

## The Art of Ectoplasm: Encounters with Winnipeg's Ghost Photographs

Edited by Serena Keshavjee. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2023. 318 pp.  
ISBN 9781772840377.

*The Art of Ectoplasm: Encounters with Winnipeg's Ghost Photographs* provides an interdisciplinary approach to exploring the materials and ideas that the University of Manitoba's Hamilton Family Fonds collection conjures. This collection, which was created between 1918 and 1945, consists of 700 images and over 1,300 notes and documentation of the psychical research<sup>1</sup> of Dr. Thomas Glendenning "T. G." Hamilton; his wife and coresearcher, Lillian, a nurse; and extended friends and family. The collection's predominant intrigue and popularity originate from "teleplasm," or ectoplasm photographs documenting the "vital forces" or "biological rods" that psychic investigators claimed to have emerged from female mediums' bodies during Hamilton's paranormal research (p. 60).<sup>2</sup>

*The Art of Ectoplasm* was edited by Serena Keshavjee, a modern art and architecture professor at the University of Winnipeg, and features contributions from Keshavjee and seven other artists, scholars, archivists, and academics. Organized into three sections—"Historical Context," "Archival Exploration," and "Artistic Response"—the book provides a unique culmination of perspectives illuminating how archives can be used as the material *prima* for innumerable avenues of examination and creativity. The "Artistic Response" section is unique in this context and is undoubtedly influenced by Keshavjee's academic perspective, which focuses on the intersection of science and art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; her introduction and two contributing chapters bridge these thematic realms, giving the book the cohesion needed to examine such an ephemeral subject. Other contributors provide more customary historical detailing of the Hamilton family and overviews of psychical research during the early twentieth century from feminist, paranormal, and archival research perspectives. It is important to note that this book does not seek to debate the plausibility of the ectoplasm images (or of psychical research in general) or expose them as fakes. The reader will need to look elsewhere if expecting a skeptic's inquiry. *The Art of Ectoplasm* views the Hamilton family's research as authentic recordings of psychic phenomena when applicable to each chapter's theme.

When most people think of ectoplasm, they probably picture Slimer, a green animated ghost from the 1984 film *Ghostbusters* who wreaks havoc by eating and sliming his way through the plot. Actor and screenwriter Dan Ackroyd's great-grandfather was a Chautauqua Lily Dale Society Spiritualist movement<sup>3</sup> member in upstate New York at the turn of the twentieth century, and this family history

influenced Ackroyd's script. But pop culture icon Slimer is not the first ectoplasmic character in film history, as Professor Murray Leeder's "Mere Symbolic Ectoplasm: The Ectoplasmic Screen" chapter details. The history and role of ectoplasm in cinema predates *Ghostbusters* by at least thirty years as a plot device, character, and metaphor for the film medium itself. Leeder demonstrates how ectoplasm's definition has evolved from its "early twentieth-century curio" roots to its current ability to personify qualities of a digital image (p. 213).

Just as Ackroyd's spiritualist family history influenced the film *Ghostbusters*, the Hamilton family's personal and historical contexts influenced their creation of teleplasm photographs and psychical research studies. Walter Meyer zu Erpen, an archivist and the founder and director of the Survival Research Institute of Canada, provides a timeline of the Hamiltons' research phases in his chapter, "Defending the T. G. Hamilton Family Psychical Research Legacy." The chapter outlines the family members, mediums, and community involved in the Hamiltons' experiments; details individual contributions; analyzes Dr. Hamilton's intentions in documenting teleplasmic manifestations; and presents Meyer zu Erpen's conclusions on the research. Although Meyer zu Erpen argues that the Hamiltons' research was not a grief response or a "bereavement strategy," it is impossible to ignore how the losses families endured during the First World War and the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic (which took their son Arthur) set the stage for their inquiry to connect to and commune with the dead (p. 128).

Editor Keshavjee's chapter "Experiments and Experiences in Psychical Research: Scientific Séances in Winnipeg" further profiles T. G. Hamilton's "seemingly contradictory views from science, the practice of séances, and even mainstream Christianity" within the larger context of the scientific study of ectoplasm in the early twentieth century (p. 46). As a medical doctor, Hamilton approached his psychical studies through a strictly scientific framework, capturing the ectoplasmic images and viewing them as illustrations of hard science. Surprisingly, he did not consider himself a spiritualist, once even calling the movement a "cult" (p. 43). In contrast to T. G.'s strictly scientific approach, Katie Oates, a research associate at the University of Western Ontario's Department of Visual Arts, uses a feminist social history perspective to reframe Lillian Hamilton's psychical research contributions. In her chapter, "Seeing and Feeling, Science and Religion: Negotiating Binaries in Lillian Hamilton's Photographic Albums," Oates argues how Lillian's arrangement and annotations of photographic albums "both adhere to and challenge ideas about femininity" and "personal photography" (p. 95). Lillian compiled and annotated a unique photo album from hundreds of available research images, alongside traditional portraits of family members, creating an interdimensional photographic family history. Lillian's creation of the albums scripted the family narrative "from her perspective," allowing her a place to "communicate her experience of the séances" and to incorporate her spiritual and emotional understanding as well as the

scientific viewpoint she shared with her husband (p. 96). This decentering of T. G. Hamilton's rational perspective reformulates the value of Lillian's contributions and demonstrates her capacity to "advance rational thought" without needing to assume "unemotionality" to do so (p. 106).

