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Other Worlds: Alfred Russel Wallace and the Cross-Cultures of Spiritualism

Christine Ferguson

In the spring of the great revolutionary year of 1848, a twenty-five year old Alfred Russel Wallace was preparing to set out on the ethnographically unprecedented four-year expedition through the Amazon Basin that would launch his international career as a naturalist and lay the foundations for his co-theorization of natural selection with Charles Darwin. Thousands of miles to the north, an epoch-defining incident of equal significance for Wallace's thought was underway in the tiny and now no-longer existent hamlet of Hydesville, New York. Here, in late March, the young mediums Kate and Maggie Fox started to receive— or simulate— the rapped spirit messages from the other world that would electrify the northeast's radical communities and initiate the Anglo-American spiritualist movement in which Wallace was later to become such a major player. Wallace recalled first hearing reports of the phenomena during his bio-ethnographical tours of the global South in the eighteen-fifties and dismissing them as “too wild and too *outré* to be anything but the ravings of madmen” (276).ⁱ Indeed, it was not until 1865 when, back in London and able to witness mediated spirit contact— or at least, its Western incarnation— first hand, that Wallace would personally and then publically embrace the new faith in a move that provoked considerable controversy and derision within the newly professionalized ranks of Britain's scientific naturalist elite.ⁱⁱ

It has become increasingly common to link these two distinct phases— the ethnographic and the spiritualist— of Wallace's career into a seamless causal trajectory, with the first being assigned catalyzing status for the second. Wallace biographer Martin Fichman, for example, has argued that “the years spent among indigenous inhabitants of South America and the Malay Archipelago left their mark

on Wallace's psyche . . . Animist creeds and belief in the reality of spirits abounding in nature were fundamental precepts of these people" (*An Elusive Victorian* 170-71). Sherrie Lynne Lyons confirms this assessment strenuously in her recent monograph *Species, Serpents, Spirits, and Skulls* (2009), contending that "Wallace's view of native people provides an important clue to his later conversion to the spiritualist hypothesis (120). Even Wallace's contemporaries were keen to assert an identity between his religious heterodoxy and his prior contact with the non-Western peoples then designated as savage or primitive.ⁱⁱⁱ A sneering review of Wallace's *The Scientific Aspect of the Supernatural* (1866; later incorporated into *On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism* 1875) in the *Anthropological Review* suggested that he might have been converted by the spirit of the "first man" ("Science and Spiritualism" 242), a term here standing in for both the evolutionarily earliest and contemporarily least Westernized indigenous human. In none of these instances, however, does the evidence for this assumed affinity go beyond its mere assertion. Nonetheless, it continues to persist in Wallace scholarship, as if the contemporary New Age fusion of openness to cross-cultural contact and non-Western religions with belief in post-life existence has been deemed always already present in that culture's spiritualist predecessors.

Yet there are important reasons, both from the perspective of Wallace studies and spiritualist historiography, to re-evaluate this apparent correspondence. Perhaps, as my article contends, the reason why the supposed affinity between Wallace's ethnography and his spiritualism has not been better evidenced despite its near ubiquitous assertion is that it does not, in fact, exist, or at least, did not during the period of Wallace's most vocal campaigns on behalf of new faith. On the contrary, I want to explore a far less comfortable, and even antipathic relationship between

Wallace's experience of Non-Western indigenous religions and his heterodoxy than has hitherto been supposed, one that has significant consequences for our understanding of the British scientist's approach to racial difference and of the complex and shifting status of the "primitive" in Anglo-American spiritualist thought. *On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism* performs an anxious and curiously Tylorite quarantining of non-first world practices of spirit contact from those of modern Britain, one that becomes all the more remarkable, we will see, when juxtaposed against the wider anthropological turn underway in English spiritualism during the decades when Wallace was first advertising his beliefs in print. Indeed, his uneasiness about the potential proximity between civilized and primitive spirit phenomena placed him in opposition to the simultaneous attempts of many of his co-believers to synthesize all global and historical manifestations of spirit presence into a single coherent whole. This article examines how and why Wallace resisted this project of amalgamation in the eighteen-seventies before he went on to embrace a more universalist stance in late life as his conviction in the *telos* of Enlightenment waned.

