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**OCCAM'S BEARD: BELIEF, DISBELIEF, AND CONTESTED MEANINGS  
IN AMERICAN UFOLOGY**

**BY**

**WILLIAM J. DEWAN**

B.S., Anthropology, James Madison University, 2000  
M.A., Anthropology, East Carolina University, 2002

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy  
American Studies**

The University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

**December, 2010**

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this dissertation is to critically examine the emergence, maintenance, evolution, and dissemination of belief traditions in New Mexico and the United States that are most commonly associated with the UFO phenomenon. This critical analysis incorporates theoretical frameworks from a multitude of interrelated disciplines, including folklore, history, anthropology, popular culture studies, sociology, and psychology. The primary goal of this dissertation involves the attempt to formulate a typology of UFO accounts in American culture, and how said accounts are interpreted, communicated, and publicly evaluated. To achieve this end, a database of UFO-related experiences was compiled in New Mexico and accompanied with a sample of extensive firsthand interviews from New Mexico and other parts of the United States, collected from 2007 to 2009. These data were analyzed for both their correlation to socio-demographic variables, and for patterns and variations in narrative form and content.



The findings of this dissertation suggest that personal experience narratives—or memorates—containing UFO-related content remain relatively common among a sample New Mexican population. Utilizing an interdisciplinary approach, the overarching explanation for this commonality involves the complex interplay of a variety of social factors, including: the continued presence of Cold War-related anxieties and cultural paranoia; the ubiquitous presence of UFO and alien imagery in American popular culture; broad-based public mistrust in the scientific establishment; the usefulness of the phenomenon in modern “technospiritual” reconciliations; the occasional presence of a seemingly core experience comprised of near universal characteristics, and the influence of UFO-centric cognitive models in the perceptions, interpretations, and reconsiderations of said experiences. These findings further suggest that many proponents of UFO-based belief traditions publicly position their opinions against a hostile skeptical community. To gain further insight into this competing perspective, a sampling of self-professed skeptics were interviewed in 2008. Their attitudes about the UFO phenomenon and other anomalous belief systems generally supported the idea of a broad competition in which proponents and skeptics grapple over cultural authority regarding public consensus on normative belief and experience in American life. The UFO phenomenon remains a key component in this public struggle, while continuing to symbolize deeper social anxieties involving issues of scientific ethics, governmental secrecy, racial disharmony, and spiritual hybridity.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Situated Aliens

I am a man: I hold that nothing human is alien to me.

-Terence  
Roman comic dramatist (185 BC - 159 BC)

When I first began asking Daniel questions about UFOs (Unidentified Flying Objects), my uneasiness with the situation increased tenfold.<sup>1</sup> Minutes earlier, I had arrived at his house with notebook and tape recorder in hand, ready to finally begin my long series of interviews with various individuals who claimed to have had any number of strange sightings of objects or lights in the sky. Since this was my first “house call,” I was naturally a bit apprehensive. I wanted to be fully prepared with a series of set questions, but I also wanted the interview to be organic enough to allow for various (potentially useful) side tangents. I was also a bit unsure of the proper tone to take with my line of questioning: do I maintain stoic neutrality throughout the interview, or do I allow myself to express moments of awe, incredulity, sympathy, or skepticism in reaction to his narrative? Either way, I figured that my initial apprehension was quite understandable, and merely compounded by the fact that I was entering a stranger’s house to talk to him about aliens. Once the interview began, I told myself, these anxieties would quickly dissolve.

Unfortunately, my initial nervousness was dwarfed by Daniel’s. As we sat down in his office, he immediately began fidgeting at his computer, half looking at me, half looking at his screen. When I turned on the tape recorder and started asking questions (“What were the basic circumstances surrounding your sighting?”), he became increasingly agitated: starting, stopping, stammering, murmuring, backtracking, and sweating. He then asked me to stop the

tape recorder (which I did), and requested several minutes to collect himself. Daniel decided he needed to know more about me. I rattled off basic information, including my department and research interests. Yet this didn't seem to satisfy him. He wanted to know more about *me*, and why I might be so interested in UFOs and aliens.

I was a bit befuddled by this, and began stammering myself. Fairly soon, however, I came to the now obvious conclusion that Daniel was about to impart several very personal experiences to a stranger, and because of that he wanted to know a bit more about the person firing questions at him. Did I believe in UFOs? Did I believe in ghosts? Was I there to psychoanalyze him? Was I there to ridicule him? Daniel simply wanted to establish some basic semblance of trust and familiarity before getting into a discussion of the world as he experienced it. Trying to maintain honesty, I gave him the somewhat cryptic response of, "I do not necessarily *disbelieve* in them." Although this answer seemed less than completely satisfying to him, Daniel appeared comfortable enough at that point to proceed.

And proceed he did, for several hours. My initial apprehension gradually evolved into incredulousness, skepticism, and even worry. Daniel had witnessed UFOs on multiple occasions. He produced several grainy photos on his computer screen as proof. But his experiences hardly ended there. He talked about seeing various entities and creatures on road trips. He thought the government was transmitting behavioral regulations into people's minds through cell phone towers, and that 9/11 was an inside job. NASA was even hiding artificial structures on Mars. Furthermore, it seemed that almost every place he had lived in was haunted, particularly the present one. He shared stories of inexplicably shaking beds, objects being moved around or knocked down by phantom forces, and ghostly apparitions

appearing in the hallway. Supposedly, the prior owner of the house had passed away due to cancer, and was none-too-happy about the presence of the current occupants.

As Daniel rattled off more and more bizarre incidents and conspiracies, my supposedly noncommittal, nonjudgmental attitude dissipated, and I began to mentally tick off a number of possible psychological disorders that might account for his peculiar worldview. I was in this admittedly distracted state when Daniel abruptly invited me to ask the ghostly presence in the house a question for the tape recorder. I awkwardly agreed, then sat silently for several seconds trying to think of an appropriate question to ask a ghost. I finally settled on, "If there is a presence here with us in this room, please give us a sign." We waited. Nothing. Daniel then assured me that I would have to go back and listen to the tape for any possible electronic communications. Just then, Daniel looked down at the floor and let out a slight gasp. I followed his gaze, and noticed two small screws lying on the floor. He stated that they had just fallen out of the desk tray. We both found this occurrence unusual given the timing, and he further assured me that, having assembled the desk himself, the screws had been put in tightly.

I wasn't quite sure what to think. Was Daniel pulling a prank on me? Had the screws simply fallen out much earlier? Was Daniel merely a better storyteller than carpenter? Or was it simply an odd coincidence? I considered each of these explanations in rapid succession (and still do now), and yet, at that moment, Daniel's work room became part of the realm of the uncanny. I found myself now nervously glancing around the room, checking for moving shadows or cold drafts of air. In at least one part of my mind, I was no longer merely sitting through a long interview in a stranger's house. I was now a disrespectful and perhaps *unwelcome* guest in a haunted house. As Jodi Dean (1998) described the

transformation of the reality of alien abductees, so too did I allow a transformation of seemingly mundane, disconnected occurrences (screws falling out of a desk tray, a towel rack falling down in the bathroom), into a strange web of anomalous experiences that collectively suggested one thing: a supernatural presence indeed inhabited this living space.

This understanding of Daniel's worldview—in which belief languages, personal experiences, and the desire to create meaning all interact in complex ways—directly informs my academic approach to the topic of this dissertation: how people come to believe (or disbelieve) in UFOs, and the greater implications of professing such beliefs in contemporary American culture. In the pages that follow, I seek to address the complicated role the UFO phenomenon has continued to play in people's lives, basing my analysis on both the works of a multitude of researchers from a variety of academic disciplines, and from personal interviews conducted with individuals such as Daniel, who claim to have had their own anomalous experiences. The central issues I address are deceptively simple, including: exploring the factors that motivate interest—or, conversely, hostility—toward the subject of UFOs; the specific ways in which UFO experiences and their related systems of belief are promoted or rejected within a 21<sup>st</sup> century American context; and perhaps most crucially, articulating what is fundamentally at stake in the modern public debate about the reality of UFOs and extraterrestrial visitors as well as the social implications of promoting belief or disbelief in such possibilities.

This study was designed to elicit broad-based information on the UFO phenomenon in the interest of determining (1) the consistency and typology of UFO accounts in American culture and (2) how said accounts are interpreted, communicated, and publically evaluated. The specific objectives for data collection included a compilation of a database of UFO-



centric anomalous experiences in the United States, with a particular focus on experiences in New Mexico; and to collect a sample of more extensive first-hand accounts from the central New Mexico region as well as other parts of the country. The overall goals, objectives, and methodologies included in this dissertation are directly informed by my prior research in anomalous light experiences (Dewan 2006a, 2006b).

The analysis of my respondents' narratives necessitates the development of a system of categorization for their experiences, and thus one goal of this project has been to produce a general typology of UFO and other anomalous experiences, and how they may correlate with certain socio-demographic variables, including age, gender, and religious predispositions. A second analytical goal was to thoroughly investigate both the form and content of these narratives, with a particular focus on how UFO-like experiences may be framed, interpreted, and imbued with meaning based on the traditions of belief available to the individuals, and how such traditions of belief may themselves be impacted by personal experience.

What makes the subject of UFOs worthy of academic study? What is to be gained by examining accounts of UFOs, alien abductions, crop circles, cattle mutilations, and Men in Black? Mere public mention of these interrelated topics—which typically inhabit the broad body of lore in American culture housed within the umbrella term “UFO phenomenon”—may elicit a multitude of individual reactions, from awe and excitement to annoyance and ridicule. Yet whatever one's personal opinion on these subjects, it remains clear that UFOs and aliens maintain a ubiquitous presence in American culture, from the box office (i.e., *Avatar* and *District 9*) and television (i.e., “UFO Hunters” and “V”) to NASA's primary concern with finding life on nearby planets (or their satellites). Alien imagery may be found anywhere, in toys, posters, tee-shirts, and even saucer-shaped coffee shops. As Debora

Battaglia notes, this “deep familiarity” with UFO imagery in American culture helps establish an exotic, if common, sense of Otherness in our lives while blurring boundaries between science fiction and science fact, particularly in regards to UFO sightings (2005, 1-2).

This dissertation treats the UFO as an admittedly exotic entry point into a deeper examination of the dynamics of culture and belief. Wrapped up in the alien we find numerous attitudes and insights on a variety of social issues, and we possess many useful analytical tools at our disposal. First, an historical approach provides a crucial contextualization of the origins and evolution of the phenomenon. When did Americans first start seeing UFOs? What was happening in American culture during this time? How did the federal government’s response to UFOs relate to that of the public, press, and entertainment industry? By successfully addressing such questions, we may establish a firm context for UFO-related beliefs and representations in American life, including the various social factors that collectively served to mold common public understandings of alien ideas and imagery.

Such an approach on its own, however, paints a woefully incomplete picture of the UFO phenomenon. If the empirical elusiveness of the UFO mandates that scholars focus their attention on the individuals who see and believe in them, then an ethnographic approach provides a direct link to the personal attitudes, biases, cosmologies, and meanings conveyed by actual witnesses.

Academics continually tell us that, despite its undeniable prevalence and popularity in the public eye, this phenomenon—and other anomalous belief systems—inhabit what can be considered a “fringe” realm of belief in that they exist outside socially normative belief structures in American culture. Or do they? In a recent survey of college students, 53% agreed with the statement that the U.S. government had special knowledge of UFO sightings

(Biasco and Nunn 2000, 96). Past sociological studies have found that nearly one in five Americans reported frequent paranormal experiences, including déjà vu, ESP (extrasensory perception), contact with the dead, clairvoyance, and other experiences (Greeley 1975, 20-28). Indeed, such studies force us to call into question how we deem certain belief systems “marginal” or “normative.” Furthermore, although historians and psychologists continually assure us that supernatural or anomalous beliefs have taken on an increasingly diminished social function in contemporary society, these traditions nevertheless continually compete with the rationalist paradigm today, despite predictions of the demise of religion and supernatural beliefs over forty years ago (Bennett 1999, 9; Bullard 2000, 151). This continued popularity of UFOs may suggest that they themselves are clothed in a modern rationalistic philosophy in which the powers (and mysteries) of traditional spiritual deities are resurrected through technological means (Bartholomew 1991, 7-8). Specifically, they remain similar to traditional religious belief systems in that, as with all religious beliefs, they generally seek to answer questions that cannot be explained in terms of what we understand to be objective knowledge (Lehmann and Meyers 1997, 2). Public *perception*, however, marginalizes these beliefs in that they typically do not adhere to established Judeo-Christian cosmologies nor rationalist, empirical approaches to observing the world. This is why they are framed as *alternative*. Therefore, although many Americans subscribe to various proponents of these belief systems, in the public realm they remained marginalized.

