, scientific innovation and discovery confirms a “universal law of relations,”
in which an egalitarian connective force (like electricity or ether or a collective communication) “permeat[es] the universe..., enabling the union of all souls.”30 In the second scenario, scientific discovery re-establishes and reinstates the stratification of categorization, emphasizing difference and the “cultural hierarchy,” the power, the “conquest and transformation” that progress and discovery could sanction.31 The focused scientific exploration of the mid-nineteenth century, then, produced a wide capacity that affected antebellum citizens’ understanding of belief, faith, and spirituality; that lauded potential of limitless progress through a series of scientific and pseudoscientific claims; that proposed a universal equality, a crossing of the borders of economic social position, of race and gender and ethnicity, of, even, life and death while, at the same time, reinstating stratifications of scientific categorization, political power, and social structuring. In Poe’s presentation, conceiving either science or spirit, each housed in the “infinite littleness” of vanishing interspaces, requires imagination and faith, an almost spiritual investment in “what is not.”32 Scientific and spiritual discovery are connected in Poe’s tale and in the record of scientific experimentation and theory through an embrace of belief, through an expansion of limits that conceives progress.

Poe’s conflation of inevitable death and mesmeric life, his merging of scientific specificity and enigmatic abstraction, suggest a fascination with the possibilities of progress and its effects on actual personal experience. Poe positions mesmerism as a progressive scientific act that could potentially yield medical benefit while releasing the mind from its limitations, opening the mind to philosophical knowledge of the unknown. This consideration of the unknown is a
site of risk and vulnerability, traits inherently present in a fictional, mesmeric journey through the unknowable afterlife, traits inherently present in the very real, commonplace prospects of innovation, investment, discovery, and reform that Poe’s readers would encounter throughout the financially-tumultuous, progress-driven 1840s and 50s. Poe’s mesmeric tales exemplify the public’s (sometimes uneasy) negotiation with progress through the inclusion of supernatural or spectral power infused at sites of potential – potential return, potential risk, potential adjustments to belief that could alter a sense of reality

Spectral innovation is an expansion of limits, and the ability of increased perception (like Vankirk’s experience under the mesmeric trance) was a desirable skill. Perception as a capacious capability, like the expanded limits of economic influence (wealth, social capital, investment savvy) or the expertise of scientific or technological prowess (conceiving the inconceivability of a new innovation) could be presented in literature through spectral powers of mesmeric control, mesmeric perception, communication with the dead, shape-shifting, or the manipulation of haunting. These powers might yield incredible return or might, in the control of another, enact incredible loss.
Progress and Investment, Risk and Return

Steam is no stronger now, than it was a hundred years ago, but is put to better use. A clever fellow was acquainted with the expansive force of steam; he also saw the wealth of wheat and grass rotting in Michigan. Then he cunningly screws on the steam-pipe to the wheat-crop. Puff now, O Steam! The steam puffs and expands as before, but this time it is dragging all Michigan at its back to hungry New York and hungry England. Coal lay in ledges under the ground since the Flood, until a laborer with pick and windlass brings it to the surface. We may well call it black diamonds. Every basket is power and civilization. Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Conduct of Life

Forces producing effects invisibly without contact over distance – magnetism, gravity, electromagnetic waves – are still keeping scientists hard at work...; their mysteriousness has inspired a plethora of theories about spirit and spirits, and these have spurred on the spread of technologies and their uses. Franz Mesmer won widespread fame and fortune for his cure – infusing his patients with “animal spirits”, a form of electric current. Marina Warner, Phantasmagoria

Investment is the economic referent of progressive social thought and the moving, limit-expanding spectral image, a gamble on the possibility of return, on improvement Investment is one way that movement across social stratification might occur. Investment is, itself, a spectral space, in its delay, in its promise. It is always loss with the hope of return. The unknowable return is, like the ambiguous spectral image or the claim to social reform, a risk. That level of risk varies, dependent upon opportunity and capital and the ability to perceive innovation. The stake and the return vary widely as well. While antebellum railroad barons acquired monopolistic legacies of wealth, the resulting transnational railroad encouraged further land acquisition in the West and afforded associated transportation and labor prospects from afar. Local industry increased manufacturing, while stores and markets emerged in increasingly populated cities, providing entrepreneurial and investment opportunities on a smaller scale. Through extensive tracking of regional
productivity and patent data, economic historian Kenneth Sokoloff defines the period from 1820-1860 as being one of overall growth (sometimes tremendous growth, interspersed with the financial panics of 1837 and 1857), rivaling the productivity that followed the Civil War. A “phase of technological development characterized by mechanization and major increases in the capital intensity of production” defined the 1850s. Sokoloff notes, “The extraordinary expansion of markets that is characteristic of early industrialization appears to have played a fundamental role in the achievement of these gains and in the elevation of such achievements into a self-sustaining process.” Part of that self-sustenance was the investment of earnings as inventive capital. Sokoloff explains the specific economic investment environment of 1850s America:

Substantial increases in productivity could be and were realized through incremental changes in the organization of production and in the design of tools or output. These are the sorts of technical changes that could well have been realized continuously in response to investments in inventive activity, and with the participation of a broad cross-section of the population in their discovery and implementation. Indeed, the growth of manufacturing productivity (especially in less capital-intensive industries) and of patenting appear to have spread out together from urban districts after 1820, along with the extension of transportation networks and extensive involvement in inventive activity by individuals with rather ordinary skills and backgrounds.

Investment, in this era, was available to the “ordinary” individual, not sanctioned only to the wealthy and the well-connected. The right investment in the right small business could prove both profitable and life-changing if discerned correctly.

Antebellum political economists, who flourished in this prosperous economic climate, valued Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations (1776) as well as the works of British political economists like Thomas Malthus and David Ricardo, who theorized
a distribution of wealth across three classes of land, labor, and capital. These foundational theorists painted a dark picture, in which a growing population and an increased need for industrial labor would increase wage obligations and decrease profits “thereby eroding investment and depressing real per capita wages until both economic and demographic growth ground to a halt.”

American economic theorist Henry Carey proposed a different scenario: “in a free market, increasing productivity rendered capital itself, like any other commodity, less expensive to reproduce, therefore less valuable and cheaper for the laborer to purchase. Meanwhile the more productive labor became, the higher grew its value to the employer and the more the employer would be compelled to pay for it.” Carey's theory espoused, “Money embodied the bountiful wealth-creating force [that was] commerce itself, making possible limitless abundance through endless exchange of goods and services, dissolving class differences through an alchemy of association.” Carey’s progressive economic theorization emerges in an expanding market of inventiveness and investment, in the climate of risk and return that fuels, also, progressive social reform.

Despite Solokoff’s assurances of continual economic growth and Carey’s optimistic vision for economic viability within social equality, the perception of investing in antebellum America was consistently represented and portrayed as substantially risky; there was risk in investing poorly, and there was risk in passing on a profitable return. Both scenarios were represented in literary spaces, whether that be the prolific collection of anti-speculation novels published by women writers or the hyperbolic calls for investment in newspapers and serial journals.
The opening scene of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (the best-selling novel of the nineteenth century⁴⁰) begins with the results of an investment gone wrong. Mr. Shelby is negotiating the sale of his slave, Tom, “a good, steady, sensible, pious fellow” that Mr. Shelby regrets losing to the despicable slave trader, Haley. Mr. Shelby has “speculated largely and quite loosely; [has] involved himself deeply, and his notes to a large amount had come into the hands of Haley.”⁴¹ Stowe positions the poor investment as the foundation of the story’s plotline; Tom’s long, often harrowing journey, his separation from his wife and family, and his ultimate sacrifice begin with Mr. Shelby’s poor investment. Stowe’s positioning of the speculative investment and its disastrous results as the initial contact with her characters is not only a rebuke to unnecessary risk, but, clearly, a reproach of the South’s financial manipulation of slaves and their social and familial relationships.

The risk of passing on investment opportunities could be fictitiously represented as well. One report in the *New York Herald* proclaimed:

> Steam and electricity, with the natural impulses of a free people, have made, and are making, this country the greatest, the most original, the most wonderful the sun ever shone upon... Those who do not mix with this movement – those who do not become part of this movement – those who do not go on with this movement -- will be crushed into more impalpable powder than ever was attributed to the car of Juggernaut. Down on your knees and pray.⁴²

Steam and electricity are presented here as innovations capable of expanding the limits of technology, communication, transportation, and, then, the nation and the self. An inability to conceive and embrace such innovation is destructive to the self, a pulverizing into powder that conjures Valdemar’s liquefying desecration. Investment risk and especially investment loss is recorded historically and in
literature as resulting from a seemingly invisible force always inherent in the nature of investment and from the actions of men working behind that force. This simultaneous nod to uncontrollable, inevitable cause and human manipulation resides also in the confusion of pseudo-sciences, which could, at first glance, seem supernatural, but then be exposed as manipulation.

The economic growth of the late antebellum era stabilized the financial situations of some households that had endured the depression years of the 1840s, but the explosion of new innovations and ideas was anything but a stabilizing presence. Marina Warner explains: “new technologies offered a model for understanding that was extended to mysteries beyond the reach of scientific experimentation.”

The difficulty was, at times, identifying which claims were actually new technologies and which were pseudo-sciences or hoaxes. The rise of technological innovation – some mechanical, some almost magical – was, therefore, a realm of uncertainty in the minds of writers and readers.

Poe’s 1839 story, “The Man that Was Used Up,” highlights this troubling and rising concern for antebellum citizens: in an era of change and progress, who and what may be believed? The progress that allowed for the General’s reinvention creates, also, a crisis of perception. What the narrator believes he has seen, the measure of his assessment regarding the General’s social presence, position and power, proves a false indicator. Instead, the components of his assessment are products of invention. The rise of technological invention and industry creates both economic opportunity and a need for personal re-evaluation in the intimate merging of product and personhood. Poe’s General personifies a crisis of perception and a
fear of human instability – literally, a concern regarding the potential of product-based, money-fueled transformation, and, metaphorically, a fear that the ability to perceive might warp beneath shifting economic and social contexts.

The uncertainty of the specter depicts a tenuous understanding of wealth and capital and power’s reassignment in a vastly changing world. Poe’s mesmeric tales are another example of this uncertainty. Vankirk and Valdemar engage in equal investment – a willingness to hand their consciousness to a mesmerist at the moment of death. Vankirk’s investment yields the return of knowledge and understanding, though his initial agreement was less daring, less risky. Valdemar's great risk yielded little return, only a vast and distant loneliness for seven long months. Poe touts the danger of mesmerism, the danger of investment, while also displaying his unease with practices that cannot be explained. Despite his scientific treatment of mesmeric experimentation, mesmerism, like land grabs and technological investment and confidence schemes, provides little security.

Mesmerism thrives on word of mouth and public advertisement, yet the process is intimate and private, filled with potential personal risk and return. Poe presents opportunity as both an active choice and a surrender, a conscious willingness to succumb to what might bring light and perception or darkness and discomfort -- potential “hideous,” “loathsome,” “putridity. Poe’s disintegration of Valdemar’s body stands for the submission that must occur with mesmerism or investment, the threat of total, irretrievable loss.

