BETWEEN BELIEF AND SCIENCE: PARANORMAL INVESTIGATORS AND THE PRODUCTION OF GHOSTLY KNOWLEDGE IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLAND

BY

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DISСЕRTATION

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Abstract

Based on eighteen months of field research in England, this dissertation is an ethnography of knowledge production among contemporary English paranormal investigators. It examines the paradox of paranormal investigators who are critical of (orthodox) scientists and yet remain captivated by science. Paranormal investigators are amateur experts who seek to make sense of ghosts and the paranormal through their collaboration with mediums, deployment of technology, and interpretation of embodied encounters with ghosts. They grapple with their understandings of science, belief, and evidence in their struggles to understand the paranormal and, by doing so, they reveal the boundaries of popular knowledge, scientism, and expertise.

This dissertation begins with an analysis of the constitution of “paranormal investigators.” I demonstrate that investigators and their critics both consider belief antithetical to legitimate knowledge. In this context, producing legitimate knowledge, I argue, is deeply contingent on embracing science. I then examine the type of mastery that investigators imagine necessary to produce legitimate knowledge. I argue that they hope to master a variety of “tools,” including mediums, technology, and embodied experience. Despite this aspiration to mastery, they fail to convert each “tool” into a viable form of evidence. I then consider the ways in which paranormal investigators enact their ideologies of research, investigation, and evidence by examining how they use technology and collaborate with mediums.

The remainder of the dissertation examines the practical logistics and mechanics of paranormal investigating. I show how online networking and popular imaginaries
provide would-be-investigators with the repertoire and imaginative tools needed to craft themselves into investigators.

Ultimately, I conclude that a persistent form of scientism renders investigators’ attempts to make sense of the paranormal futile. By eschewing belief and more humanistic ways of knowing as “unscientific” and, thus, ultimately unsatisfactory, investigators remain unable to account for the ghosts they suspect abound. This reveals that paranormal investigators conform to dominant ideologies of science, truth, and evidence, despite the unorthodox subject matter of their research. It also reveals the pervasiveness of a brand of scientism that denigrates anything non-scientific as invalid and unworthy of consideration.
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INTRODUCTION

Over the past three years, friends and family regularly asked me if I had experienced anything paranormal or if I now believed in ghosts. I was never quite sure how to answer these questions. *Had I experienced anything? Did I believe?* After spending 18 months with paranormal investigators and participating in their research, one might expect the answers to be obvious. They are not. Before beginning this research, I assumed that feeling the presence of a phantom hand or seeing a blurry figure that wasn’t really there would probably indicate the presence of a ghost. My investigator friends, however, showed me that identifying ghosts is much more difficult than that. This very problem of identifying, researching, and knowing ghosts is the focus of this dissertation.

In contemporary England, thousands of people are intimately engaged in projects, research, and recreation designed to bring them into close contact with ghosts. Newspapers suggest that more people believe in ghosts than in God. From paranormal investigating to the proliferation of academic departments of parapsychology to the variety of forms of ghost tourism found in England, ghosts figure largely in English public culture.

Anthropologists of Great Britain have focused on a range of topics including race (Brown 2005), class (Willis 1981); village life (Birch 1959; Frankenberg 1957; Rapport 1993), kinship (Bouquet 1993; Edwards 2000; Firth, Hubert, and Forge 1970; Strathern 1981, 1992), heritage (Macdonald 2002), religion (Hall 2002; Hetherington 2000), magic (Greenwood 2000, 2005, 2010; Luhrmann 1989), science (Franklin 1997, 2007), and medicine (Cornwell 1984; Day 2007). Anthropologists of Britain have not addressed the
proliferation of popular interest in the paranormal. As of 2011, I am not aware of any published work or unpublished theses dealing with the paranormal in England from an anthropological perspective. This dissertation is the first attempt to do so.

When I first became aware of these practices of engaging the paranormal in 2006, I was fascinated by their implications for popular English understandings of the past and the nation. I considered possible approaches to identifying these implications. A demographic approach to the ethnography of ghost hunting would undeniably yield fascinating insights into popular imaginaries of Englishness and the past. Similarly, an analysis of ghost hunting as an attempt to understand invisible worlds, forces, and power structures would offer fascinating insights into the production of conspiracies and other forms of paranoid knowledge. It is also possible to imagine a dissertation that would focus primarily on ghost hunters’ recourse to the visual. While these are fascinating projects, I have chosen to focus on other intriguing elements of paranormal investigation.

This dissertation is an account of paranormal investigators’ struggles to understand the paranormal, how they have constructed the identity of the paranormal researcher, how they have crafted communities and networks of researchers, how they understand science and belief, and how they struggle with questions of evidence. I am fascinated by paranormal investigators’ epistemological struggles and what they reveal about understandings of science, belief, and popular expertise in contemporary England.

Paranormal investigators are certainly not the only people in contemporary England engaged in projects dedicated to producing new knowledge about ghosts. They are only one segment of what I have called the arena of paranormal knowledge producers. Investigators populate this arena along with ghost hunters, parapsychologists,
psychical researchers, and Spiritualists. I have chosen to focus primarily on investigators in my dissertation for a variety of practical and intellectual reasons. Unlike Spiritualists, parapsychologists, or ghost hunters, paranormal investigators are more uncertain and tentative about their endeavors. While the other groups of paranormal researchers more or less know where they stand with respect to approaching and understanding the paranormal, investigators are embroiled in persistent epistemological struggles. They constantly debate how best to pursue knowledge of ghosts and what the limits of this knowledge might be. I found this intellectually fascinating and personally appealing.

People like the paranormal investigators that I have come to know are more likely to attract dismissive eye rolls from many academics than sustained scholarly attention. I think this is a grave oversight on the part of anthropologists and other scholars. Ethnographic inquiry into the production of the epistemologies underpinning ghost hunting offers a chance to glimpse the lived dynamics of what Harry Collins and Robert Evans (2002) have called the “extension of expertise.” Regardless of whether academic scientists and researchers approve, paranormal investigators have become popular authorities on ghosts, life after death, and even science. Their endeavors are regularly the subject of newspaper and magazine articles. They are the protagonists in a variety of popular documentary programs (of varying degrees of realism). In short, their visions of science, belief, and evidence attract vast popular attention.

This dissertation addresses something that has compelled anthropologists throughout much of our disciplinary history: the nature, scope, and constitution of rationality. Bruce Kapferer has noted that “what constitutes reason and rationality is at the root of much anthropological endeavour and the history of debate over theory and
method in the discipline resounds with its irresolution” (2001: 341). Scholars who debated the relationships among magic, science, and religion (Evans-Pritchard 1976; Malinowski 1948, 1965; Tylor 1970[1874]) were fundamentally fascinated by whether the practitioners of the magical arts properly understood the causalities underpinning their magical interventions in the world. Stanley Tambiah observed that these intellectual debates centered, in part, at least, on “the quality of the ‘rationality’ they portrayed” (1990:2). While anthropologists no longer debate the rationality of their informants’ beliefs, in the English public sphere, such debates continue to rage on regarding pervasive belief in the paranormal and supernatural. As I will demonstrate throughout this dissertation, anxiety over the nature of rationality manifests itself publicly as well as privately in the personal struggles of paranormal investigators.

As I struggled to map paranormal investigators’ engagement with ghosts, I realized that three principal, interrelated structures organize its terrain: belief, evidence, and science. These interrelated concepts shape investigators’ queries into the paranormal. That they curtail as well as enable the project of investigating is of chief importance. Belief, evidence, and science are contested and highly noticed constructs for investigators; however, they are sometimes unconsciously part of the disposition and decision-making process of the investigators.

Belief is the most explicitly troubling concept for investigators. Ghosts often are thought to be matters of belief. In fact, as I prepared for my fieldwork, I included “do you believe in ghosts?” as a possible question in my interview guide. My question reveals my own initial sense/bias that ghosts are objects of belief rather than empirical reality. I was
certainly not alone in my unconscious linking of belief and ghosts.\(^1\) This tension between belief and empirical reality, or evidence, is a driving and irresolvable force in the day-to-day uncertainties of investigators. They struggle with the paradox of pursuing encounters with a category of being, ghosts, which most people assume is a matter of belief while all the while seeking objective evidence. Investigators grapple with how to relocate ghosts from the domain of belief to the arena of empirical reality or evidence-based practices. In the process, investigators often demonize belief. Accordingly, investigators as well as a range of their contemporaries such as skeptics and parapsychologists discursively constitute belief as a flaw or weakness. They see believers as accepting and subscribing to ideologies/claims that may or may not be true. They see their own project as distinct from this. They understand themselves as pursuing objective evidence regarding the existence of ghosts.

Paranormal investigators’ relationship with science is no less complicated than their relationship to belief. On the one hand, they embrace science and technology as possible avenues for yielding objective evidence while, on the other hand, they remain deeply ambivalent and suspicious of scientists. Despite what they see as the analytic possibilities of science, they never lose sight of their understanding of science as a “belief system,” not entirely unlike religion. They embrace technology, which they see as the tools of science, while remaining profoundly skeptical of scientists and “science” as an orthodox body of knowledge that they sometimes see as intentionally delegitimizing research into ghosts. The ironies of their partial embrace of science while being scorned

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\(^1\) This sense that ghosts are a matter of belief is widely shared by people throughout the U.S. and England. Consider the number of popular polls that query people’s “belief” in ghosts (e.g. Ipsos Poll 2003; Kahn 2008; Mitchell 2010).
by orthodox scientists abound. Despite their doubts regarding science, they struggle to imagine how they can apply their understanding of science to investigations of ghosts. Their ability to apply scientific methodologies promises to ensure that they cannot be positioned as believers in ghosts (or science or any other “belief system”).

In their quest to rehabilitate science into a usable, instrumental component in their investigations, they reveal a perhaps unsurprising doxic facet of contemporary English life: that science is the idealized means of understanding and engaging the world. In their attempts to formulate an effective mode of paranormal investigating, they relocate science from the domain of doxa to the “universe of discourse” (Bourdieu 1977: 168). I am fascinated by the dynamics of this discursive move and its consequences in the ideological and practical struggles of investigators. Far from freeing them from any ideological constraints, investigators struggle to position science in their epistemology and it continuously emerges as the most significant arbitrator of evidence, despite their explicit desire to reduce it to but one tool in their “investigator’s toolbox.”

As they navigate between the poles of science and belief, investigators repeatedly ask themselves what counts as evidence. They engage in emotionally fraught ongoing debates, contestations over the very nature of evidence. They ask: can their embodied encounters with what may be ghosts count as evidence? What types of technologically mediated observations count as evidence? Self-doubt and uncertainty mark their endeavors to answer these questions. Caught between their fear of belief, their cautious passion for science, and the troublingly embodied encounters that often come to be presented as evidence, investigators find themselves unsure of how to proceed.
Since the Victorian era, there has been recurrent popular interest in how to produce objective knowledge of ghosts, spirits, and the paranormal. At various historical moments, different means of learning about ghosts acquired varying levels of popularity. Victorian era Spiritualism attracted mass attention because of its claims to offer objective evidence of the survival of the spirit after death through demonstrations of mediumship. In the late 19th century, gentleman scholars banded together to query the performances of the mediums of Spiritualism trying to deduce the reality of ghostly phenomena present. During the early part of the 20th century, parapsychology rose to prominence as a means of scientifically examining paranormal phenomena. While there are certainly parallels between the current moment of popular interest and earlier modes of engagement with questions of ghosts, it would be a mistake to assume a continuous or evolutionary line of unrelenting, unchanging English fascination with ghosts. The current moment differs from earlier moments in its explosion of popular expertise. In the past, the domain of expert was limited to mediums, gentleman scholars, or professional scientists. Now, anyone can aspire to be an expert on the paranormal. This begs the question: what has enabled the explosion of popular interest and expertise in the paranormal?

Investigators’ ideological engagement with belief, science, and evidence rests on several “conditions of possibility” (Foucault 1970). Their ability to articulate a collective identity and formulate social collectivities is instrumental in their emergence as popular experts. While there is nothing new about ghosts, the rise of the paranormal investigator was precipitated by widespread and accessible Internet access, new forms of social

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2 Historians Alex Owen (1989, 2004), Jenny Hazlegrove (2000) and Owen Davies (2007) have demonstrated that practices such as Spiritualism or belief in ghosts are historically situated and constituted practices.
networking, and recursivity. These contemporary technologies engendered the rise of new forms of expertise.

**Organizational Overview**

This dissertation is organized into three sections. In Part One, I introduce readers to this project. In Chapter One, I contextualize this project in the anthropology of science and the otherworldly. In Chapter Two, I explain how I approached the research and navigated overlapping, conflicting worlds as a researcher. In Chapter Three, I situate paranormal investigators in the broader arena of paranormal knowledge producers. I show the overlap as well as the divisions in communities of people committed to learning about the paranormal or otherwordly.

In Part Two (“The Paradoxes of Belief and Wanting to Believe”), I consider the metadiscursive considerations of paranormal investigating as well as how they translate into actual investigative protocols. Part Two examines the possibilities and constraints investigators face as they attempt to learn about the paranormal. I begin in Chapter Four by considering how investigators, parapsychologists, and skeptics respectively articulate an understanding of belief. This chapter demonstrates that there is a collective reluctance to being positioned as a believer. Chapter Five explores the principal paradox for investigators: how to translate their embodied encounters with the paranormal into what they recognize as evidence. I explore investigators’ conceptualization of evidence and explores the ways in which “science” constrains their evidentiary possibilities. Then, in Chapter Six I examine how investigators engage mediums. While investigators value the contributions of mediums *in theory*, they often dismiss and criticize mediums’
enactments of mediumship. I argue that investigators’ understandings of science and rationality negate the possibility of their genuine engagement with mediums. Finally, in Chapter Seven I examine the extent to which this metadiscourse of investigating translates into technologically mediated practices. This chapter argues that investigators conceive of themselves as expert investigators, capable of mastering a variety of ways of knowing, but their understanding of “science” constrains their potential to investigate and, ultimately, to know.

In Part Three (“Building Community, Identity, and Expertise”), I consider how investigators produce, police, and shape their community. Emerging amateur experts must craft their community and determine their collective identity. Chapter Eight examines the role of popular entertainment, particularly the television program *Most Haunted*, in enabling the emergence of “paranormal investigator” as a popular form of expertise. I argue that consuming this television program and then imagining futures, first, through the lens of fandom and then later antifandom enables the recursivity necessary for would-be investigators to fashion themselves as authorities. Chapter Nine further explores the processes through which investigators emerge as a significant presence in England. It explores the role of online networking in the lives of paranormal investigators. I argue that online networking acted as the historical condition of possibility necessary for the social organization as well as repertoires of knowledge and technological expertise of investigators.

In Chapter Ten, I examine the frailty of investigators’ expertise and authority. I argue that their regular recourses to humor demonstrate a deep and persistent fear that other people are dismissing their endeavors as trivial, illogical, or even pathological.
Humor, for them, is an attempt to resist such classifications. Then, finally in Chapter Eleven, I shift my focus away from investigators to more explicitly touristic forms of engagement: commercial ghost hunts and ghost walks. Examining the discourses and enactments of belief found in these forms of travel demonstrates the plurality of ways of believing and their diverging social consequences.

Ultimately, this dissertation maps the struggles, frustrations, and possibilities of paranormal investigating. It shows that, while science has been popularly embraced as a nearly unlimited means of knowing, popular ideologies of science can curtail the imaginative possibilities of many. In this way, I work toward revealing some of the less understood mechanisms of science’s popular power and influence.
PART ONE

THE PUZZLE AND ITS ARENAS
CHAPTER ONE
ANTHROPOLOGY OF SCIENCE, ANTHROPOLOGY OF OTHERWORLDS, AND
PARANORMAL INVESTIGATORS IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLAND

The practices of English paranormal investigators entail recourses to science and belief. To put this in broader perspective it is crucial to relate the phenomenon to the study of science and the study of belief in otherworlds, especially those anthropological approaches that most relate to them or precede them. In this chapter, I situate my project in the anthropology of science. I then turn to that anthropology of otherworlds.\(^1\)

**The Anthropology of Science**

Since the 1980s, the anthropology of science has become an important and central arena for anthropological inquiry and exploring what this project adds to it, draws from it, and contributes to it is important. The anthropology of science has tended to take laboratories and sites of science-making as the focus for its ethnography. It has focused on the production of scientific facts, the construction of scientists, and how science

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\(^1\) My use of the term Otherworlds is inspired by Susan Greenwood’s (2000) study of English magic; however, I use the term more broadly than she does. Greenwood wrote that the otherworld, for magicians at least, “is another dimension of this world, and otherworldly realms are associated with spirit beings” (2000: 27). She also maintained that the otherworldly is separate, distinct from the ordinary in everyday life and she emphasizes the need for an experimental approach. While this is perhaps true of the English magicians she studies, I want to eschew that differentiation and methodological stance while adopting her emphasis on taking seriously and completely other terrains and realms occupied by spirits, ghosts, and beings. Another advantage to the rubric of “otherworlds” is that it does not foreground the religious. While some of the engagements with otherworlds that I consider here – for instance, New Age practices – veer toward the religious, none of the movements I discuss is easily or straightforwardly classed as religious. This is useful in considering paranormal investigating, an avowedly nonreligious practice.
inflects and is inflected by broader sociopolitical conditions. Seldom have anthropologists of science considered that science’s unparalleled revelatory and predictive capacities do little to prevent people from doubting it or imbuing it with hope that far exceeds its current possibilities. This project on paranormal investigators forces me to take a different approach. Anthropologists have focused on deconstructing myths of science’s impartiality, its non-cultural nature, and its claims to objective interpretations of nature. In short, they have attempted to mitigate the unbridled hegemonic power that some scientists aspire to and some people ascribe to science. This focus, while productive and enormously illuminating, has kept anthropologists and science and technology studies (STS) scholars from closely examining popular resistance to and appropriation of science’s explanatory power, something crucial if we are going to understand the phenomenon of paranormal investigating and the production of ghostly knowledge in England. Indeed, science’s hegemonic place in North Atlantic life has prevented anthropologists from asking a fundamental question about science, one crucial here but also, I will argue, important more generally: Why do people accept, and ascribe certain qualities to, science?

I accept and value that anthropological studies of science have focused on demonstrating and revealing that science is cultural. Much of this work is valuable in multiple ways. For example, in 1995, Emily Martin wrote that an anthropology of science required “interpreting [science] as meaningful social action” (1995: 25). And in 1988 Sharon Traweek showed the cultural composition of science’s “cultures of no culture” (Traweek 1988: 162).
Indeed, Sharon Traweek’s (1988) study of the cultural worlds of high-energy particle physicists in the U.S. and Japan demonstrated the deeply cultural worlds of science. She argued that the community of physicists was an example of “an extreme culture of objectivity” (1988: 162). However, she unraveled these perceptions of non-culture by showing that their deep understandings of time, space, and matter, to say nothing of professional trajectories and notions of success and meritocracy, take diverging forms in the U.S. and Japan, revealing the culturally- and historically- rooted nature of scientific knowledge production. She also revealed the potential for ethnography to show the mechanisms of life-making, metaphor construction, and socially-inscribed action – all traditional arenas of anthropological inquiries into distinct societies-- present in contemporary, elite science. This is good because it poignantly demonstrates the culture of science but less good in that it does not examine how the work of physicists becomes publicly valued.

I also note and value the research focus on the production of facts and the cultures of science. Many scholars draw on Bruno Latour’s early work demonstrating the analytic value of following science-in-the-making, and I agree that this approach can reveal the internal processes and struggles of laboratories. Many anthropological, feminist, and critical studies have similarly sought to reveal that the objectivity that is popularly ascribed to science is never as absolute and totalizing as its proponents would maintain. Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway, for example, both offered diverging but compelling interpretations of the construction and actuality of scientific objectivity.

The argument between them is revealing in terms of their project (and beyond what may be typically spotted in the scholarly literature). Harding (1986, 1991) argued
for “strong objectivity.” Drawing on feminist standpoint theory, she noted that knowledge produced from the vantage point of groups often excluded from the heart of knowledge production, such as women, has the potential to strengthen science’s understandings of reality. She noted that including such vantage points “makes strange what had appeared familiar, which is the beginning of any scientific inquiry” (1991: 150). Donna Haraway counters with a different emphasis. Addressing the problem of objectivity she explored, “how to have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own 'semiotic technologies' for making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world” (1991:184). Turning to notions of vision, Haraway called for an understanding of vision and knowledge as always situated and always partial. Both Harding and Haraway come across as obsessed, perhaps ironically, with manifestations of objectivity, a focus, I argue, that keeps the spotlight from being on how science functions outside traditional scientific domains and how notions of scientific objectivity are popularly deployed.

Indeed, in general, anthropologists of science have tended to focus their analyses on orthodox, elite terrains on North Atlantic science. This focus is motivated in part by a desire to challenge the taken-for-grantedness of science and destabilize the once popular myth that science is a non-cultural, entirely objective form of knowing. I suspect that Michael Fischer is correct in arguing that for anthropologists since the 1980s “science studies took on the role that critical theory, feminism, media studies, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies had performed for an earlier generation of anthropologists” (2009: 81). Fischer means that studies and critiques of science have provided anthropologists in
recent decades with a means of offering critical insights into structures of power, and my own exploration of the subjects of inquiry in a range of influential anthropological examinations of science seems to support his claim. Noteworthy are studies of cloning (Franklin 2007), assisted reproduction (Franklin and Ragone 1997; Inhorn 2003), PCR (Rabinow 1997), immunology (Martin 1994), high-energy physics (Traweek 1988), and nuclear science (Gusterson 1998).

I, therefore, here adopt an observation made in 1982 by Steven Shapin with respect to the history of science, namely that “professionalization radically changed the ways in which concerns within the scientific community related to the concerns of wider society” (1982: 175). It, he argued, portended the death of the social history of science, at least for historians of science concentrating on the era of professionalization. Of course he does not address its implications for anthropological studies of science, but I believe that a similar case could be made. Anthropologists of science focusing on modern science in the North Atlantic world have engaged science’s publics and subjects only when they are mostly explicitly implicated in science’s unfolding knowledge (e.g. as subjects of eugenics movements or as reproducing women).

*Science beyond the Laboratory*

This warrants further exploration here. While laboratory studies inaugurated the anthropology of science in the 1980s, most contemporary ethnographies of science are indeed deeply concerned with science’s interactions with publics. It is just that the publics in question are those that most readily form the subjects of scientific knowledge and innovation.
I draw here on Emily Martin’s notion of the citadel. In her 1998 examination of what anthropology could offer science studies, Martin introduced her three images of citadels, rhizomes, and string theory to explore the ways that science shapes and is shaped by broader social settings. She likens the natural sciences to citadels in the sense that they have “left most of us thinking they are set apart from the rest of history and society” (1998: 26). Citing Sharon Traweek’s (1998) examination of physicists, Martin wrote that such work “opens up” the possibility of examining popular fears and imaginings of scientific works such as the supercollider or physics more broadly. Ultimately, she notes that “the walls of the citadel are porous and leaky. Action and inaction go in both directions” (1998: 30).

Many scholars have likewise focused on questions of flow in and out of science, and this approach is a step in the right direction although it still does not go as far as my project will require of science studies. A noteworthy example of studies of the flow in and out science is Karen-Sue Taussig, Deborah Heath, and Rayna Rapp’s 2003 examination of “flexible eugenics,” by which they mean the flow of ideas, discourses, and modes of citizenship between Little People (the Little People Association) and genetic scientists. Here, the impact of scientific theorizing on non-scientists is clear. Similarly, in her book on Chernobyl (2002), Adriana Petryna examined the health consequences of the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl focusing on the ways in which (technological) disasters shape notions of citizenship, health, and the state. That health is a focal point in many of these anthropological studies that focus on science and its publics is not surprising. It is a clear instance of one kind of regular flow between “science” and its publics.
I also want to acknowledge work in the anthropology of science that focuses on the ways in which scientific knowledge shapes, and is shaped by, currents in popular culture. Emily Martin’s 1994 study of immunology in the U.S. is one example. Her work is important because it explicitly challenges the common assumption that science exists solely in the realm of the laboratory and that only scientists define the use/deployment of scientific ideas and terms. This comes closer to addressing the case of paranormal investigators in contemporary England. In this study of immunology in American culture, Martin clearly works to “avoid the idealized picture of science, which its practitioners would like to believe, that knowledge is produced inside and flows out” (1994: 7). She finds that metaphors of flexibility inflect popular ideas as well as scientific approaches to immunology. In essence, she shows that the worlds of science and the popular domain are permeable realms and I think that this dissertation adds to that insight. Similarly, Rayna Rapp’s (2000) analysis of amniocentesis focuses on the “translation” of scientific information to lay publics. An interesting feature of both Emily Martin’s and Rayna Rapp’s work is its shared focus on issues of human health, a domain of scientific knowledge that necessarily intersects with nonscientific or lay communities. Such scholarship demonstrates the affective and powerful role science plays in people’s life courses and decision-making. I note, however, that it does not extend beyond the realm of health and health delivery systems, at least not in its case studies and my research here does not focus on matters of health or health promotion.

Largely absent as well in the anthropology of science is sustained work on the influence and prevalence of religion and belief in the practice of science and public engagement with it. John Evans and Michael Evans wrote in 2008 that while STS
scholarship has provided more nuanced understandings of science, it “usually does not engage questions of religion” (2008: 90), and I concur. There have, of course, been anthropological studies that focus on both science and religion. Revealingly, however, they tend to focus on biomedical issues and processes. For example, Marcia Inhorn (2003) and Susan Kahn (2000) have both studied the ways in which religious ideologies shape local consumption and practice of new biomedical and reproductive technologies and they demonstrate the continued power of religion in consuming and receiving healthcare. Instances of seemingly unbridled biomedical possibilities being impeded by existing religious structures or practices have formed the focus of such work. In Inhorn’s case it is a question of Islam in Egypt and, in Kahn’s case, of Judaism in Israel. The biomedical focus may not be accidental since anthropologists have conceived of such sites as spaces for ideological conflict and emerging ideologies.

Important to my work – and something I note as a troubling omission – is the otherwise relative non-engagement of anthropologists with questions of science as a religion. I note that Sharon Traweek tantalizingly wrote in 1988 that “traditionally, the mysteries of the universe have been the provinces of theologians and priests” (1988:2). “Physicists,” she added, “of course do not see themselves as writing the cosmology of some secular religion… But they do see their profession as the revelation and custody of fundamental truth, and to a surprising degree Western culture confirms them in this privileged role” (1988: 2). Traweek does not return to this theme, but her words offer a glimpse of how fertile an arena anthropology of science could be when it actively engages questions of blurred boundaries and ever changing belief. Indeed, physics seems an ideal place to examine the fluidity of issues of belief, science, knowledge, cosmology,
and religion, considering its search for origins of matter and its famous invocation of the “god particle.” Popular physics is even riper for such study, considering the impact of popular physics texts such *A Brief History of Time* (1988), complete with Hawking’s famous invocation of the “mind of god.”

Ronald Numbers (1985) warned historians of science against assuming conflicting or warlike relations between science and religion, pointing to a number of instances in U.S. history in which religious and scientific collaborations were possible and fruitful.² Similarly, John Evans and Michael Evans (2008) remind us that the “epistemological conflict assumption has limited our understanding of the relationship between religion and science” (2008: 100). They warn scholars against facile assumptions that truth resides at the core of ensuing conflicts over the domains of science and religion, a point worth stressing here. Commenting on the history of anthropological inquiry into multiple modes of rationality and different styles of codification, Michael Fischer seems to agree. In 1991, he wrote that anthropologists studying magic, science, and religion or, conversely, ethnoscience, arenas that have typically fostered considerations of religion and science as competing or alternative modes of understanding, must “move on” (1991: 531).

I do so, I hope, in this dissertation. I draw on the porous nature of the citadel but focus exclusively on the unfolding of events, lives, and intellectual struggles in the popular sphere, and not on the flow in and out of the citadel’s walls. In 1991, Michael Fischer expanded on his earlier work on anthropology as cultural critique. He argued that

² Looking beyond relatively recent or modern history, the possibility of ignoring the complex fruitful and sometimes frustrating relations between modes of science and religion becomes even more problematic.
anthropological examinations of science, media, and the management and reconstitution of polities and civil society following trauma constitute chief arenas for anthropological critique, and I seek to follow his example. I particularly value his point that “the role for anthropology could be to deconstruct these discourses precisely by drawing attention to their presumptions, their particularistic groundings, or the social context from which they are staged” (1991: 529). He proposed that scholars should direct their attention to the non-unitary nature of science and the social/political arenas in which science informs society and by which science is informed, and this emphasis on the non-unitary nature of science is especially useful here in thinking about paranormal investigators and their pursuit of knowledge in England. Scholars have productively pursued such arenas of inquiry, especially with a focus on health (Biehl 2005; Heath, Rapp, and Taussig 2004; Petryna 2002; Rapp 2000), but not all that much beyond it.

Problematic in Fischer’s argument, however, and in subsequent scholarly work is the underlying assumption that challenges to science’s previously unchallenged authority would come exclusively from scholars. His assumption – an assumption that informs much anthropology of science – is that science is universally revered. I find this claim too unexamined.

I also see anthropologists engaging a set of science’s publics, but largely limiting themselves to those directly implicated by scientific works and biomedical interventions, with the important exception of scholars such as Debbora Battaglia (2005, 2007), Gary Downey (1986), and David Hess (1991, 1993, 1996). Overall, I find anthropologists of science just too infrequently considering popular enactments and discourses of science
that do not intersect with the practices, regimes, or influences of biomedical or scientific researchers.

*Popular Science and Popularization*

Historians of science, in recent years, have developed a different approach, one I find more productive in my analysis here. Like anthropologists, historians of science have developed an interest in the relationship between scientific knowledge and practice and the broader public. Unlike anthropologists, however, they have developed an interest in publics that consume and contest scientific knowledge. This has typically fallen under the rubric of studies of “popular science” or “popularization.” Roger Cooter and Steven Pumfrey argued in 1994 that separating studies of the popularization of science from histories of science itself presented an artificial division between the production and consumption of scientific knowledge, a point further exemplified in this dissertation.

Ralph O’Connor’s 2009 essay is instructive. He likened the process of diversifying and democratizing the field of history of science to other historical fields, namely political history. He argued that, in the 1980s, long held assumptions were that the only real, or important, political history occurred at the elite level. As he put it, historians assumed that “what went on in the pub was always secondary to what went on in the Houses of Parliament” (2009: 344). He argued that the case for historians of science was different, and I suspect that his point applies to scholars of science, more generally. “The elitism implicit within the category ‘science,’” he wrote, “is too deeply rooted in our culture to be easily shrugged off” (2009: 344). While he maintained that
scholars must attend to popular enactments and popularizations of science, he worried that including them under the rubric of “history of science” would confuse others.

Such studies have been sparked, in part, by the increased frequency of attempts in the U.K. to popularize science, a phenomenon of immediate relevance to the topic of this dissertation. Since 1985 English scientists have been encouraged to “educate” the public about science. In her 2003 study of demarcation in popular physics books, Felicity Mellor argues that an important component of popularization is the act of demarcating science from “non-science.” The “non-science” in question in these demarcating texts is often exemplified by science fiction and the paranormal, and these texts associate some components of these realms with the murkier, irrational realms of magical thinking and religiosity. In 2003 Mellor wrote that “the boundary around religion is expanded to include all that is deemed irrational. Ufology, magic, mysticism, astrology, established religion- all are as one to these authors, all clumped together opposed to the ways of science” (Mellor 2003: 157). Even if scientists view such efforts to popularize science as acts of democratization, Mellor reminds us that such maneuvers end up “reinforcing the epistemic authority” (2003: 531) of scientists.

Equally useful is Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent’s argument that in contemporary North Atlantic society we are moving from a deficit model to a participatory model of knowledge and that this has vast implications for how we approach science and knowledge. In 2009 she urged historians of science to look beyond the construction of scientific knowledge. She wrote:

We know a lot about the social construction of knowledge; but what do we know about the construction of society through the hegemonic status of scientific
knowledge? In order to characterize the “regimes” of knowledge production in the past, we have to focus on the process of the mutual construction of legitimate science and “popular knowledge.” We still need more local studies attentive to the variety of cultures of science—from the most academic to the least orthodox—in any period of time. How did they interact? Did they learn from each other, ignore each other, or criticize each other? (Bensaude-Vincent 2009: 367).

These questions are as relevant for anthropologists as they are for historians. I think that by looking further away from the core of science, and from the obvious spaces where scientific authority intersects with publics, anthropologists can begin to gather a more textured sense of the lived complexities of a world in which science remains the dominant, and yet not uncontested, form of knowledge. To return to Emily Martin’s image of the citadel, it may be time for anthropologists to consider enactments, performances, and discourses of science that do not directly intersect with actual scientific authority. As this dissertation will show, the ideology of science both constrains and enables the prospects of paranormal investigators. While my study of English paranormal investigating reveals little of the inner workings of science and little of how elites manage scientific information, it does reveal the processes by which investigators evaluate and classify events, claims, and experiences as plausible or believable; it shows, in short, how they make sense of the everyday and otherworldly under the specter of science.

_Pseudoscience and the Boundaries of Orthodox Science_
I must, of course, address the question of pseudoscience and the boundaries of orthodox science. Historically, significant scholarship in the philosophy and sociology of science has focused on demarcating the boundaries of science from non-science. Scholars have argued for reason and observation (Comte [1853] 1975), falsifiability (Popper 1963), or institutional certification (Merton 1973) as means of distinguishing science from non-science. More recently, scholars have examined popular renderings of such demarcations (Gieryn 1999; Mellor 2003).

A variety of scientists, social scientists, and popular writers contribute to this burgeoning literature concerned with demarcating the boundaries of science and non-science (Feder 1999; Gardner 1952; Shermer 2001). Many accounts offer schemata to help readers distinguish between science and non-science. For example, Michael Shermer provides readers with a “boundary detection kit” that helps them distinguish among “normal science,” “borderlands science,” and “nonscience” (2001:22). During this time of rapidly proliferating forms of unorthodox science, especially in the public sphere, it is understandable that formally trained scientists would want to distinguish between science and nonscience, particularly in the face of climate change denial and other immediately pressing issues. Indeed, Bruno Latour (2004), who has offered decisive analyses of the constructed nature and inherent uncertainty of much of scientific practice, has come to worry about the political implications of this analytic approach in the face of climate change and other public scientific controversies. Yet while I understand such analytical and political concerns, I adopt a different approach throughout this dissertation.

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3 Of course, some have questioned the legitimacy of such endeavors. For example, Laudan reduced such questions to a “pseudo-problem” (1983: 29).
Thomas Kuhn’s (1962) insights into the paradigmatic nature of scientific revolutions have led many sociologists and philosophers before me to use social frames of analysis to address the differences between science and pseudoscience or orthodox and deviant sciences. Such an emphasis allows scholars to examine the cultural politics and consequences of scientists’ own demarcations. Already in 1979, R.G.A. Dolby, reflecting on the benefits of the term “deviant science” rather than “pseudoscience,” argued that such an approach allowed scholars to explore the cultural terrain of debates. Usefully, he wrote that “deviant science is that which is rejected by the orthodox scientific experts, and which they may label ‘pseudo-science’; however, it has its own body of supporters, who claim it to be a science” (1979: 11). Dolby’s distinction does important work in differentiating the projects of the scientists, who can and should engage in their project of defining science, and social scientists who should explore their demarcations, a productive distinction in considering paranormal investigators in contemporary England.

The perils of social scientists and humanities scholars trying too hard to demarcate the boundaries between science and pseudo-science themselves are clear in historical scholarship on past modes of science such as astrology. Indeed, in 2006 Daryn Lehoux argued against making facile assumptions about the boundaries between science and pseudo-science since they are constantly shifting historically and culturally. Writing about histories of astrology, he noted that “defenders of astrology often wielded formidable arguments that need to be taken very seriously on their own terms if we are to fully understand the roles of astrology in the worlds in which it operates” (Lehoux 2006:119).
Like sociologists and historians such as Dobly (1979) and Lehoux (2006) my interest in the construction of paranormal knowledge is cultural rather than scientific. As Clifford Geertz argued in 1977 “anthropology is an “interpretive [science] in search of meaning” (1977: 5). Accordingly, my principal concern in this work is how paranormal investigators understand and pursue their research. Throughout this dissertation and research, I avoid explicitly discussing the legitimacy of researchers’ claims or assertions. I leave such work to interested scientists. In approaching the popular understandings of science and research among investigators, I am principally concerned with how they themselves make sense or do not make sense of their research endeavors.

Suspicion toward Science

The above depictions of science paint a totalizing picture. In many of these depictions, it is hard to believe that there are people who question and doubt science. But, of course, there are many parties in the North Atlantic world and beyond it that remain suspicious of the claims of science. Some scholars (e.g. Franklin 1994) have referred to such stances as skepticism. I prefer the language of doubt and suspicion for several reasons. Most importantly, to term such engagement skepticism risks confusing them with popular modes of skepticism (which are actually highly pro-science), philosophical skepticism, and skepticism as a component of the scientific method.

Often, when anthropologists have diverted their attention to groups or individuals adopting a skeptical stance toward science, they have focused on instances of controversy. Anthropological accounts of the intelligent design/creationism debates and nuclear power debates in the U.S. are two such examples. In 1986 Downey explored
public perceptions of scientists and engineers in the U.S. with respect to nuclear power. Showing how public support or outrage shaped the possibilities of science, he argued that “ideologies made nuclear powerful meaningful” (1986: 408). Likewise in 1994 Christopher Tourney explored the ideologies and practices of contemporary American creationists, arguing that their commitment to creationism demonstrated a frustration with American modernity and, paradoxically, a commitment to a particular vision of science. Eugenie Scott, in a more thoroughly concerned fashion, noted in 1997 the plurality of religious ideologies that underpin Creationism and Intelligent Design and explores how the movement makes political inroads.

In addition to explicitly controversial subjects such as creationism, intelligent design, and nuclear power, birthing practices have generated sustained popular critique and doubt in the North Atlantic world. Such critiques call into question the legitimacy of attempts to increase the medicalization of birth through the increased use of Caesarean sections, biotechnology, and silencing techniques such as Lamaze. Interestingly, anthropological analyses of homebirth movements and popular feminist critiques of medicalized birth are often relatively sympathetic to these critiques. For example, Brigitte Jordan developed the notion of authoritative knowledge with respect to regimes of medicalized birth, and others have deployed it to examine the processes of normalization and authorization of medicalization in pregnancy and birth (Browner and Press 1997; Georges 1997). Jordan concluded that “authoritative knowledge is persuasive because it seems natural, reasonable, and consensually constructed” (Jordan 1997: 57). In studies of instances of contestation of authoritative knowledge of birth, Jordan and others reveal the potential to resist biomedical orthodoxy. I find it interesting that she and other
feminist medical anthropologists couch such instances of doubt toward science as modes of active resistance.

Scott (1997) and Tourney (1994) do not seem to allow for the actions of proponents of creationism/intelligent design to be considered acts of resistance against received scientific orthodoxy. I suspect that this is, in part, because they concentrated on these phenomena as troubling social developments. However, Jordan and other feminist anthropologists have focused their attention on groups who are directly and explicitly implicated by unfolding biotechnical regimes of knowing. For them, resistance is concrete and in reaction to immediately troubling exertions of power. As the intellectual project of paranormal investigators demonstrates, science’s authoritative position can be called into question by those not directly implicated. Indeed, it can act as a prohibiting and enabling factor in realms far removed from what scientists may consider their domain.

The case of the science wars is informative. During the so-called science wars of the 1990s, conservative intellectuals and pundits in Britain and the U.S. reacted with great concern and outrage to both scholarly deconstructions of science’s claims to total impartiality and absolute objectivity and popular challenges to science and attempts to broaden its reach. Sarah Franklin noted that critical scholarship called into question science as “long enshrined” and “as a kind of apex of rational knowledge production, so powerful as to remain largely immune to the vicissitudes of social change” (1996: 142). She concluded that “science is now up for deconstruction just like all the rest of the Western canonical fare” (1996: 142) and that some scientists and public figures were outraged at the idea, thus engendering the ensuing “science wars.” Conservatives linked
the emerging field of science studies to a range of popular movements that call into
together a host of dangerous threats: scientific creationism, New Age alternatives and cults,
astrology, UFO-ism, the radical science movement, postmodernism, and critical science
studies, alongside the ready-made historical specters of Aryan-Nazi science and the
Soviet error of Lysenkoism” (Ross 1996: 7).

This linking of anthropological, feminist, and critical studies of science and
popular modes of thought may seem markedly sensationalistic. Indeed, I suspect that
Ross and other scholars took such linkages as problematic and possibly insulting.
Certainly, Latour, writing in 2004, worried about the public consequences of scholarly
critiques and deconstructions of science. Citing instances in which U.S. politicians failed
to treat scientific facts as authoritative and self-evidently true, Latour worried that the
brand of STS scholarship that he had generated may have enabled such popular
articulations.

Perhaps anxiety at being likened to the scientific fringes as well as the persistent
identity crisis over our discipline’s claim to scientific authority has diverted
anthropologists of science away from the fertile arenas of critique, hope, and doubt found
in these popular “anti” or “pseudo” scientific movements. In the time that has passed
since the conservative outrage over critical studies of science inside and outside the
academy, critical scholarship of science and critical popular movements both continue to
flourish. Interestingly, the nearly fifteen years that have passed since the Science Wars
have seen comparatively little scholarship focusing on such popular enactments and
engagements. This, I think, is a lost opportunity.
Anthropologists have failed to ask what I think is a central question: Why do most people subscribe to scientific ideology? More pressingly, why doesn’t everyone? The failure to ask this question reveals a deep-seated assumption that I fear still haunts anthropology, namely, that people subscribe to science “because it works.” Even when exploring instances where scientific knowledge or expertise intersects with public life, anthropologists of science have not interrogated its popular authority or contestations. My goal in this dissertation is to do just that.

**Anthropology of Otherworlds**

There is a second large body of work which this dissertation engaged. I call it the anthropology of Otherworlds. Throughout the history of anthropology, anthropologists have chronicled a variety of practices in which people enter into serious, sustained contact with spirits, beings, or guides understood to occupy Otherworlds. Such studies appear in the anthropology of religion, divination, traditional magic, and spirit possession. More recently, anthropologists have begun to explore the emerging practice of the New Age movement as well as emergent forms of magic in the U.S. and Western Europe. Such studies have typically focused on questions of personhood, rationality, subjectivity, and self. Many such studies have excluded examinations of science and technology from their engagements with these forms of spiritual practice, enacting what, in the history of science, Ronald Numbers (1985) has critiqued as a false, misleading dichotomy between the practices of religion and science.
I will first address studies of spirit possession and what they contribute to this project on English paranormal investigators. Studies of spirit possession constitute an important and prolific arena in which anthropologists consider humans’ embodied interactions with disincarnate spirits. In 1994 Janice Boddy generalized possession to mean “the hold exerted over a human being by external forces or entities more powerful than she” (1994: 407). Paranormal investigators’ embodied encounters with ghosts and English mediums’ understandings of their practice do not fit this description all that well. However, the seriousness with which scholars of possession consider questions of resistance, embodied knowledge, and the ambiguity of religion as a social category makes it useful for me to consider what some of this scholarly work on spirit possession explores and debates.

Historically, some scholars have emphasized the psychological or medical role of possession. In his 1987 review of possession studies, Thomas Csordas wrote that there is a marked tendency toward conceptualizing possession as a psychological or group therapy practice, even when participants articulate the possession in very different terms and frameworks. For example, Ward argued that possession constituted a ritually induced and mediated form of indigenous therapy. For her, possession results from “individuals’ stress” (Ward 1980: 158). Anthropologists have, in recent years, argued against such models, however, and their reasoning makes increasing sense. I find Michael Lambek’s 1989 argument compelling when he wrote that such psychologizing tendencies diminish anthropologists’ capacity to explore possession as a cultural text and discourse. As I think
about paranormal investigators in England today, it is clear to me that one approach would psychologize them whereas Lambek’s would not.

Similarly, there has been a tendency among psychologists and sociologists to ascribe psychological (or, in some cases, psychologically pathological) roles to possession, trance, abduction, and other anomalous phenomena. The controversy and critique surrounding John Mack’s (1975, 1976) psychological research into abduction narratives demonstrates this reluctance to take unusual phenomena seriously (and in terms and frameworks of those experiencing them). I will return to this theme of psychological or medical reductionism toward the end of this discussion.

While anthropologists have moved past psychologically reductionist models of possession, they continue to debate how best to position and understand possession. The relationship between possession and religion emerged as a central debate. Despite Edward Tylor’s famous 1871 definition of religion as belief in supernatural beings or spirits, anthropologists have demonstrated that not all forms of possession and engagement with spirits constitute a form of religious activity. In 1978 Vincent Crapanzano urged anthropologists to take spirits in the terms of those possessed, allowing for possession to be religious or not religious depending on the context. This approach, too, does not seek to psychologize or pathologize those who engage with spirit worlds, and comes close to the approach I take in this dissertation.

Also useful is the stress placed by numerous scholars on divorcing practices and experiences of possession from understandings of religion. For some, avoiding the category of religion constitutes an attempt to consider possession in a culture’s own terms rather than superimposing “Western” categories onto it. Eschewing a religious focus,
Vivian Garrison and Vincent Crapanzano asked, "why limit it to a form of religious behavior? What indeed is the virtue of placing it in a Western category at all? What is important is to understand its multiple significance within the particular contexts in which it occurs" (1978:424). Crapanzano then argued that religious frameworks limited anthropologists’ capacity to explore possession, and advocated a culturally contingent approach in which anthropologists considered possession as "an idiom for articulating a certain range of experience" (1977:10). That acts of engagement with spirits need not being tied to religion is of chief importance in considering English paranormal investigators and mediums, who often adamantly eschew such labels.

I note as well that anthropologists exploring spirit possession have often grappled with possession’s relationship to knowledge of the past and enactments of history. Ultimately, anthropologists have most heavily emphasized imaginings of the past as the arena of possession implicated in practices of knowledge production. The spirits who possess humans are often the manifestations of ancestors, dead loved ones, or historically significant figures. As Jeanette Mageo noted in 1996 “the characters that emerge in possession often embody era-specific voices” (1996: 76). She noted that possession could be understood as a form of historical discourse. Indeed, she argued that possession acts as a form of moral history-making in Samoa where the possessed encounter lessons from the past that enable them to grapple with problems in their lives.

Mageo is not alone in exploring ties to the past. In 2001, Karen McCarthy Brown also emphasized the roles of spirits as actors teaching historically grounded moral lessons. And Lambek, in 1998, demonstrated that spirit possession in Madagascar produced a form of historical consciousness at odds at “Western” conceptions of history.
“Historical consciousness,” he wrote, “is not reducible to a single attitude, but arises through the interplay of multiple voices. It is neither single nor static, but open” (1998: 109). I note that he contrasted this with a sense of history found in “West,” writing that “unlike the dominant mode in the West, where history recedes and the historian goes back, the Sakalava past is carried forward” (1998: 121).

I am largely interested in these scholarly efforts because they come close to addressing an aspect of my research, but stop short. This emphasis on understanding and engaging the past through possession is productive yet, for paranormal investigators, mediumship’s role in understanding the past is secondary to its role in demonstrating the reality of existence of spirits and ghosts. For them, as I shall show in later chapters, the realness of ghosts is at stake more than engagements anyone has with the past. This is not to say that understandings of the past do not emerge in acts of mediumship or paranormal investigation. They absolutely do. However, this is not investigators’ primary interest.

Contestations, critiques, and challenges of political and social order also appear in anthropological work on spirit possession and this has a bearing of my work here. An excellent example is Paul Stoller’s examination of how West African Hauka performers imitate, mock, and strategically deploy the power of white Europeans from the colonial era (1995). By mobilizing colonial power, he argued, these possession performances challenge the political order.

Janice Boddy’s 1989 work on the contestations of power present in Zar in Sudan is related, and it is productive as well for my work here. The practices of Zar, she argued, become a means of contesting the dominance of Islam in Sudan and turn into a “subversive discourse.” “The presiding discourse in the village,” she wrote, “is a
localized version of Islam ostensibly controlled by men, in which zar spirits play a legitimate though, from the men’s perceptive, tangential role. In this sense, women’s amplification of zar beliefs into a possession cult can be seen as a kind of counter-hegemonic process” (1989: 5). In a more functionalist vein, I. M. Lewis (1971) likewise argued in 1971 that possessions can take the form of protests against gendered imbalances, noting that women’s possessions in gender stratified societies constituted a “thinly disguised protest against the dominant sex” (1971 :31).

The case of paranormal investigators is different. They contest the hegemonic status of orthodox science; however, they are not always convinced by their own contestations. Anthropologists of possession have neglected this problem – that people seeking out or inviting mediumship and embodied encounters with spirits might not be entirely convinced of the reality or authenticity of their encounter. Interestingly, this is not a problem that is absent in the ethnographic record. For instance, in Crapanzano’s account of Tuhami’s possessions, it is clear that some people doubt the validity of Tuhami’s spiritual encounters. However, Crapanzano does not focus on the nature of these contestations.

Like Crapanzano, Aihwa Ong’s 1987 book offers some signs of such contestations, though it is not her main point. The book showed that the mass possession of young women working in multinational free trade zones was a form of silent resistance to troubling work conditions. Notably she suggested that “spirit possession episodes may be taken as expressions both of fear and of resistance against the multiple violations of moral boundaries in the modern factory” (1988: 38). Of interest here is that the management of the companies contested the validity of these possessions by situating
them in a scientific, biomedical framework, with Ong noting that management uses “the biomedical model to locate the sources of spirit possession” (1988: 36).

Interestingly, while scholars such as Ong and Crapanzano have highlighted instances of outsiders doubting the veracity of spirit phenomena and other anthropologists have highlighted “Western” skepticism about the reality of spirit phenomena, anthropologists in general have not highlighted instances in which those experiencing possession question the validity of their own experience. As I will show in later chapters, this is a crucial aspect of the lives and experiences of paranormal investigators and mediums in England, and the absence of work elsewhere on such doubt is surprising. The possibilities and dynamics of internal doubt are rarely engaged in most work on possession and belief is simply the assumed default position. The case of paranormal investigators is markedly different. They doubt their own embodied encounters while also critiquing and challenging the insights of mediums.

Another serious shortcoming or limitation in anthropological approaches to possession is its emphasis on practices largely outside the North Atlantic world. Indeed, concerns about translatability have dominated anthropological accounts of spirit possession. For example, Paul Stoller has asserted that many anthropologists who examine spirit possession “usually consider a complex local phenomenon in terms of Western categories” (1995: 19). Stoller is not alone in asserting this. While anthropologists concerned with possession have tended to limit their focus to areas outside the North Atlantic world, implying that possession or possession-like phenomena are not indigenous here, they have pointed to a very serious problem in the “West.” Many ethnographies of spirit possession offer polemical assertions about the character and
nature of “Western” spiritual practice, subjectivity, and intellectual categories. Such casual observation, had it been directed toward any other cultural-geographical area or society, would have been highly troubling to scholars. Many anthropologists of possession, however, seem content to labor under the assumption that the North Atlantic world is devoid of practices that are roughly analogous to other cross-cultural instantiations of possession. Indeed, despite the long and varied histories and practices of mediumship, divination, possession, and trance popularly practiced throughout Western Europe, the U.S., and Canada, anthropologists continue to position possession as foreign and in need of translation.  

In their critique of the “render[ing of] phenomena in Western commonsense or scientific terms” (Boddy 1997: 410), anthropologists of possession have highlighted an enormously significant issue, namely, the deep tension between scientific-rational frameworks for understanding possession and accounts that take seriously the experience and ontology of possession. That tension lies between scientific, psychological, medical, or rationalizing modes of accounting for extraordinary embodied experiences (explanations that essentially “explain away” or pathologize the phenomena in question) and accepting the phenomenon in its own terms. They have painted this as a problem of ethnocentrism and, in anthropological scholarship, they are correct. However, it is also a problem that emerges in the day-to-day lives of people seeking out and encountering extraordinary experiences. For them, it manifests itself as a form of self-doubt and

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4 Anthropologist C. Nadia Seremetakis’s (2009) examination of technologically mediated acts of divination in contemporary Greece is a rare exception, but Greece, like other countries on the Balkan Peninsula, has been treated for some time by Northern and Western Europeans as a backwater of Europe, so perhaps the exception is not so exceptional.
unyielding tension. These tensions, in addition to forming ethnocentric “Western” biases, constitute an important component of lived experience for people in England. So, while there are significant parallels between the practices of spirit possession and paranormal investigating, the existing scholarship on possession does not offer much in the way of a theoretical rubric capable of grappling with English paranormal investigating. I ultimately agree with Michael Brown who, in considering the relationship between channeling practices in the U.S. and cross-cultural phenomena such as shamanism and possession, noted that the “feel” of these practices is different (1997: 79).

*Anthropology and the New Age*

Of plausible relevance, of course, are other works on the phenomena typically thought of as the “New Age Religious Movement.” “New Age” refers to a collection of spiritual, psychological, health-related, and scientific practices that emerged in the North Atlantic world over the past half century and became known as the New Age Movement. This scholarship is significant for my examination of paranormal investigating, not because paranormal investigating is part of the New Age movement. Indeed, it is not, but I consider it here because it has acted as a stimulus for anthropologists and sociologists to consider changing forms of spiritual practice and claims to scientism in the North Atlantic world.

In fact, the New Age movement (NAM) refers to, and encompasses, a wide range of diverging traditions, practices, and ideologies. Providing a definitive definition is

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5 Estimating the number of active participants in the NAM is difficult. Michael D’Antonio (1992) estimated that there were approximately 20 million Americans involved in the NAM.
difficult. The NAM includes wide-ranging and diverse practices drawn from traditional European magic and cross-cultural religions. Examples include channeling, astral projection, Wicca, Neo Paganism, forms of meditation, color therapy, and shamanism as well as forms of divination and aura reading. New Age practices often lead to forms of travel, pilgrimage, and tourism that allow practitioners to worship at sites of emerging importance (Hetherington 2000; Rountree 2002a, 2002b, 2004). In 1998, Tanya Luhrmann wrote that the New Age movement "is a broad cultural ideology, a development of the countercultural sixties, which privileges holistic medicine, 'intuitive sciences' like astrology and tarot, ecological and anti-nuclear political issues, and alternative therapies, medicines and philosophers" (1989:30). I think she is generally right. While her emphasis on its left-leaning tendencies overlooks the ideological diversity of the movement – for instance, its tendency toward dystopian conspiracies—it captures much of the diversity of the NAM. In 1991 Ellen Badone noted that “while emphasizing spirituality and self-actualization, the New Age teaches that these goals are fully compatible with material success, and may in fact contribute to its achievement” (Badone 1991: 535). She added that it is “important to recognize that the New Age is not an organized movement with well-defined boundaries” (Ibid 1991: 535).

The chief defining characteristic of the NAM, according to Paul Heelas, is a “sacralisation of the self” (1996). Self-spirituality, a term he gives to a mode of spiritual practice deeply concerned with the self, is, in his view at the core of NAM and prevents NAM from becoming a “mish-mash…or fundamentally incoherent” (1996: 2). Kevin Hetherington (2000) echoes this sentiment, arguing that the NAM is primarily engaged in “help[ing] individuals develop their full spiritual potential as individuals” (2000: 13). The
role of the individual and nature of the self are issues at the core of the NAM. The emphasis placed on notions of an integrated, sacred self in the NAM result in knowledge practices that emphasize the value of experimental knowledge. As Jeremy Northcote wrote “they tend to privilege experiential knowledge over empirical validation” (2007: 63). New Agers, Heelas adds, believe that they are capable of sensing or intuiting secret knowledge (1996).

David Riches argued in 2000 that a variety of Western cultural practices exhibit a tendency to resist the Cartesian dualism and have sought to integrate the mind/body. This is particularly evident in British New Age practice, with its emphasis on the individual and the need to integrate the mind and body to perfect the individual, but this is not the case among paranormal investigators. “Western ideals holding up the holistic person,” according to Riches, “should be understood as a social construct” (2000: 670) tied to imagined goals of egalitarianism. For Riches, the desire for personal holism is tied to the desire to constitute egalitarianism. New Agers in Glastonbury, he noted, demanded “proper balance among the constitutive elements: the physical, the spiritual, the mental, the emotional” (2000: 678). The ideal self, then, is a balanced self.

I have asked myself how well this fits any description of paranormal investigators in England and the answer, as I shall explore in depth later, is that the focus is different. Paranormal researchers do not share this ideal sense of self with New Agers, but they are nonetheless deeply interested in the degree to which the mind and body can and should be integrated. Unlike the New Agers, however, this is a fraught arena in which they rarely find closure. And, unlike New Agers, they doubt their own ability to sense, know and feel, and they further doubt the role of these mediated practices in their articulation of
knowledge about ghosts. For them, however, the issue concerns practices of knowing rather than practices of being. It makes a reading of scholarship on New Agers relevant but only in part.

Michael Brown’s 1997 ethnography of U.S. channelers extends this point by implication. Channeling, he argued, “involves a mild form of dissociation… [and] induces an emotional state that practitioners experience as a distinct personality or consciousness” (1997: 21). While Brown notes that channeling results in forms of enlightenment and contributes to self-growth, he acknowledges that for some, “bewilderment over the boundaries of self veers into pathology in the condition known as multiple personality disorder” (1997:179-180). He similarly noted phenomenological similarities between channeling and the practices of 19th century U.S. spiritualism – a movement he treats only in its historical capacity. This differentiation of channeling and multiple personality disorder partially roots the difference between them in divergent interpretations of a similar experience of selfhood. It also echoes the division drawn by anthropologists of possession between possession (as a culturally understood and intelligible practice) and trance (as its biological correlate).

As these studies demonstrate, questions of selfhood are at the core of the New Age movement. As Brown, Riches, and Heelas have shown, the New Agers share a deep concern with the self – a self that is at once transcendental and sacred. They engage in practices to develop this self and to heighten their own spiritual, emotional, and

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6 There is a marked tendency among anthropologists and historians to overlook the ongoing existence of Spiritualism. While it is certainly a more popular practice in the U.K., Spiritualist churches exist in the U.S. as well. Jennifer Porter (1997) and Deirdre Meintel (2007) are among the few anthropologists who provide sustained ethnographic accounts of contemporary Spiritualism. Ultimately, Spiritualism is unquestionably an ongoing, living religious tradition in both nations.
embodied power. This near utopian concern with the self, while hugely divergent from the concerns and practices found in paranormal investigating, points to an important condition present in North Atlantic life: an emergent concern with selves. Of interest here will be that the concern with selfhood found in paranormal investigating is different from that of the New Age movement. Unlike New Agers, paranormal investigators do not fullheartedly or easily embrace an anti-Cartesian stance although some of their embodied practices of encountering ghosts trouble the mind/body dualism. They debate and struggle with mind/body dualism, struggle with and rarely succeed at reconciling embodied experiences with intellectual rationalization.

The sense of self developed by North Atlantic New Agers confounds the predictions and expectations of anthropologists of spirit possession and underlines the necessity of looking critically and ethnographically at the manifestations of self found in a variety of North Atlantic practices. For paranormal investigators, there are dynamic and fraught processes and discourses through which practitioners debate and grapple with the construction of self and its connection to practices of knowing. The chief characteristic of this struggle is profound doubt, an emotion and stance absent in characterizations of possession as well as New Agers’ production of sacred selves.

*The Anthropology of Magic and Witchcraft in the North Atlantic World*

In this last section, I briefly turn to the anthropology of magic and witchcraft in the North Atlantic World. While anthropologists have long considered practices of magic and witchcraft throughout the world, I limit myself to the North Atlantic world. Anthropologists exploring the realm of magic have been thorough in their consideration
of the rationalization of practices of magic. Anthropologists of spirit possession have typically eschewed concerns about rationality, since possession is often construed as a religious or vaguely religious activity but anthropologists of magic have had to grapple with questions of understanding causalities and underlying rationalities since magic is typically understood as an activity that renders particular results. The anthropological scholarship on witchcraft is vast and varied.

For a long time, historians of Western Europe assumed that magical practices and thinking were things of pre-modern Europe. Historical accounts of magical thinking in Medieval Europe often open or close with explicit observations about the decline of magical thought (Davies 1999; Thomas 1971; Trevor-Roper 1967). Anthropological scholarship has offered exciting insights into emerging traditions and practices of British witchcraft, definitively demonstrating that magic and witchcraft continue to flourish in the contemporary world.

I draw special attention here to Tanya Luhrmann’s productive notion of interpretive drift. In her 1989 study of English magic and witchcraft, she defined the interpretive drift as “the slow, often unacknowledged shift in someone’s manner of interpreting events as they become involved with a particular activity” (Luhrmann 1989: 312). In tracing this shift in the perspective of newcomers to magic, she noted that they may not initially set out to “believe,” yet eventually their position shifts. Her use of the term drift emphasizes the “accidental, unintended” nature of the process (Luhrmann 1989: 213).

Luhrmann’s interpretive shift offers a productive mechanism for considering shifting questions of doubt, belief, and embodied experience on the part of investigators.
Her emphasis on experience and rationalization as components of the interpretive shift is of particular significance for considering the practices of paranormal investigators. She wrote that “the point about these experiential involvements is that they must be interpreted and rationalized” (1989: 313-314). Ultimately, the interpretive shift of magicians offers a productive contrast with investigators’ engagement with ghosts. Both investigators and magicians seek out experiential encounters with what Greenwood has suggested calling “otherworldly” (2000) sources. Magicians and witches, according to Luhrmann, eventually come to accept, rationalize, and readjust their perspective as a result of these experiences. Paranormal investigators, on the other hand, do not. Even the most profound series of encounters across time rarely seem capable of shifting their perspective on the reality of ghosts.