As with other works in cultural studies, my focus on the fringe (perceived or otherwise) status of UFO beliefs is not meant as a mere glorification of the margins and peripheries of society (Bhabha 1994, xi). Yet an examination of these margins—in this case, the alien—reveals the ultimate literal and symbolic “Other” so often reflective of various

social concerns over race, gender, sexuality, class, nationhood, cultural paranoia, spirituality, and the future of humanity. Whether our encounters with the alien arise cognitively or empirically, we cannot help but perceive them through specific terrestrial filters, and the various meanings we each ascribe to the alien will be entirely dependent on our own complex cultural identities. Thus, it is this filtering process and subsequent generation of meaning which should be of foremost interest to the humanities and social sciences. When these meanings are finally excavated, we often find that the alien allows for, in the words of Debora Battaglia, “the freedom to part company with normative social structures,” as well as “imagining new forms of relationality and knew ways of knowing—and thus of agency and empowerment” (2005, 12). In other words, the alien narratives discussed in this dissertation—while certainly conveying personal attitudes about the aforementioned social concerns—are near uniform in their tendencies toward expressing ideas about the struggle to control knowledge in contemporary American life (Brown 2007, 4).

In 2010, although academic studies of UFOs have certainly not become commonplace, they have nevertheless increased in their frequency and variety. During much of the early Cold War era academic discussions about the subject were largely limited to physical scientists and aviation experts (Hynek 1972; Klass 1968, 1974; Menzel 1953, 1963; Ruppelt 1956; Sagan and Thornton 1974) who debated the likelihood of UFO sightings as representative of extraterrestrial visitation. Gradually, a handful of individuals within the social sciences and humanities expanded this discussion, with the early notable works of psychologists (Festinger et al. 1956) and historians (Jacobs 1975), turning their attention to the individuals involved in the developing phenomenon. By the 1980s, folklorists (Bullard 1989; Dégh 1977) began situating UFO encounters within older folk traditions, sociologists

(Westrum 1977) became interested in examining skeptical responses to the phenomenon, and psychologists (Haines 1979) turned their attention to the rationality of UFO witnesses (Bartholomew 1991, 2).

After Whitley Strieber's bestselling 1987 book *Communion* helped popularize alien abductions in American culture, academic focus predictably shifted in its direction.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, psychologists led this charge. While a handful of these researchers—notably Harvard psychiatrist John Mack (1994, 1999)—were sympathetic to so-called abductees, the vast majority of psychologists predicated their research on the assumption that literal kidnappings of human beings by extraterrestrials was unlikely, if not impossible. Therefore, they were free to focus on the mental state of abductees. During the 1990s, psychological studies of alien abductees turned out a variety of possible explanations for their accounts, including temporal lobe epilepsy, fantasy-prone personality disorders, and sexually masochistic desires (Newman and Baumeister 1996; Ross and Newby 1996; Spanos and Cross 1993). Some cultural critics—notably Elaine Showalter (1997)—followed this cue, and included alien abduction narratives among other modern “hysterical epidemics” (i.e., Gulf War Syndrome, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome) created out of a mixture of journalistic irresponsibility and psychogenic illness. More recent psychological research, while moving away from singular explanations for abduction accounts, nevertheless continues to frame such accounts as the products of combinations of mental disorders, sleep disorders, and scientific ignorance (Clancy 2005).

Most other academics also shifted their focus to abduction narratives. Folklorists (Ellis 2003; Hufford 1995) have noted consistent experiential components of abduction accounts that share core similarities to other folk traditions, while religious scholars (Denzler

2001; Scribner 2007) note the structural and functional parallels between contemporary UFO beliefs and more traditional religious cosmologies. Some researchers (Dean 1998; Matheson 1998; Sentes and Palmer 2007) looked at these narratives as reflections of human anxieties in an increasingly technological age. More recently, academics such as Bridget Brown (2007) have argued that abduction narratives—although seemingly less popular in post-9/11 American culture, nevertheless primarily represent *internalized* expressions of exclusion and marginalization in multiple aspects of modern American culture, and offer up “sobering counterpoints” to the more popularizing narratives concerning the Space Age, the Cold War, globalization, and the Information Age (2007, 5). Relatedly, recent anthropological focuses on the subject frame abductions and other UFO-related beliefs as attempted reparations of various disabled social connections in human lives, providing marginalized individuals with political or spiritual capital that modern American culture has otherwise suppressed (Battaglia 2005).

While such academic treatments of the subject move beyond binaries of belief and disbelief to the arguably more important historical, symbolic, and political aspects of aliens and UFOs, they are near universally partial and narrow in their analytical scope, and often unintentionally reinforce many dominant cultural attitudes about the subject that they wish to problematize. For instance, in discussing the underlying meanings within abduction narratives, Brown (2007) is refreshingly honest about her disbelief in literal kidnappings of humans by extraterrestrials, yet contends that abductees express very down-to-Earth oppositions to dominant discourses on environmental, technological, and sexual politics in American life. Yet, in some ways, Brown’s work ironically serves to bolster the marginalized status of UFO beliefs in American culture, including her professed disbelief

(such stories cannot be literally true), her assumption of historical and cultural particularism (abduction narratives as partially symptomatic of post Cold War/pre 9/11 American attitudes), and focus on abduction narratives specifically (as typical of UFO experiencers). In their desire to map the boundaries of a shared “UFO community,” most contemporary researchers—even those sympathetic to their respondents—continually work to reinforce popular perceptions of such individuals as “different,” “on-the-fringe,” or even as exhibiting pathological behavior. As Diana Tumminia points out, scholars interested in ufology continually seek out definitions of UFO communities, and in the present moment have settled on nine distinct (if overlapping) groups, including: (1) “freelance” skeptics and other unaffiliated parties; (2) investigation organizations, both sympathetic and skeptical (e.g., MUFON and CSICOP); (3) the “myth-making” of popular media, including magazines (*Fate*), books (*Communion*), radio and television programs (*Coast to Coast A.M.*, “The X-Files”), the internet (uforia.com), and films (*The Fourth Kind*); (4) general believers in extraterrestrial and paranormal phenomena; (5) psychotherapeutic support networks (i.e., abduction support groups); (6) individually-renowned psychics and mystics (e.g., George Adamski, Ramtha); (7) religious groups (e.g., the Aetherius Society, Heaven’s Gate, Raelians); and (8) science fiction fandoms such as the “Trekkies,” who have developed quasi-religious beliefs about extraterrestrials based on popular culture representations (2007, xxiii).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, these groupings fail to encompass any category of *experiencers*, although such individuals may be assumed to be synonymous with general believers.

Although the existence of these groups and their importance in the formulation and development of a broader UFO community should be of obvious interest to researchers, the underlying insistence on articulating such a community—particularly in contrast to a larger

outside community unfamiliar with ufology—subtly reinforces popular notions about normal versus eccentric activities, interests, and beliefs. One underlying message is thus perpetually reinforced in nearly all academic treatments of UFOs: such beliefs and experiences are not common in American culture.

Although my work here challenges this longstanding, often unspoken presupposition, it nevertheless borrows liberally from the aforementioned theoretical frameworks. While, individually, I maintain that such approaches tend to revert to reductionistic models of social reality, the various academic arguments referenced and discussed throughout this study almost universally remain useful, and, indeed, *true* in an objective sense as promoted by Donna Haraway's conception of "situated knowledges" and limited locations of investigation, in which we allow for simultaneous critical inquiries that, although superficially appearing as contradictory at times, ultimately lead to more complete, holistic accounts of a "real" world (1988, 579). In other words, the bodies of work produced about UFOs by various psychologists, folklorists, historians, anthropologists, religious scholars, literary critics, and sociologists have collectively produced a rich, even astonishing picture of the formulation, maintenance, and reshaping of a complex contemporary tradition of belief. Yet, as John Saliba (1995) has noted, since the UFO phenomenon resists easy categorization, its study cannot simply be housed within a single academic discipline (quoted in Tumminia 2007, xxxi). What remains to be done is to put such approaches in dialogue with one another. Hence, a primary goal of this project is to critically examine contemporary UFO beliefs from an interdisciplinary, integrated perspective that considers multiple theoretical perspectives and incorporates a variety of analytical tools from various academic disciplines.



This study treats the subject of UFOs as a dynamic and revelatory area of academic interest. No attempt will be made here to promote the reality of extraterrestrial visitations or sinister government conspiracies. Conversely, I do not wish to directly challenge or refute such realities. This agnostic position is undertaken for several reasons. First, although forthrightness concerning one's personal opinion about such subjects promotes the admirable academic virtues of transparency and self-reflexivity, I maintain that *a priori* determinations of the nature of UFO experiences have continually narrowed and oversimplified most academic treatments of the subject. For instance, if a researcher remains convinced of the reality of extraterrestrial spacecraft visiting Earth, he will likely be much more inclined to de-emphasize, distort, or outright ignore the symbolic aspects of UFO experiences, and construct overly literal interpretations of personal experiences. On the other hand, researchers who categorically reject non-prosaic explanations for UFO sightings continually fall into the habit of reducing such experiences to singular causes—causes that all-too-often tend merely to reflect the particular interests of the researcher in question.

A second reason for this agnostic positioning has to do with the fact that attitudes about belief and disbelief are *themselves* major areas of study here. Folklorically, I treat both proponents of alien visitation and paranormal “debunkers” as inhabiting a broader continuum of belief language, in which all players abide by certain sets of shared cultural categories (e.g., natural/supernatural, rational/irrational) in order to publically communicate their ideas. In this context, *contestation* between competing attitudes of reality takes on central importance. To summarize, then, I do not wish to promote any one explanation for the reality of UFOs or related topics, since such a presumption both invites reductionistic

research and undermines my examination of the underlying (and surprising) similarities in the attitudes conveyed by the parties involved.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to this academic agnosticism, I do not wish to imply here that the UFO phenomenon is distinctly “American” in its formulation and present propagation. As I will point out in later chapters, the appearance of strange aerial objects, lights, and even humanoid beings did not originate in 20<sup>th</sup> century America, and UFO-like experiences are continually reported all over the world. However, I am largely in agreement with scholars like Bridget Brown, who maintain that the UFO phenomenon (in its present form) exists in part as an American “export,” as with other “mass-produced cultural forms” (2007, 11-12).<sup>5</sup> In other words, I will promote the idea here that popular global conceptions of the UFO phenomenon were initially formulated through a distinctly American ideology.

Perhaps most crucially, this dissertation presupposes that any academic treatment of the subject of UFOs will tell us much more about social realities than about aliens, spaceships, or government conspiracies. The crafts, lights, and entities included in these narratives are best understood as windows, mirrors, or canvases for very down-to-Earth, *human* concerns over race, sexuality, gender, class, religion, government, and science. Furthermore, an examination of the traditional *lack* of academic and scientific attention devoted to UFOs can reveal fascinating insights into the politics of science and Western assumptions about what we consider to be rational, normal, and real (Bartholomew 1991, 1).

In the chapters that follow, I provide an integrated approach to understanding the often overwhelming variety of social factors involved in contemporary American beliefs and attitudes concerning the UFO phenomenon. This interdisciplinary perspective aims to reveal how belief—unlike bacteria colonies—cannot simply be isolated and singularly scrutinized,

lest academics (like believers and disbelievers) simply reduce the study of the phenomenon to an alien mirror of their own specific disciplinary interests. In Chapter 2, “Flying Saucers, the Cold War, and Cultural Paranoia,” I explore the historical origins of what we in America have come to label the UFO phenomenon. While acknowledging the adherence of the phenomenon to similar archaic traditions from around the world (addressed in part in Chapter 5), I contend that the rise of sighting reports in America during the late 1940s and 1950s represented, if partially, a literal manifestation of public anxieties arising out of the early Cold War era. Specifically, public and government concerns over communist infiltration of American culture, newfound fears over nuclear annihilation, ethical critiques of the scientific enterprise, and the dawn of the Space Race collectively created a cultural environment conducive to the UFO phenomenon and a related culture of conspiracy to take hold of the public imagination.