Poe’s fictional investigations of mesmerism are also allegories of scientific and pseudo-scientific progress, each presented as factual accounts. Each story claims to
be the transcription of certain notes taken during the experiments, here presented as empirical evidence of mesmerism's power to cross the boundaries of life and death. Poe begins “Mesmeric Revelation” with the assertion that mesmerism’s “startling facts are now almost universally admitted.” Though the Franklin Commission, among other reports, had discredited mesmerism’s claims of magnetic physical manipulation some fifty years earlier, the lingering constant of mesmerism was its influence, the idea that “man, by mere exercise of will, can so impress his fellow” as to increase his “intellectual faculties...his keenly refined perception.” Mesmerism excited the imagination because it was a preternatural expansion of human skill: the mesmerist displayed the ability to exact his will upon another, to influence outcomes, to glean information from the most private recesses of the mind. The mesmerized displayed increases in knowledge and understanding, keen abilities to perceive through the senses, a surrender of inhibition and repression, a relaxed and intimate bond that could not be replicated outside of the trance-like state.

Chauncy Hare Townshend, a proclaimed mesmerist, performed his feats of control and manipulation in private homes and before exhibition audiences during the 1840s and 50s. His claims regarding the benefits of mesmerism include a “rise in man’s nature” that Townshend describes as an improvement of disconnection from the self: “separated from the usual actions of the senses, the mind appears to gain juster notions, to have quite a new sense of spiritual things.” Townshend also claims that the mesmerized offer candid confessions, assure the living of the “never-dying nature of the soul, of its ransomed beatitudes, of its progress through various
eras of existence;”49 and “exalt” and “refine” the mind’s sensibilities, creating in a previously uninterested young girl, for example, a passionate response to poetry.

The preternatural expansion of human skill is both a spectral trait and a fantasy. Poe joins mesmerism (spectrality) with science in his stories to consider the scientific possibility of fantasy, of this expansion of human ability, and this synthesis of science and fiction provides an avenue to consider how spectral images and abilities (like the apparitional skills of entering another’s mind and speaking from beyond the body) could represent skepticism and credulity, cynicism and belief, imagination of what is not and what could be – all intellectual constructs that were implicit in progress, in the resurgence of the antebellum economy, in the technological innovation of the industrial age and in the desire to master that progress for personal comfort and gain.

“Rappings” and Spirit Photography: The Venture and the Hoax

Throughout the nineteenth century, new discoveries challenged old ideas and riveted the public’s attention. The unimaginable turned out to be possible; mysteries proved penetrable.

Barbara Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*

To call the supernatural a fiction is to assert that “human evidence must be regarded as utterly worthless.”

*Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, 1855

Plumbe’s beautiful and multifarious pictures all strike you (whatever their various peculiarities) with their naturalness, and the life-look of the eye – that soul of a face! In all his vast collection, many of them thrown hap-hazard, we notice not one that has a dead eye.

Walt Whitman, “A Visit to Plumbe’s Gallery” (1846)
In May 1844, Samuel B. Morse, sitting in the Supreme Court Chamber in Washington D.C. tapped, with the handle of a small, wired device, a message that his assistant Alfred Vail received forty miles away in Boston and then sent back, in moments, as Morse’s onlookers watched: “what hath God wrought.”

The success of their invention, the telegraph, profoundly changed the possibilities of long distance communication. Whereas communication’s speed had always been equal only to the speed of the man, the horse, the bird that provided transport, messages could now seemingly fly to their destinations, granting an instantaneous and inconceivable ability to speak to another at a remarkable distance. The invention of the telegraph had long-reaching effects on the communicative abilities of those involved with commercial trade; technological discovery and advancement; settlement of the West; military communications; the rise of the press and the spread of news; and the private sector: those who simply desired personal correspondence over great distance. The telegraph was magical – taps – dots and dashes and pauses that called out into the nether and found a waiting ear.

In March 1848, a different sort of message was received, again through taps and pauses. Mary Redfield, a neighbor of the Fox family, residing in the small community of Hydesville in upstate New York, was called to the Fox family home to witness what John Fox, the father, referred to as “raps” resounding through the house. Upon entering the family’s shared bedroom, Mary witnessed two daughters, Maggie and Kate, aged 14 and 11, huddled together on a small bed. Margaret Fox, the girls’ mother, pulled Mary to her and proceeded to speak into “what…seemed like thin air.”

What Mary witnessed was a sort of call and response: Margaret
calling out a number, and then, the appropriate number of raps, from an unknown source and an undetermined location, answering. The mysterious rapping counted out Mary’s age, and when Margaret inquired, “If you are an injured spirit, manifest it by three raps,” the “rap rap rap” that answered sent Mary home to collect her husband as yet another witness. Mary’s stirred interest and her desire to share the phenomena with her husband was indicative of the stimulated public response to the Fox sisters’ communicative abilities (as they, and not their mother, continued the performance). Like the tapping of the telegraph that sent messages almost inexplicably across miles, the Fox sisters’ rappings, they claimed, were another kind of inexplicable, but long-distance communication with the dead.

Word of the girls’ claims quickly spread (the telegraph allowing news reports to spread swiftly across the nation), and their newfound popularity prompted strangers’ visits to their home and more requests for the performance of communication than they could deliver. Joining by their sister Leah, Kate and Maggie began to tour their talents, no longer needing the walls and floors of their Hydesville home to hear and interpret the spirit codes. In light of their new roles as vessels of spirit communication, the word “medium” shifted in definition to comprise also the description of a person with otherworldly powers. The girls called themselves “celestial telegraphers.” Their influence was far-reaching and overwhelming, even to themselves. Their rappings and the messages they relayed became the sacred word of the dead, the foundation of a belief system for a devoted group of religious followers. The sisters had become the founders of Modern Spiritualism.
In November 1849, the girls stood onstage at Corinthian Hall amidst an array of speakers eager to expound upon their claims of scientific or medical or social progress. Participants included phrenologists, mesmerists, doctors, healers, and reformers. The exhibition was, for some, a display of newfound knowledge, the latest in scientific and medical advancement; for others, it was a money-making opportunity, a mission in which convincing a crowd of consumers to believe could create more performances, more publicity, more sales of the book or the product or the service, here claimed as a new and remarkable achievement.\(^{56}\) As Weisberg notes, “the clash of theories” and claims, the demonstrations and witness testimonials and certified results, made it difficult to navigate and discern “for certain what was real and what wasn’t?”\(^ {57}\)

A definitive assessment of scientific and pseudo-scientific claims proved elusive during this era. The prolific and rapid pace of technological, scientific, and medical advancement, along with the rise of the press and the ability to share discoveries quickly across tremendous space, led to a bombardment of seemingly inconceivable claims. Scientific and pseudo-scientific claims of progress looked very similar: they were each displayed in public arenas, witnessed in various testimonials, and each was a money-making endeavor. A few examples of scientific claims (that seemed far-fetched but were actually true) include the 1841 naming of fossilized bones that resembled “terrible lizards” and fabled dragons; the first use of ether for surgical anesthesia in 1846 in a tumor-removal surgery by Dr. John Collins Warren; Dr. Charles Grafton Page’s 1851 test of an experimental electric locomotive (fifteen years after his invention of the first circuit breaker in 1836); the
presentation of life-sized models of those previously named dinosaur bones to the shocked Crystal Palace crowd in 1854; and Darwin’s theory of evaluation and natural selection in *On the Origin of Species* published in 1859. Like the inconceivable speed of the telegraph message and the equally inconceivable system of the Fox sisters’ communications, gigantic, dragon-like creatures, sleep-inducing ether, electrically powered locomotives, and the theory of evolution were ideas ripe for skepticism. When John Warren turned to those in attendance at the medical amphitheater (after completing his surgery that removed a tumor from the jaw, for the first time without cries of pain or the thrashing of limbs), he announced, “Gentlemen, this is no humbug.”

The antebellum fascination with technological and medical advancement (and the subsequent fear of the hoaxes that could claim such advancement) features prevalently in literature of the time. Robert Montgomery Bird’s 1836 novel, *Sheppard Lee*, for example, includes scenes of grave-robbing for the purposes of medical experimentation, galvanization experiments, mummification trials, experimental methods for treating acute hypochondria, and the exhibition of medically manipulated bodies and experiments in a traveling exhibition of medical advancement and cultural curiosities. Bird’s traveling museum in *Sheppard Lee* foretells the immense popularity of P.T. Barnum’s traveling exhibitions of the Feejee Mermaid and Zip the Pinhead, overt displays of objects and people justified with scientific explanation as they relied on false claims and representations.

Poe’s portrayal of mesmerism as a scientific investigation, immersed within a discussion of medical discovery and physics and philosophy, is a portrayal so
authentically crafted that he had to reveal "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" as a fiction (or in the eyes of the scientific community, a hoax) after its publication.

Medical student, George Washington Eveleth, wrote several letters to Poe, including one about the Valdemar experiment, in which Eveleth struggles with the possibility of the story as truth: “Tell us the truth about your ‘Facts In the Case of M. Valdemar.’ My organ of Marvelousness is so fully developed that I am inclined to believe almost any thing that can bring reason to bear in the finishing.” Eveleth concludes his letter with this admission, “I have strenuously held that it was true. But I tell you that I strongly suspect it for a hoax.”60 Poe’s response, dated March 14, 1846, includes: “P.S. The ‘Valdemar Case’ was a hoax, of course.”61 Eveleth’s struggle to believe or to suspect is apparent in the depth and detail of his epistolary debate, in which he supports Poe’s rendition of mesmeric death through cited quotations from Bell’s Anatomy. His admission, upon the close of his letter, that he believes the tale to be a hoax, is followed by an intimate plea, “If you tell me, in confidence, about it, I shall believe it, let it come on which side it may.”62

Poe was enamored with the hoax, submitting fictional stories or scientific or medical progress to various publications, usually as a fictional report of remarkable transportation or expedition. “The Unparalleled Adventures of One Hans Pfaff,” published in the Southern Literary Messenger, June 1835, feigns to be a note dropped from a hot air balloon detailing Pfaff’s journey to the moon to escape creditors. “The Journal of Julius Rodman,” appeared in Burton’s Gentlemen’s Magazine, serially, January to June 1840. The purported journal follows an expedition to the Far North in 1792. The journal entries were acknowledged soon after in a document by US
Senator Robert Greenhow, who cited Rodman, a fictional character, as the leader of an early expedition across the continent:

It is proper to notice here an account of an expedition across the American continent, made between 1791 and 1794, by a party of citizens of the United States, under the direction of Julius Rodman, whose journal has been recently discovered in Virginia, and is now in course of publication in a periodical magazine at Philadelphia. The portion which has yet appeared relates only to the voyage of the adventurer[s] up the Missouri during the summer of 1791; and no idea is communicated of their route beyond that river, except in the Introduction by the editor, where it is stated that they traversed the region “west of the Rocky Mountains, and north of the 60th parallel, which is still marked upon our maps as unexplored, and which, until this day, has been always so considered.”

Poe’s stories were clearly not consumed by all readers as entertainment only. Part of his skill in the creation of a credible (though fictional) claim is his inclusion of real persons. In 1844, Poe published a broadside in the *New York Sun*, detailing the historic journey of Monck Mason (an actual balloonist) across the Atlantic Ocean. The announcement lauded the first Atlantic crossing and included an illustration of Mason’s steering balloon. Poe’s last known hoax was the publication of “Von Kempelen and his Discovery” in 1849, a sort of Midas/chemical advancement story which claimed that a German chemist had discovered the ability to turn lead to gold. Poe revealed the stories as hoaxes when asked, but left many readers to their own fantastic imaginative realities.

