Within five years of its emergence in upstate New York, Modern Spiritualism had become transnational. It spread to Great Britain in late 1852, after the arrival of the American medium Mrs. W.R. Hayden (Goldfarb and Goldfarb 1978: 68–87). At about the same time, séance phenomena elicited growing interest on the Continent. As early as 1851, practitioners of Mesmerism in France took note of the “mysterious raps from America” (Cahagnet 1851a); by spring 1853, news from the United States had ignited a widespread fascination with table-moving in Germany, France, Italy, and Russia, among other places (Biondi 1988; Cuchet 2012; Monroe 2008; Treitel 2004; Vinitsky 2009). Sitting around a table with friends, laying hands on its top, and feeling it rotate, creak, or tap, apparently without any direct physical impulsion, became a common party game from Brussels to Moscow. While broad popular interest diminished rapidly, small groups across Europe embraced the American notion that these phenomena and others of similar kind could serve as a means of conversing with the spirits of the dead, and these groups began to speculate about the metaphysical significance of this dialogue. Over the next decade and a half, these isolated groups grew and coalesced. First in France, then in Italy, Spain, and Russia, it became common to distinguish Spiritualism from ‘Spiritism’, a religious system that shared fundamental elements with its American progenitor but differed on key points that seem to have made it more attractive to believers whose expectations were shaped by Catholicism and, to a lesser extent, Eastern Orthodoxy (Monroe 2008; Biondi 1988; Vinitsky 2009; Abend 2004; Cuchet 2012). In the 1870s and 1880s, Spiritism made its own way west, to Latin America and the Caribbean, where it subsequently became part of a syncretic mixture typical of what Paul Gilroy (1993) has called the “black Atlantic.”

This essay seeks to shed some new light on a crucial turning point in this process of global transmission: the initial codification of the philosophy and practice of Spiritism by the French writer and editor Hippolyte Léon Denizard

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1 See Moreira-Almeida et al. 2005, and Rivera 2005. For syncretism and the complex social meanings Kardec’s ‘doctrine’ has acquired in Latin America and the Caribbean, see Aubrée and Laplantine 1990; Brown 1986; Hess 1991; and Santo 2010.
Rivail, who published his most important works under the pseudonym Allan Kardec. In addition to considering how Kardec’s ideas emerged from the French encounter with American Spiritualism in the late 1850s and early 1860s, I will use a case study—that of the ill-starred Bordeaux lawyer Jean-Baptiste Roustaing—to analyze the distinctive dynamic of authority that characterised Kardecist Spiritism and marked one of its most salient differences from its American counterpart.

It has become increasingly common for historians—especially in the United States—to say that their field has undergone a ‘transnational turn’ (see for example Bayly et al. 2006; Roberts 2005; Seigel 2005). Scholars are coming to see the concern with individual nation-states that has typically structured historical inquiry as potentially arbitrary and restrictive, and they are seeking other ways to frame their subjects. Epoch-making social, economic, intellectual, and religious developments, after all, have often been notable for the ease with which they cross political borders. A transnational approach privileges such instances of crossing, by foregrounding migrations, diasporas, and movements of ideas among nations and across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Historians who adopt a self-consciously transnational approach are primarily concerned with the study of exchanges—relations of contact in which each party takes something from the other while simultaneously distinguishing itself by marking out its own differences. Analyzing the process by which individuals and groups discover, invent, and define their similarities and differences, in turn becomes the primary subject of scholarly inquiry. This approach has the salutary purpose of revealing the constructedness of national and cultural identities, which emerge not as reified sets of defining characteristics, but as unstable terms subject to ongoing renegotiation, constantly permeated by influences from elsewhere.

Despite Modern Spiritualism’s global reach, and its consequent implication in numerous and complex relations of exchange, scholars have been remarkably slow to consider it as a transnational phenomenon. Historians of the United States, who have produced perhaps the largest, most highly developed body of literature on the subject, tend to present Spiritualism as a distinctively American religious movement. Their efforts to do so have taken an array of forms. To varying degrees, many (Braude 1989; Moore 1977) have emphasised Spiritualism’s connection with the groundswell of interest in radical reform, ranging from women’s rights to abolitionism, that historians in the United States have long considered a defining aspect of “the American 1848.”

2 “The American 1848,” a widely-used term of art among American historians, was coined by Michael Paul Rogin (1983).