Chapter 3, “New Religions and Celluloid Invaders,” continues the historical contextualization of UFO beliefs, with a focus on both the religious aspects of early UFO beliefs and the parallel growth of alien invasion films in the 1950s. First I explore the earlier historical roots of the UFO “Contactee Movements” in the highly racialized teachings of 19<sup>th</sup> century Theosophy, tracing the growth of the movement into its more familiar “New Age” forms in the 1970s and 1980s. Here, I seek to reveal the quasi-religious elements of early UFO beliefs, and how these elements gradually merged with more conspiratorial ideas in the alien abduction narratives of the present day. Next, I examine the introduction of alien invader-themed science fiction into the public imagination, arguing that the attributes of celluloid aliens continuously reflected then-present social anxieties throughout 20<sup>th</sup> century

American culture. I also discuss the ambiguous, curious relationship such films had (and continue to share) with the behavior of alien inhabitants described in UFO reports.

Chapter 4, “A Survey of UFO and Paranormal Experiences in New Mexico,” presents a fundamental shift in focus by moving away from the motivations and anxieties behind historical belief in UFOs, to an examination of reported frequencies of such experiences in a local sample population. In this chapter, I discuss the results of a survey conducted in New Mexico that challenges long-held academic assumptions about the marginal status of anomalous experiences. Rather than promote cultural determinism as the primary element in the continuation of beliefs surrounding the UFO phenomenon, I contend that the results of the survey indicate the relative “commonality” of reported anomalous experiences in sample populations. This further supports the idea that the marginalized or stigmatized status of UFO and paranormal experiences in public culture masks their seemingly frequent appearances in everyday life, and that such experiences may hold a primary role in why associated belief systems maintain themselves in 21<sup>st</sup> century American life.

The experiential components of belief that are excavated in Chapter 4 are themselves resituated within existing folk traditions in Chapter 5, titled “The Dynamics of UFO Folklore.” In this chapter, I consider UFO experiences from a traditionally folkloric approach by first focusing on their emergence out of older, broader folk traditions. Moving beyond the historically particularistic focus on Cold War American culture, this approach locates the UFO phenomenon as part of a broader, older belief language involving supernatural, spiritual, and quasi-religious traditions. I then turn to a folkloric analysis of personal accounts collected from various anonymous respondents during the course of my survey research, particularly examining how witnesses contextualize their personal

experiences within the contemporary belief languages available to them, and furthermore how spiritual, religious, or scientific meanings are subsequently ascribed to them.

Chapter 6, “Memory, Culture, and Experience,” represents a continuation of many of the ideas explored in Chapter 5, but with the incorporation of various approaches derived from recent research in the field of cognitive anthropology. Specifically, I first consider memories of UFO experiences as inherently cultural reconstructions, again turning to the narratives provided by my respondents to explore the relationship between remembrance, meaningfulness, and cultural schemas. Next, I examine how these respondents draw on various, sometimes conflicting cultural models when grappling with “troubling” anomalous experiences, and how they in turn communicate their mediated narratives to a potentially skeptical audience.

Finally, in Chapter 7, “Skepticism and the Scientific Ideology,” my analytical focus shifts from the belief language formulated out of UFO experiences to so-called “traditions of disbelief.” Here, the contemporary culture of skepticism is traced back to its historical roots in experimentalism, as well as its development in response to a growing disconnect between scientific practice and public education. Furthermore, I examine the specific ways in which contemporary skeptics frame anomalous beliefs and experiences as marginal, pathological, and inherently dangerous. Ultimately, this underscores my contention that traditions of belief and disbelief inhabit a public “battleground of contested meanings,” in which various figures and organizations provide competing narratives for the constitution of normative belief and experience in American culture. In addition to historical texts and media, the data for much of this chapter comes from interviews with scientists and skeptics living and working in New Mexico.

Although the academic approaches utilized throughout this dissertation are typically divided by chapters and subject matter, they should not be treated as mutually exclusive perspectives or mere alternative positions. Rather, I intend them to be conceptualized as individual, yet *interconnected*, components of a broader, more holistic perspective on the role the UFO phenomenon has played (and continues to play) in American culture. While such a complicated approach might be read as “schizophrenic” (in the words of Bridget Brown) in its focus, I prefer to think of my reading as ever expansive in its considerations (2007, 6). In the conclusion, “Re-centering the Sideshow,” I place these interconnected approaches in a more direct dialogue with one another in an attempt to move closer to this holistic perspective, while carefully avoiding sweeping pronouncements informed by Haraway’s “God Trick,” or an infinite, objective vision of social realities (1988, 582). Rather, the vision I promote is less godlike and more insectoid: the compound eyesight of a housefly from within. With this in mind, our compound gaze will first be drawn to the historical peculiarities of 20<sup>th</sup> century American life that served as the backdrop for the alien invasion.

## Chapter 2

### **Flying Saucers, the Cold War, and Cultural Paranoia**

Secrecy, being an instrument of conspiracy, ought never to be the system of a regular government.  
-Jeremy Bentham

Mother, should I trust the government?  
-Pink Floyd

Any attempt to examine the appearance, dissemination and evolution of the UFO phenomenon in America culture must begin with a discussion of the specific historical contexts in which these beliefs arise. Although sightings of strange aerial phenomena and encounters with mischievous humanoid beings are not confined within national borders nor to specific periods in time, the acceleration of UFO experiences and their associated beliefs in the United States clearly coincided with the beginning of the Cold War. This critical period in American culture gave rise to an amalgam of public anxieties, conspiracy theories, new religious movements, and popular culture artifacts that collectively laid the foundation for the modern UFO phenomenon. In this chapter, I will first discuss the formative stages of modern cultural paranoia and conspiracy, and explore how this method of thought both reflected and challenged the burgeoning social anxieties surrounding communism, nuclear annihilation, scientific progress, and the ever-increasing secrecy of the national security state. Next, I will examine early government and public responses to the UFO phenomenon, and specifically address how official U.S. policy toward the investigation of UFO sightings both marginalized the subject as a “fringe” topic and gave rise to conspiracy narratives regarding increased governmental secrecy.

## **Paranoia and the Atomic Bomb**

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, nearly every historic event bears an associated conspiracy theory. The 9/11 tragedy, Hurricane Katrina, the Oscars, the success of the New England Patriots, and almost every recent presidential election have all faced the scrutiny of a paranoid gaze. Cyndy Hendershot has argued that, particularly during troubled times, paranoia offers both individuals and collective culture a sense of relief in its ability to craft a narrative of meaning and control. In other words, she argues that conspiracy narratives effectively create coherent, holistic connections within seemingly chaotic national and global political systems (1999, 3). For instance, recent conspiracy narratives connecting the Bush Administration to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 structurally reposition the administration in a coherent, if wholly malevolent light. In a time of political and economic uncertainty, 9/11 conspiracy narratives such as *Loose Change* (dir. Thomas Hefferon, 2006) provide a much-needed sense of order, structure, and careful calculation within an American bureaucratic system that is anything but. Furthermore, conspiracy thinking and public paranoia born out of the Cold War and carried into the postmodern world are, according to Peter Knight, less likely to be about alarmist fears about disruption of the normal social order. Instead, he contends, they give rise to suspicions that *the normal order of things amount to a conspiracy* (2000, 3). It is with this reconceptualization in mind that we must approach the rise of such thinking within the context of the Cold War. The bureaucratic compartmentalization of the federal government coupled with the formulation of the military-industrial complex during this period helped ignite a gradual, if powerful shift in how many Americans articulated a variety of social fears.



Indeed, any examination of contemporary alternative belief systems in American culture--ranging from the alleged U.S. government cover-up of a spaceship crash near Roswell, New Mexico, beliefs about government involvement in the Kennedy assassination, Zionist attacks on Black America, and Communist infiltration of the U.S. government--must begin with an assessment of the impact of Cold War politics and policies on broader public ideologies. Many, if not most of these beliefs thematically share the basic proposition that *those in power presumably do not have the interests of the general public in mind*. Of course, such an assumption is hardly a recent or specifically American notion. Some historians, such as Robert Goldberg, contend that conspiracy thinking and a permeating sense of public paranoia arrived with the first English settlement in the New World, with early colonists immediately suspecting both friends and strangers of secret alliances, from the Salem witch trials in New England to the 18<sup>th</sup> century fears of “black conspiracy” that resulted in the proactive killings of 29 blacks in New York City in 1741 (2001, 1-4). The argument could be made that the founding of the American Republic occurred amid fears and suspicions harbored by both British and colonial leaders, with early American leaders well-versed in political intrigue handed down to them from British politics (Knight 2000, 2). Indeed, conspiracy fears were even rampant during World War II, with writer Charles Beard surmising that Franklin Roosevelt manipulated the Japanese into bombing Pearl Harbor to justify the entrance of the U.S. into the war (Goldberg 2001, 18). However, the advent of the nuclear bomb and the beginning of the Cold War era ushered in a completely new series of public anxieties that served to both ramp up conspiracy thinking and usher in new attitudes about America’s place in both the global and cosmic spheres.

Clearly, the Cold War stood out as the singularly most important component of this “Era of Uncertainty.” Nuclear munitions were stockpiled by both the United States and the Soviet Union, yet the era remained haunted by the threat of war rather than war itself. Forgoing all-out physical confrontation between the sides, the proxy war was instead compromised of propaganda, psychological warfare, and limited regional wars. Despite possessing a newfound ability to eradicate humankind, both the United States and the Soviet Union ultimately avoided this apocalyptic scenario (Jeansonne and Lurhssen 2006, 269). The cultural tensions created by this threat, however, weighed heavily on American minds.

After the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japanese soil in 1945, the arms race rapidly accelerated. By 1949 the Soviets had detonated an atomic bomb of their own, and Americans countered this achievement with the development of the hydrogen bomb in 1952. One year later, the Soviets again followed suit. As Glen Jeansonne and David Lurhssen point out, these competing bomb tests became so powerful that their value lay primarily in their ability to create anxiety among adversaries (2006, 269-270).

Competing visions of nuclear utopias and catastrophes became the source of much anxiety and debate in both the public and private sectors. Even supposed “peaceful applications” of atomic energy worried commentators such as James Reston of the *New York Times*, who feared that the application of the new technology would create “mass unemployment” rather than “mass leisure” and ultimately usher in an era that would mirror the economic hardships of the 1930s. Similarly, socialist leaders such as Max Lerner painted nightmarish pictures of enormous, all-powerful corporations harnessing the power of the atom and ruling the planet (Boyer 1994, 141,143). Furthermore, the participation of many of America’s leading scientists in the Manhattan Project created fears that the military would

recruit the best scientists from American universities with the fundamental aim of the development of advanced weaponry. In a broader sense, questions were raised concerning the impact of weapons of mass destruction on American democratic values (1994, 145).

As Paul Boyer states, however, perhaps the greatest impact the atomic bomb had on the American psyche was the accompanying disillusionment with scientific progress. While some commentators saw the “intellectual brilliance” of the achievement as a model for the advancement of the social sciences (“the social sciences should utilize the same methods of natural scientists to catch up to their achievements”), many others believed the creation of such a destructive device served as a complete refutation of the Enlightenment belief that scientific advancement of human knowledge would bring greater collective prosperity to the world at large (1994, 230). Anxieties over this issue were put on prominent display in many of the nation’s newspapers. Writing in the *Chicago Defender*, W.E.B. DuBois lamented the union between science and destruction and forecasted science as a potential enslaver of humankind. In a 1945 radio address, Rockefeller Foundation president Raymond B. Fosdick noted that the public was now more frightened of science than at anytime before, and that the scientific search for truth had “brought our civilization to the brink of destruction” (1994, 269). Such fears could not simply be chalked up to public paranoia, as scientists themselves later acknowledged their often unquestioning attitudes toward such research. For instance, George B. Kistiakowsky, chief of the explosives division at Los Alamos, later reflected on his involvement in the Manhattan Project: “There was no organized movement at Los Alamos to stop the bomb use. I changed my mind afterwards but I was very much influenced by the military estimate of what would happen that summer” (Hendershot 1999, 25).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, even before the actual construction of the bomb itself, the integrity of the physicists

involved was comprised by their fear of the Nazi war machine. After Leo Szilard and Enrico Fermi had discovered large neutron emissions in Fermi's laboratory at Columbia University (suggesting that the creation of an atomic bomb might be possible), Szilard proposed in a March 1939 letter to his fellow physicists John Wheeler, Leon Rosenfeld, Niels Bohr, and Edward Teller that secrecy on the matter was needed, and that they "must induce all physicists to stop all publicity about fission." In Szilard's mind, the publication of nuclear research in open journals could aid the Nazi's own potential nuclear research (Paglen 2009, 80-81).<sup>7</sup> Clearly, the concerns of DuBois and Fosdick were not without merit. And while Paul Boyer acknowledges that these attitudes toward science may not have been as ubiquitous as some historians have contended, he maintains that "the coming of the atomic bomb did influence in important ways the cultural standing of scientists and the scientific enterprise" (1994, 274).