It is fruitful to consider why this is the case. Why are paranormal investigators constrained by scientific ideology (among other forces) in ways that witches and magicians are not? Is it the fact that paranormal investigators are seeking objective knowledge through scientific means? Susan Greenwood’s account of how magic becomes meaningful in the lives of contemporary English witches and magicians differs from Luhrman’s in clarifying ways. For Greenwood, magicians’ experimental encounters with the otherworld ground their engagement with magic. Questions of the interpretive drift are less relevant than engagements with the experimental nature of magic. She argues that magicians’ understandings themselves and their worlds are shaped by their phenomenological encounters with the otherworld. A different picture emerges in her work with respect to belief and experience among magicians.
Like Greenwood, Kathryn Rountree (2002) emphasizes the absence of dichotomies such as magic/science in her examination of feminist New Zealand witches. Science and magic, she argued, are complementary modes of explanation. Rountree presents their engagement with magic as untroubled by science because they see it as entirely distinct. She writes, “witches' definitions of magic show an unequivocal rejection of the magic versus science dichotomy” (2002: 47). Unlike paranormal investigators, then, the feminist witches are untroubled by science and magic as explanatory frameworks. Rountree concluded that “believing in magic and believing in science apparently presents neither a difficulty nor a contradiction for many people: if it requires switching between two worldviews, this switch is made” (2002: 56). Engagement in magic, therefore, does not curtail the ability of witches in England or New Zealand to embrace scientific thought and, in the case of the English witches, many were employed in scientific and technological fields, such as computer programming (Luhrmann 1989).

The case is starkly different for paranormal investigators. Perhaps this is because, unlike witches, they actively seek to integrate science and encounter. They are not content “switching between two worldviews” (Rountree 2002: 56). Instead, they struggle to integrate embodied, phenomenological encounters with ghosts and scientific, rational ways of knowing. That science manifests itself in the lives of people in the North Atlantic world is, in and of itself, revealing.
CHAPTER TWO
METHODS AND RESEARCH

When I began this project, I set out to study the production of paranormal knowledge. Upon arriving in England in the summer of 2006 to conduct preliminary fieldwork, I began to realize that this was an enormous and ultimately untenable task. There were simply too many varieties of paranormal knowledge. To study all of them would take a lifetime. By the time I returned to England in 2008 to begin my dissertation fieldwork, I had narrowed myself more fully to knowledge about ghosts; however, this was still a vast, unwieldy field. It is a field marked more fully by disagreement, contestation, and suspicion than friendly collaborations. I quickly learned that parapsychologists and psychical researchers consider investigators and ghost hunters unqualified interlopers in the field of the paranormal while investigators consider ghost hunters thrill-seeking dilettantes.

I initially imagined myself spending equal time with all sectors of this arena of knowers: parapsychologists, psychical researchers, investigators, ghost hunters, and mediums. In the end, I chose not to for a variety of reasons. I spent the majority of my time with paranormal investigators, ghost hunters, and the mediums with whom they work. There are multiple personal and intellectual reasons for this. First and foremost, some sectors of this arena – namely paranormal investigators, ghost hunters, and mediums – were more eager to work with me than others. They were more able and inclined to include me in events and discussions. Doing so did not disrupt their research. In the case of parapsychologists, the presence of an additional researcher in their
laboratory experiments posed an additional threat to delineating the delicate nature of psi.\textsuperscript{1} Psychical researchers, while welcoming, were far less active in their pursuit of paranormal research than ghost hunters and investigators. Additionally, I genuinely enjoyed the company of investigators and ghost hunters and felt we developed a rapport and, in some cases, friendship.

Focusing on investigators, ghost hunters, and their mediums was practical and productive because, unlike other segments of the arena of paranormal knowledge producers, they were highly active during the course of my fieldwork.\textsuperscript{2} They routinely conducted paranormal investigations in addition to meeting regularly. They were engaged in projects that allowed me to think through issues of science, expertise, and the otherworldly in exciting ways. Because their expertise was markedly lay, grounded in \textit{being an investigator}, rather than being a scientist, it offered a dynamic chance to ethnographically think through the popular “extension of expertise” (Collins and Evans 2002).

This is not to say that I did not conduct research with parapsychologists, psychical researchers, operators of ghost tours, and conspiracy theorists. In fact, between 2006 and 2009, I spent significant time meeting them and attending their events. However, the bulk of my participant observation between 2008 and 2009 was with investigators, ghost

\textsuperscript{1} Parapsychologists conceptualize psi as the object of their inquiry. It is an umbrella term for a variety of extraordinary forces that may result in telepathy or psychokinesis. I discuss the notion of psi more fully in Chapter Three.

\textsuperscript{2} As I discuss at varying points in this dissertation, their comparatively high levels of activity, in contrast to psychical researchers and parapsychologists, has not been the case historically. In other moments (e.g. the 1950s or 1960s), psychical researchers were more active and “paranormal investigators” barely existed as a category of self-classification.
hunters, and their mediums. As a result, they emerge as the central focus of this dissertation.

**Location of Research**

Between July 2008 and December 2009, I lived in York, England, for the purpose of learning about the production of paranormal knowledge and meeting its producers. According to the Office of National Statistics, the city of York has a population of 193,300 (2009). It is located in the North of England. While I lived in York for the duration of my fieldwork, very few of my informants also lived there. They were dispersed in other northern communities within traveling distance.

York proved to be a useful home base for several practical as well as ideological reasons. First, York is a city with a reputation for hauntedness. York is an ancient city that has been populated since at least 7000 B.C.E. Throughout its history it has been the site of Roman, Viking, and Angle conquests and communities. In fact, the York tourist industry foregrounds much of this history in its tourist attractions such as the Jorvik Viking Center, the Viking Festival, the Roman Baths, and the popular Roman walls that surround the city center. York has played an important role in many popular historical moments that are widely circulated in contemporary England such as the Civil War and the Reformation.3

Numerous travel articles and television specials have identified it as “the most haunted city” in England, Europe, or the world. It features many reportedly haunted sites

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and it is a hub for ghost tourism. Living in York allowed me to participate easily in its high number of walking tours. York also houses many haunted sites that regularly allow paranormal investigation groups and ghost hunting teams to “investigate.” Many of these sites also allow companies to host commercial ghost hunts or “fright nights,” where tickets are sold to the general public. Living in central York provided easy access to these events.

Second, the city of York is located in a nexus of public transportation links. Many of my closest friends and collaborators did not live in York. They largely lived to the north and northeast of York in cities such as Middlesborough, Redcar, Yarm, Thornaby, Hartlepool, and Newcastle, as shown on the map in Figure 2.1. Some also lived in cities surrounding Leeds. While several of my friends and collaborators lived further away in the Northwest, in places such as Liverpool or Stockton, or in the Midlands, they tended to belong to paranormal research groups located in the northeast. York is located on several high-speed rail lines that easily connect it to much of the northeast. By train, it took me an hour to reach both Middlesborough and Newcastle. The ease of rail accessibility enabled me to participate and engage a range of groups and events. My research process with each of the groups of knowledge producers was somewhat different. The social organization, research activities, and location of groups of knowledge producers vary.

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4 Access to public transportation was especially important to me because I chose not to attempt to drive a car in England.
Research with Paranormal Investigators and Ghost Hunters

Description of Research Process

Research with ghost hunters and paranormal researchers constituted the majority of my fieldwork in England. Upon arriving in England in July 2008, I began to contact some of the many groups of ghost hunters and paranormal investigators. I made my first contact with these groups by email. Most groups of paranormal researchers and ghost hunters maintain their own group website that tends to include a link or email address that allows visitors to contact the group. During the course of my research, I sent out 148 introductory emails that included a brief description of my project and expressed a desire
to meet and talk with researchers about their inquiries into the paranormal. Not all of these emails met with significant responses.

Some of my emails were never answered. Others met with an immediate automated reply reporting that the email address was no longer active. Relying solely on their website, I found it hard to determine which groups were still active and which had fallen into obsolescence. As a result, I contacted many groups that had disbanded in the past, leaving behind an un-updated website. As I came to know members of groups better, I shared these early experiences with them and they were able to tell me about which groups had ceased to be active.

Many of my emails to groups often elicited curious and helpful responses. Leaders, or de facto leaders, of groups would reply to my email. They would either ask for further information about my research or propose meeting in person or talking on the phone. I ended up meeting with members of the majority of groups that replied to my emails.

First Offline Meetings

These initial meetings with members or representatives of groups were my first offline interactions with most groups. We tended to meet at places they suggested near their homes. Often, this took the form of pubs or coffee shops. Periodically, collaborators

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5 Not all groups had an appointed leader; however, in most groups, one or two members were especially active in the group both online and offline. They emerge as de facto leaders in that they are primarily responsible for addressing queries from potential associates or interested members of the public.

6 There were, of course, exceptions. I met several investigators at commercial events or lectures and they invited me to meet their larger group.
immediately invited me to their homes. We would begin by discussing the nature of my research over shared beverages. My initial meetings with collaborators lasted anywhere from an hour to 6 hours.

Upon meeting the participants in the first meeting with a group, I would immediately discuss the nature of informed consent and I would share with them my IRB consent forms. While I began to explain what the IRB forms meant and why we should talk about them, most of my collaborators just signed them and returned them to me. Many of them joked about “unnecessary regulations” and “silly forms.” They tended to read or refrain from reading the forms in a very theatrical fashion and then hand them back to me. One collaborator joked, “don’t worry, we trust you.” While they often joked and dismissed the IRB forms, these forms also served as an indicator of the seriousness of my inquiry and interest. One collaborator responded to the IRB form by remarking, “look at this. It’s so official like!”

The nature of my early discussions with many members was incredibly variable. Most asked what I was researching and I explained. Some interpreted my research as an inquiry into the reality of ghosts and the paranormal. I tried to counter these assumptions as much as possible but they periodically persisted in ways I did not anticipate. For instance, several months into my relationship with one collaborator, we were participating in an investigation together. Throughout the investigation, he kept joking (albeit in a serious fashion) that he was hoping he could finally “prove ghosts existed for me.” Despite my assertions to the contrary, some collaborators remained convinced that, at some level, I was profoundly curious about the reality of ghosts and the paranormal. Other anthropologists working with New Agers, magicians, and alternative healers have
reported that their collaborators also interpreted their research as, at least in part, a personal quest for the truth of paranormal or religious (Badone 1995).

During my first meetings, collaborators directed several important queries at me. I think this acted as a way for them to begin to evaluate my position in the realm of paranormal knowledge production. It also enabled them to verify that I was not a skeptic intent on mocking members of their community. I was acutely aware of this potential interpretation of my project and I tried to emphasize my respect for them as knowledge producers and researchers at every stage of my project. This did not always translate into completely agreeing with them or maintaining a neutral standpoint with respect to their methods and findings. The more time I spent with my collaborators and friends, the more clearly they demanded my perspective on key issues in the field. At first, I was wary of participating at this level but eventually I felt comfortable sharing my opinions and perceptions. This proved to be helpful. While my collaborators did not always agree with me, they respected (or pretended to respect) my perspectives and engaged in philosophical and methodological debates with me.

The first way that most collaborators began to assess my project and me as a researcher was to ask why I had chosen to research paranormal knowledge producers and what my personal investment or interest was. I emphasized that my interest and background was in the anthropologies of knowledge, science, and technology and that I was interested in paranormal investigating and ghost hunting as forms of knowledge production.

Collaborators also tended to ask how people at my home university and department viewed my project. I think this question acted as a way for them to
contextualize me in my own intellectual community. One collaborator asked, “do they think you’re a little nutty for wanting to do this?” To answer this question, I emphasized that anthropology is a very broad field and anthropologists study a wide range of cultural forms in a broad array of geographic and temporal locations. I cited some anthropologists and their studies that I thought they might find especially interesting. For instance, I mentioned David Hess’s (1991) writing on Spiritism in Brazil and Tom Boellstorff’s (2008) research on Second Life as potential ethnographies that demonstrated the broad range of anthropological work. I selected works such as these that would also pique my collaborators’ interest.7

Not all collaborators were happy with this answer; they pushed for me to be explicitly clear about how people in my university and department viewed the project. I think this was of such crucial interest to them because most paranormal researchers tend to be acutely aware of the lack of intellectual esteem for what they do. To answer their question, I explained that the members of my committee were all interested and supportive. At their prompting, I did explain that some people did not think paranormal knowledge was an ideal subject and that England was not necessarily an ideal location. Many collaborators eagerly asked for details of disapproval from anthropologists. I tended to cite an encounter with an anthropologist who was very agitated to hear that I was interested in researching the production of paranormal knowledge, especially when he learned that my background was in the anthropology and history of science and

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7 My collaborators’ reactions to and embrace of anthropology was one of the many fascinating things I encountered during this project. Friends and collaborators would ask for me to pass along anthropological articles dealing with phenomena such as spirit possession and trance in different cultural contexts. They also encouraged me to share my perspectives on how anthropology could contribute to paranormal investigating.
technology. I explained that he worried that my project would legitimate what, to his mind, was a profoundly illegitimate subject. Collaborators were gleefully outraged when I mentioned that he likened me to President George W. Bush and my project to either the War on Terror or the No Child Left Behind Act, meaning that my project and paranormal investigators perverted the term “science” in much the same way the War on Terror and the No Child Left Behind Act perverted the terms “terror” and “education.” They were delighted by this encounter and relished expressing disapproval of people they saw as our shared critics. It also helped to craft a bond between us as they were able to situate both my scholarship and their own research as lying outside the realm of orthodox science or research.

My collaborators also regularly asked me if I had ever had a “paranormal experience.” Initially, this was a slightly unsettling question for me. I was not at all sure how to answer it. I did not think that I had experienced anything paranormal. I explained that I had experienced instances of déjà vu and periodic odd dreams. I also shared stories about friends and family who had experienced paranormal events. For instance, I mentioned an occasion when a former roommate thought our shared house might be haunted, reporting to have seen a ghost man standing near my bed. I also mentioned my aunt who regularly reports seeing ghosts.

The final positioning question that I generally faced in my first meetings with collaborators was whether I believed in the paranormal. While many of these collaborators would go on to theorize and critique the notion and role of belief in engagements with the paranormal, it was important to them that I clarify my initial thoughts on the paranormal. I answered the question honestly. I explained that I had
never seen or experienced anything explicitly paranormal; however, I thought it was possible that such things existed. Over time, I began to situate my answer in their language more fully. I would rely on parapsychological research and (honestly) answer that I found the research into psi phenomena like micro-PK compelling. I explained that I found the cumulative nature of such studies very interesting.

These first meetings acted as an opportunity for me to conduct semi-formal interviews with members of the paranormal community. During our first meetings, we tended to engage in a getting-to-know-each-other process. I asked questions about their backgrounds, interest in the paranormal, approach to research, and ideological stance on ghosts and the paranormal. We tended to devote significant time to tracing the process through which they became aware of the paranormal, actively interested in it and, finally, participants in the production of knowledge about it. We also spent a lot of time talking about different explanatory frameworks for the paranormal. In approaching these semi-structured interviews, I relied on a prepared set of questions. These were very loosely ordered and I rarely asked all of them. I allowed (or tried to allow) the conversation to flow without relying too heavily on my prepared questions. I also tried to allow the collaborator to direct me to topics that she or he found significant.

At the close of these initial interviews and meetings, I asked participants about additional directions they might recommend for my project. This led to a series of incredibly productive suggestions and leads. Some collaborators generously shared the names and contact information of friends in the paranormal community. Some even arranged meetings and introduced me to other researchers or mediums. Most emphasized the importance of talking to a number of groups and trying to get a sense of the
ideological and methodological range present in the paranormal community. Notably, paranormal investigators and ghost hunters only suggested contacting other investigators, ghost hunters, and mediums. Almost universally, their awareness of their community did not include parapsychologists or psychical researchers. They would also often suggest that I get in touch with the producers and hosts of paranormal television programs.⁸

These initial interviews produced valuable information regarding collaborators’ views and histories with the paranormal. They also allowed me a chance to begin developing relationships with longer-term collaborators. At the conclusion of these interviews, some of the participants would invite me to attend their events. Several paranormal groups, which went on to form my core groups of collaborators, extended an open invitation to attend all of their events.

**Participation in Events**

Sharon Traweek wrote in 1988 that “the fieldworker’s goal, then, is to find out what the community takes to be knowledge, sensible action, and mortality, as well as how its members account for unpredictable information, disturbing actions, and troubling motives” (1988:8). Accordingly, anthropologists of science have often taken the laboratory or field setting as their field site. I took the field sites of investigators as my research location. Investigators and ghost hunters seek out haunted spaces in which to explore the possibilities of paranormal activities and these haunted sites became my field site as well. Several groups generously invited me to freely attend and participate in their

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⁸ I agree with my collaborators that this would have been a fascinating and rewarding direction in which to further my research; however, I had little luck in my initial attempts to approach the producers and stars of paranormal television programs. I confess that I did not pursue this as far as I could have because my research arena was already so broad and engaging.
investigations and public and private events. These events enabled me to observe the core of paranormal research – the paranormal investigation or ghost hunt.

Different groups or teams host paranormal investigations or ghost hunts with varying degrees of regularity. After meeting members of the groups, I participated in all of their investigations to the extent I could. The only real barrier to my attendance was transportation. Events typically began around 8 or 9 at night and ended between 3 and 5 in the morning. Sometimes events were located far from any transportation hub and, if members of the team were not able to drive me, it could be fairly difficult for me to attend. Despite these difficulties, I attended 72 non-commercial paranormal investigations during the course of my research.\(^9\) Ironically, I participated in more investigations and events during the course of my research than most of my collaborators.

Anthropologists who study professional scientists such as chemists or physicists are rarely able to participate fully in the research that these scientists are conducting. Theirs is an elite expertise available only to a select few. Investigators and ghost hunters, on the other hand, are lay experts and their project, by its very definition, is open and accessible to those interested and willing. This formulation of expertise allowed me nearly infinite possibilities for participation, which I embraced. My collaborators welcomed my participation in investigations. As a result, over time, I began to handle

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\(^9\) I distinguish between commercial and non-commercial investigations. For-profit paranormal tour and event companies host commercial investigations, charging between £50 and £100 for the event. Haunted venues charge these for-profit tour and event companies a different rate to use the space (typically between £100 and £300 more than they charge non-commercial groups. The paranormal research teams and groups periodically hold “public events” where they charge members of the public a fee to participate. The fee is significantly less, ranging between £15 and £45. They do so to allow them to pool money to access sites with heightened reputations for hauntedness and paranormal activity that charge sometimes steep fees for overnight access.
investigating tools such as digital thermometers, digital cameras, and EMF readers. I also
learned to use a variety of divination tools some of which I had used before such as ouija
boards and others that I had not, such as crystals, glass divination, and automatic writing.
During several public investigations hosted by my closest group of collaborators, I was
encouraged to lead members of the public on an investigation on my own. In a very real
sense, I came close to becoming an investigator.

In addition to participating in public events, I joined my collaborators during
many of their meetings. Some of my collaborators regularly organized lectures and public
discussions of the paranormal in pubs. These provided chances to observe investigators’
grappling with the epistemological and procedural questions inherent in investigating.
These gatherings also offered me insights into how teams selected investigation sites as
well as the organizational dynamics behind planning investigations.

I also participated in several regular but less formal modes of socialization and
activity. Team members were often on very friendly terms with each other and, as such,
would meet for dinner or drinks in pubs. When invited, I joined members on these
outings. Through outings such as these as well as more formal events, I began to craft
friendships as well as professional researcher-subject relationships with some of my
interlocutors. As many anthropologists have noted, interlocutors cast ethnographic
researchers in a variety of roles depending on a variety of identity-based constellations
such as gender or religion (Behar and Gordon 1996; Briggs 1970; Fernea 1995 [1965];
Rabinow 1977). Given my interest in interrogating the ghostly -- albeit interrogating it
quite differently than investigators-- my interlocutors tended to cast me as a peer, which
generated the possibility of friendship. Many anthropologists have commented on the
emergence and nature of friendships in ethnographic fieldwork (Behar 1996; Briggs 1970; Powdermaker 1966; Rabinow 1977). Hortense Powdermaker even wrote that “the intimate inside view which a field worker receives from his close friends must…differ somewhat from [what] another anthropologist would get from different types of intimates in the same field situation” (1966:290). For me, the friendships that emerged from my fieldwork led to many hours of pleasant intellectual debate and exchange regarding the variety of epistemological issues raised by paranormal investigating. This was of profound interest to friends as well as my research collaborators and me.

I also participated in the semi-regular impromptu investigations that some collaborators arranged. These were relatively unstructured ventures out into the English countryside in the evening. Collaborators would walk around wooded areas, beaches, and historic towns in the dark as a means of enjoying the countryside but also observing and trying to better understand their own reactions to anxiety and unusual settings. They were also on the lookout for anything potentially paranormal as well as any venues that might be interested in hosting an investigation in the future.

Participating in a 7-week course on ghost hunting also constituted part of my research into the social worlds of paranormal investigators and ghost hunters. The course was titled “Ghost Hunter Training Course.” The course was offered through a commercial ghost-hunting group. I learned about it through Ruth, one of my paranormal investigator collaborators, who was planning to take the course. After contacting the teacher of the course and explaining my project, I enrolled in the class. I participated fully in the 7-week learning process. The class met for 3 hours each Sunday morning for 7 weeks in a reportedly haunted castle in Newcastle.
The class was an opportunity to learn about the education process in paranormal investigating and ghost hunting. As such, it had both shortcomings and advantages. In the class, Jay, the instructor, exposed the 10 participating students primarily to his opinions on ghost hunting. He had no formal qualifications in paranormal research, which is not uncommon in the community of paranormal researchers and ghost hunters. He drew on his years of experience personally investigating the paranormal. He also relied on a ghost hunting book, *How to Hunt Ghosts* (Warren 2003). At the beginning of the class, each student received a copy of this book and it acted as a textbook.

The use of this book demonstrates the irregular nature of popular paranormal research. After reading the book, I discussed Warren’s claims with my collaborators active in ongoing research. Many of them dismissed his explanations and assertions. They also questioned his authority to produce such a book. As Harry, a leader of a Midlands group, put it, “what has he done that allows him to write something like this? I could sit here and write something like that and I would have every bit as much authority as him. More even, since at least *I* know some actual science.” Harry prides himself on his purely scientific approach to the paranormal. Some of Warren’s claims regarding the “science of ghost hunting” frustrated Harry enormously.

Despite such challenges to Warren’s authority to author a definitive text on ghost hunting and Jay’s authority to teach such a course, former students in the class used the course to invoke their expertise and authority within their own paranormal research groups. On several occasions, I observed Ruth cite her participation in the class as a justification for a particular activity she wished to pursue. Indeed, when members of a
research team periodically wanted me to assume a larger, more active role in an investigation, they would cite my participation in the class.\textsuperscript{10}

Online locations such as chatrooms, email exchanges, websites, and web forums also emerged as important field sites in the course of this research. As I discuss later (in Chapter Nine), a great deal of the intellectual exchanges, networking, and socialization in between official meet ups and investigations occurs online. As a result, it was imperative that I remain abreast of what unfolded in the forums and chatrooms. I regularly read and periodically participated in online exchanges on the websites of the groups that I worked most closely with and, I browsed through and observed, other investigating and ghost hunting websites.

\textbf{Research with Parapsychologists and Psychical Researchers}

While I spent the most time in ghost hunters’ and paranormal investigators’ social circles and events, I made a concerted effort to immerse myself in the social worlds of parapsychologists and psychical researchers. This process was not as easy or straightforward as my entry into the community of ghost hunters and paranormal researchers; however, with time, I began to feel more comfortable in these worlds.

\textsuperscript{10} This was done both seriously and comically. Rose, my closest friend in the ghost hunting community, periodically suggested that I should more actively participate in investigations since I “had the patience to sit through the 7-weeks of that.” While she initially thought the class might be a good idea, she was hugely taken aback when she saw the certificate I received at the end of the class that verified me as a ghost hunter. The instructor had misspelled my name and there were several prominent typos. She noted that her 10-year old son could do a better job. To her the spelling errors on the certificate were emblematic of comedic assumption of authority on the part of the instructor.
Attending professional events acted as one of my main areas for observation and interaction with professional parapsychologists and psychical researchers. The Parapsychological Association (PA) and the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), the two major professional and intellectual organizations of psychical researchers and parapsychologists, hold annual meetings where researchers present their research and findings in paper format. I participated in as many of these meetings as possible.

The PA is an international organization of parapsychologists and, as such, it conducts its meetings at a range of international locations each year. Given the range of locations, it was impossible for me to attend all its meetings; however, I managed to attend two PA meetings. I attended the PA meetings in 2006 in Stockholm, Sweden, and in 2008 in Winchester, England.\textsuperscript{11} The SPR is less internationally oriented than the PA and holds its meetings almost exclusively in the U.K. In 2008, the SPR held a joint meeting with the PA in Winchester and, in 2009, it held its annual meeting in Nottingham. I was able to attend both events.

At the conferences, I attended all of the papers, sessions, and evening lectures.\textsuperscript{12} I also observed the interactions and exchanges that occurred at the conference. To the best of my ability, I met and talked with participants. Attendees at these conferences, especially the SPR conferences, are remarkably friendly and welcoming. The SPR conferences work hard to foster a social atmosphere, having group meals together and encouraging participants to visit the conference bar/pub after the sessions. During my interactions with participants at both conferences, I always identified myself as an

\textsuperscript{11} The PA met in Seattle, U.S., in 2009 and Halifax, Canada, in 2007.\textsuperscript{12} There is no overlapping scheduling so this is the typical way people attend the conferences.
anthropology graduate student and described the nature of my research. At conferences and beyond, I had many productive conversations and exchanges with psychical researchers and parapsychologists.

I also participated in an open parapsychology course at the University of York in the winter of 2009. This provided an excellent opportunity to learn more about parapsychology and to learn about how it is publicly consumed and presented. Additionally, to deepen my understanding of psychical research, I visited the collection of the Ghost Club at the British Library. Here, I was able to develop a greater sense of the history of the Ghost Club in the distant as well as more recent past. Consulting their papers and newsletter, stored at the British Library, allowed me a greater sense of how psychical researchers viewed the advent and growing popularity of late 20th and 21st century ghost hunting and paranormal investigation.

**Research with Mediums**

Mediums are individuals who claim the ability to communicate with the dead and/or access information unavailable though ordinary or scientifically established mechanisms. In recent years, they have attracted significant public attention and many famous individuals have consulted them. For example, Princess Diana reportedly visited several mediums. Musical groups such as Coldplay, Ash, and Van Morrison reportedly consult mediums. Their popularity is not, of course, limited to Britain. Mediums and psychics enjoy great popularity throughout much of North America and Europe.
Mediums work in a variety of arenas. For-profit sittings and demonstrations and Spiritualist Church services are among the most popular (Wooffitt 2006). I focused my research on mediums who actively seek out and collaborate with paranormal investigators and ghost hunters. The vast majority of these mediums do not share their mediumship for profit. This puts them among a comparative minority of mediums (Wooffitt 2006). Many of these mediums participate in investigations, although this is not often the only site at which they share their mediumship. Many demonstrate at Spiritualist Churches or psychic fairs as well. While mediums collaborate with ghost hunters and investigators, they are not necessarily members of investigation teams and they do not share the outlook of investigators.

I met all of the mediums I worked with through paranormal investigating and ghost hunting friends. They shared the names and contact information of mediums they knew and/or respected with me. I then would contact mediums either by telephone or by email. Some mediums were too busy or uninterested in talking to me. We would typically arrange to meet for semi-structured interviews. In these interviews, I questioned the mediums about their life histories, their experiences as mediums, and their collaborations with investigators. I semi-formally interviewed mediums between 1 and 3 times and these interviews varied in length from 2 hours to 5 hours.

My sample size of mediums was necessarily smaller than that of investigators and ghost hunters. Simply put, there are fewer mediums involved in investigating than self-proclaimed investigators or ghost hunters. I conducted my in-depth interviews with nine mediums.

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13 While I contacted investigative and ghost hunting groups that I found online, I was less inclined to do so with mediums. I was primarily interested in talking to mediums who collaborated with paranormal researchers, not simply individuals who identified as mediums.
 mediums (five men and four women). In addition to interviews, I also observed these mediums and others share their mediumship with investigators. In some instances, my medium collaborators invited me to attend other events with them such as demonstrations at community centers or Spiritualist services or, in one instance, a house clearing. In addition to the nine mediums I interviewed at great depth, I met many others and talked to them more briefly about their mediumship.

In addition to interviews and participant observation with mediums who collaborate with investigators and ghost hunters, I also attended Spiritualist Services and demonstrations when I was in England. Most weeks, I attended Sunday or Wednesday night Spiritualist services or demonstrations in either York, London, Leeds, or Huddersfield. While this research does not constitute a central focus of my dissertation, it was enormously helpful in enabling me to better understand the range of mediumship performances and receptions.

**Important Others**

In addition to the above groups, I also engaged in research with conspiracy theorists, magicians, and skeptics. When I began my research, I had not anticipated the need to meet with or discuss my project with these people. I had not realized that self-identified skeptics were especially active in their contestation of the legitimacy of ghost hunting, paranormal investigation, parapsychology, mediumship, and a range of other

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14 By house clearing, mediums refer to the process of removing evil spirits or demons from a home. In essence it is an exorcism but some mediums prefer to avoid such language, feeling that it is tainted by Christian overtones.
emerging practices. By talking to investigators, I realized that the skeptical opposition to investigations was a force I should consider more closely.

Skeptics

Skeptics, a self-identified heterogeneous collection of people who advocate a commitment to science and rationality, are vocal and public in their outrage, alarm, and frustration with the proliferation of groups and people interested in the paranormal and New Age. They read and post on paranormal investigating websites, forums, and chats and organize social events to promote skepticism. Investigators and ghost hunters are acutely aware of their critiques. Many investigators encouraged me to study and meet skeptics as a way of broadening my focus and “seeing who is against” them, as one investigator put it.

To do this, throughout the course of my fieldwork, I attended events, conferences, and lectures hosted by skeptics. In particular, I attended “Skeptics in the Pub” events in Leeds and London. I also attended the first ever TAM London.\(^{15}\) I attended and participated in these events and, in the process of doing so, I met and encountered skeptics.

Magicians

Magicians invested in debunking and de-legitimating the paranormal are by no means new. Famous magicians from Harry Houdini to “Penn Jillette and Teller” have been outspoken critics of mediums, Spiritualists, and paranormal investigators, groups of

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\(^{15}\) TAM London, alternatively known as The Amazing Meeting (TAM), is an event organized by the Randi Foundation. It was a 3-day event in London in 2009 intended to support and encourage scientific literary and skepticism.
people they consider to be active frauds. This legacy of outspoken criticism informs the critiques voiced by magicians in England today.

There are many magicians who are invested and involved in skeptical causes. It is not coincidental that James Randi, the founder of the Randi Foundation, which organizes TAM, is an American magician. A number of famous and less famous magicians in England are actively committed to demonstrating what they see as the deliberate fraud on the part of investigators. During the course of my research, I had the chance to meet and interview several such magicians. I conducted in-depth interviews with three such magicians and I met more informally. This proved very helpful in understanding the nature of critique leveled at investigators and ghost hunters.

Conspiracy Theorists

During the course of getting to know investigators and ghost hunters, I realized that some of them ascribed to a variety of conspiracy theories. For example, during the outbreak of the Swine Flu in 2008 and 2009, many of my collaborators expressed their reluctance to accept the “official” version of the origins of Swine Flu and the benefits of the proposed vaccine. While my collaborators were not especially invested in any one conspiracy, from time to time they would voice a serious interest in, and suspicion about, conspiracies. Conspiracy theorizing, as a way of knowing, runs very close to the outlook they adopt with respect to the paranormal. As a result of this, I became increasingly curious about the similarities and differences between conspiracy theorizing and paranormal investigating. To address my curiosity, I attended several conspiracy theory events and met with theorists.
In my research with each of these segments of the paranormal knowledge producers community and some of its significant opposition, I tried to ask questions and think through the ways in which they developed, consumed, and produced knowledge. Ethnographic research with these groups allowed me to ask questions about the role of science and investigating in enabling and configuring the possibilities of learning about the otherwordly.

**Approach to Privacy and Quotations**

Throughout this dissertation, I have changed the names of all my collaborators in England. I have assigned them pseudonyms that I use throughout the dissertation. I have also changed the name of all of the research groups, clubs, and teams that I spent time with. I have tried to keep the character of these names intact when ascribing pseudonyms.

In writing this dissertation, I have drawn heavily upon recorded interviews and conversations with paranormal investigators. In transcribing and reproducing these interviews here, I have allowed the character of my collaborators’ voice, dialect, and slang to remain intact. This sometimes takes the form of non-standard English.

In considering their ideologies of investigation and science, I have also drawn heavily on investigators’ online writings that appear in Internet forums, chatrooms, and emails. I have reproduced some of these writings in my dissertation. As with the interviews, I have reproduced the texts complete with any typing errors, slang, profanity, or non-standard English.

While many of these writings are in the public domain, I have chosen not to include links as a means of reference. Such citations would compromise the privacy of
the organizations that collaborated with me as well as the individual members. I seriously deliberated over the benefits of acknowledging the intellectual endeavors of investigators against the need to maintain their privacy and, in the end, I decided that their privacy was more important. My failure to include references to specific websites should be seen as an indication of my desire to protect the identities of investigators rather than a slight to their intellectual production.
CHAPTER THREE

THE ARENA OF PARANORMAL KNOWLEDGE PRODUCERS

Today, the “paranormal” is a broad and all encompassing field that engenders inquiries from and “research” by a wide range of participants. Defining the paranormal, or, the ghostly, is not an easy task for researchers who are active in the field nor is it easy for me. During the course of talking to (self-identified) “paranormal researchers,” Spiritualists, parapsychologists, psychical researchers, ghost hunters, and mediums (to say nothing of New Age practitioners, Ufologists, or cryptozoologists), it became clear that they agreed on very little regarding their inquiries. Therefore, I will attempt to describe the main forms of self-classification and categorization that I encountered among individuals interested in querying the paranormal and the corresponding ideas that inform their inquiries. I hope it becomes obvious that these forms of self-categorization are far from neat and stable. Indeed, self-categorizations often shift and some labels are bandied about as tacit forms of dismissal. This conglomeration of interested parties challenge the legitimacy of each other’s queries and compete for dominance of the media and control over the role of expert.

Paranormal researchers, ghost hunters, parapsychologists, Spiritualists, mediums, and psychical researchers comprise the core set of categories that comprise the popular engagement with the paranormal. In this dissertation, I will refer to them collectively as paranormal knowledge producers (PKPs). These groups of people are bonded together not necessarily by shared intellectual goals but by shared public presence, a fact that
dismays many of them. Voices from the arenas of paranormal researchers, ghost hunters, parapsychologists, Spiritualists, mediums, and psychical researchers all contribute to ongoing public discussions and engagements with the “paranormal” in contemporary England. They also compete for (1) the authority to define the nature of the paranormal and (2) dominance as the public experts most qualified to comment definitively on the paranormal. These contestations are ongoing and the successful dominance of one group is far from permanent.

As E. Summerson Carr (2010) has pointed out, expertise is deeply interactional and performative. It is not something that individuals can have or possess. Indeed, expertise constitutes what Michael Silverstein has called “second order indexicality” (1992, 2003), meaning sociohistorical metadiscourses that mediate the relationship between would-be-experts and the objects of their expertise. Metadiscourses of expertise can entail contestations between competing agents who seek to identify themselves exclusively as the experts on a given subject or material (Redfield 2006). This is the case for paranormal knowledge producers.

A social worlds/arenas approach provides a helpful framework for considering the debates, divergences, and sense of shared purpose that exists among paranormal knowledge producers (PKPs). Adele Clark explains that arenas are comprised of “all the social worlds that focus on a given issue meet and interact. The collective actors/social worlds involved in an arena can be stunningly heterogeneous” (1998: 16). Indeed, within the broader arena of paranormal knowledge production, the subsidiary collectivities of ghost hunters, parapsychologists, and the like each struggle against each other for dominance. In arenas, Anselm Strauss explains, “various issues are debated, negotiated,
fought out, forced and manipulated by representatives” (1978:124). Indeed, in researching this project, I have tried to follow the actors involved in producing and circulating ideas about the paranormal but also the objects and subjects of their inquiry (Clark 1998; Latour 1986). Here, I will try to illuminate the social composition of the arena of paranormal knowledge production.

Parapsychologists

Parapsychology is the professional branch of inquiry into the paranormal. While the term parapsychologist is periodically used to connote a scientifically oriented or skeptical individual during popular paranormal investigations or television programs, parapsychology, as a field, is defined by its professionalism. Today, parapsychology is largely a laboratory-based, university-sponsored field of inquiry. There are academic programs that offer qualifications in parapsychology at a masters and doctoral level across the United Kingdom. Some of the most noteworthy university programs are housed at Edinburgh, Nottingham, Northampton, and Liverpool Hope Universities, although institutions such as Coventry, York, and Safford also accommodate parapsychological research in their broader psychology departments. Research tends to be conducted in laboratory settings and findings are published in academic journals in psychology or, more specifically, parapsychology.
**Figure 3.1: British Universities and Departments offering Concentrations in Parapsychology**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Department</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of the West of England, Bristol</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
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<tr>
<td>University of Coventry, Coventry</td>
<td>Parapsychology Group, Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Derby, Derby</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh</td>
<td>The Koestler Parapsychology Unit, Department of Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Greenwich, Greenwich</td>
<td>Counseling Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Hertfordshire, Hertfordshire</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Lancashire, Lancashire</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lancaster University, Lancaster</td>
<td>School of Health and Medicine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool</td>
<td>Transpersonal Research Unity, Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool</td>
<td>Parapsychology Research Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldsmiths, University of London, London</td>
<td>Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Northampton, Northampton</td>
<td>Centre for the Study of Anomalous Psychological Processes, Psychology Division</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of York, York</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Parapsychologists trace their own history to 1882 and the founding of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in England. They consider the founding of the SPR to be the result of two social movements of the 18th and 19th centuries: mesmerism and Spiritualism. Both movements generated significant public interest in the relationship between the living and the dead and the boundaries of human consciousness. The SPR became heavily involved in the project of attempting to distinguish legitimate mediumship from fraudulent practices. Since that time, the SPR has been interested in both parapsychological and psychical research.
Parapsychology is the most “disciplined” of the arenas concerned with paranormal knowledge production. As such, it has uniform and widely accepted canons of knowledge and definitions of the field. Harvey J. Irwin and Caroline A. Watt, the authors of *An Introduction to Parapsychology* (2007), the ubiquitously used introductory text in the field, define parapsychology as:

The scientific study of experiences, which, if they are as they seem to be, are in principle outside the realm of human capabilities as presently conceived by conventional scientists. Thus parapsychological phenomena ostensibly indicate the operation of factors currently unknown to or recognized by orthodox science, popularly referred to as paranormal factors” (2007: 1).

In this definition, the reference to the “popular” is revealing. For many of the first-year university students or adult learners participating in extension classes on parapsychology, popular representations of the paranormal cloud their perceptions of what they will encounter. For instance, in one extension parapsychology class in which I participated, most of the students explained that they thought they would largely learn about ghosts, spirits, and mediumship in the class. In fact, some were disappointed when they learned that this was not necessarily the focus of parapsychology.

Indeed, many parapsychologists express feelings of frustration at the current popularity of the paranormal because it provides a misleading perception of

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1 Clark defines “disciplining” as “exercising control over participating individuals and groups both within the discipline and related to it – sharing its wider arena of concern. Disciplining thus can involve policing and enforcing particular perspectives” (1998: 7). In this sense, parapsychology is the most disciplined of the fields of PKP; however, parapsychologists’ capacity to fully define and delineate the scope of research is far from definite. Parapsychology is a field embroiled in often-public contestations over its legitimacy, premises, and goals.
parapsychological research. Parapsychologists’ anxiety over their association with popular interpretations and account of the paranormal is not without cause. Skeptical organizations and websites often critique ghost hunters, parapsychologists, and mediums with the same broad-brush strokes.

The definition’s reference to “conventional scientists” offers another key glimpse of the self-identification of parapsychologists. They see themselves as “scientists”; however, they position themselves against what Irwin and Watt refer to as “conventional scientists” and what others have called “orthodox” or “close-minded” scientists. This is an immediate expression of the contested and poorly understood terrain in which parapsychologists work.

The Parapsychological Association, the major professional organization of (international) parapsychologists, offers another popular definition of parapsychology. In 1989, they described parapsychology as the study of “apparent anomalies of behavior and experience that exist apart from currently known explanatory mechanisms that account for organism-environment and organism-organism information and influence flow” (1989: 394-395). This definition clearly demonstrates the lengths to which parapsychologists go to avoid prematurely ascribing agency, directionality, or causality to possible abnormal phenomena.²

The typical objects of parapsychological investigation are “anomalous phenomena” such as extrasensory perception (ESP), psychokinesis (PK), the survival

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² While carefully crafted definitions and explanatory frameworks such as this demonstrate parapsychologists’ seriousness and philosophical deliberation, this style of analysis and definition occupies a complicated public space. Indeed, parapsychologists’ cautious ascription of causality and, ironically, their skepticism curtail the scope of their role as public intellectuals or experts.
hypothesis, near death experiences (NDEs), out-of-body experiences (OBEs), and “apparitions.” While parapsychologists traffic in these concrete descriptions of potentially paranormal processes, they also struggle to find language that allows them to express the fluidity and unknown nature of the potentially paranormal. The term $psi$ enables them to do this. Irwin and Watt describe psi phenomena as “a generic term encompassing both ESP and PK… The Greek letter psi here is used to denote the unknown paranormal element in these experiences in much the same way as the letter $x$ represents the unknown in an algebraic equation until its identity is determined” (2007: 6). Out of all of the paranormal knowledge producers, parapsychologists go to the greatest lengths to emphasize the unknown character of possibly paranormal occurrences, emphasizing that the mechanism of the event is as likely to be a poorly understood element of human observation as it is paranormal. Indeed, some parapsychologists (as well as some psychical researchers) are troubled by the very term paranormal. They worry that the ascription of para- to the normal unduly implies extraordinary mechanisms of causation.

Psychical Researchers

Of all the groups involved in producing knowledge of the paranormal, psychical researchers tend to have the lowest public profile and their differences from parapsychologists, on the one hand, and paranormal investigators or ghost hunters, on the other hand, are murky. Most psychical researchers understand themselves as partaking in serious research into the paranormal. For them, this differentiates them from paranormal investigators and ghost hunters.
Unlike parapsychologists, psychical researchers are not necessarily based at universities and their research tends not to be conducted in laboratory settings. There are two subsets of psychical researchers. The first category is that of fieldworkers, who see themselves as pursuing “spontaneous case investigations,” or serious investigations of the potentially paranormal that occur outside of the laboratory. For psychical researchers (as well as paranormal investigators), queries into the paranormal are necessarily a field science rather than a laboratory science. While often they are versed in the language of parapsychology, for example, understanding references to ESP, psi, and PK, they pursue and articulate their own findings in more broadly humanistic language.

The second group of psychical researchers is even more diverse. It tends to be comprised of educated, often academic researchers with a scholarly interest in Spiritualism, the paranormal, or ghosts. Some of these people have Ph.D. degrees or university appointments; however, they are rarely in psychology or parapsychology departments. Their research focuses on a range of largely humanistic topics. For instance, at the 2009 SPR conference, psychical researchers from fields such as history, nursing, and literature provided historical and literary analyses of 19th century spiritualist writings and prominent mediums. For them, the reality or provability of the phenomena in question is less important than its historical or literary dimensions. That said, these researchers also tend to be open-minded or agnostic about the possibility of the existence of the phenomena in question. Indeed, at this conference, several participants identified

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3 Identifying the field science component of paranormal research as “spontaneous case investigations” rather than either simply ghost hunting or paranormal investigating is a hallmark of psychical research. The choice of language reveals their aspirations as a serious field of inquiry on par with parapsychology or, indeed, complementary to parapsychology, while also demonstrating psychical researchers’ desire to isolate themselves from more popular manifestations.
my research as psychical research and encouraged me to submit a paper to the next year’s conference. I was generally treated as a colleague in psychical research rather than an anthropological interloper. Many were delighted by the direction of my research. Despite this, the relationship of psychical researchers and parapsychologists to qualitative work focusing on the culture and language of paranormal research production is ambiguous.\(^4\)

While parapsychologists may be aware of their work, they often question the usefulness of it since it may fail to evaluate the reality of the phenomena in question stridently enough.

Their social worlds overlap somewhat with psychical researchers, for instance, at the annual meetings of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). While the SPR is not a professional academic society like the PA, it is a scholarly organization dedicated to “the scientific study of the ways that organisms communicate and interact with each other and with the environment that appears to be inexplicable within current scientific models” (SPR 2009: 1). The SPR’s definition of psychical research is almost indistinguishable

\(^4\) At the 2009 SPR meeting in Nottingham, there was a panel dedicated to qualitative research in and on the paranormal. Presenters were all based in psychology or parapsychology departments; however, they had a more humanistic and qualitative orientation than most parapsychologists. One presenter discussed topics such as the role of OBEs and NDEs in subjects’ life courses, relying on in-depth life histories. Interestingly, when he presented a paper on this research at the 2008 joint PA/SPR meeting, one participant responded to his fairly compelling research by critiquing the comparatively low number of participants in his study, suggesting a lack of respect and familiarity with research methodologies beyond the favored quantitative, laboratory based analyses common in parapsychology. Another panel participant offered a discursive analysis of turn-taking in a popular paranormal investigation. The reactions to this paper from the psychical researchers in attendance were revealing. Some were deeply troubled that she was ascribing any legitimacy to popular ghost hunters. One audience member thought it was important that the presenter emphasize that these ghost hunters were “hacks.” Another participant, who eagerly encouraged my research, questioned the practical value this project offered to field or laboratory researchers.
from the definition of parapsychology offered by Irwin and Watt (2007) and the Parapsychological Association (1987).

The phenomena pursued in psychical researchers’ spontaneous case phenomena are also slightly different from those pursued by parapsychologists. While parapsychologists prefer to focus on what they consider measurable events, such as ESP or PK, psychical researchers tend to focus on the manifestation of paranormal events in living contexts. For instance, Jim, a psychical researcher, focuses on individuals’ narrations of time slip events. A time slip is when one or more people enter a historical moment other than their own for a brief period of time. Although they have never left the contemporary world/time geographically or temporally, they somehow access prior historical moments. Jim tends to interview people about their time slip events and, then, tries to map them geo-temporally to look for patterns and potential meanings. From a parapsychological point of view, this project, while possibly interesting, has little scientific merit since it offers little in the way of verifiable or testable claims.

While parapsychologists and psychical researchers participate in shared professional and intellectual organizations and, to some degree, rely on a shared linguistic, ideological, and theoretical orientation, parapsychologists do not always fully embrace the contributions of non-parapsychologists. In 2008, the PA and the SPR held a joint annual meeting, the third time this has happened in the organizations’ histories. Members of the PA and SPR tended to present their papers in separate panels. During the course of the conference, there were numerous joking, off-the-cuff remarks by PA members regarding the gullibility of members of the SPR. While the comments were
lighthearted, they do point to the way in which parapsychologists tend to view psychical researchers as slightly less than full colleagues.

Psychical researchers understand themselves as sharing a history dating back to Mesmerism, Spiritualism, and the founding of the SPR along with paranormal researchers. Unlike both ghost hunters and paranormal investigators, most psychical researchers are very aware of, and conversant with, the history of psychical research. Paranormal investigators, when they are aware of psychical researchers, tend to view them as somewhat old fashioned.

Paranormal Investigators

In discussing the range and scope of knowledge producers involved in the field of the paranormal, I have chosen to separate paranormal investigators from ghost hunters. I can imagine a categorical schema that would lump psychical researchers, paranormal investigators, and ghost hunters together given the rough similarities in approach, practice, and history. But I have decided against this because of variation in the composition of these groups and, to some extent, the differences in their approaches to investigating.

Paranormal investigators do not share a uniform educational or professional background. Some investigators have not completed their A-levels and others have finished university. They lack formal education in parapsychology. They tend to have educated themselves about the paranormal through popular publications, online websites, television programs, online forums, and personal experiences. The information they
encounter in these sources is far from uniform, and the intellectual and professional backgrounds of the published “experts” quite heterogeneous.\textsuperscript{5}

Paranormal investigators typically organize themselves into investigating “teams” or “groups.” Unlike psychical research organizations like the SPR, these groups have relatively short histories. Most have not existed for more than 10 years. Membership in these groups is relatively stable and small, staying between 10 and 25 people. Periodically, there is significant turnover in membership that results from interpersonal disagreements and conflicts over team/group methodologies and membership.

Groups and teams dedicate themselves to “researching the paranormal.” To do this, they organize “investigations” at reportedly haunted sites. Some of these sites are well known within the community while other sites have never been subject to paranormal inquiry. The necessity of investigating requires groups to develop something of a geographical focus in their investigations. Members prefer to pursue investigations close to home, ideally no more than one or two hours drive from home. It is rare to encounter a non-commercial group from the North of England conducting investigations

\textsuperscript{5} Such sources include a huge range of authors. Some examples are Hans Holzer, a self-fashioned parapsychologist who purported to have a Ph.D. in parapsychology from London College of Applied Science – a claim that many parapsychologists and skeptics doubt; Richard Southall, an American who published a popular guide to “ghost hunting” with no qualifications to do so, other than his personal experiences; Richard Felix, a former cast member of \textit{Most Haunted} who produces periodic ghost walks and DVDs on paranormal investigating; and Richard Weisman, a professional academic psychologist at the University of Hertfordshire who maintains a high public profile and regularly appears at public science and skeptical events, such as the Edinburgh Science Festival and TAM London. This is not a comprehensive list of published, written and video resources that influence investigators, but it does demonstrate some of the range of backgrounds and forms that expertise takes. In terms of websites and forums, investigators spend a significant chunk of their online time browsing, observing, and commenting on other forums and websites.
in the South. It is not that they are uninterested in Southern ghosts but, rather, that the practicalities of access prevent them from pursuing such work.

When it comes to choosing unknown locations, teams approach local pubs, theaters, restaurants, and hotels. They ask the owners or landlords of these establishments, first, if they are aware of any ghostly or paranormal activity and, second, if they would consider allowing the team to spend the night investigating. Asking the latter question is in no way contingent on a positive response to the former. They also approach well-known venues and ask about the protocols for investigating.

Almost universally, paranormal investigating groups assert in their online self-descriptions that they are interested in the *science of the paranormal*. What this, in practice, actually means varies greatly. Different members of groups have had a range of personal encounters with the paranormal. The continuum of paranormal encounters ranges from never experiencing anything remotely paranormal to self-identifying as a medium who can see full aspirations regularly. Spiritualist mediums and sensitive individuals belong to these groups and the groups accept them; however, these groups purport to subject mediumship to scientific protocols and skeptical doubts. Paranormal investigators are fond of suggesting that a medium “is a tool, just like an EMF reader, that you can use on an investigation,” as Jack often explained.

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6 Local landlords’ and business owners’ level of openness to allowing teams to investigate surprised me. Regardless of whether they considered their business haunted, many were willing to allow these investigators access to their shops or pubs. Some of the willingness was certainly due to expectations of financial gain from having a ghost (real or imagined) in a pub or hotel and, thereby, attracting more customers.
Paranormal investigators are not alone in insisting on testing and verifying mediumship. Indeed, all of the groups I have mentioned demand such testing; however, they disagree on the terms of the testing. For parapsychologists, laboratory testing complete with controls and statistical analyses constitutes the best form of analysis. For Spiritualists, church demonstrations suffice with verification from audience members considered sufficient. Among investigators, an ongoing debate centered on the ideal use of the mediumship. While they were certainly interested in the insights of mediums and the psychical observations of non-mediums during investigations, they typically sought to treat these insights as just another piece of evidence rather than allowing them to become biographical narratives of the paranormal presence at a site. For instance, during an investigation, when a medium cited a sensation of coldness on the left side of her body and interpreted it as a man touching her, other members began to assess the natural environment around her to establish if there were other possible causes for this sensation and its interpretation. Different groups achieved various levels of success at this balancing task.

For paranormal investigators, disentangling the mundane from the paranormal was key in any investigation. During the course of an investigation, researchers are very attuned to the environment around them. The place being examined is typically closed for business and is very quiet. They notice minute noises and changes to the environment, such as temperature changes, scratches, the sound of the wind against the building, and electrical humming. A key activity involves identifying which of these sounds is naturally occurring or results from mundane elements of the built environment. They

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Indeed, historically, the desire to test and verify mediums was instrumental to founding of the SPR and the organization of psychical research in the 19th century.
deem any noises or occurrences that cannot be accounted for in these terms as possibly paranormal.

Investigations tend to occur at night. While this is the standard practice, there is no shared consensus on its necessity. Some investigators explain the practice in practical terms, noting that groups are likely to have access to sites only at night when they are closed to the public. They also note that it is ideal since it is usually quiet in the middle of the night. Other researchers propose that the practice is ideal since the “paranormal is more active at night.” Most researchers I know would dismiss this latter explanation, relegating it to the “pseudo-science of ghost hunters.” Interestingly, when parapsychologists or psychical researchers seek to dismiss all popular manifestations of interest in the paranormal, they assert that all popular investigators believe they need to investigate at night “because that’s when ghosts are out.” This is obviously a gross overstatement.

Indeed, in much the same way that paranormal investigators distance themselves from ghost hunters, parapsychologists are especially keen on distancing themselves from paranormal investigators. At parapsychological (and psychical research) conferences, participants regularly mourn the public presence and authority of paranormal investigators, ghost hunters, and what they see as forms of popular culture emblematic of their endeavors. For instance, at the joint SPR/PA conference in 2008, several psychical researchers and parapsychologists presented a joint paper called “Have the Lunatics taken over the Asylum?” In this paper, Ann Winsper, Steven Parsons, and Ciaran O’Keeffe harshly critiqued the current popularity of paranormal investigating and ghost hunting, arenas that they notably do not differentiate. They interpret the rise of popular forms of
hunting and investigating as endangering spontaneous case investigations carried out by serious researchers, meaning parapsychologists or psychical researchers. They write:

It would now appear that spontaneous case investigation undertaken in a scientific manner and with serious aims of trying to understand more about the mechanisms and processes by which such encounters may be generated, are at serious risk of being permanently and irrevocably undermined by this new wave of pseudoscientific, amateur thrill seekers whose primary intention might be more accurately described as wanting to spend a scary night in a spooky building” (Winsper, Parsons, O’Keeffe 2008).

This dismissal of ghost hunters and paranormal investigators as “thrill seekers” is common among parapsychologists and psychical researchers.

While parapsychologists and psychical researchers dismiss them, paranormal investigators do not share unanimously positive outlooks on parapsychologists. Indeed, while some applaud and embrace their insights, others raise doubts about their purported superiority. For instance, in response to a comment on a web forum praising the work of parapsychologists Andrew, a paranormal investigator, wrote: “I personally wouldn't say just because someone is a qualified parapsychologist it doesn't automatically make them better at investigating the paranormal, as many are 'taught' to think a certain way.” This type of response to professional parapsychologists among paranormal investigators is common. While they do tend to recognize parapsychologists as offering sometimes valuable insights, they also tend to contest the idea that parapsychologists are the ultimate authority in the arena of paranormal knowledge production. Indeed, many paranormal
investigators are at once skeptical and envious of parapsychologists’ institutional authority and academic qualifications.⁸

As Andrew’s comment suggests, paranormal investigators pride themselves on being more “open minded” and thinking more broadly than parapsychologists, to say nothing of ghost hunters. They pride themselves on having a broader approach than parapsychologists. They are proud of not limiting themselves to laboratory conditions in their research. Jack, a paranormal investigator, explained to me: “I used to think about going back and doing a course in parapsychology at uni [university] but then I realized that it was all in the lab, not about going out and getting real experience with things like we do.” In this instance, Jack notes that he once found parapsychology a desirable arena of knowledge production, but he later came to value paranormal investigating more highly because it permitted him greater leeway to engage in actual paranormal phenomena in the “real world.” This critique of parapsychology as excessively laboratory-based circulates often among paranormal investigators.

Ghost Hunters

The category and identity of ghost hunter is the most complicated and difficult to define of all the categories I have mentioned. In many ways, it is very similar to “paranormal investigator.” However, there are important differences in use of these

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⁸ The issue of qualification is an interesting one. While paranormal investigators critique the legitimacy of authority assumed on the sole basis of degrees or qualifications, praising, instead, field experience, many engage in interesting processes of self-qualification. For instance, paranormal investigators who join organizations such as the SPR are prone to including the letters SPR after their names, in the same way individuals with professional qualifications sometimes do. For instance, one paranormal investigator signed all of her interest postings, Jane Smith, SPR.
terms. “Ghost hunter” is deployed as a term of self-identification, dismissal, and popular description. This ambiguity over the title of ghost hunter has not always existed. Mid-twentieth century researchers into the paranormal, who by today’s standard would likely identify as paranormal investigators, often self-identified as ghost hunters. It is only in recent years that “ghost hunter” became an acutely derogatory term. For instance, Harry Price, a well known and generally well respected 20th century investigator of the paranormal, embraced the term ghost hunter in an untroubled fashion.

Indeed, in 2007 historian Owen Davies chronicled the rise and fall of a range of engagements with the ghostly in pre-modern and Modern England, and he noted that the term ghost hunter rose to prominence in the twentieth century. He wrote:

The twentieth century heralded the rise of the ‘ghost hunter,’ the media-friendly, maverick psychic investigator who came to each case with an open mind but who, like any good detective, treated every case as a mystery waiting to be solved rationally. The ghost hunter was not so much driven by the desire to prove profound truths about religion and the human condition – the motivating forces for the founders of the SPR – as by the thrill of the hunt and the prospect of perhaps one day finally coming face to face with spirits” (Davies 2007: 95).

Davies’ definition foregrounds certain important elements of ghost hunting, namely, the primacy of the pursuit of an encounter with the ghostly/paranormal.

Like paranormal investigators, ghost hunters express interest in “scientifically” and systematically learning about ghosts. More so than paranormal investigators, they identify the object of their inquiry as “ghosts” or “spirits” rather than the paranormal.
They tend to be untroubled by the conflation of agency and causality implicit in their use of the term “ghost.”

The advent of reality television programs focusing on the paranormal complicated the use of the term ghost hunter. Many of the participants on reality television programs focusing on the paranormal self-identify as ghost hunters. In fact, there are several shows that foreground the identity of ghost hunter in the title of their program. While these programs have unquestionably contributed to the popularity of paranormal research, their popularity within the active community of paranormal researchers is questionable at best. Many paranormal investigators actively participate in online anti-fandom and refer to participants in these shows as examples of “what not do” on an investigation. To call someone else a ghost hunter is to associate him or her actively with the research conduct of members of these shows.

Other researchers, most often paranormal investigators, apply the term ghost hunter to researchers who seem to be uninterested in collecting and considering paranormal data and prefer, instead, to enjoy thrill-seek ing first-person encounters with the potentially paranormal. They think of ghost hunters as unsophisticated and uncritical. These claims of uncritical acceptance of the paranormal permeate much of the paranormal community and act as a mechanism of dismissing the contributions and participation of others. This was also the case in parapsychologists’ discussions of psychical researchers and, to an even more pronounced degree, in their mocking of paranormal investigators and ghost hunters.

Individuals who self-identify as ghost hunters lack any necessary formal education or professional qualifications. Ghost hunters have a range of educational,
professional, and economic backgrounds. Unlike parapsychologists and, to some degree, psychical researchers, ghost hunters do not have or sustain a professional role. While they may periodically engage in for-profit ghost hunting, most ghost hunters have other, more regular occupations.

Ghost hunters periodically rely on methods that other researchers of the paranormal dismiss as excessively Spiritual, unreliable and ultimately comedic. For instance, many ghost hunters engage in the practice of scrying (i.e. gazing into a mirror in hopes of encountering spirit). They are unaware of scrying’s long, complicated history first in Elizabethan magic and, more recently in Alistair Crowley’s reintroduction of magic in the Order of the Golden Dawn.9

Paranormal investigators differentiate paranormal investigating from ghost hunting by focusing on evidence and experience-seeking behaviors. “Evidence” and “experience” constitute two very important and recurrent categories within the paranormal community. Paranormal investigators consider themselves to be the pursuers and producers of evidence. By evidence, they mean a range of systematically collected, regularly documented, and reviewed field observations and technological examinations of the normal and the paranormal.10 The goal of this evidence-collecting is to establish patterned insights into the nature of paranormal activity or to establish that such activity does not exist. While most paranormal investigators are somewhat confident that the

9 While paranormal investigators are unlikely to invoke scrying’s long and complicated history in their critique of ghost hunters, they dismiss such practices on the grounds that they are not scientific.
10 While self-proclaimed paranormal investigators tend to identify systematic collection, documentation, and review as the hallmarks of investigating, not all investigators’ work meets these criteria. Some are self-aware and critical of their failures to live up to their goals and others are not.
“paranormal” exists, however they choose to define it, they are ostensibly open to the possibility that it does not exist. They would say that this capacity to recognize the potential non-existence of the paranormal separates them from ghost hunters, who cannot imagine such a void.

In contrast, they see “experiencing” the paranormal as the goal of ghost hunters. By experiencing, they refer to the pursuit of personal encounters with the paranormal/ghostly. These encounters are not systematically recorded or analyzed. They are thought to be devoid of scientific methodology and to result in little more than personal anecdotes.11 To some extent, serious investigators consider such encounters wasted opportunities.

I have cast the practices of “experiencing the paranormal” in the negative terms of paranormal investigators. This is not to imply that these practices are inherently wrong or lacking in meaning from the perspective of self-proclaimed ghost hunters. While paranormal investigators dismiss the practices of ghost hunters as non-evidentiary, ghost

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11 This is not to say that highly “scientific” engagements with the paranormal are never dismissed by investigators (to say nothing of parapsychologists and psychical researchers) as “experience.” One paranormal research group, Dark Shadow Research (DSR), prides itself on scientific research into the paranormal. Indeed, following parapsychologists, they devised a range of complicated and well thought out paranormal experiments. The regular use of these experiments did not protect them from allegations that what they were really seeking “experience.” Indeed, after a particularly slow evening out with DSR, Rose and I talked about the role of the experiments in DSR. Rose was frustrated by the haphazard nature of their execution and the DSR members’ insistent attempts to make the experiments fun for participants. As Rose put it, “what exactly are they doing with these experiments? Are they analyzing anything? It’s not particularly regular what they’re doing. It’s like they’re out to experience science, if you know what I mean… I mean, experiments don’t need to be fun. They’re experiments.” Rose’s point was that DSR was essentially pursuing “experiences” despite their engagement with science. In Rose’s opinion, their failure to systematically execute and interpret their experiments relegated their pursuit to “experience.” Indeed, the co-leaders of DSR, Hugh and Amy, periodically questioned and worried about this independently of Rose.
hunters value their practices for resulting in personal evidence, or proof, of the paranormal. Ghost hunters’ pursuit of this “personal proof” takes two primary forms: (1) they attempt to photograph or video-record ghosts/spirit, and (2) they seek personal encounters with manifestations of ghosts/spirit. While visualizing technologies are broadly used across all arenas of the paranormal community, they maintain a special centrality in the practices of ghost hunters.12

There is an inherent paradox in the centrality of photographic and video engagements with the paranormal. For ghost hunters and paranormal investigators alike, these forms of visual evidence constitute ambiguous evidence. At once, it is highly compelling, despite periodic allegations of photo-doctoring or photographic ineptitude; however, photographic evidence produced by others is rarely as emotionally resonant with ghost hunters as their own personal encounters with the paranormal.