In the fall of 1888, forty years after the first rappings, Maggie Fox stood on the stage of New York City’s Academy of Music and read, from a prepared speech, an admission that the rappings and the interpretation of voices from the dead had been a ruse. The *New York World’s* headline on October 21, 1888 hails “Spiritualism Exposed: Margaret Fox Kane Confesses Fraud.” The account reads, in part, “The severest blow that Spiritualism has ever received is delivered today through the
solemn declarations of the greatest medium of the world that it is all a fraud, a deception, a lie.” Maggie Fox’s statement situates the beginnings of the “horrible deception” as childhood mischief, a game to trick the girls’ mother. As their claim of communication with the dead grew out of their control, the girls’ techniques of rapping changed from knocking on bedposts and tapping stringed apples upon the floor behind the bed to a practiced clicking of the knuckles and joints of their fingers and toes. *The New York World* places their deception in larger context:

> The unparalleled excitement caused by these young girls suggested to the minds of many unscrupulous persons the vast financial field that lay before anybody who should pretend similar mediumistic powers. At once there were mediums in all parts of the country and the number of these imposters has increased year by year....As the first and greatest of all mediums, their evidence can not fail to sound the death knell of the abominable business which they, at an age when they knew not what they did, began and have seen flourish into one gigantic world-wide fraud.}

Imaginative thoughts, like Poe’s fictional, but scientific presentation of mesmerism and the Fox Sisters’ claims of celestial telegraphy fuel both credulity and skepticism, and spectral innovation as imagination engages both proven and pseudo-scientific methods to press against the limits of ability, to test the boundaries of progress and its potential effects, to test the limits of belief and confidence in another’s claims.

Daguerreotype technology proved a prime example of a medium hovering between progress and potential abilities. Daguerreotypes became a visual record of the self, and for some daguerreotypists, the visual record of a spiritual presence. The photographic image is, itself, a spectral space, capturing the still image that resides now outside of its time and space, that may exist past the living years of its subject, that may return to the minds of its ancestors or to the thoughts of strangers as a memory, a haunting of its particular moment, a visitation from a specific living
instant, now lost, never to be encountered again. In a review of a local gallery of photographic works, published in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 1846, Walt Whitman expresses the enchanting qualities of the captured image:

> There is always, to us, a strange fascination, in portraits. We love to dwell long upon them – to infer many things, from the text they preach – to pursue the current of thoughts running riot about them. It is singular what a peculiar influence is possessed by the eye of a well-painted miniature or portrait. – It has a sort of magnetism. We have miniatures in our possession, which we have often held, and gazed upon the eyes in them for the half-hour! An electric chain seems to vibrate, as it were, between our brain and him or her preserved there so well by the limner’s cunning. Time, space, both are annihilated, and we identify the semblance with the reality. – And even more than that. For the fascination of looking at the eyes of a portrait, sometimes goes beyond what comes from the real orbs themselves.”

Plumbe’s galleries thrived in multiple cities as the daguerreotype craze captivated the nation. Consumers not only sought out the daguerreotype salon to sit as subject, but to take classes, learn the trade, and possibly, purchase equipment. The new technology was not only art form and remembrance, but potential profit and trade. William Robinson claims that daguerreotype technology arrived in America at a point of “national restlessness” when inventive technology and scientific advancement were “coming fast and furiously” while “financial crisis” drew many who were “attracted by the possibility of a steady income with only a small outlay for equipment,” many who “in better times might have been otherwise employed.”

The daguerreotype was an inventive medium, and the finest daguerreotypists, Whipple and Black, and Southworth and Hawes, all of Boston, pushed the medium to its limits, experimenting with lighting techniques, filtered screens, camera position, and the calming effects of entertainment in the lobbies as their subjects waited for
seating. Exposure times and lighting were key techniques that could allow crisp, clear likenesses, not blanched with light nor cloaked in shadows.\textsuperscript{69}

Daguerreotype technology, and later photographic and film technologies, were always considered potentially supernatural media. The camera’s capture of a moment in time, a fixed expression, a still but living body, conjured curious speculative possibilities. In one sense, the camera might capture an internal essence unseen by the eye. Or perhaps, the camera could capture images of spirits unseen. Warner surmises, “The camera could perhaps apprehend this spirit body in a way that fallible human eyes could not. Spirit phenomena might also lie below the threshold of vision and beyond the frequency at which the brain registers light.”\textsuperscript{70} British scientist, William Crookes, contemplates the photographic sciences: “We have actually touched the borderland where matter and force seemed to merge into one another, the shadowy realm between the known and the unknown ... Here...lie Ultimate Realities, subtle, far-reaching, wonderful.”\textsuperscript{71} Crooke acknowledges the borders of the known and the unknown and positions photography as an expansive force. Crookes’s experiments in forms of media and their dispersion led to discoveries and innovations that were “utterly unexpected and astounding to [his] contemporaries: radio, telegraphy, X-rays, neon lighting, and the cathode-ray tube that eventually made television possible”\textsuperscript{72} Crookes creates media of sound and sight and through that expansion of audio and visual skill, opens new possibilities of creation. Like the investment of capital in 1950s manufacturing, the investment of creative innovation yields new creative capital, producing a self-sustaining, self-perpetuating system of growth.
Warner notes that the “eagerness to magnify faculties of vision and hearing at beyond the human body’s capacities led to a corresponding fascination with the limitlessness of the inapprehensible world. Seeing and hearing better, further, deeper, more, opened up intimations of yet more, elusive, and inapprehensible phenomena.” 73 Extra-sensory abilities provide a fantasy of trust in one’s own perception, a fantasy of scrutiny. Perception is an economic concern tied to experiences of trade, currency valuation, and investment. It is also a social concern with repercussions in personal and community decisions regarding the rights of individuals and the appropriateness of charity or social programs. The contemplation of perception was also, itself, a subject of speculation and debate. In an August 1855 article in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, John W. Draper explains his theory of “Inverse Vision”:

The perception of external objects depends on the rays of light entering the eye and converging so as to produce images which make an impression on the retina, and through the optic nerve are recognized by the brain...But the inverse of this is possible. Impressions already existing in the brain may take, as it were, an outward direction and be projected and localized among external forms.74

Draper’s theory of the inner workings of the retina and optic nerve allow for the projection of visions outward into the visual realm. The projection of “already existing” impressions, he claims, could be made visible among “external forms.” This scientific explanation of vision allows for the recognition of items not actually there, items projected from the impressions of others’ brains -- spectral images.

Photographic technology provides a medium by which we might view the “projections” among us, projections unseen by the eye. The daguerreotype in Hawthorne’s The House of the Seven Gables is an omniscient judge of character,
projecting the malevolence of Jaffrey Pyncheon's publicly charming face and the angelic youth of the falsely imprisoned Clifford. As Holgrave’s preternatural tool, the daguerreotype in Hawthorne’s text is a medium of Holgrave’s ability, what Marina Warner explains as “photography as impressions of mental powers, as translations of thoughts into images, as ‘psychographs’.”

Psychic photographers, on the other hand, were thought to “harness the visible end of the electromagnetic spectrum and preserve light traces to offer proof of life everlasting to the faithful and consolation to the bereaved.”

Early photographers experimented with aperture settings, lighting, double exposure, and material interventions to the frame (partial lens caps, straps, films, cloth) to create special effects with daguerreotype and tintype images that sometimes did appear ghostly. Robert Montgomery Bird’s early experiments with prolonged exposure over time resulted in one of the earliest ghostly photographs on record, an image from his Filbert Street home in Philadelphia.

On each paper negative he wrote the chemistry and the details of the lighting and exposure. His calotypes (paper prints from paper negatives) are acknowledged as some of the best examples of that early process.
William Mumler also experimented with early photographic technology, though his daguerreotypes had a different process and a different purpose. Mumler’s specialty was spirit photography. His double exposed pictures feature a seated subject and a ghostly image hovering to the back or the side of frame. Mumler’s clientele included Mary Todd Lincoln, whose portrait revealed (upon development) the image of her husband. The pictures as we see them today seem obviously manipulated, yet in these early days of photographic technology when the common consumer had neither access to photographic equipment nor the knowledge of how the capture of the image or the process of its development occurred; many were duped. Mumler was eventually tried for fraud after multiple subjects did question the veracity of his $10 pictures. His trial was famously attended by P.T. Barnum, who testified against Mumler, perhaps in an attempt to distance his own hoaxes from the media spotlight. The court ultimately found Mumler not guilty. Michael Leja reflects on the verdict: “in the age of Barnum and

Figure 8: Master Herrod in a Trance

Figure 9: Mrs. Conant of Banner of Light

Photographs by William Mumler
Mumler, truth was no longer the issue, not even in a court of law. What mattered now was the style of the deception and the business of the court was to determine which styles would be protected by law and which would not.”

Barnum’s style included the publication of a book, “The Humbugs of the World,” in which he identified and explained hoaxes such as The Fox Sisters’ claims of rapping (20 years before their confession), spirit photography, table-raising, diamonds and food and pills, hoaxes of miscegenation and medical discovery and haunted houses. He identifies the “history of the humbug” as:

truly humiliating to intellectual pride, yet the long silly story is less absurd during the later ages of history, and grows less and less so in proportion to the spread of real Christianity. This religion promotes good sense, actual knowledge, contentment with what we cannot help, and the exclusive use of intelligent means for increasing human happiness and decreasing human sorrow. And whenever the time shall come when men are kind and just and honest; when they only want what is fair and right, judge only on real and true evidence, and take nothing for granted, then there will be no place left for any humbugs, either harmless or hurtful.

Testifying against William Mumler, Barnum made a similar statement: “If we could have a full exposure of the tricks of trade of all sorts of humbugs and deceivers of past times, religious, political, financial, scientific, quackish, and so forth, we might perhaps look for a somewhat wiser generation to follow us.”

The implication that wisdom or religion prevents the humbug deception in this era is precarious, I think, in that the tenets of progress, discovery, innovation, and technological advancement align so closely with the inconceivable, with what appears at first glance, or first listen, to be impossible. Bombarded with the reports and claims of scientific and pseudo-scientific innovation, adjacently placed in news media and serial publications, standing next to one another on exhibition hall stages, equally
witnessed, comparably verified, wisdom alone seems not enough, at first glance, to declare humbug or no. The hoax, and the spectrality that fuels and sometimes stands in for the hoax, disrupts classification and maintains the uncertainty of borders in the face of definitive claims. The progress of this era expanded the limits of what was considered possible, yet the concurrent claims – the hoaxes and fictions that pervade 1850s literature and serial publications – also concurrently re-establish limits, enacting borders of the real and the unreal. At times, antebellum belief and discernment required patience, the long contemplation. To place faith in a claim too quickly – to purchase, to follow, to invite and witness, to invest -- could threaten economic and social livelihood.

**Spectral Power and the (Re)Consideration of Class**

My whole nervous system was in a state of exaltation and appeared to have acquired all the superabundance of power which the muscular system had lost.

Antoine Ranier, “Testimony” June 1839

The large portion of the public that hates to think for itself; that loathes everything which is new; that calls reformation revolution and prefers a rapid uniformity of existence to the animating pleasures of knowledge and discovery; those are the opponents of mesmerism.


[Loraina] Brackett stunned Margaret Fuller, who took an abiding interest in mesmeric practice, by handing her a note correctly describing Fuller's own illness; years later, Fuller still kept "those penciled lines, written in the stiff, round character proper to the blind" as a record of what "the world at large" styled "Credulity," but what Fuller thought might be the science of "more rapid and complete...intercourse between mind and mind."

Maria Tartar, *Spellbound*

Spectral actions like mesmerism (that seem unanchored, yet potentially powerful and productive) were one way that literature might exemplify personal
risk, investment, and hope for return while also representing the positions of those immersed in those endeavors – the wealthy and the powerful as well as the disenfranchised and the poor. The panic or need or miscalculation in judgment that could derail financial or social success was potentially eradicated through powers like mesmerism or psychic control.