At least early on, most Americans remained apprehensive of the destructive capabilities of the technology itself, rather than the men behind its invention. For instance, church leaders armed with newfound fears of nuclear destruction began returning to visions and prophecies of the apocalypse. While the earliest Christian leaders had believed that God's judgment and destruction of humanity on earth was imminent, over the centuries this apocalyptic emphasis had faded. Yet the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki suddenly gave Biblical accounts of the destruction of the planet a new resonance. Christian commentators such as Edward L. Long began both warning of imminent annihilation and criticizing a "secular worldview" that championed faith in historical progress and the assurance that the life of the group would outlast the life of the individual. As Boyer notes, evangelists who had for centuries evoked images of Hell and damnation now had a much more potent series

of images at hand: atomic war (1994, 237-239). Even scientific commentators couldn't resist invoking religious language in their appraisal of the impact of nuclear weapons on society as a whole. After witnessing an early nuclear test, the scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer invoked Vishnu's lament from the *Bhagavad-Gita*: "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds" (McKee 2007, 33).<sup>8</sup>

These resurrected social anxieties were manifested in much science fiction and fantasy of the early 1950s, and these popular culture artifacts will be discussed in Chapter 3. Fears over the impact of nuclear technology became interwoven with those concerning both the system of secrecy and classification of such technology created through the Atomic Energy Act of 1946 and the formulation and practices of the military-industrial complex created through the National Security Act of 1947. The Atomic Energy Act—which created the civilian Atomic Energy Commission—continued the research practices of the Manhattan Project by establishing the norm that all subsequent information relating to nuclear weapons was “born classified” in the interest of maintaining the secrecy of scientific research in that field. In other words, research data on nuclear weaponry would not appear in public journals. Patents related to nuclear weapons were specifically kept under the commission's control. Nuclear weaponry and the scientific research behind it was now covert and classified (Paglen 2009, 185).

The National Security Act, which reorganized the United States' armed forces and established the first peacetime intelligence community in the nation's history (Central Intelligence Agency), essentially laid the groundwork for the modern American military and intelligence community, with the broader intent of the containment of global communism (Powers 1995, 191).<sup>9</sup> Truman's Doctrine, announced months earlier to Congress, held the

central argument that the ideology of the Soviet Union was inherently disturbing the world order, making U.S. intervention into global affairs imperative. The ideas behind this doctrine were heavily influenced by State Department official George Kennan, who envisioned Soviet communism as a tool for Russian imperialism (1995, 198).<sup>10</sup>

American leaders were primarily concerned with the potential impact of communist ideology on the American way of life. According to Jeansonne and Luhrssen, Communism rapidly became the most messianic secular ideology of the twentieth century through both conversion and conquest. It was based primarily on the idea of working class loyalism over nationalism, even though it was led in all its major manifestations by nationalists.

Communism almost universally “imposed a command economy, prohibited religion, banned free speech and free elections, and taught ferocious pride in competition with the West...” (2006, 270).

Truman’s commitment plan to combat this communist threat included the devotion of \$300 million to arm Greece, as well as \$100 million allocated to aid Turkey, both of which were approved by Congress. Such financial investments symbolized Truman’s broader goal of utilizing American defense forces to protect any nations threatened “internally” or “externally” with communist aggression. This policy of containment, earlier apparent in the Marshall Plan, had its ideological roots in Keenan’s “long telegram” and in his article in *Foreign Affairs*. For Keenan, it was imperative that the United States explore all avenues in containing the Soviet bloc within its existing borders. Containment through attrition became the primary foreign policy strategy for nearly every American president during this period (2006, 271).

This reimagining of the U.S. position in global politics had the effect of spreading fears of communist infiltration and infestation within the domestic realm. The specter of Communism haunted nearly all aspects of American life, and the list of those devoted to its eradication included “legislators and judges, union officials and movie studio bosses, policemen and generals, university presidents and corporation executives, clergymen and journalists, Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals” (Whitfield 1991, 1). Although this response is often characterized by historians as a gross overreaction, Stephen Whitfield argues that Communism, in part, was a threat *to* the United States, if not within. While small pockets of Communists indeed existed within the American population, their numbers were too small to meaningfully impact the social and political spectrums. Even with evidence of some “infiltration” (actors, producers, or academics admitting to attending party meetings) in Hollywood and in universities, Whitfield notes that Communist Party membership in the United States totaled roughly forty-three thousand in 1950, with that number decreasing to thirty-two thousand one year later (1991, 4). Clearly, many within the federal government imagined an invasive, menacing presence that remained largely without basis in reality.

However real or imagined this communist threat remained, the biggest factor contributing to the red scare was the Soviet detonation of their own atomic bomb and the subsequent end of the American nuclear monopoly. For many Americans, this meant that the best way to defeat Communism was with the use of catastrophic violence. In the summer of 1949, even before Truman’s public announcement of the Soviet Union’s nuclear capabilities, Gallup polls showed that 70 percent of Americans *disagreed* with the government’s pledge

not to initiate atomic war with the Soviets (1991, 5). For many Americans, it appeared that pacifism was not among the lessons to be learned from the Second World War.

Ultimately, however, debates over the usage of nuclear weaponry took a backseat to very real changes in American domestic life. In fact, as Andrew Ross argues, Kennan's analysis of the communist threat can be read more as a prescription for domestic policy rather than foreign policy. The "Red Menace," infamously obsessed over by Senator Joseph McCarthy, provided a template for "postwar hysteria about aliens, bugs, pods, microbes, germs, and other demonologies of the Other that pervaded the culture and politics of the fifties" (1989, 47). Ironically, in order to combat the threat of Communism, many Americans seemed willing to compromise the very civil liberties the Red Menace threatened. As

Whitfield states:

Since NATO would not come to the rescue of Eastern Europe, at least some politically suspect writers could be kept from traveling to Western Europe. Since breath could not be restored to all the victims whom the N.K.V.D. murdered, at least some Hollywood screenwriters could be sent to prison. Since the Korean War was a stalemate, perhaps the Cold War could be won at home. And also because few citizens could sustain a lively interest in foreign policy, anti-Communism was intensified on American soil (1991, 9).

In many ways, it appeared that the aggressive actions of domestic anti-communism reaped more immediate, discernable results than various foreign entanglements.

The pathologizing of communism led to comments such as those of Attorney General J. Howard McGrath, who lamented that the Communist was infiltrating all aspects of American society, from factories to butcher shops, everywhere carrying with him "the germs of death" (Ross 1989, 47). In his State of the Union address in 1954, Dwight Eisenhower even proposed depriving Communists of their citizenship. A national poll taken after the address showed that 80% of the population agreed with the president, while 52% believed all



Communists should be jailed. Perhaps even more alarming was the fact that 42% of those polled believed that no member of the press should be allowed to criticize the American government (Whitfield 1991, 15). Artists were among those Americans most closely scrutinized, and critiques of the politics of art became standard and pervasive. As the public increasingly became unable to freely engage in the “marketplace of ideas,” the United States slowly began to resemble “the very society to which it wished to be contrasted” (1991, 11).

Within the political sphere, fears originally born out of anticommunism were soon transposed onto other social groups and associated issues. Lisa McGirr reconstructs a history of the conservative movement created out of a curious mixture of Cold War paranoia and a regional anti-eastern mentality. One key consequence of this mixture was the creation of a regional “gospel” of laissez-faire capitalism and anti-Washington strain, and by the 1960s the movement had adjusted away from fears of Communism to contemporary issues of sexual liberation, abortion, gay rights and general “domestic corruption.” Additionally, the enemy responsible for these ills was no longer an international or political opponent, but liberals in the community (2002, 226). Enemies from the outside were beginning to be accompanied by perceived enemies within.

Indeed, the Cold War was not simply about international affairs. It most readily affected politics, culture, and the media *within* the United States. Free speech was compromised, and tolerance of anyone perceived to be favoring radical ideologies became severely limited in the hopes of preventing Communist sympathies (Jeansonne and Lührssen 2006, 275). And yet paralleling notions of outside infiltration of communism into American life was the increasing sense of secrecy emanating from the newfound National Security State. During and after World War II, projects such as the development of biological

weapons, the importation of Nazi scientists, mind-control experiments, and assassinations all occurred within an increasingly secretive U.S. Defense and Intelligence establishment that now had bountiful access to both official and undocumented amounts of money.

Structurally, civilian oversight of these operations, including presidential control over the military, Congressional oversight of the CIA, and Justice Department control over the Federal Bureau of Investigation was undermined by the compartmentalization of information created by varying levels of information classification (i.e. “Top Secret”). As Richard Dolan notes, one of the most famous consequences of this compartmentalization occurred in the 1950s, when President Dwight Eisenhower “effectively” lost control of the nation’s nuclear arsenal and remained unaware of America’s nuclear retaliatory plan until his final year in office (2002, xxiii-xxiv).

In fact, Eisenhower spent the majority of his second term attempting to curtail Congress’s efforts to increase spending on defense, education, and social programs. However, Eisenhower was quick to find that the generous spending habits of Democrats were now being utilized by Republicans as well (Jeansonne and Lührssen 2006, 297). His farewell address included the famous warning to “guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought by the military-industrial complex.” Despite his hindsight warnings, his successor, John Kennedy, was already committed to increasing defense spending and expanding the military (Jeansonne and Lührssen 2006, 299). In fact, during Kennedy’s 1960 campaign he argued that *not enough* had been spent on defense (Whitfield 1991, 59).

Anxiety over perceived “enemies within” had already taken a stronghold. Even in the early 1950s, intellectuals such as William H. Whyte criticized large bureaucracies and C.

Wright Mills denounced the political and economic elite, while lamenting the lack of purpose of the middle class (Jeansonne and Lurhrseen 206, 327). Social paranoia, meanwhile, continually moved further to the political right in the form of the John Birch Society, a political organization opposed to the Civil Rights Movement and fearful of a coming socialist New World Order. Whitfield contends that the organization exemplified Richard Hofstadter's "paranoid style," or belief that history itself amounted to a greater, sinister conspiracy of power (1991, 42).

Yet another important historical development further complicated public anxieties over science and technology. By the 1950s, space exploration moved from humanity's dreams to reality. On October 4, 1957 the Soviet Union successfully launched the satellite *Sputnik* into space. This scored an important propaganda victory for the Russians in the Cold War by rattling American confidence in their own technological prowess while showcasing to the rest of the world Soviet power and ingenuity. American funding for missile research was quickly increased, and in 1958 Congress created the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), who themselves initiated Project Mercury, a manned space program, in 1959 (Jeansonne and Lurhrssen 2006, 295).

