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Reviewed by Jessica Albrecht, University of Heidelberg, Jessica.Albrecht@ts.uni-heidelberg.de

Spiritualism as well as autobiographies are prominent fields of research. In particular, looking at the role of women and gender in recent years has changed and enhanced research on both. However, they have not yet been put together. Spiritualism and autobiographies tend to be examined in relation to authenticity and “historical facts.” Both raise the question whether they can be seen as “authentic” historical sources and, consequently, in what ways they can be used for historical research. Since they are deeply related to personal experiences, the study of spiritualism and autobiographies prompt the question how taking gender into account changes or enhances this problem. Elizabeth Schleber Lowry’s Invisible Hosts: Performing the Nineteenth-Century Spirit Medium’s Autobiography seeks to answer this question. By looking at the only four book-length autobiographies written by female spiritualists in the long nineteenth century—Leah Fox Underhill’s Missing Link in Modern Spiritualism (1885), Nettie Colburn Maynard’s Was Abraham Lincoln a Spiritualist? (1891), Emma Hardinge Britten’s Autobiography of Emma Hardinge Britten (1900), and Amanda Theodosia Jones’ Psychic Autobiography (1910)—Lowry contextualizes and re-configures autobiographies, spiritualism and the performance of femininity in the nineteenth century. It is the first study to combine theoretical as well as methodological frameworks of the study of gender in spiritualism and autobiography in terms of femininity. As such, it offers a beautifully written historical analysis of sources which had not yet been examined together as well as an introduction to spiritualist writing and women’s agency.
Due to its introductory character, however, the book does not sufficiently introduce theoretical concepts which are used, such as performativity, agency and subjectivity, which are named but neither properly explained nor critically applied. As a result, it remains unclear to what extent this study answers its own questions. Throughout the book, Lowry engages with the historical and historiographical distinction between “True” and “Real Womanhood.” The author argues that the women in the study performed versions of “Real Womanhood” in order to transgress the boundaries of “True Womanhood”—which, as a category of the late nineteenth century, was (in)formed by notions of spirituality, morality and purity. Through establishing a new form of female performativity in and through their autobiographies, Britten, Underhill, Maynard, and Jones used spiritualism to challenge the hegemonic role of “True Womanhood.” But this conclusion does not require the constraints of defining their gender performance as “Real Womanhood”, a category invented by recent scholarship on Victorian femininity. “Real Womanhood” is supposed to encompass “strength, confidence and practicality” of women allowing the transgression of social ideals. In various instances, Lowry admits, that the frame of “Real Womanhood” does not fully capture the specifics of the autobiographies. The work would benefit from challenging the dichotomy between “True” and “Real Womanhood” rather than imposing this secondary frame onto its sources, into which they never quite seem to fit. The examples rather show that the concept of “Real Womanhood” itself lacks the capacity to capture what was happening in the gendered world of the nineteenth century. The possibility of the study to show new ways to look at femininity outside of this binary frame is not carried out to its full potential.

Nevertheless, the true novelty of this study lies in its thematically composed chapters, which enable the combination of the three main topics of the book: spiritualism, autobiography, and female performativity. In this way, they serve not only as introductions to various historical contexts, but also inform the reader of new possibilities for conceptualizing them. Through the comparison with Evangelical autobiographies written by female authors in the first chapter, Lowry creates a basis for defining female spiritualist autobiographies. Chapters two to four engage with the hegemonic and gendered discourse of morality. The contexts of “purity”, Christian morality, and the ideology of domesticity, show how female spiritualists, even though still very much bound to these gendered limitations, used spiritualism to transgress these bound-
aries. Vice versa, they used the legitimizing force of these contexts to vouch for spiritualism. In accordance with the general topic of the book, chapters five and six ask how the autobiographies managed to create authenticity within the restricting matrices of gender and sex. Again, autobiography as a genre in combination with spiritualism enabled forms of agency and emancipation. The most interesting chapter, however, is chapter seven which conceptualizes Britten’s and Jones’ autobiographies as travel writings. As a result, Lowry draws her yet strongest argument, namely that by framing their autobiographies in this way, Britten and Jones used a genre which was acceptable for women in the nineteenth century to subtly criticize violence, the civil war, and slavery. As such, the autobiographies can be seen as a form of social activism in themselves.

Through critically and thoroughly engaging with yet unexamined sources, *Invisible Hosts* enriches the historical scholarship on spiritualism and female agency and is therefore a useful companion for teaching and studying spiritualism and gender in the nineteenth century. As said before, at some points the study fails to meet its own demands – mainly due to a lack of an in-depth engagement with the theories used and being hindered by the constrains of the scholarly category “Real Womanhood.” Nevertheless, this creative and new composition of different contexts and disciplinary questions opens a promising way and a valuable basis for much needed further research.