A compilation of three previously-published essays on spiritualist phenomena,^{iv} *On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism* appeared at a time when the movement's transatlantic public sphere, fuelled by an expanding body of periodicals, small presses, and institutions, was taking an immense, virtually unprecedented, interest in the belief systems of historic and contemporary non-Western peoples.^v This contemporary fascination with so-called savage spiritualism, alternately patronizing or romanticizing, had at least the virtue of acknowledging non-Western spirit beliefs as legitimate objects of inquiry and potential allies in the fight against secular materialism. It also challenges the premature elision or even downright rejection of modern spiritualism's cross-cultural ambition that manifests in some

veins of Victorian occult historiography, such as in Leigh Wilson’s *Modernism and Magic* (2013) which suggests that “ ‘real magic,’ increasingly linked to the ‘primitive’ through contemporary anthropology . . . threatened the strong desire for respectability in the institutions of both spiritualism and theosophy” (4). While this assessment may, as we will see, align with Wallace’s early post-conversion stance, it was by no means true of the wider spiritualist community. On the contrary, far from being collectively threatened by the spectre of the primitive in the eighteen-sixties and seventies, many British spiritualists of varying stripes were regularly attending to and reporting on the findings of the nascent social science of anthropology as they sought new confirmation for their beliefs.^{vi} In this period, the most important pioneer of what we might call “spiritualist anthropology”— in contrast to the Tylorite anthropology of spiritualism, which took spirit belief as investigative object rather than grounding ontology— was the Quaker convert, writer, publisher, and vehement anti-imperialist William Howitt, whose 1863 *The History of the Supernatural in All Ages and Nations* collated accounts of spirit phenomena from Aboriginal Australians, Tibetan Buddhists, the Druses of Mount Lebanon, and the Karen people of Burma alongside records of spectral manifestations from Christian European cultures to argue for the universal and transhistorical presence of afterlife revenants.^{vii} “Whether . . . people are followers of Brahma, Buddha, or Mahomet,” he writes, “they all pay homage to the invisible, and believe it present and active around us” (378). Admittedly, Howitt presents the spirit beliefs of non-first world peoples as lower in character than those of modern spiritualist believers, suggesting that in Lapland, Australia, and other locations, “spiritualism has sunk to its lowest grade” (390). “[B]ut even these are spiritualism,” he continues, “though in disgrace. They are moved by a spirit-power as real, though not as pure and exalted, as in its highest and holiest forms. (390-91) Yet

the racist force of Howitt's demotion of these "disgraceful" forms of spiritualism is counterbalanced, if never entirely offset, by his indictment of Western imperialism's role in corrupting the religious practices of its conquered subjects. At the end of a highly respectful account of Native American spirit beliefs, he rebuts those who might accuse him of indulging in a noble savage fantasy by saying, "if this portrait of the American natives, North and South, seems too highly pitched . . . we have only to turn to the accounts of those who saw them in their fresh glory, when the Spaniards first arrived . . . [O]f their moral qualities, all the discoveries bear testimony to their being far more honorable, hospitable, and kind than their so-called Christian oppressors" (394-5).

Howitt, like his spiritualist anthropologist peer J.M. Peebles,^{viii} had experience of direct contact with non-Western indigenous cultures and religions, having travelled to the Australian goldfields in the early eighteen-fifties with his sons Alfred and Charlton. Alfred was later to become a famous Australian geologist, anthropologist, explorer, and the co-author, with Lorimer Fison, of a landmark 1880 study of Aboriginal kinship and marriage systems entitled *Kamilaroi and Kurnai*. Perhaps as a result of William's renown, this study was reviewed at length in an 1881 issue of the London spiritualist journal *The Psychological Review* in an article which urged its readers to search "the traditions, the customs, the modes of thought of the savage" for evidence, not only on the origins of all civilization,^{ix} but also of the prevalence of spirit involvement in human affairs ("Spiritualism among Savage Tribes" 75-). European spiritualists, the contributor insisted, had much to learn from non-Western hunter-gatherer societies, and they would need to tap this precious reserve quickly before colonialism destroyed it entirely. Similar arguments resounded in other organs of the British spiritualist press, with the *Spiritual Magazine* sarcastically lauding the

Royal Anthropological Institute and E.B. Tylor in particular for finally realizing the value of spirit investigation (“Spiritualism Among the Anthropologists” 103-4), and *The Medium and Daybreak* proposing in 1873 that “a deputation from Lake Winnipeg be invited to visit Britain and enlighten the London *savans*, for it is discreditable to our civilization that the president of the Anthropological Institute should lag behind the Red Indian in knowledge of anthropological phenomena” (“The Anthropologists and Spiritualism” 199).