Mediums and Spiritualists

The category of medium is the most complicated to describe. Mediums agree on very little in the way of origin, definition, and scope of vision, function, and spirit vision. To claim to be a medium is essentially to offer one’s own definition and explanation of the mechanism of mediumship. Generally, self-identified mediums claim to sense or encounter spirit(s), ghost, or psychical activity in one of the understood sensory avenues

12 Ghost hunters’ engagements with visualizing technologies are well represented in popular culture. Historically, cinematic depictions of ghosts have focused on fully bodied ghosts who are active characters in the plot, in films such as Ghost Town (2008); Ghost (1990); Truly, Madly, Deeply (1990). More recently, horror films have focused on ghost hunters’ engagements with cameras. In films such as Paranormal Activity (2007) and Paranormal Activity 2 (2010), as well as earlier films such as The Blair Witch Project (1999), cameras and emerging video footage act as a means of exploring invisible, threatening presences.
such as sight or sound, or to have mentally mediated encounters with them. Many also claim to be able to have ordered and mutually understandable communication exchanges with spirit(s) or ghosts. Sometimes these exchanges happen internally to the medium, meaning that the medium is in silent, mental dialogue with the being while humans around the medium cannot hear or participate. In other instances, mediums vocalize their end of the exchange with the entities. This allows people to hear one side of the exchange and begin to piece together what the spirit/entity might be communicating.

Sociologist Robin Wooffitt (2006) has identified stage demonstrations, psychic fairs, private one-to-one sittings, Spiritualist services, and telephone and online services as the chief arenas in which contemporary mediums work. Basing his research largely in these arenas, Wooffitt noted that “the contemporary consumption of the psychic’s skill has become much more of an explicit business transaction…it is understood that psychics are entitled to charge a fee for their services” (2006:11). This is the case in nearly all settings in which mediums work with the important exception of paranormal investigating and ghost hunting. Mediums who participate in investigations and ghost hunts, both non-profit activities, receive no financial compensation. Mediums may parlay their participation in such events into “evidence of their esteem” (Wooffitt 2006: 22) to be deployed for profit; however, their participation itself does not warrant pay.

Most of the mediums I met in the course of this research work in a variety of arenas, including those mentioned by Wooffitt. The mediums who work with paranormal investigators and ghost hunters most often also share their mediumship in Spiritualist Churches and very occasionally psychic fairs. Spiritualism constitutes an important other

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13 The exception to this is commercial ghost hunting events where mediums are paid for their participation.
to paranormal investigation. It is an avowedly religious, or at least, spiritual, venture to offer proof or evidence of the survival of the personality after death.\textsuperscript{14} Many of the mediums I met demonstrated their mediumship in Spiritualist Churches and some participated in Spiritualist Church development circles. Investigators often ridiculed both activity, arguing that these were desperate people poor evidence of life after death. The Spiritualist National Union (SNU) claims to have 2,000 subscribing members and that roughly 20,000 people regularly attend Spiritualist Services in over 400 venues across Great Britain (www.snu.org.uk/index2htm). Its sister organization, the Spiritualist Association of Great Britain (SAGB) does not provide any estimate of its members but asserts that it is the largest organization of Spiritualists in the world. Spiritualists define Spiritualism as a religion, philosophy, and science concerned with the survival of the personality after death. It seeks to provide empirical evidence of this survival through demonstrations of mediumship.

There are two prominent understandings about the origin and manifestation of mediumship in contemporary England. One theory asserts that everyone is capable of mediumship and the other imagines it as a more selective trait. Many mediums assert that mediumship is a core component of being human, meaning that each person has the capacity to develop his or her mediumship. I often encountered explanations of mediumship that claimed that at birth people have an inherent capacity to see things that adults have “closed themselves off to.” George, a spirit medium from Newcastle, explained:

\textsuperscript{14} Spiritualists and mediums who work in Spiritualist traditions often use the phrase “survival of the personality” to refer to a ghost or spirit.
Look at little kids. They see so much more than adults do. It’s because they haven’t learned to close themselves off to it. They don’t know that it’s bad or scary so they see things... When they’re talking about imaginary friends and that, it might be something more. They see spirit around them all the time. But parents discourage them, you see, they tell them it’s odd and it’s weird so they learn to close it off. For some it [mediumship] sticks around, but for others, it dries up. It’s hard to reopen it after that.

That George spoke somewhat harshly about the process of adults’ discouraging children’s mediumship is not surprising. Many mediums explain that their own mediumship has been a point of contention and struggle in their lives. George’s mother was “very Catholic” and interpreted George’s mediumship as a sign of mental illness or demonic possession. Throughout his life, his mother has encouraged him to seek Catholic spiritual assistance for his “problem.”

Another medium, Ray, from Sunderland echoed these sentiments of struggle. He said, “I’ve always gotten things. At first I didn’t know what it was but then I was scared to tell people. I didn’t want my wife to think I was mental [crazy].” These fears of being judged “mental” are not unfounded. In Ray’s case, for instance, his wife was genuinely quite surprised and somewhat unsure of how to proceed when he announced that he was a medium at the age of 40. When I attended one of Ray’s demonstrations at a community center, his wife sat with me and, during breaks, wanted to talk about the strangeness of watching Ray demonstrate his mediumship. She kept reiterating how confused she was.

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15 Many mediums experienced personal struggles with religious explanations for their mediumship. They are acutely aware of the religious critique and skepticism of their mediumship (and sometimes involvement in the paranormal) and include these elements in narratives of their personal struggles with mediumship.
by the whole process and how he had never told her anything about it. She sought confirmation more than once that I did not think Ray was crazy.

While mediumship has been an ever-present element in Ray’s and George’s lives, they both maintain that anyone could be a medium. They both run “development circles” intended to foster other people’s nascent or dormant mediumship. In fact, during my interviews with George, he often asked me if I was a medium and suggested that my aura indicated that I had the potential to develop quite strongly. Both he and Ray saw mediumship as a human trait capable of development and nurturing.

In contrast, some mediums understand their mediumship as a genetic trait. They believe that it is something that is passed down along certain “family lines.” For them, mediumship is a genetically inalienable facet of their biosocial identity. It is not something that can be learned. Paul, a medium from Redcar, articulated this understanding to me. He noted:

Not everyone can do this. It’s a gift. It’s not something to be developed like, like the ones at development circles tell you. They’re trying to make it something it’s not. You’re born with it or you’re not. There’s naught to be done if you’re not. Now, me, it runs in my family. My grandmam had it. She could see the dead around a person, talk to them. It skipped my mum’s generation though and then I got it. Now, my son’s not got it but the one Andrea’s carrying now [his pregnant girlfriend], I think it’ll have it… Andrea’s not got anything but since she’s been pregnant she’s been picking up loads. That’s the only thing I can think of.
In this narrative, I note his assumption that Andrea was able to “pick up things” through her connection with Paul’s genetic matter in the fetus. It underlines the idea that mediumship is biologically determined.

Mediums are often viewed skeptically by the other social worlds of PKP, namely parapsychologists, psychical researchers, and paranormal investigators. Indeed, parapsychologists and psychical researchers are primarily interested in mediums as potential subjects in experiments testing ESP and PK. The claims produced by mediums are not of substantial interest to them; rather, their self-identification as mediums casts them as useful subjects for a number of psi experiments. Rather than express dismay and hostility the way some paranormal investigators do when their research is not taken seriously by parapsychologists, some mediums relish the attention they get from parapsychologists. Rob, a medium from Saltburn, described his interaction with a group of parapsychologists noting, “I went to their lab and they gave me a load of tests. I don’t think they thought I would do as well as I did. I got almost all of their things right. They said I was right impressive. I wasn’t surprised. I know I’m a medium.” While I am unsure if Rob ever actually worked with any parapsychologists, his retelling of the real or imagined event deploys parapsychologists as supporting something he already knew about himself.16

Indeed, mediums seem to embrace parapsychology and view it as a means of verifying their mediumship. In contrast, they view paranormal investigators and ghost

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16 Here, I allow for the possibility that Rob never actually collaborated with parapsychologists because his description of the event does not mirror most parapsychological research. Ultimately, what is interesting is that he told a story about being tested by parapsychologists rather than trying to verify whether or not they actually tested him.
hunters more critically. While they may eagerly work with investigators on investigations, they tend to view their primary allegiances differently, aligning themselves with spirit rather than with paranormal investigators. Some mediums critique investigators for what they see as the cavalier manner in which they treat spirits and possibly the residents of a building. For example, Eastern Ghost Researchers (EGR) developed a working relationship with Scott, a medium from Berwick-upon-Tweed, but this relationship eventually became problematic for both Scott and the members of EGR. On one particular investigation, one that Scott and members of EGR agreed was emblematic of the problem, they went to a private home in Newcastle to investigate strange occurrences reported distressed residents. While EGR members were setting up their equipment and running their preliminary baseline tests, Scott talked with the owners. At that time, he came into contact with the “poltergeist energy” occupying the house. Without consulting with EGR, he asked the energy to leave the house and he “cleared” the house. The owners of the house were pleased; however, EGR members felt cut out of the loop and were angry that Scott had derailed a chance to examine a poltergeist.

Scott was angered by this frustration with him. To him, it exemplified the “amateurishness” of their approach. As he explained heatedly to me in an interview, They didn’t care about the energy or the people living there. They just wanted to muck around and see what they could find but I wasn’t having any of it. I was there for the living people as well as the spirit. That’s where my allegiance lies and I’m sorry if they don’t like it. Things like that are why I’m done with the ghost groups. They’re rubbish. Total amateurs.
Other mediums echo these sentiments. Indeed, many view their collaborations with “ghost groups,” as they tend to call both ghost hunting and paranormal investigation groups, as ripe with conflict. Notably, conflicts, such as the disagreement between EGR and Scott, also compound investigators’ negative feelings about mediums and their “power hungry” ways. Indeed, EGR regularly cited this instance and other incidents associated with Scott as demonstrations of mediums’ erratic and inconsiderate behavior.

While they never explicitly assert their superiority over investigators, mediums do emphasize that they can access invisible flows of knowledge that paranormal investigators cannot. Such assertions often lead them to depict paranormal investigators as foolish and irrelevant. It is not uncommon for mediums to “clear” a building of a certain well-known spirit, meaning that they help the spirit enter a more secure or comfortable place in the afterlife. That ghost hunters or paranormal investigators visit these sites and continue to interact with what they believe to be the particular spirit that has been “cleared” demonstrates their foolishness to mediums. Ultimately, mediums contest investigators’ attempts to police them in a range of ways during and after the actual investigations.

**Conclusion: Overlapping but not Cooperating**

While all these actors come into intimate contact with paranormal knowledge, they disagree intensely over the proper methods, consequences, and outcomes of these interactions. One of the main points of contention between groups in the arena of paranormal knowledge production concerns who has the right to define, delineate, and
publicly represent knowledge of the paranormal. In this chapter, I have attempted to
demonstrate some of the points of contention and discord among these groups.

Paranormal investigators and ghost hunters draw the bulk of the animosity from
parapsychologists, mediums, and psychical researchers. Indeed, that they receive such
remarkably negative attention attests to the dominance of their expertise in the public
sphere. Parapsychologists, psychical researchers, and mediums tend to distrust and resent
the current popularity of paranormal investigators and ghost hunters. They see them as
interchangeable interlopers in a field once defined by legitimate experts who ground their
claims in laboratory or scholarly research, in the case of parapsychologists or psychical
researchers, or genuine, spiritual contact, in the case of mediums. The new constellation
of the “investigator” and his rising public profile deeply distresses parapsychologists and
 mediums alike who fear their own declining public expertise, and decry what they see as
paranormal investigators’ and ghost hunters’ illegitimate knowledge consumed by
aggrieved people grappling with ghosts, spirits, and loss as well as a broader curious
public.
PART TWO

PARADOXES OF BELIEF AND WANTING TO BELIEVE
CHAPTER FOUR

“THEY’RE ALL BELIEVERS!”: AN ANALYSIS OF PARANORMAL INVESTIGATORS, PARAPSYCHOLOGISTS, AND SKEPTICS’ UNDERSTANDINGS OF BELIEF

My concern in this chapter is with the circulation of discourses of belief among investigators, skeptics, and parapsychologists. Paranormal investigators, skeptics, and parapsychologists purport to disagree on the nature of science and research as ways to contest each other group’s legitimacy publicly. Yet as I will show here, each group engages with discourses of belief and science and does so in strikingly similar ways. Indeed, each group expresses a discomfort with the notion of belief. None of them wish to be seen as believers. Here, the referent of the belief is less important than the act of believing. I argue in this chapter that investigators, parapsychologists, and skeptics’ articulations of belief function in similar ways. Each of these sets of actors identifies believing as logically problematic. All accuse others of being believers in order to cast doubt on their rationality and legitimacy. These articulations of belief, which function as a form of distancing and othering, help to produce the identity of the speaker as fundamentally rational and logical and, implicitly, more trustworthy and authoritative than believers. These distancing accusations, I argue, are based on an understanding of rationality or open-mindedness grounded in a pervasive sense of scientism.

When addressing the ontological nature of ghosts, spirits, and the paranormal, skeptics and enthusiasts alike turn to the language of “belief” to express their understanding. For example, skeptics see investigators as blind believers in ghosts and
investigators see skeptics as believers in science. More surprisingly, these same actors also rely on the language of “belief” to explore and articulate their confidence in “science” as a system of either revealing or debunking ghosts, spirits, and the paranormal. The language of belief permeates popular English expressions of support and enthusiasm for “science” and the paranormal. For instance, it is not uncommon for skeptics or investigators to declare that they “believe in science.” Belief functions in a multifaceted way in popular discourse regarding science and the paranormal. It is at once an identity category and also a verb used to express sentiments of support and ascription. In conversations with paranormal investigators about their understandings and research practices into the paranormal, belief often emerged as a topic of discussion and rhetoric deployed in projects of self-imagining.

Scholars and popular critics often pit belief and science against each other. Indeed, they often treated them as opposite sides of the same coin. Brenda Denzler notes that there is a popularly held assumption that “‘belief’ runs counter to empirical fact and rationality and it is the undisciplined mode of thought to which the poor and the uneducated are most prone” (2001: 1-2). Scholars have long attempted to render popular belief in a variety of fringe subjects such as Ufology, conspiracy, and the paranormal as forms of irrationality born of political and social disempowerment (Wheen 2004) or futile attempts at “cognitively mapping in the postmodern age” (Jameson 1988: 356). In each case, belief emerges as something to study and something that tries but ultimately fails to render the world knowable. Here, I turn to active agents involved in paranormal knowledge production and consider their understandings of belief.
Science and Belief in Contemporary England

As I began to explore in Chapter One, historians of science (e.g., Bowler 2001, Numbers 1985) have rightly warned against conceptualizing the relationship between “science” and “religion” as one of conflict or warfare. As Numbers noted in 1985, these scholarly examinations “assume the existence of two static entities, “science” and “religion”” (1985: 80). Mindful of this insight, I want to suggest that there is an ongoing conflict in contemporary Britain. It is not, however, between science and religion as such. Indeed, religion is nearly completely absent from the debate and the present invocations of science might seem foreign to some since they are far removed from the laboratory or university. I want to propose that the debate hinges on belief and skepticism, rationality and irrationality. By turning to talk about belief and believing among investigators, parapsychologists, and skeptics, I will examine the stakes of these ongoing debates in the context of paranormal knowledge production.

These understandings of belief in science and the paranormal are not entirely at odds with popular English engagements with religion more generally. In 1994, Grace Davie noted that a significant portion of the English public believed, to some degree, in a notion of God; however, this did not translate into religious membership or affiliation. She wrote:

Most people in this country – whatever their denominational allegiance – express their religious sentiments by staying away from, rather than going to, their places
of worship. On the other hand, relatively few British people have opted out of religion altogether: out and out atheists are rare (Davie 1994: 2).

While Davie wrote this in 1994, based on 2000 census material, this observation remains relevant.

Figure 4.1: List of Religious Affiliations in England and Wales, 2001 Census

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Total Number of All People (across region)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>37,046,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>7,274,290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>1,546,626</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>552,421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jedi Knight</td>
<td>390,127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>259,927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>144,453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritualist</td>
<td>32,404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>31,836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>14,909</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>10,357</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The distribution of religions in Figure 4.1 is revealing and perhaps surprising. I want to highlight three elements of it. First, that over seven million respondents identified themselves as having no religion is revealing. They did not declare themselves as atheists or agnostics. In fact, only 10,357 people declared themselves to be atheists – a comparatively small number. Similarly, they did not describe themselves as agnostics. They eschewed any label. Second, a seemingly high number of people identified themselves as Christians; however, their choice of the term “Christian” rather than as members of a specific denomination is revealing. Other people identified themselves with reference to a wide range of Christian denominations – Methodist, Unitarian, Greek Orthodox, and Christian Scientist to name but a very few. That people chose to identify
themselves as Christians rather than as members of specific denominations or churches of Christianity reaffirms Davie’s point that most people do not actively attend or identify with a particular church. Indeed, the abundance of Christians and people without a religion suggests a widespread aversion to fixed associations.

Finally, a surprisingly large number of people declared themselves Jedi Knights. In fact, Jedi Knights seemingly comprise the fourth largest religion in England. Of course, this is not actually the case. Very few people actually ascribe religious status to the Jedis (of George Lucas’s Star Wars films). Prior to the census, many people decided to identify collectively as Jedis as a joke or means of pointing out what they saw as the silliness of asking people to list their religion on the census. By asserting that they “belong” to a religion that is by nearly all accounts not really a religion, respondents poked fun at the premise of being affixed to a church.¹

Davie’s observation that people believe in something while avoiding belonging to an organized religion is interesting, especially with respect to investigators, parapsychologists, and skeptics’ stances on belief and believing. That many English people eschew declared, fixed associations with churches or places of worship in favor of simply believing in whatever version of god, spirituality, or Christianity corresponds with my paranormal collaborators’ reluctance to declare paranormal belief – an act that would

¹ Of course, I do not wish to deny the possibility that some people genuinely consider the teaching of Jedi Knights to be a religion. I am aware of the Church of Jediism and the Temple of the Jedi, organizations dedicated to following the path of the force. However, this is not a genuinely widespread religious movement in England. I have never met a Jedi. Nonetheless, this 2001 mode of identification deserves greater scholarly attention. Indeed, that they chose to identify as Jedis, characters who artfully blend tropes of science and religion in a science fiction universe, is revealing. Elsewhere, Jennifer Porter (2004) has demonstrated that Star Trek conventions – another popular science fiction community – blur the boundaries between pilgrimage and leisure.
be roughly analogous to joining a church. While Davie does not pursue an extended examination of what “believing without belonging” entails, it suggests that a facet of English postmodernity is an avoidance of fixed belief. It seems unlikely to me that this stance is prevalent only among investigators. That it extends to discussions of science as well as those of religion demonstrates the degree of doubt and skepticism that pervades English society.

**Paranormal Investigators and Belief**

As I first got to know paranormal investigators, amateurs who aspired to engage in serious, scientifically grounded research into the paranormal, I often asked them what I imagined to be a straightforward question: Do you believe in ghosts or the paranormal? To me, this seemed like a question that would warrant a relatively simple yes or no answer. Despite Rodney Needham’s (1972) warning that the language of belief is often fraught with problems and incommensurability, I naively assumed investigators would deploy the language of belief to explore their understanding of ghosts. I could not have been more wrong. This naïve question evoked lengthy treatises on what counted as a “ghost” and what exactly they believed in.

For example, during an early conversation with two paranormal investigators, Clara and Albert, I asked, do you believe in ghosts? Do you think belief is the right word to use to describe it? Their responses were telling. Clara began by unpacking my using of the term “ghost.” She commented:

Well, I suppose it depends on what you mean by a ghost. I mean, I know what people tend to mean when they say it, some sort of manifestation of a dead person that can interact with people. That sort of ghost, I don’t so much believe in, no.
But that’s not to say I don’t believe in anything. I believe there are things we don’t know about. That maybe energy has properties we don’t properly understand at the moment. I think things can happen. But I’m not a big one for that idea of a ghost.

Albert echoed Clara’s sentiment. He first reiterated his displeasure with the unifying term “ghost” and, then, expressed that he too “believe[s] in something.” I asked him what he believed in and how he came to believe in it. He paused and then answered me. “I believe there is something… I’ve seen things that can’t be explained and I’ve heard too many stories to just assume there’s naught out there, that we know everything. I don’t know what it is but I do think there is something.”

This type of uncertainty is not what one might expect from “paranormal investigators.” Surely the title “paranormal investigator” suggests that there are some paranormal phenomena capable of being investigated. This, however, is not the case. Albert, Clara, and a significant majority of investigators are content to dwell in this ambiguity of “believing in something,” suspecting that there is more than meets the eye yet being unable or unwilling to assert with any confidence what this something is. In these statements, that the something they believe in is left ambiguous is significant. It signals an openness and a curiosity about the nature of the (other)worlds around them. Indeed, the commitment to this ambiguity is pervasive. Rose, a paranormal investigator, problematized the use of the term “paranormal” in the title “paranormal investigator.” She wrote, “I sometimes wonder how we can be investigating the paranormal. I mean, the term paranormal in and of itself is a problem. We’re looking at the normal most of the time. And, if we did find something outside the normal, or outside the usual, wouldn’t it
still be normal?” This ambiguity stands in sharp contrast to the certainty of belief-based statements I will describe below. These statements demonstrate investigators’ performed curiosity and intellectual vigor and, I want to argue, they reveal a significant thread of thought regarding objectivity. That the something in which they believe remains unmarked, undetermined, and fundamentally open demonstrates (to them, at least) their lack of bias and objectivity.

For them, I argue, the claim of “believing in something” signals both a confidence in the revelatory capacities of investigation and their unwillingness to locate themselves as static believers – in science, religion, Spiritualism, or any other imaginable system – a location that would preclude the possibility of engaging in the mode of “objectivity” that they value. Their refusal to commit to the standpoint of a scientist or, conversely, a full believer (categories that I examine more fully below) in the paranormal/ghosts suggests a key facet of their self-identification as investigators. To them, being an investigator requires an open, unbiased mind able to observe and then classify emergent phenomena during the course of an investigation.2 This commitment to a kind of “neutrality” informs their articulation of objectivity and objective knowledge – the purported goals of their work. That they believed in an active, shifting way is significant. Rather than being determined, their belief remained unattached to a permanent object or system – such as ghosts or the paranormal. Put differently, Mark, an investigator explained, “we’re open-minded. That’s how we’re different from believers in science and believers in the paranormal.” This open-mindedness, or desire to situate themselves outside systems of

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2 Whether this idealized understanding of investigating reflects the actual, lived realities of investigating is not my concern here. In fact, I would suggest that it does not reflect those realities. However, my concern here is with talk about belief, believing, and irrationality.
belief, can be seen as a popular interpretation and enactment of “objectivity.” Donna Haraway (1997) and others (Latour 1999; Shapin and Schaffer 1985) have argued that people value a particular vision of objectivity in modernity. This vision privileges individuals standing outside of their assumptions or, as Haraway puts it, being “a modest witness.” “This is the virtue,” she wrote in 1997, “that guarantees that the modest witness is the legitimate and authorized ventriloquist for the object world, adding nothing from his mere opinions, from his biasing embodiment” (1997: 24). Investigators use the language of belief to situate themselves as such modest witnesses.

Ultimately, investigators fear being classed as “believers.” To them being a “believer” in tantamount to accepting a fixed, static identity. It would mean that their minds are made up. Instead, they value fluidity and investigation. That they never find satisfactory evidence or experience definitive phenomena is hardly surprising in light of these imaginings of belief.

**Constituting Believers**

While investigators assert that they “believe in something,” they never assert that they are believers. For them, “believer” is also a category of classification. Divergent groups of social actors mobilize “believer” in remarkably similar fashions. Namely, they affix the term “believer” to their oppositional others – those who they define as opposite them. Most significantly, paranormal knowledge producers and skeptics employ the term “believer” to refer to people or groups whose opinions and ideas fundamentally are established and largely unwavering.
For investigators, there are two groups of believers: most significantly, paranormal believers but, also, believers in science. Most investigators see themselves as separate and distinct from “believers.” In some sense, believer is used much like “ghost hunter”—a tacit dismissal or, at least, an act of distancing. Few of the investigators I met would label themselves as believers, especially believers in ghosts, without significant explanation or caveats.

When investigators deployed the term “believer,” they most commonly referred to individuals who are convinced that ghosts exist and who in the context of investigations are likely to interpret any out of the ordinary noises, scents, or sensations as evidence of ghosts. Quite often, investigators use the term believer to refer to members of the public who attend their investigations.

Many investigators jokingly refer to “believers” as “creaky floorboarders.” The use of this synonym is revealing. Albert described what a “creaky floorboarder” was to me. “They’re the ones who think every little sound is a ghost. If there’s a creaky floorboard in a place, it’s a ghost. It’s not just a floorboard.” Although he was very kind to, and often defended, creaky floorboarders against what he thought was unnecessarily harsh criticism, his definition of the nature of their belief in ghosts demonstrates that to him it was not a rational form of belief. He saw them as engaged in acts of misidentification. Despite his routine kindness and tolerance of them, for Albert, the squeaky floorboarders seemed somewhat foolish and desperate. He was not alone in this sentiment. Indeed, his point was that even when reasonable evidence to the contrary was presented, creaky floorboarders, or believers, insisted on interpreting events as supernatural. This is characteristic of how investigators saw “believers,” unfailingly
committed to a particular worldview and unable or unwilling to alter it based on competing evidence.

While most people use the term “believer” to refer to individuals committed to a particular understanding of the paranormal, some investigators also strategically deploy the term “believer” to critique popular understandings of science. One such investigator, Rose, was highly critical of the simplistic embracing of science by both investigators and “skeptics.” For her, it was troubling that proponents of science did not see science as a culturally mediated, or belief based, system. On numerous occasions, she explained her frustrations to me. Referring to two of our friends who were very committed to a “scientific” approach to the paranormal, Rose critically noted, “they’re just as much believers as the people who think every creaking door is a ghost.” Referring to them as “believers” was not a compliment. Rather, it was a way of asserting their dogmatic and uncritical acceptance of science as a belief system. While the pro-science investigators in question adamantly argued that science was not a belief system and that it was fundamentally different from forms of belief such as belief in ghosts, Rose and others continued to critique their intense investment in science.

Jack echoed Rose’s sentiment, arguing that scientific skeptics could also be seen as a category of believers. Jack and some other paranormal investigators would periodically refer to “believers in science” as “flat worlders,” a reference to the popular belief that scientists and the public in Europe during the Middles Ages were unwilling to believe that the earth was round, despite mounting evidence, due to their adherence to religiously guided theories of science. It is used to signal a dogmatic unwillingness to
question received assumptions and to accept new evidence and information. Jeffery Russell wrote that popularly, “‘flat-earthers’ is shorthand for ignoramuses” (1991: 75).

The use of “flat-worlder” in this capacity is unintentionally ironic. Historians Lindberg and Numbers (1987) and Russell (1991) have demonstrated that neither Christopher Columbus nor most segments of the population during the high Middle Ages actually thought that the world was flat. The popular myth that Europeans during the Middle Ages believed the world was flat is a relatively recent historical invention, emerging mainly in the 19th century in Europe and the United States. Russell traced the myth’s emergence in Europe to the rise of “middle class Enlightenment anti-clericism” (1991: 29). In the wake of the publication of *The Origin of the Species*, scholars and journalists routinely invoked militaristic metaphors to characterize science and religion’s contemporary and historical relationships. The increasingly popular and pervasive fictions of Columbus fearlessly standing up for true science and progress vis-à-vis the scientific, religious, and political powers of Europe by voyaging to the Americas did much to solidify certain understandings in the popular imaginary. Russell noted that “it fixed in the educated mind the idea that “science” stood for freedom and progress against the superstition and repression of ‘religion’” (1991: 38).

In the popular use, a “flat-worlder” or a “flat-earther” is someone who stands in the way of scientific progress. In Jack’s invocation of term as well as other investigators’ invocations of the term, scientists themselves constitute “flat-worlders.” Belief renders scientists, like the religious leaders before them, incapable of accurately understanding the world around them. Their evaluations of scientists echo Thomas Kuhn’s depiction of scientists working in existing paradigms unwilling to address the mounting contradictory
evidence. This depiction offers a revealing glimpse of how objectively real they understand genuine paranormal phenomena to be. Investigators, then, collapse the tension that earlier historical invocations of “flat-worlders” sought to maintain and critique – the science vs. religion tension – and instead, belief emerges as the central point of contention.

Investigators’ use of “flat-worlders” actively shifts the concern/scope from the composition of belief to the nature of belief. That investigators shift the referent of “flat-worlders” from adherents to a religious orthodoxy to enthusiasts of a scientific orthodoxy is not surprising. While in the U.S., the idea that science must be defended from religion remains popular, in Britain, irrationality more broadly writ is imagined as the culprit intent on disarming the public. My research supports the view that religion (in an organized capacity) is relatively absent from debates about the role of science in Britain. While periodically popular proponents of science and investigators feel compelled to defend and demarcate themselves as separate from religion, these two camps are ensnared in a battle over the nature of rationality, science, and belief.

Investigators often bluntly address the commonalities in the faith of “believers” and scientific believers. In a post in EGR’s forum, Jack strategically analyzed the similarities between “creaky floorboarders” and “flat worlders,” while offering advice on how to deal with each camp on and offline. He wrote:

Most of the debate on this comes from the same thing …If a Creaky-Floorboorder jumps on some experience that plainly isn't paranormal and a rational explanation is available, it should be given, listened too, thought about and a conclusion drawn and accepted if necessary. If a Flat-Worlder comes up with a "clutching at
straws" scientific explanation for an apparent paranormal experience then they have to be certain they are not just coming up with a "best fit" solution and using it as an excuse to dismiss something out of hand. Many Creaky-Floorboarders won't do that … Many Flat-Worlders won't do that … What do we have there? Two sides of exactly the same coin irrationally defending their belief system to the hilt … However, in my experience - and that’s all it is - I find many more of the Creaky-Floorboard brigade doing the right thing than I do Flat-Worlders (my emphasis).

In this passage, Jack’s characterization of creaky floorboarders and flat-worlders demonstrates that these are static, stable forms of classification unlikely to change due to new evidence. A particular understanding of the nature of belief is implicit in this. For Jack, then, unwavering ascription to a particular claim about the world constituted a “belief system.” As he wrote, such ascription was “irrational.”

The varying uses of the word belief are significant. There are two ways that variants of the word belief are being used in this discourse. First, there is the active, verb-based usage evident in phrases such as “I believe in something” or “I believe in science.” Second, there are the descriptive, identity-based usages in utterances like “she is a believer” or “skeptics are believers too.”

The Sheep-Goat Effect and Parapsychological Conceptions of Belief

While parapsychologists engage in less casual talk about believers and beliefs, they are also discursively engaged in examining and classifying belief. They conceive of studies of belief in a range of paranormal phenomena such as psi, ESP, and PK as
significant to their work for several reasons. First, parapsychologists argue that better understandings of “paranormal belief” (meaning subjects’ attitudes toward the paranormal) enable them to understand more clearly reports of paranormal phenomena; and, second and most importantly, parapsychologists conceive of belief in the paranormal as a potential contributing factor to performance in ESP and (to a lesser extent) PK experiments. While parapsychologists have noted (rightly) that believing can take many forms and vary in strength, the terms “sheep” and “goat” have over the past 69 years become common designators for those who believe in the possibility of paranormal phenomena and those who do not.

Grace Schmeidler first introduced the concept of the sheep-goat effect in her 1952 report on subject attitudes and their significance for ESP testing. She explained, “in some research projects, the subject’s attitude toward the experiment is an important determinant of the results” (Schmeidler 1952: 757). To enable easy reference to the types of attitudes she encountered in her research, she introduced the terms sheep and goat. She explained:

During an extended series of experiments on ESP we have inquired into one factor which might be expected to influence S’s [the subject’s] attitude: whether he accepts the possibility of paranormal success under the conditions of the experiment, or whether he is convinced that such success is impossible. (For convenience, in order to avoid repeating this cumbersome definition, Ss [subjects] who accept the possibility of paranormal success under the experimental condition have been called ‘sheep’ and Ss [subjects] who reject it have been
called ‘goats.’) Our over-all finding has been that the sheep tend to have higher average ESP scores than the goats (Schmeidler 1952: 757).

Throughout the rest of the article, Schmeidler continued to refer to her groups of subjects as sheep and goats. She never shared the deliberation process behind these names. Since then, other parapsychologists in conference papers, casual conversations, and written work have come to refer to sheep and goats routinely, offering explanations similar to the one offered by Schmeidler. There is no reflection on the significance of these labels.

While Schmeidler does not explicitly discuss the sheep-goat effect in terms of “belief,” other parapsychologists do. For instance, Harvey Irwin and Caroline Watt, in their widely used introductory textbook on parapsychology, consider the sheep-goat effect in a section on the significance of paranormal belief (the chapter “Belief in the Paranormal”). More importantly, the descriptions and research-based uses of the sheep/goat dichotomy and analyses of the sheep-goat effect fundamentally describe parapsychological understandings of belief.

I want to suggest that, despite parapsychologists’ often more nuanced understandings of believing (Irwin and Watt 2007; Jones and Russell 1980; Roe 1998, 1999), the use of these terms points to a persistent assumption about the nature of belief in parapsychology and among paranormal knowledge producers and their skeptics more broadly, namely, that belief is a static position and sentiment that solidifies people into an important (self-fashioned or imposed) category. Turning to popular characterizations of sheep and goats is informative. Popular imaginings of sheep render them conformists and less than brilliant. Sarah Franklin has noted the “tenacity” of “the sheep-are-stupid-view” (2007: 200). Like sheep, goats are not associated with excessive intelligence. They are
associated with stubbornness. Both goats and sheep are hearty animals, able to survive on their own in sometimes inhospitable climates; and, they are both animals that can (and often are) herded.

Likening research subjects who do or do not believe in paranormal phenomena, or do or do not think the experiment in question is likely to render successful results, to sheep and goats reveals a tacit understanding of the nature of belief. In this analogy, believers and disbelievers are both reduced to members of two different, yet similarly tractable, herds. Firm belief and disbelief, then, are roughly analogous. Neither is likened to an animal noted for its individuality or clarity of thought, a dolphin or a gorilla, for instance. Like other PKPs’ assessments of believers and skeptics, the agnostic middle ground remains unmarked and fundamentally privileged in these assessments. It is revealing that Schmeidler described goats as “convinced that such success is impossible.” Conviction, then, is one of the key facets of belief.

Harvey Irwin and Caroline Watt, in their widely used introductory textbook on parapsychology, wrote that “the sheep-goat effect is one of the more successfully replicated relationships in experimental ESP research, even if the overall effect size (0.03) is very small” (2007: 74). Parapsychologists have observed that the sheep effect is less unusual than the goat effect, given its consistency with cognitive psychological

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3 Sheep are often associated with images of bucolic countryside and rural England. Indeed, Franklin (2000) has suggested that “in terms of nation…sheep genealogies mix some of the oldest traditions of belonging to blood, soil, and country” (2007: 73). In contrast, goats conjure darker associations. In the Middle Ages (and even today) depictions of the Devil or Lucifer periodically included goat-like features such as goat horns and goats’ beards, drawing on depictions of the Greek god Pan. Associations of goats with evil continue today in popular myths about the centrality of (ideally black) goats in Satanic Black Masses and in popular television programs such as True Blood that continue to tie goat-like features, such as horns, to evil.
research that demonstrates people are more attentive to information that they want to observe and that they understand as observable. In contrast, Irwin and Watt wrote that the goat effect:

confirm[s] an effect of attitudes on the occurrence of ESP, it also reminds us of the adage that there are none so blind as those who will not see. But the fact that goats’ mean ESP score is significantly below chance suggests these people are not merely directing their attention away from extrasensory information nor blocking its cognitive processing; rather they seem to be identifying ESP targets at an extra-chance level and then unwittingly choosing a different target as their response (2007: 74).

This final claim is the most remarkable element of discussions of the sheep-goat effect. Parapsychologists interpret it as evidence that “goats” are so invested in their disbelief that they, at some psychological level, recognize and mislabel ESP targets.

Parapsychologists, like paranormal investigators, locate themselves as more or less outside the domain of belief. Latour recently argued that “moderns believe in belief in order to understand others” (2010: 7). They are in a position to evaluate, measure, and label belief and even disbelief. In a sense, they extend the detrimental capacities of belief even further than investigators. Parapsychologists ascribe belief to statistically verifiable effects. In a sense, parapsychologists attempt to demonstrate that belief blinds believers to the realities around them. This is clearly the case for goats and sheep, both sets of people so swayed by their belief that they are unable to identify processes unfolding around them correctly. Belief literally diminishes their analytic, evaluative capacities. This comes very close to pathologizing belief.
Believing in Science

It would be easy to assume that Jack, Rose, and other investigators were superimposing the language of belief on proponents of science. This is not the case. Surprisingly, Jack and Rose’s references to “believers in science” do not stray terribly far from how popular advocates and supporters of science characterize themselves. However, they do misrepresent pro-science claims in one significant way; not unlike paranormal investigators, advocates of science tend to articulate their belief in science in an active, verb-based fashion rather than classifying themselves as “believers.” Like investigators, skeptics use the verb form of belief to imply open, fluid hope. While pro-science skeptics do not precisely mirror the investigators’ use of belief and believe, they agree that belief is static/unproductive and believing is productive.

During my fieldwork, it was far from uncommon for me to hear skeptics and other adamantly pro-science investigators assert that they “believe in science,” or, to hear puzzled quandaries such as “how can they not believe in science?” Some investigators who advocate an uncritical application of “the scientific method” in paranormal investigating, meaning a full-hearted acceptance of scientific positivism and objectivity, proudly assert that they “believe in science.” For these pro-”science” investigators it would be deeply troubling to hear Rose and Jack’s discussions of science as a belief system. To them, “science” is self-evident in its power and it transcends a belief system. As one pro-science researcher put it, “science is science. It’s everything. It’s how we know the world.” Such assertions, notably, do little to dissuade most investigators that science has the potential to act as a belief system and it does even less to convince them
that individuals who are extremely committed to a scientific worldview are “believers” any less than “creaky floorboarders.”

While there are many paranormal investigators in the U.K., there is also a large community of skeptics. As I have mentioned earlier, there are many varieties of academic and intellectual forms of skepticism that date back centuries; however, in the 1980s, “skepticism” emerged as a popular form of self-categorization in the U.K. (and U.S. as well). It is useful to note that there have been regular publications and meetings since the 1980s of English skeptics. Indeed, in the first decade of the 21st century, U.K. skeptics have mobilized themselves into regular social gatherings called “skeptics in the pub.” These meetings have taken place in a range of English cities such as Bristol, Leeds, and London. Skeptics organized themselves in opposition to what they saw as an increase in global religiosity and, more importantly, an increase in domestic English reliance on, and interest in, wide ranging forms of pseudo-science and mysticism such as homeopathy, psychics, New Age spirituality, chiropractic medicine, and the paranormal. In response to the perceived rise in popular interest in these practices, skeptics crafted numerous websites dedicated to espousing a skeptical standpoint. Some of the most prominent are Bad Ghosts, Bad Psychics, and Bad Homeopathy, sites that seek to identify the fraudulent practices and erroneous scientific claims of ghost hunters, parapsychologists, paranormal investigators, mediums, and homeopathic practitioners.

The rhetoric and organization of the New Atheists influenced Skeptics. Indeed, much of their language and their social posturing is reminiscent of New Atheists in the

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4 I use the term skeptic here to refer to self-identified English skeptics who participate in the cultural practices I’ve described above. I do not mean to include or generalize to
U.K., but especially the U.S. The impetus for skeptical self-organization is a form of public resistance or debunking of paranormal and otherwise alternative or pseudo-scientific claims. Skeptics are, by their very definition, committed to opposing the claims and public presence of paranormal, New Age, and alternative medical knowledge. They ground their opposition on a “scientific critique” of these claims. This critique tends to focus on the alleged lack of science or scientific knowledge evident in the paranormal or alternative claims. The skeptical critics of the paranormal that I am concerned with here are not necessarily of the academic variety, although those certainly exist. Rather, for the moment, I am concerned with popular manifestations of skepticism.

In the course of attending many popular skeptical events, ranging from Skeptics in the Pub gatherings to The Amazing Meeting (TAM) in London and its associated social events, I regularly encountered claims and quandaries regarding belief in science.

__5__ New Atheism refers to a new branch of atheism popularized in recent years by authors such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. New Atheists seek to maintain a more public presence for atheism and often directly attack and mock religions and religious people. Its members often characterize their public denunciations of religion as acts demonstrating “intolerance for intolerance.” Hitchens, in a lecture reported by NPR, characterized his view and the view of New Atheists as "I think religion should be treated with ridicule, hatred and contempt, and I claim that right" (2009: 1).

__6__ The Amazing Meeting (TAM) is a meeting hosted and run by the U.S. based Randi Foundation, which is the skeptical and pro-science organization run by James Randi – the well-known magician and skeptic. The meeting was advertised as a “celebration of science, critical thinking and entertainment.” Even in its advertisement of a “celebration of science,” it is clear that participants’ and organizers’ perception of science is not that of detached consumers or participants in a knowledge producing system. Even here, in the official advertisement for the event, there are hints of the polemical stance that the conference and its participants adopt. There have been previous TAM meetings in Las Vegas, U.S. The 2009 meeting in London was the first U.K.-based meeting and, as such, it generated a great deal of attention and excitement on skeptical forums and networking sites. On these sites, skeptics seemed to see it as an opportunity for networking and
At these events, many participants shared with me belief in science. For example, at TAM, I had several revealing conversations with attendees. On the first day of the conference, I was waiting on the lengthy line to enter the conference center and pick up my registration packet. I began chatting with several young men who appeared to be in their mid-twenties in line near me. They had traveled to London from Bristol (about a 2 hour drive) for the event. We talked about what brought them there and which speakers they were excited to see. The three men each expressed excitement about hearing Simon Singh speak.

Singh is a science journalist who is embroiled in an ongoing libel suit with the British Chiropractic Association (BCA) as a result of a 2008 article (“Beware the Spinal Tap”) he published in the Guardian. The article criticized the effectiveness of chiropractics fairly harshly and suggested that it might be dangerous for patients. As a result of the article, the BCA sued Singh under Britain’s somewhat strident Libel Laws. While The Guardian was financially supporting Singh in the ongoing legal action, the case attracted significant public comment and debate both within and beyond the skeptical community. For skeptics, though, the ongoing lawsuit was of serious significance. They quickly mobilized, and websites supporting Singh emerged. The established pro-science organization, Sense about Science, launched a campaign, “Keep Libel Laws out of Science,” to support Singh in his lawsuit and to encourage a reconsideration of the applicability of libel laws to issues of science. That the young men were most excited by this controversy and its attending issues points to a confrontational socialization with other skeptics from the U.K., the U.S., and Europe as well as a chance to hear prominent skeptical speakers.
element of skepticism. Indeed, the three young men were each wearing buttons reading “Keep Libel Laws out of Science” on either their bags or coats.  

The young men asked what attracted me to the conference. I explained that I worked with paranormal investigators and I was interested in the ways in which skeptics’ voiced their opposition to their practices. They made a moaning noise when I mentioned investigators. One asked me how I could stand to spend time with them. Another one asked me why I thought that they “wasted their time like that.” Eventually, one asked, “how can they not believe in science?” I mentioned that some investigators would say that they did believe in science. This was met with laughter. He replied, “what they do is so far from science.” Believing in science, then, entailed an adherence to a particular set of practices. The meanings of “science” were not infinite.

When I described some of the experiments conceived of and executed by investigators who were proponents of science, these skeptics dismissed them out of hand. I explained one experiment that sought to measure the impact of external visual stimuli in reported paranormal experience by engaging in a type of sensory deprivation. After I described the experiment to the men, they dismissed it as non-science. One of the men revealingly said, “the thing is that they’re believers. Nothing is going to change their perspective on these things.” While skeptics were less fixated than investigators on the category of “believer,” the use of the term here corresponds with how investigators use it. Implicit in the claim that they are believers and nothing is going to change their perspective is an understanding of “believer” as a rigid, unwavering category. This is

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7 Revealingly, I received one of these buttons as part of my welcome package at the conference itself.
reminiscent of the inherent rigidity in investigators’ conceptions of believers, flat-earthers, and creaky floorboarders.

In my exchange with these men, I tried to raise the question of whether or not science was something that one believes in. I tried to ask what it meant to them to “believe” in science. They were puzzled by my question. One of them replied, “science explains things. It’s the best way to understand the world.” Others echoed this sentiment. Their use of the language of belief seemed invisible to them. The irony is that none of them problematized or addressed their use of the word “believe” to describe their relationship with science. That one believed in science seemed to be such a ubiquitous and accepted sentiment that it needed no further explanation.

These skeptics are not purporting a fringe position with respect to science. The vision of science that emerges in conversation with them as well as in the presentations and writings they embrace is a highly normative one. Science, here, appears as a method of inquiry capable of systematically unraveling the world and offering new solutions. The science they embrace is the popularized version of the science in laboratories and universities. According to Felicity Mellor (2003) popular science books in the U.K. act as a forum for the demarcation of science from non-science. As part of this policing of boundaries, a dominant understanding of science emerges. She writes, “science is typically placed at the top of a hierarchy of ways of knowing” (Mellor 2003: 512). She observes that science as a way of knowing emerges as key in popular scientific publications, especially in physics texts. She notes how it appears: “constructed as mysterious, imaginative and intellectual - a transcendental means to “truth” - at the same time as it is presented as factual, practical and a part of everyday culture” (Mellor 2003:
That popular depictions of science have moved beyond simply rendering science as the ultimate producer of facts is hugely significant. The relationship that Mellor describes between science and truth and the underlying association of science and mysticism may help explain the emergence and sustained engagement of “skeptics” in pro-science movements. The association between science and truth informs skeptics’ sense of self and science.

For instance, at TAM, there was a simultaneous sense of wonder at science and distress at its abuses and misrepresentations. The language present in the biographies of some of the TAM speakers demonstrates these mutual senses. For instance, the biography of one astronomer speaking at the conference noted, “he is a skeptic, and fights misuses of science as well as praising the wonder of real science” (TAM 2009). This description captures how many skeptics understand their role as skeptics. The un-ironic deployment of nearly Evangelically infused language – praising the wonder, for instance—is commonplace.

The social atmosphere at their gatherings often took on a jubilant and celebratory tone. At TAM, for instance, despite the lengthy and generally scholarly/serious nature of the presentations, audience members enthusiastically cheered and laughed when presenters made jokes about people who did not agree with them. One popular presenter, George Hrab, an American musician, offered a break from the more seriously minded papers and spent his presentation time singing songs about skepticism and science. These songs tended to mock the misuses of science. He was incredibly well received. Audience members clapped joyfully and laughed at his jokes.
Social gatherings of skeptics are less frequent than those enjoyed by investigators. A significant component of their social lives and networking as skeptics occurs on websites, blogs, discussion forums, and Twitter. These become sites for the articulation of skeptical identity and critique of the gullible others. One exchange that I observed on a major skeptical website – UK Skeptics—demonstrated a common element of skeptical discourse: an insistence on defending the public from the seemingly contagious irrationality of paranormal investigators and others. One poster who was new to the forum wondered why other posters felt such a need to refute the claims and arguments of “believers,” by which he meant investigators and “believers” in a wide range of practices (some of whom would identify as believers and some who would not). Another regular commenter responded quickly,

> the alternative to engaging in debate with those who *propound irrational ideas* is to keep silent and leave the floor to them. Let us not forget that for every couple of people debating, there are probably many others listening in, some of whom may be undecided (my emphasis).

Here the poster emphasizes the stakes of the contestation between investigators/others and skeptics. Skeptics’ persistent fear is that if they do not vocally oppose and publicly refute claims from a range of alternative, New Age, and paranormal knowledge producers the public will descend into a state of “irrationality.” They fashion themselves, then, as a type of public defender. Collins and Pinch (1998: 141) have noted that at times this defensiveness of science can take on the tone of vigilantism.

The dangerous ties between belief and irrationality prove difficult for PKPs and skeptics alike to disentangle. For both skeptics and investigators, irrationality is tied to a
certain type of belief. Recall Jack’s observation that believers in science (flat earthers) and believers in ghosts (creaky floorboarders) are “two sides of exactly the same coin irrationally defending their belief system to the hilt.” Similarly, the skeptical commenter emphasized the necessity of countering the claims of those (presumably believers) “who propound irrational ideas.” Belief, then, is deeply tied to irrationality. As investigators’ discursive enactment of “belief” demonstrates, to ascribe too closely to a particular system is to lose one’s rationality and one’s objectivity. Yet, they deem “believing” in something, be it science or the possibility of knowing, the necessary, even ideal, mode of engaging with knowledge producing systems.

In a sense, both skeptics and paranormal investigators constitute themselves as open-minded. Skeptics, however, are aware of this possible comparison and frequently attempt to counter it. In fact, skeptics often argue that paranormal investigators’ understanding of open-mindedness is deeply flawed. One popular skeptical online video demonstrates this position quite clearly. This video, typically called “open-mindedness mirror,” circulated among skeptics (and investigators alike). My investigating friend Rose was the first person to introduce me to it in mid-2009. Since then, I have seen it in a variety of contexts. The video seeks to contrast the understandings of open-mindedness among paranormal investigators and skeptics. It seeks to show the flawed reasoning behind investigators’ invocations of open-mindedness and demonstrates that the only true open-mindedness can be found in science. The video, which consists of two animated figures squaring off set to a backdrop of narration, begins by stating:

It seems to be an extremely common experience amongst people who don’t believe in certain non-scientific concepts to be told by people who do to be more
open-minded. This advice is typically based on highly flawed thinking including an inaccurate understanding of what open-mindedness is. In fact being open-minded simply means being willing to consider new ideas. Science promotes and thrives on open-mindedness because the advancement of our understanding about the reality in which we exists depends upon our willingness to consider new ideas. Indeed scientific discovery often requires entirely new ways of thinking. However not only does believing in certain non-scientific concepts not automatically make you more open-minded, it can often lead to be the complete opposite. A neighbor of mine once noticed a moving lampshade in my front room and said it was a ghost. When I told him it wasn’t he said you’ve got the evidence in front of you and said I was stubbornly close-minded and had no curiosity. When he finished his little outburst I reached down and I switched off the small fan heater underneath the lamp to stop the current of air that was moving the shade. It was actually my neighbor who had no curiosity in the situation. He had leaped to an immediate conclusion and dismissed all alternatives. When you label an event supernatural just because it has no explanation that is obvious to you, you will inevitably misinterpret evidence and make invalid causal relations. You will eliminate whole realms of alternative explanations before it’s clear which explanations might be appropriate and that’s the very definition of close-minded (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uu5voTjCr_c&feature=share, accessed November 2, 2010).
Here the narrator articulates his critique of paranormal investigators and enthusiasts’ understanding of skepticism, open-mindedness, and causality. The critique, although more explicitly mocking and condescending, fundamentally resembles investigators’ description of “creaky floorboarders.”

![Open-Mindedness Mirror Image](image)

Figure 4.2: Image of the Open-Mindedness Mirror

The narrative’s emphasis on science as the most profoundly open-minded mode of thinking is revealing. Science, here, appears to be an instrumental agent. *Science* “promotes and thrives.” *Scientific discovery* requires new ways of thinking. Here, science has become an actor. *Scientists* are absent. I do not think that skeptics harbor the same suspicion of scientists that investigators do; however, skeptics, like investigators, engage in a discursive practice that constitutes science as a totalizing and active entity in the
world. In such depictions, skeptics’ assertions that they believe in science seem well placed. Indeed, here, science seems almost like a totem looming over them demanding worship or adoration. Skeptics see science as a deeply heroic endeavor. Harry Collins and Trevor Pinch see that distance from the day-to-day realities of science enables such a stance and this seems quite apt here. “It is no coincidence,” they write, “that those who feel most certain of their grip on [the] scientific method have rarely worked on the frontiers of science themselves. There is a saying in love ‘distance lends enchantment’; it is true of science too” (Collins and Pinch 1998: 141). Skeptics’ valorization of science mischaracterizes the nature of science. Indeed, Collins and Pinch remark that such a stance is dangerous and misleading for science is not that “of a chivalrous knight” (1998:1).

This is not to suggest that paranormal investigators should be considered a model of public understandings of science. They are not. However, in a sense, paranormal investigators who differentiate science from scientists and seek to use “science” as a tool – a theme on which I will focus more closely in the next chapter – better understand the nature of science than skeptics who seek to defend science by positioning it as an instrumental and heroic agent.

I observed a Facebook exchange regarding this video that demonstrates the degree to which skeptics embrace this positioning. In the Facebook page for a paranormal investigation group, one investigator posted a link to the video. He noted that it was “a rather interesting examination of what it means to be 'open minded.'” A magician who is a vocal skeptic responded to this by writing “It's not ‘rather interesting’ it's correct.” The
investigators’ use of “interesting” and the skeptic’s use of “correct” are revealing. The skeptic sees the above articulation of open-mindedness as the ultimately correct version.

Both investigators and skeptics deem open-mindedness (infused with scientism to varying degrees) and its associated capacity to examine and assess events in the world correctly to be the most highly desired trait. While they disagree to some extent on the constitution of open-mindedness, they both value an understanding of open-mindedness that precludes discounting evidence and they both dismiss believers. Each group sees itself as better able to grapple with the nature of evidence and reality.

Belief, Believers, and Believing: Conclusions

It would seem that parapsychologists, skeptics, and paranormal investigators – groups with mutual dislike for each other – share a common distaste for believers. Bruno Latour has remarked that “like knowledge, belief is not an obvious category referring to a psychological state. It is an artifact of the distinction between construction and reality. It is…always an accusation leveled at others” (1999:304). The accusatory nature of the term believer is clear here.

These accusations of belief are fundamentally acts of self-imagining and self-construction. Ochs and Capps noted that “narratives are tales that tellers and listeners map onto tellings of personal experience” (1996: 21). In these narratives circulated by investigators, parapsychologists, and skeptics, the sense of imagined self is remarkably similar across the groups. Investigators distance themselves from two distinct groups of believers (believers in science and believers in ghosts), skeptics distance themselves from believers in the paranormal and other “woo woo,” and parapsychologists distance
themselves from avowed believers and non-believers, who turn out to be believers after all. These three groups share a sense that they are not believers. They are above belief, able to identify it, comment on it and, ultimately, dismiss it.
CHAPTER FIVE
UNDERSTANDING EVIDENCE AND EXPERIENCE: ATTEMPTING TO MASTER
THE TOOLBOX AND SUCCUMBING TO THE SPECTER OF SCIENCE

Paranormal investigators often deploy the metaphor of a toolbox to explain their approach to querying the paranormal. As Jack, an investigator, explained, “a good investigator’s got a toolbox. Science is a tool. Mediums are a tool. People’s experiences are a tool. It’s up to the investigator to put it all together.” Ultimately, Jack positions the investigator as master of the toolbox, the agent who must piece together the insights garnered through strategic deployment of each “tool.” Despite their aspirations, however, investigators are rarely able to master the toolbox. In this chapter, I explore how and why investigators are unable to exert the mastery they desire.

The epistemological project of paranormal investigating is crippled by a central, unyielding problem, namely, how to produce empirical evidence of entities that are most frequently encountered in embodied experiences of hauntings and mediumship. This problem, while intellectual, is also emotionally resonant for investigators. It looms over their experiences and drives them in their quest for understanding. In this chapter, I examine paranormal investigators’ inability to reconcile embodied experiences of ghosts and hauntings with verifiable, objective knowledge claims. I argue that investigators, laboring under the specter of science, are unable to translate their embodied encounters into a growing body of knowledge. While they strive to “master the investigator’s toolbox,” exerting control over science, mediumship, and personal embodied encounters, they are ultimately unable to do so.
The Trope of Investigation

As I have noted earlier in Chapter Three, a significant portion of the more seriously minded people who research the paranormal call themselves “paranormal investigators.” This form of self-identification is important. They do not call themselves paranormal scientists, paranormal theologians, or paranormal mediums; rather, they call themselves investigators. This is a term that is important for them and its use is not accidental. The investigator has become an important trope throughout much of the English-speaking North Atlantic world and it is one that investigators use to organize their queries into the paranormal. Tropes provide a useful framework for understanding the ways in which people interested in the paranormal self-identify and craft strategies for exploring the paranormal. Eleanor Townsley usefully wrote that, “tropes link cultural form to content, illuminating one way that actors use, enact, inhabit, and deploy cultural structures” (2006: 41). Researchers’ adoption of the term “investigator” resonates with the proliferation of idealized investigators who populate the English-speaking media world.

The 21st century has seen an abundance of investigators in the popular media. House M.D., the multiple incarnations of C.S.I., Lie to Me, The Mentalist, Most Haunted, and T.A.P.S. are but a few of the television programs that foreground the investigator as popular cultural figure.\(^1\) Indeed, the investigator is experiencing a resurgence in much of English-language media. In each of these veins, the investigator has emerged as a leading expert capable of solving even the most confounding of problems. In each of these cases,

\(^1\) While some of these shows are American in origin, they are widely consumed in England as well the United States.
the expertise of the investigator crosses several arenas. She or he is not an expert in one arena but able to master many arenas. This ideal of multiple masteries is important to the self-image of investigators.

On *House*, Dr. Gregory House, the main character, often reminds his colleagues “everybody lies,” instructing them to search below the surface for the underlying cause of illness. This search requires his colleagues to embark on funny, albeit highly unethical, searches of patients’ lives, homes, and work environments to uncover clues that reveal the true nature of the illness. Dr. House constantly reminds his colleagues and viewers that patients are untrustworthy in their accounts of their own illness. Establishing the *truth* of an illness requires marshalling a variety of different types of evidence. Dr. House, incidentally modeled on Sherlock Holmes, must engage a wide-ranging investigation to uncover the truth, a truth that participants, namely the ill, are not able to directly access themselves.

In her study of the representation of scientific truth on *C.S.I.*, Corinna Kruse raises a similar point. She notes that “the physical evidence is still given precedence over witness evidence or ‘stories’” (2010: 81). Indeed, this is so persuasively portrayed on the program that numerous legal scholars have worried about the so-called C.S.I.-effect when juries deliberate on cases with forensic evidence (Cole and Dioso-Villa 2007; Ghoshray 2007; Stephens 2007; Tyler 2006).

As a further example, then, in both *C.S.I.* and *House*, the investigator -- be he a doctor or a forensic scientist – must engage a broad range of evidence to reach a conclusion. It is not sufficient simply to engage science; one must also investigate. The same is doubly true for investigators of the paranormal on television. Unlike doctors or
forensic scientists, they venture into terrains without established knowledge and rules. Ultimately, what guides them is their capacity to evaluate evidence using the skills they bring to the table. Consider the popular U.S. program *The X-Files*. In it, the two main characters Dana Scully and Fox Mulder are FBI investigators who seek out information about the “x-files.” While some scholars have focused on the gendering of Mulder and Scully (e.g. Mizejewski 2004), the show’s concern with the alien and human body (Badley 1996), and its intersections with folklore (Koven 2000), little attention has been paid to the fact that Mulder and Scully were, first and foremost, identified as FBI investigators. The ideology of investigating can be understood in two of the show’s famous catchphrases “the truth is out there” and “trust no one.” For Sully and Mulder, the truth was out there and it required them to use a range of analytic tools and technical methods, to say nothing of their cunning and intellect, to uncover it. Part of that search required adopting a skeptical stance toward the assertions and beliefs of others.

All of these programs have in common the assertion that an investigator plays a critically important role. Indeed, they collectively construct the investigator as one who is able to evaluate different types of evidence critically. The investigator relies on science but is not defined by it. Dr. House does not cure illness because he is a skilled doctor; rather, he solves diagnostic puzzles because he is willing to pursue the truth ruthlessly. Here, the category of investigator emerges as broader and, ultimately, more powerful than scientist. Indeed, these programs constitute the investigator as masterful and in control, seamlessly negotiating bodies of evidence. These enactments of investigators and

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2 The show’s catchphrase, the truth is out there, became a popular saying in Britain. In fact, the phrase appeared among the top 60 English sayings in the Oxford Dictionary of 20th Century Quotations. Investigators often jokingly invoked it as a form of encouragement in their pursuits.
evidence have important real-life consequences. Indeed, as scholars concerned with the C.S.I. effect in legal proceedings have demonstrated, the depictions of forensic investigators as capable of providing irrefutable evidence, in some cases, has diminished jurors’ faith in the validity of eyewitness testimony (Cavender and Deutch 2007; Kruse 2010; Mopas 2007).

These televised depictions of investigators conform to what Arjun Appadurai has called social “imaginaries” (1996: 31). To Appadurai, “the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility” (Appadurai 1996: 31). Similarly Charles Taylor writes that he speaks of the “imaginary because [he is] talking about the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories, and legends” (2002:91). The narratives and stories presented in the above mentioned television programs constitute an important arena for understanding how, to use Taylor’s term, “ordinary people,” understand science, technology, evidence, and, most importantly, investigation. For self-identified investigators, these popular culture images of investigators become crucial tools for their own self-imagining.

To return, then, to paranormal investigators, it is clear they see investigators in a similar fashion. They see themselves as ringleaders of sorts who must orchestrate and make sense of a variety of competing forms of evidence, science and technology, mediumship, and the personal experiences of investigators themselves. For investigators, this requires a toolbox-approach, meaning treating different, competing forms of knowing
as simply alternative tools to be strategically deployed. They aim for a sort of balance. They aspire to include and consider the insights of science while also considering the insights provided by mediums. Science and mediumship constitute the polar ends of the spectrum of the toolbox. There is a futile space between science and mediumship that encompasses the personal, embodied experiences of investigators as well as the technologically mediated attempts to gauge the site. Balance and the ability to shepherd both realms are important to investigators. Consider a blog post by Bill, an investigator with E.G.R. In it, he describes what he sees as the range of investigators. He writes:

Another thing to consider when researching paranormal group[s] is the what 'type' of group they are. Some groups work purely from a scientific angle, even going so far as to belittling anyone who puts any value on anything that falls outside established scientific principles on occasion, while others lay at the opposite end of the spectrum and conduct more psychic-based investigations with teams of 'mediums' and little or no 'science' involved. Many other groups (such as EGR) fall somewhere between the two camps.