In mesmerism, the error or delusion of the imagination could become its strength. The weak-minded could become vessels of perception. The perceptive man could be duped or reduced to simple syllables. Emily Ogden's study The Science of Error claims that mesmerism stimulated “the imagination into states of errancy— but not errancy only.... [A]t once a state of delusion and a state of insight., [m]esmerism was a means of tapping into submerged and mechanical ways of knowing.” Delusion and insight worked cooperatively within the trance. Ogden notes:

> On the one hand, mesmerists asserted that the errors of the hysterical and the weak-minded could also make them exceptional empirical observers; on the other, they insinuated that well-educated and able-bodied men were not as invulnerable to error as one might think. And thus mesmeric discourse became the home of a novel proposal about who could be trusted to produce knowledge.... Marginalized figures—women, suggestible subordinates— could stake knowledge-claims on these grounds.”

Mesmerism, then, as a fantastic exercise, exemplified a potential leveling of the playing field that threatened perceptive skill and class (or gender) privilege as markers of financial or social success. As a literary implement, mesmerism held dimensional power – first as a consideration of progress’s potential (what could happen if mesmeric abilities were, in fact, real?), and second as a consideration of charlatan practices (what could happen if mesmeric abilities duped the American
public?). As Hawthorne phrased it in the opening paragraphs of *The Blithedale Romance*: mesmerism is “the birth of a new science, or the revival of an old humbug.” Mesmerism and psychic control, then, engaged a fear of unstable identities (a fear deeply interwoven with financial and social successes and failures) in two ways: by imagining a power that could alter identity (or release an inhibited identity) and by imagining a practice that could deceive, that could impel upon an identity, belief in something that did not, perhaps, could not exist.

Mesmerism is now a fodder of fiction, long-debunked, scoffed at, caricatured by the image of a bug-eyed, pointy-bearded white man standing menacingly, arms outstretched, over a swooning female form. Yet, in the 1840s, when Poe’s stories were first published, mesmerism inhabited a different cultural space. Margaret Kohlenbach describes the literary inclusion of mesmerism as a “metaphorical model” that “provided a focus for religious, socio-psychological, and aesthetic reflection” and “permitted writers to express and criticize the characteristic tensions, anxieties, and hopes of their time.” While mesmerism did engage legitimate antebellum concerns, the mesmeric trance was certainly not believed by all nor accepted by all; skepticism of its authenticity and/or its morality was prevalent. But there was something in that sheer exercise of will (chronicled repeatedly in printed and spoken testimonials) that excited the antebellum imagination. Claims of mesmeric healing and successful interventions were passed through social circles, a sort of “secular enthusiasm” that rivaled the religious passion of revival and provided new avenues for belief. The testimony of M. Van Ownenhuyzen, March 1838, expresses both the skeptical doubt and the eventual
acceptance of mesmerism’s claims, “The effects of mesmerism had always appeared to me more than problematic and uncertain. I had often treated them as chimerical and my prejudice went so far that I was almost convinced that mesmeric experiments were the result of a complete understanding between two persons perfectly awake…..I have had the happiness of seeing my errors.87

Mesmeric credulity rivals spirituality in its claims to healing and self-improvement, its openness to intimacy, its trust of another will. The action of mesmerism in Poe’s stories melds with the spectral voice, with a consideration of afterlife and belief; I view each account of mesmerism as a deliberation on belief and as an apparitional construction, invading one mind with another’s thoughts, controlling another’s body, pushing against the limits of credulity. Poe uses the trust of mesmerism to explore the expectation of an afterlife. His voices from beyond the grave could not be more dissimilar. Vankirk systematically considers the nature of God, revealing an increased knowledge and understanding of metaphysical truths that his interviewer struggles to comprehend. Valdemar speaks in a roughed voice, from a great distance, revealing nothing but simplistic, syllabic status reports on his own existence. He is reliant upon his mesmerist. He seems to have acquired no greater perception, no greater knowledge. His communication is frightening rather than enlightening. Poe is offering two answers to the question of afterlife – one filled with new perception and one filled with cavernous space. He asks us, through Vankirk, to imagine the interspaces between, the diminishing littleness that separates mass and matter. It is a theory of coalescence that simultaneously conjures and confuses the idea of spirit. Spirit is enigma, and Poe’s
varied result of the trance “in articulo mortis” expresses the confusion regarding scientific claims and empirical evidence. The question that rises from technological progress, from economic resurgence, from medical and scientific theory, and from financial dealings in trade and investment and currency is “what can be believed?”

What is the risk in siding with credulity? What is the risk in siding with skepticism? Risk and return are the key considerations of any investment or belief: financial, scientific, spiritual, or supernatural. Risk and return are the anchors of Poe’s mesmeric tales and the primary considerations of a people struggling to rise from depression, to find their place in a resurgent age of financial opportunity and technological progress.

Poe’s stories of the mesmerized dead sit upon this border, this temporal moment when economic depression gives way to unprecedented progress. While Poe toys with the expansion of limits, each tale ultimately reinstates a boundary, situating spectral power, then, not as limitless, but only potentially amendatory of existing belief. Valdemar’s life is prolonged by the innovation of mesmerism, progress that could stave off the finality of death, yet his personal, prolonged state is one of burden and stasis, tied to his body, to his claims of existence, and to an unknowable, seemingly deep, cavernous location. Valdemar’s future is neither finalized nor hopeful; he is not haunted by a future of potential, but only static continuation. His trance, at the border of his life, at the nation’s temporal border of financial recovery and industrial growth, is one that teases potential and opportunity, yet, in actuality, simply magnifies and prolongs a sense of stasis. Vankirk, likewise, flaunts his otherworldly perception and ability while entranced,
though his death at the point of (or perhaps before) his awakening eradicates the potential of his power. In Poe’s 1840s, these limited borders of power could stand in for multiple cultural shifts, shifts that pushed at their accepted boundaries while constantly encountering limitations: economic change, debates regarding individual rights, social reforms, systems of belief.

Two antebellum writers who pushed at the borders of psychic power and at the borders of social stratification were Fitz-James O’Brien and George Lippard. O’Brien’s story “The Wondersmith” is a frightening tale of a vengeful poverty-stricken, ostracized group of immigrants and outsiders. In the story, the unnamed narrator, settles the reader first into the setting of a dirty slum, Golosh Street, a location the narrator claims to prefer to a clean street because “when I go down a street which has been left so long to itself that it has acquired a distinct outward character, I find plenty to think about.”88 The contemplations that follow are awful scenarios: the contents of trash littering the street, the supposition that a young mother with six children in tow might trip upon an orange peel (“I see the pale face convulsed with agony and the vain struggle to get up”), and the scene of a three-year-old “tattered child” throwing a brick at another child, his “mire in which he wallows now…but a type of the moral mire in which he will wallow hereafter.”89

The story, in a nutshell is this: Herr Hippe, the Wondersmith, owns a small shop along this desecrated street. In the evenings, he congregates with Madame Filomel, the fortune teller, Monsieur Kerplonne, and Brother Oaksmith. Herr Hippe has created a collection of toys, “exquisitely carved wooden mannequins of both sexes, painted with great dexterity so as to present a miniature semblance of
nature.” On first inspection, the collection would seem to be toys perfected for the hands of small children, yet closer inspection reveals their “small black bead-like eyes” and their “miniature weapon[s]...clased in their wooden fingers.” The devious plan is quickly revealed. Madame Filomel has brought a bottle of souls she has extracted from “wild, tearing, dark, devilish fellows.” Kerplonne has brought a mechanical eye, capable of clandestinely surveilling the premises around their secret work so that they might avoid detection. The bottle of souls is united with the toys who become fully self-animated, soon engaging in a bloody battle over a gold coin the Wondersmith throws among them. The four test the murderous toys on Mr. Pippel's bird shop to bloody effect, and then begin to put into action their master plan: to poison the sword tips of the toys' weapons and then place the toys in shops just as consumers prepare for the Christmas holiday. Herr Hippe exclaims, “we will give the little dears toys! Toys that all day will sleep in their boxes, seemingly stiff and wooden and without life – but at night, when the souls enter them, will arise and surround the cots of the sleeping children, and pierce their hearts with their keen, envenomed blades!” The plan is, thankfully, foiled by the Wondersmith's niece and her hunchbacked boyfriend; the evil quartet, the bottle of souls, and the evil toys are consumed in a Golosh Street fire.

O'Brien’s revolutionary tale uses spectrality to enact vengeance upon the members of society that the poverty-stricken Golosh Street residents have fixed as their enemies, those who do not live in squalor, those whose children do not die in the street, those whose families will receive shiny packages on Christmas morning. O’Brien’s portrayal of the immigrant population is indicative of a problematic
cultural stereotype, what Herr Hippe describes as being labeled: “despised Bohemians” and “gypsies.” Beneath the sensational supernatural abilities and the horrific mass murder plot is an acknowledgment of lived social inequalities and the effects that those living conditions, social groupings, and perceptions of social and economic privilege could have on a sector of the city, on a group of people. The murderous toys seek to disrupt the composure of the families who will purchase them, disruptions more damaging, perhaps, but a fantasy rather than the Golosh Street reality of the decorous trash, the thrown brick, the falling mother. Disruption is presented as the constant, as the legacy of an estranged and poverty-stricken existence, and disruption is the element the bitter immigrants seek to inject into the existence of a differently composed street, into the existence defined not by its disruptions but by position of relative stasis.

Another text that challenges the privileged status of class is George Lippard’s *The Quaker City, or The Monks of Monk Hall*. Lippard’s city novel tells the intertwining stories of multiple characters, each enacted in their own positionality of social status and economic circumstance. For the purposes of this discussion, I’ll focus on the spectral nature of Devil-Bug’s dream. Devil-Bug, as the proprietor of the infinitely confusing construction, Monk Hall, serves as the host to a number of despicable characters, privileged persons who use the structure of Monk Hall to perform scheming acts. Forced marriages, rapes, druggings, and murders occur within the walls of Monk Hall, and Devil-Bug is witness, is host to it all.

In the waning chapters of the book, Devil-Bug has a dream of the last day of the Quaker City. Walking through the magnificence of the city, Devil-Bug is
reminded by an attendant spectral form of the crimes of the wealthy and the suffering of the poor. As he approaches a church, the dead begin to rise from their graves, joining the populated city streets, gliding among the living, though the “gay revelers of the street beheld them not. They walked merrily round while the arisen dead glided all around them, they smiled gaily, unconscious of the leaden eyes that were gazing so sadly in their faces.”

95 Devil-Bug’s dream is an apocalyptic scene, “Wo unto Sodom” appearing as flame in the clouds, the streets filling with the dead, the river teeming with coffins.

96 Lippard’s spectral scene is, like O’Brien’s, an acknowledgment of the unseen poor and the vengeful retribution, the recompense, that spectral forces foretell upon the unseeing, un-acting more privileged masses. Again, the unseen specters walking amidst the unsuspecting populace present the imminent arrival of disruption, a shocking and unexplainable moment that will merely mimic the existence of continual disruptions to decorum and composure that occasion estranged and poverty-stricken lives.