The frequency of such arguments for the value—both investigative and philosophical— of non-first world spirit beliefs in the mid-century British spiritualist press makes their almost complete absence from the contemporaneous writings of England’s most anthropologically experienced scientific convert all the more astonishing. Admittedly, Wallace’s reluctance to adopt this pervasive tactic may at least partially have been a practical reaction to its simultaneous adoption by those who were working to discredit spiritualism in the eighteen-sixties and seventies. The most prominent of these from the world of British anthropology was, of course, the academic discipline’s founding father, E.B. Tylor, an associate of Wallace’s whose landmark *Primitive Culture* (1871) offered Victorian séance practices as prime examples of what he termed “survivals” (v), namely holdovers from a far earlier stage in human history, proofs of the universal if differentially-implemented stages of cultural evolution. Tylor, as George Stocking has shown, himself attended a number of London séances in the late sixties as he developed his pioneering theory of animism, and, although he apparently urged Wallace to undertake further scientific research on the manifestations, his own fieldwork did not inspire him with belief.^x Instead, Tylor became convinced that the cosmopolitan spiritual medium presented an atavistic remainder of the primitive mind, distinguishable from the shaman of

Mongolia, East Asia, or Sub-Saharan Africa only by her dress, skin colour, and place of residence. “As the negro fetish-man, whose patient does not come in person, can divine by means of his dirty cloth or cap instead,” wrote Tylor, “so the modern clairvoyant professes to feel sympathetically the sensation of a distant person if communication be made through a lock of his hair or any object that has been in contact with him” (105). Although the persistence of these outdated and clearly fallacious systems of belief in supposedly enlightened times was in many respects lamentable, he contended, it at least had the benefit of providing anthropologists like himself with immediate and accessible examples of primitive thought preserved as if in amber. “We have,” he surmised, “. . . reason to be thankful for fools. It is quite wonderful . . . to see how large a share stupidity and unpractical conversation and dogged superstition have had in preserving for us traces of the history of our race, which practical utilitarianism would have swept away” (142).

Wallace was one of *Primitive Culture*'s reviewers and, needless to say, sentiments like these won few favors with him. Assessing the book in *The Academy*, he praised its ambition but chided what he viewed as Tylor's smug intellectual complacency and stubborn refusal to abstract to a generalization in light of the overwhelming evidence of universal spirit belief. Tylor, he argued, should be more willing to credit the testimony of non-Western peoples. Yet, in a fascinating and deeply conflicted closing gesture, he then reneged on this accreditation of the Other by suggesting that Tylor, in rejecting the testimony of savage spiritualism, was ultimately as ignorant and illogical *as a savage*. Wallace writes:

A work like the present, one-sided though it be, furnishes much evidence to support the views of those who maintain that a considerable portion of the so-called superstitions of mankind repose upon facts; *that these facts have been*

*almost always misunderstood and misinterpreted in past ages, as they are now by the ignorant and among savages; and that until they are recognized as possible realities, and studied with thoroughness and devotion and a complete freedom from foregone conclusions, it is hopeless to expect a sound philosophy of religion or any true insight into the mysterious depths of our spiritual nature. ([my italics] “Tylor’s *Primitive Culture*” 71)*

Only savages, this passage implies, could so willfully pervert or mistake the factual value of spiritualism as does Tylor, even though they, unlike the anthropologist, actually believed in it. There are few better examples of Wallace’s simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from identification with the belief systems of non-Western peoples than in the extraordinary equivocation we see here.