In his writing, it is clear that he sees both extremely pro-science and pro-mediumship groups as unnecessarily restrictive. Indeed, such groups would leave little room for investigating. This positioning mirrors the discourses of belief and believers found among investigators, which I discussed in Chapter Four.

While Bill sees very real and concrete differences between groups, I think he overstates the difference. In fact, based on my experiences with a number of groups, most groups see themselves in a similar light – as including mediumship as well as science without excluding either. They all ultimately hope and aim for a moderate position,
eschewing an extreme embrace of either end of the spectrum. Bill’s positioning of his investigation group, EGR, mirrors that of many other groups and it reflects the collectively valued emphasis on the investigator as negotiating and mastering a range of tools or approaches. For example, Drake, the leader of a North Eastern research team explained the role he saw for investigators. “You’ve got to make sense of a lot of things. You can’t take anything at face value – not science, not mediums, not experiences. You’ve got to weed out the people who want a thrill and tone down the ones who just want to parrot back what scientists say.” Drake, like Bill, sees balance as key and emphasizes the authority of the investigator.

Unlike the investigators on television, paranormal investigators are unable to control, contain, and balance the different tools in an investigator’s toolbox with the precision and control they desire. In their eagerness to distance themselves from the extremes of both science and mediumship, investigators find themselves in an untenable intellectual space. They are doubtful of both science and mediumship. Both extremes offer powerful explanatory models; however, in a sense, investigators are ideologically stranded.

The Categories of Evidence and Experience

Science and mediumship, the two dominant tools in an investigator’s toolbox, roughly correspond to the ideological distinction between evidence and experience that paranormal investigators maintain. Science is tied to the production of “evidence,” whereas mediumship is associated with “experience.” Often, investigators consider evidence and experience as contradictory and incompatible.
Evidence and experience are longstanding categories of thought in intellectual, as well as popular, traditions. In his examination of historically variant conceptualizations of experience, Martin Jay suggested that ideas of experience are “multiple, [with] often contradictory meanings” (2005: 3). He noted that “not only is ‘experience’ a term of everyday language, but it has also played a role in virtually every systematic body of thought” (Jay 2005:4). The same can be said of evidence. Disciplines and legal traditions all specify particular requirements and conceptualizations of evidence. The same is true of paranormal investigators.

*Science and Evidence*

A notion of evidence informs investigators’ sense of self. They see themselves as pursuing evidence that paranormal events do (or do not) occur. While it is imaginable that they might pursue religious or theological evidence, their notion of evidence is influenced by a sense of scientism. By scientism, I mean what Mikael Stenmark (1997) has defined as “the view that all or, at least, some of the essential non-academic areas of human life can be reduced to (or translated into) science” (1997: 18). Stenmark has argued that this is a pervasive ideology in much of Europe and the U.S. and, as I mentioned earlier, Felicity Mellor’s 2003 work reinforces that view, too. It is the broad context in which investigators work today. While the paranormal investigating project is not defined exclusively by scientism, it is influenced by it.

The tenets of science that influence investigators include (1) technological mediation, (2) idealistic imaginings of objectivity, and (3) a desire for repeatability. Interestingly, these three chief components also guide much of their anxiety over the validity of experience as a means of producing knowledge. Technology lies at the heart
of their enterprise, at least in theory. Investigators imagine technology as an unbiased way of accessing, observing, and chronicling the changes in their surroundings that cumulatively indicate the unfolding of a paranormal event. While technology occupies a privileged place in the collective investigating imaginary, in practice, it often takes a backseat to more experiential engagements. In an idealized setting, investigators would use technology – namely, electromagnetic energy field (EMF) readers, thermometers, and digital recording devices—to record or verify the embodied experiences of researchers.

Objectivity constitutes their chief epistemological goal. They hope to establish objective (i.e. real and irrefutable) indications of the reality of the paranormal. For them, objectivity is synonymous with a definitive sense that a person is reporting the truth. Indeed, they understand the “objective” as that which is true. It is opposed to their understanding of “subjective” knowledge, which is personal and difficult to “verify.”

For them, repeatability replaces falsifiability as the chief component of science. Repeatability constitutes a component of their ideological problem with embodied experiences. They question how they could test or repeat instances of people “picking up” spirits or experiencing the symptoms of a haunting. While some might see this as a problem emerging out of the expressly fleeting nature of the phenomena in question, most see it as a problem inherent in experiential knowledge.

That investigators emphasize repeatability at the expense of falsifiability might be seen by some as an indication that paranormal investigating is a pseudoscience. Karl Popper (1963) famously argued that the potential for falsification distinguishes science from pseudoscience and others such as Kenneth Feder (1999) have adopted similar criteria. Revealingly, Popper identified psychoanalysis, Marxist history, and Alfred
Adler's "individual psychology" as pseudosciences because of the problems implicit in falsifying them. Popper stressed that Marxist history and psychoanalysis were not rendered insignificant, meaningless, or untrue by not being science but he insisted that they were not sciences. He wrote that the problem of falsification does not indicate a lack of "meaningfulness or significance, nor a problem of truth or acceptability. It was the problem of drawing a line between the statements, or systems of statements, of the empirical sciences, and all other statements — whether they are of a religious or of a metaphysical character, or simply pseudo-scientific" (Popper 1963:39). Interestingly, investigators, at some level, do not differentiate between science and true or meaningful knowledge. The two are often (and seemingly unconsciously) the same for them.

Investigators’ frustration with repeatability periodically manifests itself in discussions I had with informants about anthropology. Some would ask me to point them in the direction of anthropological research on topics such as magic or possession and I obliged, sharing with them the scholarship of anthropologists of possession such as Paul Stoller (1995). For many, although certainly not all, this literature was deeply frustrating. As one man put it “it doesn’t tell me anything about it. I mean, it just describes it.” Another woman explained, “it’s interesting but I can’t do anything with it. How can I test anything using this?” I took these critiques of anthropology to mean that anthropology did not reveal anything about the underlying factors at work in the paranormal. It was far more likely to explain its meaning in the lives of practitioners – a point of pride among anthropologists of spirit possession (Boddy 1989; Stoller 1995). These reactions, I think, point to the implicit understandings of science, evidence, and objectivity that guide investigators. They are looking for definitive facts that underpin and explain paranormal
events. They hope for strong statements of causality and correlation, statements that anthropologists such as Boddy and Stoller carefully avoid.

Despite the obvious influence of scientism in their epistemological project, it has its limits. The vast majority of investigators do not show the unequivocal and unbridled passion and enthusiasm for science evident among skeptics, (new) atheists, and other popular proponents of scientism, as I noted in Chapter Four. Their ambivalence courses through both practical tactics of avoidance and discursive positions of science. While they are influenced by motifs of science, they also realize that orthodox, official science sees their project as vastly illegitimate. This awareness of official science’s reprobation of their enterprise lingers in their minds, as I show in my discussion of their practices of defensive humor in Chapter Ten.

Investigators typically argue that science is not pure or objective and that it is deeply ensnared in socio-political life. For example, Jack has hypothesized that science, because of its deep connection to organized government and corporate power, has no investment in revealing realities that would challenge the stability of the status quo. He explained to me that “they [scientists] don’t want us to know about ghosts and survival. If they did, think of how it would change the political situation.” He went on to hypothesize that if survival after death was a known component of human existence, governments ultimately would lose the power to control their citizens and extract wealth from them. The specificities of this critique matter less than the implicit claim that official, authoritative science is complicit with systems of power. In short, it is not pure or unbiased.
Despite their reactions against the anthropological literature I shared, investigators typically articulated an understanding of science that was far more at home with anthropological or postmodern imaginings of science than with popular depictions of it as a heroic endeavor that gradually reveals the workings of reality, and does so for the greater good. Such a reaction is slightly shocking, given their skepticism regarding the possibilities of establishing knowledge based on embodied experiences.

Interestingly, this understanding of the production of orthodox science diminishes the objectivity and authority of orthodox scientists more than of science itself. Indeed, this realization leads investigators to draw a careful distinction between science and scientists which ultimately enables them to imagine themselves as the masters of an even stronger, more objective science.

Investigators understand “science” as an instrument that enables them to detect the invisible worlds of the paranormal. This is evident in a popular online article describing “Ghosts and Science” found on many paranormal websites. The article began with the assertion that:

When scientists debunk ghosts their first statement is usually, 'there is no scientific proof of the existence of ghosts' This is wrong. There is scientific proof. Science even has theories that explain something must be happening beyond what we know and what we can see. [My emphasis]

In this statement alone, an important distinction becomes clear, namely the difference between science (or the scientific) and scientists. Here it is clear that paranormal investigators do not see scientists as individuals able to control or determine the

3 Like many such articles, there is no clear author of the article.
definition of science exclusively. In a sense, science is bigger and broader than scientists. In their imaginaries, it is deeply tied to the production of proof, or evidence.

The article goes on to cite electrical activity and variations in temperature as arenas with the potential for scientific query. It stated, “recording temperature changes is another scientific way of detecting the presence of ghosts.” The language of this assertion is revealing. I suspect that a scientist would note that investigators are conflating science and technology; however, in this instance, it is clear that investigators see science as something instrumental rather than philosophical. This emphasis on science as an instrument allows them to position it as part of their repertoire as investigators. Indeed, this understanding of science actively positions it as a tool. Because of this instrumentalization of science, they can assert more readily that science reveals things. The article noted, “these unexplainable electromagnetic fluctuations and temperature changes are scientific evidence that something is happening. Ghosts are real.”

Investigators’ association of the instrumentalization of science with the production of evidence underscores their emphasis on evidence as objective. Part of the appeal of this idea of science is that it is devoid of personalized, partial information. They conceptualize science as a tool that can be used to reveal real information, in the form of evidence. Their identification as investigators, rather than scientists, would allow them in a perfect world to manage and consume scientific evidence without succumbing to “belief in science.” Ideally, they would remain too objective and detached for such a posture.

The paranormal investigating course I participated in during the fall of 2008 actively instilled these practices in students. During the experiential elements of the
course, the instructor explained that we, the students, should articulate any physical or bodily sensations we encountered. Other students would report feeling cold, a sudden draft, a sensation of tingling in their legs, or a pain their head. These experiences, sometimes very clearly welcomed by the students, triggered others to approach the area in which they were standing and to begin using tools such as EMF readers and thermometers to see if there was any “quantifiable change” that would indicate paranormal evidence. After class, I asked Steve, the instructor, about this and he explained that individuals’ bodily experiences were interesting, but that the data produced by EMF readers and other technologies was “objective.” To return to the recurrent toolbox metaphor, this exchange constituted embodied experiences as a tool but as a tool with less use and less independent evidentiary basis than technology.

Varieties of Mediumship and Experience

Experience was no easier for investigators to define than evidence. While they routinely referenced and discussed it, whenever I asked, defining it proved burdensome. Over time, I came to understand their conception of experience as an embodied encounter with the paranormal or ghostly. This was at once both a desired entity and something that was not entirely to be trusted as a form of knowing.

Raymond Williams’s discussion of experience in Keywords (1985) is informative in thinking about investigators’ understandings of experience. Williams contends that there are two varieties of experience: experience past and experience present; as he puts it, “experience past already includes, as its most serious, those processes of consideration, reflection, and analysis which the most extreme use of experience present – an unquestionable authenticity and immediacy – excludes” (1985: 128). He noted that
experience present was a “particular kind of consciousness, which can in some contexts be distinguished from ‘reason’ and ‘knowledge’ (185: 127). This version was of significance in religious and aesthetic projects.

Williams’s idea of “experience present” corresponds with how investigators understood their encounters with the paranormal. Referring to it, as Williams did, as a type of consciousness, is apt. The embodied encounters central to investigating are full and encompassing. They include the senses, the mind, and the emotions.

The sensorium is broadly invoked. People feel, hear, smell, see, and taste phantom presences. These presences are typically partial and fleeting. Once reported, investigators attempt to identify obvious “normal” sources for these senses. For example, if someone smells flowers, investigators are likely to check to see if anyone is wearing perfume or washed his or her hair with floral scented shampoo.

This range of senses is ideally subjected to technologically mediated forms of verification. If someone remarks that he feels colder, ideally someone will direct the thermometer at him and see if there has been a decline in temperature. On one investigation in a pub, someone asked me if I felt anything and I remarked that one side of my body (the side closer to the window) was colder than the other. The investigator proceeded to use his handheld thermometer and measure the surface temperature of both of my arms. One side was indeed several degrees cooler.

These senses, in theory at least, are subject to technological verification. Despite this, investigators do not always or even frequently pursue technologically mediated understandings. This is a central paradox in their project. They fervently desire to include
sensory, mediumistic knowledge in their articulation of the paranormal; however, their attempts to do so remain mired in self-doubt and suspicion.

Beyond the typical sensorium, there is another component of embodiment present in investigations, one that is more difficult to articulate. It is a sense or a consciousness that permeates individual’s emotions and mind. David Howes asserted that “since the late nineteenth century the most prominent candidate for the position of sixth sense in the West has been ‘psychic’ perception of one form or another” (2009: 6). He notes that ESP has become the psychic, or sixth sense, par excellence in the West. In contrast to Howes (2009), I will avoid referring to these emotional, mindful senses as either ESP or a sixth sense for several reasons. First, despite his claim that these terms are endemic to the “West,” I never heard an investigator or medium describe their activities or experience in those ways even though they were certainly aware of those terms. Additionally, there is a future orientation present in both ESP (extrasensory perception) and the sixth sense, both in their popular usages and in their parapsychological invocations. For example, parapsychologists design ESP experiments to test subjects’ ability to sense current or future conditions or outcomes that would be undetectable or unpredictable using standard modes of sensing.

This additional component of experience is analogous to mediumship, albeit in a much less developed or articulated form. It is widely held among investigators (and some mediums and Spiritualists) that anyone has the capacity to become or to “develop” as a medium. Accordingly, anyone can “pick up” on things. This term, “pick up,” which is widely used to describe the act of mediumistic sensing in investigating is artfully misleading. It implies that the individual is actively selecting or choosing. This is not the
case. The subject experiences very little, if any, control during the encounter. Rose described the process through which she “picks things up.” She explained:

Things just come to mind. In my mind I’ll see something. I wasn’t actively thinking it but it’s there. It doesn’t happen all the time. I’m not saying I’m a medium. I’m not. This just happens. I could be sat in a room, maybe someone’s doing calling out, maybe not, and these things, images come into my head.

Interestingly, in this realm of quasi-medium encounters, vision becomes as much a metaphor as an actual sensory mode. People see things in their “mind’s eye” or “in their head.”

Rose’s description is apt for emotional states as well. Investigators and mediums conceive of emotional states as easily influenced by external presences and, as such, they report their shifts in mood during an investigation, understanding that they are potentially significant. Consider one investigator’s written account of Molly’s and Rose’s moods during a 2008 investigation. The investigator remarked:

At one point Rose began to feel absolutely furious. She was sat there thinking "why the fuck am I doing this, what the fuck is the point of this, why am I wasting my time here etc". She wanted to get up and walk out. Rose expressed her frustrations vocally, which made Molly laugh as she said that was exactly how she was feeling too. Rose felt as if she had somehow tuned into Molly’s emotions, which in turn caused her to react so suddenly and strongly. Rose described this as 'black' anger.

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4 An investigator wrote this description. In reproducing it here, I have kept his style of writing, usages of slang and profanity, and overall language. I have only changed the names of the investigators.
This description may sound incredibly strange to the reader. The image of a woman calmly announcing that she feels furious and questioning why she is present violates the norms of politeness and decorum. When Molly and Rose shared these feeling, however, the group treated them as possible data.

Investigators have multiple problems with experiential knowledge. First, there is the problem of the reliability of others’ reporting. As one investigator put it, “how can you trust someone else’s experience?” There was also a problem with personal experience. As Jay indicated, “‘experience,’ we might say, is at the nodal point of the intersection between public language and private subjectivity” (2005: 6). This observation is useful here. Idealized performances of experience on investigations attempt to compress the public and private temporally. Investigators are encouraged to “say what you get as soon as you get anything.” This points to two central components of experience. For the most part, it is individual and it is reported so, in essence, it is always in the past. Each of these points creates conflict for investigators’ sense of objectivity.

In these experiences of quasi-mediumship, investigators are engaging in a project of collapsing the Cartesian duality between mind and body. They are engaging in what David Riches (2000) has called an anti-Cartesian project, an endeavor increasingly common and idealized in the “West.” Investigators encourage these experiences in the hopes that they will contribute to objective knowledge of the paranormal; however, unlike New Agers or contemporary English witches, they are unable to successfully or meaningfully construct epistemologies grounded on this collapse. The collapse remains troubling for them.
The Embodied Tension Between Experience and Evidence

The tension that I am describing between the paranormal investigators’ categories of evidence and experience is not purely theoretical. It appears in emotionally fraught and unresolved ways in the lives of participants.

This is not to say that everyone who engages in mediumship or quasi-mediumship is distressed by his or her encounters. The vast majority of self-identified mediums embrace and relish their ability to experience the spirits of the dead. While I have described the ideologies underpinning mediumship in another section, I think it is useful here to consider the differences between mediums’ wholehearted embrace of their embodied experiences as a form of evidence and the inability to do so among investigators who experience brief periods of quasi-mediumship. Self-identified mediums tend to understand their encounters as self-explanatory. They are encountering the spirits of the dead. They understand themselves to have a special or highly developed talent. Their periodic frustration with investigators can be understood in this light. Mediums periodically bristle at investigators’ attempts to manage them. Indeed, they are unlikely to embrace investigators’ assertions that they should be used as tools in an investigation. They see themselves as more authoritative than investigators.5 They see themselves as able to access hidden realms that investigators can only begin to sense. They are fundamentally not conflicted about their engagement with ghosts. They, like New Agers, are able to merge mind/body successfully in asserting their mediumship authoritatively.

5 This self-assessment is well supported by the television program *Most Haunted* where the medium often directs the course of the evening.
Likewise Spiritualists, who (like investigators) search for proof-based understandings of the spirit world, are able to categorize instances of mediumship as scientific evidence. As Jennifer Porter (1995) explains:

The fact that Spiritualists do not, from an orthodox scientific perspective, “prove” the “reality” of their beliefs through the narration of personal experience does not in any way detract from the perception of Spiritualists themselves that personal experience narratives “prove” that their experiences are based on objective, ontological, “scientific” truth… From the perspective of Spiritualists themselves, therefore, the “proofs” of personal experience narratives can do nothing but establish the “scientific” legitimacy of Spiritualist claims (1995: 340-341). For Spiritualists, Porter argues, personal experience is easily translated into a form of “proof.” This is not the case for investigators.

Unlike self-identified mediums and Spiritualists who accept and embrace their embodied experiences with the paranormal, investigators view their own encounters, as well as those of self-identified mediums, through a lens of uncertainty. They are unsure what causes them and they are uncertain of how to deploy such experiences in the production of new knowledge about the paranormal. They do not trust their own perceptions of their bodies, minds, and emotions.

Ginny’s experiences with her periodic quasi-mediumship demonstrate the degree to which such encounters generate heated anxiety and uncertainty. Ginny is a co-leader of a paranormal research team that is deeply committed to the deployment of scientific perspectives and methods in investigating. She and Harry, her husband and co-leader, were among the most unequivocally pro-science investigators I met during my research.
Ginny and Harry were both skeptical of most mediums. Despite this inclination, Ginny started out her interactions in the paranormal community as someone who thought she might be able to “develop” as a medium.\(^6\) Starting out, she regularly “picked up” things and she found that many of the things she was “picking up” on investigations, such as dates and names, turned out to correspond to knowledge about the sites in the historical record. This “made [her] wonder.” However, despite her personal encounters, she remains highly suspicious regarding instances of mediumship. She explained:

“I’m not saying there’s no such thing as mediumship. I think a lot of people are faking it, though. In my case, I don’t know what it is. I pick up on things, I do.

But I don’t know how. I don’t even know if it’s real. I don’t know. It’s frustrating.

For her, this uncertainty emerges in a variety of distressing ways. One night, I arrived at an investigation with her. As we sat waiting to get started, she began to “pick up” on things. We were at an airfield in Sunderland at the time. She began to feel like “men were walking about here and they were happy and friendly with each other. But one of them wasn’t going to come back. Something was off with him.”

This episode of quasi-mediumship lasted for less than five minutes and it was the only such instance for her during the night. When I later asked her to describe how she

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\(^6\) As I mentioned in Chapter Three, “developing” is a common way of describing the processes through which a medium practices focusing on her encounters with ghosts or spirits and learns to accept and articulate them. “Developing” is associated to some degree with Spiritualist Churches, which hold regular “development circles” for people to practice their mediumship. There are “development circles” held outside of the churches as well. While not all mediums participate in or embrace the idea of development circles, many use the term “develop” to describe the process through which they honed their skills as a medium. Interestingly, the term “develop” implies that mediumship is an inherent feature of these people and that it only requires nurturing to blossom. Of course, not all mediums embrace this ideology but many do.
“picked up” on this, she described her process noting, “the thought just popped into my head. I hadn’t been thinking of it. I’d been thinking about getting a cuppa but then it was there. There was imagery too. I could see it but couldn’t see if that makes sense.” I take her description of seeing but not seeing to mean that visual apparitions that she “picked up” appeared differently to her than the objects and people comprising day-to-day life. She never thought that these visual apparitions were real or present in the way that she or I was real and present. It was more fleeting and transparent than that.

After her experience of quasi-mediumship, Ginny was visibly flustered by the event. She continued to tell the story of it and retell it to her friends as they appeared. She punctuated her retellings by noting, “I don’t know what it is. How is it that it happens? I wasn’t thinking anything to do with soldiers and then they were there in my mind.” She was genuinely flustered, confused, and anxious as a result of this. Ginny’s experiences demonstrate the complexities of translating and understanding lived, embodied experience into a form of knowledge.

Thrills, Evidence, and the Construction of a Ghost Hunter

I want to return to a point I broached earlier because of its special importance here. The importance of the self-identification of people as paranormal investigators is evident in investigators’ construction of the oppositional category of ghost hunter. While investigators imagine themselves as serious researchers intent on uncovering meaningful evidence of the paranormal, they imagine that there are others involved in endeavors that bring them into contact with the paranormal that are less than serious in their attempts, namely ghost hunters.
It is important to note that investigators see ghost hunters as “thrill seekers.” They acknowledge that ghost hunters share with investigators an interest in encountering ghosts; however, they see themselves as different and ultimately superior because of their serious pursuit of evidence. Such an understanding is not surprising given the cultural backdrop of depictions of ghost hunting and paranormal investigation. Films such as *Ghostbusters* (1984) cast such endeavors in a light humorous light and highlight their adventurous, thrill-seeking possibilities. Percy, an investigator, explained the difference between ghost hunters and paranormal investigators, “well, with ghost hunters, they want an experience. For them, it’s an experience they’re after. And that’s fine, I guess, but that’s not what we do. We want evidence.” For Percy, the distinction between evidence and experience is sharp.

Similarly, Penelope, a lead investigator of Eastern Paranormal Investigations (EPI), articulated her periodic frustrations with EPI’s less than stellar attempts to gather and shepherd evidence through recourse to the experiential dimension of ghost hunting. After a frustrating night spent calling out and engaging in glass divination, she explained:

> When we go out and mess about with things like calling out and glass divination and all of that, we’re no better than ghost hunters! Eastern Paranormal Investigations... Investigation, it’s in our name. You’d think we did that! If we’re going to sit around and try to get an experience, we ought to call ourselves Eastern Paranormal Experiences, because we’re kidding ourselves if we think what we did was investigating. If we act like that, we’re bloody ghost hunters. I’m sick of it.
The activities Penelope cited – divination and calling out – are often pointed to as among the more experiential components of engaging ghosts. They are designed to facilitate contact between the living and the dead. This is not to say that groups do not try to deploy them in investigative scenarios; however, they remain highly suspicious. In Penelope’s comments, it is clear that she, like many investigators, view experience with deep skepticism, despite their efforts to include it into their toolboxes.

While investigators often view embodied experiences with a degree of doubt, they are also critical of a science that does not include or account for such experiences. For instance, investigators are sometimes critical of parapsychologists’ emphasis on controlled laboratory tests as the site for learning about paranormal phenomena. Investigators value field research that seeks to uncover the paranormal in its more natural habitat. Despite this preference, they remain uncertain as to how to translate these experiences into what they recognize as knowledge.

The Ensuing Knowledge

One of the most surprising elements of paranormal research is how little new knowledge is produced. Neither the embodied encounters nor the technologically mediated investigative work generated much in the way of the precise insights investigators typically hoped for. Similarly, very few paranormal investigators ever convince themselves that the paranormal exists.

Investigators typically translate their embodied experiences, the insights of mediums, and their technoscientifically generated evidence into what they call “investigation reports.” This is the typical outcome of an investigation. The nature of these written reports is revealing. They are typically descriptive, chronological narratives
of the events of an investigation. Indeed, they are not entirely unlike many anthropologists’ field notes. Teams typically break into groups throughout the night and one person recounts what happened in their visit to each area in a site. This results in two to three accounts of each area in a site. Consider the following expert from an EGR investigation that occurred in a pub in York in 2009. Percy, an EGR team member wrote:

Both groups then switched locations as Percy, Jack, Rose, Molly and Michele trotted upstairs [to] the function room. Moonlight coming in through the windows that were causing a light patch on the wall opposite. Mark saw big shadow go across this light patch as if a figure had walked past the window (but it was on the 1st floor). At 1.50 AM Rose mentioned she was experiencing a 'tightness' across her chest. Percy had been feeling the same thing prior to her saying anything and Jack also complained of a 'tightness' too. Rose sta[r]ted to pick up on things once more. She felt as though she was getting dragged by her hair, through a street with grey cobbles (although she was a man in her vision). She then 'saw' grass and an empty gallows, but she felt that people would have gathered here to watch the hangings, although not in the hundreds but smaller crowd. This was felt by Rose to have taken place to the right of Gillygate, which was a short distance away. She didn't however 'see' any city wall and got no sense of the gate itself. It was instead on a slight incline (maybe landscaped), very grassy though. The incline had been leveled for the gallows, so maybe landscaped for this. Rose was keen to point out that she was pretty sure that these images were her imagination and were not anything like the 'vivid' images that she had experienced downstairs.
This description is a fairly typical rendering of a night. In fact, it is more attentive to detail and interplay than other reports. In the report above, Percy describes activities, impressions, moods, and perceptions. He does not assert that any of the potentially significant events described above, such as Rose’s vision or Percy’s sighting of a shadow, indicate the presence of a ghost or demonstrate the reality of the paranormal. Rather, these events are simply described. Reports such as this are typically the final end product of investigations. At best, they are frustratingly inconclusive. Such reports do little to add to a cumulative view of the hauntings present at a particular location or to the development of a portfolio of individual investigators’ experiences across time and space.

Investigators are not all unaware of the shortcomings of this approach. Rose, for instance, is very vocal about what she sees as the futility and lost potential of such projects. Her chief argument was that reports were useless unless investigators were committed to exploring reports at the same location over time and seeking out patterns. This was not a remarkable claim. In essence, this was the goal of investigators; however, she was alone in routinely vocally criticizing investigators’ failure to do so. In her mind, such a “mishandling of evidence” reduced her team to ghost hunters.

Many investigators are interested in generating new knowledge of the paranormal for themselves. Most remain “skeptical but open-minded” about the existence of paranormal phenomena and ghosts and they hope to find personally persuasive evidence one way or another. As Molly, an investigator in her 50s explained:

I’m doing it because I like it, obviously. I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t like it. But what I really want is to find out if there’s anything to it. Are there ghosts? That’s a question for me. I would love there to be but as of now I don’t know.
This sentiment was common. Molly was more forthcoming than many about the role she imagined personal encounters to have in shaping her understanding of the paranormal. Molly, Rose, and I were sitting in a pub chatting one afternoon when the ever-present topic of evidence reemerged. Molly remarked, “I want objective evidence, I do. But, for me, I know I also need a personal experience. I need to see it myself.” This was a common assertion. Indeed, many people become investigators to address their own, personal interest in the paranormal.

Rose had been friends with Molly for some time and decided to push this assertion. She noted that Molly had “experienced several things.” She cited an incident during Molly’s first investigation when Molly was “winding a spirit up” and a closet door violently swung open, ripping Molly’s scarf. “Yes, that was quite good!” Molly noted. Rose pushed Molly further. She asked, “so that was an experience. Are you convinced there are ghosts or spirits or whatever you want to call them?” Molly shrugged dramatically. After thinking, she explained, “I guess not. It happened so quickly. I think I would have to see something more definitive.” This tacit dismissal of her own experience and her desire for further visual encounters was not uncommon; however, sighting a ghost did little to convince investigators’ of their reality.

This was made explicitly clear to me when Jay, one of my close friends in the paranormal investigating community, “saw a ghost” at an investigation. I was not present for the investigation because I was working with a different team at the time; however, by 10 AM the morning after the investigation, I had received three text messages from different members of EGR encouraging me to “interview Jack about his experience.” As one of my investigator friends told me over text message, “u got to get ova 2 c him,
missus. Make sure he tells you about it straightaway.” When I met with Jack, he was eager to tell me about his experience. He “sat on his own,” as is often the case in smaller investigations. He was just getting up to rejoin the group when he saw a figure walk from the doorway of the room to the chair in front of him. He described the figure as “not solid like you or me, but not see through. When I saw it, I didn’t think it was just another person. I knew it was something. I watched it go by and it disappeared into the chair. I just sat there. That was something.”

After asking questions about the experience itself, I asked Jack about how this experience shaped his understanding of ghosts. Until now, he had labeled himself as an “open-minded skeptic.” This was how a large number of investigators understood their ideological stance.7 Jack had always said a personal encounter, ideally a visual one, would convince him that ghosts existed. When I asked if he now “thought that there was something to the paranormal,” he shrugged. He remained unconvinced. He continued to identify himself as an open-minded skeptic. He explained, “I don’t know, Michele. I guess I’d need to investigate.”8 The ideal of investigation, then, becomes crippled by the investigator’s imagining of evidence and science. By all explicit accounts, an embodied encounter such as Jay’s should be able to constitute a tool in understanding the paranormal; however, as Jay’s story demonstrates, Jay was unable to translate his own

7 The attachment of the prefix “open minded” distinguishes them from self-identified skeptics who tend to adopt a more explicitly pro-science stance and see investigators as unintelligent rubes, as I discussed earlier.
8 At the moment he did not investigate. This is a fact that garnered some criticism from the group; however, it was unclear what precisely he could have done to investigate such an experience.
encounter into a meaningful insight. It remained a thrilling, tantalizing glimpse of the
possibility of the paranormal.

Revealingly, Jack explained that he could not translate this experience into
evidence of the paranormal because it was hard to trust himself. He explained, “I
experienced something. I did. But I don’t know what it was. It’s hard to believe it even
happened now [a few days after the event]. I feel a bit mad really but it happened. It was
great.” Like Ginny, Jay is marked by profound self-doubt. Despite the fact that he is
certain he encountered something out of the ordinary, something that in his view is likely
to be paranormal in nature, he cannot categorize it with any degree of certainty. The
personal encounter lacks the power to persuade him or even slightly alter his perception
of the reality of the paranormal.

Despite investigators’ genuine concern for “evidence,” they produce markedly
little of what they themselves recognize as evidence on either a personal or general level.
At best, investigators conclude that a site is “active,” meaning that they suspect it is a
location of paranormal activity. They do little in the way of defining the specifics of this
activity or constructing an overview of the nature of the activity. More frustratingly to
them, they are never able to locate the evidence necessary to enable them to accept their
own experiences with the paranormal.

The Paradoxes of Experience

Why do investigators continue to pursue activities intended to engender
paranormal activity when they are unable to translate these activities into the evidence
they so desperately seek? This question puzzled me throughout my fieldwork. Investigators themselves saw this as an irresolvable paradox.

This paradox can be understood using Freud’s notion of the “oceanic feeling.” In the first chapter of *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud, drawing on his correspondence with Romain Rolland, discussed this feeling of the oceanic. Following Freud’s treatment of religion in *The Future of an Illusion* (1929), Rolland wrote to Freud about the “oceanic feeling.” Rolland noted that Freud’s analysis did not account for the feeling that precedes religion, the oceanic feeling. He described it as:

Totally independent of all dogma, all credo, all Church organization, all Sacred Books, all hope in a personal survival, etc., the simple and direct fact of the feeling of the "eternal" (which can very well not be eternal, but simply without perceptible limits, and like oceanic, as it were) (Rolland 1990: 86).

Freud characterized this oceanic feeling as “a purely subjective fact, not an article of faith; it brings with it no assurance of personal immortality” (1961: 11).

Scholars of religion have often taken these discussions of the oceanic feeling as a reference to mystical states, particularly those achieved through recourse to forms of Eastern spirituality (Parsons 1998, 1999; Masson 1980). I want to extend these analyses by considering the applicability of the oceanic feeling to the so-called “experiences” of investigators in their encounters with the paranormal. By doing so, I do not mean to imply that their embodied experiences constitute modes of mysticism or initial stages of religion. As I have shown, encounters with ghosts often necessitate a feeling of unboundedness. The ghosts may permeate investigators’ thoughts, emotions, and bodies. The encounters transform the realms of typical autonomy into porous, permeable
receptacles for forces that the investigators can neither identify nor understand. At the heart of the “oceanic feeling” as well as ghostly encounters is an experience of limitlessness.

Freud’s analysis of the oceanic feeling is relevant for the crises and self-doubt that embodied encounters engender in investigators. While Freud sought to provide at least a tentative explanation for the feeling of the oceanic, I am less interested in his final conclusion – that the oceanic feeling emerges from a regression to a childlike state in which the ego is not yet separated or closed off from the world – than in the analytics of his argument. His insights regarding the normal state of the rational self, or the ego, are especially helpful. “Normally,” he wrote, “there is nothing of which we are more certain than the feeling of our self, of our own ego…. But towards the outside, at any rate, the ego seems to maintain clear and sharp lines of demarcation” (Freud 1961: 12-13).

Although, for Freud, this feeling of self is always illusory, given the lurking presence of the unconscious, it is an important facet of self-understanding for most people. Freud’s analysis of ego and self was rooted in a flawed universalized sense of personhood. As Debbora Battaglia noted in 1995 “the ‘transcendent self’ of ego psychology and some psychological anthropology… is cast as a socially enacted agenda or ideology, a practical capacity of human culture rather than of human nature” (1995: 2-3).

Freud acknowledged that there are instances in which peoples’ experience of their own ego changes. He cited the experience of being in love as one such possibility. He concluded that “even the feeling of our own ego is subject to disturbances and the boundaries of the ego are not constant” (Freud 1961: 13). This is an important rejoinder.
So, while most people routinely experience themselves as solitary and complete, changes and fluctuations occur.

Investigators do not normalize these experiences despite their routine occurrence. In contrast to Rolland’s assertion that the oceanic feeling, or mysticism generally, often forms the source of religion, investigators do not translate this feeling into religious sentiment. More accurately, they do not translate the experiences into any explanatory system. While a religious or spiritual model would seem an obvious choice of how to explain or channel such encounters, they are not interested in this. Their difficulty in making sense of these encounters results, in part, I suggest, from the anxiety and uncertainty stemming from their experiences of their self/ego as less than fully distinct and bounded.

To return to Ginny’s anxiety regarding her episodes of quasi-mediumship, she is troubled by the origin of the visions and memories that enter her consciousness. When she inquires where the images that penetrate her personal consciousness originate, the answer that is implied, that she and others suspect, is not that it is a divine vision, subject to the rules of some yet-to-be-determined religion but, rather, that the origin is in the natural world. However, the modes of technology taken up by investigators offer little in the way of addressing such experiences. They can only look to external factors, empirically verifiable changes in temperature or electromagnetic energy. The external focus of these technologies and all of the nascent theories of the paranormal are revealing. They routinely conceive of the paranormal as external to themselves. So, when the symptoms of paranormal activity emerge in the form of shifting senses of self and the
experience of being contaminated by unidentifiable others, investigators do not know how to respond or make sense of it.

Furthermore, this collapse of self/other at the heart of these instances of quasi-mediumship or “experience” troubles investigators’ understanding of self. The investigator, as represented in the media as well as in her or his own active imagining, is actively in control of the multiple pieces of investigating – the mediumship and the science. This model of an investigator assumes a stable self, one capable of evaluating mediumship and science evenly. It does not allow for the possibility that experiences of mediumship will implicate the investigator herself.

Science as Cultural Constraint

In considering the dilemma of paranormal investigators, it is important to ask why they associate science so closely with evidence. In their deliberations, the insights of mediums never outweigh the workings of technology. Similarly, they do not understand their own personal embodied encounters as transparent enough to indicate the unequivocal existence of the paranormal.

The fascinating feature about paranormal investigating -- the trait that separates it from movements such as ufology, creation science, and anti-climate change science -- is the residual doubt and uncertainty that marks their recourse to science. While they seek to position science as a tool and scientists as biased, subjective researchers, the specter of science haunts their pursuit. And despite their explicit desire to convert embodied experiences of mediumship into “evidence,” they are unable to shake the suspicion that they are wrong, that their embodied encounters can never constitute real, objective evidence pointing to the existence of ghosts. This is all the more striking in investigators’
hopes to convince themselves (and themselves alone) of the existence of ghosts. Here, a scientifically mediated doubt permeates individuals’ understandings of their own minds and bodies. They remain hindered in categorizing and labeling a phenomenon that they highly suspect.

This deeply personal and highly confining engagement with science differs from other models. “Science” here is at once infinitely more powerful than what scholars such as Latour, Toumey, Butler, or Cross depict, unyielding in response to investigators’ attempts to tame it into their toolbox.

Investigators often deployed the metaphor of a toolbox for explaining their approach. In an idealized investigation, investigators assert that they would have a toolbox that would include science, experience, and mediums, to name but a few. Despite such reactions, many investigators would argue that science is just one tool in their toolbox for exploring the paranormal. One investigator explained, “it’s not perfect but it has its uses.” In much the same vein, they would suggest that mediums should be thought of tools, to be observed and chronicled, not to be taken at face value. They emphasize that nothing should be left out. Ultimately they would fantasize that they were the masters of their toolboxes, yet the two dueling sets of tools proved to be powerful in their own right. Investigators are unable to reconcile their desire to include tools of experience with the tools they see as producing experience.
CHAPTER SIX
WHY MEDIUMS ARE DESTINED TO FAIL: PARADOXES IN PERFORMANCE AND EVIDENCE

Mediums deserve further examination. As I have noted in previous chapters, they occupy a central yet fiercely contested role in paranormal investigating. Investigators clearly seek out mediums’ insights into the realm of spirits, yet they also understand the participation of mediums as requiring regular policing and critique on investigations. In this chapter, I examine the performances of mediums on paranormal investigations and will show that, perhaps paradoxically, they are destined to fail. That is to say, the knowledge that mediums produce through their engagement with the invisible actors of the (so-called) spirit world is unlikely to be embraced as evidence by many of the participants in a paranormal investigation. Investigators rely on three general criteria to evaluate, criticize, and dismiss mediums’ performances: language use and bodily performance, the degree of specificity of resulting knowledge claims, and claims to power. It will become clear that, for both stylistic and substantive reasons, mediums’ performances cannot be adequately subjected to the ideals of scientific verification to which paranormal investigators aspire. Ultimately, it means that investigators and mediums maintain irreconcilable understandings of the nature of evidence, proof, and authority.

Mediumship in England

Mediums – individuals who claim to be able to communicate and interact with the dead (and non-present) or to be able to access information not available through regular
means—are engaged in a variety of projects in England. The three most common arenas in which mediums today display their capabilities are one-on-one sittings, mediumship demonstrations, and paranormal investigations. As I mentioned earlier in Chapter Three, Robin Wooffitt suggests that stage demonstrations, psychic fairs, private one-to-one sittings, Spiritualist services, telephone psychics, and popularly published books by psychics are the main ways in which the public interacts with mediums, psychics, or what he refers to broadly as “psychic practitioners” (2006: 8-11). I would add to this list the important setting of paranormal investigations. While in recent years, some scholars have begun attending more closely to the discursive strategies deployed by mediums in their performances of stage mediumship and one-on-one sittings (Wales 2009; Wooffitt 2006, 2007), there has been little attention devoted to mediums’ activities in the context of popular paranormal investigation.

Mediumship is a very broad term that encompasses a broad range of sometimes-divergent cultural practices. Historians and psychologists, as well as parapsychologists and practitioners, have generally argued that there are two forms of mediumship: physical mediumship and mental mediumship. Physical mediumship, a form of mediumship that seeks to produce physical manifestations of spirit, was most popular during the 19th century. Wooffitt recently described it as a process wherein “the spirits offered visible, audible and sometimes tangible evidence of their presence” (2006: 5). In 1985 Janet

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1 In fact, not all individuals who are able to access understandings of the dead through mental, ostensibly paranormal, mechanisms self-identify as mediums. Some prefer terms, such as clairvoyant. For the most part, though, the term medium is ubiquitously recognized and used. Other individuals who may only access understandings of the dead periodically prefer terms such as “sensitive,” in part as a way of eschewing the power associated with the term medium. The terms sensitive and medium are used fairly interchangeably, although sensitive is less common.
Oppenheim described the varieties of psychical mediumship in nineteenth century séances writing that some mediums:

specialized in particular effects, whereas others offered a broad repertoire of manifestations. That repertoire might include the materialization of entire spirit bodies…in addition to more commonplace rapping, table tilting, and the emergence of spirits heads. Reports of séances also told of furniture cavorting around the room, objects floating in the air, mediums levitating, musical instruments playing tunes by themselves, bells ringing, tambourines jangling…From the bodies of some mediums a strange foamy, frothy or filmy substance, dubbed ectoplasm, might be seen to condense (1985: 8).

In contrast, she noted that mental mediumship tends to involve the medium experiencing a range of senses in her or his consciousness and, then, verbally articulating them to the audience. While parapsychologists, historians, and other scholars have found this to be a useful demarcation of modes of mediumship, most of the mediums I met do not use this language to describe their practice. Rather, they simply identify as mediums and explain that their mediumship manifests itself in a variety of ways. While I agree with Wooffitt (2006) that contemporary modes of mediumship tend more toward mental mediumship, rather than physical mediumship, elements of physical mediumship still appear in mediums’ performances on paranormal investigations. For example, elements of physical mediumship such as raps and sounds emerge upon mediums’ invitation. Mediums also come to embody the spirits in question.

Self-identified mediums in England today experience and understand their mediumship in a variety of ways; however, sensory perception is a foundational facet of
it. Some mediums use the terms clairvoyance, clairsentience, clairaudience, clairalience, and clairgustance to refer to modes of extrasensory perception grounded in vision, touch, sound, scent, and taste respectively. There is another category of perception, claircognizance, that is not so easily tied to a particular sense; rather, it includes the acquisition of knowledge of the unknown, dead, or paranormal gained through unspecified extrasensory channels.

While not all mediums experience their mediumship in just one of these sensory veins, at least one of these modes of sense is present in most forms of mediumship. One medium, Jen, who regularly worked with several paranormal research groups in the Northeast of England, described her process as a medium to me explaining that:

when I’m getting things, they just sort of come to me. I hear the voice and it can be loud or faint or however. I try to repeat what it said, if I’m working with a group. It’s not always a voice, though. Sometimes I see things, although that’s less common for me. I can sometimes just sort of get a sense, a taste for something…. When it’s really strong, sometimes I can just give myself over to it.

Let it work through me.

Jen would go on to tentatively identify herself as a clairaudient; however, while extrasensory hearing constitutes the main way she engages spirit(s), she also periodically sees and smells spirit(s) as well. While each medium’s experience of mediumship is somewhat unique, Jen’s description captures the extent to which mediums avoid specialized language and the degree to which they are flexible in their encounters. Indeed, in descriptions of mediumship, the spirits set the terms of the encounter more readily than the mediums.
Jen opened her description by referring to “getting things.” This is the most common, indeed nearly universal, way in which mediums refer to the process of encountering spirits or the paranormal. It renders the medium as a passive recipient in the exchange with the more active paranormal agent. That mediums “get things” suggests that spirits must give things, such as sensations, information, or new forms of consciousness. This implied passivity acts as a harbinger for the unfolding struggle over mediums’ understanding of their agency, consciousness, and power within a given mediumship event. It also acts as a linguistic marker that signals the beginning of a mediumship performance during an investigation. Some mediums “get things” more often and more intensely than others. This can be associated with how long they have willingly participated in or developed mediumship, or it could be based more on innate skill. When the sensory engagement with the spirits/paranormal becomes very strong, these forces may cease to speak in the first person and, instead, assume some degree of control over the body and consciousness of the medium. These are usually incredibly short-lived incidents, lasting no more than a minute.

Periods of active, engaged mediumship are not sharply separated from periods of non-mediumship or inactivity. Like in the process of “getting things,” each medium conceives of her or his mediumship and non-mediumship somewhat differently. In interviews, many mediums explain that they are always engaged in “getting things”; however, they do not always choose to share these “things” with the world at large. Rob, a medium who works exclusively with a Northwestern paranormal research group explained:
I always get things. I can’t close it off like some people can. I envy them. I’m always seeing spirit and they’re always there. I just don’t always talk about it. It’s up to people to ask for it, if you know what I mean, I don’t want to just come up out of nowhere and say, oh excuse me sir, there’s a ghost sat with you. What would the point be?

In Rob’s description of his mediumship, he emphasizes that he is always “getting things.” For him, receiving information from the spirit world comprises his usual state of being. Assessing how and when to share that information requires greater consideration and management. Rob alludes to other mediums who are able to actively construct and maintain some form of mental barrier between their consciousness and the spirit world.²

Rebecca, a medium who has worked with several groups, also elaborated on this question of establishing barriers between her consciousness and the spirit world. She explained:

Well, it [contact with spirits] used to be constant. They were everywhere and I was always aware of it. Then, I had this one instance where a spirit of this man just wouldn’t leave me alone. He was pestering me like nothing you’ve ever seen. I eventually had to say to him, look, I appreciate that you want to talk to me but we have to have limits. I started meditating more and being more conscious of when I wanted to deal with spirits and when I didn’t. Now it’s on my terms. I open up and close down and it’s a lot better, really.

² As I mentioned in Chapter Three, many mediums and, indeed, many paranormal researchers expressed a hypothesis that everyone has the capacity to be a medium as a child; however, through the process of socialization, they unknowingly learn to establish barriers between their consciousness and the spirit world/paranormal. As a result, they are blind to those barriers and many never understand how to lower or remove them.
For her, a clear sense of demarcation was necessary between her everyday consciousness and her engagement with spirits. In her narrative of establishing this boundary, it is noteworthy that contact with spirits emerges as her natural state whereas a bounded, cordial encounter with spirits is a condition that required her active negotiation.

Most paranormal investigators do not think that the potential to interact with spirits is limited to mediums. Their entire project of investigating the paranormal depends on an understanding of ghosts or spirits that is grounded in the natural, rather than spiritual, world. Investigators see the paranormal as part of the nature that unfolds around them, which, in turn, enables their investigations. They see mediums’ assorted engagements with manifestations of the paranormal (in the form of individualized mediumship or “mediumship demonstrations” in the context of Spiritualism) as just one among many ways of encountering the paranormal. While mediums may have more routine encounters with spirit(s), investigators and indeed most mediums maintain that anyone can have such an encounter and, in fact, many individuals who do not self-identify as mediums do experience spirit(s) and the paranormal during investigations. Investigators refuse to allow encounters with spirit to become a specialized arena, controlled by self-identified mediums.

Mediating Knowledge Specificity and Verifiability

Paranormal investigators are motivated to include mediums on their investigations by the hope that they will produce or trigger verifiable insights into the paranormal. This could take many forms: a name of a former resident or details about an event that occurred at the site, for example. Investigators aspire to try to verify mediums’
claims by comparing them to the known historical record of the site in question; however, the claims produced by mediums never meet paranormal investigators’ requirements for valid insights. Mediums’ claims alternate between being too specific and being too vague to be considered useful.

Mediums also tend to understand their mediumship as resulting in verifiable, reality-based claims about the world. They describe it in their own words as a form of “proof.” It was not uncommon in my interviews with mediums for them to offer to show me “proof” in the form of discursive descriptions of the spirits around us or knocks or raps produced by the spirits around us. Proof is a multifaceted concept for mediums. When they share their mediumship with others, it is implicit that it should be taken as proof of their mediumship and proof of the reality of spirits/paranormal. Mediums are not alone in their understandings of their behavior as resulting in “proof” or, some form of evidence. Paranormal investigators share the expectation that mediums or, at least, good or successful mediums will produce proof of mediumship. Such proof is expected to be in the form of accurate information about a particular spirit or ghost. It will, in and of itself, constitute a form of verification of the paranormal but, more pressingly, also of spirits present at a particular investigation site.

Subjecting mediums to assorted tests of verification is not unique to the paranormal investigating scenario. Mediums work in a range of social settings to produce knowledge about living individuals, their deceased friends and relatives, and the dead who are now spirits. Aside from paranormal investigating, Spiritualist Churches and mediumship demonstrations and for-profit one-on-one sittings are the most common forums for mediums. In each of these settings, mediums or psychics produce claims
about the living and dead that are centered on a specific individual or group of individuals and the targeted individual(s) act(s) as the verifier(s) of the medium’s claims.

For example, in all mediumship demonstrations that I observed both in and beyond Spiritualist Churches, mediums would indicate that they were “picking up something” with respect to someone in particular. Sometimes they weren’t sure who it was but they were able to establish the identity of the intended recipient of their mediumship through processes of elimination. In these settings, the verification process is direct and fairly immediate. Relying on their engagement with spirits, mediums present their sitters with a variety of claims about the sitters and dead people associated with the sitter. While these claims may be voiced in a tentative fashion, the sitter is either able or unable to verify the medium’s claims. For instance, one exchange between a medium and one of the attendees in a Spiritualist Center in London demonstrates the immediacy of the verification process.

**Medium:** I’m getting a man for you.

[Indicates sitter by pointing. The sitter acknowledges her selection by nodding.]

**Medium:** I’m getting… is it your dad? Is he in spirit?

**Sitter:** Yes.

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3 This process of elimination could take several forms. Sometimes a medium, especially a more novice medium, would only become aware of the name or identity-based elements of the spirit with whom he or she was establishing contact. The medium might not be sure with whom the spirit was associated in the audience. To establish this, the medium would generally ask if someone could connect or “receive” the spirit in question. This would take the form of a question like, “I’m getting a John. Can anyone here receive that?” The medium would then sort through the potential receivers. Sometimes, mediums understood that their contact with a spirit was intended for someone in a specific area of the room but might be unsure which person in a row of people. For example, it might be the spirit intended to communicate with. By posing a series of questions, a medium could establish the identity of the intended receiver.
Medium: He was a good man, wasn’t he?

Sitter: Yes.

Medium: He did something with his hands, with swinging. Was he a butcher?

Sitter: Hm… No, no.

In this situation, the medium went on to eventually identify the nature of father’s employment correctly. In this instance, it was quickly established that the father was not a butcher.

The comparative ease and speed of the verification process in most situations where mediums perform is markedly different from the process in paranormal investigations. During the course of a paranormal investigation in a private home or at a museum of heritage site, mediums will produce a variety of observations about the spirits and paranormal activity present. Because these insights are grounded in the place itself (meaning that the spirits in question are related to the site rather than the individuals present), there is rarely a possibility of immediate validation as is the case in church based demonstrations.

When considering how to best deploy the insights generated by mediums, paranormal investigators often comment that they should be noted during the investigation and, then, following the investigation, researchers should look to different historical sources for verification. For investigators, this is fraught with three general categories of problems, however: vagueness, plausibility, and specificity. The implicit demands of paranormal investigators condemn mediums to fail to produce information that is considered useful.
Paranormal investigators often struggle with the problem of vagueness in claims produced by mediums. During the course of an investigation, a medium will produce a range of claims about the spirits associated with the site in question and, when revisiting these claims after an investigation, investigators struggle with how to verify them. For example, on an investigation of a private home, Jen, who was assuming the role of medium for the night, produced a range of claims. Some of the more central observations she made during the night were that there was a “little boy in spirit form present” and an “old woman died of something to do with her heart.” She also frequently commented that she was either cold, angry, or scared. I sat with Trevor and Ann, two of the more involved paranormal investigators in that group as they sorted through their notes from the night. They were both frustrated by Jen’s performance. As they looked over her contributions, Trevor asked the question, “what are we supposed to do with things like this?” Ann agreed, noting, “how do we go about researching a little boy at the house? There’s nothing there to go on? What can we do with that?”

Ann raised a key complaint shared among paranormal investigators. How can one research or verify the sometimes vague insights of mediums? In the case of Trevor and Ann’s frustrations with Jen, the central problem was that her chief mediumistic insights – that an older woman died of something related to her heart and that there was a little boy present – were nearly impossible to verify. I asked Ann and Trevor how they would deal with these insights. Ann replied, “you can’t really. I mean, a little boy in the house? I’m sure there have been thousands of little boys in the house. It’s an old house. That tells us nothing. It’s always the same with her [Jen]. Mediums are all a bit like that.” Judged
against the enormity of the past, investigators found it difficult to verify mediums’
claims.

While vagueness constitutes one pole in the continuum of paranormal
investigators’ frustrations with mediums, excessive specificity is equally suspect as is,
more troublingly, accuracy. When mediums assert claims about spirits present that
correspond to known established historical interpretations of the past of a site,
investigators begin to wonder if the medium has engaged in previous historical research
about the site, in a sense voiding their capacity to engage in mediumship.

This was the case during a 2009 visit to Chillingham Castle. Amy and Hugh had
been eager to be alone with me and Rose since the first night we arrived at the castle.
They conspiratorially whispered that they had something important to tell us. Later in the
afternoon on the second day of our three day stay at the Castle, Rose and I were alone
with them in Hugh’s car as we drove into Alnwick, the town nearest to Chillingham. As
soon as we were alone in the car, Hugh and Amy rushed to share what was on their mind:
Ruth, the medium. They were convinced that she was “faking things.”

The night before, Hugh, Amy, Rose, and I had gathered in the courtyard of the
Castle with Ruth and several of the other invited weekend guests. The goal for the night
was paranormal investigation, meaning a systematic scientific query into the possibility
of present paranormal activity. This took the form of various organized experiments
throughout the night. While participants were engaging in the planned activities, Ruth, a
self identified medium walked through the court “picking things up.” Rose, Amy, and I
were walking with her. She vocalized what she was “getting.” Speaking slowly in an
uncertain tone, she stated:
I’m getting…[7 second pause]…Sage…the word sage is in my head. But… I think it’s a person…not like the herb or flavor or whatever… [5 second pause]…it’s a man….He’s a bad man…I think…oh…he’s done some bad things here…[7 second pause]…I think he died here though. Got a taste of his own medicine, maybe.

During her delivery, Rose, Amy, and I had watched and listened to her. When her delivery seemed to conclude, Amy exclaimed in an interested and encouraging tone, “that’s interesting, Ruth!”

The next day in the car, Amy and Hugh were eager to critique Ruth’s mediumship. They began by asking what Rose and I “made of” Ruth during the previous night. Rose, seeming to sense where the conversation was headed, offered a noncommittal answer, observing that she found it to be an interesting night. She asked what Hugh and Amy thought. Amy replied that she couldn’t believe it when Ruth “came out with” Sage. I asked why this was so remarkable.

Hugh explained that John Sage was the most famous ghost associated with Chillingham Castle. According to Hugh, Sage was the former executioner and torturer who was eventually executed himself at the Castle. For Amy, the publicness of this information was troubling. She commented with agitation, “he’s the most google-able ghost there!” She paused and then noted, “I think Ruth researched this beforehand. She must have.” Rose, who was often careful not to become embroiled in gossip of this

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4 John Sage does figure prominently in most online discussions of the ghosts of Chillingham Castle. For instance, he is listed on such mainstream sites as Wikipedia page for “Chillingham Castle” and on Chillingham Castle’s own website. He is also featured in several of the many television programs about ghosts filmed at the castle.
nature, remarked that it was interesting. Hugh agreed with Amy and noted that he thought it was “suspicious.”

Comparing the respective critiques of Ruth and Jen’s mediumship demonstrates the paradox of medium-based knowledge. In the case of Jen’s mediumship, her information was too vague to be useful and Ruth’s mediumship at Chillingham was too specific, too well known to the wider public to be believable.

Agency and Intentionality in Mediumship

Questions of language and performance are central to the practices of mediumship in English paranormal investigating. Mediums’ or sensitives’ performance of mediumship is one of the dominant ways in which understandings of spirit and ghosts emerge. Debates among investigators over the legitimacy of individuals’ mediumship often focus on the boundary between their personal consciousness/subjectivity and their mediumship. The question of how someone knows something is key to evaluating mediumship and, in performances of mediumship during investigations, this is mediated through mediums’ language and bodily performances.

Investigators’ concerns about vagueness and especially about specificity in performances of mediumship reveal a central fear, namely, that mediums are intentionally misleading investigators. Are mediums researching sites ahead of time as a means of seeming like mediums? Is their vagueness a guise for their inability to produce genuine mediumship? The fear that mediums are intentionally misleading investigators is rampant and persistent among investigators. In interviews with me, investigators were

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As I have already noted, the very mediums who participate and perform on these investigations often demonstrate their mediumship in more formal settings such as Spiritualist churches and organized “mediumship demonstrations.”
very careful not to accuse mediums of intentionally being “fakes”; however, in essence, they communicated fear of fraudulent mediums. Much of this anxiety rests on the ambiguous nature of mediums’ intentionality and agency in their performances of mediumship.

I find Webb Keane’s 1997 work useful here. In it, he noted that communication and interaction between the world of everyday humans and the otherworld were central to many forms of religious practice, including divination. “Not only do they impose special semiotic difficulties on human practitioners,” he wrote, “but their language must sometimes contend with the fact that the very presence of the deity, spirits, or ancestors cannot be taken for granted” (Keane 1997: 48).

Mediums working with paranormal investigators now in the U.K. experience great semiotic difficulties in successfully performing their mediumship. They must indeed strike the right balance between intentional and unintentional speech, and dramatic and mundane performances of that speech, if they are going to placate the “scientific” sensibilities of their primary audience, paranormal investigators.

To invoke Keane again, “human agency is not always something people want entirely to celebrate or claim for themselves; they may prefer to find agency in other worlds. To the extent, however, that their access to other worlds is mediated by language, it involves persistent tensions between transcendence and the pragmatic present” (Keane 1997:66). This tension between “transcendence and the pragmatic present,” I find is key for English mediums and artfully managing it in their performance ensures the success or failure of its reception. I agree with Keane that attention to the linguistic performances of
religious participants provides a useful framework for understanding the tension between “transcendence and the pragmatic present.”

I find it relevant that some scholars have focused on the role of intentionality in speech acts as a way of understanding this tension. I draw on work by Keane, Goffman, and Hanks in exploring this tension. In “Footing” Goffman took issue with the traditional assumption that a speech act encompasses only two roles or speakers. He explained that “during any moment in time, one will be speaking his own thoughts on a matter and expressing his own feelings… the other, listening” (1981: 129). In contrast, he proposed several possible roles in a speech act or performance: the principal, “someone who believes personally in what is being said” (Goffman 1981:167); the author, someone who formulates the actual words or utterance; the animator, the person who utters the words; the addressee, or intended recipient, the person to whom the words are intended; the target; and the overhearer. Goffman stressed that these roles can be played by as few as two people; however, it is also possible that an exceedingly wider range of actors may occupy some of them.

William Hanks (1996) found this useful in examining Mayan shamanism and I find his adaptation of Goffman especially helpful in attempting to understand the paradox of English mediums. “From an anthropological perspective,” Hanks wrote, “it is obvious that participant roles must be viewed in relation to social contexts. It makes no sense to isolate a distinction, say, between a performing shaman and the spirit agents from whom he learned his prayer without spelling out the ethnographic significance of the relation. Similarly, it is distorting to a shaman in performance as acting alone simply because his spirits are nowhere visibly to the untrained observer” (Hanks 1996: 167). As Hanks
emphasized, a turn to participant roles in “events” allows analyses that account for local
senses of order and meaning. Indeed, he reminded anthropologists that “utterances are
part of social projects, not merely vehicles for expressing thoughts” (Hanks 1996: 168).
This point is key when considering the performance of mediumship in paranormal
investigations.

Following Hanks (1996) and others, I turn to Goffman’s articulation of “footing”
(1981) as a means of understanding the many agents and audiences implicit in
mediumship. Managing changes in footing, I argue, is key in ensuring a well-received act
of mediumship. Most of the changes in footing occur at the level of the speaker. To
investigators, the ideal act of mediumship seems to entail the medium speaking as the
animator, author, and principal, meaning that the medium remains the conscious, active
navigator of the encounter with a spirit. She or he would encounter and observe the spirits
and then offer narration.

Instances of mediumship that entail stable footings are the least likely to elicit
criticism, at least on performative grounds. Indeed, they are most likely not to elicit
commentary at all. For example, during the course of one investigation, Ruth engaged in
several acts of mediumship that are good examples of mediumship that does not elicit
commentary. (Indeed, while Ruth’s mediumship in general would be called into question
many times, these minor moments of mediumship rarely were.) While investigators
engaged in the mundane acts of investigating, Ruth narrated some encounters with the
spirit world. She quietly said, “I’m getting a sad male energy. I think he sat in this room
quite a bit. He likes that we’re here and that we’re looking for him.” While her claims
about a sad male energy did not warrant significant interest, her performance in this instance was not criticized.

In other instances of mediumship, the medium is the animator of the utterance; however, the principal and/or author of the utterance may be spirit(s). The medium may act as author and animator, whereas the principal remains the spirit. In other instances, the spirit acts as author and principal, reducing the medium to simply an animator. There are several verbal cues that act as indicators of the medium’s role and state of consciousness in performances of mediumship. As I noted above, the phrase “I’m getting” is a common cue initiating a narrative encounter with spirit(s); however, the use of the first person in that utterance is highly significant. It acts as an indication that the speaker is acting as animator, author, and principal.