Hawthorne’s Seven Gables approaches disruption, the metaphor to the tenets of economic and social disparity, in a very different way. In Hawthorne’s tale, mesmerism and reform are positioned as the operating threats (the disruption) to class position, shown through the interaction between two families, the Pyncheons, representing a family legacy of wealth and economic influence, and the Maules, representing a family mired by poverty, whose members interact without the benefits of wealth, but in possession of a psychic power. Hawthorne distinguishes social rank as a potentially devastating loss at the beginning of his novel:

In this republican country, amid the fluctuating waves of our social life, somebody is always at the drowning-point. The tragedy is enacted with as
continual a repetition as that of a popular drama on a holiday, and, nevertheless is felt as deeply, perhaps, as when an hereditary noble sinks below his order. More deeply; since with us, rank is the grosser substance of wealth and a splendid establishment, and has no spiritual existence after the death of these, but dies hopelessly along with them.\footnote{97}

Hawthorne’s tale of land and family legacy hinges upon the experience of social position determined by wealth and ownership; it is a story haunted in its “connection to the long past,” in its “reference to forgotten events and personages” (6). The novel begins with Colonel Pyncheon’s acquisition of Matthew Maule’s “hut, shaggy with thatch” built on “Maule’s Lane,” a humble spot that proved a desirable tract of land with the growth of the town and the plot’s proximity to “a natural spring of soft and pleasant water – a rare treasure on the sea-girt peninsula” (6,7). Pyncheon made a claim upon the land “on the strength of a grant from the legislature,” and the land was eventually handed to him upon Maule’s death, a “death that blasted with strange horror” (7). Maule was executed as a witch, a notion set forth by Pyncheon in what was, in effect, a confidence game that planted seeds of doubt in Maule’s character. Maule “declared himself hunted to death for his spoil,” and, at the moment of his death, he pointed to Colonel Pyncheon, there in audience, with the ominous curse: “God will give him blood to drink!” (8).

Hawthorne begins with this balance of class positioning that foreshadows the fear-filled legacy of the story entire. The Pyncheons, as socially powerful citizens, will use their economic and social strengths to maintain the illusion of class power. The Maule’s, without land or money, will usurp that power through supernatural means, plaguing the Pyncheon’s with dream manipulation, haunted portraits, and the immeasurable power of mesmeric mind control.\footnote{98} The haunting presence of the
Maules exists alongside the haunted Pyncheons and their ghost-filled house, their brackish well and haunted gardens, maintaining a continued social compact of stirred animosity and cloaked truths. The Maule's control is an ever-present, pending disruption to the desired decorum of the Pyncheon existence. The Maule's presence is a reconsideration of the power of legacy and what can be inherited.

In the current time of the novel, Maule's ancestor Holgrave tells the young Pyncheon niece, Phoebe, the story of her ancestor, Alice. Alice's story begins with her father, Gervayse Pyncheon, summoning young Matthew Maule, the grandson of the executed witch to the House of the Seven Gables, the house that had replaced Maule's hut after the Pyncheon acquisition of his land. Pyncheon is looking for a document or a deed that might confirm the Pyncheon ownership of "an unsettled claim," a "vast extant of territory at the eastward" (195). Pyncheon wishes to measure his property "by miles not acres," and has called Maule to his beck as both carpenter and possible occultist. Young Matthew Maule's grandfather, the witch, may have taken such a deed to his grave. Young Matthew Maule's father, Thomas, the architect of the house, may have stolen the deed from the Colonel's desk on the morning of the Colonel's unexpected death, a traumatic scene in which he was found choking on his own blood, a death that Gervayse, as a young child (the Colonel's grandson) had discovered. Pyncheon's very request of Maule is couched in class privilege and condescension. Pyncheon tells Maule, "A gentleman, before seeking intercourse with a person of your station and habits, will first consider whether the urgency of the end may compensate for the disagreeableness of the means. It does so, in the present instance" (197). Young Matthew Maule is able to strike a deal
with Gervayse Pyncheon: he will take the House of the Seven Gables in exchange for information regarding the deed’s location. Pyncheon agrees, eager to find the deed; “his property – to be measured by miles, not acres – would be worth an earldom and would reasonably entitle him to solicit or enable him to purchase that elevated dignity from the British monarch” (199).

What happens next is the tragedy of the tale. The men barter and tug at the potential ownership of land – Maule seeking the house that he believes should be his. Pyncheon seeking the tract of land he believes to be his. And then, at Maule’s request, Alice enters, the young, poised and stately daughter of Gervayse Pyncheon. Maule says Alice is the key to finding the deed. Alice, alone, might communicate with the dead and learn their secrets. Pyncheon reluctantly agrees, as Alice assures her father that no influence would break her inner resolve. As Maule gestures toward the young girl, “as if directing downward a slow, ponderous, and invisible weight upon the maiden,” Pyncheon debates the potential of Maule’s influence against the “rich dowry” that the found deed might bestow; his Alice “might wed an English duke or a German reigning – prince instead of some New England clergyman or lawyer” (204). Full of “imagery magnificence,” Pyncheon, with his back to his daughter, ignores her “half-uttered exclamation” – “faint and low,” “indistinct,” “little more than a whisper to his ear” (204). Though he recognizes this soft but “dismal shriek” as a “call for help,” he “did not turn” (204). Maule, in now complete control, uses Alice as a “telescopic medium” to contact the ghosts of Colonel Pyncheon, old Matthew Maule, and Thomas Maule. He learns, through Alice, that Colonel Pyncheon’s ghost cannot reveal the secret of the deed as part of his
recompense for his dishonest grab of Maule’s land and his calculated accusation of Maule’s witchcraft. Young Matthew Maule leaves the Pyncheon house with nothing but Alice’s obedience. He no longer wants the House of the Seven Gables, “heavy with the curse upon it;” but only Alice: Maule explains, “Why, she is fairly mine” (207-8). Maule’s will over Alice “constrained her to do its grotesque and fantastic bidding” (208). Indignant of Alice’s initial admiring glances (“Does the girl look at me as if I were a brute beast?”), Maule does not even use his power of persuasion to make her -- the beautiful, the desirable, the girl with “tender capabilities” that would have made most men “lie down in her path and let Alice set her slender foot upon his heart” -- love him (201). Instead, he causes her to dance and laugh and cry at his whim. He takes away her self-possession, her self-control. Hawthorne explains, “It seemed to be Maule’s impulse, not to ruin Alice, nor to visit her with any black or gigantic mischief, which would have crowned her sorrow with the grace of tragedy, but to wreak a low, ungenerous scorn upon her. Thus all the dignity of her life was lost” (209). Maule’s treatment of Alice, his retribution to her father and her family name is to dismantle the structure of class privilege and class behavior that had supported her. While her family still has money, still lives in the House of the Seven Gables, still holds a potential claim to the ownership of a vast tract of land, her social place is taken from her. There will be no marriage, no dowry, and no dignity. Maule diminishes Alice to the role of a servant girl, both in her manner and in her action. He calls her to serve for him and his betrothed at will, and it is on one such inclement night, when called to him and then sent home, her “satin slippers wet through and through” that Alice becomes ill and dies (209).
These foundational stories of the novel – old Colonel Pyncheon and Matthew Maule, Alice Pyncheon and young Matthew Maule – are layered with greed and sacrifice, social climbing and social drowning. The patch of land that was Maule’s Lane and then Pyncheon-street bears witness to the desire and fear that drives each negotiation, each betrayal, each haunting. Hawthorne positions the power of wealth and the power of the supernatural as formidable opposing forces. Mesmerism, as a dark power, could be, in Hawthorne’s fictionalization, the dismantling of economic privilege and social position. There can be no legacy of wealth and land and dowry and title if those who hold social and economic influence can be manipulated through their dreams, if the portraits on their walls bleed red blood and frown and move, if their daughters laugh loudly at a funeral or dance a high-paced jig or cry at the whim of another, if their own throats gurgle with a murmur that may, they fear, be the curse of “blood to drink.” The supernatural, here, is an expansion of limits that operates through disruption, but it is a disruption enacted through individual interaction, not in the horrific schemes or apocalyptic dreams of O’Brien’s and Lippard’s texts. The expansion of limits in science, in medicine, and in technology blur the limits of this possible interaction. The Maule’s psychic power is presented as a fiction, but in Hawthorne’s presentation is the possibility of a new order. The supernatural in these texts is a terroristic threat, uncertain, unpredictable, impossible to resist or escape or reverse. Disruptions unsettle the process by which class is relationally established. And in its juxtaposition, in its fair opposition to the threat of economic power, Hawthorne reveals the uncertain, irrevocable quality of wealth’s force as well. The story creates in wealth and in supernatural “progress”
the enticement of absolute power and the threat of absolute destruction. Wealth
and progress, though desirable conditions, states to which one would most certainly
aspire, are revealed to be, also, terrifying in their uncertain limits, their exploding
boundaries that could change the social structure of individuals, of communities, of
the nation. The very desire of such power is disconcerting. The betrayal that
happens in Gervayse Pyncheon’s drawing room is a father’s abandonment of his
daughter, his stance that will not turn toward her quiet, dismal cry for help. He
chooses the potential for a dowry, for miles rather than acres, over his daughter’s
well being. Maule’s actions and motives, though clearly a terrible violation in their
imposition of intimacy, do not, still, betray intimacy the way that Gervayse’s betrayal
of his daughter does.

Hawthorne was deeply concerned with the effects of mesmerism on intimate
relationships, a concern that reveals his own uncertainty regarding its legitimacy
and its potentially disruptive capabilities. On October 18, 1841, he wrote a letter to
his beloved Sophia from his stay at Brook Farm. The note is a response to the
knowledge that she and her sister have been speaking with a mesmerist:

[M]y spirit is moved to talk with thee to-day about these magnetic miracles,
and to beseech thee to take no part in them. I am unwilling that a power
should be exercised on thee of which we know neither the origin nor
consequence, and the phenomena of which seem rather calculated to
bewilder us, than to teach us any truths about the present or future state of
being. If I possessed such a power over thee, I should not dare to exercise it;
nor can I consent to its being exercised by another. Supposing that this
power arises from the transfusion of one spirit into another, it seems to me
that the sacredness of an individual is violated by it; there would be an
intrusion into thy holy of holies – and the intruder would not be thy husband!
Canst thou think, without a shrinking of thy should, of any human being
coming into closer communion with thee than I may? – than either nature or
my own sense of right would permit me? I cannot. And, dearest, thou must
remember too, that thou art now a part of me, and that by surrendering
thysel to the influence of this magnetic lady, thou surrenderest more than thine own moral and spiritual being – allowing that the influence is a moral and spiritual one.99

In Hawthorne’s view, mesmerism constitutes an intimate violation of both the self and the sacredness of relationships. It is a violation on par with adultery, a spiritual penetration. This view informs his use of mesmerism in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) which featured the predatory, violation of the veiled mesmeric woman, and in *Seven Gables*, as the Maules gain manipulative, mesmeric control over Alice and over the dreams of the Pyncheons; Hawthorne’s view likewise informs the restraint and care that Holgrave shows in his choice not to mesmerically control Phoebe, fixing their relationship as one of sacred, mutual dedication. Antebellum mesmerist, Chauncy Townshend identifies the connection between the mesmerizer and his subject as being one of intimacy and confusion. At times the subject does not know, will ask, if the hand touching his head is the mesmerizer's or his own. The subject often takes on the injuries, tastes, and aversions of the mesmerizer, as when a young girl began limping on the mesmerizer's sore ankle, or when a woman who proclaimed to like olives, spit them out because they were something the mesmerizer did not like. Townshend notes, “when severed from him[the mesmerist], they[the mesmerized] should acknowledge a schism in their being and seem all out of unity with themselves.”100 This intimate connection, which he assures is “removed from sexual feeling,” was exemplified when he walked away from a child (aged nine or ten) that he had mesmerized. When he returned, he found her crying, “because you stayed so long away. It makes me suffer so much.”101
Other antebellum writers also considered mesmerism’s intimate connection. Harriet Martineau was at first skeptical of the practice, claiming that Americans, in particular, were too quick to place their faith in unconventional claims. She wrote, in her 1838 book, *Retrospect of Western Travel*:

If a phrenological lecturer from Paris, London, or Edinburgh should go to Boston, the superficial, visible portion of the public would wheel round once more, so rapidly and with so clamourous a welcome on their tongues, that the transported lecturer would bless his stars which had guided him over to a country whose inhabitants are so candid, so enlightened, so ravenous for truth. Before five years are out, however, the lecturer will find himself superseded by some professor of animal magnetism, some preacher of homeopathy, some teacher who will undertake to analyze children, prove to them that their spirits made their bodies and elicit from them truths fresh from heaven.102

“Truth” and “truths from heaven” in Martineau’s initial estimate are but fad whims. Martineau, however, became a believer in the mesmeric trance when a series of mesmeric sessions cured the long convalescence she had endured from a protracted uterus. Martineau then addressed mesmerism’s naysayers in an 1845 missive, “Letters of Mesmerism,” citing her own recovery and subsequent belief as a result of empirical evidence. Taylor Stoehr, in his study “Hawthorne and Mesmerism” positions this experience as key to belief: “the very powerful evidence of personal experience verging on the miraculous must be kept in mind when attempting to account for the nineteenth century’s bedazzlement with what seems to us merely fads with a grain of truth in them.”103 Stoehr contends that mesmerism’s hold was not based solely on its authenticity: “Intellectuals of that day saw equally well that mesmerism was largely quackery...because the truths deduced by such showmen seemed paltry, while the implications of their authentic feats seemed marvelous, there was a great sense of mystery, of truths as yet unrevealed, of vague promise.”104
Emerson, also, sought an explanation to mesmerism’s hold on the American public, retrospectively, in his essay, “Historic Notes from Life and Letters in New England”:

There was, in the first quarter of our nineteenth century, a certain sharpness of criticism, an eagerness for reform, which showed itself in every quarter...On the heels of this intruder came Mesmerism, which broke into the inmost shrines, attempted the explanation of miracle and prophecy, as well as of creation. What could be more revolting to the contemplative philosopher! But a certain success attended it, against all expectations. It was human, it was genial, it affirmed unity and connection between remote points, and as such was excellent criticism on the narrow and dead classification of what passed for science.

Emerson’s equation of mesmerism with an eagerness for reform is an interesting connection, one also seen in the connection of reform and the Spiritualist movement, linking an ability to conceive alternative modes of “what passed for science” with an openness to change in other stations of society. It’s the connection that Hawthorne makes within Holgrave’s character, Holgrave who is artist, mesmerist, reformer, Holgrave who consorts with “reformers, temperance lecturers, and all manner of cross-looking philanthropists” (62) and imagines that “this age, more than any other past or future one, is destined to see the tattered garments of Antiquity exchanged for a new suit” (107).

Reform’s and Progress’s reverse can be, as hoaxes and public displays attest, anonymity, seclusion, limits: The anonymity of crowds and travel and the progress of transportation and communication, however, posed similar concern for Hawthorne’s Clifford, a person of need, a released prisoner held captive, socially, by the accusations of his past and his criminal conviction. When Clifford runs from the death scene of Jaffrey Pyncheon, his escape is both a personal liberation and a flee from potential conviction of a new crime. As he and Hepzibah board the train filled
with strangers, Clifford laments the passing of anonymity that progress has complicated. He names electricity as “the demon, the angel, the mighty physical power, the all-pervading intelligence” that allows “the round globe” to become a “vast head, a brain, instinct with intelligence” (264), and worries that technological progress such as the telegraph violates the rights of privacy and exodus, fearing that “poor rogues,” or the “fugitive alight in some distant town” might “find all the people babbling” (265). Clifford’s concerns remind that, for the antebellum public, technological progress could provide the same expansion of limits, the same fantasy of discernment imagined through the supernatural literary inclusion of spectral innovation. Mesmerism and the omniscient daguerreotype, for example, exposed the criminality of Jaffrey Pyncheon, just as Clifford fears the telegraph will expose the “unfortunate individuals” – the murderers and bank robbers who are now denied the refuge of escape.

Clifford’s concern for those with a criminal past is a fleeting nod toward the many possibilities of social reform – abolitionism, women’s rights, temperance movements, rehabilitation and the treatment of mental illnesses – available to the public. These texts impose but a small scratch on the rich history of reform measures in antebellum America. Yet their nod to the personal experience of discernment speaks to the challenges reform measures faced in the realm of public opinion. Hawthorne situates Holgrave’s interest in reform with his spectral talents and his revealed ancestry as one of the Maule family. His work with reform, alluded to as almost suspicious behavior throughout the novel, is relegated to the banished site of his work as a daguerreotypist and his abilities as a mesmerist. All are skills of
expanded limits, methods of progressive discernment and change, potentially able to disrupt existing structures of social and economic power, and all are given up as he chooses Phoebe and the “ancient limits” of conservative risk and traditionally accepted happiness rather than the progressive opportunities of uncertainty:

The world owes all its onward impulse to men ill at ease. The happy man inevitably confines himself within ancient limits. I have a presentiment, that, hereafter, it will be my lot to set out trees to make fences – perhaps, even, in due time, to build a house for another generation -- in a word to conform myself to laws, and the peaceful practice of society. 306-307

The building of a house is a return to limits; “the heaps of bricks and stones” in Clifford’s view are “stumbling blocks in the path of human happiness and improvement” (261). It is a sentiment earlier echoed in Emerson’s lecture read at Amory Hall, March 1844, “Here we are paralyzed with fear; we hold to our little properties, house and land, office and money…We desire to be made great, we desire to be touched with that ire which shall command this ice to stream and make our existence a benefit” 106 and in Holgrave’s rant against the prevalence of the past:

I doubt whether even our public edifices – our capitol, state-houses, courthouses, city-halls, and churches – ought to be built of such permanent materials as stone or brick. It were better that they should crumble to ruin, once in twenty years, or thereabouts, as a hint to the people to examine into and reform the institutions which they symbolize. 184

Clifford and Holgrave contemplate two definitions of happiness, one a traditional domestic existence, accepting of the social and economic constructs of society, and the other a progressive journey toward improvement in which contentment would be found in breaking free from the constraints of conventionality to form new paths toward reformed thought and practice. Holgrave’s commitment to reform is sacrificed, along with his omniscient daguerreotypes and his mesmeric skill, for the
peaceful conclusion of his future happiness with Phoebe. Hawthorne considers the potential of reform, of technological progress and a spectral expansion of limits, but ultimately fears the change of such progress, the potential restructuring or dismantling of static social and economic systems if such changes were to become actualities. He ends his novel with Holgrave’s acquiescence and Clifford’s liberation, Holgrave’s plan to make fences and Clifford’s redemptive call: “The soul needs air; a wide sweep and frequent change of it” (261).

In these literary examples and the historical record of investments, innovations, hoaxes, and experiments, I find the spectral image as a consistent representation of disruption. Disruption is the onset of the spectral encounter, the “exceptional circumstance” that Jamison considers as the potential undoing of self-sufficiency, of our presumption of the dense and solid world. The progressive, the expansion of limits, the moment of discovery, the risky and the unknown, the potentially deceptive: these are all disruptions, perhaps happy, perhaps devastating. The spectral possibility occurs at the moment of disruption, when doubt might give way to belief, when composure and decorum are challenged. The moment of the table ticking, the Hydesville rapping, the spirit appearing on a developing frame, the mental consumption of Alice, the call of Valdemar’s demise, these are moments of disruption and reorganization, moments that bring the limits, order, and structure of lived systems into view.

Disbelief and skepticism, like established economic and social structures or defined limits, resist expansive gestures and spectral motions. The moment of disbelief is a protective measure, understandable and conservatively wrought, a
conscious return to a decorum or a dismissive stance of composure. This is the
stance of traditional legacy, of relational social position, of status quo. Claims of
limitlessness defy such a stance, mock it, poke at it. A dismissal of the limitless may
retain composure or seek decorum despite disruption, but this dismissal occurs,
cultural and literary tales imply, at the risk of expansiveness thought. Hawthorne's
consideration of social and spectral possibility was closed down by the turning of a
Maule into a Pyncheon. It's no mistake that reform measures have been consistently
literarily aligned with the spectral image. The specter, like the challenge to social
norms, is the disruption that must be encountered or ignored. The existence of the
disruption is a challenge to the paths of both traditional and progressive legacies.

New paths of thought that allow the re-consented acceptance of persons and
cultures demand the expansion of our previously set, ambiguous borders. Spectral
imagery engages the uncertain and the chaotic of the antebellum era, the limitless
and the possible, the reinstated limits and realities. The literary and cultural
exploration of limits -- presented here in Poe’s tales, in scientific claims and financial
hoaxes, in the disruptive narratives of O’Brien’s short stories and Lippard’s city
novels, in the social embrace and the intellectual skepticism surrounding mesmeric
ability and its declarations – settles within the perpetual limitlessness of the
spectral image. In that holding of it all, the spectral image and our reading of it
opens always, the paths of progressive and of traditional legacies unfolding beyond
the “confines” of an ever-expanding embrace. This spectral expanse, like Whitman’s
Eidolons, provides the space upon which we must read the persistent exploration of
limits and the limitless, the sustained interrogation situated across literary sites of

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social investment, in antebellum literatures of reform, domestic fiction, and African-American writing.

Ibid., 15-16.

Ibid., 17-18.

Ibid., 26.

I have not found any extensive recent research or interpretation of “The Apple-Tree Table.” See, Carolyn L. Karcher, “The 'Spiritual Lesson' of Melville's 'The Apple-Tree Table,'” American Quarterly (23:1), 1971, 101-09; Malcolm Magaw, “Apocalyptic Imagery in Melville’s 'The Apple-Tree Table,'” Midwest Quarterly 8 (July 1967); and Frank Davidson, “Melville, Thoreau, and ‘The Apple-Tree Table,’” American Literature 25 (January 1954).

Melville, “Apple-Tree Table,” 27.

Wealth reorganization could occur through the increased equity of land acquisition; significant returns or losses on investment; fund transfers through trade or charity; or the capital and wealth repositioning that accompanies an altered position of public trust, a change in confidence.


The story of Valdemar was published in two journals in 1845, one of which used the title, “The Facts in M. Valdemar’s Case.” The story has also been titled, "Mesmerism in Articulo Mortis" and "The Last Days of M. Valdemar". For a detailed discussion of Poe’s publishing history, see Arthur Hobson Quinn, Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1998.), 470, 516.
The study of the spaces surrounding atoms is still of scientific and individual interest today, as evidenced by a personal message received by the author which contained an image of dumbbell shaped rows of atoms at a record resolution of 0.6 angstrom, about 1 millionth the diameter of a human hair. The rows were encompassed by blank spaces, so large in comparison that the space surrounding the atoms seemed to diminish them. These were atoms taken from human tissue. The image came with a message, “I love this - thinking of the spaces we are made of. Of what we are, and what we are not. Yet:” scientific limitlessness, affecting our perception even today. Thomas Osborn, email message to author, September 22, 2004.