A similar tension runs through *On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism*, a work we can only fully understand when we recognize the extent to which it was written in Tylor’s shadow. Despite its support for a controversial new faith, the book is also one of the most conservative examples of Wallace’s published writings. This quality manifests not in the spiritualist belief system that Wallace champions, but rather in the way he shapes and authorizes his argument. Although the twinned figures of the contemporary hunter-gatherer and the prehistoric man had earlier been crucial to Wallace’s argument for the non-applicability of natural selection to human mental evolution,^{xi} neither receives significant mention in *On Miracles*. Instead, the majority of Wallace’s examples of authoritative phenomena and conversion come from the ranks of the educated, professional, and distinctly male Anglo-American elite. He opens by tackling Hume’s argument against miracles, insisting that what might look like a temporary suspension of the laws of nature—the mediumistic phenomena of levitation, telekinesis, or *apports*— would ultimately reveal themselves to be the

products of as-yet undiscovered yet perfectly systematic natural principles which supported the existence of post-life survival. But even as Wallace dissects and disassembles the influential arguments of a leading exponent of British empiricism, nowhere does he seek to replace the epistemological convictions of the West's intellectual elite with the folk beliefs of working-class white or non-Western tribal peoples, as a number of his co-believers would.^{xiii} Instead, he insists that the best guarantor of the veracity of séance manifestations lay in the professional status of its most prominent believers, *all of whose* examples, in the first edition of *On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism* at least, are educated male elites.^{xiii} "It is," he confidently and almost definitely inaccurately insists there,^{xiv} "among the middle and upper classes that the larger proportion of adherents are found, and among those who have declared themselves convinced of the reality of facts such as have always been classified as miracles, are numbers of literary, scientific, and professional men" (48).

On Miracles did acknowledge—as indeed it had to for its universalist argument to hold force—that “this belief [in spirits] had existed in all states of society, and has accompanied every stage of mental power” (26). Yet the representatives Wallace offered of these different social states, namely Socrates, Plutarch, Luther, and Calvin, were hardly fringe autodidacts with no connections to institutional power or the Western intellectual tradition. Even when the book does acknowledge, albeit in muted fashion, what we might term the spiritualist proletariat, it is the imaginative allure of their otherworldly visions rather than their reputability as witnesses that warrants their inclusion. Thus when Wallace writes approvingly of Anglo-American trance medium Emma Hardinge Britten's channeled accounts of an afterlife where the spirit continues to grow and progress through all eternity, what he admires is their beauty and emotional appeal, not their proof status. We know that

Wallace was by no means personally unwilling to credit the performances of female and/or working-class mediums— if anything, as Martin Fichman points out, he had a reputation even among fellow believers for being too accepting of sometimes egregiously fraudulent mediums (*Alfred Russel Wallace* 129)— but these voices receive no sustained acknowledgement here. The very “professionalizing elite” (Fichman *An Elusive Victorian* 147) on whose fringes Wallace sat in the eighteen-seventies are here elevated to the status of virtually exclusive guarantors of spiritualist epistemology.

But non-Western and non-first world spirit beliefs are not entirely suppressed in *On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism*. They appear as subject of brief, one might venture, grudging allusions within the larger argument, their presence necessitated by the unavoidable weight of Tylor’s recent theory of survivals. The first comes at the end of the volume’s opening essay on miracles in a subsection entitled, “Is the belief in miracles a survival of savage thought?” (26). Unsurprisingly in light of Wallace’s review of *Primitive Culture*, the answer is a resounding no based on the supposedly entirely separate means by which the savage and the scientific spiritualist arrive at their convictions.

The thoughts of those educated men who know, from the evidence of their senses, and by repeated and careful investigation, that things called supernatural are true and real facts, are as totally distinct from those of savages as are their thoughts respecting the sun, or thunder, or disease, or any other natural phenomena. As well might he maintain that the modern belief that the sun is a fiery mass is a survival of savage thought, because some savages believe so too; or that our belief that certain diseases are contagious,

is a similar survival of the savage idea that a man can convey a disease to his enemy. (26-7)

Wallace here evinces a desire to link spiritualism not with magic but with what Wouter Hanegraaff describes as the original significance of the term *occult*, namely as a tool for disenchantment which “withdraw[s] the realm of the marvelous from theological control and makes it available for scientific study” (180). What mattered then about the new revelation was less its proposal that the dead returned than the putatively rational means by which this thesis was supported, one presently, if perhaps not permanently, denied to non-Western indigenous peoples.