In their performance of mediumship, mediums’ footing often shifts, resulting in switches between speaking in the first person and speaking in the third person. They move from being a first person participant in an unseen unfolding paranormal drama to being a more temporally and emotionally removed observer of the unfolding scene, one able to narrate it for the group, demonstrating shifts in footing and corresponding shifts in consciousness. For example, during an investigation at Castle Keep in Newcastle Nancy, the medium for the evening struggled to experience and describe the paranormal events unfolding in front of her. We were standing in a hallway at the uppermost level of the castle when she began to experience the presence of an evil male spirit. This is a transcription of her description of the event. She is the main speaker and, during the event, changes in her footing abound.

(1) Nancy: I’m getting…I see him. What he is… which I can always get in time…
c’mon c’mon c’mon… he… he’s not a monk….he’s higher than any order…be glad he’s…

(2) **Mark:** And is this the guy who’s been seen here?

(3) **Nancy:** Black eyes... black eyes, sockets with no eyes there. It is almost there like a reaper.

(4) **Mark:** Do you think it’s more symbolic?

(5) **Nancy:** It’s more symbolic. People keep saying he’s a monk but he’s not a monk. He would hurt you. He would. It’s like a ritual. It’s a ritual to have blood on his hands. Like he gets this fantastic surge. And he goes like this. And he likes to feel the blood dripping on his fingers. He likes it! (As she notes this, she starts moving her hands up and down with the palms facing upward and the fingers spread apart.)

(Pause)

(6) **Nancy:** Why!?

(7) **Mark:** Is that the man down there? (Referring to an earlier experience someone had)

(8) **Nancy:** What the hell?

(Pause)

(9) **Nancy:** I wish I could say this… I wish I could pronounce this. I am…(sigh)…domino domine…present…presenti…ah domino…presentus…

(Pause)

(10) **Nancy:** Don’t scream.
(Pause)


(Pause)

(12) Nancy: What’s this ‘meanings of the dead’?

(Pause)

(13) Nancy: Look he says, look it up. Meanings of the dead.

(14) Mark: Is he actually here?

(15) Nancy: No he’s been here all the time.

(16) Joanna: Is that somebody down there?

(17) Nancy: Presendus prefundus?

(Pause)

(18) Nancy: What is prefundus?

I want to highlight several of the uses of language present in this instance of mediumship. In this excerpt, Nancy’s shifting consciousness is clearly evident. In her first utterance (Line 1), Nancy demonstrated that she was actively narrating an experience. She was conscious of her speech and able to articulate the experience as Nancy. She also verbally signaled the ongoing processes of her mediumship, murmuring “c’mon” as a way of coaxing further insight. With that utterance, the footing of the audience shifted. They were not, presumably, the intended recipients of her encouragement. The spirits or paranormal processes were the intended recipients, the addressees, in Goffman’s terms.
Toward the end of the excerpt, Nancy begins to repeat the phrase “meanings of the dead.” She then pauses and wonders in a baffled voice what it means. By asking “what’s this ‘meanings of the dead,’” Nancy signals a shift in her consciousness. She separates her active, intentional speech from speech that she produces unintentionally. Again, her “footing” changed as had the “footing” of the audience. When, after a pause, she changed her footing again to speak as Nancy, she observed that “he’s not a monk.” Once again, the audience’s footing shifted as the living agents present regained their status as primary audience.

Nancy’s footing remained steady in lines 3 to 5, although the footing of the audience (of present investigators) changed. We became the overhearers rather than the addressees. In fact, in line 3, the addressee was unclear. That Mark intervened in line 4, asking for clarification is revealing. He urged her to maintain a steady footing as principal, author, and animator and to remember that the investigators are the desired addressees. She maintained this desired footing through utterance 5; however, by utterance 6, the audience’s footing shifted again and she directed her utterance either at spirits or herself. We were relegated again to overhearers. Mark attempted to intervene again; however, Nancy continued her performance.

When Nancy began to utter words that are not recognizable as English and repeated the phrase “meaning of the dead,” she engaged in the most profound change in footing present in this speech event. In utterance 9, her footing is unclear. Is she repeating speech she is overhearing in the spirit world or is the spirit speaking through her? This was an unresolved question for investigators as they analyzed the events of the night. That she “wishes she could say this” suggests that she maintained her footing and
consciousness; however, when she uttered the non-English words, her tone has taken on a lower and shakier timber to it. Investigators were divided in how to interpret the act. Her repetition of “meanings of the dead” was more readably interpreted. Investigators generally understood this as the spirit speaking through Nancy or, conversely, Nancy attempting to perform what would be seen as an act of the spirit speaking through her.

When I talked to participants in the investigation about Nancy’s performance that night, they were far from convinced that she was actually engaging spirits and providing an accurate description of that process. Several investigators identified her use of language in the above transcript as problematic or suspect. Starting in line 9 of the above transcript, Nancy struggled with a language she seems to be either overhearing or speaking. That this language was not readily identifiable proved to be a major stumbling block for investigators. As one person who witnessed it explained, “what was she speaking? Is that even a language? I mean, she just got back from living in southern Spain for a year. A part of me wonders if she wasn’t just trying to speak Spanish at us or something.” The same logic of proof that negated mediums’ assertions of facts about spirits was applied to the speech produced by mediums. In this instance, if Nancy produced a recognizable language, Spanish in this case, it was suspect since she personally could know Spanish; however, if she produced an unrecognizable language, it might not be “real.”

The Problem of Plural of Subjectivities

As I have discussed above, investigators were troubled by mediums’ shifts in footing and their (implied) correlated shifts in consciousness. While investigators never
directly address the question of consciousness, I contend here that mediums were troubled by the fractured/splintered consciousness/subjectivity some acts of mediumship seemed to imply.

In Nancy’s mediumship, Nancy maintained a triangulated author/audience relationship, shifting between addressing the audience of investigators, being addressed by the spirits, and addressing herself or the spirits, in some instances of mediumship and allowing her consciousness to shift accordingly. In other even more controversial instances, the footing of the medium is relatively stable; however, her implied consciousness troubles investigators. In some instances, mediums or individuals experiencing profound mediumship encounters may lose themselves in the encounter. This can take wildly dramatic forms in which mediums seem to lose themselves both bodily and cognitively, vomiting and behaving in a fashion far removed from their regular personalities. In most instances, though, it remains a discursively mediated event.

Occasions in which mediums’ consciousness becomes nearly sustained by spirit(s) are rare but, when they do occur, the reactions they elicit are revealing. One such instance occurred on an investigation at a pub in York. Sam was a member of the public who had contacted the group of investigators and expressed a desire to participate on an investigation. Several people who knew members of the team thought that he might be a medium, as he “got things” in the past. On the night of the investigation, he was a very friendly and jovial man in his late twenties. Members of the group were pleased to meet with him. However, as he joined me and three other investigators, he quickly became absorbed in his experience of the night. We were standing about in the apartment of the
pub’s landlord. None of the investigators present found anything especially noteworthy at that point.

In contrast, Sam began to “get” quite a lot. Upon entering the room, Sam remarked that “it’s an odd room.” He offered a few other opening comments noting how “strange” he felt. Then, his footing shifted and he began to speak in the first person; however, it appeared that he was not “principal” of the utterances (Goffman 1981). Indeed, he seemed to take on a new identity. His tone of voice changed and he began to speak as if he were someone else. “I don’t like that you’re here. I want you to get out! This is just too much. Too fucking much.” Then, his voice switched back to normal and he commented in a very frightened fashion, “I’m sorry. I don’t know what is happening here to me.” He then shifted back to speaking in the aggressive fashion. Throughout the night, it became more and more aggressive and threatening. He noted several times that he wanted to hit certain investigators and throw them out the window. His body shook with anger seemingly involuntarily. While he periodically became “himself” during the night, he would remark on the strangeness and scariness of what was happening to him. That Sam switched back and forth between being consumed by the spirit and commenting on the discomfort of the experience reveals that Sam never completely lost himself in the encounter with the spirit. The spirit might speak and gesture through Sam but Sam maintained some shred of his own consciousness.

Unlike Mark’s attempts to redirect Nancy’s engagement with the spirits, investigators made few interventions in his delivery. They explained later that this was because they wondered if Sam was sane or dangerous. Indeed, after the events of the night, investigators spent much time analyzing his participation. Many investigators
suggested that he might be “crazy,” proposing various mental illnesses they thought his behavior might indicate such as bipolar disorder or “split personality disease.”

The suggestion that Sam was mentally ill was the most revealing element of the discourse. That one investigator pointed to the possibility that Sam experienced “split personalities” underlines the concern investigators’ concern over Sam’s extended period of (at least) dual consciousnesses. Van Wolputte noted in 2004 that “in the West multiple selves traditionally have been associated with pathologies such as schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder” (2004: 262), and Debbora Battaglia noted also in 1995 that the central importance of a singular, unchanging self is a manifestation of the association of individuality with modernization (in the “West”).

Anthropologists writing about spirit possession have often argued that possession produces different states of consciousness in different societies. Some acts of mediumship or possession require the person to be fully overwhelmed or taken over by the spirit. Other modes necessitate the maintenance of dual consciousness, those of the spirit and the medium. The fate of the self in acts of spirit possession is variable. Many practitioners of possession accommodate this variability in the permeability of the self. Paranormal investigators do not.

The investigators I met in England maintained the firm assumption that selfhood should remain even when spirit also entered that consciousness and, in fact, that selfhood should be stronger than the spirit. That spirits ever subsumed mediums’ senses of self (and that spirits were ever able to assume bodily supremacy) speaking of their own volition deeply troubled investigators. To mediums, it was hardly noteworthy.
Selfhood and Science

While collaborations with mediums rarely provide the insights that paranormal investigators desire, they do offer investigators several important prospects for asserting their own commitment to rationality and a scientific viewpoint, which skeptics and other critics often call into question. Critiquing mediums’ performances allows investigators to reiterate their participation in dominant understandings of selfhood and rationality.

The notion of selfhood that underpins mediums’ engagement with the spirit world deeply unnerves paranormal investigators. Charles Taylor wrote in 2007 that one of the significant differences between modernity and pre-modernity is the constitution of the self, and that the pre-modern world – what Taylor calls the “enchanted world” – is characterized by “porous minds.” To him, “the line between personal agency and impersonal force was not at all clearly drawn” in pre-modern times (Taylor 2007: 32). “Porous” selves, he wrote, were open to influences, possession, and encounters with external others. Clearly, the senses of selfhood that correspond to contemporary mediumship in England correspond significantly to this early notion of the self. Taylor argues that, with the “disenchantment” of the North Atlantic world, we have come to have “buffered” selves. Taylor notes that “for the modern, buffered self, the possibility exists of taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside the mind…things beyond [the buffer] don’t need to ‘get to me’” (2007: 38). In their acts of policing the footing of mediums’ performances, investigators attempt to encourage mediums to maintain a buffered sense of self.

Taylor’s notion of the buffered self corresponds to popular understandings of science and objectivity. Philosophers of science have remarked on the persistence of the
trope of the “brain-in-a-vat” as a way of understanding the world objectively. The hyper-rational, decision-making self is the ideal of science. Indeed, while science studies scholars have urged scientists and scholars generally to avoid thinking of science as the search for certainty, a possibility seemingly afforded in the “brain-in-a-vat” mode of thinking (Latour 1999), paranormal investigators and other groups of non-specialists committed to contemplating science continue to think of it as a quest for certainty. This quest for certainty and ultimate knowledge is grounded in Taylor’s notion of the “buffered” self. By criticizing and challenging mediums’ embrace of a “porous” selfhood, investigators reiterate their commitment to science, rationality, and objectivity. Unlike mediums or New Age practitioners who seek to collapse the boundaries between mind and body (Riches 2000), paranormal investigators remain at least partially committed to preserving this boundary and its attending possibilities of certainty.

Conclusion

Investigators’ reactions to, and engagement with, mediums confuse outsiders. One might reasonably wonder why they choose to include mediums on investigations. Allowing for the possibility of valid mediumship acts as an element of their conception of “good investigating.”

To paranormal investigators, investigating requires an “open mind” and a willingness to consider and evaluate all possible “evidence.” By including mediums, they allow for the possibility that mediums can produce valuable insights. When I asked Jack, an investigator, what he imagined the ideal behavior of a medium on an investigation to be, he explained they he just wanted mediums to “say what they get and have that be
that.” Many other investigators echoed this sentiment, reiterating that mediums should simply report what they perceive. This expressed goal of “saying what they get” reveals one of the roots of the conflict between mediums and investigators. Investigators imagine that mediums will be able to simply report what they encounter. This assumes a stable sense of self and an unchanging sense of footing. In short, they imagine that mediumship allows the style of consciousness and modes of expression that investigators favor. As I have discussed above, this is not always the case.

Despite all of the ways in which investigators critiqued mediums, they continued to suggest that mediumship itself was possible. While they allowed that such things were possible, they were doubtful of the veracity of any manifestation. They wanted to work with something that, when manifest as its logical extreme, deeply troubled them.

Investigators align themselves with “science” in their response to mediums’ shifting footing and multiple selves inherent in mediumship. Scientists, or legitimate knowledge producers, are what the mediums are not. A compelling interpretation is that mediums must fail in these situations so investigators can successfully perform as scientists. Allowing and encouraging the participation of mediums allows investigators to full realize their role as the mediators of “objective” information. That investigators can relegate them to the role of producers of invalid claims demonstrates their prowess as investigators, a category informed by a scientism. Mediums fail, then, because of an underlying and unresolved discord between mediums’ understanding of self and truth and investigators’ interpretations of them.
CHAPTER SEVEN

AMBIGUOUS TECHNOLOGIES: TOOLS AS UNTRUSTWORTHY WITNESSES AND RELIABLE CREDENTIALS

The media and skeptics alike portray paranormal investigators as technology hungry, gadget lovers. This is not an entirely unfair portrayal. Investigators are deeply interested in technology as a tool for understanding the paranormal. In this chapter, I examine investigators’ theories regarding technology as well as the ways in which they use or fail to use technology on investigations. Although investigators draw legitimacy from their use of technology, I have become interested in how these tools generate very little knowledge about the paranormal. In fact, I have found a significant disjuncture between investigators’ ideas about usage of technology in general and their usage of technology during actual investigations. In theory, investigators embrace technology and regard it as the most likely avenue for generating objective knowledge of the paranormal. In practice, they find themselves reluctant to use it. Here, I examine this tension between their ideology and their actual practice.

Though the tension between investigators’ use of technology and their professed confidence in technology is fascinating on its own, it reveals something more fundamental: the epistemological crisis that marks so much of investigators’ project. In its documentary capacity, investigators suggest that technology has the potential to authenticate or discount their embodied experiences. I will show here that, despite this explicit statement of technology’s potential, investigators prefer either to use the tools in a revelatory capacity or, do not to use tools at all. They are caught between their desire to
deploy technology in a revelatory capacity (i.e. to reveal the presence or absence of ghosts) and their fear that this diminishes the legitimacy of their findings. I argue that it is here that investigators’ fraught relationship to science is clearest. They are seemingly faced with the opportunity to legitimate their project more completely and, yet, they fail to pursue it. Their dilemma here becomes clear. They are caught between science and belief.

The list of possible or even ideal equipment that ghost hunters and investigators can or should use on their investigations is nearly limitless. On paranormal websites, some groups advocate a broad range of “equipment.” For example, one group advocates using a “four in one measuring tool” that notes levels of light, humidity, and sound; digital still cameras; digital video cameras; EMF readers; dowsing rods; dowsing rod holders; motion detectors; laptops; crystals; crystal holders; walkie-talkies; digital recorders; digital thermometers; and temperature logs. Yvette Fielding and Ciarán O’Keeffe’s guide to ghost hunting, *Ghost Hunters: A Guide to Investigating the Paranormal* mentioned the following as “the basic items essential for use in any investigation” (2007: 198): business cards and identification; notebook and pens; two torches; tape recorder and blank tapes; 35mm camera; digital camera; wristwatch; thermometer; compass; chalk to mark the area; talcum powder; first aid kit; tape measure; binoculars; motion detectors; jackets; and food and drink.

While these exhaustive lists seem to imply that there is a nearly endless number of tools and technologies to include in investigations, most investigators and nearly all ghost hunters focus the majority of their attention on five key tools: EMF readers, digital
thermometers, digital voice recorders, digital cameras, and video cameras. Indeed, while ouija boards and dowsing rods routinely appear on investigations, their presence is never as ubiquitously welcomed as EMF readers or thermometers. Their associations with belief and vaguely religious practices mar them for investigations. By focusing on these five major, predominant technologies, I hope to reveal some of the motivating factors guiding and curtailing these uses of technology. I focus on the most common items actually found in ghost hunters’ equipment kits; these items are the most discursively referenced as well.

Technology as a Black Box

Science and technology theorists’ approach to the black boxing of knowledge offers an important lens for understanding ghost hunters’ and investigators’ use of technology. They borrow the term “black boxing” from cybernetics, where it refers to technology or apparatuses that are too complex for easy understanding. Theorists have used the term to refer to the layered and often obscured nature of facts, technologies, and methods in science.

A significant part of the STS intellectual project has been to reveal the processes of black boxing through which “reality is secreted” (Latour and Woolgar 1979: 243). Here, I am less concerned with “opening” the black box of ghost hunting technologies;

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1 This is not to say that they don’t care deeply about some of the tools mentioned by O’Keeffe and Fielding. For example, business cards and jackets, while by no means essential to investigating, are items of deep concern for investigators. They are tools in their production of professionalism and expertise. Teams emphasize the importance of acquiring matching jackets for team members and professional-looking business cards. They consider both items useful in securing future investigation sites. However, investigators do not consider these items essential to the actual investigating.
rather, I am interested in charting the ways in which paranormal investigators deploy these black boxed technologies.

While Latour and other STS scholars (Collins 1983; Hard 1994) focus on the processes of fact-building and black-boxing largely with respect to laboratory practices and to relatively traditional chains of science, Latour’s idea of the black box proves equally useful when considering the deployment of technology and invocations of science found outside the laboratory. Indeed, his observation that technology itself is black-boxed bears fruitfully on an examination of paranormal investigators’ invocation of technology.

Latour noted that machinery constitutes a special category of black boxes. He wrote that “machines, for instances, are drawn, written, argued and calculated, before being built…. The more modern and complex they are, the more paper forms machines need so as to come into existence. There is a simple reason for this: in the very process of their construction they disappear from sight because each part hides the other parts as they become darker and darker black boxes” (1987: 253). While Latour did not extend his analysis of black boxing into its implications for popular consumptions of technology, it is, nonetheless, highly relevant. That most technologies are black boxes has important ramifications for investigators.

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2 STS scholars have increasingly focused on the social constructions and implications of technologies. As Brian Rappert noted, “the view that a technology is merely a neutral instrument for achieving some end has given way to much more sophisticated approaches for understanding how technologies help constitute and are constituted by social relations” (2001: 557). Indeed, what Steve Woolgar and Keith Grint (1992) have called post-essentialism, led to significant scholarship focusing on claims made about technology and the social uses of technologies. This highly fruitful approach has tended not to engage with the notion of black boxing, in part because such a focus would be counterproductive to their purposes.
Because technology is black-boxed, especially when it reaches the public spheres of consumption, many users or consumers are necessarily unable to unpack the meanings, facts, and labor invested in these technologies. An understanding of the machine’s construction and functions eludes them. For investigators, the black-boxed nature of technology enables and sustains a plurality of interpretations.

David Hess has suggested thinking about the plurality of interpretations of technology in terms of its orthodox or heterodox uses. While the notion of heterodoxy has been widely used in religious studies (Hanegraaf 1998; Hess 1987), Hess suggested applying it to technology studies. He noted:

the concept may be counterintuitive for technologies because it is so easy to fall into instrumentalist, commonsense ways of thinking about them: either they work or they do not. Yet because technologies are both positioned symbols in conflicted societies and congealed outcomes of social conflict, in effect they operate as totems-or "techno-totems"-of identifiable individuals, networks, communities, and social categories. In some cases technologies become props (if not agents) in power struggles between those sanctioned by official institutions (orthodoxies) and those who are marginalized if not suppressed (heterodoxies) (Hess 1996: 659-660).

Hess’ notion of heterodox uses of technology is helpful in thinking about investigators’ plural uses of technology – uses that often differ in profound ways from scientists’ understandings of the tools. The very black-boxed nature of technology does much to sustain the possibility of the technological heterodoxies underlying paranormal investigation.
Technology Used in Investigating

The black-boxed nature of popularly available technologies is key in enabling investigators’ plural, performative, and (self-)frustrating uses of these technologies. To understand the extent to which investigators receive these technologies as black boxes, it is productive to consider their definitions and theoretical understandings of technology.

The five most commonly used technologies -- the electromagnetic field reader (EMF reader), digital thermometer, voice recorder, digital (still) camera, and video recorder-- share several important characteristics. Most importantly, these technologies are all affordable and commercially available. Since very few paranormal investigators pursue investigating as a full-time, paid mode of employment, many expenditures come largely out of their own pocket. EMF readers and digital thermometers are available in stores such as Morrison’s for between £10 and £20, roughly $15 to $20 U.S dollars. They are also available through online vendors. Cameras and voice recorders are available at any electronics store. The amount that participants tend to spend on these cameras or voice recorders varies greatly. One investigator spent around £25 on her camera while another investigator spent close to £200 for a video recorder. Some people opt for the least expensive models available. Others prefer to select cameras based on their special features, such as night vision or infrared vision. Familiarity with cameras and financial security tend to guide this decision-making process. While they include these cameras as

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3 Of course, paranormal investigating groups and teams, especially those that periodically host public ghost hunts, may use the money generated by these public events to purchase group equipment.
part of their tools for ghost hunting and investigating, most investigators also use these cameras in other arenas of their lives.⁴

While each of these five technologies is nearly ubiquitous on paranormal investigations, there is no concrete consensus regarding their correct application or their ideal interpretation. This, in turn, leads to a plurality of uses and interpretations. Ultimately, the black-boxed nature of these tools enables this plurality of uses, which range from what I call revelatory to documentary purposes. Since investigators cannot access the underlying machinery, theories, and ideas that led to the original creation of the technologies, they are able to engage with the technologies only on a superficial level. All of their uses are, to some extent, what Hess would call “heterodox.” As such, it is hard for investigators or ghost hunters even to determine correct or incorrect uses definitively.

Documentary and Revelatory Uses

In investigators’ deployment of these common technologies, there are two dominant modes of use: documentary and revelatory styles. In the documentary style, investigators deploy technology to document the world around them. They locate sources of noise or energy and attempt to account for the reported embodied encounters of those present. In this capacity, technology can confirm investigators’ embodied senses and

⁴ The multiplicity of camera uses is evident at investigations where ghost hunters and investigators may show each other pictures of other life events and activities in which they have participated. For example, before one investigation, a paranormal investigating friend showed me and another investigator nearly 300 pictures from a recent concert she attended. This is not the case for people who purchase CCTV systems. For them, this is an exclusively research-oriented camera.
document factors in the environment. It cannot demonstrate the presence of paranormal forces. It can only accumulate evidence to build a case for the presence of paranormality.

In the revelatory style, technology is used to reveal the presence or absence of ghosts. In its revelatory capacity, technology does not gauge presences; it simply declares them. This way of using technology is analogous to divinatory techniques in that investigators operationalize the tool to determine whether a paranormal force is present. In this sense, it is like ouija boards; however, unlike ouija boards, the agency of humans in determining the outcome is less foregrounded. When investigators or ghost hunters discuss ouija boards, their considerations are marked by a concern about the potential for others to excessively direct the course of the ouija board, knowingly or not. They consider it highly subjective and illegitimate. That these critiques do not apply as sharply to technologies such as EMF readers or cameras demonstrates the degree to which investigators see technology as objective arbiters of the world around them. I apply the term “revelatory” to this mode of technology-use to underscore its similarities to traditions of religious revelation. It shares with them the allocation of agency to external presence. In both instances, the object – ghosts, prophecies, or gods’ teachings – reveals itself to people. While people take note of it, the revelation is beyond their agency. Technology, in its revelatory uses, has what Latour has called the “slight surprise of action” (1999: 281). This has the pleasing effect of diminishing investigators’ anxieties that they are unknowingly causing the proceedings.

Technology, in both its documentary and revelatory uses, locates ghosts or the paranormal as outside the minds of investigators and mediums. This adds to the appeal of technology as a means of understanding the paranormal. It offers investigators a way of
situating and exploring ghosts that seems not to implicate their individualized subjectivities and biases. Technology allows investigators to maintain the “buffered” sense of self (Taylor 2007), which is instrumental in supporting their rationality.

Pluralities in Technological Deployment

Each of the commonly used tools in investigating – the electromagnetic field reader (EMF reader), digital thermometer, voice recorder, digital (still) camera, and video recorder – has the potential to be used in either documentary or revelatory capacities. The EMF reader, or electromagnetic reader, is the tool that lends itself to plural-- sometimes contradictory-- uses most readily. As one investigator, who seemed to think my question about its uses was rather simple-minded, succinctly explained to me, “they measure electromagnetic energy.” This deceivingly simple answer is the most agreed upon facet of the EMF reader. That it “measures electromagnetic energy” is widely cited and reported.5

While investigators and ghost hunters typically agreed that EMF readers measured the presence of electromagnetic energy or electromagnetism, they did not agree at all on what that energy was. Some focused on EMF readers’ documentary capacity, others on their revelatory ones. To the former, EMF readers document and possibly explain a variety of elements in their environment. Some investigators cite it as a useful tool for determining where electrical wiring is located. The overall significance of

5 Fielding and O’Keeffe (2006) write, “the EMF reader: a valuable device for the modern paranormal investigator. With this instrumentation it is possible to measure and locate the source of electromagnetism” (2006: 203). While Fielding and O’Keeffe refer to “electromagnetism” rather than the electromagnetic energy commonly cited by ghost hunters and investigators, the emphasis on the tool as measuring and locating remains the same.
locating these external, mundane sources of energy is that they may “explain” or “discount” noises or sensations that might otherwise indicate paranormal activity in their vicinity. Drawing on psychical research studies (e.g. Parsons and O’Keefe 2008), other investigators assert that the presence of higher than normal electromagnetic energy may result in sensations akin to those reported by individuals encountering “ghosts” or “paranormal activity.” For instance, individuals may report feelings of being watched or having the “hair on the back of the neck stand up”–sensations commonly attributed to hauntings. In both cases, they see the EMF reader as measuring, recognizing, and identifying external forces in the environment. On the one hand, this allows them to discount anomalies and, on the other hand, it allows them to begin putting together theories regarding the role of EMF and paranormal experience.

In a revelatory vein, investigators conceive of EMF readers as detecting the presence of ghosts. There are two variations in this general approach. Some investigators subscribe to the theory that EMF readers measure the electromagnetic energy emitted by ghosts. They assert that human life is sustained by electrical energy. They cite the operation of the human heart as an instance of electrical operations. When a living being dies, they argue, its electrical operations cease to exist; however, when a ghost tries to manifest itself, it relies on electromagnetic energy to do so. Accordingly, when there is a spike in electromagnetic energy, it might correspond to a ghost attempting to appear or actually appearing. Other ghost hunters use the EMR reader as a type of divinatory tool. They verbally request that any ghost or spirit present “make this box beep.” Here, the fact that the EMF reader is ostensibly a calibrated tool capable of specific measurements

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6 The same case has been made for infrared sound. Some of the more psychical research-savvy investigators are increasingly interested in attempting to measure this.
appears irrelevant. An assumption that ghosts are electrical entities capable of impacting the reader is implicit here. While the first theory more explicitly articulates an understanding of ghosts as energy, this may be a less complex articulation of a similar ideal of ghosts as energy.

Figure 7.1 Woman using an EMF reader during a paranormal investigation (2008)

The first set of uses – locating electrical wiring and correlating “spooky feelings” with the presence of electromagnetic energy – fit into what I call documentary uses of technology. In these deployments, investigators use technology to monitor, probe, and document external (and objective) conditions. In contrast, the latter set of uses – detecting energy emitted by a ghost and being a tool that ghosts can act upon – constitutes what I refer to as revelatory uses. In these forms of use, investigators deploy the tools to determine whether or not a ghost is present. In essence, they rely on the equipment to reveal the ghost.
The other four popular technologies – digital thermometers, digital cameras, video
recorders, and audio recorders – also have a range of uses, from the documentary to the
revelatory. Digital thermometers, for example, can be deployed for both purposes. In
broad terms, investigators and ghost hunters agree on what thermometers measure,
namely, changes in the temperature. The use of a thermometer allows investigators to
determine if there is an objective/external change in temperature when participants report
feeling a change in temperature. This style of use can support both documentary and
revelatory interpretations. The thermometer, for instance, offers empirical indications of
change in the environment. Investigators could chart changes in temperature and factor
them into an overall assessment of a site’s paranormal activity. Thermometers, however,
also measure changes in temperature, which can be interpreted as direct indications of
paranormal activity. One explanation of ghosts asserts that they drain the warm energy in
a room as a means of gathering the energy necessary to appear. This is tied to the
electromagnetic explanation of their appearance. Ghosts use the positive electromagnetic
energy and leave cold absence in their wake as they struggle to appear.

Video and audio recording devices similarly enable a plurality of usages.
Investigators and ghost hunters agree that audio recorders or tape recorders “record
sound” but, as with digital thermometers, they explain how they work differently.
Investigators, for example, argue that voice recorders are useful tools for remembering

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7 Here, the temperature can refer to the room temperature, the surface temperature of
walls or objects or, sometimes, the surface temperature of humans.
8 I have observed some ghost hunters use digital thermometers, like EMF readers, as a
technology of divination. For example, they ask the ghosts or spirits to lower or increase
the temperature in a room, as gauged by the thermometer, as evidence of their presence.
However, such uses are quite uncommon. As a result, I have not included them in the
main uses of thermometers.
measurements and events from the night. But, investigators also argue that they have the potential to capture the voices of ghosts’ audible or inaudible to the human ear.

Likewise, video and still cameras can be used in either a revelatory or documentary capacity. Digital cameras can “capture” the setting of the investigation, providing investigators with “objective” indications of where things were and where the light sources were. While investigators articulate the merits of this, I know of no investigators or ghost hunters who purchased or brought a camera to an investigation for this purpose. Instead, investigators and ghost hunters alike typically preferred the more revelatory use of the digital camera. In this form of deployment, investigators and hunters understood that by taking digital photographs they were potentially able to reveal presences of ghosts that may or may not be sensed by the participants. Video recorders similarly offered potential documentary uses (recording the events of the investigation as they unfolded) as well as revelatory uses in which they had the potential to reveal ghosts and spirits. Again, in this instance, investigators and ghost hunters tended to emphasize, and act on, the revelatory use of the video camera.
Valuing the Documentary

Among investigators and ghost hunters, explanations that emphasize the documentary roles of these tools carry far more value. Indeed, for some investigators, other researchers’ acceptance of the revelatory uses of technology illegitimates them as researchers.

EMF readers are among the most commonly deployed and routinely mocked tools on paranormal investigations. The most serious investigators see their use as separating the dilettante ghost hunters from the genuine paranormal investigators. EMF readers are routinely mocked, in part, because they personify the tension between documentary and revelatory uses. The degree to which they act as points of contestation and frustration
underscores the ideological significance of the division between documentary and revelatory uses of technology.

Consider the following. In late 2009, I attended a lecture where two prominent investigators, Fred and George, were speaking. As is often the case, they began their lecture with humor. The two men entered from the back of the room carrying two metallic cases that they loudly deposited on the table at the front of the room. George began pulling out various pieces of equipment that constitute the stereotypical tools of investigating – a digital thermometer, a digital camera, and such—while Fred nodded approvingly. Finally, George removed an EMF reader with a big smile. George and Fred then began to discuss it.

George: Now, Fred, you know what this is right?

Fred: An EMF Reader!

George: Right. No ghost kit is complete without it.

Fred: Of course not.

George: Now, what this does is it tells you when a ghost is present. You just turn it on like this and wait for it to beep.

[George turns it on and as it beeps the two men exchange goofy smiles.]

Fred: This place must be crawling with ghosts!

George: Of course it is! The EMF meter says so!

George and Fred then slapped themselves on the forehead and explained, somewhat unnecessarily, that they were “just joking.” They went on to advise the gathered group that an EMF reader should never be used this way. It was not, as Fred put it, a “ghost
meter” despite what some might think. They explained that it measured the presence of electromagnetic energy, which is enormously important in researching the paranormal.

In this brilliant moment of comedy, Fred and George lampooned a number of elements found in paranormal investigating – namely, what they considered the misapplication of functionality and the performative enactment of technological expertise. I will return to the question of performative enactments later in this chapter. The humor in their performance centered on a key tension in uses of the EMF reader in particular, and technology in general.

The conceptualization of the ghostly that underpins such deployments of EMF readers genuinely troubles many investigators. For example, I joined two of my investigator friends, Harry and Ginny, on a public investigation hosted by a new Northeastern team, Northern Spooks (NS). During the investigation Ron, the de-facto leader of the team, demonstrated and described the team’s equipment. As I sat with Ginny and Harry, out of the corner of my eye, I could observe Ginny quietly giggling and rolling her eyes at Ron’s explanations as Harry subtly shook his head in disagreement several times. Ron was eagerly presenting a revelatory understanding of the EMF reader. He said that it was good for “telling you when a ghost is present.” Ron’s performance perfectly mirrored Fred and George’s parodic imitation of misguided interpretations of technology. During one of the tea breaks that night, I sat with Ginny and Harry and his explanation of technology came up. Harry dismissed it. He noted that “things like that are a bit rubbish. He doesn’t know how the thing [EMF reader] works. It can’t just tell you when there are ghosts! Or, does he know things about ghosts he’s not telling the rest of
us? Yeah, is he somehow sure a ghost is pure electromagnetism? Because I’d be quite interested in that.”

Harry’s sarcasm is not unusual among researchers who fashion themselves as serious investigators. Indeed, many self-fashioned paranormal investigators point to the difference in revelatory or documentary interpretations of technology as an indication of the seriousness or legitimacy of investigators. Of course, they would not call them documentary and revelatory but, rather, legitimate or illegitimate. For example, in one online article on different types of paranormal researchers, the author referred to revelatory uses of EMF readers as signs of lack of seriousness. She wrote that “these individuals are usually hobbyists and their investigations generally consist of walking around a cemetery late at night with a flashlight, a camera and possibly a single axis Electromagnetic Field Meter (EMF) and hoping to see something that will scare the bejeeze out of them. They are simply thrill seekers with little to no education in the field of ghost research and investigation.” The reference to the EMF reader and the camera are telling. They are tools often deployed in their revelatory capacities. Harry’s skepticism, and the skepticism of numerous other investigators, reflect their suspicion of unabashed belief. To embrace the revelatory capacity of technology would position investigators as believers and not investigators, blurring a distinction they seek to make.

**Documentation as Science**

Investigators are deeply invested in the proper uses of technology for a different reason as well. In addition to providing yet another demarcation between serious and dilettante researchers, technology offers investigators an avenue to legitimate their
project as scientific. In doing so, they locate the object of the inquiry, ghosts, in the natural world, distancing them from religion and belief. Investigators deploy technology to locate the ghostly in the domain of science. By using EMF readers and other technological apparatuses, investigators equate ghosts or the paranormal with other, better-established scientific phenomena such as electrons or protons.

Many of the documentary uses of these tools constitute the paranormal phenomena in question as energy. That energy, particularly electromagnetic energy, occupies such a central place in investigators’ imaginings of ghosts should not be surprising. In physics, the electromagnetic force is one of the four fundamental forces in the universe. It is present in many features of daily life, including the voltage of batteries, X-rays, and the electric currents that support tools such as flashlights. The electromagnetic force is at once invisible to the human eye and capable of powering the tools of daily life. As Bruce Clarke and Linda Henderson remark, “by the later nineteenth century, electromagnetism…radically challeng[ed] prevailing conceptions of physical reality” (2002:2). In the 1890s, inventions such as X-rays and wireless telegraphs captured the public’s attention. Throughout the twentieth century, energy, especially electromagnetic energy, became a medium and metaphor for expressing hope and potential in art, literature, science, and public culture (Hunt 2002; Kahn 2002; Wise 2002). The significant connection between investigating and (popular) physics, if often unnoticed by investigators, underscores Sharon Traweek’s observation that science, especially physics, is a form of “secular religion” (1988).

In addition to the variations and contradictions in how investigators and ghost hunters interpret the significance of electromagnetic energy, there are also divergences in
how people use EMF readers and interpret their results. Individuals using EMF readers rarely agree on the area of space in which the reader actually detects electromagnetic energy. They similarly do not agree on what varying levels of electromagnetic energy signify. They struggle with how to best record their findings from these technologies. Part of the appeal of documentary deployments of technologies is their ability to situate investigating closer to the domain of orthodox science. While the leap from using technology to doing science might seem extreme, such an understanding of the relationship between science and technology is common. While science and technology scholars have long combatted the view that technology is simply the practical application of science, this view still permeates much of the public sphere. Francesca Bray describes this dominant understanding, explaining that the popular understanding holds “science as the purest and most powerful form of knowledge, the driving force of modernity; technology is essentially the application of science to practical problems” (2007: 39). Investigators subscribe to this ideology. When they reference “scientific investigating,” they typically invoke the image of highly technological investigations.

Technology as Witness to the Senses

Investigators turn to technology and its implied scientism to address a chief problem that haunts their research: the problem of embodied experience. Technology, in both its documentary and revelatory capacities, can potentially monitor and verify the reported embodied experiences of investigators and ghost hunters. This capacity is

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9 In investigators’ reports, they commonly assert that “electromagnetic energy was reported in this area.” They tend not to note the precise area in which the energy was reported. Similarly, they rarely record the specific calibrations of changes in electromagnetic energy.
remarkable, given the investigators’ unease with embodied encounters as a type of evidence. That they embrace technologies seemingly capable of verifying at least some of their embodied experiences is significant.

Each of the five chief technologies deployed on ghost hunts and investigations--digital cameras, video cameras, voice recorders, EMF readers, and thermometers—provides seemingly empirical, or objective, data that mirrors the embodied experiences of participants. While investigators and ghost hunters do not explicitly address this parallel, I suspect that it is the undercurrent that informs much of their emphasis on technologically mediated forms of research. In considering the stated theoretical uses of each of these tools, there is an implicit emphasis on embodied experience. For example, consider the discussions of the EMF reader. Ghost hunters and investigators theorize that the EMF reader is capable of detecting electromagnetic energy (or electromagnetism). Investigators suggest that electromagnetic energy might trigger “spooky” feelings in participants or, conversely, ghosts may manifest themselves using electromagnetic energy. EMF readers, then, can explain or verify a range of investigators’ sensory engagements with ghosts.

Each of the other technologies also corresponds to a common embodied sense reported during investigations. For example, as I detail in Figure 7.3, technology provides a seemingly scientific way of monitoring each of the physical of psychological sensations commonly associated with hauntings such as changes in temperature, strange visions, and unusual sounds.
Sometimes investigators come close to articulating the implied monitoring of embodied senses. For example, in one case, Alicia commented that, “now it would be interesting if someone was feeling something and the EMF reader went off [picked up increased electromagnetic energy]. That’s the sort of thing that makes you think.” Alicia’s comments imply that a correlation between technological monitoring of the environment and ghostly and embodied reactions to it would offer a particularly compelling form of evidence.

Similarly, in the ghost hunting class in which I participated in 2008, the instructor encouraged students to use technology to investigate any reported embodied experiences. When one student reported feeling cold, another student approached her and measured the temperature around her. This training suggests that individuals’ reported experiences do not constitute evidence; however, with technological verification, they could constitute evidence.
Bill, the instructor in the Ghost Hunting Class, instructs the students on how to use EMF readers to verify their sensory experiences.

This understanding of technology as capable of verifying embodied encounters seems to offer an answer to the central crisis in paranormal investigating: their inability to agree on what constitutes evidence. By all accounts, technology, particularly in its documentary capacities, seems likely to produce evidence. This, however, is not the case. Despite investigators’ understanding of technology as capable of generating evidence, they exhibit a deep reluctance to use technology, particularly in its documentary capacities, during their investigations.
Steven Shapin has argued that “there is probably no other sensibility that more strongly links seventeenth-century and late twentieth-century moderns than the recommendation of intellectual individualism and the rejection of trust and authority in the pursuit of natural knowledge” (1996: 72). For seventeenth-century “moderns,” this rejection of trust and authority led to reconsiderations of the role of experience (real or imagined) in previous scholarship. English scientists in the seventeenth-century saw experience as the root of experimentation and knowledge construction. However, they struggled with the question of “how [experience] was to be reliably attainted” (Shapin 1996: 81). Shapin (1984, 1996) has argued that forms of witnessing emerged as important components of ensuring the validity of reported experimental experiences. “Experimental performance that was witnessed by one man alone was not a matter of fact,” he added (1984: 484). Scientists dealt with this by engaging in a variety of acts of witnessing, both real and virtual, such as the inclusion of witnesses, the construction of detailed written descriptions, and gentlemanly trust. Following Shapin (1984, 1986) and Shapin and Schaffer (1985), Donna Haraway follows suit writing that acts of witnessing constitutes:

one of the founding virtues of what we call modernity. This is the virtue that guarantees that the modest witness is the legitimate and authorized ventriloquist for the object world, adding nothing from his mere opinions, from his biasing embodiment. And so he is endowed with the remarkable power to establish the facts. He bears witness: he is objective; he guarantees the clarity and purity of objects. His subjectivity is his objectivity (1997: 24).
Investigators during my research intently longed for such objectivity. Not unlike these seventeenth century scientists, they grappled with the problem of rendering their embodied experiences into facts about the paranormal. I want to suggest that investigators’ use of technology constitutes a type of witnessing similar to those Shapin, Schaffer, and Haraway described in the eighteenth century. Technology functions as a form of witnessing for them. They hope that their technologies can translate their embodied experiences into objective knowledge thus relieving their stressful, often emotionally painful anxieties over their embodied experiences.

Disuse of Technology

Technology, it would seem, answers many of investigators’ most pressing problems: their fear of illegitimacy, their anxiety over embodied experiences, and their uncertainty over the nature of evidence. In theory, technology legitimates their project as science, construes ghosts as legitimate subjects of scientific inquiry, and verifies the reality of their embodied encounters. By investigators’ own accounting, technology should solve many of their most persistent problems. Yet, as I suggested above, it does not, and this disjuncture between investigators’ theory and practice has puzzled me.

Shapin warned readers 15 years ago against accepting scientists’ accounts of their methodologies at face value. “Historians and philosophers of science,” he insisted “have traditionally paid far too much attention to formal methodological pronouncements, often taking such statements at face value” (Shapin 1996: 94). I am interested in his idea that many historians have kept themselves from realistically assessing what scientists actually did by over-focusing on scientists’ own statements about their methods. As I look at
paranormal investigators, I, too, see a significant disjuncture between how they theorize technology and how they actually use it. This disjuncture between explicit theory and practice demands accounting. Consider how investigators actually deploy technology during the course of an investigation. During an actual investigation, use of technology varies tremendously, and investigators who extol the virtues of a technologically-mediated approach during offsite discussions may abandon all technology, or appear reluctant to use it.

Consider my first meeting with James in late 2008. An investigator in a very pro-science group, he spent much of the interview expounding on the centrality of technology to his approach to paranormal research. Having brought along his “basic kit,” he painstakingly explained each tool to me. He described the importance of conducting “baseline” tests with these technological tools to better distinguish the mundane from the possibly ghostly. He also emphasized the importance of generating “scientific data” about anything people “sense” during an investigation. Shortly after this first meeting, James invited me to join his team of investigators at a pub investigation in Wakefield. I eagerly went along, expecting to observe high uses of technology. During the actual investigation, however, much of the prized technology was either unevenly or rarely used.

At the actual investigation, four of the five main investigators brought along one or two metal cases with the team’s initials printed on them. There were seven cases of

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10 This is the standard case style for investigators: a metallic suitcase-cum-brief case with the team’s initials on the outside of it. On the inside, investigators insert black foam that they cut out to form protective casing for their equipment. When they open the cases, the individual piece of equipment is neatly on display. Very few investigators maintain messy kits.
equipment in total. We entered the pub while it was still open for general business. The five team members, a friend of the team who tagged along, and I settled into a table. Their cases and their matching fleece jackets made them stand out in the pub. Some pub patrons came over to ask what they were doing. The patrons correctly guessed that they were paranormal investigators and they asked about their kits. As one male patron who seemed to be in his fifties put it, “ah, that’s your equipment then? You find the ghosts with that, do you?” Two of the team members, James and Lily, popped open their kits and began to explain what each piece of technology did during an investigation. The patron eventually noted that “it seems quite impressive.” When I asked the team members about this interaction, they explained it was “quite common.” Members of the public were often interested in their work, they asserted. They noted that some were just interested in “taking the mickey” but others were genuinely quite interested in hearing about it. James added that many “love to get a look at our kits.” He noted that even some who had mocked the group reconsidered their opinion when they realized what a “technological project it is.”

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11 Typically, when groups conduct pub investigations, they arrive shortly before closing time. Each member buys a drink as a means of “showing support” for the pub. This time in the pub often allows members a chance to chat with the landlord while also possibly interacting with other people still in the pub.

12 My own observations confirm this. Most members of the public, when they encounter paranormal investigators, are genuinely quite interested. While they may not entirely find the enterprise compelling or legitimate, they ask about the research methods and, largely, do not explicitly mock the project. Even the one significant act of “taking the mickey” that I observed was not especially mean-spirited. When I entered a small pub with a group of investigators who were all wearing matching jackets with the word ghost featured prominently, some patrons of the pub began to loudly sing the theme song to the film *Ghostbusters*. This was not especially mean-spirited, however. Eventually, some of the singers asked the team members questions about their investigations.
The performative role that possession of this technology plays is immense. It acts as a symbolic indication to the public of the team’s legitimacy as investigators or researchers, and it also serves as a means of individually bolstering the investigator’s reputation. Ownership of these tools enables investigators to explain the tools. This does a great deal to situate them as figures of authority. The act of explaining situates the technologically uninitiated in a passive, learning role and confirms the authority and expertise of the investigator. I do not wish to suggest that investigators own equipment or express rhetorical commitments to technoscience solely to enhance their own legitimacy. Indeed, I do not suspect that investigators consciously understand it as such. I think their performances of technological ownership, while enhancing their authority, also point to their deeply held ideas about the centrality of technology to scientific, paranormal research.

I can certainly name instances in which investigators regretted, and even lamented, the absence of technology. During one memorable investigation, Rose and her friend Amy invited me to join them at a pub in Ugthorpe, a town near Whitby. They also invited Tom, a friend of mine from my parapsychology class. Tom was a physicist who was employed in industry research near Leeds. Tom drove me to Whitby in the early afternoon and we met Rose there. We spent the afternoon wandering through Whitby and chatting as we waited to meet up with the rest of the group. As the day progressed, more and more members of the group cancelled.¹³ By the end of the day, it seemed that the investigation team would be comprised solely of Rose, Tom, and me. Tom, who had never been on an investigation, was highly concerned. Rose was not especially concerned.

¹³ There was a nasty stomach flu going around at the time.
although, as the time for us to head to the pub approached, she began to joke nervously that no one would take us seriously since we didn’t have any “kit” or “equipment” with us.

Rose often articulated and maintained a skeptical outlook on investigators’ uncritical embrace of technology. She was not genuinely concerned by our lack of technology; however, she did realize that the absence of technology might call our qualification or professionalism as researchers into question. She jokingly commented on an element of disjuncture present. As she put it, “I’m with a doctor and a near-doctor, we’ll be the most qualified team ever most likely.14…And what they’ll notice is the lack of kit!” Her comment was noteworthy. In paranormal investigating and ghost hunting, there are no formal requirements. In lieu of such requirements, performances of technical mastery, or ownership of technology, act as indicators of legitimacy and professionalism.

It is clear in these performances that investigators value their ability to demonstrate technological proficiency to each other and members of the public through demonstration and discussions of their equipment. The link between science and technology here empowers them in the eyes of the public. At least some members of the public seem to take their technological ownership as indication of technological and, accordingly, scientific mastery. In a sense, technology ownership imbues them with a form of authority. As E. Summerson Carr (2010) reminds us, expertise is always constructed through performance.

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14 Tom had a Ph.D. in physics and Rose liked to refer to me as being near the completion of my Ph.D., although this was not really the case.
The Limited Deployment of Documentary Technologies

To return to my investigation with James, after the pub had closed and the team was free to begin the investigation, members began by enacting another performance of their equipment this time for me, the landlord, and the friend. Each of the members who brought a kit proudly opened it and displayed it on a pub table. James, one of the de-facto leaders of the group, began explaining each piece of technology. While the tools were numerous, they did not truly vary beyond the five types of equipment I mentioned above, namely, EMF readers, thermometers, voice recorders, still cameras, and video cameras; however, there were multiple variants of each item. As James explained, although with some hesitation, “maybe we can show you how to use some of these.”

After the interlinked performances of technological ownership and authority, I anticipated a highly technologically mediated investigation, but this was not the case. As the investigation began, James and Lily fought among themselves about who should be responsible for conducting the “baseline tests.”15 They each claimed that she or he had been the last one to do it. It was quite clearly a task that neither member relished.16 Eventually James resigned himself to doing it, in part because I was present and he “wanted to explain it to [me].” In this instance, his ability to turn what was meant to be a

15 “Baseline tests” are a series of acts intended to monitor the environment of a ghost hunt. Most investigators agree that the person responsible for them should measure the EMF in the room, record the temperatures present, and note anything of interest.
16 Lily and James were far from exceptions with respect to their reluctance to carry out “baselines.” Most groups that I interacted with experienced a similar lack of willingness to conduct them. Part of their resistance to them stems from the fact that they typically are carried out by only one or two individuals. In short, they are private rather than public performances of technological prowess. Additionally, in theory, at least, they require a significant amount of note-taking, which can be quite tedious.
routine act into a performance of technological authority and capability transformed it into a desirable task.

As James led me through the rooms of the pub and the private upstairs quarters occupied by the landlord and his wife, he relied primarily on his digital thermometer and EMF reader. As we entered the first room, he pressed the main button on the EMF reader. After its initial swooping beeps indicating that it was turned on, he held it away from him and walked around the perimeter of the room, stiffly moving the EMF reader along the walls. When it periodically beeped, suggesting a peak in detected “electromagnetic energy,” he would comment that it might be wiring. He commented that “I should be writing this down but I forgot my notebook.” He declined my offer of notepaper, noting that he might ask me to write anything “really important” down.¹⁷ He similarly noted the general air temperature in each room but failed to record it. After we carried out this procedure in each possible room, James declared it finished and we returned to the group.

Team members used their EMF readers and thermometers only sporadically during the rest of the night. In one instance, James deployed the digital thermometer to assess the air temperature when Lily reported feeling cold. Affixing the digital beam of the thermometer to the surface, they noted the surface temperature of the wall closest to her and, then, the surface temperature of her arm. This successful linking of Lily’s embodied experience with the technologically verified external change in temperature pleased the investigators. They excitedly observed a difference, but did not write it down. This correlation entered no written record of the night. In this instance, team members

¹⁷ I inadvertently ended up filling the role of note-taker for several investigation groups. Since members were usually reluctant to take notes during baselines and, since I typically accompanied whoever (if anyone) ended up carrying out the baselines, I was often the de-facto note-taker.
deployed technology to monitor or verify Lily’s reported embodied experience. In the other instances where team members deployed the digital thermometer or EMF reader, I noticed that the monitoring role was the same.

That night, I noticed that investigators did not engage in the detailed technological mediation that they described as the investigative ideal. When I asked James about this, he shrugged off my question and asserted that sometimes using the technology grew dull. James and his team are not alone in their valuation of technology. EGR, another group that presented itself as fairly “scientific” or “serious” in investigations, does not use technology much in practice. Members of the group, who (in theory) consider the documentary uses of technology to be more legitimate and productive, often begin to use their equipment in a far more revelatory fashion as the night progresses. Team members are likely to interpret beeps on the EMF as indications of invisible paranormal forces undetectable to human senses than as simple measures of electromagnetic energy. In a sense, in a perfect inversion of their desire to use technology as a witness to embodied experience, technology becomes a witness to the invisible forces that investigators are unable to sense.

Similarly, investigators often present technologically mediated evidence as conciliatory in the absence of embodied encounters with ghosts. For example, after one “quiet” investigation, meaning that participants and mediums “picked up” very little, Molly was very disappointed. As she and I walked toward her car, she remarked that the night was “rubbish.” As an afterthought, she added “at least we got something on the EMF reader.” This is not to say that investigators embrace these quasi-revelatory experiences following the events. Indeed, they tend not to see them as legitimate. They
remain deeply conflicted about them – as they are over mediumship and embodied experiences.

**Embracing the Revelatory**

Technology is used in a more revelatory mode by some people or in some instances, but it is important to note that there is great variation in how frequently it is used and how much passion investigations communicate with speaking of it.\(^\text{18}\)

Investigators and ghost hunters who embrace the less respected, revelatory understanding of their equipment use it more frequently. They also derive greater pleasure from its use.

During the course of an investigation with Ghost Doctors, for example, members presented tools similar to those in James’ group, even if not as many. But, unlike the investigation with James, there was no arguing about using the technologies. Several members enthusiastically and visibly used the measuring technologies; however, they used them in a very different fashion. While in explicit discussions about technology, they espoused similar ideas about the type of data that they tools generated, namely documentary/measurement, during the actual investigation they deployed the tools in a markedly revelatory fashion. I accompanied Alicia, the de-facto leader of the group, and Ken, one of the “sensitive members,” on a “base line.” Alicia, like James, relied mainly on her EMF reader and her thermometer. However, whereas James observed and commented on electromagnetic energy as an indication of wiring and tended to see

\(^{18}\) Indeed, commercial ghost hunting companies include EMF readers and digital thermometers in the “hands on” tools to be used by their guests during commercial ghost hunts. This is not because they imagine or hope that guests will conduct baseline tests. Rather, they (correctly) anticipate that guests will enjoy using them in a revelatory, nearly divinatory fashion.
changes in temperature as more or less natural things during the baseline (at least), Alicia interpreted such variations differently. When in one room Alicia’s EMF reader began to beep loudly and frequently, presumably suggesting a high level of electromagnetic energy, Alicia responded excitedly noting, “oh look at what it’s getting in here! It’s quite active, isn’t it! We’ll have to call out in here.” She happily interpreted the beeping of the EMF reader to indicate ghostly or spiritual activity. After the series of loud, frequent beeps, Ken also (literally) addressed the activity, “thank you for doing that to the box, spirit!”

Alicia and Ken’s ability/willingness to cast these tools in a revelatory fashion seemed to allow them to deploy them more enthusiastically throughout the night. In fact, throughout the night, Alicia and other members of the group regularly used these technologies in such a fashion. Beeps of the EMF reader were indications that a ghost was near. Sudden increases or decreases (of 1 of 2 degrees Celsius) in temperature were acts of ghostly manipulation. Indeed, members of the group would ask the ghosts present to do so as a means of demonstrating and verifying their presences. This style of using technology is markedly similar to ghost hunters’ use of ouija boards, dowsing rods, or crystals – tools intended to demonstrate the presence or absence of ghosts. In this style of use (by Sharon and others), these technologies found more passionate and broad use.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Alicia and her group were rarely able to translate their technologically mediated experiences into concrete evidence after the event. Similar to investigators who had embodied encounters during investigations, Alicia and her group discounted their technological experiences.
It is imaginable that some investigators might dismiss Ghost Doctors as a ghost hunting group rather than a paranormal investigation group. That they did not do so is more a result of groups’ personal affection for Alicia than a reflection of their esteem of her group. However, I see their inability to translate technologically mediated experiences into the type of evidence they desire as linking them to other investigators who are unable to translate mediums’ claims, or their own embodied experiences, into the types of evidence they so desire.

Conclusion

In earlier chapters of this dissertation, I explored the epistemological crises faced by investigators regarding mediumship and embodied experience as sources of evidence. Technology, on the surface, would seem to offer the one reliable/valid way of engaging the paranormal but, as I have tried to show in this chapter, that is not case. Despite the promise investigators’ ascribe to technologies, they are deeply reluctant to use technological equipment during investigations or, more aptly, to use it in the ways they consider most fruitful.

I suspect that investigators are interested, despite their protestations to the contrary, and perhaps even long for an embodied encounter with something paranormal. That they eschew technology in favor of embodied experiences during the course of investigations suggests that they may find such experiences more pleasing or rewarding. Of course, they cannot translate these experiences into evidence. Anything they experience is a matter of belief and, to them, belief has no place in evidence. However, despite the promise paranormal investigators see in technology as a counter to subjective experiences, their limited use of technological equipment fails as well to give them
evidence they trust. In the end, investigators are caught between science and belief and, as a result, never produce the evidence that they desire so much.
PART THREE

BUILDING COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, AND EXPERTISE
CHAPTER EIGHT
THE EMERGENCE OF THE PARANORMAL INVESTIGATOR:
EXAMINING THE ROLE OF MOST HAUNTED

It is only recently that paranormal investigators and ghost hunters have acquired popularity as amateur experts in England. While individuals such as Harry Price or Peter Underwood rose to fame as ghost hunters in the U.K. in the 1920s and 1970s respectively, their prominence did not spur the growth of paranormal investigators in those decades. As I will show in this chapter, the “paranormal investigator” only became a widely embraced form of identification in the first decade of the 21st century.

Self-identification as a “paranormal investigator” is worth examining in this light. I am interested here in paranormal investigators’ long-term interest in the paranormal, and how it often dates back to unusual early childhood encounters. I am also interested in the extent to which these experiences and interests transform people from passively interested paranormal enthusiasts to self-identified paranormal investigators. Perhaps surprisingly, I have come to view the “reality” paranormal television show, Most Haunted, as a catalyst in these transformations, and I will examine the reasons in this chapter. Most Haunted was an enormously popular reality documentary television program that aired in the U.K. between 2002 and 2010 and nearly all paranormal investigators I knew were aware of the program and watched it at some point. Here, I want to examine the ways in which their viewer-ship of Most Haunted shaped and enabled the emergence of their expertise as investigators.
Media scholars (Maller and Luden 1932; Sparks and Miller 2001; Sparks and Pellechia 1997) and popular critics (Dawkins 2000; Randi 1992) alike have often argued that the proliferation of popular entertainment foregrounding the paranormal encourages “belief in the paranormal.” As I show in this chapter, such causal understandings are problematic. My ethnographically informed account of the role of *Most Haunted* in the lives of paranormal investigators allows instead for a more nuanced understanding of the plural roles that the show plays in investigators’ lives. As I will demonstrate here, viewing *Most Haunted* did little to alter investigators’ perceptions of the paranormal. It did, however, provide a means for them to imagine themselves as investigators and enable them to craft a shared identity and sense of purpose that led to collective identification and organization. I demonstrate here that *Most Haunted* provided paranormal investigators with a repertoire of techniques, methods, theories, and, most importantly, community that drew on a pre-existing foundational interest in the paranormal. The show did not transform uninterested viewers into paranormal investigators. It enabled people with existing interests in the paranormal to begin to act on those interests.

**Assessments of the Relationship between Paranormal Television and Paranormal Belief**

Both scholars and popular journalists have identified a relationship between paranormal television programming and collective belief in the paranormal. They have debated and worried about the possibility that exposure to such programming positively influences “belief in the paranormal.” They have typically based their analyses on survey data, in the case of sociologists and psychologists, or alarmist readings of the
proliferation of paranormal programming, in the case of journalists. My research with investigators suggests that there is a relationship between paranormal programming and “paranormal belief,” but I call into question that causality and suggest instead that such programs provide an imaginary and cultural repertoire for acts of self-fashioning and self-actualization that are grounded in far earlier, childhood encounters with the paranormal.

I have noted in my research that the long-dominant scholarly paradigm rests on a suspicion that exposure to paranormal entertainment or writing increases the likelihood of paranormal belief. In 1932, for example, Julius Maller and Gerhard Luden considered the “contribution of books and newspapers” (1932: 321) to establishing and maintaining superstitious beliefs in addition to factors such as educational background, class, and family life. Maller and Luden found that “there is some relationship between the number of superstitious beliefs and the type of reading preference” (1932: 341), and they noted that individuals preferring “books of science and invention” to “books of fiction, adventure, and mystery” professed fewer superstitious beliefs.

Likewise, communication studies scholars Glenn Sparks, Will Miller, and Marianne Pellechienia (Sparks and Miller 2001; Sparks and Pellechienia 1997) examined the relationship between reading or viewing paranormal news programming and belief in the paranormal. That these are much more recent works is noteworthy. Sparks and Miller defined belief in the paranormal as “belief in one or more extraordinary phenomena that defy explanation according to current scientific understanding of natural law” (2001: 98), and Sparks and Pellechienia (1997), based on survey research in the U.S., found that exposure to news stories about the paranormal increased the likelihood of belief in the paranormal. Somewhat differently, Sparks and Miller (2001) found that the correlation
between paranormal television viewing and paranormal beliefs was contingent on having already experienced a paranormal event.¹

In public settings, journalists, scientists, and skeptics in the U.K. present between paranormal television programming as a pressing social problem because of their belief in its effects on the public. They view the increasing prevalence of paranormal television programming with something akin to horror, and maintain serious concerns that such programming actively erodes the critical thinking skills of the masses. Popular writers and speakers such as James Randi, Richard Dawkins, Stephen Fry, and Derren Brown typically tend to assume that there is a causal relationship between viewing paranormal programs, such as *Most Haunted* or even *The X-Files*, and belief in the paranormal.² For them, this is deeply disturbing, as the examples below will illustrate.

James Randi, a magician who has become one of the most celebrated skeptics in the world, has been a vocal opponent of paranormal television programming for many years. In a 1992 *Time* magazine article, Randi claimed that the abundance of “absurd beliefs,” by which he meant paranormal and theistic belief, “is to be found in the uncritical acceptance and promotion of these notions by the media” (1992: 80). Randi’s argument is fairly typical of popular criticisms of paranormal television programming but

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¹ Interestingly, the Sparks and Miller (2001) study findings appear to correspond to some degree with my own findings, based on interviews with paranormal investigators. Sparks and Miller, however, focused on the general public whereas I focused on individuals actively committed to crafting a paranormal research agenda.

