

Enchanted Ground: The Spirit Room of Johnathan Koons. By Sharon Hatfield. Ohio University Press, 2018. 360 pages. \$28.95 (cloth).

Sharon Hatfield's *Enchanted Ground: The Spirit Room of Jonathan Koons* is a detailed biography of nineteenth-century American spiritualist Jonathan Koons (1812–1893). Although a pioneering visionary of early spiritualism, Koons has been neglected in the history of spiritualism despite his first spiritualist experiences having occurred in 1850, closely following those of the far more famous Fox sisters in 1848. Hatfield notes that although spiritualist Emma Hardinge Britten noted the important influence of Koons in her 1870 book, *Modern American Spiritualism*, and again in her 1892 sequel to *Ghost Land* (281–82, 283–84), for the most part, Koons has been generally overlooked in later histories of American spiritualism. Hatfield writes that “[Marc] Demarest [curator of the Emma Hardinge Britten online archive] argues that Koons has gotten short shrift perhaps because of the reported exposure of his fraudulent séance” (291). The Fox sisters too were later exposed as entirely fraudulent, with Maggie Fox confessing in 1888 that their spiritualist “rappings” were produced through the cracking of their toe joints (260); yet unlike Koons, their impact on the spiritualist movement in the nineteenth-century has certainly been well-documented. Whatever the reasons for the historical and scholarly neglect of Koons, Hatfield demonstrates well his enormous impact on the spiritualist movement, with his popular spirit room becoming a major pilgrimage site in early American spiritualism, serving as a major source of inspiration for later spiritualist practitioners in the 1850s and beyond.

Born in Bedford, Pennsylvania, Koons moved to Athens County, Ohio, in 1833 and married and started a family with Abigail Bishop in 1836. In 1838, the family began clearing land in Dover Township, Ohio, establishing their small farm in an area that would later be named Mount Nebo. Koons, his wife, and their children all began demonstrating mediumistic tendencies as early as 1850, with his eldest son Nahum showing especial talent in communicating with spirits. Starting in 1852, the Koons family was visited by a powerful spirit known as King. Hatfield writes that “On August 16, 1852 . . . Nahum Koons took up a pencil and began to draw. Supposedly acting at the direction of King, Benjamin Franklin, and other entities, the 14-year-old sketched a diagram of what the spirits called ‘an electrical table’ that would enable them not only to speak but to create vocal and instrumental music” (58). Jonathan Koons took up this diagram and constructed the device on the instruction of the spirits; an increase in paranormal activity followed the completion of the electrical table. With the spiritualistic phenomena at the Koons farmstead increasing, so too began an ever-increasing flow of visitors, creating logistical challenges for the family, at the time living in two small cabins. This led Koons to build a separate “Spirit Room” for the purposes of contacting the spirits and more easily sharing the message of spiritualism to visitors. Koons and his family engaged in a variety of spiritualist practices, including automatic writing, materializations, and trance speaking.

Hatfield notes that “[h]istorians believe that Johanthan Koons was the first person in the spiritualism movement to develop ‘direct voice’ communication through the trumpet,” with spirits speaking through a kind of “metal megaphone,” bypassing the earlier “tedious business of rapping or table-tipping their way through the alphabet or limiting themselves to yes-or-no questions” (76). Hatfield’s detailed picture of Koons and his family demonstrates the financial, social, and spiritual challenges they faced throughout their lives. The most pressing of the spiritual ones came from those challenging the veracity of Koons’s spiritualist claims, with many of their more traditionally minded neighbors viewing spiritualism as a possible threat to the established Christian order. These challenges also came from within spiritualist circles, as skeptical spiritualist investigators sought to ensure that the burgeoning spiritualist movement was not infiltrated by frauds; these investigators worked to distinguish “true” from “false” psychic activity. Following Koons and his family—as well as their neighbors, the Tippias, who began to practice a similar sort of spiritualism—throughout their lives, Hatfield constructs a fascinating close history of this spiritualist milieu. By the book’s end, Hatfield takes readers nearly, if briefly, to the present, noting that the area around Koons’s Mount Nebo would later become the location of Aethelred Eldridge’s William Blake-inspired Golgonooza community in the 1970s and 1980s (277–78).