This distinction allowed Wallace to preserve both the modern enlightenment *ethos* and white racial constituency of progressive modern spiritualism intact, at least for the moment. He repeated this act of segregation and quarantining in the book’s concluding discussion of spiritualism’s historical significance, arguing that the new faith facilitated a retrospective acceptance of the supernaturalist beliefs of the Western tradition’s great classical thinkers (207), but not, markedly, of folk tradition or supposedly primitive societies in the Congo Basin or the Scottish Highlands. True, he admitted, “second sight and many of the so-called superstitions of savages may be realities” (209), but their possessors could not be affiliated with spiritualism proper unless they gained an empirical and hence properly scientific understanding of their own faculties. “The assertion, so often made,” he writes, “that Spiritualism is the survival or revival of old superstitions, is so utterly unfounded as to be hardly worth notice . . . Spiritualism is an experimental science, and affords the only sure foundation for a true philosophy and a pure religion . . . It and it alone, is able to harmonize conflicting creeds” (221). Harmonize them, this statement implies, by replacing them with the epistemological apparatus of western scientific naturalism.

Savage believers might have a place in European and North American séance rooms as spirits— and Wallace reported encountering such presences repeatedly during his 1886-7 lecture tour of the United States (*My Life* 338-9)— but their living descendants could not be allowed to taint the modern movement through association with the primitive mind.

It would be easy to dismiss Wallace's curiously aversive mid-seventies stance to savage spiritualism as a stereotypical by-product of the prevailing spirit of Victorian racism. But there are many good reasons for not evasively deferring to a lazily formulated version of the spirit of the times, not least of which being that what constitutes a *zeitgeist* is rarely straightforward or coherent. Indeed, as we have seen, the climate within the spiritualist circles in which Wallace moved was by no means hostile to contact with other cross-cultures of numinous belief. Further, such a conclusion, based only on Wallace's uneasiness about accepting savage believers as spiritualist allies, would ignore his openness to and even idealization of other aspects of non-Western indigenous cultures. Consider, for example, his extravagant praise of the moral and social characteristics of non-First world societies in *The Malay Archipelago* (1869), ones, he felt, that brought these communities far closer to Utopia than anything ever achieved in the white West.

We most of us believe that we, the higher races, have progressed and are progressing. If so, there must be some state of perfection, some ultimate goal, which we may never reach, but to which all true progress must bring nearer. What is this ideally perfect state towards which mankind has been, and still is tending? Our best thinkers maintain that it is a state of individual freedom and self-government, rendered possible by the equal development of the intellectual, moral, and physical parts of our nature . . . Now it is very

remarkable that among people in a very low state of civilization we find some approach to such a perfect social state. I have lived with communities of savages in South America and in the East, who have no laws or law courts, but the public opinion of the village freely expressed. Each man scrupulously respects the rights of his fellow . . . In such a community, nearly all are equal.

(The Malay Archipelago 456)

Savage thought patterns may then have presented a fatal stumbling block to spiritualist co-identity, but they provide in this imagining an excellent, not to say utterly unique, foundation for true social egalitarianism. For Wallace, who would publically identify as a socialist in 1890 in culmination of a lifelong interest in Owenism and social justice (*An Elusive Victorian* 230), the tradeoff must sometimes have seemed tantalizingly worthwhile. “Although we have progressed beyond the savage stage in intellectual advancements,” he continued, “. . . it is not too much to say that the mass of our populations have not at all advanced beyond the savage code of morals, and have in many cases sunk below it” (*The Malay Archipelago* 456).^{xv}

Yet if indeed people in “a low state of civilization” were morally superior to those in a higher, did not the spirit beliefs and practices that formed such a substantial part of their everyday lives have something to do with it? What did it mean for Wallace to embrace and exalt the social values of non-Western tribal peoples while simultaneously rejecting the spiritual convictions in which they presumably had some basis? In these questions, Wallace’s rigid methodological prioritization of modern spiritualism began to falter. He had always contended that primitive peoples believed in spirits for the wrong reasons, namely in deference to unenlightened materialist and animist principles. If “disgraceful” spiritualism, as Howitt might call it, lead to a better social state than its more modernized, scientific counterpart, then the case for