² Interestingly, Randi, Dawkins, and others refer to *The X-Files* as the television program that sparked the contemporary fascination with the paranormal. Neither the producers of *Most Haunted* nor its fans and antifans in the paranormal investigation community ever explicitly refer to *The X-Files*. Journalists and skeptics’ inclusion of explicitly fictional and entertaining programs such as this with shows that present themselves as reality-based demonstrates a high degree of confusion on skeptics’ part. Indeed, it suggests that they understand very little about how “serious” investigators and viewers consume paranormal programming.
there are others. For example, in his 2000 book, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, Richard Dawkins critiqued the prevalence of paranormal television, writing that “television is an even more powerful medium than the newspapers, and we are in the grip of a near epidemic of paranormal propaganda on television” (Dawkins 2000: 125). Dawkins’ use of the term “epidemic” is indicative of skeptics’ understanding of paranormal television programming. In their eyes, paranormal television is much like a disease agent, spreading its sickness to as many people as possible. Such analyses render the public in general, and the audiences of paranormal programming in particular, as gullible and easily guided.

These critiques and doubts constitute a popular and widespread way of understanding the emergence and popularity of paranormal investigating and ghost hunting but it would be a mistake to think that only journalists and skeptics participate in such thinking. While attending parapsychological and psychical lectures and conferences, I personally heard many assessments of the relationship between ghost hunting and the consumption of televised popular paranormal investigations, and specifically *Most Haunted*. At an SPR conference in 2009, for example, many conference presenters explicitly doubted the legitimacy and viability of paranormal investigators, often pointing to *Most Haunted* to index their faddishness. One conference participant, in response to a paper that addressed the popularity of paranormal investigating, stressed that these people were not serious researchers. To emphasize their lack of seriousness, she noted that she suspected they all were in search of a “*Most Haunted* type experience,” suggesting that their interest was superficial. She was not alone.

Both these scholarly and popular assessments fail to consider what, based on interviews with investigators, appears to me to be the most important cultural element of
paranormal television programming. That is its ability to catalyze pre-existing interest in the paranormal, helping to create a community of emerging experts. None of my interlocutors referred to any television programming as influencing his or her belief; rather, they found such programs to offer a framework for actively engaging a life-long interest.

Childhood Experiences

Understanding the role of Most Haunted in investigators’ personal trajectories requires shifting the focus back to their childhoods. People’s paths toward becoming investigators typically do not begin with viewing Most Haunted. They begin in their childhoods. While I will argue in Chapter Nine that the superabundance of communication technologies and the formation of online communities enable and sustain the surge of activity, social organizing, and active research in paranormal investigating, in describing their trajectories as investigators, participants said something else. They typically emphasized that an interest in ghosts or the unusual preceded their active participation. In fact, most of the ghost hunters and investigators I met during my fieldwork in the U.K. between 2006 and 2009 maintained an interest in ghosts or “unusual” things since they were children; however, they tended to become active in paranormal research only in the “last few years,” typically meaning between 2001 and the 2008. Examining their trajectories from passively interested individuals to active knowledge producers demonstrates the centrality of what they considered to be unresolved or odd childhood experiences. Indeed, as will become clear, a certain narrative arch shapes many individuals’ stories. For many investigators, their entry into
the world of investigating is guided by a longstanding interest in the unusual in combination with an encounter with some representation of the “community” or the act of investigating. This trajectory tends to begin with often unremarkable and yet odd childhood encounters.

The first day I met Rose, for instance, we spent several hours in a pub talking about investigating. She is an outgoing investigator in her mid-thirties who would become one of my closest friends in the paranormal community. Rose works with three separate groups of paranormal investigators and is very passionately invested in questioning and examining ideas and claims about the mind, body, and the paranormal. Outside of investigating, she is training to be a massage therapist and is deeply interested in the relationship between the conscious mind and ghosts. She cannot identify a particular moment when she realized that she was interested in the ghostly or paranormal. As she explains,

I was always just sort of interested in it, curious I guess. I had a few things happen to me when I was younger and I think that only made me more interested… When I was still at school, I had a mate over and we were sat in my mum’s kitchen. We must have been doing our work or talking. We were home alone. We heard something off upstairs and got a bit spooked. We went up together to look to see what it was and it was nothing. Then, when we got back to the kitchen, all of the tea towels were gone. There had been tea towels on the table and they were just gone. I don’t know how that happened. We were alone. That’s one of those things I always wonder about.
This encounter is in no way radical or obviously paranormal. Rose never suggested that it was; rather, she noted that it was odd and it entered her thoughts from time to time.

This event alone was not enough to trigger Rose’s active participation in paranormal research. When she was slightly older, in her mid twenties, Rose was ending a period of substance abuse. She had been attending support group meetings and was successfully negotiating her recovery process. She told me about one afternoon when she had an odd bodily encounter. She explained:

I’d been sobering up for a bit by then and it was going well. And I was in the house I used to live in Scarborough. I was on the bed and my dog was in the other room. Otherwise I was alone. I just started to feel my body change. I was sort of…semi conscious and I felt like I was floating. I could see things about me in a different way, if that makes sense. Now, that encounter and the other few I’d had before, it made me wonder. I don’t mean to say that this was paranormal per se. I mean, I was going through withdrawal and all of that. But it sort of ghosts and all of that back in the front of my mind.

These embodied encounters or odd occurrences led to an interest in the paranormal.

Similarly, Jack, an active paranormal investigator in his early 40s, experienced several unexplained events in childhood and during his teenage years. In our first meeting, he described one of them and its role in his life to me. He explained:

When I was a kid, my parents lived right next to the old airfield in Sunderland. Now, this airfield hasn’t been used since World War II. I don’t think it was ever bombed or anything but I think that soldiers would fly their planes back to there after being attacked by Nazis and the like. A lot of them died there. I hear it’s
quite haunted... I don’t know…. But when I was a kid, my bedroom window looked out toward it and a handful of times, there would be these really bright lights flashing outside. It happened more than once so I don’t think I was dreaming. It was very real. It was scary but it was odd. Now, I don’t know what it was. I can think of loads of possible explanations but I don’t know. Maybe it was secret MI5 testing. They say there was a lot of that in this area. It could have been UFOs. It could have been ghosts of the airman. I don’t know. I’ll never know. It was just odd. It’s stayed with me my whole life… I think about things like that. Things like that show that the world isn’t how we think it is. There’s more. I don’t know what but I think there must be more we don’t know about.

Like Rose, Jack never sought to classify the event as “paranormal” nor even as “ghostly” in any definitive way. He was content to note that it was odd, unexplained. Indeed, he did not fix a particular meaning to it although the possibilities he articulated above are revealing. Each possible explanation – that the MI5 was engaged in secret activities, that UFOs were active in the area, or that there were ghosts – rests on the premise that there is more to the world than meets the eye. This tendency to question received wisdom and orthodox knowledge characterizes many paranormal investigators’ narratives of their early lives. Indeed, this tenacious, unwieldy curiosity is a point of pride for them. In the course of conversations and interviews with paranormal investigators, a significant number emphasized proudly that they had always been curious about the world, even as children.

In addition to instilling what would become a lifelong interest in the paranormal, these early experiences also demonstrate how investigators understand experience. A
long tradition in religious studies classifies extraordinary experiences as the core of religion (Eliade 1957/1987; Smart 1996) but, like critics of that tradition, I find some basic notions of religion and experience quite problematic and not in accordance with my findings. ³ Arguing for a building-block approach to religion, Ann Taves argues that individuals can classify such “special experiences” in a variety of ways (2009). “Whether people consider a special thing as (say) ‘religious,’ ‘mystical,’ ‘magical,’ ‘superstitious,’ ‘spiritual,’ ‘ideological,’ or ‘secular,’” she writes, “will depend on the preexisting systems of belief of practice, the web of concepts related to specialness” (Taves 2009:162-163). While some would dub these experiences as wondrous, anomalous, or fundamentally religious, Rose, Jack, and the others did not articulate them as such. They remained more open, less deterministic. That they did not class them as religious or definitive is key. They saw them as objects to explore. This understanding of special experiences informs their later approach to paranormal investigating.

Some investigators and ghost hunters emphasized childhood curiosity and refusal to accept the status quo as key cornerstones in their later engagement in paranormal research. Like Jay, Rob, a paranormal investigator in his fifties, emphasized that he had always been curious about “odd things.” He explained to me:

I’ve always wondered. It seems like there’s always more than meets the eye.

When I was at school, I always found myself wondering what they weren’t telling me. There’s loads they don’t tell you! It’s all what they want you to know, what

³ More recently, religious studies scholar James McClenon (1994) has dubbed extraordinary experiences as “wondrous.” Parapsychologists would term such experiences as “anomalous” (Bem and Honorton 1995; Cardena, Lynn, and Krippner 2000). As Ann Taves notes, the ascription of wonder or anomalousness is “highly contextually dependent” (2009: 39).
they need to tell you to make you good tax paying citizens… So from an early age, I liked to read about UFOs and ghosts and weird creatures. I’m not sure if I believe in any of them, mind you, I’ve never seen any of them. But they make you wonder.

While Rob has never experienced anything out of the ordinary, he emphasized his curiosity and unwillingness to accept what he saw as partial information uncritically.4

Rob’s emphasis on what he was not learning in school is a key point noted by other investigators who, like Rob, reported that their interest in the unusual was unsupported by their schools. Tigris, for example, remarked on the absence of school library books that would help him expand his interests in the paranormal or unusual. Clearly, Jack, Rob, and Tigris constitute themselves as isolated in their early childhood interest in the unusual. They emphasize the absence of a coherent framework through which to explore these interests.

Investigators situate their active role in investigating within the overall context of childhood. Indeed, for them, these early encounters or interests lay the groundwork for their adult interests and activities. It did not, however, trigger active engagement in paranormal research. Their active participation in, or consideration of paranormal research, had much more to do with some popular media. In particular it was popular media that treated the paranormal or unusual as real and researchable that played a

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4 Rob’s narrative emphasized that he had a childhood interest in a range of “odd” areas including ghosts, UFOs, and odd animals. The range of childhood interest here is at once both interesting and revealing. Many other investigators, expressed a similarly diverse range of childhood interests yet, in later life, their active participation focused almost exclusively on ghosts. UFOs and strange animals are both topics that could lead to active, hands-on investigations, like paranormal investigating, and indeed there are some people in England actively researching them. That ghosts were the elements that stuck with investigators is intriguing.
significant role in demonstrating the potential of such research to would-be-investigators. By emphasizing that the origin of their active participation in paranormal research lay in childhood, rather than in being a fan of *Most Haunted* or in participating in online paranormal forums, they seem to attempt to sidestep potential criticisms that they are simply “reacting” to *Most Haunted* or “getting online.” Such criticism would characterize their interest as merely faddish or passing. By referencing their childhood interests, they situate their later technoscientifically enabled forms of socialization as natural offshoots of their own personal quest, seemingly rendering their engagement more organic or authentic.

*Most Haunted* clearly deserves close examination here. It debuted in 2002 against this backdrop of dormant or unrealized interest in the paranormal. It was a reality documentary television program that focused on the paranormal. Its first episode premiered on May 25, 2002, on Living, a British television channel. Fourteen seasons of the program aired between 2002 and 2010. The program featured a regular cast of “investigators” who visited a new reportedly haunted site each time with the goal of investigating the paranormal. It also generated a second, less regular show, *Most Haunted Live*. The regular participants in *Most Haunted* included a presenter, a historian, parapsychologists, and a medium or psychic. Turnover, of course, took place over the

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*Living* has undergone several changes in its name during its history. When the channel was first launched in 1993, it was called UK Living. It changed its name to Living in 1997, and then in 2001, it changed its name to Living TV. Its name reverted to Living in 2007. It was owned and launched by Virgin Media. The producers of the channel originally geared the programming toward women, although in the late 00s, programming was increasingly geared toward expanding male viewership (especially with the introduction of several U.S. serial crime shows such as C.S.I.: Miami.).
years. Historian Owen Davies noted in 2007 that the program “presents sensational, telegenic live investigations” (2007: 97). Each episode of the show typically featured the cast visiting a reportedly haunted site, where they cast and crew spent the night “investigating.” Mediums played a prominent role on the program and their interpretations of a site’s haunting featured very heavily. The show also included a skeptical or scientific voice in the form of a parapsychologist.

In The Official Behind-the-Scenes Guide to Most Haunted, Yvette Fielding, Derek Acorah, and Gill Paul offered an “official” history of the program. They wrote:

As the twentieth century drew to a close and the twenty-first began, Yvette Fielding was working as a television presenter and her husband, Karl Beattie, was a freelance cameraman. Their ambition was to create a series on their own and they spent a lot of spare time brainstorming ideas, but the spark that was to become Most Haunted came from an unexpected direction. A friend of theirs knew the owner of Michelham Priory, a medieval monastery…The friend suggested to Karl and Yvette that they might like to use it as a location for a shoot some time. He finished with a throwaway comment: ‘By the way – in case you’re interested – it’s also haunted.’ Now Karl and Yvette were both very interested in the paranormal.

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6 Some of the most famous participants include Yvette Fielding, Karl Beattie, Ciarán O’Keeffe, Derek Acorah, Phil Wyman, and Richard Felix.

7 The show featured several “parapsychologists.” Sometimes the individual in question was, in fact, a parapsychologist that other parapsychologists would recognized as such, meaning an individual who received graduate training in parapsychology. In other cases, the parapsychologist seemed to be simply an individual who espoused slightly more skeptical interpretations of the phenomena in question.
This “throwaway comment” inspired Fielding and Beattie to begin pursuing the idea of a television show about hauntings.

Regarding viewership, Fielding, Acorah, and Paul boasted that *Most Haunted* enjoyed remarkable popularity among viewers. They wrote:

*Most Haunted* is the most watched paranormal programme in the UK, with regular viewing figures of around 1 million per episode and up to 3 million for live events. In fact, the 2004 Hallowe’en special got higher viewing figures than any programme on terrestrial channels at the time – the first and only time this has happened (2005: 16).

They quoted Richard Woolfe, the president of ITV, as explaining:

We were getting a viewing spike when each show aired, and we noticed that people were tuning in at five to nine on Tuesday evenings – I guess they thought we might start early and they didn’t want to miss anything. We’ve since found out that loads of fans have rituals attached to the way they watch the show. They turn off the lights, close the curtains, some burn candles and others set up tape recorders running in case there’s any EVP” (Wolfe in Fielding, Acorah, and Paul 2005: 14).

While I never met anyone who engaged in the particular viewing rituals described by Woolfe, *Most Haunted* undeniably attracted fervent fans and antifans during my fieldwork and led to a noticeable degree of participation and reaction.
Most Haunted in the Lives of Investigators

I turn to some examples of that now. In my interviews and conversations with paranormal investigators and ghost hunters, *Most Haunted* never failed to emerge as a conversation topic. In response to my questions about how they came to be actively involved in paranormal research, investigators inevitably mentioned *Most Haunted* – often with a tone of slight embarrassment.

In interviews, investigators mentioned that viewing *Most Haunted* propelled them into forms of more active and collective interest in the paranormal. Jack explained how watching *Most Haunted* impacted him. He noted:

Now, I’m sort of embarrassed to admit this but, er, when *Most Haunted* first came on I watched it all the time. I thought it was ace. Really interesting stuff. They went to top sites and I was interested in what they were doing. I mean, I didn’t go for all of it. Derek Acorah always seemed like a bit of a twat to me…8 What they were doing was interesting though. It got me thinking. Then, I must have just gone on the Internet to look for it because I found myself on all of these sites.9 I got to talking with others… And then I started going onto other paranormal sites. There’s so much out there…And that’s how I got involved really.

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8 Derek Acorah is a controversial medium who played a central role in several series of *Most Haunted*. Several rounds of heated accusations of fraud marked his time on the show.
9 This slightly ambiguous reference to online networking, fandom, and communication is common among investigators. While Internet-based forms of communication and networking are undeniably central to their entire project, investigators are rarely able to remember their acts of navigating the Internet during their early stages of use. Indeed, they typically refer to all facets of Internet-based communication and networking as “using the Internet,” “getting online,” and “using the computer.” While they are quite proficient in navigating their online worlds, the language they use to describe the process does not mirror or reflect that of more tech-savvy Internet users.
That Jack is a fan of the show leads him to seek out forums to discuss the show and to further engage the ideas associated with it. I am reminded of Henry Jenkins’ point that media “consumption has become a collective process” (2006: 4). *Most Haunted* transformed Jack into a member of a community. This transition is facilitated by the possibility fostered by *Most Haunted* of collectively identifying as paranormal investigators. Jack’s experience of going from committed, interested viewing of a program to participating in its fandom and, then, finally, finding a community of likeminded parties on websites, online chat room, and discussion boards is common. Many investigators reported a similar entry into the world of investigating.

The acts of active imagining sparked by viewing *Most Haunted* echo Arjun Appadurai’s point that “the consumption of the mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and, in general, agency” (1996:7). Importantly, however, full fledged identification as ghost hunters or paranormal investigators was contingent on online socialization and collective formation. So, while consuming mass media certainly entails creativity, imagination, and agency, it seems that some means of interaction is also required.

Consider how Steve, an investigator in his late thirties, describes his interest in *Most Haunted*. He explained:

I’ve always been interested in ghosts and the like. When I was a kid I would read books on it. I even did a report on it at school! I watched shows like Arthur Clark and Strange But True? when they were on. 10 I’ve always been interested in things

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10 “Arthur Clark refers to the television program *Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious World* that aired on ITV in 1980. Each episode focused on a different mysterious phenomenon such as lake monsters or UFOs. Interestingly, none of the thirteen episodes that aired
like that. Unusual things. I never realized there was a way to, you know, study them at school like, parapsychology or what you’re doing. I never did much with it. Just read the odd book and watched things on the tellie. But, I’ve always been interested. Now, when *Most Haunted* came on, I really sat up and took notice! When it was first on, I thought it was brilliant. I watched it every Tuesday it was on. I was dead into it. I got online and started talking to other people who were interested in researching things. I met up with one lot from a website but we didn’t click. They were a bit political if you know what I mean. After that initial meeting, I was a bit wary of meeting other people. I was afraid they would all be tossers like that. But, then, I got to talking [online] with Emma and we really hit it off. We thought, why don’t we start our own group and we did. It’s been ace….To be honest with you, I still do watch it [*Most Haunted*]. I know a lot of it’s rubbish and fake and all that but the locations are top.

Steve’s narration of his trajectory is very typical. Investigators tend to characterize their childhoods and adolescent years as ripe with interest; however, they characterize themselves as unaware of how to expand or develop that interest in practical, applicable ways. *Most Haunted* offered one possible way.

Consider Delores, a ghost hunter in her late fifties, and how she described the role of *Most Haunted* in her development as a ghost hunter. She explained to me that:

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focused explicitly on ghosts. *Strange But True?* was another English television program that aired between 1993 and 1997. It focused on a range of paranormal or odd topics including vampires, monsters, ghosts, and near death experiences.

11 By “they were a bit political,” Steve means that there were a lot of internal squabbles and conflicts within the group.
I’d always been interested in ghosts and the like. When the show first came on, I loved it. It was great. Yvette was a bit much but it was fantastic to see the locations they went to and to see what they caught on film.\textsuperscript{12} It made me really want to go out and do it myself. I don’t like it [\textit{Most Haunted}] as much anymore. I can’t help but thinking it’s all faked. But for me, it was really big when it came out.

In Delores’s narrative, the show transformed her longstanding interest in ghosts into a more active form of engagement. After viewing the program for some time and while beginning to establish her own expertise on the paranormal, Delores became critical of it, asserting that it was “fake.”

\textit{Most Haunted} is by no means the first popular program that focuses on the paranormal. Indeed, BBC radio aired live transmissions of two of Harry Price’s investigations in 1936. There have been more recent and sustained programs focusing on the paranormal as well. As Steve mentioned in his narrative, television programs focusing on the unusual or paranormal have existed since the 1980s. \textit{Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious World} and \textit{Strange but True?} are just two examples, so it is important to identify what it is about \textit{Most Haunted} that spurred popular interest and active engagement in paranormal research. I want to suggest here that the answer is two-fold. First, the format of the television program enabled a different type of engagement with the subject matter.

\textsuperscript{12} Yvette Fielding is the host and producer of the show. Fans and critics alike routinely criticize her somewhat over the top reactions on the program. For example, whenever there is a noise of any sort, Yvette is likely to scream in response. To many, this reaction is laughable and extreme for someone who is professionally engaged in researching ghosts.
Second, *Most Haunted* emerged at the moment when a significant portion of the English population had regular access to Internet-ready computers. I elaborate on both below.

**Most Haunted and the Emergence of Investigation**

Episodes of *Most Haunted* ran for an hour with commercials and about 46 minutes without commercials. Episodes usually opened with a teaser, typically less than a minute, of the footage to come during the main part of the episode. It usually included images captured on a night vision camera of the cast and crew nervously looking around them. The teaser included audio clips hinting at the exciting paranormal activity to come during the episode. For example, during the episode based in Nottingham’s Galleries of Justice, viewers heard medium Derek Acorah state “there’s evil down there” followed by an unknown man yelling “fucking hell.” Yvette Fielding, in a voice over, alerted the audience that the investigation is based in the Galleries of Justice and that “retribution, anguish, and executions await” them.

After the opening credits, which featured the title of the program and images of buildings but did not include anything resembling a cast list, Yvette Fielding, the presenter, introduced the episode. She typically stood in front of the exterior of the site under investigation during daylight hours. She was in full presenter mode. She held a microphone in her hand and spoke directly to the camera. She briefly commented about the history of the place in question and then described the different areas while they were shown on screen in a voice-over. Then, she began to talk about the site with the different “experts” featured on the program. Richard Felix, the self-identified historian of the

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13 Fielding was the presenter of the program for all of its history.
group, offered a description of the history of the particular site, focusing specifically on its darker moments and his thoughts on the likelihood of encountering ghosts during the program. Interviews with people who work at the museum or site of investigation might also appear on the program. The staff typically talked about any odd experiences they had personally had or any that other people had reported. Phil Wyman, the “paranormal investigator,” also usually appeared on screen and discussed his impression of the site and the experiments he planned to conduct during the night. Importantly, his experiments typically included activities such as leaving a voice recorder in a room where people had reported hearing voices or leaving trigger objects around the room. Such experiments do not require significant financial investment. This low budget element of the program likely added to viewers’ perception that paranormal investigating is something they can do themselves.

After Wyman and Felix’s semi-formal interview comments, Acorah always appeared on the screen with Fielding and Wyman. While Felix and Wyman’s initial appearances had them remaining stationary and seated to talk about the site and their plans for the evening, Acorah typically stood and walked through the building with Fielding and Wyman, offering psychical impressions of the spirits present. While this segment of the program was never formally labeled, throughout each episode it was periodically referred to as the “walk around with Derek.” Acorah struggled, often

14 Felix was the resident historian on Most Haunted from series 1 through 8.
15 The language and structure of Most Haunted has unequivocally influenced the production and organization of commercial ghost hunts, public events hosted by investigation groups, and even seriously minded paranormal investigations. Terms such as “medium walk about” and “trigger objects” have entered the vernacular of all investigators, ghost hunters, and tourists, regardless of whether or not they agree with the methods.
dramatically and in collaboration with Sam, his Spirit Guide, to identify, label, and provide a biography of the spirits present. As he pieced together a name or identity, a caption would appear below him on the screen noting if there was a historical record of anyone of that name or identity.

Following Acorah’s walk around and typically after a commercial break, the Most Haunted team settled into the investigating. Fielding typically noted that it was time to turn the lights off, casting the entire building into darkness. Then, the team would settle into one of the haunted areas. At this point, the cinematic and visual style of the program changed from staged formal interviews to a seemingly documentary style of narration. The crew filmed the participants using night vision cameras, which cast them in a green light and turn their eyes extremely white and shiny. During this part of each episode, viewers are more likely to see one of the two cameramen on screen, either talking or “accidentally” being shot by the other cameraman. The filming always became choppier, emphasizing the un-staged nature of the shoot.

**Constructing Spontaneity, Authenticity, and Expertise**

During this main part of an episode of Most Haunted, the activities of the cast appear the most unscripted. They always discussed what to do and how to proceed in front of the camera. For example, in the episode filmed at the Galleries of Justice, during

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16 Some mediums assert that they rely on “spirit guides” in their mediumship. These are spiritual beings that act as gatekeepers between the medium’s mind/consciousness and the spirit world. Some mediums know the names of their guides and regularly speak to them and thank them for their help during the course of performing their mediumship.

17 This typically occurs 15 to 20 minutes into the program and lasts until very close to the end of the episode. This period of “lights out” investigation constitutes the majority of the episode. Additionally, it is the element of the program that most inspires conversation, consideration, and debate among members of the public and paranormal investigators.
the first few minutes when the lights are off, Acorah and Fielding discussed and planed where to go. Acorah remarked, “there’s evil down there!” pointing to an enclosed, outdoor space where criminals were once hanged. Fielding replied, “shall we go?” Acorah responded, “yes! Please!” The group then moves out into the courtyard. As a result of this exchange, the action seems unplanned and spontaneous.

Exchanges such as this dialogue, combined with visual markers of “documentary style” such as choppy camera work, construct the unfolding paranormal activity and exchanges between participants as spontaneous. For example, during one scene in the Galleries of Justice episode, Acorah described his sense that the caves underneath the jail at one time connected to Nottingham Castle. In the midst of this description, a loud bang occurred off screen. Acorah paused and assorted cast and crewmembers yelled, “what was that?” Fielding looked distinctly terrified and yelped, “what the hell was that?” Presumably, her use of profanity underscored her shock. The episode never returned to focus on Acorah’s observations regarding the tunnel. Instead, the cameramen refocused the cameras toward the general vicinity from where participants heard the noise. This move positions TV viewers in the investigator’s point-of-view and implicitly involves them in the unfolding action. All of the cast members present quickly moved toward that area. They searched the ground for any indication of where the noise came from.

This exchange demonstrates two of the most important stylistic features of Most Haunted. First, the composition of the show foregrounds the sense of spontaneity, which is a key premise. Exchanges such as those above emphasize that the program is neither scripted nor staged. The investigators simply visit a site and allow paranormal occurrences to unfold around them. Cast members have also explicitly argued that the
program is not scripted or staged. Fielding was quoted in 2005 as saying that "there is no acting in this programme, none whatsoever. Everything you see and you hear is real. It's not made up, it's not acted" (Fielding quoted in Roper 2005). This assumption and its reassertion convey to would-be-investigators a sense of reliance on comparable investigation techniques in their own potential investigations.

Second, the blurring of the boundaries between onscreen personalities and off-screen crew characterizes much of *Most Haunted* filming. From the cameramen casually or perhaps “accidentally” filming each other filming to actually appearing on screen offering their observations, the presence of the crew is evident. For example, in one episode Karl, one of the cameramen, appeared on screen observing that the atmosphere in a particular area was “giving him a headache.” Fielding and Acorah took this as an interesting piece of evidence. Indeed, at certain points, Fielding, Felix, or Wyman stared into the camera and asked if “you” heard, felt, or saw that. While it might appear they were speaking to the audience, that was not the case. They were, instead, asking the camera crew. Typically, the crew would respond. These twin elements, the seeming spontaneity of the program and the blurring of boundaries between on screen and off screen personalities, creates the sense that the program is filming events as they naturally unfold and that the crew and cast are more or less witnesses to an unfolding natural drama.

Indeed the format of *Most Haunted* differed in significant ways from that of its predecessors. While other programs focused on narrating and describing mysterious events, *Most Haunted* featured the gradual unfolding of paranormal events filmed in
seemingly documentary style. This style would be instrumental in the formation of popular paranormal research groups.

In *The Official Behind-the-Scenes Guide to Most Haunted*, Yvette Fielding, Derek Acorah, and Gill Paul Fielding noted that the filming style of the program was inspired, in part, by the film *The Blair Witch Project*, an American horror film released in 1999. This inspiration is highly significant. The film focuses on the fictional story of three young filmmakers intent on producing a documentary about a reported witch. Filmed in a mock documentary fashion with hand-held cameras, the film unfolds from the cinematic perspective of each of the three supposed filmmakers’ cameras as the three protagonists look for any evidence of the Blair witch in the woods. Eventually, all three filmmakers disappear and their cameras go black, allowing audiences to draw their own conclusions about what happened to the filmmakers. The film was internationally successful, grossing nearly US $250 million.

Several elements of *The Blair Witch Project (BWP)* deeply and obviously influenced the conceptualization and production of *Most Haunted*. First, the *BWP* filmmakers actively blurred the boundaries between actors and production crew. Sarah Higley and Jeffrey Weinstock wrote in 2004 that the three actors were given a crash course on the use of hand-held cameras and, then, “with no script, or even much idea of the story or their relationship to each other as characters they were set loose” (2004: 24). The directors and writers then attempted to scare them as the shoot continued, filling in the role of the Blair Witch. As a result, “the actors, then, shared ambiguous status with

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18 I emphasize the seemingly documentary style because it is unclear to me, as to most viewers, the degree to which any of this is staged or actual. Numerous controversies surround *Most Haunted*’s claims to authenticity and I will discuss them below.
the writers/directors” (2004:24-25). Higley and Weistock also noted that the conditions of filming resulted in them “pretending to be filming in a completely ‘uncontrolled’ situation” (2004:25). As a result of this style of production, BWP fits into the film genre of direct cinema or cinema verité, a genre characterized by Stephen Mamber as “a filmmaking method employing hand-held cameras and live, synchronous sound” (1974:1).

In the case of Most Haunted, the lines between actors/presenters and film producers/staff are even murkier. During episodes of the program, cameramen and makeup artists spending the night at the haunted location along with the official on-camera staff appeared regularly on camera. It is not uncommon for Yvette Fielding, the main presenter, to ask cameramen what they saw and if they felt what she felt. They are complicit in narrating the program. That Most Haunted casts camera crew and make-up artists as integral to the investigation is important. These are individuals who have professional expertise in film-making, not in history, parapsychology, or mediumship, as is the case for on-air personalities such as Fielding or Acorah. By deeply involving the production crew in the investigation, Most Haunted constitutes paranormal investigation as an open field where neophytes can quickly become experts. The involvement of the crew suggests that specialist training is not required; rather, by simply visiting a haunted site, anyone can uncover new knowledge of the paranormal. Such representations are useful for viewers who are deeply interested in the paranormal but feel as though they

19 He emphasizes that “the filmmaker does not function as a ‘director’ nor, for that matter, as a screenwriter…A prepared script, however skimpy, is not permissible, or are verbal suggestions, gestures, or any form of direct communication from the filmmaker to his subject” (1974:3).
lack the “know how” to pursue investigating. *Most Haunted*’s manipulation of the conventions of cinema verité provides would-be-investigators with a powerful message about their potential involvement in investigating.

Much like *BWP*, *Most Haunted* operates within the genre of “direct cinema” or cinema verité. While *BWP* was a fictional enactment of this, *Most Haunted* troubles the boundaries of “direct cinema” by leaving ambiguous the degree to which it is “real” or “staged.” This ambiguity is important because it will later provide investigators with the means of criticizing the “fakeness” of the program. *Most Haunted* often features night vision filming in which it is difficult to clearly determine the setting and unfolding action. *Most Haunted*’s filming style mirrors that of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) in its choppiness and their shared emphasis on filming “real events as they unfold.” While the producers of *BWP* marketed it as a fictional horror film, the distinction between fiction and reality is far murkier in *Most Haunted*.

*Most Haunted* uses the conventions of direct cinema to construct itself as a documentary, and its self-positioning within the documentary genre results in certain viewer expectations regarding realness and truth. Vincent Campbell argued that “the validity of a documentary’s exposition is constantly reaffirmed through established documentary techniques, such as the use of archive footage, expert and witness testimony, and detached off-screen narration” (2000: 148). In the case of *Most Haunted*, expert and sometimes witness testimony provide a backdrop for the unfolding of paranormal events in each episode. Fielding’s overarching off-screen testimony similarly provides a sense of objectivity and realness. Ultimately, the show succeeds in presenting itself as a vehicle for the truth about ghosts.
Most Haunted differed from previous paranormal programs such as Strange But True? in important ways. I find Vincent Campbell’s suggestion that a hallmark of most paranormal documentary is the absence of visual evidence useful here. He wrote:

perhaps the most striking feature of many documentaries on paranormal topics is the treatments of visual evidence. The most pressing problem for several of the programmes assessed was the lack of visual ‘evidence’ of the subject matter (Campbell 2000: 149).

Importantly, Campbell’s analysis of paranormal documentaries focused exclusively on cryptozoology and Ufology, forms of inquiry that often fail to traffic in visual evidence. Visual evidence in the form of photographs or film footage occupies a central evidentiary place in ghost hunting and paranormal investigation. As a result, the case of 21st century documentaries about ghosts is quite different. Most Haunted routinely features visual evidence of ghosts. Indeed, the vast majority of the program focuses on capturing such evidence. Most Haunted’s divergence from typical paranormal documentary tropes of discussing but failing to demonstrate evidence may contribute to its role as a major factor enabling the construction of paranormal investigator as a popular identity.

This switch from describing real or ideal evidence to actively, and seemingly successfully, seeking out evidence is key. Most Haunted’s traffic in visual evidence and ethos of amateur expertise collectively attest to the viability of investigating at the popular level. Importantly, the program foregrounds collecting audio and visual evidence but it does not emphasize analyzing it. Instead, it treats such evidence as straightforward. Such representations contributed to many people’s initial interest in, and hopes for, paranormal investigating. This repertoire of investigative imagery likely contributes to
investigators’ assertions that *Most Haunted* showed them investigating was a viable possibility.

The format of each episode of *Most Haunted* focuses on the “Most Haunted team” investigating a haunted site. Whereas earlier shows focused on narrations of what might or might not be haunted or monstrous, *Most Haunted* focused on the act of investigating. That the program focuses on the act of investigation and emphasizes the uncertainty of what each investigation might reveal, I suspect, acts as the most inspiring element of the show. By focusing on knowledge as an unfolding, uncertain process in which people of varied backgrounds can and do experience and produce knowledge, the producers crafted a show that did, in fact, stir the agency of viewers. Additionally, the show regularly demonstrated that failures and dead-ends in investigations are normal and OK. This is also useful for a neophyte investigator. As Jack explained, *Most Haunted* “showed me that this [investigating] could be done. That I could do it.” Similarly, Tigris remarked, “the good thing about it [*Most Haunted*] is that it shows that people can do this. That there are new things to learn.” For both Tigris and Jack, viewing the program instilled in them a sense that they, too, could be investigators.

**Most Haunted Antifandom and the Establishment of Authority**

While investigators are initially influenced and inspired by *Most Haunted*, especially in the early stages of their trajectory, eventually many come to criticize it and distance themselves from the show. In doing so, they perform their superior knowledge, media savvy and, ultimately, expertise.
Allegations of fraud on *Most Haunted* exist in public, and are even in print, but investigators and viewers also routinely assert them. While many investigators initially embraced *Most Haunted*, now that they have become investigators they identify themselves as critics not fans. In fact, following Jonathan Gray, I use the term antifan to refer to “those who hate or dislike a given text, personality, or genre” (2005: 841). To Gray “hate or dislike of a text can be just as powerful as can a strong and admiring, affective relationship with a text, and they can produce just as much activity, identification, meaning, and ‘effects’ or serve just as powerfully to unite and sustain a community or subculture” (2005: 841). It is this aspect that I stress here.\(^{20}\)

Despite their frequent critiques of the program, many investigators continue to regularly watch *Most Haunted*. This would not surprise Gray who in 2005 wrote that “antifandom will either involve audience-hood from afar, as the antifan refuses to watch, or may be performed with close knowledge of the text and yet be devoid of the interpretive and diegetic pleasures that are usually assumed to be a staple of almost all media consumption” (2005: 842). Paranormal investigators indeed regularly watch the program. When I asked Tigris why, he explained, “oh I reckon it’s one of those things where you can’t look away. It’s like a train wreck. They’re rubbish but you’ve just got to watch. Oh, and they go to top places.” His comment indexed the two most cited explanations (or justifications) for viewership. Investigators typically expressed a genuine appreciation for, and interest in, the sites featured on the show. For instance, Molly, a paranormal investigator I knew well, updated her Facebook status to note that she was

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\(^{20}\) While critical studies of fans, inspired by Henry Jenkins’ (1992) and Camille Bacon-Smith’s (1992) pioneering works, have demonstrated the plurality of ways that fandom shapes and is shaped by fans’ lives, less scholarly attention has been dedicated to antifans.
watching the show. She noted, “watching *Most Haunted*. It’s shite but the locations [sic] ace!” Vernon, another investigator we both knew, commented on this status, observing “can[t] [sic] believe your [sic] wotchin [sic] this! load o crap. where is this one at?” Molly and Vernon both emphasize their low opinions of the show while also maintaining an interest in where the program is filmed. Viewing the program provides investigators with a shared object of critique. In person and online, investigators critique various elements of the show as a means of constructing and performing their own authority. Misuse and of equipment and logical oversights constitute major veins of critique.

Many investigators criticized the use of technology on *Most Haunted*. Investigators pointed to the use of EMF readers as particularly problematic. As I described in Chapter Seven, investigators acknowledge two general ways of using technology -- revelatory and documentary ways -- and they clearly prefer the latter as a viable form of evidence. On *Most Haunted*, cast members often treat EMF readers and other technologies as revelatory, assuming that changes in EMF readings or temperature indexed paranormal activity. That cast members often failed to consider more mundane possibilities explicitly troubled investigators. They publicly pointed to such apparent oversights as problematic and, in doing so, reaffirmed their own authority.

Additionally, investigators were concerned with the construction of visual evidence on *Most Haunted*. Many charged the show with popularizing the idea of orbs, small balls of light that appear in film and photography. Some people, including many *Most Haunted* cast members, consider orbs to be paranormal phenomena. This interpretation of these photographic anomalies is one of the most contentious claims in the community of paranormal investigators. Investigators, as well as most psychical
researchers and parapsychologists, see orbs as almost exclusively the result of light illuminating dust particles in the air – a thoroughly mundane, rather than paranormal, occurrence. To paranormal investigators and other likeminded researchers, ascribing paranormal significance to orbs signals a failure to fully grasp mundane causalities. Individuals who identify themselves as ghost hunters as well as individuals who investigators pejoratively label ghost hunters often find orbs deeply fascinating. Investigators, echoing criticisms leveled at them by parapsychologists and psychical researchers, charge ghost hunters with uncritically embracing the problematic components of Most Haunted.

In addition to criticizing the representations of paranormal research found on the program, many investigators also debated the program’s authenticity as a form of documentary. These questions, in many respects, mirror The Mirror’s allegations regarding Most Haunted. In 2005, Most Haunted’s resident parapsychologist, Ciaran O'Keeffe, collaborated with The Mirror on a story that claimed the show’s medium Derek Acorah was not a genuine medium. O'Keeffe was quoted in the article as saying “I think it's time to open the dialogue about what I've experienced on Most Haunted. There have been many incidents with the medium that have been brushed under the carpet” (O’Keeffe in Roper 2005:1). This news story generated significant controversy.

Investigators often question the legitimacy of Acorah’s mediumship, citing his intensely dramatic style and the frequency with which he becomes possessed as indications that he may be faking it. As Harry explained, “he [Acorah] is crap. He’s always getting possessed or something over the top. I mean, I can see how he makes for good tellie but he’s rubbish as a medium. Not that I think you’re likely to find a genuine,
mind you.” In addition to doubting the veracity of the program’s medium, investigators are skeptical of the purported reality of the paranormal phenomena caught on film.

Other investigators offer insider information based on contact with venues that host the program. For example, several investigators mentioned private conversations with the manager of a famously haunted pub. They allege that the manager told them about all the fakery from the *Most Haunted* team from producers pushing cameramen to discussing what to fake in advance. One investigator worked at a museum that *Most Haunted* used as haunted location in 2005. She was present for the filming and often recounted stories about the team’s fakery. As she explained to me, “they were down there throwing pebbles and what not, faking it. And mind you it’s a brilliant place to investigate! Loads of actual activity. But they couldn’t be bothered.” To many investigators, *Most Haunted*’s access to renowned sites and their seeming refusal to actually investigate it was distressing.  

Publicly critiquing *Most Haunted* in these varied ways allows investigators to assert their own authority, legitimacy, and insight as experts. Demonstrating the ways in which *Most Haunted* cast members misuse technology or misinterpret visual evidence tacitly emphasizes investigators’ own expertise. Likewise, their ability to analyze the legitimacy of the show as a documentary asserts their own media-savvy. In frequently rehashing the Derek Acorah controversy and offering their own insights into it, they

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21 *Most Haunted*’s access to a range of highly desirable haunted locations is a fascinating component of the show’s popularity. During the course of the show, they visited sites such as the Blair Street Vaults in Edinburgh, Woodchester Mansion, the National Coal Mining Museum in Wakefield, and Lancaster Maritime Museum. Many of these sites experienced significant increases in tourism following their appearance on the program. Indeed, many of these sites later began marketing themselves as destinations for commercial ghost hunts.
signal that they are not duped by mediums or by popular entertainment. In criticizing the show’s use of haunted sites, investigators implicitly distance themselves from such superficial engagements with place. Ultimately, criticizing the show allows investigators to demonstrate their own seriousness as investigators.

While many of my investigator friends began their trajectory toward becoming investigators as *Most Haunted* fans, they now often viewed unabashed, uncritical consumption of the program as problematic. Investigators routinely deployed references to *Most Haunted* as a way to dismiss ghost hunters. When investigators described ghost hunters’ expectations for an investigation or ghost hunt, they typically noted that “they want the whole *Most Haunted* bit.” By this, they meant that ghost hunters expected the structure of the night to mirror that narrative organization of the show. They anticipated an explanation from “experts,” followed by a walk around with a medium, and, then, periods of “investigation” in which they regularly encountered paranormal activity. As Jack explained, “they’re all expecting *Most Haunted*, you know, regular [paranormal] activity, a medium, the whole thing.” These expectations ran contrary to most investigators’ stated understandings of investigating.  

**Conclusion**

*Most Haunted* serves as an important mediascape for investigators. Indeed, at every stage of their trajectory toward becoming investigators, the show provides investigators with a repertoire of images and narratives that facilitate the development of their expertise. In the early stages of becoming investigators, it provides them with a

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22 While it ran contrary to their expectations, I suspect that investigators also would welcome regular paranormal activity during events.
repertoire of techniques that catalyze their childhood interest into a viable form of social action. Once they have established themselves as investigators, offering critical readings of the show’s techniques, validity, and practices offers investigators a means of publicly asserting their superior expertise.

Ultimately, over the course of the past decade the program provided a key ingredient in investigators’ imaginings of themselves as *investigators*. The program promulgated an understanding and vision of paranormal investigating. While investigators might not embrace that vision for the entirety of their trajectory as investigators, it was nonetheless a useful tool. The presence of *Most Haunted* enabled investigators to begin to imagine themselves pursuing investigating and as part of a collectivity. In its initial stages, Delores, Tigris, Steve, and Jack’s consumption of *Most Haunted* occurred in a largely private fashion. Each of these investigators or ghost hunters and, in fact, most of the ghost hunters I met, watched *Most Haunted* in their living rooms with family members or partners. This act of consumption did not yet constitute would-be-investigators as publicly or socially recognizable beings but it laid the groundwork for it. It did, however, enact processes of imagining that, in some cases, transcended the privacy of the living room. The first act enabling collectivities to form with respect to viewing of *Most Haunted* was to “go online.”

While *Most Haunted* was undeniably instrumental in their trajectories as investigators, their viewing of the show happened in conjunction with “going online.” In many cases, it sparked it. As I consider in the next chapter, the rise of their form of expertise was spurred in part by *Most Haunted* but also by online networking.
In this chapter, I examine the ways in which paranormal investigators use the Internet to imagine a sense of shared purpose and community.\(^1\) I explore the way in which Internet-based forms of communication enable and promote the formation of a body of paranormal facts. This is crucial in understanding how and why paranormal investigators have emerged only recently as key figures. Historians like Davies (2009) clearly documented popular interest in the paranormal in the past but paranormal investigators are a new form of subject position that warrants further scrutiny now. As I will show here, Internet-mediated forms of communication constitute a performative, recursive space that is instrumental to the formation of paranormal expertise. I aim to show that the Internet, as a cumulative, widely accessible resource, enabled this development of expertise particularly well because paranormal investigators are able to use the space to develop a collective identity, share a repertoire of facts, and articulate authentic voices.

\(^1\) Following DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, and Robinson, I use the term “Internet” to refer to “the electronic network of networks that links people and information through computers and other digital devices allowing person-to-person communication and information retrieval” (2001:307). Similarly, Wilson and Peterson use the term “Internet” to refer to “the physical global infrastructure as well as the uses to which the Internet as infrastructure is put, including the World Wide Web, email, and online multiperson interactive spaces such as chatrooms” (2002:452). Following these scholars, I also use the term Internet to refer to the organizational structure and the interpersonal modes of communication it engenders.
Anthropologists and sociologists have taken intellectuals and scientists as exemplars of expertise and it is easy to identify works on the role and construction of the expert in the sociology of knowledge (Brenda 1928; Coser 1970; Eyal and Buchholz 2010). I appreciate how Dominic Boyer and Claudio Lomnitz shifted the emphasis in 2005 to an anthropology of “intellectualism” foregrounding the cultural labor inherent in any notion of the intellectual. Yet even such scholarship does little to pave the way to promote scholarly engagement with what Harry Collins and Robert Evans have called popular “extensions of expertise” (2002). Since such extensions are key in understanding the prevalence and role of today’s paranormal investigators, I especially appreciate E. Summerson Carr’s emphasis on the performative nature of expertise. As Carr pointed out recently “expertise is something people do rather than something people have or hold” (2010: 18).

The Internet as Public Sphere

Other scholars have preceded me in arguing that public spheres emerge out of reading and the dispersal of particular cultural forms. Jürgen Habermas (1962/1989) and Benedict Anderson (1983), among others, have noted its prevalence in earlier historical eras. As is well known, Habermas argued in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962/1989) that face-to-face encounters in public spaces like coffee houses led the bourgeois public sphere to emerge in an earlier historical period. I am interested in his description of this public sphere as “the sphere of private people [who] come together as a public” (1989: 27), and as something instrumental to enabling democracy. I will demonstrate here that reading online materials firms today’s paranormal investigators’
sense of collective community. I am interested in how this resembles, but also differs from, those earlier public spheres that captured Habermas’ attention. Clearly online networking, communication, and learning entail reading. They also entail writing though, as I discovered, that occurs less frequently.

Christopher Kelty’s notion of recursive publics is useful here as well. Recursive publics, he claimed, are “a particular form of social imaginary through which [a] group imagines in common the means of their own association [and] the material forms this imagination takes” (2005: 186). I will show how the Internet indeed provides paranormal investigators with the recursivity necessary to collectively identify themselves as a collectivity. They establish their identity as researchers by collectively reading, writing, and circulating a set of Internet-based texts. They also identify, promote, and debate the methodologies, technological proficiencies, and theories necessary to enact their project of investigating.

Online Networking and Imagined Communities

As Sharon, Steve, and Jack’s narratives in the previous chapter demonstrate, viewing the program Most Haunted acted as a catalyst in transforming them into active paranormal investigators or ghost hunters. Yet the Internet was just as important. As Steve put it, “I got online and started talking to other people who were interested in researching [paranormal] things.” It was, he says, what led him to become an investigator. The two are closely linked. Being a fan of Most Haunted clearly leads to Internet-based forms of socialization. Fans of the show “go online” and, in doing so, interact with other fans of the show and locate further resources of information on the
paranormal. It is hard to overstate the impact of online socialization and networking around the paranormal in the day-to-day lives of investigators.

Interestingly, although many investigators and ghost hunters referred to “going online” or “getting on the computer” as chief facets in their transformation into investigators, it was very difficult for them to describe the actual details of “going online.” For example, in Jack’s narrative above of his appreciation of *Most Haunted* he just said, “And then I started going onto other paranormal sites. There’s so much out there…And that’s how I got involved really.” His comment is revealing in its lack of specificity. In contrast, while discussing *Most Haunted*, Jack cited not only a specific program that revived his interest but also particular participants on the program who displeased him. In referring to his online activity, he was significantly less specific. Our exchange regarding this lack of specificity is revealing:

**MH:** Um, were there specific websites you would go to?

**J:** I’m sure there were… Uh… (Laughs.) I can’t think of them. (Laughs.) I could tell you where I go now but I can’t remember what I did then. It was a few years ago now.

**MH:** Where do you go now?

**J:** Well, EGR’s site for sure. (Laughs.) I’m always on the forum. I’ve a lot to see to there.² I go to IP’s [Investigations into the Paranormal] a bit. I like them a lot. They’re good people…Um… I’ve been to DSR’s [Dark Shadow Research] but I’m not on there as much as others… Like Rose… I go to MHB (Most Haunted

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² Jack was largely in charge of this particular website and he moderated (to a degree) the forum. He also assumed responsibility for answering much of the inquiring email addressed to the group.
That’s just because they’re such tossers. (Laughing.) Sometimes I go on there and say things to wind them up. I’m surprised they haven’t shut my account down to be honest with you… Um… I go to more… I can’t think… um… (Laughs.) I know I go to more! Sorry, Michele.

MH: That’s ok. Don’t worry. To go back to when you were first looking up paranormal websites, do you remember what sparked it at all?

J: Well… I was already online a good bit by the time Most Haunted was on. I went to chat rooms for all sorts of things. Conspiracies. The David Icke rooms used to be a laugh. (Laughs.) I don’t really know... I just did it. It’s what you do, isn’t it, when you’re interested in something? I’m sorry I’m not more help on this!

This exchange raises interesting points about Internet use. First, there is Jack’s inability to remember his earlier use of websites and his inability to chronicle his progression through the world of paranormal websites. His comments also underline the centrality or ubiquity of online socialization in his life. His comment that “It’s what you do, isn’t it, when you’re interested in something” rings true for many investigators and points to the centrality of the Internet in investigators’ lives.

That online networking is part of English paranormal investigating is not surprising in today’s England, but it matters that we are talking about England and not many other possible countries. England is in a privileged position with respect to Internet access, which is indeed widespread now. England also has a great technological capacity and this enables online socialization. In 2002 Wilson and Peterson aptly noted that

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3 MHB is a group that EGR had a contentious relationship with. They were once the same group but MHB splintered off from EGR and there have been hard feelings on both sides since that rupture (which occurred around 2005).
“throughout most of the 1980s and 1990s, the conviction was widespread that the growing and evolving communications medium comprising inter-networked computers would enable the rapid and fundamental transformation of social and political orders” (2002: 450), but such optimistic imaginings did not always take into account questions of availability of Internet access, the language and alphabets of use, and forms of governmental control. By now many know that the kind of global liberation imagined by some utopian theorists of the Internet were never realized. “Internet usage,” Kristopher Robison and Edward Crenshaw recently wrote, “is not driven entirely by affluence but also by important social and political structures historically characteristic of the West” (2010:34). In this context, it matters greatly that my study was of paranormal investigators in England today.

The U.K. enjoys markedly high levels of Internet access, as I show in Figure 9.1. According to the Office of National Statistics, in 2009, 18.3 million households in Britain had Internet access. This comprises 70% of the U.K. population. Of these Internet-ready households, 90% had a broadband connection in 2009. (In total, 63% of the U.K. had a broadband connection in 2009.) These figures demonstrate that a significant portion of the British population enjoys regular and often broadband Internet access in their homes. In 2010, 30.1 million adults (60% of the population) access the Internet “everyday or almost everyday.” According to the Office of National Statistics, in 2009 the most popular online activities were sending and receiving email and engaging in online networking. Forty percent of recent Internet users noted that they had participated in a

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4 The Office of National Statistics is a branch of the U.K. Statistics Authority, a non-ministerial department that provides statistics to Parliament about the population of the U.K.
chatroom, posted a message to an Internet forum, or read a blog. Ninety percent reported using email.

Figure 9.1: Table of Internet Access and Use in U.K., according to the Office of National Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Households with Internet Access (% of population)</th>
<th>Number of Households with Broadband Internet Access (% of population)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>14.26 million (57%)</td>
<td>9.91 million (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>15.23 million (61%)</td>
<td>12.82 million (51%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>16.46 million (65%)</td>
<td>14.14 million (56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>18.31 million (70%)</td>
<td>16.52 million (63%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the investigators and ghost hunters I met during the course of my research had regular access to the Internet at home, work, or through the public library. Most accessed the Internet through their home computers. Most investigators considered an Internet-ready computer to be a necessity at home. Investigators who did not have Internet-equipped computers maintained an online presence by using computers at their place of work or a public library. Local libraries in England maintain computers for public use.5 Many investigators maintain a nearly constant online presence. Even individuals who did not have Internet access at home checked online forums and posted to them throughout the day. So, while it is unwise to sustain utopian visions of the

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5 There are typically time limits imposed on these forms of computer use; however, most of the investigators who relied on library computers knew how to circumvent these limits.
Internet as a limitless democratizing force on a global scale, within England the Internet does offer creative, imaginative possibilities for social formation.

The online venues frequented by investigators, unsurprisingly, tended to focus on paranormal research and investigation. These typically took the form of websites and discussion boards associated with particular teams or groups of investigators. For example, Eastern Ghost Research (EGR), a fairly well-known investigation team maintained a popular website and online forum. Their forum attracted (near) daily contributions from each team member, responses and readership from members of the other research teams, and interested members of the general public. Online activity typically took the form of reading and replying to forum posts.

Individual investigators participate online frequently enough that other contributors comment on their presences and absences. For example, when one investigator and his girlfriend were away for a weekend at the bi-annual Goth Festival in Whitby, his fellow commentators regularly referred to his absence. As one contributor to their forum put it, “jims offline this week. hes [he’s] at whitby fer [for] goth week. if u [you] need him, u [you] can always text im [him].”6 Indeed, other forms of technologically mediated social availability mitigated online absences.

Online and Offline Identities

Participants and contributors to the forums typically knew each other face-to-face to some degree. Investigators who were part of a team met regularly for discussions of

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6 Regarding the transcription of Internet text, I have maintained the original use of “text speak” among investigators. However, I have changed the investigator’s name, keeping with my use of pseudonym. Investigators, many of whom speak in heavy Northeastern accents, reflect their accented English in their use of “text speak.”
“team business” and other paranormal issues in addition to seeing each other on regular team investigations. Investigators who were part of other teams knew each other less well offline; however, many had met at joint investigations or conferences. Members of the general public typically had not necessarily met any of the other contributors, although they might eventually do so if they later attended an investigation.

Investigators expected a certain continuity of identity in online and face-to-face interactions. This did not always take the form of developing an in-depth personal knowledge of all facets of participants’ identities; however, it did require ideological and interpersonal consistency in offline and online interactions. The case of a man known as “Tigris” is illustrative. Investigators knew this man both online and offline as “Tigris.”

For more than a few months, no one knew his given name or his surname. He was the leader and sole member of his own paranormal research team.7 His online user name in all of the paranormal online forums that he frequented was “Tigris.” In fact, he was consistent across his use of online media in using this name. When he met online contacts in person at investigations, he introduced himself as “Tigris.” He maintained the same persona in his online and offline encounters. In forum posts, he represented himself, as he put it, as “tending toward believer with skeptical tendencies.” During investigative scenarios, he behaved accordingly. Other elements of his identity also traveled from cyberspace to investigations. For example, online, he presented himself as a “caring type,” emphasizing on several occasions (in several different forums) that he was

7 This is a common form of identification among some investigators who want to have the “prestige” of an association with a research group for the purposes of securing investigations but do not want to join a team. Investigators in more traditional (plural) teams tend slightly to mock these teams of one. They often suggest that the individual leading a solo team simply cannot get along with other investigators and that his or her solo team should be taken as a warning sign.
pursuing a degree in counseling therapies and that he volunteered for the Samaritans.\(^8\) In investigations, he presented himself as acutely sensitive to the emotional needs of ghosts and humans alike.\(^9\)

For the most part investigators never pursued this, and did not appear concerned by their lack of familiarity with his “real identity,” meaning his name in his day-to-day activities, work, and education. They were content to refer to him as Tigris and include him on investigations. However, they eventually challenged his motives for maintaining this degree of anonymity, doing so on social grounds. Edna, an investigator in her late 50s who had interacted with him on several forums and through investigations with her team, told me that she suspected Tigris:

I suspect Tigris is on the prowl.\(^{10}\) Figures there are lots of pretty young girls in ghost hunting and he’ll just come along and take his pick. Don’t get me wrong; I think he is interested in investigating. I do. But I reckon there’s a bit of that kind of hope among a lot of men. They’re interested in ghosts and it doesn’t hurt that there are so many women! I bet our Tigris has a missus at home that knows naught about what he gets up to!\(^{11}\)

\(^8\) I do not mean to suggest that he was not, in fact, pursuing a degree in counseling therapies in his life; rather, I aim to emphasize that this was how he strategically chose to present himself to other investigators on forums.

\(^9\) This is not to say that investigators did not mock these tendencies. As one investigator explained, “he’s a bit much with his therapies and all. Bit cloying really.” Part of this critique rests on the presumed disjuncture between Tigris’ publicly enacted “caring” personality and his private/real life that might be devoid of these overstated caring tendencies.

\(^{10}\) By “on the prowl,” Edna meant that Tigris was interested in meeting women to date.

\(^{11}\) Missus, in this instance, refers to a wife or long-term female partner.
In this critique, Tigris’ motives for maintaining a distinctly ghost hunting identity are called into question; however, his ideological stances and legitimacy as an investigator, while periodically mocked, were not challenged as being different online and offline. 12

In some instances, when there appears to be an ideological disjuncture between an investigator’s performance of online identity and her or his investigative behavior, investigators do become explicitly critical. Such disjuncture does not please them. EGR members’ reactions to one such commenter demonstrate this. For about a year, a commenter using the name ghostboy1 had been actively participating in their online forums. He contributed to all of the open threads, sometimes more than once a day. He presented himself as a “skeptic,” and noted that he was highly skeptical of ghosts’ existence but “open to the possibility.” He often developed an antagonistic approach in dealing with users who identified themselves as “believers.” There are several regular threads on EGR’s forum (as well as most other forums) where users post digital pictures, typically in jpeg format, of what they think may be ghosts. The aim of these posts is to generate discussion, debate and, ultimately, new insights into the veracity of these photographs. Most people who contribute to these debates are very polite, even if they doubt the validity of the picture as an indication of paranormal activity.

As Mark, an EGR team member who regularly responds to new posts of ghost pictures, explained to me, “I tell them what I honestly think and then I back off. Sometimes they’re convinced they have a picture of a ghost and, while I disagree, I don’t

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12 Eventually, Tigris’ legitimacy as an investigator was called into question but it was based primarily on his “questionable” performances of mediumship, possession, and paranormal knowledge.
want to upset them. I don’t see that as my role.” Mark’s approach is typical of most investigators, and it is the generally preferred approach.

In these threads, ghostboy1 adopted a very different approach. He was often combative and hostile in his critique of pictures. Even when it became apparent that the individual who posted the picture was unlikely to alter his or her stance on the legitimacy of the picture, ghostboy1 would continue to barrage him or her with criticism and links to “articles” that challenged the validity of the photos.13 As more than one EGR member noted, ghostboy1 eventually became something of a pest.14 After about a year of posting on the forum, ghostboy1 decided to join EGR during a public investigation. The team was somewhat nervous beforehand and joked about how crazy ghostboy1 might be in person. They also decided carefully which group to put him in during the actual investigation.

On the night of the investigation, everyone was shocked when ghostboy1, whose name turned out to be Jamie, introduced himself to the group. He was an unassuming, soft-spoken man in his mid-twenties. He was friendly to all of the team members. That these traits surprised investigators reveals the extent to which a continuity of online and offline identity and persona permeates their thinking and assumptions. Beyond his demeanor, his investigative behavior and stance did not reflect the adamant skepticism evident in his online postings. During the course of the investigation, ghostboy1/Jamie did not exhibit any of his trademark skepticism. He expressed seemingly genuine

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13 Linking to articles is a common practice in paranormal forums. What posters call “articles” varies hugely. This can include posts on someone’s personal blog, articles in newspapers or magazines, or descriptions on an investigator’s or team’s website.
14 I never had the chance to talk directly and in person with ghostboy1 about this. I met him on two occasions and spoke to him about interviewing him, but he avoided arranging a meeting date with me.
admiration for the technology used by investigations and exhibited a willingness to interpret and accept relatively small events (e.g. small noises) as indications of ghosts.

This disjuncture led to significant discussion after the investigation. When I talked about the investigation the next afternoon with Jack and Rose, Jack remarked:

I’d like to bloody kill him when he gets going like that [his aggressive online postings]. At first, I just assumed you know he was a troll. And I kept an eye on him. But he seemed sincere enough so I didn’t ban him. But I couldn’t believe it when I saw him at an invo [investigation]! He acts like he’s this big skeptic on the computer and then at that investigation, he was on about every bloody thing being a ghost! [Laughing]

Jack found the disjuncture highly amusing, although he was not impressed with ghostboy1/Jamie. Rose was more concerned by the disjuncture. She remarked that it was a “bit of a game to them,” meaning ghostboy1/Jamie and others like him. She called into question the legitimacy of his online skeptical persona as well as his seemingly real-life belief.

In other cases, investigators remarked on and sometimes criticized disjuncture in others’ online performances, especially where they did not match their offline practice. For instance, Harry and Ginny, who were the de-facto leaders of their own paranormal investigation team, often worked and collaborated with members of EGR both online and in real life. Jack’s performance and management of online/offline identity often frustrated them. In offline encounters and conversations, Jack presented himself as a skeptical investigator, meaning that he thought it was possible that paranormal phenomena existed but that he did not accept many of the more popular pieces of evidence such as orbs or
spirit photographs. Online, he failed to discourage people from sharing pictures of orbs and embracing them as “proof” of the paranormal and often responded harshly to commenters who he perceived as overly critical or harsh toward “believers.” Harry and Ginny found these deeply disingenuous. As Harry explained, “if he thinks something, really thinks it, why not just come out and say it? I don’t get why he says one thing in person and then another online. I don’t understand mucking about like that.”

These questions of the virtuality or realness of online and offline identity, and of continuity or disjuncture between online and offline identities, have been at the heart of much anthropological and sociological discussion of the Internet. These forums occupy an interesting middle space between what Tom Boellstorff has described as “virtual spaces” and other forms of online networking. As Boellstorff notes, “not all new technologies are virtual” (2008: 237). This is the case for the various forms of online networking among ghost hunters and investigators. Its non-virtual nature is what enables and engenders the forms of offline behavior that ensue: investigations, conferences, and meet-ups. The play and discord that Tom Boellstorff describes between the actual and the virtual in interaction in Second Life was absent in paranormal forums and discussion boards.

