Journal of American Studies, **44** (2010), 4. doi:10.1017/S0021875810001829

Cathy Gutierrez, *Plato's Ghost: Spiritualism in the American Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, £37.50). Pp. 232. ISBN 978 0 19 538835 0.

Cathy Gutierrez's *Plato's Ghost: Spiritualism in the American Renaissance* is an original and keenly intelligent study of nineteenth-century American spiritualism, one poised to transform scholarly opinion on its heterodox subject. Abandoning the dismissive elitism of previous scholars who, such as Daniel Cottom, have suggested that "what … [spiritualism] had to say about spirits was practically insignificant in comparison to the practices that composed its sayings" (*Abyss of Reason: Cultural Movements, Revelations, and Betrayals* (1991), 109), Gutierrez identifies American spiritualism first and foremost as an intellectual tradition, one which sought to appropriate, adapt, and instrumentalize Platonic thought for a new republic. Far more than simply promoting a belief in post-life survival, the movement, in Gutierrez's convincing account, worked to replace the Enlightenment model of historical progress with an earlier Renaissance one which held that "the wisdom to advance was to be found in the past" (13). Particularly commendable about Gutierrez's thesis is its challenge to the progressivist bias of many recent studies of nineteenth-century transatlantic spiritualism. Contemporary scholars have sometimes been too quick to take nineteenth-century spiritualists at their own iconoclastic self-valuation and have, accordingly, focussed primarily on those aspects of the movement – its feminism, abolitionism, socialism, and so on – which seem to precociously anticipate contemporary progressive politics. Gutierrez's spiritualism is an altogether more complex and Janus-faced phenomenon, forever looking backwards as it sought a way forward into the next era of human spiritual evolution.

Gutierrez traces the bidirectional impetus of spiritualist thought through five rigorous and carefully contextualized chapters on memory, machines, marriage, medicine, and minds. Some of these, such as the "Machines" chapter, can take on too much of the prolix and mutable quality of their subject, enumerating allied ideas rather than pursuing a tightly coordinated argument. Others, including the excellent chapters on medicine and marriage, are more focussed and coherent in their readings of popular spiritualist philosophy. To praise these chapters is not to say that I fully endorse their conclusions. I do not, for example, share Gutierrez's conviction in the movement's relative disinterest in birth control or negative eugenic control over human breeding; my own work on transatlantic spiritualist attitudes towards over-prolific families and the spread of so-called feeblemindedness suggests to me a far darker picture of the movement's engagement with Utopian social engineering than the one described in *Plato's Ghost*. I am equally sceptical about the claim that spiritualists viewed disease as a "benign" (119) punishment for an ultimately always-correctable ignorance. One might certainly find examples of this aetiological optimism in American spiritualist writing, but so too can we discover its inverse; there was no shortage of late Victorian American trance-speakers and mediums, from Cora Tappen to Mary Shelhamer, who were willing to declare that some humans were already too diseased and impaired at birth to hope for any amelioration in life, and that our best solution was to prevent their conception. Even Andrew Jackson Davis, the figure whom Gutierrez quite rightly identifies as "arguably Spiritualism's

primary theologian," claimed in his 1885 biography *Beyond the Valley* that "criminals must not be brought into the world … by the wrongly married, who are the legalized makers of demoniac children, and the law-authorized breeders of human moral monstrosities" (*Beyond the Valley: A Sequel to "The Magic Staff"* (1885), 8, 347). It is hard to see how the degenerate progeny of such "wrong" marriages were to be cured by the infusions of ignorance-busting knowledge that the movement apparently made equally available to all seekers. The fact that *Plato's Ghost* raises these questions is not, however, a sign of its weakness, but rather of its commendable ability to provoke new debate rather than parrot progressivist clichés about the movement's intriguing and often highly contradictory politics of the body. Ultimately, Gutierrez's stimulating study makes an extremely valuable and often groundbreaking contribution to the study of New World religion and Old World esotericism, bringing her twin subjects together in a synthesis that is as fascinating as it is lucid and lively.

University of Glasgow CHRISTINE FERGUSON

Journal of American Studies, **44** (2010), 4. doi:10.1017/S0021875810001830

David Levering Lewis, Michael H. Nash, and Daniel J. Leab (eds.), *Red Activists and Black Freedom: James and Esther Jackson and the Long Civil Rights Revolution* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010, $125.00). Pp. xix + 113. ISBN 978 0 4154 7255 5.

The civil rights movement was more temporally, geographically, and ideologically capacious than classical narratives convey. Not merely a post-1954 uprising rooted in Cold War liberalism, it was, as the title of this book suggests, a "long civil rights revolution" dedicated to racial and gender equality, global change, and economic justice. The eleven essays that comprise *Red Activists and Black Freedom* explore the ways in which African American activists Esther and James Jackson enabled and embodied this revolution. Their achievements have been largely dismissed, forgotten, or, in the words of Angela Davis, "subjugated" (103). Celebrating them and freeing those memories serves both to fill a historiographic lacuna and to reinvigorate the struggle in the service of social transformation. As the editors themselves admit, "there is nothing even-handed about these essays," just as "there was nothing even-handed about the despairing lives of most African-Americans" in the twentieth century (x). This book, like the writings discussed by many of its authors, is a cultural product of the ongoing civil rights revolution.

James and Esther Cooper Jackson were, David Levering Lewis writes, "the dream team of the revolutionary left" (11). In her exploration of that partnership, Sara Rzeszutek persuasively argues that the Jacksons considered a marriage of equals as crucial to the political work they pursued through the Southern Negro Youth Congress and Communist Party. Their view of marriage as politics-in-action grew from their commitments, characterized by Erik McDuffie as "support for civil rights, social justice, internationalism, and radical democracy" (33). Whether organizing Virginia tobacco workers through the SNYC; analyzing the conditions of "The Negro Woman Domestic Worker," as Esther Jackson did in her 1940 MA