the latter's superiority seems moot. Perhaps it would be better not to recognize the spirit beliefs and practices of indigenous communities as coherent or meaningful at all rather than face this unsettling conclusion. It is notable that Wallace barely mentions the religious aspects of Malay and Amazonian indigenous life in his travel writings, and when he does, what he emphasizes is their eclecticism, materialism, and lack of systemization. Thus in *A Narrative of Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro* (1853), he describes a syncretized Roman Catholic baptism rite among the Indians of Guia in which "water and holy oil— and spittle [are] rubbed on the eyes . . . which all bear sufficient resemblance to the complicated operations of their *pagés*^{xvi} to make them think they have got something very good, in return for the shilling they pay for the ceremony" (158). Although this account of a crass material exchange of money for sanctifying spit was written over a decade before Wallace's conversion to spiritualism, and thus cannot be seen as a response to it, it nonetheless works to lay the preconditions for his culturally isolationist position on and desires for the Anglo-American movement. Of the Amazonians, he concluded, "I cannot make out that they have any belief that can be called a religion" (*A Narrative of Travels* 348). Later in *The Malay Archipelago* (1869), based on his pre-conversion travels but published after his public avowal of spiritualism, he again focuses on the merely material aspects of indigenous religious practice, describing, for example, the belief in human-crocodile transformation in Lombok (125) and the insatiable tribute demands of the local deities in Minahasa, gods in his account who existed only to be propitiated and who required no specific moral behavior or beliefs of their subjects. As ideal as these communities might be in many other respects, their rituals and beliefs could not be described as a legitimate faith system or even religion, not because their practitioners weren't white— such a prejudice would have surely prevented approval of others

aspects of their culture as well— but because they weren't recognizably scientific. And scientific, in the late eighteen-sixties and seventies, was desperately what Wallace needed to believe that modern spiritualism might be in its role as Utopian religion of the future.

Of course, Wallace's ability to conceive of the higher spiritualism in such a detached, rational, and systematic fashion surely owed much to his absence from the movement's epicentres during the period of its first emergence. Had he been closer to Hydesville than Belém in 1848, he would have observed a nascent modern spiritualism that bore much more in common with those animistic and folk healing practices he struggled to recognize as a religion than it did with the investigative procedure of the Royal Society. Consider, for example, the early clairvoyant healing work of Andrew Jackson Davis, the famous Poughkeepsie Seer whose eighteen-forties harmonialist philosophy laid so much of the conceptual groundwork for the Anglo-American movement. In his 1857 autobiography *The Magic Staff*, he describes the conditions he diagnosed and treated while performing as a trance speaker in upstate New York. One memorable case involved a rural worker who Davis diagnosed with deafness, a condition, amazingly, that hadn't apparently been noticed by the patient, his family, or associates until then. Davis prescribed for him "the magnetic moisture of the rat," to be administered by positioning "the warm skins of the rats over and back of each ear, ever night . . . for a certain length of time" (255). Sure enough, Davis recollects, "the disagreeable remedy wrought his much-desired restoration" (255). Had Wallace been present at scenes like these, he might have struggled to distinguish them from the eye-spitting blessings of the Amazon basin.

But such distinctions would not, for Wallace, remain urgent or even valuable, especially in the latter stages of his life when what had once seemed like the gold

standard of social advancement— namely, science— began to tarnish. His attitude towards non-first world spiritualism noticeably changed in this period, not so much, I would argue, because he revised his opinion of the non-white indigenous people he continued to idealize, but rather because he lost his unquestioning faith in the merits of first-world civilization. Wallace had become by the late eighteen-nineties highly skeptical about the extent of the modern west’s moral and intellectual advancement, arguing in the ironically titled *The Wonderful Century* (1898) and elsewhere that the unprecedented technological discoveries of the era were little compensation for the failure to eradicate war, poverty, social injustice and environmental devastation. Later, in *Social Environment and Moral Progress* (1913), he linked the persistence of these blights to a kind of evolutionary stalling by which, even though our anatomy and intellectual capacity had adapted significantly over the course of our long species history, our moral instincts remained “in a stationary condition . . . from the earliest periods of human history and presumably from the dawn of civilization” (8). This was a deeply pessimistic contention, but also one that forged consilience between the “early” man and his later descendent, between the primitive and the modern. Whether one was an ancient Mesopotamian, a contemporary hunter-gatherer in the Amazon rainforest, or a modern London scientific professional, we all, contended Wallace, had an equivalent moral character from an evolutionary point of view. It was time, he concluded, to eradicate this universal stasis and accelerate the species’ moral progress, not through the Galtonian eugenic proposals that Wallace found unconvincing,^{xvii} but through socialism and feminism. If women were allowed greater independence and education, they would be able to marry for choice rather than status or economic necessity, or simply not to marry at all. In such a system, as Wallace enlisted Swedenborg to argue, lazy, vicious, or congenitally insane men would be less