As Philip Agre aptly noted in 1999, “so long as we focus on the limited areas of the Internet where people engage in fantasy play that is intentionally disconnected from their real-world identities, we miss how social and professional identities are continuous across several media, and how people use those several media to develop their identities in ways that carry over to other settings” (1999: 4). This productive and enabling quality that Agre identified in online and offline identity construction is of central importance to
investigators. In fact, a stable performance of identity, particularly the negotiation of the identity-based continuum of skeptic/believer is key to paranormal investigators both with respect to online/offline performances of identity and the performance of identity in explicit discussions/investigations. The expectation of continuity is important because users interested in the paranormal see the Internet as a “generative” space, not one of “virtuality.” To them, it is a site of concrete networking, planning, and solidarity. As Boellstorff argued, “in the age of techné, human craft can – for the first time – create new worlds for human sociality” (2008: 236). For ghost hunters and investigators, the Internet acts as just that – a space capable of generating new modes of sociality, albeit a sociality that transcends the exclusively virtual.

Scholars have noted that the Internet enables the emergence of new forms of intimacy, particularly romantic intimacy (Valentine 2006) and fan-based community (Baym 2000; Stenger 2006). “The Internet,” Valentine writes, “provides a space for those traditionally excluded from public space” (2006: 378). This seems quite parallel here. Investigators are among those who understand their interests as marginal or not traditionally mainstream. While organizations such as the SPR or the Ghost Club have existed since the nineteenth century, they are geographically and culturally remote from many contemporary investigators. Their regular meetings are typically based in London and their members are more typically professional and upper class. For investigators, Internet-based chat rooms, discussion forums, and websites become a transformative space for actualizing their interest in ghosts and their nascent identities as investigators.
Knowledge, Expertise, and the Internet

In 2003 Peter Walsh aptly noted that “there is something about the Web that makes the idea of the expert seem withered, even disreputable or laughable” (2003: 365). While he doubts that the Internet is capable of completely destroying what he calls the expert paradigm – constellations of expertise that abound in our society—he does suggest that it will “continue to alter existing paradigms, to push them in new directions and into new forms, just as the printing press did in the past” (2003: 371). One such new direction, I would add, is that the Internet enables the emergence of new forms of popular expertise.

This clearly applies to paranormal investigators. For them, the Internet also acts as a mechanism for the dispersal of information about paranormal investigating. A broad range of popular books focusing on “how to ghost hunt” has been published in recent years. Yet, websites and forums remain key places where investigators and ghost hunters verse themselves in the technologies, techniques, and theories that inform their work.

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw the publication of a number of new titles in ghost hunting; however, few investigators seem concerned with their content.15 Examples include How to Hunt Ghosts: A Practical Guide (2003) by Joshua Warren, How to Be a Ghost Hunter (2003) by Richard Southall, and The Weiser Field Guide to Ghosts, Apparitions, Spirits, Spectral Lights, and Other Hauntings of History and Legend (2009) by Raymond Buckland. Investigators typically do not concern themselves with this emerging and ever growing body of published literature. For example, during a visit to a well known haunted Castle, I perused the gift shop, which featured numerous recent publications of hauntings and investigating. I was with two of

15 Participants on commercial ghost hunts were the main people I met who seemed to have seriously read these guides.
my closest investigator friends. As I prepared to buy several of these books, both friends expressed surprise and skepticism. One noted, “it’s a waste of money.” This attitude was not uncommon. Often, investigators questioned the expertise of the authors. One investigator commented to me, “what have they done to qualify them to write this? It seems silly. I could probably write one of these myself, if I wasn’t so lazy.” While they might applaud the evident ambition in writing a guide and publishing it, investigators typically questioned the authors’ qualifications and expertise.

During interviews and conversations, I regularly asked investigators and ghost hunters how they knew the things they did about ghosts and investigating. Typically, they cited “the Internet” as the source of their knowledge, rather than books, magazine articles, or even television programs. It took some prodding from me to begin to unearth which websites, blogs, and forums investigators considered to be useful repositories of information. For example, in the following exchange, Ian, an investigator who had participated in forums and read websites broadly before becoming a member of EGR described his research process for me with much hedging and hesitation:

 **MH:** How did you start to learn about paranormal research?

 **I:** Well, aside from obvious things, when I actually started to be serious about it, I started to read. I’ve always been a big reader.

 **MH:** What kinds of things did you read?

 **I:** Articles about different elements of it and the like.

 **MH:** Where did you find the information to read?

 **I:** Mostly on the computer I guess.

 **MH:** What exactly did you find yourself reading?
I: Articles about the science of it, about methods and the technology you can use.

It’s good stuff. I can send you some links if you want.

After this exchange, Ian did email me a series of links. The links largely led to general articles on the websites of local investigation groups, such as EGR or IP. I note here how important it is that the groups be local. Most would-be-investigators understand investigating as an ideally active, participatory activity, so they (for the most part) tend to enmesh themselves in localized groups. That these groups may include contributors who are embedded in their offline social networks may also contribute to a sense of ease in the community.\(^\text{16}\) Ian is not alone in turning to these articles as a source of authoritative knowledge about investigating and ghosts. Many other investigators and ghost hunters referenced such work to me in conversations and interviews, and they tended to link to it in the course of online discussions about method or theory.

One of the most telling characteristics of such sources is that they are typically anonymous (or at least not explicitly authored or claimed by an author). I have explored this in various ways and have decided that it is not an accident. These articles typically do not contain extended discussions of underlying assumptions, rationales, or research activities that inform them, and some of this may be due to their brevity. Indeed, many bear a striking resemblance to the type of text and context understood by Bruno Latour (1987), Latour and Steve Woolgar (1986), Thomas Kuhn (1962), Gregory Myers (1992), Sharon Traweek (1988), and Mary Smyth (2001) as producing “facts” and circulating such facts, namely, textbooks, educational settings, and religious settings. Perhaps

\(^{16}\) It was not uncommon for members who met online and later offline to learn that they shared friends, acquaintances, or colleagues in their offline networks.
ironically my study shows that the Internet (broadly writ) constitutes another such context for the production and contestation of facts, non-hegemonic as these facts may be. For ghost hunters and paranormal investigators, it acts as an important site and repository of knowledge they consider reliable.

Interestingly, online (re)presentation of paranormal knowledge often takes a form Latour calls “positive modalities.” A positive modality, he wrote, is a “sentence that leads a statement away from its conditions of production, making it solid enough to render some other consequences necessary” (Latour 1987: 23). Latour understood that positive modalities can be understood as autonomous facts that are perceived as valid enough to enable further action by providing building blocks for future inquiry. Scientific textbook writing relies primarily on the deployment of positive modalities that result in the emergence of a strong, fact-based representation of the scientific enterprise (Latour 1987).

The online representation of ghost hunting knowledge, then, is not different in key ways. It really does often take the form of Latour’s “positive modalities.” However, the modes of repetition that these positive modalities take vary from those of scientific facts. Indeed, the “facts” of ghost hunting often appear verbatim on various websites. From browsing through the popular English ghost hunting websites, I noticed striking commonalities in their articles and their contents. Most descriptions of technology are indistinguishable. Many sites feature articles of varying titles but identifiable content. For example, several sites feature an article titled “Ghost Hunting Mistakes.” This article warns against the “most common” mistakes in ghost hunting. It appears on at least four
sites with only minor variation. Consider the case of expository descriptions of paranormal investigating technology, in this case the EMF reader.

**Website A**

“EMF Detector: These are great! EMF Detectors can pick up electronic fields over different frequencies. Where there are ghosts there are usually disruptions in the electronic field. They are relatively cheap ranging from £15 upwards. You should try to get a hold of one or more of these for all field work. As a guide line each person in your group should have one on hand.”

**Website B**

“Emf Meter:- Aside from a camera (digital or film), the most basic tool for a ghost hunter is the EMF meter. When ghostly activity takes place, electromagnetic anomalies often occur in the environment. These meters can allow you to detect these disturbances.”

**Website C**

EMF Readers – Pick up electronic fields over different frequencies. Ghosts and other paranormal activity often disrupt the electronic field.

**Website D**

EMF Detector: - The most basic tool in any ghost hunter’s kit. When ghosts appear, electronic disruptions follow.

While, in the instances above, the exact same wording is not used to describe the EMF reader, there are marked similarities among them. For example, the phrase “pick up electronic fields over different frequencies” appears in both Website C and Website A.
Such sites engender a canon of sorts or, put differently, a collection of positive modalities. These online definitions inform the ways in which investigators and ghost hunters perform and articulate their expertise in person as well as online.

In a sense, investigators and ghost hunters engage in what others might consider acts of plagiarizing. I propose thinking of these not as acts of plagiarizing but, rather, of fact-production. Indeed, the practice of “borrowing” the text and content of others’ ideas, often verbatim, and reposting them, bears a striking resemblance to the practices of fact-building found in textbooks and education.

I talked to Jack, my friend who largely ran the EGR website about this practice.

We discussed the practice of copying from other sites.

MH: I’ve noticed that some of the articles on your page are sometimes the same as those on other pages.

J: Yeah.

MH: Maybe this is a stupid question but why don’t you cite where you got the articles?

J: Well…uh… some of them are my own. Or Rose’s. Or Ian’s. I don’t know why I don’t include that. (Laughs.) But others, I got them from other sites, sure, but I don’t think those people wrote them either. I’ve no clue who wrote them. I guess I wouldn’t know who to say wrote them. But, to be honest, it never crossed my mind.

MH: It doesn’t bother you when someone posts one of the articles you’ve written and doesn’t give you any credit?

J: Nah. They do all the time. I can’t be bothered.
As Jack’s comments suggest, these practices are unremarkable to most members of the ghost hunting community, underlining the degree to which the Internet acts as a repository and site of knowledge. ¹⁷

The prevalence of the Internet as a knowledge-building recourse is underlined further in the critiques and struggles that investigators face when dealing with mediums and their claims. Indeed, when mediums present knowledge that is “google-able,” investigators often treat such claims with deep suspicion, worrying that they are indications of fraud. This concern is somewhat understandable given the ubiquity of the Internet in their own understandings of how to investigate and research. In essence, the Internet enabled the emergence of a body of popular facts in ghost hunting by providing a space for the publication and proliferation of these authorless and highly circulated texts.

The case of the emergence of lay expert paranormal investigators affirms Carr’s assertion that “expertise is something people do rather than something people have or hold” (2010:18). For investigators, recourse to online bodies of knowledge helps to establish the skills and knowledge base necessary to assume the role of expert in the field of investigating. ¹⁸ As I have explained, the act of reading sites and forums is instrumental in enabling people to craft an identity as investigators. The act of reading discussions of investigative technology, theory, and methods is also key in crafting their expertise as

¹⁷ The case that I am making here about the production of paranormal knowledge on the Internet might also apply to published guides to ghost hunting. These guides rarely cite any other guides or scholarly resources; however, they produce nearly identifiable claims about investigating.
¹⁸ This is not to say that their role as expert is uncontested. Indeed, parapsychologists and psychical researchers typically are deeply concerned by the rise of ghost hunters’ and investigators’ expertise. However, such concerns rarely register with the ghost hunting public.
Conclusion

The Internet, as a technology that has generated countless new forms of sociality, is instrumental to the project of paranormal investigating. Without online networking, it is almost inconceivable that paranormal investigators would have emerged as a collectivity of experts. More importantly and, perhaps more surprisingly, the online nature of investigators’ and would-be-investigators’ engagement has enabled them to craft and establish a body of facts, or positive modalities, along the lines of what orthodox scientists share in textbooks while also providing an ever-expanding venue capable of facilitating theory-building and new creative ventures. In this context, these online ventures have obscured the significance of traditional modes of dispensing scientific or popular knowledge, namely, books, journals, and magazines.

Collins and Evans argued in 2002 that the next wave of science studies must focus on extensions of expertise and experience. My study argues strongly for closer attention to the modalities of knowing, the innovations in citational practices, and forms of social networking generated by online communication. Online spaces have provided paranormal investigators with a framework to articulate a repertoire of knowledge, facts, and theories that are distinctly their own, disparate from “orthodox science,” parapsychology, and psychical research.
CHAPTER TEN
LAUGHING IN THE FACE OF RATIONALITY: EXAMINING THE HUMOR OF PARANORMAL INVESTIGATORS

It is obvious that paranormal investigating is a matter of serious importance to participants, but it is also true that investigations and conversations among investigators typically entail lighthearted exchanges and deeply humorous instances of storytelling. In this chapter, I want to examine paranormal investigators’ comedic engagement with what might be considered the more farfetched or absurd elements of investigating.

I will show here that the humor that emerges in paranormal investigating results from the contrast between two frames of interpretation of ghost hunting: (1) investigators’ own understanding of the acts of ghost hunting as logical, rational pathways necessary to uncover the realities of ghosts and (2) in contrast, the often mocking, skeptical interpretation of these very acts that finds them fundamentally irrational. The tension between these interpretations reveals a central ideological configuration that constrains and shapes the possibilities of paranormal investigating. In this chapter, I will draw on the two major theoretical veins in humor theory -- incongruity theory and aggression theory -- to analyze investigators’ humor.

Much anthropological analysis of humor has foregrounded the role of jokes and brevity in addressing social inequality and power. This inequality often takes the form of colonial relations (Basso 1979; McCullough 2008; Redmond 2008), gendered relations (Alexeyeff 2008; Seizer 1997; Yoshida 2001), the changes wrought by globalization (Alexeyeff 2008), class relations (Saltzman 1994), research relationships between
anthropologists and their interlocutors (Beckett 2008; Dwyer and Minnegal 2008; Rasmussen 1993). In many of these instances, humor works to configure or reconfigure social identities. The forms of humor that I examine here similarly contribute to the production of another form of identity, that of the paranormal investigator.

While many of these scholars have thought of humor as a contestation of powerlessness, this is not entirely the case with English paranormal investigators. Paranormal investigators’ humor functions as a way of aligning them with the dominant form of rationality in contemporary England. Indeed, rather than attempting to redefine rationality, their humor acts as a strategy for asserting their complicity in the dominant understanding of rationality. They demonstrate clearly that their endeavors are based on science and rationality, not belief.

The Role of Incongruity in the Construction of Humor

Theorists have argued that incongruity is a central component of the social and linguistic construction of humor. According to humor theorist Tony Veale “of the few sweeping generalizations one can make about humor that are neither controversial or trivially false, one is surely that humor is a phenomenon that relies on incongruity” (2004: 419). Indeed, within psychological, anthropological, and rhetorical examinations of humor, scholars agree that incongruity is nearly ubiquitous, and incongruity certainly plays a visible role in paranormal investigators’ humor. Here, I draw on Elliot Oring’s notion of appropriate incongruity as well as William Beeman’s stress on linguistic manipulation to make a point about the kind of humor that dominates humorous
conversations and performances among paranormal investigators. From Oring, I take the idea of appropriate incongruity, “the perception of an appropriate interrelationship among the elements from the domains that are generally regarded as incongruous” (Oring 1992: 2) and that humor results from the clash among, or discord in, the multiplicity of interpretations thus generated. From Beeman I take the idea that:

a communicative actor presents a message or other content material and contextualizes it within a cognitive “frame.” The actor constructs the frame through narration, visual representation, or enactment. He or she then suddenly pulls this frame aside, revealing one or more additional cognitive frames which audience members are shown as possible contextualizations or re-framings of the original content material. The tension between the original framing and the sudden reframing results [in humor] (2001: 103).

To paranormal researchers, the introduction and linguistic manipulation of multiple frames in telling and retelling events on investigations constitutes a powerful mechanism for examining, critiquing, and countering challenges to their project.

The Incongruity of Skepticism and Investigation

Consider the fact that during the course of interviews, investigations, and casual conversation, paranormal investigators shared many humorous stories with me. These stories typically pivoted around an incongruity between their engaged, committed participation in a research situation and what this commitment would look like from the perspective of an outsider.
Many of these stories are told and retold. On several occasions, Rose and Jack
told me a humorous story about one of their investigative experiences. They first told the
story to me during our first meeting and interview. In the story, their investigation team,
E.G.R., had the chance to spend the night at the Roman Baths in York for research. It was
a team-only night, although they had invited members of another local team. Members of
the group were engaged in a variety of activities. Jack and Rose settled into one area of
the Baths and began “calling out,” an activity in which investigators speak directly to any
present spirits and ask them to reply in some capacity.

   **Jack:** So, we’re sat there, calling out. Normal things. Is there anybody there?
   Are you a man? That sort of thing. And we start getting responses. These
   little knocks start coming so we’re excited--

   **Rose:** We’re dead excited. We’re really going for it. Asking all sorts of things.
   And it keeps knocking away, answering us.

   **Jack:** We’re thinking, this is great! Dead interesting. We’re finding out all of
   this information that we think we’re going to go look into after the
   investigation…

   **Rose:** Then, Sam comes up to us and says, “you know there’s a pipe that’s
   leaking over there.”

   [Pause]

   **Jack:** I go and have a look. The pipe is leaking. It’s making the taps we’d been
   talking to.

   **Rose:** We’d been sat there talking to a pipe! (Laughing)
**Jack:** For quite awhile. We’d been sat there maybe fifteen, twenty minutes talking to a pipe! (Laughing)

**Rose:** Ace investigators, we are! (Laughing)

Jack and Rose found this story deeply funny as did almost everyone else I observed when they told the story. The humor comes largely from the incongruity that emerges late in the story.

Consider this case using Beeman’s notion of frames. To him each humorous moment entails four stages: the setup, the paradox, the denouncement, and the release. In the case of the story above, the first frame is the typical paranormal investigative frame. During the first seven lines of the story, the narrative encourages listeners to assume, just as Jack and Rose assumed, that the narrators were engaged in routine acts of paranormal investigating. Indeed, Jack and Rose’s telling of the story encourages listeners to assume that the audible taps may be caused by ghosts or some other paranormal entity.

The incongruity is then introduced in line eight when Sam mentions that there is a leaking pipe. I consider this, following Beeman, the second stage, the paradox, involving “the creation of the additional frame or frames” (2001:103). Notice that another potential interpretation for the audible taps emerges. This calls into doubt the initial interpretation introduced in the first frame.

At this point, the denouncement, the third stage, emerges. Beeman observes that the “denouncement is the point at which the initial and subsequent frames are shown to coexist” (2001:103-104). Here the fleeting ambiguity regarding the cause of the taps acts
as the denouncement. The release, i.e. the resulting enjoyment or pleasure, results from this denouncement.

Understanding the source of humor here requires special attention to the conflict between the two frames that underpin the setup and the paradox, because this reveals an important and central tension in paranormal investigating and popular, skeptical interpretations of it. The typical logic of paranormal investigating guides the first frame: Jack and Rose attempt to engage paranormal or ghostly forces, question them, and embrace the results as potential evidence. While Jack, Rose, and other paranormal investigators consider such forms of inquiry as viable (if not entirely conclusive) mechanisms for exploring and learning about the paranormal, skeptics conceive of them in a very different light. Indeed, opaque references such as these to skeptical critiques inform much of paranormal humor.

Skeptics and their Humor

As I noted in earlier chapters, skeptics maintain a public presence intended to rival the proliferation of “irrational” forms of thought, such as those espoused by ghost researchers. At skeptical social events, such as TAM London or Skeptics in the Pub, self-identified skeptics parody investigators’ engagements and research attempts. Like paranormal knowledge producers, skeptics are a heterogeneous mix of people. John Jackson, on the website UKSkeptics, describes skepticism as a method, noting that skepticism is “a method” in which “the idea is to apply the rules of logic and reason with critical thinking skills in assessing claims or issues and to form conclusions based on evidence, not on personal preference or prejudice” (2007). As I noted in Chapter Four,
most self-identified skeptics thoroughly blur that line. However, Jackson’s emphasis on skepticism as an act of applying logic, reason, and critical reasoning characterizes much of how skeptics identify themselves while also implying how they see their illogical, unreasonable, and uncritical others, paranormal researchers among them.

Skeptics often point to incidents such as the one described by Jack and Rose as an indication of paranormal researchers’ faulty logic and questionable grasp of causality and science. A common critique leveled by skeptics against paranormal investigators is that they misinterpret common noises or sights and incorrectly interpret them as paranormal. In the story above, Jack and Rose’s initial interpretation of the taps could serve as evidence of investigators’ problematic understanding of the natural and built environment around them.

In fact, skeptics often engage in what humor theorists refer to as disparagement humor to deride the efforts of paranormal investigators. In fact, the very scenario depicted by Rose and Jack could provide fodder for skeptics’ humorous dismissals of investigators. For example, while I was waiting in line to attend TAM London, I chatted with several young skeptics. In the course of talking about how troubling and unbelievable they found the efforts of paranormal investigators and ghost hunters, skeptics often resorted to humor as a means of emphasizing their contempt for the intellectual project of paranormal investigating. One of them, Jay, a man in his twenties, recounted a story that sparked much laughter among the skeptical listeners. He had been

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1 Other targets of skeptical critique include mediums, who skeptics often conflate with paranormal researchers; alternative healers and medical practitioners; parapsychologists; and conspiracy theorists.
watching “one of those paranormal programs” when he observed the incident in
question.\(^2\) As he recounted:

it was bloody hilarious. A bunch of grown men are sat [sic] around in a dark room
in an old house talking to nothing. They think they’re hearing knocks and creaks
or what have you and they’re on about what spirit is talking to them. Bloody hell,
they’re in old house. It’s night! There’s wind! There are literally a thousand things
it could have been but they just knew it was ghosts.

Jay’s friends laughed at this with apparent pleasure. Revealingly, this humorous story
depicts a scene similar to the one recounted by Jack and Rose. Investigators observe
noises and incorrectly assume that a paranormal force produced them. In both narratives,
the first frame addresses the legitimacy of the paranormal interpretation. In Jay’s case,
the legitimacy of this interpretation is weakened by his narrative style, yet it remains
present. Similarly, in both narratives, the second frame and the ensuing humor (or
release) result from the incongruity between the first and second frames, in which it is
revealed that ghosts are not causing the noise.

The depiction of investigators found in Jay’s narrative corresponds to broader
skeptical depictions of investigators. The image that skeptics conjure of paranormal
investigators is a deeply magical one. Skeptics present investigators as trenchant

\(^2\) He did not specify which program he watched. There are several television programs
that air regularly in the U.K., such as *Most Haunted*, *Ghost Hunters International*, and
*T.A.P.S.* I am not at all sure that he was referencing a particular scene in a particular
program. Most people who are involved, even tangentially, in pursuing or critiquing
paranormal investigation are able to conjure stereotypical scenes such as these. To be
fair, such imaginings do bear a strong resemblance to some segments of paranormal
television programs; however, in most shows, the presenters and crew typically
acknowledge the possibility that “environmental factors,” like wind or creaky
floorboards, might contribute to sounds.
believers who misdiagnose simple, naturally occurring causalities, preferring to interpret them in magical ways that comply with their predetermined beliefs. Of course, such a representation is deeply at odds with how investigators see themselves. Skeptics consider the ascription or possibility of anything extraordinary underlying events to be nearly unthinkable.

When Jack and Rose choose to recount a humorous story that hinges on their misunderstanding of what is causing the tapping, they are taking a risk given the proliferation of critiques of ghost hunting that dismiss it on such grounds. On the other hand, Jack and Rose attempt to neutralize skeptical critiques of investigating by actively acknowledging and manipulating such periodic oversights. Jack and Rose’s comedic deployment of the second frame in this story directly addresses the critiques leveled by skeptics against paranormal researchers and attempts to neutralize them. By introducing the second frame and engaging with it playfully, Jack and Rose position paranormal investigating as a balanced field of inquiry that embraces a multiplicity of causalities for events, not simply, as their critics would posit, the ghostly explanation.

Importantly, in the denouncement of this narrative, Jack and Rose (the narrators and actors in the narrative) realize and accept the second frame as valid and probably correct. They gladly accept dripping water as a likely cause for the taps they had initially interpreted as paranormal. Ultimately, Jack and Rose demonstrate their legitimacy as researchers and attempt to defy skeptical depictions of investigators by demonstrating their willingness to accept a plurality of causes and acknowledge their own mistakes. Rose’s joking statement, “Ace investigators, we are!” acts as a means of dismissing their mistake and acknowledging their fallibility. That they can laugh at their oversight
demonstrates their self-awareness. Their capacity to understand and maintain a degree of self-awareness regarding their fallibility demonstrates their objectivity and their capacity to bridge skepticism and serious queries into the extraordinary.

Jack and Rose’s deployment of the incongruity of causes allows them to deflect skeptical critiques. They tentatively position these two poles – extraordinary event and rational, even skeptical, thought – as reconcilable. Such reconciliation points to some of the transgressive work implicit in paranormal investigating, namely, the reconciliation of an enchanted world with scientific reasoning and methodology that many see as banishing the potential for such enchantments.

Disparagement and Identity

Both the story of the dripping pipe and the story of the foolish television investigators include caustic, defensive edges. In the more clear-cut case of Jay’s recounting of the silly television program, the caustic edge is very clearly directed at investigators. In Jack and Rose’s story, there is an obvious defensive reaction to critiques of investigators’ rationality and an attempt to manage it. Indeed, these stories might constitute what humor theorists have labeled disparagement humor.

Mark Ferguson and Thomas Ford explain that disparagement humor “refers to remarks that (are intended to) elicit amusement through the denigration, derogation, or belittlement of a given target (e.g., individuals, social groups, political ideologies)” (2008: 283). Sigmund Freud (1905) referred to this type of humor as “tendentious” humor, meaning humor that had a specific purpose, observing that “by making our enemy small, inferior, despicable, or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of
overcoming him” (1905: 103). For Freud, this type of humor typified the hostile impulses contained in much, if not all, humor.

Many humor theorists have linked disparagement humor to notions of superiority and identity formation. Both approaches offer insights into the management of humor by investigators and skeptics. Scholars emphasizing the role of constructed superiority in humor (Gunner 1997; Willis 1981) have suggested that amusement emerges from “enhancement of self-esteem derived from a downward social comparison” (Ferguson and Ford 2008: 288).

Considering the story of the leaking pipe is more complicated. Contributing to understandings of enactments of superiority in disparagement humor, Wolff et al. (1934) argued that individuals and groups were more likely to derive enjoyment or find humor in the denigration of individuals and groups not associated with them.\(^3\) Jack and Rose’s story, while poking fun at their initial oversight in failing to identify the source correctly, avoids an act of self-disparagement. While Jack and Rose allow themselves to appear silly and overly hasty to assume that the taps were paranormal in origin, by the conclusion of the narrative they had more than willingly accepted the more orthodox understanding of what had happened – namely the dripping pipe had caused the taps.

Interestingly, both stories focus on belief, believing, and believers. To Jay, the willingness of investigators to consider a paranormal cause demonstrates that they are entrenched believers. To Jack and Rose, their own willingness to consider (and accept)

\(^3\) Notably, they emphasized that it was difficult to predict which groups would find what forms of disparagement humor particularly funny. This is due, in part, to the complicated social relationships among groups.
multiple possible understandings of taps shows that they are open-minded. It also refutes their status as dogmatic believers.

Most investigators would understand Jack’s and Rose’s willingness to consider multiple possibilities when encountering taps, both paranormal and mundane, as indications that they were not entrenched in a particular “belief system” regarding the paranormal and that, ultimately, they were good investigators. In paranormal investigation terms, they would appear neither as “believers in the paranormal” nor as “believers in science.” Rather, they drew conclusions based on available evidence and reconsidered them when necessary. In the narrative, they appear “open-minded,” a trait highly valued by members of the paranormal investigating community. Investigators often emphasized the importance of “open-mindedness” in conversations about critical, especially skeptical, responses to paranormal research. As Harry, an investigator who embraced scientific research and professionally worked in a biotechnology laboratory, observed, “science is great. It makes huge innovations all the time. Of course, we should pay attention to it. The thing is that it doesn’t know everything yet. I think it’s good to push, to be open-minded. A lot of ghost hunting is absolute rubbish but so what? I think it’s better to be open-minded.” Harry’s comments rang true about investigators valuing “open-mindedness.”

Investigators realize that their brand of “open mindedness” has pitfalls, namely, that it has the very real potential to lead them into possibly silly or ridiculous circumstances and, yet, they engage this with humor. A well-known psychical researcher,

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4 This is not to say that skeptics do not refute these understandings and valuations of “open-mindedness,” as I discussed in Chapter Four. In much the way that investigators reinterpret the term skeptic, skeptics alleged that investigators’ definition of open-mindedness is a misnomer.
John, routinely and often publicly recounts an instance of open-mindedness that paints him in a very silly light. Rather than allowing this to varnish his image, he repositions his misstep as an indication of his seriousness and open-mindedness. John, a well-known researcher in his early 40s who completed a Ph.D. in psychology, often lectures at paranormal conferences with his colleague, Jeff, who is pursuing postgraduate study in parapsychology. I observed him tell this story at two paranormal research gatherings.

**John:** I was 16 or 17 when I first decided to become an investigator. I had read some books and I decided that the best course of action was to post signs in my village to see if anyone had anything they wanted me to investigate. [The audience laughs.] I know! I was very enthusiastic to get started. So, it’s pretty late one night and I get a phone call. This was before the days of email and I actually put my family’s phone number on the signs, can you believe that? [The audience laughs.] So, I get this call. The man calling says that the Flying Dutchman is heading up his street and he sounds really concerned and sort of out of it so I race over to his house.⁵

**Jeff:** I’m sorry, John, but I’ve got to interrupt you for a minute. [The audience laughs.] The Flying Dutchman? [Audience and John laugh.]

**John:** I know!

**Jeff:** Didn’t you grow up near Coventry? [Audience laughs.]

**John:** I did. [Audience laughs.]

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⁵ The Flying Dutchman is a very famous ghost ship that is unable to dock. It dates back in folklore to the 18th century. Novels, poems, and operas often depicted stories about it. In 20th and 21st century sightings, it is typically depicted as a collection of eerie lights moving in the form of a ship.
Jeff: And you thought the *Flying Dutchman* was coming up the road there?

[Audience laughs.]

John: (Laughingly) I thought I should at least check it out.

Jeff: All right. Go on then. [Audience laughs.]

John: I get to the house and knock on the door. Something strange does seem to be happening. Everyone inside is pissed or high. [Audience laughs.]

Jeff: So, no Flying Dutchman that night?

John: [Laughingly] No, not that night. [Audience laughs.]

John went on to comment on the story, noting that it was good to take each claim seriously even if, as in the case above, it amounted to nothing. The source of humor in John’s narrative was clearly his gullibility. The audience first laughed when he recounted that as a teenager he was willing to publicize his family’s phone number in order to pursue investigations. Among all of the comedic releases in this narrative, this instance of humor has the least to do with investigating. Indeed, the incongruity here emerges from comparing youthful understandings of confidentiality in the 1970s with the necessarily more nuanced understandings needed in the twenty-first century world of online communication.

The other instances of humor, however, result from John’s willingness to trust the anonymous caller’s assertion that the Flying Dutchman was present in a village near Coventry. Part of the humor stems from John’s uncritical acceptance of the report that a ghost ship unable to make port was present in a village near Coventry. Given that Coventry is significantly inland and that the Dutchman is typically considered to be a
seafaring vessel, it seemed unlikely to the audience that the ship would be spotted in its ghost form in or near Coventry.

Despite these humorous incongruities, John does not emerge as a pitiful character in these narratives. Indeed, since he is telling this story, it is unlikely that he would tell it if there was not a redeeming element to it. While John willingly showed himself as gullible and overly trusting at the beginning of the narrative, by its conclusion, he has shown that he is not overly or entirely gullible. By then, we learn that he visited the household that reported seeing the Flying Dutchman, and that he quickly realized that drunken people had summoned him. By acknowledging this, he demonstrates that open-mindedness is not the same as gullibility. As he later emphasized in commenting on this story, it is “important to take claims seriously… until you can prove them wrong,” even if this query was a waste of time.

Humorous depictions such as this inscribe open-mindedness with a certain morality. Investigators are trusting and willing to take all claims seriously, even if they sacrifice their own dignity in doing so. This understanding of open-mindedness, complete with its emphasis on discounting illegitimate claims as part of being open-minded, starkly contrasts with skeptical depictions of investigators.

The Relational Rational Self

Paranormal investigators’ humor nearly always incorporates references to others. Although these others are not typically specified, I see links to skeptics and their discourse. In a frequently enacted genre of paranormal humor, the storyteller introduces an unknown, hypothetical observer into a paranormal investigation. This typically entails
an observation such as, “what would someone think if they saw this?” or “can you imagine what a stranger would thing?” Examining the identity of the stranger offers an important insight into the production of ghost hunting self-identification.

During a conversation with Sharon, an investigator in her late 40s, such a narrative emerged. Sharon and I were sitting in a coffee shop in Wakefield on a Sunday morning talking about her weekend paranormal investigation. She and four other members of her group had carried out a semi-legal investigation of a decrepit, abandoned hospital on the outskirts of their town with a reputation for paranormal activity. They had arrived well after nightfall and parked their cars about a mile up the road from the hospital to avoid arousing the suspicion of the local authorities. They walked the mile to the hospital in the dark, climbed over a fence, and then set about investigating. Sharon explained that the group did the “normal things.” They called out to potential ghosts, asking them to make the team aware of their presence; the team’s medium wandered around and collected a variety of psychic impressions of the building; and they used their electromagnetic readers to detect any unusual electromagnetic energy. During the night they heard several noises that they found difficult to explain and they considered them potentially paranormal in nature. Around 3 a.m., they began to hear clear footsteps approaching them. They stood very still and listened. Then, one of the members panicked and yelled, “leg it!” He began to run out of the hospital. Sharon and the other two followed. They raced across the field toward the fence and hurled themselves over it as quickly as possible. For Sharon, it was too quick and she lost her footing and fell flat out in the mud. She laughed nearly uncontrollably when she told me this story.
“Can you imagine, at my age, being out in an abandoned hospital running away from footsteps? Can you imagine what anyone would have thought if they could have seen us? What a team of crack investigators we are!” She erupted into another fit of laughter. The image that Sharon conjured was comical in its absurdity and I joined her in laughing at her adventure.

In Sharon’s story, the source of the footsteps is never specified. Indeed, the incongruity in her story is more general than specific. The first frame in the narrative—that is that she and her team were investigating—is called into question not by a mistake but, rather, by her introducing an external, general perspective. In the second frame, the denouncement and the release, to use Beeman’s terms, result from an unspecified other’s gaze.

This tendency to imagine, speculate and, ultimately, find humor in unspecified others’ critical gaze marks much of paranormal investigative humor. During the course of multiple investigations, it was common for an investigator to ask, “can you imagine if someone saw us?” Such questions consistently elicited laughter from all of the present participants. For example, during a small group investigation at Chillingham Castle, Harry and Ginny were interested in conducting a series of sensory experiments in two reportedly haunted places in the Castle, in the “torture room” and by the “hanging tree.” For these experiments, Harry and Ginny dressed one participant in either soundproof earphones or a blindfold, left the other one with all of his or her senses, and left them both in the haunted space alone for 30 minutes. They were interested in comparing the embodied, sensory experiences of people with a full range of sensing and those with a limited range. I participated as a subject in one of these experiments. Ginny and Harry
left me and Rose by the hanging tree for 30 minutes at 3 a.m. I spent the 30 minutes blindfolded. When Harry and Ginny returned to end the experiment and interview us about our experiences, Ginny asked us if we “imagine what people would say if they could see us… Especially you, Michele!” This elicited enormous laughter from the participants, including me. The humor here resulted from subjecting what was a well-thought out act of investigating to the gaze of uninitiated others.

Sharon’s narrative and Ginny’s reaction to the deprivation experiments raise an important question: Why are investigators so often concerned with the perspective of imagined others? Furthermore, who are these others? The answer is, I believe, twofold. There is a general other and a specific other. The general other is anyone who might misunderstand or misconstrue the (often seemingly odd) behavior of investigators out of genuine misunderstanding. The skeptic embodies the other, the more specific, hostile other. The act of imagining critics in the act of observing them allows investigators to articulate the ideological constraint that curtails much of investigating. This figure of the skeptical other actively misconstrues and denigrates the activities of investigators. And yet I suspect that investigators are less concerned with actual skeptics than with a constant nagging sense that what they are doing is somehow illegitimate. It emerges in their humor and inability to convert their embodied experiences into a form of trustworthy evidence in the course of investigations.

Investigators themselves were uncharacteristically un-reflective about who these others might be. When I tried to talk with Ginny about the source of this humor on several occasions she had difficulty identifying the others or mechanisms of humor. In response to my question about these humorous incidents, she observed:
I don’t know who the who is. I think it’s that… well… I don’t know! People who don’t know what we’re doing would think we’re mad to be out in the middle of the night like this messing about in torture rooms with deprivation and all. 

[Laughs.] We would seem like nutters. Then, there are people who do try to take the piss [make fun of] what we do. I guess that’s it.

As Ginny’s comments demonstrate, she is aware of two varieties of others: the benignly ignorant others who might not understand what investigators were doing and the hostile others who seek to mock or denigrate investigators. The common thread here is that both have the potential to cast investigators in a negative light. Indeed, by submitting, even hypothetically, to the surveillance of others, investigators call into question the legitimacy of their actions. The gaze of external others calls into question their rationality, seriousness, and even sanity.

Ginny, Harry, and Sharon’s invocation of the gaze of an external other can be understood as acts of self-effacing humor. Freud argued that such forms of humor must be considered tendentious humor, explaining that “a particularly favorable occasion for tendentious jokes is presented when the intended rebellious criticism is directed against the subject himself, or, to put it more cautiously, against someone in whom the subject has a share – a collective person” (1905: 11). In his essay “On Narcissism,” Freud (1914) expanded further on the role of humor, arguing that self-effacing/self-directed humor was a way for the more advanced, mature self to laugh at the “primitive,” immature self. Humor that targets the speaker, Freud argued, was a means of punishing the self in hopes of appeasing the critical (and, ultimately, correctly critical) other. To Freud, this was an adaptation allowing the self to laugh at itself while simultaneously releasing dread and
anger. Freud was not alone in seeing this link. Samuel Juni and Bernard Katz, for example, invoking him in 2001 noted that “within the humiliation and apparent masochism…there is an uncanny sense of control and an attempt to seduce the perceived aggressor to accept the self-inflicted punishment as adequate punishment” (2001: 120-121).

Without fully embracing the entirety of Freud’s association of humor and masochism, I cite Freud here because I consider his approach productive in allowing for the possibility that investigators’ humor might reveal a very real, central tension. This is tension they experience in approaching their work as investigators, namely, that they acknowledge the gaze of those who doubt them. Such invocations of “what they would think” act as aggressive defenses against real or imagined critiques, rather than as mechanisms for punishing investigators. That investigators consistently experience the need to engage in such defenses, however, points to a central tension in their lives and work.

As I noted earlier, theorists have argued that one of the functions of humor is the formation and solidification of collective social identities. Scholars who have observed humor in workplace settings have noted that humor acts to solidify solidarity and ease tension. Owen Lynch is one of them. He writes “that in-group humor is a means in which organizational members organize and (re) produce both their self identity and labor practices and process” (2010:155). In thinking about investigators, I believe that the humor of imagining an external other observing their practices plays a role in solidifying their identities as rational, daring investigators. This is the more productive element of their humor.
More broadly, this tendency toward self-effacing humor points to investigators’ persistent self-doubt. Their regular references to being observed by critical outsiders and the humor that ensues reveal a simmering sense of insecurity in their project. This insecurity also appears elsewhere -- for instance, in the problems they have making sense of their own embodied encounters—but it is clear in the humor, too. A sense of rationality that excludes their endeavors seems to haunt the investigators.

Performing and Internalizing Rationality

While I have focused on investigators’ deployment of humor in their stories, not all humor unfolds in articulated narratives. As Mady Schutzman reminds us, “humor itself is a performative trope” (2006: 283). Investigators engage in a variety of humorous performances. Like their narrative humor, these humorous performances act as a means for investigators to preempt and dismantle potential critiques, especially of their intellect, reason, and project of investigating.

One such instance occurred during an investigation at Chillingham Castle. Ginny and Harry organized a large group of friends and colleagues from assorted investigating groups to spend three nights investigating the notoriously haunted castle. Ginny and Harry prided themselves on their scientific approach to investigating. The night in question had been a quiet night plagued by problems outside their control. The people managing the castle limited the group’s access to desirable interiors such as the torture chamber. This frustrated the group considerably. At around 4 a.m., five of us found ourselves gathered in the living room of our rented apartment. We were all watching the
four CCTV cameras that monitored the interior of the apartment in which we were staying.

Ginny had a sudden burst of energy. She turned to me and asked if I wanted to see something. I tentatively said I did. She said laughingly that she would show me some orbs. As I mentioned briefly in an earlier chapter, orbs are among the most contested and scorned phenomena in all forms of paranormal research. To recap, enthusiasts identify orbs as little balls of light in photographs, and some even consider them to be the condensed souls or energy of a spirit. Yet all skeptics and parapsychologists, and nearly all paranormal investigators and psychical researchers alike, dismiss orbs as nothing more than dust or moisture particles that reflect the flash of a camera or some other source of light. They accuse individuals who consider orbs meaningful of lacking a thorough understanding of the underlying causes of these balls of light. More specifically, investigators consider belief in orbs an indication that someone was a ghost hunter rather than an investigator. Among the investigators I knew, in fact, Ginny and Harry were among its most outspoken critics, so Ginny’s comment had quite an edge.

Clearly the context that night was nuanced and layered. After confirming that everyone in the group was interested in seeing orbs, Ginny left the living room and went to her bedroom. She took a pillow from the room and then went and stood in front of one of the cameras. She waved exaggeratedly at us and then ducked off screen. From where we were sitting, we could hear the sound of her hitting the pillow. Soon, little orbs appeared on one of the CCTV screens. She yelled up the stairs to us that she would get “some colored orbs” for us as well. She returned with a pink sweater that she hit and produced dust particles that appeared on screen as orbs.
Harry and the other investigators present found this performance highly amusing. When Ginny returned, she declared triumphanty that she had shown me some orbs. She and the others laughed quite a bit. This segued into a discussion of the foolishness of ascribing meaning to orbs.

In this performance, Ginny actively played with frames of interpretation. The appearance of the orbs was obviously staged. In her obvious staging of the orbs, she demonstrated her ability to identify chains of events correctly. She also implicitly indexed ghost hunters’ inability to do so. In the process, she mocked their use of technology. By showing that she could manipulate a camera to produce what they would take as “evidence,” she demonstrated the partiality and fallibility of technology—something she and other investigators tend to think ghost hunters’ do not understand.

I do not consider the timing of this performance coincidental. While no one in the room had questioned or challenged Ginny’s legitimacy as an investigator or accused her of misinterpreting causalities, I suspect that the encounters with the Castle management earlier in the night had reminded her of the sometimes hostile or mocking public perception of investigating. The “someone” of the imagine-if-someone-saw-us trope had become the castle’s management staff. While the staff did not question the rationality of investigators, they did not treat their desires to conduct experiments in the middle of the night as warranting unlimited access to the castle. Many in the group perceived them as dismissive of them and their project. The castle staff came to represent all external criticisms – both real and imagined.

In this instance, the self-doubt and internalized anxiety are evident. It is clear to me that investigators, who often seek to distance themselves from skeptics and other
popular discourses that constitute science in heroic terms, still internalize the elements of a hegemonic view of science. They equate the ability to identify chains of causality correctly as a chief component of rationality. Each of the ethnographic vignettes I have examined in this chapter includes this premise.

The performance at the Castle that night struggled to legitimize investigating by demonstrating their ability to identify chains of causality correctly. Ginny’s own performance both distanced investigators from ghost hunters and reaffirmed the validity of criticisms directed at investigators. Her performance realigned investigators by making them the ones to voice the criticism rather than receive them. Her performance further dispersed dominant understandings of rationality.

Conclusion

Rose and Jack first told me the story of the leaking pipe during our first interview together. In the course of initial meetings and interviews with investigators, many shared humorous depictions of their work with me. These stories were often repeated during the course of public events or when they met people who might be new to ghost research. Public performances of this humor are not surprising. Indeed, they enable investigators to protect, project, and manage their identities while attempting to ward off pernicious attacks from real or imagined critics.

That the social gatherings of investigators and skeptics are rife with laughter should not be taken as an indication that they are frivolous. Keith Basso concluded his analysis of Western Apache joking about the Whiteman by noting that “the whole thing had been in fun. But, paradoxically, not really” (1979: 82). The same could be said of
paranormal investigators’ humor. In light of paranormal investigators’ difficulty articulating and sustaining a method -- and their troubled negotiation with the realms of experience and evidence -- their routine comedic engagement with real or imagined criticism of their work is revealing and significant.
CHAPTER ELEVEN
DISCOURSES AND ENACTMENTS OF BELIEF AND TRANSFORMATION ON
GHOSTS WALKS AND COMMERCIAL GHOST HUNTS

On a given Friday night in York in 2008 or 2009, during the course of my fieldwork, up to seven walking ghost tours could be winding their way through the city center while one or two commercial ghost tour companies prepared to lead participants in ghost hunts or vigils in haunted buildings also in the city center. At the very same time, paranormal investigation teams might be preparing to engage in their serious investigations somewhere in the city. Ghost tours would likely stop at the very sites that would host these ghost hunts, vigils, or investigations. This image of three very different groups of people weaving their way through the same city center, intent on learning about ghosts, is an apt representation of some of the differing ideological and practical engagements with ghosts in England. Throughout this dissertation, I have outlined some of the ways in which paranormal investigators grapple with their understandings of belief, science, and evidence in attempting to understand the paranormal. Their struggle is not representative of all people who are seriously curious about ghosts. For some – such as people who purchase ghost tours or commercial ghost hunts – articulating and acting on ideas about ghosts are less problematic. Here, I explore two such sets of people, the participants on ghost walks and commercial ghost hunts, and their attending understandings of belief and ghosts.
While ghost walks and commercial ghost hunts are structurally very different, they both foreground and embrace belief as a means of reckoning with ghosts. In this, they differ drastically from the paranormal investigations I have described throughout this dissertation. In this chapter, I argue that these two forms of recreation mobilize differing understandings of belief and, yet, each embraces belief as a way of knowing. I show that ghost walks constitute belief as a pre-determined interior state while commercial ghost hunts constitute belief as an achievable, desirable state contingent on demonstrated evidence. I argue that commercial ghost hunts provide a context for liminality and the reconfiguring of belief or disbelief, while ghost walks provide narration intended to amuse and support participants’ pre-existing belief or disbelief. I will argue that the former is a form of secular pilgrimage while the latter is a mode of tourism. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that the differing structures and practices of ghost walks and commercial ghost hunts support differing understandings and practices of belief.

That I am comparing these two forms of touristic engagement or pilgrimage would baffle the people who participate in these events as well as my paranormal investigator collaborators who observe both sets of events with distanced interest. The confusion would not emerge from the different forms the events take – one lasts an hour while the other lasts for upward of five hours – but from the profound variations in desired experience, expectation, and hope for transformation. Likewise, it would be easy for readers to confuse commercial ghost hunts with paranormal investigations, but I want to caution against this. While there are genuine similarities – such as the fact that in both activities participants spend the night in the dark in haunted places equipped with ouija
boards and technology intended to mediate their contact with the paranormal – the activities are not interchangeable. Individuals who purchase commercial ghost hunts are typically eager to have firsthand, embodied encounters with ghosts. As I will argue, they see such “experiences” as potentially capable of transforming them into “believers.” The corresponding understandings of evidence, experience, and belief vary in important ways from investigators, who view the entire enterprise of commercial ghost hunting with sustained suspicion.

Tourism and Pilgrimage

Acts of tourism and acts of pilgrimage are both forms of travel that generate contact with a designated space. As Victor Turner and Edith Turner noted in 1978, “a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist” (1978: 21). Similarly Ellen Badone and Sharon Roseman wrote more recently that “one has to ask the question of where, within this kaleidoscope of juxtaposed images, now lies the distinction between ‘religious’ pilgrims and ‘secular’ tourists” (2004: 9).

Turner and Turner usefully argued in *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* that pilgrimages should be understood as liminal or “liminoid” experiences, and that this liminoid quality emerges from the voluntary nature of pilgrimage in contemporary industrialized societies (Turner and Turner 1974). The liminoid, they wrote, appears in secular, voluntary acts of entertainment and leisure such as sporting events, concerts, or pilgrimages, and it expresses “potentiality” rather than the transitory promise found in the liminality of many rituals.
If Turner and Turner are right, pilgrimages, with their emphasis on the liminoid, share with liminal experiences, “not only transition but potentiality, not only ‘going to be’ but also ‘what may be’” (Turner and Turner 1978:3).

In 1995 Edith Turner further clarified:

the pilgrim is on an adventure, a quest. Her enlightenment is in the lap of the gods. She is not bound to make the passage to membership in some religious community. Optation – individualism—reigns. What draws her is perhaps some message from the holy spheres, not the dictates of biology as the community, as with puberty initiation… in pilgrimage, it is the journey to the actual place containing the actual objects of the past (E. Turner 1995: xv).

In this description, Edith Turner foregrounds what I will return to as the most defining characteristic of commercial ghost hunts – the potentiality for transformation –as the core of pilgrimage.

I draw as well on James Clifford’s observation that pilgrimage’s “‘sacred’ meanings tend to predominate –even though people go on pilgrimages for secular as well as religious reasons” (1992: 110). While all of the pilgrimage sites that Turner and Turner (1978) considered were explicitly religious, it was clear to Clifford and it is clear to me that there is nothing inherent in their understanding of liminality and communitas that prevents it from being applied more broadly to non-religious acts of pilgrimage. (Indeed, in her 1995 preface to *Image and Pilgrimage*, Edith Turner embraced this very fact.) In fact, there is nothing inherent in a destination that locates it as a site of tourism or pilgrimage. John Eade and Michael Sallnow (1992), Mary Lee Nolan and Sidney Nolan
(1992), Boris Vukonic (1992), and Thomas Bremer (2004) have all shown that pilgrimage sites often host religious tourists as well as pilgrims.\(^1\)

While there are other highly productive frameworks for understanding secular pilgrimage – for instance, Morinis’s (1992) emphasis on pilgrimage as the pursuit of an embodied ideal—I want to foreground the role of transformation in pilgrimage here. Drawing on Turner and Turner (1978), I want to explore the idea that intention, transformation, and belief lie at the point of disjuncture between tourism and pilgrimage rather than questions of sacredness, religiosity, or meaningfulness. I will argue below that participation in ghost walks and commercial ghost hunts can be distinguished along these three axes and that these differentiations are significant with respect to the placement (and rationality/subjectivity) of the participants in contemporary English society. Indeed, as these two forms of engagement with ghosts demonstrate, believing or disbelieving in ghosts does not call one’s rationality into question. Indeed, such engagements are a part of the status quo. However, passionately believing or disbelieving in ghosts begins to call a dis/believer’s rationality into question.

\(^1\)As Thomas Bremer has demonstrated in his study of visits to Missions in San Antonio, pleasure-seeking tourists and pilgrims may often visit the same sites; however, the impact and experience is widely variable. He argues that in instances where religious practice and belief overlaps with touristic practices a “simultaneity of places” (Bremer 2004:148) emerges in which different visitors visit and experience different spaces although geographically and temporally they are in the same place. He writes, “pleasure travelers and religious adherents make distinct places out of shared space” (2004:5). For him, though, explicit religiosity is key in determining pilgrimage. Such a stance has obvious shortcomings, especially when considering secular modes of pilgrimage. Numerous anthropologists (Badone and Roseman 2004; Morinis 1992; Porter 2004) have productively contested such demands for explicit religiosity as the chief characteristic of pilgrimage, demonstrating that forms of secular travel such as attendance at Star Trek Conventions (Porter 2004) or visits to battlefields (Gatewood and Cameron 2004) constitute pilgrimages for some, in that they allow visitors to encounter or embody idealized notions absent in their homes.
Ghost Walks and Commercial Ghost Hunts

While both ghost walks and commercial ghost hunts foreground understandings of ghosts, they do so in very different ways. In fact, they are very different forms of engagement with ghosts. Ghost walks are a ubiquitous form of tourism found across Britain.2 They can be found in a broad range of English cities, several Scottish cities, and the capitals of Northern Ireland and Wales, as I show in Figure 11.1. Ghost walks usually occur in the early evening, between 7 and 9 p.m., in the city center. They last between one and two hours and cost between £3 and £6, or roughly $5 to $10 U.S. A guide, typically a man dressed in black contemporary clothing or black Victorian costume, leads a group of tourists on a relatively short walk through the historic city center, stopping at certain places of either historic or ghostly significance to tell stories about the ghosts found there.3

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2 This is not to suggest that they are only found in the U.K. There are numerous ghost walks in the United States in cities such as Savannah, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and Chicago. There are also ghost walks in a range of other cities in the world such as Montreal, Venice, Dublin, and Prague. While ghost walks exist in other nations, none can match the level of ubiquity of ghost walks in the U.K., although the U.S. comes closest.
3 Very few ghost tour guides are women. During the course of attending many ghost walks across England and Scotland, I have only taken one tour led by a woman and it was a slightly unusual walk in Edinburgh that pushes the boundaries of typical ghost walks. During the 18 months I spent in York, there were no women who offered regular ghost walks in the city; however, since I have left the field, I am aware of three women who have established a new ghost walk in York.
Figure 11.1 - List of U.K. Cities with a Ghost Walk

| Aberdeen     | Newcastle  |
| Bath         | Newport    |
| Belfast      | Norfolk    |
| Brighton     | Nottingham |
| Brixham      | Oxford     |
| Burton       | Penzance   |
| Cambridge    | Peterborough |
| Cardiff      | Plymouth   |
| Chillingham  | Sheffield  |
| Derby        | St. Ives   |
| Devizes      | Stirling   |
| Dorset       | Stratford-upon-Avon |
| Edinburgh    | Tenby      |
| Exeter       | Warwick    |
| Gloucester   | Weymouth   |
| Hull         | Whitby     |
| Lincoln      | Windsor    |
| Liverpool    | Worcester  |
| London       | York       |

In contrast, commercial *ghost hunts* are more pronounced private affairs. They typically occur inside reportedly haunted venues, usually pubs, museums, castles, or estates. Different companies and tourists call these events fright nights, ghost hunts, and investigations. I will refer to them as commercial ghost hunts. In addition to the companies that offer these commercial ghost hunts, there are also teams of ghost hunters or paranormal investigators that periodically offer ghost hunts to the public. While they
share many features with commercial ghost hunts, the organizational and financial structure of these events varies.

In England, there are seven active companies that offer regular commercial ghost hunts. These ghost hunts typically happen on Friday and Saturday nights. Like regular (non-profit) investigations, they begin around 8 or 9 in the evening and last until between 2 and 5 in the morning. Unlike non-profit investigations, participating in a ghost hunt costs a significant amount of money, typically between £40 and £100, roughly between $65 and $165 (U.S.). Normally, there are between 25 and 40 participants on these hunts. Attendees usually come in groups. It is rare to have more than one or two participants who attend alone. Each company hosts ghost hunts at a range of reportedly haunted sites.

Knowledge on Ghost Walks and Ghost Hunts

The processes through which consumers become aware of ghost walks and commercial ghost hunts differ. For participants on a commercial ghost hunt, the night of ghost hunting results from weeks or even months of planning and decision-making. On the other hand, individuals who purchase ghost walks may have decided to purchase a walk in a much less premeditated fashion. This difference in planning points to the significantly different meanings these activities have in the lives of their consumers.

4 There is also a company that sells commercial ghost hunts in Scotland. I am unaware of any operating in Northern Ireland or Wales. As far as I know, England is unique in this element of paranormal tourism. While the U.S. offers ghost walks in a range of cities, I do not know of any U.S. companies that regularly sell the chance to spend the night in a haunted building.

5 During bank holiday weekends, long weekends where most businesses are closed on Monday, an investigation might happen on a Sunday night but it is rare.
The companies that produce commercial ghost hunts rarely advertise their events in particularly accessible public places. Their advertisements rarely take the form of public billboards, brochures, or even signs. They make their presence known almost exclusively through various website and web-based forms of advertising. In the case of commercial paranormal tour companies, their ads have been known to appear on a range of ghost hunting and paranormal investigating websites, especially directories. Individuals visiting these websites would likely have a pronounced interest in ghost hunting and paranormal investigation.

The individuals who purchase these commercial ghost hunts typically are well versed and familiar with websites focusing on the paranormal and ghostly. Many of them noted that they regularly watch television programs such as *Most Haunted* or, increasingly by the end of my fieldwork, the U.S. based program *Ghost Hunters International*. In fact, their narratives of the trajectories that led them to participate in a commercial ghost hunt often foreground their viewership of such television programs and their readership and possibly participation in Internet forums. They emphasize that consumption of these programs and websites is not incidental. They maintain that it

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6 I am aware of one notable exception to this. One of the smaller companies sometimes posts fliers announcing the time and cost of the next investigation in the particular pub or site that it plans to investigate. In the case I observed, this entailed a flier on the bulletin board of a popular haunted pub. This is fairly exceptional, however. In fact, that the upcoming investigation was set at this particular pub may explain the presence of the flier. The pub in question is one of the most popular investigation sites in the north of England and, as such, the pub embraces and publicizes its ghosts to a higher degree than most.

7 By web-based forms of advertising, I mean ads purchased by companies that appear on other websites.

8 These websites range from individuals’ personal blogs focusing on their own readings and understandings of the paranormal to more collective efforts such as the homepages of paranormal research groups.

9 Interestingly, they share this trajectory with paranormal investigators.
struck a nerve with their longstanding interest in the ghostly or paranormal, often since childhood.

While their trajectories into participating in commercial ghost hunts mirror those of paranormal investigators and ghost hunters in many ways, there is a significant difference. For paranormal investigators, the trajectory culminates (for the time being, at least) in organizing and leading their own investigations in the paranormal. For most participants in commercial ghost hunts, it typically ends in joining in commercial ghost hunts.

Strikingly, individuals who traveled significant distances to participate in a particular ghost hunt did not tend to situate these journeys as part of weekend breaks where they remained in the city of the ghost hunt for the rest of the weekend. This was made clear to me when talking to a couple that had traveled from Glasgow to Nottingham for a ghost hunt. I asked them if they planned to stay in Nottingham for the weekend and they were puzzled by my question. The woman explained, “we’ve got to get home. I have to work tomorrow night. This isn’t a city break for us.” She and many other participants on ghost hunts subtly emphasized to me that they did not see their involvement in ghost hunts as a form of tourism. It is, rather, the culmination of a deliberate and often inconvenient decision to partake in a ghost hunt.

Participants’ emphasis that their journeys to haunted sites were not part of pleasurable weekend-long excursions is significant. As Turner and Turner (1978) observed years ago, the blurring of tourism and pilgrimage often troubles sacred authorities. Such authorities tend to condemn any blurring of these boundaries. While

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10 This was a lengthy journey. It would easily take 5 or 6 hours.
such authorities are not really present in ghost hunts, the participants themselves police these boundaries, emphasizing the seriousness of their pursuit of ghosts by highlighting the absence of pleasure-seeking, touristic behaviors.

The decision to purchase a ghost walk is very different. Unlike ghost hunts, the operators of ghost walks advertise their tours very publicly in the vicinity of their walks. While some ghost walk operators may maintain websites discussing their walks and rates, I have never spoken to any tourist who was aware of, or consulted, these websites prior to purchasing the tour.\textsuperscript{11}

In the city of York, ghost walks maintain the highest public presence. Walking through the city center of York, it would be difficult for visitors to overlook the abundant street advertisements for competing ghost walks. They are found on trash cans, billboards, and in shop windows. There are also stacks of flyers in receptacles on trash cans, on checkout counters in stores, in the tourist information center, and in hotels.

\textsuperscript{11} One guide noted that these websites were most useful for bus tours or school groups.
Figure 11.2: Photograph of a Ghost Walk advertisement on a trashcan near the York Minster, 2007

Figure 11.3: Photograph of displayed ghost walk pamphlets at the York Tourist Office, 2007
There are typically between 5 and 10 ghost walks operating in York at any given time and their advertisements make it difficult to distinguish among them. They often feature a man, usually wearing a vintage hat, illuminated against a dark and foreboding background. They include the name of the walk and the place and time of departure. They include very few details about the nature or content of the actual walk. Many note that they are acceptable to “older children.” Some include notes remarking that there are “no gimmicks.”

These tours operate against a backdrop of a fairly negligible nightlife in the city of York, comprised mainly of the city’s many pubs. There are few non-pub related activities to pursue in the evening in York. While there is a theater, the York Royal Theater, that periodically hosts plays, it does so on a less than regular basis. There are also very few other walking tours that compete with the ghost walks. The Association of Voluntary Guides offers daily walking tours of the city; however, unlike the ghost walks, these depart in the daytime, usually at 10:15 in the morning. The only non-ghostly evening walking tour is the Viking Walk, a relatively recent addition to York’s tourist nightlife.\(^{12}\)

In many ways, York is a unique case.\(^{13}\) The sheer number of ghost tours housed within the city is unusual. Most cities have one tour, at best. I have never visited an English city where the prevalence of advertising of the ghost walk competes with York’s ghost walks. Indeed, ghosts and ghost walks figure quite centrally in York’s “destination

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\(^{12}\) The Viking Walk was introduced to the city of York in October 2009, very late into my fieldwork. I am not really sure how it will interplay with the ongoing ghost walks.

\(^{13}\) The only other British city that can compare to York in terms of the undeniable presence of ghost walks is Edinburgh. There, like York, it would be difficult not to see advertisements and posters for ghost walks when walking through the touristic city center, namely Edinburgh’s “Golden Mile,” or Princess Street. (For a complete discussion of ghost tours in Scotland see Inglis and Holmes 2003.)
image.” York’s reputation as the “most haunted city” in England, Britain, Europe, or the world factors into its marketing. Deciding to purchase a ghost walk occurs against this backdrop of advertising and manufactured destination imagery. While the volume of ghost walks in York is unique, the deliberate marketing of ghosts as part of a touristic experience is less unique. “The phrase ‘most haunted,’” according to historian Owen Davies, “has become part of the English tourist experience, with numerous pubs, villages and towns laying claim to the title. Ghost tours and walks have become a popular leisure activity” (2007: 62). While Davies does not offer a precise account of when these tours and marketing strategies became so prevalent, he does note that such widespread manifestations are a “largely twentieth century phenomena” (Davies 2007: 62).14 Indeed, as Davies suggests, ghosts truly have become a mainstream and marketable feature of the touristic landscape in England.