Jodi Dean makes the critical observation that at the dawn of the Space Race, NASA sought to distinguish itself as an open, public institution standing in marked contrast to American perceptions of a secretive, militaristic Soviet program (1997, 71). This public face of NASA, however, belied the creation of its secretive twin, the National Reconnaissance Office, which concerned itself with "inward" satellite surveillance of foreign powers in contrast to NASA's "outward" exploration of space (Paglen 2009, 124).<sup>11</sup> Yet due to the concerted effort made to convey NASA as a public, transparent institution, the organization's

birth, stumbles, and greatest achievements were all played out in the televisual sphere. For both ideological and financial reasons, NASA's fate was (and continues to be) ultimately tied to that of its television audience. This audience provided the program with a much needed sense of credibility: rockets could be observed blasting off into space, photographs could be sent back from the moon, and astronauts could be heard speaking from their capsules. Indeed, the idea that television viewership legitimized NASA's success was quickly picked up on by the news media, as evidenced by *Newsweek's* 1962 claim that John Glenn's historic space flight was second only to the Kennedy-Nixon presidential debates in terms of its global viewership (1997, 73-74). However, after the 1969 *Apollo 11* moon mission provided a peak period for public interest, viewership steadily decreased with subsequent missions. Clearly, the passive (yet fickle) television audiences of the 1960s were gradually moving on to different conceptions of space and its exploration.<sup>12</sup>

Most importantly, NASA's primary conceptualization and public presentation of space exploration reflected a familiar extension of American expansionism and colonialism. Space was pitched as the "final frontier" for a superior, democratic way of life. Much like the Wild West, it existed primarily as a place to be explored and ultimately conquered. However, a competing vision of space had already taken its own substantial hold in the public imagination. This alternative vision effectively inverted the roles of colonizer and colonized, indigenous and alien (1997, 19-20). Indeed, the UFO movement brought with it one of the quirkiest, yet *direct* challenges to the American government's authoritative stance in both the domestic and global realms.

## **The Rise of the UFO Phenomenon**

It is within this context of nuclear jitters, communist fears, the space race, and government secrecy that the UFO phenomenon came into fruition. As mentioned earlier, sightings of strange aerial craft certainly did not begin with the Cold War, yet the frequency of purported sightings increased dramatically after WWII.<sup>13</sup> During the war itself, the most celebrated anomalies were the foo fighters (a pun on the French word for fire, *feu*), which Jerome Clark describes as “a catch-all phrase encompassing a wide variety of flying phenomena reported in both the European and Pacific theaters by Allied and Axis troops.” However, sightings of these mysterious objects during the war were not limited to pilots in the war. A great number of sightings occurred in the United States, although they received much less official attention (1992, 379).<sup>14</sup>

After the war ended, reports of discs and cigar-shaped objects in the skies increased, particularly in 1946. Some of the best-known sightings included the “ghost rockets” seen over the Scandinavian countries that were feared to be secret Soviet weaponry. First reported over Finland in February, the objects were noted for their luminosity, erratic movements, and smoke trails (Gross 2001, 217-218). The Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* (July 15, 1947, July 16, 1947, September 3, 1947) reported a series of sightings of “ghost fliers” over the Oslo area from July through September of the year that were first explained as Norwegian airliners testing their landing lights. This hypothesis by the local media was gradually rejected in favor of experimental rockets as a more likely explanation. Sweden by far experienced the most sightings during this period, and by August, U.S. newspapers such as the *Washington Post*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *New York Times* were giving front-page treatment to the reports from Stockholm (Gross 2001, 217-218). Soon the U.S.

military was taking note, and in an October 1946 issue of the *Field Artillery Journal*, retired Army Colonel C.H. Lonzo speculated that the ghost rockets signified a Soviet reopening of former German experimental stations for guided missiles. That same month, an editorial by Robert Word in *Aviation News* (October 14, 1946) accused the Danish and Swedes of keeping a tight lid on the entire matter. Word, like Lonzo, feared the ghost rockets were bombs from an old German research center that was seized by the Russians. He further contended that all meteorite explanations were lies.

Later in the year, the United States took the sightings seriously enough to dispatch intelligence experts General James Doolittle and David Sarnoff to Sweden, although their conclusions remain unknown (Gross 2001, 218). After numerous sightings, the Swedish Defense Staff came forward with an estimate of the situation, declaring that some observations made could not be explained as natural phenomena, Swedish aircraft, or the observer's imagination (Clark 1992, 168-174). Sightings of odd cigar-shaped objects continued over Sweden and Finland through 1948, and U.S. Army Intelligence continued to fear that the Soviets were displaying secret weapons created in collaboration with captured German scientists (Thompson 1991, 3). Clearly, the seeds for American unease over unusual aerial phenomena (and their association with secret Soviet technology) had been planted immediately following the war.

The birth of the modern UFO phenomenon itself, however, is said to have begun with the 1947 sightings near Mount Rainier, Washington, by a United States Forest Service employee named Kenneth Arnold. Arnold, a pilot, was in the midst of searching for a missing plane on June 25<sup>th</sup> when he sighted nine bright saucer-like objects flying at an incredible speed between Mount Rainier and Mount Adams. Arnold returned to the Yakima,

Washington airport and told his story to several people there. Soon the press picked up the story and ran it in newspapers across the country. One local reporter named Bill Bequette allegedly captured Arnold's passing statement that the nine disk-shaped objects made an undulating motion like "a saucer skipping over water." Hence, the birth of the phrase "flying saucer." Following this sequence of events, people throughout the United States responded to Arnold's story with their own reports about anomalous objects seen in the sky (Thompson 1991, 1-2).

The UFO craze had begun, and, perhaps, unsurprisingly, given the fact that American citizens had spent a great part of World War II scanning the skies for Japanese and German planes and missiles. This tendency likely carried over into the 1950s with newfound fears of Soviet bombardment—this time in the form of atomic destruction. Tom Engelhardt notes that by this time, the skies were no longer just scanned by human eyes, but by advanced radar systems on the lookout for "ghostly blips" that could be anything from temperature inversions to spaceships to Russian attacks (1995, 104). Thus, anxious Americans (both the public and the government) continued to worriedly monitor the skies above them, and quite rapidly their imaginations traveled much, much further beyond their lines of sight.

After Arnold's 1947 sighting brought such experiences into the national spotlight in the U.S., the ensuing summer and fall of that same year produced a rash of reports around the country. It was during this time that the Roswell incident took place. The July 8<sup>th</sup> issue of the *Roswell Daily Record* reported that the remains of a flying disk had been recovered by an Air Force officer (Major Jesse Marcel) on a ranch outside of Roswell. Curiously, the *Roswell Morning Dispatch* reported several crashed disks in Texas on the same day. After this sensational story splashed across headlines throughout the country, the story was quickly

retracted by the Air Force on the following day, with the July 9<sup>th</sup> issue of the *Roswell Daily Record* reporting Brigadier General Roger Ramey's announcement that the debris was actually remnants of a radar weather balloon. This explanation was widely accepted by the press, and the Roswell incident was quickly forgotten and laid to rest for over thirty years (Peebles 1994, 10-11).

By this time, the Air Force had begun actively collecting and evaluating flying saucer reports. They had good cause. Again on July 8<sup>th</sup>, a multiple witness sighting of a group of silver-colored objects occurred at Muroc Air Base in California. The craft was sighted by both civilians and Air Force personnel who were present at the base, and each witness provided testimony to the sighting. This sighting, along with others occurring at White Sands in New Mexico, convinced the Air Force that flying saucers were a genuine problem, and most likely not the result of public paranoia (1994, 12).

By late September, Lt. General Nathan Twining had provided Brig. General George Schulgen with Air Materiel Command's (AMC) preliminary analysis of the saucer problem. Among other comments, Twining opined that the phenomenon was real and not visionary or fictitious; there existed the possibility that some sightings were of natural phenomena; reports of some objects indicated operating characteristics that included extreme rates of climb, motion, and maneuverability that must be considered *evasive* when contacted by American aircraft. Twining went on to offer several explanations for the craft, including top-secret domestic projects unknown to AMC or foreign craft (with possible nuclear propulsion) outside of the current domestic knowledge. Twining went on to recommend an Air Force directive that would assign a security class and code name for a detailed study of the phenomenon. He recommended the Air Force further prepare a set of data on the subject that



would be made available to, among other groups, the Army, Navy, Atomic Energy Commission, Air Force Scientific Advisory Group, and Rand Corporation (Twining 1947).

During this initial wave of sightings, Air Force concern mirrored speculation over the Ghost Rocket sightings from the previous year. Namely, it was feared that the sightings were of new Soviet aircraft. After World War II it was apparent that both the U.S. and Soviet Union had obtained data on the latest German technological developments, and this was cause for great alarm among military officials (Ruppelt 1956, 23). By October, General Schulgen was speculating that the disks were inspired by the “Parabola” designs of German engineers Walter and Riemer Horten, and that with their help the Soviets were building these flying craft (Schulgen 1947). A November report by the Counter-Intelligence Corps titled “Flying Saucers” reaffirmed this possibility and requested that the Europe CIC locate and interview all German aircraft specialists (including the Hortens) and test pilots that might have knowledge of such craft. The Hortens and others were located less than a month later, yet U.S. Army Intelligence found no evidence of production of “flying wing” craft nor any coordination with the Soviets. The report did leave open the possibility that others with knowledge of such experimental German craft could have passed information along to Soviet authorities (Pretty 1947).

Meanwhile, by early 1948, the flying saucers had taken a foothold in the public imagination. The January 1<sup>st</sup> copy of the *New York Times* acknowledged the 1947 wave of sightings and quoted University of Iowa psychologist Dr. C.C. Wylie’s concerns over the potential “mass hysteria” the saucers could bring about. Wylie contended that many pranksters were contributing to the saucer “legend,” and that a fanciful literature was thus building up. Later that month, the Joint Research and Development board, the government’s

top scientific body, was providing similar explanations for the saucer scare. Additionally, the *East Oregonian* (January 31, 1948) reported that a board spokesman had dismissed saucer accounts as mirages induced by mass self-hypnosis.

While the *New York Times* was attempting to assuage public fears, the Air Force was taking the flying saucer issue head-on. On December 30<sup>th</sup> of 1947, based on Twining's earlier recommendations, Air Force Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. L.C. Craigie ordered Project Sign to be set up under the AMC at what is now Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio (Clark 1992, 282). The project, which officially began on January 22, 1948, spent the majority of its early focus on a famous sighting that took place two weeks earlier on January 7<sup>th</sup>. Newspapers around the country, including the original January 7<sup>th</sup> article in the *Courier Journal*, were reporting that an Air Force pilot was killed in a plane crash while chasing a flying disk. On that day, witnesses near Louisville, Kentucky, saw a cone-shaped, silvery object approximately 250-300 ft. in diameter moving towards the south. The object was reported to the state police, who in turn called Goodman Air Force Base for further information. The flight controllers at the base went outside and provided visual confirmation, and subsequently radioed four Air National Guard F-51 planes to take a look. Captain Thomas Mantell, the lead pilot, spotted the object and went up to observe. As he climbed higher towards the object, it sped away and moved higher up. Captain Mantell had no oxygen equipment in his plane, but in his excitement he decided to climb to 20,000 feet to overtake it. Describing the object to controllers as metallic and "tremendous in size," Mantell soon lost consciousness, his plane crashed, and he lost his life (Jacobs 1975, 44-45).

Project Sign's explanation, which concluded that the object was Venus, was met with significant incredulity (Clark 1992, 282).<sup>15</sup> This official explanation began, according to

David Jacobs, an enduring theme in the UFO controversy: that the Air Force, in the minds of many, was conspiring to keep information about UFOs away from the general public (1975, 45).

Internally, Sign staff members grappled with many seemingly perplexing cases and thoroughly investigated the idea that the objects might be secret Soviet weapons. Although the likelihood appeared more and more doubtful, the Air Force refused to rule it out entirely. In an October 11<sup>th</sup> memo titled “Analysis of Flying Object Incidents in the U.S.,” Colonel Brooke E. Allen assessed Sign’s analysis of flying disk incidents up to that point, stating that some indiscernible flying objects were certainly being observed, and that it remained unwise, in the interest of national defense, to overlook the possibility that some of the objects could be of foreign origin. Allen went on to list possible reasons why foreign craft would appear so regularly over American skies, including: negating confidence in the atomic bomb as the most advanced and decisive weapon in warfare; photographic reconnaissance; the testing of U.S. air defenses; and conducting familiarization flights over U.S. territory. Even as late as December, 1948, there remained speculation that new types of Soviet guided missiles that incorporated rocket propulsion could be responsible for both the flying saucer reports and the ghost rocket sightings of 1946.<sup>16</sup>

As this position became increasingly untenable after extensive interviewing of German engineers, the idea came forward that if these objects were real, but neither Soviet nor American, and if their flight capabilities exceeded the state of technology at the time, perhaps they came from another planet. One group within Sign began to seriously entertain this possibility, while the other maintained all accounts could be explained as either psychologically induced delusions, or misidentifications of man-made or natural phenomena.