likely to find partners and hence transmit these qualities, presuming they are inheritable, to offspring (*Social Environment and Moral Progress* 137). The state would not need to legislatively or scientifically bio-engineer its citizens towards perfection because the steps it took to empower women would automatically diminish competition, the capitalist monopoly on property and production, and inequality of opportunity.

Although not a spiritualist work *per se*, *Social Environment and Moral Progress* can be read as a meditation on and riposte to the teleological, scientific, and whitewashed version of spiritualism that Wallace had earlier promoted in *On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism*. Rather than trumpeting the accomplishments of scientific naturalism and industry, it acts as a scorching jeremiad, stating baldly that “*it is not too much to say that our whole system of society is rotten from top to bottom, and the Social Environment as a whole, in relation to our possibilities and our claims, is the worst the world has ever seen*” ([original italics] 153). The cross-cultural and transhistorical unity mapped here is a dismaying one, based on evolutionary underperformance. But *Social Environment and Moral Progress* also imagines alternative, far more positive, forms of cross-cultural and interracial solidarity, ones based on the very spiritual affinity its author had earlier been so anxious to resist. The book’s third chapter, for example, cites passages from a recent English translation of the *Maha-Bharata* by the distinguished Indian scholar and civil servant Romesh Chunder Dutt to affirm that “no one can read this beautiful rendering without feeling that the people it describes were our intellectual and moral equals” (11). This moment of identification is based not on mutual debasement but rather elevation and aesthetic refinement. Intriguingly, the passages he cites come from the Indian epic’s conclusion in which Yudhishthira enters the spirit world and reunites with loved ones and former

enemies alike as they prepare for a “brighter and holier future” (10).^{xviii} Wallace’s selection here is obviously far from random. Of all the verses he could have quoted to prove either excellence of contemporary Indian translation or the piety of the Vedic people, he chooses one that testifies to the existence of a progressive afterlife, not through scientific evidence, but via poetic assertion. This moment represents a vindication of, and co-identification with, both non-Western spirit belief and the non-Western epistemology on which it was based.^{xix}

In the late eighteen-sixties and early eighteen-seventies, modern spiritualism had allowed Alfred Russel Wallace to break down the barrier between one set of worlds— those of the living and the dead— while shoring up another, that which separated the global third-world spirit belief systems which some of his co-believers recognized as allies from Anglo-American séance practice. Eventually, this barrier too would break under the combined force of his radical skepticism about progressive modernity, and his enduring optimism, even in the face of the most lamentable counter-evidence, about humanity’s nonetheless enduring capacity for moral improvement, one nowhere better evidenced than in the global expressions of a belief in post-life spirit agency. However disparately expressed and signified across contrasting cultural locations, the conviction ultimately offered for Wallace the best hope for our future evolutionary advancement, offering a route from the degraded and divisive society of capitalist, colonial Britain into a pending spiritualist utopia in which all kinds of bodies and spirits could co-exist.

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ⁱ Wallace toured the Amazon basin between 1848-1852 and the Malay Archipelago between 1854-1862. These travels removed him from the British and American centers of the modern spiritualist movement in its first wave of popularity. See Wallace 1853 and Wallace 1869 for accounts of the expeditions.

ⁱⁱ Kottler 1974, Fichman 1981 and 2007, and Shermer 2002 provide accounts of the genesis and impact of Wallace’s spiritualist conversion.