In her chapter, "Journey to the Spirit Realm," KC Adams, a Cree, Ojibway, and British artist and educator, augments and expands upon settler-colonial scientific methods from an Indigenous perspective. Adams's piece challenges and criticizes methodology, framing the Hamilton séances as settler intrusion into the Indigenous spirit realm. The chapter is part poem, part critique of settler appropriation, and part ethnographic<sup>4</sup> refusal<sup>5</sup> (the chapter ends exclaiming the nehiyewmowin word "*awas!*," which means "go away"; p. 220). Adams cites Métis archaeologist Kevin Brownlee's excavation of an ancient burial ground as an example. Dissatisfied with "stiff" archaeological reporting to describe the remains of a young *nêhiyaw* (Cree) woman, Brownlee decided, with Elder William Dumas's assistance, to incorporate storytelling and Elder knowledge into the report, remediating and augmenting the traditional model into a more generative one (p. 219). Deep history (including radiocarbon dating) and cultural and community context are utilized as a way forward and back.

*The Art of Ectoplasm* interfaces with the Hamilton Family Fonds in other ways not detailed here, including historian Dr. Esyllt W. Jones's chapter on the unphotographed and "less formal family séance circle" (p. 7) and the "weirding" of the city of Winnipeg in Brian Hubner's "Weird Winnipeg': or How the Hamilton Family Fonds Helped Make Winnipeg an Unlikely Center for the Paranormal." Keshavjee's extensive closing chapter, "Embodying the Dead," in which she traces the visual culture of ectoplasm from the Victorian era to the twenty-first century, offers an extensively researched throughline for understanding the "art" of *The Art of Ectoplasm*.

Generously illustrated and indexed, *The Art of Ectoplasm* provides a multifaceted, interdisciplinary approach to the collection that expands the possibilities of archival research. It demonstrates how various uses and examinations of archival collections can stimulate varied responses and threads of inquiry. Through its ephemeral subject matter (trance states, ectoplasm manifestations, table tipping), this book transcends the haunting specter of the past (personal loss, scientific history, and family history) toward new possibilities of a reparative present. Like evidentiary ectoplasm produced by a medium as an offering or guide, *The Art of Ectoplasm* objectifies through its text the potential uses and approaches we can explore with archival materials. Archivist emerita and retired head of the University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections Shelley Sweeney summarizes this well at the end of her chapter "Life After Death: New Uses of the Hamilton Family Fonds": "Although the power of this collection is unusual, it serves as an example of how stories can be rewoven into new narratives well beyond the lifetimes of the original storytellers and how their records can enjoy new life" (p. 177). This "new life" for me, is of immense

value, as it is through this extrapolation and reimagining of the use of our collections that archives can foster greater transparency and become spirited, potentially transformative, and necessarily reparative.

© Kure Croker

*Tulane University Special Collections*

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> “Psychical research” is defined as “the study or investigation of paranormal, [especially] parapsychological, phenomena.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “psychical research (n.),” March 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2912840217>.
- <sup>2</sup> I use the words “teleplasm” and “ectoplasm” interchangeably in this review. “Teleplasm” is defined as “a supposed paranormal phenomenon consisting of a viscous substance which emanates from a spiritualist medium and often develops whole or partial human form; ectoplasm.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “teleplasm (n.), sense 2,” September 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/5716031731>.
- <sup>3</sup> “Spiritualism, in religion, [is] a movement beginning in the 19th century in America and Europe based on the belief that departed souls can interact with the living. Spiritualists sought to make contact with the dead, usually through the assistance of a medium, . . . and some claimed to be the catalyst for various paranormal physical phenomena (including the materializing or moving of objects) through which the spirits announced their presence.” Melton, J. Gordon, “spiritualism,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, October 11, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/spiritualism-religion>, captured at <https://perma.cc/67WY-6B27>. The Chautauqua Lily Dale Society still exists today.
- <sup>4</sup> “An ethnographic refusal is intended to redirect academic analysis away from harmful pain-based narratives that obscure slow violence, and towards the structures and institutions that engender those narratives.” Alex Zahara, “Refusal as Research Method in Discard Studies,” *Discard Studies*, March 21, 2016, <https://discardstudies.com/2016/03/21/refusal-as-research-method-in-discard-studies/#:~:text=Ethnographic%20refusal%20is%20a%20practice,issues%20on%20their%20own%20terms>, captured at <https://perma.cc/YHP3-CATN>.
- <sup>5</sup> “Refusal holds on to a truth, structures this truth as stance through time, as its own structure and comingling with the force of presumed and inevitable disappearance and operates as the revenge of consent—the consent to these conditions, to the interpretation that this was fair, and the ongoing sense that this is all over with.” Audra Simpson, “Consent’s Revenge,” *Cultural Anthropology* 31, no. 3 (2016): 326–33. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48579450>.
- <sup>6</sup> Kevin Brownlee and E. Leigh Syms, *Kayasochi kikewenow—Our Mother from Long Ago (An Early Cree Woman and Her Personal Belongings from Nagami Bay, Southern Indian Lake)* (Winnipeg Museum of Man and Nature, 1999).