By late July of 1948, spurred in part by a multiple witness sighting of an object with “windows” streaking past an airliner over Alabama, the pro-extraterrestrial faction in Sign produced a Top Secret “Estimate of the Situation,” which, according to Capt. Edward J. Ruppelt, declared that the evidence pointed to interplanetary visitation (Clark 1992, 283). However, after the report was sent to Chief of Staff General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, the general decided the report lacked proof and sent it back to Sign. Several months later, it was allegedly declassified and burned (Ruppelt 1956, 45).

On November 3<sup>rd</sup>, growing impatient with Sign’s inability to identify the origin of the flying disk reports, Major General C.P. Cabell sent a letter titled “Flying Object Incidents in the United States” to the AMC in which he reiterated the “inescapable” conclusion that some type of flying object was being observed, and that the needs of the national defense required harder evidence in order that appropriate countermeasures could be taken. Cabell also noted that it would be necessary to inform the public as to the status of the problem, warning that the press was about to take matters into their own hands. Thus, official Air Force silence on the matter was no longer acceptable. On November 8<sup>th</sup>, H.M. McCoy of the AMC responded to Cabell’s query, stating that Sign had analyzed approximately 180 cases up to that point. Some of the objects reported were definitely identifiable as weather balloons, astro-physical phenomena (Venus), optical illusions, and hoaxes. McCoy conceded, however, that a certain number of reports remained without reasonable explanations. These reports were classified as “unknowns,” and the current available information suggested that these unknowns were not of domestic design. The possibility of extraterrestrial origin had not been ignored, but there was simply no supporting tangible evidence. McCoy went on to advise officials not to present information to the press without reasonable conclusions. If the press were to insist on

an official statement by the Air Force, he suggested that they be informed solely of the objects that had been positively identified as weather balloons or astral bodies.

Following this recommendation, Brig. General E. Moore sought authority from the Air Force Secretary of Defense to prepare magazine and newspaper articles dealing with flying saucer incidents. In a November 24<sup>th</sup> memo, Moore noted that *Saturday Evening Post* writer Sydney Shallet had been directed to write an article on the subject, and that Shallet had approached the Air Force Director of Intelligence for assistance in preparation of the article. While such publicity was considered “undesirable” by Air Intelligence, Moore stated if such articles were to be written, it would be less harmful to national interests if guidance was given by the Air Force. According to a November 30<sup>th</sup> memo from C.P. Cabell titled “Publicity on Flying Saucer Incidents,” this information was passed on to, and approved by Secretary of Defense James Forrestal.

A December 1948 report (known as Study #203 and titled “Analysis of Flying Object Incidents in the United States”) that was later released in April of 1949 by Sign did not reject flying saucers outright, acknowledging that it had been unable to explain twenty percent of the approximately 200 cases it had examined. Observers of the phenomena included U.S. Weather Bureau personnel, Air Force officers, civilian pilots, and commercial airline technicians. The report mentioned the possibility that U.S. sightings could have been influenced by the Scandinavian sightings of 1946, yet due to the quality of some observers, this remained unlikely. Descriptions of the objects were placed into three main categories: disk-shaped; cigar-shaped; and balls of fire. Furthermore, Sign felt that there *was* a discernable pattern of sightings, which appeared to intensify throughout states bordering the Atlantic and Pacific coastlines, as well as Ohio and Kentucky. Domestic and foreign origins

for some of the sightings were put forward, and included possible misidentifications of the XFSU-1 (Flying Flapjack) developed by Chance-Vaught, the Northrup B-35, and the turbo-jet powered Northrup YB-49.

The report concluded that since the Air Force was responsible for control of U.S. air defense, it was imperative that all other agencies cooperate in confirming or denying the possibility of a domestic origin for some of the sightings. Otherwise, it was noted, if a domestic origin was firmly rebuked, the objects *would* be considered a threat and would warrant more active efforts at identification and interception. However, the report added that enough incidents could be solved to “greatly reduce the mystery associated with these occurrences.” No mention was made of possible extraterrestrial origins (Clark 1992, 283).

By early 1949, The Central Intelligence Agency began monitoring the saucer phenomenon. A department memo (written on March 15<sup>th</sup> and titled “Flying Saucers”) circulated within the Office of Special Intelligence expressed doubt that “true” flying saucers could exist, since the Air Force and commercial airliners would certainly be aware of the problem. Furthermore, the memo posited that such craft over the U.S. would be too far away from native soil to be foreign craft. Instead, it was speculated that the wave of sightings of 1947 and 1948 were possibly due to some sort of “midsummer madness” among the general population or simply sightings of “asteroids.” This early inquiry by the CIA into the flying saucer phenomenon reveals that the agency was initially ill informed of Air Force investigations and the range of sightings occurring over the country. However, by the early 1950s CIA involvement in the study of flying saucers would quickly escalate.

Meanwhile, flying saucer sightings were dropping off considerably across the country. This coincided with an increase in the predominance of the skeptical influence

within Project Sign. More and more investigators were leaning towards the likelihood that almost all sightings could be explained as misidentifications of weather balloons and the planet Venus (Peebles 1994, 30). While a number of these investigators had formerly been “believers,” the negative response to the so-called Estimate of the Situation encouraged the attitude among investigators that flying saucers simply didn’t exist. This hypothesis seemed easier to prove, and more importantly, it received a much more positive response from the Pentagon (Ruppelt 1956, 58-59).

The Air Force abruptly terminated its former plans to expand Sign’s investigation, and instead the project’s name was changed to Project Grudge and investigations were shifted to alleviating public anxiety over UFOs by largely incorporating a “debunking” approach to UFO reports. An April 27<sup>th</sup> personnel briefing for the Air Force Chief of Staff titled “Unidentified Aerial Objects” noted the recent drop-off in sighting reports, as well as Grudge’s recent findings that despite persistent news and media reports, analysis did not support the contention that saucers were Soviet missiles. Mirroring the current thinking among most Grudge investigators, the briefing noted that it remained highly unlikely the remaining unknown reports were representative of foreign craft, and that there was no basis on which to speculate that advanced civilizations existed outside the earth which could theoretically be responsible for such activity. The briefing went on to positively acknowledge a “realistic” treatment of the phenomenon in an upcoming issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*.

As part of Grudge’s new public relations focus, the staff cooperated with writer Sidney Shallett’s two-part article about flying saucers that appeared in the *Post*. Before the article itself appeared, however, the Air Force released a copy of Study #203 to the press on

April 29<sup>th</sup>. In this version, foreign or extraterrestrial origins for flying saucers were labeled as nearly impossible. The report pointed out that astronomers were in agreement that Earth was the only planet in the solar system (aside from the “relatively inhospitable” Mars) capable of sustaining life, and further noted that scientists found it hard to believe that any technically established race would come to earth, flaunt its ability in mysterious ways, but never establish contact. The report went on to express doubts about the excessive distance between neighboring stars and speculated that there would be insufficient fuel for such a voyage. The report cemented its case against the extraterrestrial hypothesis by (wrongly) claiming that, with a few exceptions, all reports of flying discs were confined to the continental United States. Genuine spacemen, the report suggested, would scatter their visits across the globe. This pointed to a decidedly earthly origin for flying saucers, be they physical or psychological in nature.

The Shallett article appeared on April 30<sup>th</sup> and May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1949, and further reduced such reports to natural and psychological causes, noting that Americans were living in a “jittery age” induced by fears of the atomic bomb as well as modern dreams of space travel, and naturally they might see Martians and saucers (Jacobs 1975, 50-51). Focusing on the Mantell case in particular, Shallett noted the continual misidentifications of Navy Skyhook balloons and astronomical phenomena by observers emotionally invested in notions of interplanetary visitation. Ultimately, Shallett effectively dismissed UFOs as any cause for concern. Soon, several other national magazine articles during this time also questioned the nature of the UFO reports along with the veracity of witnesses. A *Time* magazine article asserted that all UFOs were military Skyhook balloons, while *U.S. News and World Report* declared all objects to be secret naval weapons. An article in *Cosmopolitan* characterized



UFOs witnesses with such terms as screwballs, gagsters, and members of a lunatic fringe (Thompson 1991, 9).

In December of 1949 the Air Force announced that Project Grudge would be releasing a final report to the press. The Grudge Report, officially titled “Unidentified Flying Objects-Project Grudge” (UFO becoming the new official term for flying saucers), cited studies by astronomers, meteorologists, psychologists, and the Rand Corporation. It concluded that nearly all UFO reports could be explained as weather balloons, celestial bodies, hoaxes, optical illusions, and questionable observations of nutty witnesses. While the report received curiously scant attention from the press, the fact remained that Grudge investigators felt “further study along present lines would only confirm the findings presented herein.” With official approval, the Grudge Report effectively sunk the project as an investigative body (Ruppelt 1956, 65-68).

The year of 1950 continued the previous year’s trend of dwindling sighting reports, and the few UFO reports that did come in to the Air Force were now being processed through normal intelligence channels. The Air Technical Intelligence Center (ATIC), the primary AMC investigative body for UFO reports during Sign and Grudge, had only 150 reports trickle in throughout the entire year. While press coverage of UFOs remained consistent, it appeared that both the military and the general public had switched their attention to the Korean War (1956, 83).

By 1951, Project Grudge’s staff had been reduced to a handful of investigators. In February, aeronautical engineer and World War II veteran Captain Edward J. Ruppelt was recalled to active duty and assigned to ATIC as an intelligence officer. Ruppelt’s interest in UFOs was considerably elevated when he learned that ATIC was the government agency

responsible for investigating the phenomenon. However, his new colleagues generally failed to match his enthusiasm, and after several months Ruppelt's interest in the topic faded (1956, 83-87).

The mood at ATIC changed, however, when it was learned that an inquisitive reporter from *Life* magazine who was looking into the status of Grudge was planning on traveling to Dayton to check some of the project's reports. According to Ruppelt, for whatever reason, the reporter's visit spurred a significant increase in official UFO interest. An alarming series of incidents in September of that year solidified this interest. In New Jersey, a number of radar and pilot sightings culminated in a report that was sent to the Pentagon. The ATIC's then current chief, Colonel Frank Dunn, received a phone call from Air Force Director of Intelligence Major General C.P. Cabell demanding an investigation of the incident. ATIC investigators were immediately dispatched, and the General was later given a briefing on the matter at the Pentagon. The investigators were sent back to ATIC with instructions to set up a new UFO project (Ruppelt 1956, 91-93).

At this point in time, Ruppelt was handed the responsibility of overseeing Project Grudge. On October 27, 1951, the New Project Grudge was officially established, and Ruppelt was given a flexible operating policy that allowed him to analyze all UFO reports with limited speculation in an attempt to provide honest, unbiased answers to sighting reports. All reports that Grudge would identify as unknowns were to be set aside and collectively reexamined at a later time. Ruppelt and his colleagues set to the task of sorting out and studying all pre-1951 reports, as well as outlining the future objectives for Grudge. In December of 1951, Ruppelt presented his findings and recommendations to the new Director of Intelligence, Major General John A. Samford. By March of 1952, Grudge was no

longer a “project within a group”; now a separate organization existed that would devote itself entirely to investigating UFO reports. Project Grudge’s name was formally changed to the Aerial Phenomena Group, and soon afterwards it was again renamed Project Blue Book, allegedly in reference to the title of college test booklets that shared with the UFO phenomenon a considerable set of “equally confusing questions.” This change in policy reflected a steadily growing rate of sighting reports that began in late 1951 and carried over into the largest historical UFO wave in U.S. history in 1952 (Ruppelt 1956, 116-131).

It appears that this sudden increase in official UFO interest was caused, at least in part, by the realization that UFO’s appeared to be seen more frequently around sensitive U.S. defense installations. Particularly, sighting reports around the Los Alamos-Albuquerque area, Oak Ridge, and White Sands Proving Ground were especially high. Other sensitive locations, such as port sites, Strategic Air Command bases, and industrial areas were also frequent zones of “UFO interest.” The CIA, meanwhile, took notice of the Air Force’s renewed interest in the topic, and by February of 1952 the agency began taking note of reported sightings in regions within the Soviet Union (Ruppelt 1956, 116).