This era boasted a national interest in scientific advancement, both in the classification of natural sciences that thrived under exploratory journeys and several books and organizations whose goal was to offer classification and organization of scientific principles. The Smithsonian Institute began in 1846 under the English benefactor James Smithson, and, in 1848, Joseph Henry founded the American Association for the Advancement of Science. See Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 466-469. Howe explains, “The young American republic enjoyed a Protestant Enlightenment that bestowed an enthusiastic religious endorsement upon scientific knowledge, popular education, humanitarianism, and democracy. The most widespread form of Christian Millennialism added faith in progress to this list. The spread of literacy, discoveries in science and technology, even a rising standard of living, could all be interpreted – and were – as evidences of the approach of Christ’s Second Coming and the messianic age foretold by the prophets, near at hand” (Howe 469).


29 Quoted in Gilmore, Aesthetic Materialism, 25.
30 Gilmore, Aesthetic Materialism, 21.
31 Ibid.
32 Poe’s very stories refute his claim that it is impossible to imagine what is not. Imagination is, in fact, one prevailing connection between science and fiction – the ability to think beyond what is known, to create or discover what has not been before.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 374.
37 This explanation of Henry Carey’s economic philosophy comes from Sklansky, The Soul’s Economy, 85. See also Henry C. Carey, Principles of Political Economy (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1837).
38 Sklansky, The Soul’s Economy, 92. Carey, a proponent of “free-flowing currency,” became, after the Civil War, “a leading theorist of the greenback campaign..., which would allow the money supply to grow along with the economy.” His call for payment through association became “the movement’s cross-class gospel” (Sklansky 92).
39 Numerous popular novels by women reported the rise and fall of an American family seduced by the promise of speculative wealth. A few examples of these include Hannah Farnham Sawyer Lee, Three Experiments of Living (1836); Catharine Sedgwick, The Poor, Rich Man and the Rich, Poor Man (1836); and Anna Warner, Speculation; or, the Glen-Luna Family (1853).
41 Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly (Boston: Dover, 2005), 4, 9.
43 Warner, Phantasmagoria, 221.
44 Poe presents the mesmeric trance in “Mesmeric Revelation” as documented dialogue with no narrative intercession during the trance conversation. Poe presents “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” as a factual account that must be made public due to a “garbled... exaggerated account ma[king] its way into society” which “became the source of many unpleasant misrepresentations, and, very naturally, of a great deal of disbelief.” The narrator explains “Mr. L-l [a medical student] was so kind as to accede to my desire that he would take notes of all that
occurred, and it is from his memoranda that what I now have to relate is, for the most part, either condensed or copied verbatim.” Poe, “The Facts,” 142, 143.

45 Poe, “Mesmeric Revelation,” 137.

46 The Franklin Commission was commissioned in 1784 by King Louis XVI, a skeptic of Anton Mesmer’s claims of “animal magnetism,” or the presence of “magnetic fluids in nature that could be used to rid the body of disease.” The French Academy of Sciences appointed a committee, consisting of Antoine Lavoisier, Jean Bailly (mayor of Paris), Dr. Joseph Guillotin, and Benjamin Franklin, all scientists or prominent citizens. Mesmer’s assistant, Charles Deslon performed the demonstration at Franklin’s home, magnetizing trees and asking a young boy to identify the magnetic trail. The committee’s findings concluded “that there was no scientific evidence of animal magnetism and that the cures attributed to it may have either happened through a normal remission of the problem or that the cure was some form of self-delusion.” See, “Benjamin Franklin and Mesmer, 1784,” Inquiring Minds, PBS, 2002 http://www.pbs.org/benfranklin/l3_inquiring_mesmer.html 4 January 2014.

47 Poe, Mesmeric Revelation,” 137.

48 Chauncy Hare Townshend, Facts in Mesmerism (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1841), 118.

49 Ibid., 119.

50 Howe, What Hath, 1.

51 This account of the first acknowledgment of the Fox sisters’ rappings is recreated from Barbara Weisberg’s extensively documented study of the Fox sisters and the popularity of Modern Spiritualism. See Barbara Weisberg, Talking to the Dead: Kate and Maggie Fox and the Rise of Spiritualism (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 1-2. The Fox Sisters’ emergence as mediums is also detailed in Dellon M. Dewey, History of the Strange Sounds, or Rappings: Heard in Rochester and Western New York, and Usually Called the Mysterious Noises! Which are Supposed by many to be Communications from the Spirit World, Together with All the Explanation that Can as Yet be Given of the Matter (Rochester: Dewey, 1850); “Spiritual Manifestations,” Littell’s Living Age, 37 (April-June 1853); and P.T. Barnum, The Humbugs of the World: An Account of Humbugs, Delusions, Impositions, Quackeries, Deceits, and Deceivers Generally, In All Ages (New York: Carleton, 1866), Chapter 10. Another skeptical satire that lampoons the rise of the Fox Sisters is Orestes Brownson’s The Spirit-Rapper: An Autobiography (Boston: Little Brown, 1854).

52 Ibid., 2.

53 Warner, Phantasmagoria, 221; Avery Gordon asserts, “As a concept, mediation describes the process that links an institution and an individual, a social structure and a subject, and history and a biography.” (Ghostly Matters, 19). This definition of mediation, coupled with Warner’s connection between the girls’ fame and the expanded definition of “medium” reinforces the sisters’ existence as an institution, as individuals, as a social structure and a history (forming the new religion of Modern Spiritualism). The sisters, then, though they were, in fact, not mediums of supernatural power, manage to fulfill the terms of the definition through their public presence.

The Spirit Papers, as the Spiritualist Periodicals came to be called, were, like many nineteenth-century publications, serials consisting of stories, poems, testimonials, notice of lectures and events, and philosophical essays on dreams, sleepwalking, miracles, séances, and reform. Progressive social reform is a staple of these periodicals, an expansion of social limits that coincides with expansion of belief. Advertising within the periodicals focuses upon goods and services related to

54 Warner, Phantasmagoria, 221.
55 Spiritualism flourished throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Its belief system of the ability to communicate with the dead comes from its inception in response to the Fox sisters’ claims. Over time, spiritualism expanded to include belief in reincarnation and other expanded limits of life after death. The progressive and pervasive abilities of belief among its members embraced both the contemporaneous claims of pseudoscientific invention and reform movement claims of equality. The power of Spiritualism’s reach resided, in part, within a thriving publication industry. The following Spiritualist publications were gleaned (as merely the pre-1860 examples) from an expansive list of Spiritualist Periodicals compiled for the American Antiquarian Society: Age of Progress, 1854-8; Agitator, 1858-1860; Anthropologist, 1851; Banner of Light, 1857-1907; Buchanan’s Journal of Man, 1849-56; Chief, 1858; Christian Rationalization and Theological Reformer, 1848; Christian Banker, 1853; Christian Spiritualist, 1854-57; Disclosures from the Interior and Superior Care for Mortals, 1851; Good Time Coming, 1859; Green Mountain, 1859; Herald of Light, 1857-61; Home Gem, Progressive Juvenile Monthly, 1858; Illuminati, 1857; Index, 1855; Journal of Progress, A Paper for the People, 1853-4; Light from the Spirit World, 1852-53; Medium, 1856-57; Messenger of Light, 1854; Mountain Cove Journal and Spiritual Harbinger, 1852-53; New England Spiritualist. A Journal of the Methods and Philosophy of Spirit-Manifestation and its Uses to Mankind, 1855-57; New Era of Heaven Opened to Man, 1852-55; Nichols’ Journal: Devoted to Health, Intelligence, Freedom; Individual Sovereignty and Social Harmony, 1843-53; Northwestern Excelsior, 1856-59; Nucleus, 1857; Practical Christian, 1840-1860; Radical Spiritualist, 1858-1860; Sacred Circle: The Truth against the World, 1854-65; Social Revolutionist. A medium for the free discussion of general principles and practical measures pertaining to Human Progress, 1856-57; Spirit Advocate, 1854-56; Spirit Messenger, 1850-52; Spirit World, 1851; Spiritual Age. Devoted to rational Spiritualism and Practical Reform, 1857-1860; Spiritual Messenger, 1856; Spiritual Philosopher, 1850; Spiritual Telegraph, 1852-57; Spiritual Tribune, 1857; Spiritual Universe, Radical Advocate and Journal of Reform, 1854-55; Spiritualist, 1857; Spiritualist Register, Facts, Philosophy, statistics of Spiritualism, 1857-61; Spiritualliste de la Nouvelle-Orleans; echo-mensuel (New Orleans), 1857-58; Star of Truth, 1852; Telegraph Papers, 1852-57; Tiffany’s Monthly, 1856-59; Truth Seeker, 1857; Univercoelem and Spiritual Philosopher, 1847-49; Vanguard, Devoted to Spiritualism, Practical Reform and Progressive Literature, 1857-59; Weekly Spiritualist, 1857; World’s Paper. For the discussion and Diffusion of Truth and Exposure of Error, 1857-1866. See Ann Braude, “News from the Spirit World: A Checklist of American Spiritualist Periodicals, 1847-1900.” http://www.americanantiquarian.org/proceedings/44539462.pdf.
spiritualism and supernatural abilities. For example, the Saturday, August 19, 1848 edition of *The Univercoelum* prominently featured the following advertisement for Electro-magnetism:

RT Hallock, Magnetic Physician, No. 12 City Hall Place, New York
The subscriber would inform those who are aware of the invaluable curative properties of Galvanic Electricity when properly applied to disease, especially those complaints which arise from, or are confirmed more particularly to the nervous system, that he has opened an office at the above place. Experience has confirmed the fact of its vast superiority in a great variety of diseases over every other agent known to ancient or modern science.

Similar advertising for galvanism, phrenology, mesmerism, and séance mediums appear throughout the publications.

56 The Fox girls’ presence at the Corinthian Hall exhibition is recounted in Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, 89; and in multiple newspaper accounts and advertisements.

57 Weisberg, *Talking to the Dead*, 89.


59 Barnum, a self-proclaimed “Prince of Humbugs” pulled off several hoaxes in his exhibition sites. The Feejee Mermaid was a fish’s body with a primate’s head and chest sewn to it. Zip the Pinhead was William Henry Johnson, a black microcephalic dwarf, whom Barnum labeled, just after Darwin’s publication of *On the Origin of the Species*, as “the missing link.” Perhaps his most famous hoax features his wood carving of a petrified giant that was intended to steal the popular thunder of another claim of a petrified giant, “The Cardiff Giant” that was exhumed from Cardiff, NY in 1869. A court hearing involving Barnum and the proprietor of the original giant revealed that both specimens were fake. See, Barnum, *The Humbugs of the World*; P.T. Barnum, *Barnum, the Yankee Showman and Prince of Humbugs, Written by Himself* (London: Piper, Stephenson, and Spence, 1855); Bluford Adams, E. Pluribus Barnum: *The Great Showman and the Making of US Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); and A.H. Saxon, *P.T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

60 Eveleth’s discussion of the story in its entirety is as follows: “Tell us the truth about your ‘Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar.’ My organ of Marvelousness is so fully developed that I am inclined to believe almost any thing that can bring reason to bear in the finishing, though the starting be unsupported by good evidence. But the starting here does have evidence of its truth – that one can be put into the mesmeric sleep under certain circumstances there are too many reliable witnesses for me to gainsay it. Admitting this, then – that the sleep can be produced so that the body will lose all sensation – etc. etc. etc. -- it is not so hard to believe the rest. The crumbling, rotting away into a loathsome liquid so soon after the removal of the magnetic fluid (if it be this) looks like a big one – but in Bell’s Anatomy page 245, I find the following (the Author is speaking of the life of the muscles) – ‘for the moment this lingering portion of life is gone the body dissolves and falls down –’.