Hatfield builds her picture of Koons and his circle based on her exhaustive local historical research and numerous historical spiritualist periodicals that contained contemporary accounts of visitors to Koons’s Spirit Room as well as the serialized publication of Koons’s own autobiography. In the book’s acknowledgments, Hatfield notes that her access to the spiritualist periodicals was facilitated through use of the excellent online resource the International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals (IAPSOP, www.iapsop.com). The book is certainly historically rigorous, with clear and well-organized endnotes for this vast amount of archival research. Hatfield is not an academic by profession, but instead, per her brief author biography on the book’s dustjacket, an “award-winning nonfiction writer.” Hatfield’s nonfiction background is evident in her extremely detailed history that remains quite enjoyably readable—perhaps not only for scholarly audiences. This means, however, that the book does not contain a clear academic thesis; as suits its purpose as a nonfiction biographical history, its work is primarily descriptive. For the most part, theoretical speculations concerning possible psychological and historical foundations for Koons’s spiritualism are only briefly addressed in the book’s short afterword.

Academic readers might therefore certainly identify some missed opportunities for contextualization and deeper analysis in Hatfield’s work. Although Hatfield does cite some important scholarship on the history of American spiritualism, like Ann Braude’s classic *Radical Spirits* and Catherine Albanese’s monumental *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, there were a number of places where additional scholarly sources could have made Hatfield’s history even richer. Hatfield mentions, for example, Koons’s purported discovery of a Native

American burial mound, following the guidance of the ghost of an Indian chief. While Hatfield discusses the fact that Koons “had whittled a rude homestead out of the forests of Mount Nebo . . . carved in legend as a sacred spot for the Shawnee Indians,” she writes simply that “the message made sense to Koons and may have come as no surprise” because this “Indian” history may have helped Koons and others in the region to contextualize their encounters with Indian spirits. Here, I think that scholarship like Molly McGarry’s *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* could have been supremely useful in addressing how Koons, like many spiritualists of the era, engaged in often troubling (if unconscious) social and racial practices. The chapter on “Machines” in Cathy Gutierrez’s *Plato’s Ghost: Spiritualism in the American Renaissance* might similarly have served to more meaningfully contextualize Koons’s construction of his electrical table. Yet for a work that does such rigorous archival research, these critiques are actually minor ones; interweaving too many theoretical or contextual considerations into this close history might have detracted from the book’s complex biographical narrative of an important and under-researched figure in the history of American spiritualism.

For scholars of spiritualism and nineteenth-century American religions, *Enchanted Ground* might serve as a kind of primary text, providing a solid foundation on which to make weightier theoretical claims. Although this book is of obvious interest to scholars of spiritualism, it should also be of interest also to scholars working in various other subfields of religious studies, including new religious movements, nineteenth-century American religions, space and place in religions, religions and materiality, and religion and the family. Having done the painstaking work of compiling and organizing the history of Koons and his circle, Hatfield has provided scholars with an important resource that could serve as a solid foundation for future research in a number of areas pertinent to religious studies.

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Prescribing the Dharma: Psychotherapists, Buddhist Traditions, and Defining Religion. By Ira Helderman. University of North Carolina Press, 2019. 328 pages. \$90.00 (cloth), \$29.95 (paper), \$22.95 (e-book).

Ira Helderman tracks the close relationship between psychotherapy and Buddhism from the late nineteenth century to the present. The author approaches his subject from the vantage of a practicing psychotherapist and Buddhist sympathizer with a PhD in religious studies. He invites readers to empathize with the dilemma of therapists who are trying to help people who are desperately hurting amidst social pressures while keeping psychotherapy separate from religion.