By April, the *Life* magazine article hit the stands. Titled, “Have We Visitors From Outer Space?,” the article took a decidedly neutral stance, yet left the possibility open that an extraterrestrial source was conceivable. Being a reputable magazine, the *Life* article did more to bolster public interest in the phenomenon than any article in *True* would have been able to accomplish. The article quoted a number of famous scientists, including one of the developers of the German V-2 rocket, Dr. Walther Riedel, who stated that he believed UFO’s were from outer space. Ruppelt felt that, in the minds of many readers at the time, questions over why a significant publication such as *Life* would carry such an extensive article about

UFOs provided clues that the Air Force higher-ups were beginning to take sighting reports quite seriously. In fact, the article indeed reflected much of the general thinking in the Air Force at this time, and the opinion that the extraterrestrial hypothesis was a strong possibility was privately voiced by several high-ranking Pentagon officials. By May, Ruppelt was giving, on average, at least one briefing to Pentagon officials every two weeks (1956, 131-132,138).

UFO reports among both the general public and military, had been steadily increasing through early 1952, and by June the giant 1952 “flap” had begun (Ruppelt 1956, 138-139). The United States experienced a flood of UFO sightings, breaking all previous records for number of UFO reports. From June 1<sup>st</sup> to Oct 31<sup>st</sup> of 1952, Blue Book reported receiving 886 reports, which totaled 149 more reports than had been received during the previous five-year period that Project Sign/Grudge had been in existence. Ohio State University astronomer and Blue Book scientific consultant J. Allen Hynek spoke with forty-four fellow astronomers during the summer of 1952 and reported that five of them had seen UFOs themselves, which he maintained was a higher percentage than among the general public (Clark 1992, 273).

Along with the high amount of sighting reports coming in from around the United States, in June Blue Book was also receiving a significant number of UFO reports from Korea. Numerous fighter pilots reported sightings of silver spheres on several different occasions, and radar in both Korea and Japan had been tracking unidentified targets (Ruppelt 1956, 143). The CIA, in particular, took a great interest in these international sightings. On July 1<sup>st</sup>, CIA director Walter B. Smith sent a memorandum titled “Flying Saucers” to the Director of the Psychological Strategy Board in which he discussed a proposal sent to the National Security Council concerning the current Air Force problems identifying unknown

aerial objects. Smith expressed his concern that these problems had conceivable intelligence and psychological warfare implications, and proposed a board meeting that would address the potential utilization of offensive or defensive psychological warfare purposes for both the U.S. and Soviet Union. Smith maintained that the primary purpose of such a meeting would be to assess whether any CIA interest in UFOs would be warranted. At the very least, the CIA was now highly interested in Soviet knowledge of UFOs, and Smith lamented the relative small number of Air Force personnel under Ruppelt who were currently committed to studying the phenomenon.

Thus, the CIA began its own extensive probe into UFOs. An August 1<sup>st</sup> report by the OSI, authored by Edward Tauss and titled “Flying Saucers,” established that out of the approximately 2,000 reports received by ATIC, the majority were “phony,” or could be explained as known U.S. aircraft or balloons, and natural phenomena that included meteorites, clouds, and aberrations of light. About one hundred of the remaining reports remained “unknowns,” yet within this subset there existed no discernable pattern of sizes, configurations, characteristics, or location. Most importantly, the CIA concluded here that it was probable that if complete information were available for these reports classified as unknowns, they, too, could be eventually categorized as explainable in either conventional or natural terms. The report follows this, however, by noting that so long as a group of sighting reports remained unexplainable, an extraterrestrial origin could not be completely ruled out, and caution would require that the CIA continue its monitoring of the subject. This statement was immediately followed by a warning that knowledge of CIA surveillance of UFOs be kept away from both the press and the public, since the “alarmist tendencies” of both might take

this information as confirmation of some of the wilder claims made by pro-UFO authors about governmental involvement in the UFO phenomenon.

As stated earlier, the CIA also remained highly interested in the Soviet reaction to the UFO phenomenon. An August memo written by the Assistant Director for Operations to the Deputy Director noted the near complete lack of discussion of UFOs in the Soviet Press. However, an earlier Moscow press release stated that all UFOs were U.S. stratospheric measurement devices. Saucer sightings were noted by the CIA over the U.S.S.R. and iron curtain countries, including several sightings in East Germany. Generally, the communist governments of the Soviet bloc displayed an ambivalent attitude concerning UFOs, treating some UFO accounts as “bourgeois propaganda” originating in capitalist countries, while other “higher echelon” members of the Soviet government expressed a clear interest in sighting reports. It seemed apparent that the Soviet Union was not the source of the phenomenon, and in fact appeared to be having similar problems to the U.S. regarding the matter (Ramet 1998, 81-82).<sup>17</sup>

CIA inquiry into the UFO matter appeared significantly more holistic than the scope of ATIC. A January 1953 department memo revealed that the CIA had decided to start keeping tabs on new civilian saucer organizations such as the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena (NICAP). However, the most pressing concern for the CIA remained the nagging question over national security. The OSI continued to maintain that the most central problem for investigators should be establishing whether or not there were any national security implications for UFO reports. An October 2<sup>nd</sup> memo written by OSI Assistant Director H. Marshall Chadwell concluded that flying saucers posed two elements

of danger that had such implications: mass psychological considerations and the question of U.S. vulnerability to an air attack.

One group of sightings that caused particular alarm within the Air Force and CIA were the Washington National Sightings that occurred in July of 1952. This series of extraordinary events occurred in Washington, D.C. and the surrounding area on July 19-20, July 23, July 26-27, July 28, and July 29, 1952. The episode began around midnight on July 19-20, when radar operators at Washington National Airport began tracking seven unknown targets traveling in the vicinity of Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland, which was approximately fifteen miles southwest of Washington National. At times the objects appeared to hover in one position, then suddenly darted vertically at speeds around 130 miles per hour. Eventually, two of the objects streaked off the radarscopes, and the airport control tower was contacted. The tower confirmed that the targets were also being picked up on their scopes, and later Andrews radar operators also confirmed radar tracking of “strange blips.” Visual confirmation of the objects came at around 3:00 a.m. on the 20<sup>th</sup>, when a pilot from Capitol Airlines flying southbound towards Washington National sighted seven objects (where radar showed them to be) that he could not identify and described them as being like “falling stars without tails.” Periodically, some of the radar targets appeared invisible to planes in the area, but a second visual confirmation came from a second airliner inbound from northern Virginia, whose pilot reported a light that followed the plane to within four miles of the runway (Story 2001, 644).

Around this time, an Air Route Traffic Control Center (ARTCC) traffic controller called the control tower at Andrews AFB and told the tower operators that ARTCC was tracking a target south of the Andrews tower. The tower operators looked outside and

reported visual sighting of a “huge fiery-orange sphere” hovering in the sky directly over the range station. After confirming that the targets weren’t being caused by a radar malfunction, ARTCC called for Air Force interceptors to check the area out. An F-94 finally arrived by daylight, but by that time the targets were gone (Ruppelt 1956, 160-161).

Interest in these sightings was not limited to the Air Force. The Washington area press thoroughly covered the incident, and the next day local headlines such as “INTERCEPTORS CHASE FLYING SAUCERS OVER WASHINGTON, D.C.,” overshadowed coverage of the Democratic National Convention. Stalling the press while trying to find explanations for the sightings, Ruppelt entertained the possibility that temperature inversions in the atmosphere during this summertime period in the nation’s capital could have been creating false radar targets. However, Ruppelt found the visual confirmation by the airline pilots troubling, and also stated that the Pentagon “brass” held the consensus that the radar operators should have been able to spot inversion-caused targets (1956, 161).

In any event, judgments on the origins of the objects were halted when sightings in the area continued on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. At approximately 10:30 p.m. on July 26, ARTCC radar, Andrews AFB radar, and the Washington National control tower, all began tracking between four to twelve targets spread out over the metropolitan area, including Herndon, Virginia, Andrews AFB in Maryland, and Washington, D.C. A United Airlines pilot reported a visual confirmation of at least one “colorful” light, and Andrews personnel reported three lights rapidly streaking across the sky. Again jet interceptors were requested, and two jets from Castle Air Force Base in Delaware arrived on the scene two hours later. At this point, many of the targets were only visible on radar, but one of the pilots pursued four bright lights for



about two minutes, which he failed to overtake at full throttle. After running low on fuel, the jets returned to base (Story 2001, 644-645).

At 4:00 p.m., Major General John Samford held what was then the largest and longest Air Force press conference since World War II in the Pentagon. He stated that there had been no pattern to the light formations that would suggest a menace to the United States. The radar and visual sightings were explained as being due to mirage effects created by temperature inversions. Although internal Air Force debates continued over the likelihood of temperature inversions accounting for the sightings, the intention of the press conference was to quell public concern over the incident. Blue Book still classified the sightings as “unknowns” (Ruppelt 1956, 168-169).

Concerns over such troubling sightings, rather than parlaying into a concerted inquisition into the nature of the UFOs themselves, instead instigated a more pressing fear within the Air Force and CIA. By late July of 1952, in the midst of the largest wave of sighting reports, the clogging of intelligence channels of UFO sightings caused substantial concern among the CIA that hostile foreign powers could possibly take advantage of a communications gridlock. This concern was shared by several high-ranking Air Force officers, and as revealed in space scientist Philip Strong’s untitled letter to Lloyd Berkener in January 1953, the Pentagon had decided to form a panel to examine the national security implications of the UFO phenomenon. In January of 1953 a CIA-sponsored meeting in Washington, originally requested by the White House, convened to discuss UFO evidence presented by Ruppelt, Hynek, and others. Headed by California Institute of Technology physicist Dr. H.P. Robertson, the scientific panel members (collectively called the Robertson Panel) included Berkener, later Nobel laureate Luis Alvarez, astronomer Thornton Page, and

nuclear physicist Sam A. Goudsmit. The panel requested (and was given) access to all available top-secret military data that might have some bearing on UFO sightings, which included tests of new balloons, rockets, and aircraft. Although some of the scientists present, particularly Thornton Page, felt that most of the sightings were ludicrous and vocalized this opinion, Robertson reprimanded the naysayers and took the proceedings very seriously (Story 2001, 494).

As mentioned, the panel was briefed by Hynek, Ruppelt, and the scientific advisor to Blue Book, as well as all three military services. The panel of scientists discussed the evidence, which included photographs, drawings, and film footage of alleged craft, for most of the day. The panel lamented the lack of overall sound data, and postulated that reasonable explanations could be suggested for about ninety percent of the sightings. According to some CIA sources, one scientist on the panel embraced the extraterrestrial hypothesis for some of the reports. Yet this was certainly a minority viewpoint, and other members of the panel followed the assumption that UFO reports were confined to North America, thereby making the notion of extraterrestrial surveillance “preposterous.” Ultimately the panel concluded:

1. There was no evidence that UFOs were a physical threat to U.S. security.
2. No evidence existed in the reports of unknown scientific principles.
3. The UFO subject was not of direct intelligence interest.

With these conclusions, official government interest in UFOs as a scientific problem was formally extinguished.

UFOs, according to the panel, were not a threat to national security unto themselves, but, mirroring CIA concerns, belief in them certainly was. Page, in particular, was concerned about a “Red threat,” or Soviet intercontinental ballistic missile attack. UFO reports could

potentially disrupt all military communications, and a missile attack could conceivably slip through. The panel and the intelligence members present did find that the phenomenon was of operational interest due to the possibility that Soviet jamming of air defense operations could occur due to the lack of the ability of operating personnel to discriminate between radar anomalies and actual airborne weapons. A flood of UFO sightings instigated by the Soviet Union could also conceivably create a “psychological offensive,” that, timed with an actual attack, could reduce the defense effort of the general public (Story 2001, 494).

Hence, in a paper titled “Comments and Suggestions of UFO Panel,” the group offered up the recommendation that a program of public debunking of UFO reports should be implemented. The panel hoped that such a program would result in the reduction of public interest in flying saucers, and, presumably, fewer actual sightings. Propositions for implementing such a program included the use of mass media, television, motion pictures, and popular articles. It was further recommended that the CIA and other intelligence groups continue keeping tabs on civilian saucer organizations such as NICAP and the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO) due to their potential influence on “mass thinking” if widespread sightings were to occur.