ⁱⁱⁱ A word on terminology is necessary here. The Victorian use of the terms “primitive” and “savage” as blanket signifiers for an amorphous group of non-Western, non-white, non-First World, or simply non-educated and non-urban people— “generally all those of any race whose skins are darker than ours own, and whose ideas. . . differ from those held by the dwellers of . . . Primrose Hill” (158) as R.B. Cunninghame Graham once jeered— has thankfully been consigned to the past. If I preserve them here, it is not to endorse this characterization, but to accurately record Wallace’s use of the terms to signify a fantasy construction of non-First World Otherness that cannot be accurately synonymized by less offensive terms because it never had any precise real-world signifier to begin with.

^{iv} It brings together *The Scientific Aspect of the Supernatural* (1866), “An Answer to the Arguments of Hume, Lecky, and Others, against Miracles,” (1870), and “A Defence of Modern Spiritualism” (1874).

^v One important precursor in the context of spiritualist raciology is the writing of Emanuel Swedenborg, which championed the elevated spiritual capacities of the denizens of the interior of Africa and spawned a British-based colonization project in the late eighteenth century. For more on this fascinating historical episode, see Coleman 2005.

^{vi} Another important expression of the transatlantic movement’s obsession with non-First World peoples lies in the frequent channeling of Native American, African

American, and East spirits in this period. For more on this practice, see Cox (2003), Tromp (2006), and McGarry (2008).

vii For more on Howitt's role in British spiritualist anthropology, see Richardson 2014.

viii See Peebles's *Seers of the Ages* (1869), published while its author was serving as the United States Consul at Trebizond in Turkey.

ix Here the writer adopts the common stadialist position that contemporary hunter-gatherer societies were no different than prehistoric ones, and the former would eventually succumb to civilization as had the latter.

x For more on Tylor's encounters with the eighteen-sixties London spiritualist circuit and their influence on his developing theory of religion, see Stocking 1971. Wallace's describes Tylor's encouragement of his spiritualist investigations in *My Life* (Wallace 1905 282).

xi In "The Limits of Natural Selection as Applied to Man" (1870), Wallace famously argued that so-called primitive peoples had so much more intellectual capacity than they actually needed for survival that an unknown higher power must have placed it there.

xii See Ferguson 2012 for a discussion of the cultural capital of non-educated spiritualist belief and mediumistic capacity within the transatlantic spiritualist movement.

xiii The 1896 revised and expanded edition of *On Miracles* does include a section on Oliver Lodge's experiments with the renowned Italian peasant medium Eusapia Palladino, but again the authority of her male investigator—who freely admits that Palladino sometimes cheated—is prioritized over Palladino's own attempts to account for the phenomena.

xiv Admittedly, the demographics of spiritualist belief are almost impossible to determine with any finality, but the existence of plebian spiritualist communities in North England and elsewhere (Barrow 1986) and the sheer volume of self-published writings by non-educated believers and mediums in the Victorian spiritualist archive discredits this claim of middle-class dominance.

xv Here again we see the bizarre equivocation that permeated Wallace's review of *Primitive Culture*. After praising the moral superiority of savage society, he then laments the fact that most white Britons have not advanced beyond it.

xvi Local medicine men or healers.

xvii He writes in *Social Progress and Moral Environment* (1913), "Sir Francis Galton's own proposals were limited to giving prizes or endowments for the marriage of persons of high characters . . . this may perhaps not do much harm, but it would certainly do very little good" (127). More troubling to Wallace were the negative

eugenic measures being proposed by Galton's adherents: "any direct interference with the freedom of marriage . . . is not only totally unnecessary, but would be a much greater source of danger to morals and to the well-being of humanity than the mere temporary evils it seeks to cure" (129).

xviii The full passage to which Wallace directs this remark reads:

"These and other mighty warriors, in the earthly battle slain,
By their valour and their virtue walk the bright ethereal plain!
They have lost their mortal bodies, crossed the radiant gate of heaven,
For to win celestial mansions unto mortals it is given!
Let them strive by kindly action, gentle speech, endurance long,
Brighter life and holier future unto sons of men belong!"

(Dutt qtd. in *Social Environment & Moral Progress* 10).

xix This claim of kinship between western spiritualism and Hindu belief went two ways in the early twentieth century. In a 1906 lecture in Benares, the Hindu nationalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak praised British physicist and spiritualist Oliver Lodge for "declar[ing] that the soul does not die with the body" and thus "accept[ing] the doctrine of Karma if not reincarnation" (355).