Now why couldn’t it be that there was virtue in the magnetism to preserve this life
of the muscles after the life of the nerves had become extinct, after the mind had gone out – and that your mind had somehow or other taken the place of his and was that which spoke? – in short why couldn’t it be that a portion of the life of your body has been conveyed into his, and that a portion of your mind had become infused into the place of his? I think it is in some such way as this that Mesmerism must be accounted for. This is the manner in which I have argued (or talked) about the “Facts” with those that have spoken to me upon the subject – and I have strenuously held that it was true. But I tell you that I strongly suspect it for a hoax in spite of its ingenious management and of its coloring of truth. If you tell me, in confidence about it, I shall believe it, let it come on which side it may.” Eveleth takes the scientific aspects of Poe’s story and draws upon more scientific evidence to support Poe’s claim. Yet, despite his engagement with this process, he admits to believing the tale to be imaginative. George Washington Eveleth, The Letters from George Washington Eveleth to Edgar Allan Poe, Ed. Thomas Olive Mabbott (New York: Bulletin of the New York Public Library, 1922), Web, 12.
61 Quinn, Edgar, 529.
62 Eveleth, Letters, 12.
63 Greenhow closes with a mention of the account’s credibility: “From what has been published, it is impossible to form a definitive opinion as to the degree of credit which is due to the narrative, or as to the value of the statements, if they are true; and all that can be here said in addition is, that nothing as yet appears either in the journal or relating to it, calculated to excite suspicions with regard to its authenticity.” See Robert Greenhow, “Memoir, Historical and Political, on the Northwest Coast of North America, and the Adjacent Territories; Illustrated by a Map and a Geographical View of Those Countries,” US Senate Document of the 26th Congress, 1st Session, Volume IV (1838-1849) (February 10, 1840), 140-141.
64 Poe’s hoaxes are detailed in exhibits at The Museum of Edgar Allan Poe, Richmond Virginia. 24 July 2011.
66 Ibid.
69 Robinson describes the daguerreotypists’ studio as a site of inventive thought. Elias Howe, working in a studio, overheard a discussion about the need for mechanical stitching and invented the sewing machine. Samuel Morse ran a daguerreotype studio and trained several operators. Robinson claims that “for the twenty years that the daguerreotype held prominence (ca. 1840-1860), many studio daguerreotypists worked as diligently trying to discover a means of making shorter exposures with less light as they did actually posing their subjects.” Robinson, Certain Slant of Light, 28, 23. Inventive uses of daguerreotype technology includes:
daguerreotypists’ experiments with combining camera and telescope lenses provided pictures of the moon’s craters (Whipple’s daguerreotype of the moon was displayed at the Crystal Palace in 1851); experimental attachment of camera devices to hot air balloons provided aerial photography; daguerreotypes recorded and documented medical cases for further study; and daguerreotypes of handwriting allowed study of details and comparison of samples for criminal cases. See Robinson, Certain Slant of Light, Chapter 3.

70 Warner, Phantasmagoria, 223
71 Quoted in Warner, Phantasmagoria, 224.
72 Warner, Phantasmagoria, 225.
73 Ibid.
75 Warner, Phantasmagoria, 228.
76 Ibid., 221.
80 P.T. Barnum, Quoted in Leja, Looking Askance, 56.
81 Townshend, Facts in Mesmerism, 387.
83 Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Blithedale Romance, Ed. William E. Cain (Boston: Bedford, 1996), 40. Hawthorne goes on to distinguish between the presentation of mesmerism in its earlier days to the time of his writing: “Now-a-days, in the management of his ‘subject,’ clairvoyant,’ or ‘medium,’ the exhibitor affects the simplicity and openness of scientific experiment; and even if he profess to tread a step or two across the boundaries of the spiritual world, yet carries with him the laws of our actual life, and extends them over his preternatural conquests. Twelve or fifteen years ago, on the contrary, all the arts of mysterious arrangement, of picturesque disposition, and artistically contrasted light and shade, were made available in order to set the apparent miracle in the strongest attitude of opposition to ordinary facts” (40).
85 See Townshend, Facts in Mesmerism; George Sandby, Mesmerism and its Opponents with a Narrative of Cases (New York: Benjamin and Young, 1844); Harriet


87 Ibid., 365.


89 Ibid., 38.

90 Ibid., 43.

91 Ibid., 44.

92 Ibid., 42.

93 Ibid., 43.

94 Ibid.


96 Ibid., 377.

97 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables*, 1851 (New York: Penguin, 1981), 38. Subsequent citations will be included parenthetically within the text.


100 Ibid., 122.

101 Ibid., 122, 123.


103 Stoehr, “Hawthorne's Mad Scientists,” 35.

104 Ibid.

Chapter Five

Coda: Shimmer Lines

Remember to remember me, standing still in your past, floating fast like a hummingbird. Wilco, *A Ghost is Born*

The antebellum spectral image stands still and floats fast within its literary moment, a fixed and hazy shape always there, shimmer lines catching light, calling attention to its space. My interest in this project began with two books: Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself* (1837), encountered soon after Christopher Looby’s reclamation, and Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997), encountered during my initial research on spectral theory. I soon saw hazy shapes and shimmer lines throughout antebellum writing, in gothic fictions and in news articles, in penciled lithographs and in carefully worded advertisements. In antebellum stories, like *Sheppard Lee*, I found imaginative constructs with seemingly endless interpretations. In Gordon’s text, I discovered the often inconclusive, but endlessly generative expanse of spectral scholarship. Spectral theorization of literature (and other disciplines) embraces ethereal observation, the peripheral sight that sees the specter and contemplates its presence, the ambiguity that inspires thought. It is a generative scholarship, fodder for the imagination. In Bird’s tale of poverty and escape, I could see Gordon’s assessment of story: that it is the combination of what is available to us and what we’re reaching toward.¹ Through that lens, I could clearly see Sheppard’s spectral self as a temporal expanse, holding past, present, and future, holding trauma, lack, wish and fear.
In this project, I worked to approach each literary spectral image as if seeing the specter for the first time. The specter is an encounter and a disruption, an exceptional circumstance to the solidity and density of existence, a space of narrative that contemplates what it holds and what it reaches toward. Through that process, I began to see a pattern of spectral representation in antebellum texts: the specter was possibility – a space for wish and fear; the specter was slant exchange; the specter was limitlessness and expansive embrace; and the specter was disruption. These formative chapters that comprise *Apparitional Economies* situate the specter as a site of possibility and potential, as a temporally and spatially expansive representation, and as disruption. Chapter two holds the spectral as the encounter and the disruption to collective fantasy; chapter three holds the spectral as the encounter and the disruption to equivalent exchange; and chapter four holds the spectral as the encounter and the disruption to perceived limits. Through each encounter and disruption, the spectral image maintains an expansive interpretive stance, an expansive embrace. The confluence of disruption and expansive embrace is indicative of spectral complexity, of its complicated presence in the text.

The significance of the antebellum spectral image is reliant upon the era’s chaotic economic systems and tumultuous climate of individual rights debate. The era, as Eric Wertheimer describes it, is a “network of imagination, money, and American legacies,” where “imagination does work on the material world.” Individual experience and economic fluctuation, imagination and material, all conflate to comprise the complexity of lived experience. The state of the individual and his or her experience is economic in the market-driven society of early
American capitalism. The spectral image, then, works to represent complicated market dynamics of value and exchange, investment, risk and return while also representing conflicts of identity and exemplification (themselves steeped in value and risk and exchange equations).

Fitz-James O’Brien’s story, “The Diamond Lens” (1858), provides an interesting encapsulation of these intersections. The young narrator, fascinated with microscopic science and poised to not only accept but to expand the shimmering boundaries of the known world through microscopic technology, visits a medium, Madame Vulpes, who uses table rappings and convulsive spirit-manipulated writing to speak to the dead. The young scientist’s request is to speak to the famed (yet deceased) father of microscopics, Leeuwenhoek. Through a series of written questions and the medium’s spirit-manipulated hand, the spirit of Leeuwenhoek relays (while tables and banisters and walls rap around the young scientist) the instructions for making the world’s most powerful microscope. This microscope that will open up knowledge of the world “so great that all that has gone before is as nothing” requires the sacrifice (as its lens) of a diamond of 140 carats. The microscope will convey the promised miraculous images within the pierced space of the diamond lens. Conveniently, the young scientist knows a young man who, he discovers, has such a diamond (acquired illegally and secretly through time spent “superintending a gang of slaves engaged in diamond-washing in Brazil”). The young scientist murders the diamond’s owner in what appears to be a suicide and then builds the microscope with the now un-sought-after diamond.
Upon completion, the powerful microscope reveals, in a droplet of water, another universe, “cloudless and serene and as seemingly limitless as space itself, ... an almost boundless dome filled with a supernatural radiance.”6 The young scientist’s diamond-infused vision is soon filled with “gaseous forests, dimly transparent and painted with prismatic hues of unimaginable brilliancy.”7 The droplet holds a beautiful, fluid universe, replete with a “dewy and serene” female form floating elegantly amid the colorful clouds.8 The young scientist is transfixed by the female form that he names Animula. He watches her intently and obsessively, finding the “perfect roundness of her limbs” and her “suave and enchanting curves” infinitely more appealing that the clunky females of his own world with their “thick ankles” and “gross, discordant movements.”9 The young scientist watches the droplet until it evaporates, his obsessive observation affecting his neglect of the water universe’s preservation.

In O’Brien’s story, the young scientist uses two methods to access the unknown and seemingly limitless -- though encased in a water droplet -- universe (this infinitesimal exploration reminiscent of Poe’s describing infinitely small interspaces): access to the communicative dead through a spirit medium and the transfer of an economic unit of immeasurable exchange value to an item of use value. The young scientist removes a traditionally valuable item from exchange circulation while investing in the less traditional economic exchange of spiritual presence and knowledge. In so doing, he alters the valuation of each. The young scientist’s obsessive observation of scientific discovery becomes a particular sort of interiority, altering his prior identity as he now rejects the tenets of his known
world in favor of the newly discovered limitless and supernaturally radiant water droplet universe. That which he encountered as a disruption is now the ideal. That which has been known and accepted is now a disruption. O’Brien’s narrative of an unsettled existence in the light of discovery and newfound obsession, of the rejection of a traditionally established value standard for new expressions of use value and worth, is a representation, a position of antebellum complexity of lived experience; a young man with ambition finds himself dislocated, caught between an existence he can’t attain and a background he can’t return to. Like many of the spectral images that I’ve encountered through this project, O’Brien’s tale provides a complicated representation of nuanced economic and social conditions while generating further inquiry, sparking further imaginative thought.

My exploration of spectrality in moments of panic and hardship, in moments of exchange and valuation, and in moments of encounter and limitless belief establishes a method of examining spectral images temporally, spatially, and economically, and provides a foundational framework by which fantasy, unshored value, and limitless progress spark reconsideration of the structures of individual rights and identity representations. This coda serves, in one resolve, to close these chapters of spectral exploration; I cannot help, however, but to consider the spectral structures yet to be explored. My research has revealed fascinating spectrality housed in reform documents, in the ethereal narratives of domestic fiction, and in preternatural slave narratives and African-American writing. *Apparitional Economies* serves as the inspiration, the foundation to these further explorations.

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5 Ibid., 19.

6 Ibid., 24.

7 Ibid., 25.

8 Ibid., 26.

9 Ibid., 26, 31.


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