In York, the superabundance of ghost walks and the similarities in their styles of advertising result in difficulties tourists and tourist officials both have in making distinctions between the tours available. For example, when I talked to staffers at the York Tourist Information Center about how they describe the different ghost tours to interested tourists, a woman explained to me, “I tell people that there are two styles of ghost walks. There are the funnier ones where the guide is a bit more theatrical. Then, there are the ones with a bit more history. They’re both good, of course. It just depends on what you’re in the mood for.” It is unclear to what degree tourists who purchase these

14 This is not to say that earlier historical eras did not witness any forms of ghost tourism. Davies usefully points to several nineteenth and eighteenth century tourist publications that foreground ghosts. For example, in 1858, Harriet Martineau’s Guide to the Lake District mentioned several haunted homes and businesses. Such a published guide to haunted sites is reminiscent of the many ghost “gazetteers” and guide books that identify intriguing haunted sites published in contemporary England.
tours are aware of these differences. When I asked participants on the ghost walks how they decided on a particular walk, they commonly expressed ambivalence about the differences between the walks. One tourist, a man in his fifties from Hartlepool who was spending the weekend in York with his wife, described their selection process by noting, “we saw the signs for this one. We figured it would be fun, something different. It left from the Minster and we knew how to find the Minster.”

Tourists’ lack of differentiation between the tours became even more evident when I talked to them a day or more after their tour. For example, when I was talking to the older parents of a ghost hunting friend, they were eager to tell me about their ghost walk experience since they knew I was generally interested in ghosts. When they tried to tell me which walk they took in York, they were unable to remember either the name or any revealing characteristic of it. Elaine, a woman in her mid seventies, observed, “I can’t remember which walk it was. They’re so similar, really. Well, the man who led it was quite good. He was dressed in black and looked like he was trying to dress historical like. It left from the city center.” This description could apply to nearly all of the ghost walks in York (and, indeed, any ghost walk that I have observed in England). Elaine was not unique in her inability to recall which ghost walk she purchased. I encountered numerous tourists who could either not identify which tour they took or incorrectly identified it.

Tourists’ inability to identify the ghost walk they purchased says much about the casual nature of ghost walks. Little planning or forethought goes into the selection process. Tourists assume that they are interchangeable. Indeed, for tourists participation

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15 The Minster refers to the York Minster, the large cathedral in the center of York that is one of its most popular tourist sites.
in a ghost walk is a casual act; however, the sheer casualness of these acts of consumption points to the undeniably public role ghosts play in contemporary England.

The varying costs of ghost walks and ghost hunts further differentiate ghost walks and commercial ghost hunts. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, there is a major difference in the cost of participating in a ghost hunt and taking part in a ghost walk. Ghost walks cost between £4 and £10, with most costing around £5.\textsuperscript{16} Ghost hunts cost anywhere from £35, on the low end, to £99 on the higher end.\textsuperscript{17}

In part, the low cost of ghost walks explains why so many tourists purchase them without prior consideration. For most people who spend a weekend or day touring a town, £5 is not a significant cost. As one recent commenter replying to a review of a particular York ghost walk in \textit{The Guardian} newspaper observed, “£5 is not a large sum to gamble for over an hour's entertainment.” Many tourists who purchased ghost walks emphasized that their relatively inexpensive cost encouraged their casual consumption. As one man in his fifties explained, “it’s only five quid [pounds]. That’s nothing. That’s a drink in the pub. We thought, let’s see what this is like. It might be interesting. It’s something to do at least.”

In contrast, participants in commercial ghost hunts tended to see the price of the event as quite costly. For many, the price was very significant. Many participants in commercial ghost hunts remarked that they wished they could participate in ghost hunts more frequently but that their cost was prohibitive. Participants’ reactions to my solo

\textsuperscript{16} Children, student, and senior fares were often reduced by £1. In contrast, there were no discounted tickets to ghost hunts. In fact, individuals under 18 years of age were prohibited from participating.

\textsuperscript{17} Companies periodically offer weekend long ghost hunts and these cost significantly more, typically between £200 and £350. These include weekend-long activities and all meals.
status on one ghost hunt demonstrated their understandings of the price of hunting. I had planned to attend a commercial ghost hunt with one of my paranormal investigating friends. Together we had purchased tickets for the event, which was to be held at the York Castle Museum; however, at the last minute, her transportation for the evening fell through and I was forced to attend the event alone. The host for the night publicly asked where my friend was. After I explained that she would not be coming, several of the other participants befriended me. They voiced shock that my friend did not join us. As one woman noted, “it’s so dear [expensive]! I would have walked here if I had to.” The cost of commercial ghost hunts led to a more deliberate, careful consumption of these events. In fact, many participants I met would periodically lament the cost of participating.

The length of time needed for either a ghost hunt or ghost walk also differed greatly and resulted in different modes of consumption. Ghost walks are comparatively brief time commitments. They rarely last more than 90 minutes. To participate on one does little to diminish tourists’ capacities to enjoy the rest of their night in York (or any other city). The event typically finishes by 9 p.m. at the latest, which leaves tourists sufficient time to visit one or more of the city’s many pubs.

Commercial ghost hunts, on the other hand, typically last between 5 and 8 hours. This is not an insignificant amount of time to spend on an activity. Furthermore, these events generally occur between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. Most participants are not in the habit

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18 This was to be her first commercial ghost hunt. After talking to me about my research, she was very interested to see how these events differed from paranormal investigations.
19 Attending these events alone was somewhat unusual. As I tended to do just that, groups of participants often befriended me.
of routinely staying awake all night. To do so requires significant commitment on the part of consumers. Indeed, such engagement is not intended for casual consumption.\textsuperscript{20}

The varying costs, time commitments, and public accessibility of ghost walks and commercial ghost hunts demonstrate that these events are produced for very different demographics and, indeed, are consumed accordingly. The variations in the degrees of deliberateness and intentionality point to one of the major differences between ghost walks and ghost hunts. In commercial ghost hunts, participants explicitly seek out and pursue an encounter with ghosts that is demanding in terms of finances, time, and emotional involvement. They are seeking a meaningful encounter with ghosts. In many cases, participants are seeking the “evidence” or “experience” necessary to transform them or turn them into “believers” or, if not believers, at least into people who are slightly more convinced that ghosts exist. The ghost walk participants, by contrast, are seeking entertainment that corresponds to their already existing belief or disbelief in ghosts. They do not anticipate that the walks will alter their beliefs, and the tour guides make very little effort to do so.

While transformation alone does not distinguish pilgrimage from tourism, I want to consider the possibility that the type of transformation sought by participants on commercial ghost hunts may indeed distinguish it from less transformative forms of tourism. An obvious problem here is the blurriness that scholars like Bremer (2004) have

\textsuperscript{20} This point was illustrated best during a commercial ghost hunt at the Golden Fleece pub in York. There were three tourists from London in the pub who became aware that there was going to be a ghost hunt. They expressed a desire to participate and the host allowed them to do so. Their presence on the ghost hunt proved to be hugely troubling to the rest of the group. They did not share common understandings of ghost hunting methods and they were frustrated by the late hour. Eventually around 1 a.m., the tourists decided to abandon the ghost hunt, to the pleasure of the remaining participants.
identified in the difference between tourists visiting religious sites and pilgrims visiting those same sites. For the pilgrims, the place in question has always had transformative potential. For some tourists, on the other hand, the encounter may, quite unexpectedly, provide a type of transformation or transcendence, but it comes as a surprise. It is never their goal in visiting the site. In commercial ghost hunts and ghost walks, the casual tourist is differentiated from the ghost pilgrim, in part, by how deliberately they seek transformative encounters with ghosts. While I do not want to underestimate the transformative potential of a ghost walk, I have never met a tourist who found the experience to be profound in any way. They have identified the walks as “fun,” “entertaining,” and “historically interesting.” However, they have not described the walks as transformative. As I will discuss later, participants’ belief tends to stay unchanged on ghost walks. It is this very fixedness that identifies their practice as a form of tourism and enables the other, more complicated enactment of belief. The fixedness and public disclosure of their belief is the most interesting thing to me about ghost walks.

The Presentation of Ghosts

Ghosts are a central component of ghost walks as well as commercial ghost hunts. The term “ghost” has far less defined or coherent meaning than most people realize. The range in visual, sensory, and rhetorical depictions of ghosts is huge. This inherent ambiguity in the term “ghost” enables one of the sharpest and most meaningful distinctions between ghost walks and commercial ghost hunts. In addition to presenting ghosts remarkably differently, commercial ghost hunts and ghost walks conceptualize and enact belief in significantly different ways. Ghost walks center on ghost stories whereas commercial ghost hunts seek to enable participants to experience ghosts. Each
activity’s organization and structure demonstrates its different understanding of ghosts and how to know and understand them.

Ghost walks traffic in ghost stories. This is made clear even in some of their advertisements. As I have noted, not all of their advertisements include a description of what the ghost walk entails. Those that do so tend to foreground the notion of storytelling. One ghost walk pamphlet reads, “I am the ghost creeper. Follow me along dark passageways and narrow streets to hear… sinister stories of the absurd and the unnatural…chilling tales of scandal and death.” Another ghost walk flyer reads, “Come! Let me be your guide! Walk with me through the back streets and alleyways of historical York. Let me regale you with stories of mysteries, gruesome ghosts, and the foul deeds once committed in medieval York.” In each of these advertisements, the act of storytelling emerges as the primary feature of the ghost walk.\textsuperscript{21} Tourists will learn about ghosts through stories.

The format of the walking tours reflects this emphasis on stories. The guides tend not to offer any sort of broad introduction to the tour. Rather, they simply begin the walk and storytelling. For the more serious, historically-oriented ghost walks, this tends to include mentioning some safety reminders and then embarking on the route. On one historically-oriented walk, the guide introduced the tour by observing:

Good evening everyone! Welcome. We’re going to walk around a few haunted places tonight. We’re not going to walk too far, though. Don’t worry. Every ghost story I tell is perfectly true. Some ghost stories are more true [sic] than others.

\textsuperscript{21} While I have focused here on ghost walk advertising found in York, the same emphasis can be found on ghost walks around the country.
The guide then launched into his first ghost story, which was set at the starting point of the tour. In his introductory comments, the guide himself identified the purpose of the tour to be the dissemination of ghost stories while maintaining an ironic stance vis-a-vis the stories’ veracity.

The more theatrical tour guides tinge their introduction with comedy. For example, on one ghost walk, the guide asked tourists to stand in the corner in front of a closed shop. He then proclaimed to the group, “ladies and gentleman, that concludes our ghost walk!” This was met with laughter from the group. He then launched into a discussion of their location and the course of their tour and its correlation to Victorian York. He commented:

We will head down Swinegate, where in Victorian times you could buy yourself a pig. A nice pink, pork pig. We will cross over Grape Lane where you could have bought yourself a bottle of wine. Now, in Victorian times, Grape Lane had a nickname, ‘Grope Lane.’ And, ladies, if you had hung around there in Victorian times you could have made yourself a bit of a profit. [This comment led many in the group to laugh.] Well, one or two of you anyway. [The crowd laughed at this.] Now very important, you must stay behind me at all times and the man at the back, keep up!! [This tour guide always chose one middle-aged man to pick on and tease through the night. This was the source of significant comedy.] Or you may find yourself grabbed by a goon. [As he mentions goon, the guide eyes the man in the back meaningfully. The crowd finds this highly amusing.] Now, get ready. We are going to go down Swinegate and across Grape Lane. We will end up on Stonegate, where our ghost hunt begins!
The brevity of this introduction demonstrates the degree to which guides and tourists alike assume that the goals of a ghost walk are self-evident. Indeed, on these walks, it is extremely rare to encounter an explicit overview of what the walk entails or what constitutes a ghost. In the introduction to the more historically-oriented tour, ghosts are explicitly referenced in their capacity to be more or less true; however, no definition of ghost is provided and no explanation of how to gauge the “truth” of these entities is offered.

After the introductions, the guides lead the group to the first stop on the tour. In York, guides for different walks coordinate with each other to avoid stopping at the same location at the same time, which can be a delicate and challenging task, especially during the busier periods of tourism. Tours stop in front of buildings. The guide stands with his back to the building, facing the group of tourists who stand in front of him. The tourists tend to watch the guide closely during the stories and may glance occasionally at the building in front of them. The guides and the tourists do not interact in many significant ways during the tours. Tourists periodically laugh at the intentionally comedic acts of guides and guides may rely on tourists to act out or participate in scenarios. Tourists very rarely ask questions or interrupt the tours.22

22 When tourists do ask questions, they tend to focus either on the guide’s experience with ghosts or with the history of York. For example, after the tours, I have heard several tourists ask the guides if they ever saw ghosts. I have also observed people ask mundane historical questions. One woman asked about what year Margaret Cither’s house was built, for example. The only form of significantly disruptive behavior I have observed on ghost walks involves “hen parties,” or bachelorette parties. York is a popular weekend destination for all female hen and all male stag parties and, periodically, the participants in these parties, especially the hen parties, chose to participate on ghost walks. Sometimes members of these parties are somewhat intoxicated and disrupt the walk. Guides tend to seem highly annoyed by those interruptions.
Upon arriving at the designated location, the guide launches into a story about the particular site. The story typically lasts five or ten minutes. Sometimes, especially at particularly significant sites, such as the York Minster, a guide will tell two stories at the same place. The stories, which emerge as the central points of the tour, vary somewhat in style and substance. Some stories are intended to be funny while others remain serious in tone. One of the York guides who offers a tour he imagines as a comedic and magical encounter as well a ghost walk often tells the typical stories of York’s ghosts in an explicitly funny, dramatic, and sometimes over the top fashion. For example, on his first tour stop, this guide stops at a haunted building on Stonegate, a main shopping street that is fashioned to resemble a Medieval street. There he tells the story of the ghost of a young girl. I will turn to his telling of this story in some detail here to examine his use of comedy and to consider the depiction of ghosts. On one tour in which I participated, the guide launched into the ghost story after arranging the tour group in front of him. In a very dramatic tone, using elongated syllables, he noted:

Ok, the building behind me is haunted by the ghost of a small child. How old are you child? [He turned to a young girl standing at the front of the crowd. She replied that she was nine years old.] She was nine years old when she died in a horrible manner. This used to be the home of a local doctor. He was famous for the parties he would hold down here in his dining room. One night his small daughter had attended one of these parties. When it came to nine o’clock, she was sent up to her attic bedroom. Well, like all children, she wasn’t tired. She didn’t

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23 By magic, I mean stage magic rather than mystical or transformative forms of magic. Several of the guides rely on relatively simple enactments of magic, such as a sleight of the hand, to complement their tours.
want to go to bed. And she must have been leaning over the banister trying to look at all the fun and the excitement below when her hand slipped and she fell 55 feet down through the stair well to the basement below, where she broke her poor little neck. Fortunately, there was no damage to the staircase. [At this, the crowd laughed heartily.] And I would recommend that all of you enter this building tomorrow. You can go down to the basement where she fell and stare up through the staircase. And you, you can go to the top. [This comment was directed to a man who the guide had humorously been teasing throughout the night. The audience found this comment very funny.] And try leaning over. [The crowd laughed even more.] Now her ghost has only ever been seen on one occasion. But she is more famous for her poltergeist activity.

While it would be easy to portray this as a sad story, the guide’s excessive drama and irreverent telling of the story render it more comedic. Interestingly, in his telling of this story, he treats ghosts as self-evident. The young girl died a sudden and untimely death and became a ghost who lingered around the site of her death. Unlike some, this guide makes no claims regarding the truth-value of the story in question.

In this story, as in every ghost story I have heard on a ghost walk, the narrative treats the notion of a ghost as self-explanatory. The narrative styles assume that tourists understand what a ghost is. The guides also rarely put pressure on tourists to accept or reject the truth-value of their stories. These are not tales to be carefully interrogated. Rather, they are flexible, able to support belief or disbelief. In the story of the little girl above, the guide jokes about the details of the story. He fashions the dead girl’s age to the age of an audience member. This could be interpreted in several ways. One possible
interpretation is that the guide doubts the veracity of the story. Another is that it is a rhetorical flair intended for comedic effect. Notably, that comedic effect is grounded on the untrustworthiness and unbelievability of ghost stories. By taking these tours, hearing these stories, and not engaging in ongoing, tortured analyses of them, participants (perhaps unwittingly) locate themselves as believers of a very different order than participants on a commercial ghost hunt.

In contrast to the narrative whole presented on ghost walks, commercial ghost hunts present a more fractured, fleeting conception of ghosts. In fact, the idea of ghosts bleeds seamlessly into a broader category of “paranormal activity.” As one commercial ghost hunting company advertises on its website, “we only book locations with recent reports of activity to increase our chances of witnessing something paranormal. Of course, there are no guarantees, however be prepared as our locations have never let us down yet!” As this explanation demonstrates, notions of “activity” and “witnessing” figure prominently in the packaging of ghosts on commercial ghost hunts. Overall, commercial ghost hunts are designed (and purchased) with the intention of enabling encounters between participants and the ghostly or paranormal.

At the beginning of commercial ghost hunts, the hosts and mediums typically welcome the guests and excitedly discuss the possibilities of the evening.\textsuperscript{24} Their excitement, in and of itself, is remarkable. For them, as well as for the participants, the night remains an unknown entity replete with encounters that they are not yet sure of. This stands in stark contrast to the guides of ghost walks. For them, each walk is more or

\textsuperscript{24} I believe that this is genuine excitement on the part of hosts and mediums. All of the hosts and mediums that I spoke to very much enjoyed their involvement in paranormal tour companies and maintained a deep personal interest in, or commitment to, researching the paranormal.
less the same. Setting aside unusual circumstances, they typically know and anticipate the geographic and social contours of their night. This is not the case for hosts and mediums. Like the participants, they are on the verge of having a new experience themselves.

During these periods of introduction, it is not uncommon for mediums to comment in passing on the site. They tend to share their excitement about the evening’s possibilities. On one commercial ghost hunt, one medium told the group, “I won’t spoil anything for you but I reckon it should be a good night.” On another ghost hunt, the medium explained, “I think it’s quite an active building. It should be a good night.” While the host/investigator often emphasizes that the company cannot ensure paranormal activity on a particular night, the mediums often express a positive outlook on the likelihood of activity. It is common for ghost hunter organizers and consumers as well as paranormal investigators to equate a “good night” with an “active night.” Participants generally respond in an excited and favorable fashion to these comments from mediums. It is not uncommon for some to exclaim enthusiastically that they hope it is an active night. Already, in these introductory moments, the organizers of commercial ghost hunts construe the participants as active consumers of the paranormal rather than passive recipients of crafted knowledge. Here hosts and mediums cast ghosts as immediate, experiential entities.

Like these participants and the organizers of commercial ghost hunts, paranormal investigators struggle with this equation of a “good night” with higher levels of “activity.” On some level, many investigators do maintain this association in their minds and they are genuinely somewhat disappointed when little of a paranormal nature occurs during an investigation. On the other hand, they recognize that in their understanding of
good investigating a quiet night can also be productive. They also struggle with their assumption that, as investigators, they should embrace each possibility equally. As I mentioned earlier, investigators struggle against the very real (and quite legitimate) assumption that ghost hunting and paranormal investigation are both forms of thrill-seeking. That participants on a commercial ghost hunt so blatantly assert their desire to encounter the paranormal and that commercial companies market their hunts as “thrilling” compounds investigators’ anxiety over their own desires to encounter the paranormal or ghostly. They engage in significant boundary work to differentiate between themselves and these activities.

In fact, the entire structure of commercial ghost hunts explicitly enables encounters with ghosts -- from the initial “walk through” with the medium to participants’ later direct interactions with the ghosts through more direct forms of engagements such as divination and “calling out.” The understandings and realizations of ghosts that these styles of engagement produce are distinctly fragmented and partial.

The walk through with the medium, a guided walk through the darkened building led by the medium who narrates the ghostly presences, provides the first glimpse of the ghosts’ presence. In each room, the medium quickly walks about and then begins to share his or her mediumistic impressions of the space. S/he generally describes whatever presences s/he sense in the room. They typically refer to the presences as either spirits or ghosts. They use the terms somewhat interchangeably. If the medium had the chance to walk through the building prior to the arrival of participants, s/he might share what s/he “picked up on” during the early visit to the building. S/he simply describes that. For
example, one medium described something he picked up on prior to the start of the night. He observed:

it was interesting, I had a feeling about a room like this all day and then when I walked in before I got the overwhelming sense of sadness. Something terrible happened here, I think. Before, I was getting a bloke who I think might have hurt himself. He’s not here now but we might try calling out for him later.

Some mediums also actively “get things” while they lead the group through the rooms. For example, during a commercial ghost hunt in a museum, the medium led the group into a room that depicted life in the sixteenth century. She commented that she was “getting” children. She observed, “there are children all around you. Do you feel them? they’re reaching toward you… they…they want to play! They might grab your hand. They’re lovely.”25 Assertions such as these present an image of the building as full of spirits that one might encounter. They also recast the building so that a site housing a museum or a pub “becomes” a site replete with invisible presences that are the object of consumption.

The participants typically stand and face the medium. They do not move around the room as freely as the medium. However (unlike participants in ghost walks), participants are constantly engaged in processes of evaluation and active involvement with the ghost present despite being rendered as the less experienced or more passive party in the encounter. When the medium speaks about a spirit in a particular location,

25 There is often a marked disjuncture between what the medium describes and the everyday use of the room. In the instance above where the medium was “picking up” a man who might have committed suicide, the group was standing in a room displaying large trains. The medium made no attempt to relate the man to the trains.
most of the people realign their bodies to face that general direction. Sometimes, participants quietly confirm what the medium says. For example, in the instance above where the medium described children’s spirits, several participants reported feeling children reaching for them and holding their hands.

After the walk-through with the medium, participants break into two groups and set off to “investigate” and look for ghosts either with the host or the medium. When doing so, the host makes sure that they are equipped with technologies that enable their encounters, such as EMF readers, dowsing rods, or crystals. Many participants embrace these technologies; however, unlike paranormal investigators, they are unconcerned with the technologies’ documentary capacities. They full-heartedly embrace the tools’ revelatory potential. They treat changes in temperature or variations in the EMF levels as indications that ghosts are present. While investigators are torn between embracing the documentary and revelatory capacities of technology, participants on commercial ghost hunts experience no such anxieties over the nature of evidence, at least none I ever witnessed.

Participants also tend to bring digital or video cameras with them hoping to document ghosts that are present. Participants photograph the area frequently. The host or medium rarely does anything to impede this. Indeed, some hosts express extreme interest in seeing photographs that capture anything potentially paranormal. Hosts and mediums encourage participants to alert the group before using flash photography in order to allow them to shield their eyes from the flash.26 This engagement with visual technologies points to many participants’ deep hope that they will capture “visual evidence” of a

26 Ghost hunts and, to a lesser degree, investigations are punctuated by shouts or murmurs of “flash.”
ghost. As one middle-aged man who participated on a ghost hunt with his wife explained, “I would love to get a picture of something. [My wife] is convinced there are ghosts. She sees them, you see. But me, I don’t know. If I had a picture of one, that would convince me, though. Definitely.” This visual engagement acted as another way in which participants sought to experience ghosts during these hunts. Indeed, as the middle-aged man’s comments suggest, they are also hoping for a technologically mediated transformative encounter. The man aspires to capture evidence. He hopes that this ghost hunt will finally enable him to be firm in his belief in ghosts.

The commercial ghost hunt is largely designed to enable active encounters between participants and ghosts. On those in which I participated, when hosts led the groups into rooms, they generally suggested an interactive activity like calling out. The host typically starts the “calling out” but encourages participants to join in and redirect it if they want to. “Calling out” is an activity that ghost hunters and paranormal investigators invoke to try to entice ghosts or spirits into interacting with the humans present. To “call out,” hosts (or, in paranormal investigations, investigators) ask in a clear and slightly loud voice if there are any spirits present. Participants often participate or join in eventually. They then pause and the group waits for some discernible response. The response could take the form of a noise or, ideally, a voice. I have never been present when a group encountered a voice; however, I have observed instances when participants and hosts interpreted knocks and bursts of wind as positive indications that spirit was present. In some instances, the nature of the activity was unclear. For example, in the

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27 Indeed, the question “Is there anyone there?” is nearly ubiquitous as an initial query.
following excerpt from an investigation held at a museum in York, the host engaged in fairly typical acts of “calling out” and the participants that the spirit responded:

**Host**: Is there anyone there?

(Pause)

**Host**: Come on, we’re here to talk to you. Please make yourself known to us.

(Pause)

**Participant 1**: Did you feel that?

**Participant 2**: I felt it on my left hand.

**Participant 1**: I felt it as well.

**Host**: If that was you spirit can you please do that again!

Here, as in most instances of calling out, a period of silence follows both unsuccessful and successful invitations for spirits and ghosts to participate. In instances of “calling out” that generate (perceived) positive outcomes, the period of silence is interrupted by participants’ descriptions of what they interpret as (potential) contact with the spirit. In the instance above, no one ever clearly established what participant one and participant two “felt.” However, this did not diminish the host’s willingness to encourage the spirit based on their encounter.

This activity assumes that ghosts or spirits are able to understand and engage with the humans present.28 This is a proposition with several implications. First, it suggests that ghosts or spirits are able to hear. This implies that ghosts or spirits maintain a

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28 I use both ghost and spirit here because participants and organizers of commercial ghost hunts use both terms interchangeably. While the event is called a ghost hunt, participants, hosts, and mediums are as likely to use the term spirit as ghost. While some hosts invoke the distinction of consciousness between ghost and spirit that I discussed earlier, even those hosts use the terms indiscriminately.
sensory apparatus (rather than simply being able to act upon living humans’ sensory apparatuses). It also constructs ghosts or spirits as discursive participants in an ongoing conversation with ghost hunters. Indeed, participants and hosts wait with careful and rapt attention during the silence that follows each instance of “calling out” to see if the ghost or spirit answers or offers some discernible signal of its presence.

The ghosts that emerge in these situations as well as the methods of contact that they require construct a particular image or understanding of ghosts. These are partial beings. They are profoundly fragmented. A ghost’s hand touches a person but the ghost’s hand or, more remarkably, body never materializes. Participants’ visual glimpses of the ghosts are brief and fleeting. Beyond the ghosts’ only partial bodies and physical capacities, the narratives that emerge about them are profoundly fractured. The biographical sketches of the ghosts generated by calling out or ouija boards are tantalizing, brief, and partial. Participants may learn a bit about why the ghosts died and pick up some fragmentary pieces of his or her autobiography, but a complete sketch of who the ghost was and why she or he died is elusive.

This is a far cry from the ghosts of ghost walks, who emerge as complete and fully formed in the tour narratives. Whereas participants in ghost walks can evaluate a complete story about a ghost and decide whether or not they wish to espouse belief in it, participants on commercial ghost hunts face a more complicated situation. Many hope for evidence of the reality of ghosts-- to enable participants, as they put it, to “believe in them”—yet what they actually find is profoundly fragmented and partial, leaving them to grapple indecisively with their encounter.
Haunted Places/Spaces

Place figures very differently in ghost walks and commercial ghost hunts as well. Ghost walks are entirely outdoor events, organized to show tourists the exteriors of haunted buildings. In contrast, commercial ghost hunts bring participants into the interior of buildings. This difference corresponds to the different notions of belief and ghosts associated with each form of engagement.

On ghost walks, the city center of York acts as an atmospheric setting for ghost stories. One ghost walk’s website noted, “tales are drawn from the immense History of York and are told against a backdrop of haunting beauty [sic].” The reference to the city as a “backdrop” is revealing. On the ghost walks, guides lead visitors from the setting of one story to another, but tourists are never able to access the interior of these sites. The guides conduct the walks entirely outdoors.

On ghost walks, guides lead tourists to buildings that act as the backdrop of their stories. The guides may gesture to the buildings and, in some cases, even touch the buildings; however, the tourists themselves are never invited to do so. Indeed, since the ghost walks occur in the early evening, most of the buildings (which are often commercial or touristic buildings) implicated in the ghost stories are already closed for the day. Even when it is possible to visit the site of the ghost stories in question, guides typically do not stress that possibility. The most notable instance of this in York is the

29 The notable and, to my knowledge, only exception to ghost walks’ emphasis on exteriors is Mercat Tours in Edinburgh.
30 I am unaware of any ghost walks or ghost hunts that take place in the day time in England. Mercat Tours in Scotland operates several tours in the afternoon but they typically take place in underground areas. For ghost walk guides, the decision to run walks at night is twofold: the evening setting adds a certain spooky ambience to the walk (especially during the fall and winter when it gets dark earlier) and most guides have “day jobs” that fill their daylight hours.
telling of the Harry Martindale ghost story. In this famous ghost story, a young plumber encountered the ghosts of the lost Roman Legion while working in the basement of the Treasurer’s House in the 1950s. He observed the Roman soldiers and their horses, visible only from the knee up, walk out of a basement wall and across the basement. It was later learned that the basement stood above the site of the ancient Roman Road. This story, perhaps the most famous ghost story in York, is told on every ghost walk in the city. To tell the story, guides typically stand in front of the closed and locked gates of the Treasurer’s House. The house itself stands about 20 feet back from the gate. The crowd looks at the house from this distance and listens as the guide tells the story of the Romans in the basement. They routinely fail to mention that the Treasurer’s House is a National Trust property that is open to the public most days and, even more interestingly, that the National Trust sells tickets for a hourly tour to the haunted basement itself. If they are not aware of this information, tourists remain ignorant of it while on the ghost walks.

Figure 11.4: Photograph of Advertisement for the Ghost Cellar at the Treasurer’s House, 2007
When I asked guides why they omitted this information, they jokingly noted that they would not want to “shill” for the National Trust. They also noted that they did not think the information was relevant to the tour or interesting to the tourists. As one guide explained, “they want to hear ghost stories. That’s what they’re there for.” I suspect that their reluctance to mention the Ghost Cellar is less connected to their desire not to “shill” for the National Trust and more that they do not consider this information interesting or relevant to the ghost walk. Visiting the Ghost Cellar entails a larger degree of commitment than participating on a ghost walk. The same visitors who participate in the walks may not have an interest in visiting the Treasurer’s House in general or the Ghost Cellar in particular.

The understanding of place is markedly different on commercial ghost hunts. A main feature in the execution and advertising of commercial ghost hunts is access to “haunted” places. One commercial ghost hunting company explicitly prides itself on access to “haunted and unusual locations,” and boasts of this in its ads. Other companies similarly boast of their access to the “best haunted sites” and the “most active haunted sites.” Commercial ghost hunting companies and consumers alike conceive of “access” as entry into a space and not just viewing it from outside, as is the case on ghost walks. Interiority, here, signifies haunting.
The Golden Fleece is a popular destination for commercial ghost hunts, walking tours, and paranormal investigators.

These events occur entirely indoors, in sites that are supposedly haunted. From the moment participants arrive, they enter the space of the haunting. This positions them very differently. By entering the space responsible for claims of ghosts or hauntings, they enter a murkier and less resolved realm. While remaining outside a haunted building allows participants on ghost walks to stay physically but also experientially removed from the haunting, participants in commercial ghost hunts enter a domain of partial, embodied encounters. Theirs is a messier engagement fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity. The haunted space and the event itself become a liminoid space.

Ultimately, ghost walks and commercial ghost hunts offer nearly opposite ideas or encounters with ghosts, experience, and belief. In ghost hunts, the ghosts are less
identifiable; however, participants are invited to encounter and experience them, whereas on ghost walks the ghosts are clearly identified and storied but tourists lack the ability to access them. Participants on commercial ghost hunts, then, encounter ghosts by entering haunted spaces that, in a sense, constitute two overlapping domains featuring elements of liminality. Commercial ghost hunters step well outside the domain of their day-to-day lives. They stay awake when they normally sleep; they spend those hours of the night typically confined to the private sphere in profoundly public spaces; they exert ideological control over venues typically under the purview of museum or private authorities, thus disrupting established hierarchies; and, most importantly, they enter a space thought to be occupied by ghosts. To understand the layers of quasi-liminality, it is necessary to contend seriously with the ghosts said to occupy such spaces. Taken as literal entities, they too are entering a space of liminality. Indeed, ghosts are truly liminal beings. Turner wrote that “liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (1969: 95). Taken literally, this truly is the case for ghosts, who are caught between life and death, embodiment and disembodiment. The space of a haunting, then, acts as overlapping domains of liminality intended to bring the living and the ghostly into contact.

The fragmentary, partial nature of this contact contributes to its liminoid status. Turner and Turner indicated that liminoid, or "quasi-liminal," describes the “many genres found in modern industrial society that have features resembling those of liminality [and that] these genres are akin to the ritually liminal, but not identical with it… they are plural, fragmentary, experimental, idiosyncratic, quirky, subversive, utopian, and
consumed by identifiable individuals" (Turner and Turner 1978: 253). Indeed, the partiality of the ghosts and the fragmentary nature of participants’ encounters with them, further constitute these as liminoid encounters. In turn, these commercial ghost hunt companies capitalize on and commercialize this liminality.

Do You Believe?

Lastly, the structure and narratives inherent in ghost walks and commercial ghost hunts implicate belief in very different ways. While references to belief are found on both ghost walks and ghost hunts, their implied (and enacted) understandings and performances of belief diverge greatly.

At the beginning of many ghost walks, guides commonly ask participants the question, “do you believe in ghosts?” They then ask them to raise their hands if they do or they do not believe. Some guides, but not most, ask people to raise their hands if they are unsure of what they believe in. In this presentation of belief, the choices are clear-cut and the bifurcated (or, in rare cases, trifurcated) possibilities are presented neatly. The act of deciding and declaring belief in this neat fashion positions participants more readily than their belief, disbelief, or agnosticism. Their willingness to raise their hands signals their public assertion of a particular style/mode of belief. This mode of belief is what I will refer to as “hard belief,” and it is the belief that some paranormal investigators and ghost hunters mock as “blind” belief.

Belief, in this instance, is not based on evaluations of evidence or examinations of personal encounters. It is, rather, an articulation of a stance decided in advance, a position that is definable. When I talked to ghost walk participants about this question, they failed
to see why it interested me. To them, answering the question of whether or not they believed in ghosts was straightforward. As one middle-aged tourist put it, “of course, I don’t believe in ghosts.” He had no qualms or hesitation in answering me. When I asked why he chose to take a ghost walk, he replied, “I thought it would be fun, different. Just because I don’t believe in ghosts doesn’t mean I don’t want to hear a few ghost stories.” Another participant explained, “I suppose I believe in them. I’ve never seen one or anything, mind you.” When I asked if this belief drove her to take the tour, she laughed and said, “to be honest with you, I never considered that. I just thought it would be fun!”

Tourists do not see their taking a ghost walk as implicating their internal beliefs in a meaningful way; however, at the same time, they are prepared and content to perform their identities as believers or disbelievers. Such a public performance does little to alter their social position or internal understanding of the world. Consuming a ghost walk is a casual act for them, in part, I would argue, because of how little or how shallowly belief is implicated.

The enactment of belief on commercial ghost hunts is markedly different. While roughly the same categories are referenced -- believer, disbeliever/skeptic, and agnostic/uncertain—in both ghost walks and commercial ghost hunts, they are differently understood and enacted. Whereas belief is conceived as predetermined and static on ghost walks, participants and producers of ghost hunts understand belief as a shifting engagement with unfolding evidence. Their association of belief and evidence/experience distinguishes them from casual ghost tourists.

On some commercial ghost hunts, the host may raise the question, “who believes in ghosts?” Like ghost walks, people will raise their hands to identify themselves as
believers or skeptics; however, in contrast to ghost walks, this question generates considerable discussion between the host and the participants. For example, on one ghost hunt, the host raised the question of belief. Out of the group of thirty-five, by a show of hands, seven people identified themselves as “believers,” nine people identified themselves as “skeptics,” and the remaining nineteen were unsure. This show of hands prompted a dialogue between the host and the participants as well as among the participants about the status and nature of their belief. At the show of hands, the host replied, “ah, well, I’m in the same boat as most of you. I’m not sure what to make of a lot of it. I want to believe but I’m not there yet.” A woman in her twenties who identified as a believer responded to this, saying “I know what you mean. I mean, I said I believe and I do in a sense. I think there is something but I’m not sure what it is. So in a sense I’m uncertain.” Uncertainty, rather than firm belief, emerged as the dominant posture toward ghosts.

Similarly, when I spoke with participants about their belief, many expressed a high degree of uncertainty. However, this uncertainty was marked by a desire to believe. In fact, many participants saw their participation in the ghost hunt as an act intended to secure their belief (ideally) or disbelief (less ideally). When I asked one participant, a woman in her forties who had driven two hours to attend the commercial ghost hunt, if she believed in ghosts, she replied, “I’d like to [believe]. At the moment, though, I don’t know. I’ve seen some things but I’m not convinced. Maybe I’ll get some evidence tonight!” The participant cast her belief in temporal terms. At that moment, she did not believe; however, she hoped that emerging evidence would change that. Participants’

31 This was a fairly typical breakdown of believers, skeptics, and undecided, based on my overall fieldwork.
engagements with belief demonstrate the degree to which commercial ghost hunts act as a “liminoid” state (Turner and Turner 1978). Here the host and participants imagine transformation as a key facet based on belief and they accept that ghost hunts are the sites of these transformations. This engagement with belief seems to me to do the most to identify commercial ghost hunts as a form of pilgrimage.

I also think that Turner’s idea that liminoid phenomena have a voluntary component is apt here, too. “Liminoid phenomena,” he wrote, “tend to be more idiosyncratic, quirky, to be generated by specific named individuals and particular groups – ‘schools,’ circles, and coteries…they have to compete with one another for general recognition and are thought of at first as ludic offerings placed for sale on the ‘free market’” (Turner 1974b: 208). This describes commercial ghost hunting to a tee. Companies sell commercial ghost hunts to willing consumers who consider the variety of available options on the market before selecting one. The explicitly commercial nature of these transactions does not negate their significance for participants.

Ultimately, Turner argues that the liminal is more thoroughly transformative than the liminoid. Pilgrimages, which typically entail the hope for transformation, are examples of the liminoid. Participants on commercial ghost hunts desire a transformation from non-believer to believer contingent on the production of evidence; however, the commercial ghost hunts seem unable to yield the transformations they desire.

Conclusion

As anthropologists have demonstrated, attempts to engage people’s actual beliefs often lead to a problematic terrain ripe with guesses and suppositions about the interiority
of others (Keane 2008b; Luhrmann 1989; Needham 1972). My intention in this chapter has been not to suggest that belief in ghosts differentiates ghost walks from commercial ghost hunts. Rather, what I have tried to demonstrate is that a quest for belief, a desire to believe, distinguishes the two forms. In ghost walks, belief is incidental. Tourists purchase these tours hoping for entertainment and perhaps historical education. Transformation is absent there. In commercial ghost hunts, many participants explicitly hope for the evidence necessary to transform them from doubting skeptics to believers in ghosts. In a very real sense, their journeys to pubs in Nottingham, museums in York, or castles in Newcastle are secular pilgrimages and, as Turner and Turner (1995) have made clear, not all secular pilgrimages in modernity are successful or transformative. This speaks to their very liminoid nature. The differences between ghost walks and commercial ghost hunts demonstrate the perils in assuming that any and all engagements with ghosts traffic in similar notions of the ghostly or belief. Clearly, the paranormal or ghostly engenders different types of belief and reasoning for different people.

Clearly, belief is a highly variable concept for people interested in ghosts. Belief is seemingly the simplest for ghost walk participants. They either believe or do not believe in ghosts. They seem to know from the start where they fall. For people who buy commercial ghost hunts, it is more complicated. Many of them see these commercial ghost hunts as a chance to foster belief. Indeed, these events function as a form of pilgrimage which, they hope, generates the experience or evidence necessary to transform them into believers. In both cases, the status of belief remains unchallenged. For both sets of actors, ghosts are a matter of belief. This is a far cry from investigators’ fraught
struggles over belief, evidence, and science, and their inability to assert an ontology of ghosts with any degree of certainty.
In this dissertation, I have mapped the constitution of the “paranormal investigator” as a viable amateur expert and examined the ways in which investigators struggle and fail to research and understand ghosts. The social practices of paranormal investigators display a poignant struggle over ideas of belief, science, and evidence. It is a struggle that is never entirely resolved. In this dissertation, I have argued that paranormal investigators are unable to articulate a new or authoritative body of knowledge about the paranormal confidently because of their anxieties over belief, evidence, and science.

In Part One of this dissertation, I examined the arena of paranormal knowledge production and contextualized it within the anthropology of science and the anthropology of the otherworldly. In Chapter One, I positioned this project in the anthropology of science and the otherworldly. In Chapter Two, I described my methodological approach to the project. In Chapter Three, I mapped the competing actors and groups involved in producing paranormal knowledge. I showed that paranormal investigators compete for legitimacy with Spiritualists, parapsychologists, psychical researchers, and ghost hunters. I demonstrated that while paranormal investigators have emerged more recently than many of their competitors, they are enjoying a period of public popularity.

In Part Two of this dissertation, I examined the investigators’ contradictory epistemologies and knowledge practices. In Chapter Four, I considered paranormal investigators, parapsychologists, and skeptics’ understandings of belief. I showed that
these groups share a remarkably uniform understanding of belief as an untenable way of knowing despite their dissimilar projects and competing ideologies of research. Indeed, for each group, deploying the term “believer” was tantamount to an insult. In Chapter Five, I explored the ways in which people construct the identity of the “paranormal investigator.” In their attempts to self-fashion themselves as “paranormal investigators,” investigators become ensnared by their paradoxical understanding of the boundaries of evidence and experience. They struggle with how to convert embodied experiences into what they consider to be objective knowledge and, ultimately, they fail.

In Chapters Six and Seven, I provide a close analysis of how investigators manage two of their idealized investigative “tools”: mediums and technology. I show that in both instances, investigators remain profoundly uncertain about how to best manage and deploy these “tools” while also maintaining contradictory understandings of their evidentiary potential and tacit hopes of their revelatory potential. In Chapter Six, I examined investigators’ engagements with mediums, engagements that are fraught with tension and anxiety over evidence. There I demonstrated that investigators were uneasy with mediums’ full-hearted embrace of their embodied exchanges with the spirit world. Rejecting this engagement allows investigators to perform their commitment to an idealized understanding of science as a means of affirming their own rationality in light of pervasive public critiques from skeptics and other critics. In Chapter Seven, I explored investigators’ paradoxical consumption and deployment of technology. I show that investigators ascribe two potentials to technology: revelatory and documentary. While investigators theorize that documentary uses of technology offer the most reliable and viable forms of evidence they more commonly use it in its revelatory capacities.
Ultimately, investigators are caught between their tacit desire to believe and the explicit need for scientifically grounded evidence.

In Part Three, I consider the dynamics of collective identification, community building, and production of expertise among paranormal investigators. In Chapters Eight and Nine, I examine the dynamics of their expertise. Chapter Eight focuses on the role of the popular television show *Most Haunted* in enabling the formation of their identities as investigators. In that chapter, I tried to complicate pervasive understandings of the role of media consumption in generating “paranormal belief.” I demonstrated that investigators’ consumption of *Most Haunted* cemented pre-existing interest in the paranormal and offered a repertoire for constructing their identities and expertise as investigators. In Chapter Nine, I examined investigators’ use of online networking as a means of crafting their expertise. The Internet provides a performative space for investigators to enact their expertise by crafting identities and solidifying their repertoire of facts.

The final two chapters examined the emotional consequences of paranormal investigators’ epistemological stance as well other paranormal enthusiasts’ alternative ways of approaching the paranormal. In Chapter Ten, I closely analyzed paranormal investigators’ self-effacing humor and demonstrated that, despite their very able crafting of expertise, community, and identity, investigators maintain lingering doubts and concerns about their own legitimacy. Their deployment of humor poignantly demonstrates their internalized anxiety over the legitimacy of their expertise and even their rationality. In Chapter Eleven, I moved away from my close analysis of paranormal investigators and focused instead on the more touristic components of the ghost craze: participants on commercial ghost hunts and ghost walks. This chapter demonstrated that
these ghost enthusiasts, unlike investigators, maintain a profoundly different understanding of belief and, ultimately, embrace it as a viable way of knowing the paranormal. This stance allows them to enjoy their encounters with the paranormal unabashedly while, nonetheless, building a body of personally meaningful evidence that can sustain their positions as believers or disbelievers. Ultimately, participants in commercial ghost hunts and ghost walks do not fall victim to the ideological conundrum that traps investigators.

**Scientism, Secularism, and the Plight of the Paranormal Investigator**

As has become clear throughout this dissertation, scientism – the fantasy and suspicion that science can and should explain the entirety of the world – both enables and condemns investigators’ endeavors. Despite their explicit suspicion of institutionalized science and popular scientism, investigators fall victim to a sneaking sense of dread and doubt that whatever they try to do will not work. There is no evidence capable of successfully submitting to the demands they imagine science to make. Despite their most earnest endeavors, investigators cannot shake the sense that science – in their minds an objective way of rendering the world knowable – invalidates their attempts to understand the paranormal. It renders mediumship untenable and personal paranormal encounters irrelevant. As their humor indicates, it even intrudes on investigators’ own sense of self. Scientism appears to have a life of its own and permeates their various pursuits. I have
demonstrated the multiplicity of ways in which science and scientism shape their endeavors in the second part of this dissertation.

Scientism is often thought of as a practice of extension by which people adopt the mantle of science to explain things beyond science’s proper scope (Peterson 2003; Stenmark 1997). Critics often view such extensions with great suspicion, suspecting that such extensions are deliberate manipulations of science’s popular power and prestige (Gould 1999; Scott 1997). For example, critics (Shanks 2003; Spuhler 1985) have asserted that people mask fundamentally religious ideologies in the language of science, for example, as in the case of Creation Science or Intelligent Design. The assumption that these acts are straightforward manipulations of power is deeply problematic. Such an interpretation would constitute paranormal investigators as manipulators who seek to bolster their own authority and expertise by relying on science. I hope that I have crafted a more nuanced depiction throughout this dissertation. Investigators’ practice is grounded in a form of scientism, certainly; however, this scientism is a double-edged sword. They hope for objective renderings of the world grounded in science while fearing that science illegitimates the entirety of their project.

Paranormal investigators are caught between belief, a way of knowing they construe as illegitimate, and science, the way of knowing that they prefer. Of course, to an outsider, this is a false dichotomy. There are many other ways of legitimately knowing (e.g. the social sciences and humanities) that would offer potentially more viable ways of making sense of mediumship and embodied experiences; however, investigators do not turn to such ways of knowing. They remain focused on belief and science.
What can explain paranormal investigators’ persistent focus on this constructed dichotomy between belief and science? The theme of secularism has lurked at the edges of much of my analysis in this dissertation and it offers a partial contextualization and understanding of the phenomena. I want to suggest, following others, that scientism is a symptom of secularism, which generates paranormal investigators’ persistent doubt. Indeed, science and scientism are deeply tied to secularism. Articulating a widely held view, philosopher John Caiazza argues that “the triumph of the secular in our [North Atlantic] culture is largely the result of the triumph of empirical science” (2005: 13). While others have fairly criticized such a view (Haught 2005), it persists in important ways in public culture and scholarly analysis.

Secularism offers an important historical and political context for considering commitments to science as well as suspicions of belief. Indeed, metadiscourses of modernity construct the increased explanatory power of science and the decreased dependence on religious belief as the driving forces of secularism. Secularism is a historically situated metadiscourse grounded in the North Atlantic world about how things will or should be (Asad 1993, 2003; Cannell 2010; Latour 1993; Taylor 2007). As Talal Asad (2003) has argued that progress and the presumed ability to know nature and to progress define liberal secularism. He notes that ideologies of secularism support particular hegemonic ways of living. A commitment to science, as a tool of progress, and unbelief as a way of orienting one’s self to the world are central among them.

As I noted in Chapter Four, the project of paranormal investigating unfolds against a backdrop of decreased identification with organized religions in England. Scholars have broadly commented on the (purportedly) increasing secularization of
Britain (Bruce 1996; Davies 1994). So, secularism, in addition to acting as an ordering discourse, also seemingly describes the sociological reality.

Charles Taylor’s (2007) analysis of secularism offers a compelling lens through which to examine the proliferation of new forms of engagement with spiritual or invisible worlds. Although he comes dangerously close to asserting that there is a universal desire and search for religious experience, what he calls “fullness of life,” his idea that people, or at least some people, are interested in such encounters has merit. For Taylor, even in the secular world, people seek out encounters that affirm the “fullness of life.” While these are not called religious, Taylor argues that they are fundamentally similar to religious experiences. As a variety of modes of North Atlantic New Age faith, magic, and witchcraft make clear, some people reject the rubric of religion but they still engage in acts that anthropologists are apt to label religious (Battaglia 2005, 2007; Brown 1997; Hetherington 2000; Lurhmann 1989; Pike 2001; Riches and Prince 2000; Riches 2000). These engagements appear less fraught with indecision and doubt than those of paranormal investigators. Battaglia (2007) has even remarked on the pleasures attending these techno-spiritual engagements.

It is tempting to conclude that paranormal investigators are similarly engaged in a process of looking for the “fullness of life” through their encounters with the paranormal, that their project is fundamentally religion masked as “science.” I do not think this is the case. Unlike the assorted New Age groups I mentioned above, investigators never craft a coherent belief system based on their engagement with the paranormal. Their project is marked by pervasive doubt and uncertainty. They doubt orthodox science. They doubt mediums. They doubt their own embodied encounters.
I want to return again to science. The rise of science as an organized way of knowing has often been associated with increased secularism or disenchantment. Many scholars had predicted that with the proliferation and growth of science there would be a decline in magical and religious thinking (Bostridge 1997; Greeley 2009; Tylor 1970[1874]; Weber 1946). Of course, this is not the case (Bowler 2001; Evans and Evans 2008). Despite the increased public profile and authority of science, religion persists in a variety of forms. Historian Owen Davies noted that “instead of thinking of the modern period as an age in which the mass of the population has advanced from a state of supernatural credulity to one of scientific rationality, we must look at it as a period in which expressions of ‘irrational’ belief have continued by a process of translation” (1999: 295). Davies’ emphasis that such engagements are not straightforward acts of “supernatural credulity” or “scientific rationality” is useful and allows for the nuances of social engagement with science. However, as Fenella Cannell reminds us “the idea that the relative truth claims of religion and science can be somehow settled in straight contest is clearly strong” (2010:88). Indeed, there has been a well-documented boom in popular writing to that end (e.g., Dawkins 2000; Gould 1980; Sagan 1996). I suspect that pervasive ideas about secularism give rise to a debilitating brand of scientism. Investigators’ orientation toward research is a symptom of such understandings of good subject-hood in secular modernity. They eschew belief in favor of a research method grounded in skeptical doubt.

In short, scientism fuels investigators’ doubt. This doubt is not limited to their embrace of “science” at all costs. It also configures their understanding of proper or appropriate selfhood. Throughout this dissertation, I have made it clear that investigators
cannot come to terms with their own embodied encounters with the paranormal nor can they come to terms with mediums’ performances of mediumship. The implicit notions of self as “porous” and open to external influence that underpin such performances deeply distress them. Their deep commitment to Cartesian doubt as the ultimate method of science prevents them from taking such encounters as forms of evidence. Accepting the validity or reality of these embodied encounters would constitute a form of belief and investigators are not prepared to adopt belief as a way of knowing.

As I argued in Chapter Six, there is a model of selfhood privileged in popular imaginings of good science: a “buffered” sense of self (Taylor 2007). Investigators, who are deeply committed to conceiving themselves in this way, reject what Taylor called the “porous selves” of an earlier Enchanted era. These commitments to science and with it “buffered,” rational selfhoods do not easily accommodate sustained encounters with ghosts. Making sense of ghosts – deeply uncanny beings whose nature is difficult to define – becomes untenable. Their scientism renders them unable to navigate their project successfully.

The Extension of Expertise and Questions of Knowledge

As their project makes clear, the mantle of the expert proves far more readily popularized than personally persuasive. As I have shown in Chapters Eight and Nine, investigators have crafted an identity for themselves and they have transformed the Internet into a resource for crafting the epistemic modalities that come to define their practice. Indeed, the public is interested and not entirely hostile to their endeavors. People ask them questions and treat them as experts. Business owners permit them to investigate
their establishments. People invite investigators into their homes and look to them for answers to their suspicions that their houses are haunted. Their performance of expertise is, at least partially, publicly persuasive.

Personally, however, investigators are never able to convince themselves of their genuine expertise or of the reality of the paranormal. They remain uncertain and unconvinced of the nature of the paranormal and of the ideal method of studying it. As I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this dissertation, an insidious brand of scientism prevents it.

That their expertise is popularly persuasive but personally unpersuasive is fascinating. While sociologists of expertise have often treated expertise as something that select people “have” or become endowed with through education or training (Collins and Evans 2002, 2007), Carr (2010) has persuasively argued for thinking of expertise as interactional and performative – an approach I have tried to adopt throughout this project. Indeed, it seems obvious that anthropologically engaging what Collins and Evans (2002, 2007) have called the third wave of science studies – the extension of expertise – demands such a performative approach.

Members of the public embrace (at least partially) paranormal investigators as expert authorities on the paranormal, much to the chagrin of parapsychologists and psychical researchers. However, this ability to perform and maintain expertise does not translate into personally persuasive encounters with the paranormal. Despite their apparent public expertise, paranormal investigators remain uncertain about the fundamental questions about the paranormal.
The Recurring Problem of Not Knowing

As has hopefully become clear, investigators in the end agree on very little. They agree that there may well be paranormal forces in the world and that orthodox structures of power – science and government, for example – collude to obscure them. Most investigators agreed on this before beginning their investigations. Most investigators, however, never come to find the evidence they desire: irrefutable indications that ghosts or the paranormal exist.

In the process of struggling to research ghosts, investigators illuminate a set of rarely visible, partially understandable figures. These are not ghosts, for the most part; rather, they are the power structures with which investigators struggle, the ones they resist, and those with which they comply. Throughout this dissertation, I have tried to illuminate the hegemonic discourses of science that limit their creative possibilities.

Some readers may be surprised that the project of investigating is not curtailed by the absence of potential paranormal experiences. I have shown that this is not the case. Investigators routinely experience slightly odd sensations, their technology suggests a variety of presences (both natural and supernatural), and the mediums with whom they collaborate offer their evidence. For investigators, none of this ever constitutes a compelling or acceptable form of evidence. The nature of reality does not constrain them in these endeavors; rather, ideologies of belief and science do.

I want to return to the question of the realness of investigators’ experiences briefly. Throughout this dissertation, I have refrained from dwelling on it. I have refrained from commenting on the legitimacy of investigating or the reality of their experiences. However, for a moment, I want to return to the nature of investigators’
“paranormal experiences.” I want to suggest that these experiences are real. They are certainly real to the investigators. As such, there is no inherent reason that investigators should be unable to find a system of meaning able to account for them. Other people do. Many people in England and elsewhere report instances of mediumship, spirit possession, and religious trance without the staggering doubt and insecurity that marks investigators’ attempts to make sense of these anomalous encounters. Their experiences are real – at least in the sense of “social facts” (Durkheim 1982).

Investigators’ project is marked by a concerted desire to constitute such experiences in the realm of objective, real knowledge. They are not religious, for investigators and investigators do not wish to see them as matters of belief. They want an objective understanding of them. This desire is not entirely new, as I have mentioned. Their inability to find such a framework is new.

Their inability to find a satisfactory means of positioning their varied experiences of paranormality reveals several dimensions of the nature of science, objectivity, and facts. That investigators are unable to articulate a coherent schema for constituting their experience as objective and examinable does not attest to the “correctness” of their understanding of science nor of the “scientific literacy” of the public; it reveals the hegemonic power of science and an associated way of making facts. Latour (1993, 1999, 2010) explores the “belief in naïve belief.” He has argued that “moderns” have come to think that fetishes, constituted by “ naïve belief,” are “fabrications” while “facts” are not. Investigators are thoroughly modern, in Latour’s sense. They eschew belief in favor of facts. Because the subjects of investigators’ queries are “tangled objects” (Latour 2010:

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1 This is not to say that I necessarily think ghosts are causing the experiences.
investigators remain confounded, unable to convert their fragmented experiences into the facts they desire. Their desire for facts is thwarted and they are left with claims that are seemingly transparent in their fabrication.

The Future of Paranormal Investigating?

The particular focus of this dissertation – paranormal investigators and their epistemological struggles – is deeply historically situated. As I prepared to leave England in late 2009, and as I wrote this dissertation during 2010 and 2011, I began to realize that what I was struggling to describe and understand might well be a historically fleeting phenomenon that I encountered during its dwindling years.

During the course of writing this dissertation, the terrain of the paranormal arena in England shifted again. The television series *Most Haunted* aired its last episode (for the time being at least) in 2010. My interlocutors emailed me to inform that there was a decline in paranormal investigating. Investigating groups that had hosted numerous investigations that were instrumental to their research as well as my own fell into obsolescence. Formerly active discussion forums fell into near silence. Friends emailed me to complain that it was no longer financially viable to investigate; instead, they were reduced to purchasing tickets to ghost hunts. These changes concerned me. I feared that the subject of this dissertation, already assumed by many to be unworthy of scholarly attention, would be illegitimated further by the slow collapse of investigating. I worried fleetingly that I was producing something reminiscent of “salvage ethnography” (Gruber 2)

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2 There is an active Internet campaign demanding its return – just another instance where the blurring of fiction, documentary production, popular authority, and online networking converge.
1970) – albeit something some anthropologists and critics were less than delighted to preserve.

There are practical reasons for this decline. The economics of investigating is constantly evolving. During the course of my fieldwork, it became increasingly expensive for groups to access sites, particularly well-known and desirable ones. For pubs, hotels, and museums that once embraced paranormal investigators as a novel way of possibly increasing exposure, the novelty had worn off. They now sometimes charged high fees. Commercial ghost hunting companies and groups that aspired to become commercial companies compounded this. Sites were frustrated that investigation groups might profit off their largess and they demanded to be cut into the financial dealings which, in turn, diminished the possibility for non-profit investigation. The global economic recession also deeply impacted England further compounding the financial pressures of investigating. Most investigators are unable and unwilling to pay exorbitant fees (sometimes hundreds of pounds) to investigate. They continue to conceive of investigating as something that they should not have to pay to do. For them, it is research and not leisure.³

I cannot help but think that there is more at work here, nonetheless. I suspect that investigators’ systematic deconstruction of their own experiences as well as of science, belief, and evidence can lead to a degree of burnout among investigators. I received an email from a friend in the field, Molly, who had become frustrated with investigating.

³ Ironically, investigators’ complaints about ghost hunters and commercial ghost hunting companies curtailing their capacity to investigate echo the complaints psychical researchers leveled at them (as I described in Chapter Two).
The investigation group that she belonged to had not recently conducted any investigations nor had they scheduled any. She wrote to me:

I did go on the [commercial] ghost hunt on Friday [with her friend]. It was alright. It was good to get out and do something. [The paranormal investigation group that she belongs to] has nothing lined up at all this year and I just wanted to do something. It wasn’t as bad as I expected it to be. Was alright. They weren’t cut [caught] up in the whole science business and the like. You know what I mean. They were just there for ghosts. It was sorta nice. I might do it again if [her group] doesn’t get it together.

While Molly did not expound on what made the experience “sort of nice,” I suspect that it was the freedom from post-investigation deliberations, contestations, and shared self-doubt. Molly, as I have mentioned, genuinely “wanted” ghosts to exist. She explicitly wanted evidence that would allow her to assert that they did exist. Commercial ghost hunts are designed to engender an experience with the ghostly. They do not traffic in documentary deployments of technology, only revelatory ones. They do not worry about the legitimacy of mediumship. They simply present it and allow participants to make up their own mind. Evaluating the “experience” was left as a private matter after the event and perhaps there is a measure of comfort in that (from the epistemological quandaries of investigating). They allow themselves to be “naïve believers” (Latour 2010). While they do not think of it in these terms, perhaps there is an element of rebellion present in that analytic move. As I demonstrated in Chapter Eleven, there certainly is an appeal in that.

When journalists, anthropologists, investigators, parapsychologists, and skeptics reflect on ideas about the paranormal in the language of belief, I have shown that it is an
analytic move intended to distance the speaker and render the believer slightly less than fully rational – the sort of subject suitable to be discussed and dissected. This analytic move – so closely tied to scientism – while intended to free the speaker to think and analyze with greater freedom does not do so.

The Specter of Science

This dissertation has attempted to show that scientism, then, is the specter of science. It haunts investigators. Its invisible and unwelcome presence disrupts their ability to know and investigate. It permeated investigators’ every intellectual and practical turn. Their attempts to domesticate science into a research tool – an understanding of science that I have argued is more closely aligned with actual or orthodox scientific practice -- were rendered futile by scientism and a desire for a holistic way of knowing rendered inconceivable by scientism.

The (brief) era of the paranormal investigator may come to a close. This does not, however, render the principal problem of this dissertation – the relationship of science and belief to evidence – irrelevant. I think that the subject of this dissertation matters deeply. During the period in which I researched and wrote this dissertation there were a number of scientism flair-ups that struck close to home: Stephen Hawking declared that the universe created itself, leaving no room for a creation driven by god; the American Anthropological Association became embroiled in a public controversy regarding the removal of science from its long-range plan, sometimes mistakenly referred to as its mission statement; and the University of Illinois group called Atheists, Agnostics, and Freethinkers generated public controversy for their chalk drawings of the Prophet
Mohammed. These may seem like individually distinct events and certainly far removed from the situation of English paranormal investigators that I have described throughout this dissertation. I do not think that is the case. I think a common thread of scientism links them. In each case, the fear seems to be that other modes of knowing cannot co-exist with science. In my work with paranormal investigators, I have tried to map the fears and hopes that mark scientism.

Anthropologists have done extraordinary work in understanding how scientists pursue their projects and constitute their “cultures of no culture” (Traweek 1988). We have done less to understand scientism or popular understandings of science. We have not translated our complicated understandings of science --as always situated and partial yet also able to grapple with the materiality of our world-- into equally complicated public understandings. The North Atlantic world currently bears witness to a number of extensions, contestations, and manipulations of science. It is my hope that anthropologists will attend more seriously to these manifestations of the extension of science and popular scientism.
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