This new orientation towards debunking was immediately felt both in official explanations and in the press. Donald Menzel, Harvard astronomer and Air Force consultant, reflected this growing attitude within both the military and scientific fields. After conducting his own investigations and experiments, Menzel concluded that the UFO problem consisted mainly of mirages, reflections, ice crystals floating in clouds, refraction, and temperature inversion. He believed that saucer reports would eventually vanish, and lamented UFO sightings as a “frightening diversion in a jittery world,” while referring to himself as the man

“who shot Santa Claus” (Jacobs 1975, 73).<sup>18</sup> By September of 1952, Menzel preceded the Robertson Panel concerns by arguing that the flying saucer scare could be dangerous in the sense that if an enemy were to attack the nation, it could take twenty-four hours for the people in the target area to decide whether it was a terrestrial enemy or visitors from Venus. His 1953 book *Flying Saucers* included a technical discussion of optical mirages that he believed accounted for a high number of misidentifications among observers. Meanwhile, the *Baltimore Sun* was comparing flying saucers to the Loch Ness monster, and the *Milwaukee Journal* remarked on the lack of imagination needed to see a UFO, adding that if imagination were not enough, “a little alcoholic stimulation will help” (1995, 73,79,83).

Following the meeting of the Robertson Panel, the CIA’s F.C. Durant made an internal announcement on March 31<sup>st</sup> that the OSI would no longer follow UFO reports, although the agency itself continued to do so through the 1990s. Project Blue Book, meanwhile, continued to collect and analyze sighting reports, albeit less enthusiastically. Later in 1953, Edward Ruppelt stepped down as head of Blue Book, and after his departure primary field investigations for sighting reports were transferred over to the 4602<sup>nd</sup> Air Intelligence Squadron.<sup>19</sup> Ruppelt was replaced by Captain Charles Hardin, who oversaw the project until 1956. Blue Book’s new (and lasting) policy was to explain as many reports as possible by any reasonable means and preferably without additional investigation (Ruppelt 1956, 231-232).

Sighting reports waxed and waned over the next several years, although the amount of reports would never reach the peak period of the 1952 wave. On October 25, 1955, *Project Blue Book Special Report 14* was released to the public. In the report, it was reinforced that no objects such as those popularly described as flying saucers had overflowed

the United States, and explained the remaining ‘unknown’ reports it had studied as certainly due to conventional phenomena or illusions (Davidson 1966). Despite this early report, Project Blue Book continued to collect, analyze, and catalogue cases from around the country from the 1950s through the 1960s. In fact, another wave of U.S. sightings in the 1960s eventually led to an official scientific study of UFOs by the University of Colorado under physicist Edward Condon. The committee’s findings, however, which were completed in 1968, were both informed by and reflected the Robertson Panel conclusions of 1953.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, official military and intelligence analysis of the UFO phenomenon from the late 1940s to the early 1950s would establish the protocol for all subsequent governmental and scientific inquiries into the phenomenon. UFOs were established to be non-Soviet in origin, non-extraterrestrial in origin, and hence were not perceived as a national security threat to the United States.

While the Air Force and the CIA took this intermittent interest in UFOs for the next several decades, the real foothold the phenomenon gained was in the imagination of the American public. Sightings of flying saucers over American skies were conceptualized differently by different groups. George Adamski, a Southern California cultist, began making claims in 1952 of contact with blonde-haired “Venusians” in the California desert. The Venusians, according to Adamski, came to Earth to warn humans against our “warlike ways” and encouraged the abolition of nuclear testing for the sake of universal harmony. This “contactee movement” sprang up in areas around the country (but particularly in southern California), and as Engelhardt notes, in the following years numerous Americans would report regular encounters with space aliens in deserted locations (1995, 104). “Space Brothers” came from a variety of locales, including Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune,

“Clarion,” and even from the Earth’s past. The narratives contactees told were often steeped in strong religious traditions that borrowed heavily from Eastern religions (particularly Hinduism) as well as Western Messianic traditions (saviors from space). Adamski and his brethren typically positioned themselves as “chosen ones” selected by the space visitors to warn humankind of its numerous follies (Story 2001, 134). This group of contactees, aside from being forerunners for both New Age proponents and later alien abductees, bore a strong “resemblance to former Communists, informers, and defectors ready to help anti-Communist investigators tease Communists out of government or Hollywood” (Engelhardt 1995, 104).

Another group of saucer enthusiasts, led by retired Marine Corps Major Donald Keyhoe, decided to take on the National Security State directly by making pointed accusations about Air Force repression of information regarding UFO reports. Keyhoe, the author of several “pro-saucer” books on the subject, including *The Flying Saucers are Real* (which sold 500,000 copies), wrote a sensational article for the January 1950 issue of *True* magazine. In it, he interpreted Project Grudge’s new stance on flying saucers as evidence that the Air Force was hiding something big. Bold assertions like these were drawn largely from reconstructed conversations with anonymous individuals “in the know.” Keyhoe’s main conclusions were that the earth had been under periodic surveillance from extraterrestrials for several centuries, and that this surveillance had escalated after 1947 following the series of atomic bomb explosions that began in 1945 (Keyhoe 1950).

The public acceptance of Keyhoe’s dubious assertions was, again, likely due to the general mood of the country during this period. Following President Truman’s announcement in September of 1949 of an atomic explosion in the Soviet Union, newly reinforced atomic fears and Communist jitters provided a public backdrop of conspiracy,

espionage, and general fear. By 1950, Joseph McCarthy was making claims of massive Communist infiltration of the State Department, and in June North Korean troops invaded South Korea, sparking the Korean War. According to Curtis Peebles, an “Age of Suspicion” had engulfed the American public, and flying saucer conspiracies were largely representative of that mindset (1994, 46-47). Curiously, and not without significance, early “ufologists” such as Keyhoe were perhaps the *only* group to take on the National Security State directly through their accusations of governmental cover-ups of space aliens. In essence, they declared the government to be an “enemylike entity” guilty of the suppression of information that should have been available to the public.<sup>21</sup> As Engelhardt notes, perhaps because of their perceived “fringe-belief” status, they were practically the only oppositional group of the period never to have been accused of communism (1995, 104).

While public paranoia should not completely be ruled out in terms of its association with UFO sightings, its connection to the subsequent culture of conspiracy surrounding the phenomenon is much more viable. As mentioned earlier, post-Hiroshima public attitudes towards the federal government and the scientific community were ambivalent at best. The successful and covert Manhattan Project indeed created a new image of the federal government as a powerful and potentially secretive structure, while science was now seen by many as being a potentially (massively) destructive practice that had no established ties to a moral base (Boyer 1994, 269-270).

It is here that, arguably, the seeds were planted for a culture of conspiracy in the United States. Again, as Peter Knight argues, one must discard the general image of the conspiracy theorist as an obsessive, paranoid nut. Instead, the advent of a culture of conspiracy within the United States has neatly coincided with the rise of the National

Security State. While such theories today may serve to express a wide range of doubts, traditionally in American culture they have functioned to bolster a sense of an “us” versus a malevolent “them” (2000, 3,20). In the case of UFO conspiracy theories that allege governmental cover-ups, such accusations most likely serve, to paraphrase the thinking of Jodi Dean, as an “unfocused” protest against the perceived collusion of the military-industrial-scientific complex (2002, 88).

As a postscript to this discussion, it should be noted that the Air Force was itself largely to blame for the culture of conspiracy that grew up out of the UFO phenomenon. Harken back to Project Grudge. While its 1949 report concluded that no evidence existed to suggest that the saucers were extraterrestrial craft or anything compromising national defenses, it still remained content to leave nearly one out of four cases unexplained. Subsequent official silence, even though put in policy merely out of caution, ultimately served only to aggravate public concerns and feed into the outlandish claims such as those of Keyhoe. Perhaps more importantly, while maintaining the official position that flying saucer reports were baseless, the Air Force nevertheless quietly (and seriously) investigated such reports over a long period of time. Furthermore, after recommendations were implemented in 1953 to dissuade public belief in UFOs, the Air Force did its best to reduce the number of UFO reports by utilizing methods of debunkery and quickly resolving all sightings. Its small staff, questionable bookkeeping, and underwhelming funding belied its projected public image as an efficient investigative body. Although occurring during a much later period, the 1970s release of UFO documents via Freedom of Information Act requests revealed thousands of documents from the FBI, CIA, and National Security Agency that concerned UFOs, when each organization had denied any interest in such phenomena for years. Even



though many of the documents were merely newspaper clippings of sighting reports, the authorities were nevertheless caught in an obvious lie. When, in 1997, the CIA admitted that it and the Air Force had made misleading statements about UFOs in the 1950s and 1960s to cover up the fleet of American spy-planes, their admission only deepened public cynicism. As Robert Goldberg notes, “assuming their right to lie while holding fast to the privilege of secrecy, authorities had become accomplices to the plot weaving that they decried” (2001, 209-211, 228). In this sense, the caution and subsequent secrecy of each of these organizations reinforced public mistrust and anxiety over the burgeoning national security state.

### **Conclusion**

In order to understand the rise of the UFO phenomenon in 20<sup>th</sup> century American culture, one must take into account the various historical factors that influenced its initial formulation, dissemination, and maintenance. In one important sense, the phenomenon may be viewed as a social product of Cold War politics. For many Americans, the federal government’s obsession with the global containment of communism led to public anxieties rooted in fears of nuclear annihilation, invasive forces, scientific progress, and an increasingly secretive national security state. Given such fears, it is unsurprising that sightings of strange craft over American skies exponentially increased shortly after the development of atomic weapons and the beginning of the Cold War. Yet the government’s own response to these sightings served to merely bolster the surrounding cultural paranoia. The Air Force’s decidedly lackluster investigative response to sightings, coupled with the CIA’s insistence on a public campaign of ridicule emboldened and somewhat legitimized the claims of individuals such as Donald Keyhoe, who fed conspiracy narratives to an eager

public involving massive governmental cover-ups of an extraterrestrial presence on Earth. Despite their dubious assertions, such narratives provided a focused (and *rare*) public protest against the increasingly secretive structure of the military-industrial complex.

Aside from the government's often quizzical treatment of the subject of UFOs, the American public was also heavily influenced by the concurrent wave of science fiction films from the 1950s onward, which helped to solidify the flying saucer as a 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural icon. Additionally, the UFO-centric brand of cultural paranoia marketed by Keyhoe was soon accompanied by the technospiritual sermonizing of contactees like George Adamski, who helped foster an important new social role for UFOs: a negotiator between technological acceleration and religious humility. In the following chapter, the role of the UFO within popular culture and religion will be explored in great detail.

## Chapter 3

### New Religions and Celluloid Invaders

Belief creates the actual fact.  
-William James

Individual science fiction stories may seem as trivial as ever to the blinder critics and philosophers of today -- but the core of science fiction, its essence has become crucial to our salvation if we are to be saved at all.  
- Isaac Asimov

In the previous chapter, I examined the role the UFO phenomenon played in the formulation of Cold War conspiracy culture. And yet Donald Keyhoe and other early ufologists represented only one segment of the burgeoning UFO community. The publicity of the claims of eccentric individuals such as George Adamski and George Hunt Williamson quickly insured that public attention to the subject of UFOs would extend beyond sinister government cover-ups to include fantastical rendezvous' with "Space Brothers." Hollywood further ensured that the public fascination with UFOs would not wane, as the flying saucer quickly became the most popular vehicle for both celluloid invaders and saviors in the 1950s and beyond. In this chapter, I will trace the rise of the New Age Movement, focusing on both its roots in 19<sup>th</sup> century Theosophy and racial hierarchies, and its transformative impact on public perceptions of the UFO phenomenon. Next, I will examine the explosion of science fiction literature and cinema during the Cold War era and its influence on the UFO movement.

#### **New Age Reconciliations**

While the Cold War had a significant impact on the formulation of ideological shifts in American culture, deeper and older beliefs associated with race and identity also heavily impacted the growth of alternative belief systems in the U.S. The New Age movement of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century could broadly be characterized as an individualistic synthesis of

transpersonal psychology and Eastern religion, with specific attempts to reconcile both eastern and western philosophies with modernist scientific materialism. The movement grew largely out of the 1960s counterculture, as well as earlier Enlightenment critiques of official religion and the Spiritualist movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hess 1993, 4).

The movement itself was borne out of the counterculture's reaction to the sometimes abusive role of mainstream religion in American life. As Jeansonne and Lührssen note, religion has always been a central component in the country's history, and in 1950, 57 percent of Americans belonged to a church or synagogue. By 1959, that number had increased to 69 percent. After World War II, the United States had no equal in the West in terms of population affiliations with religious institutions (2006, 311-312). Whitfield contends that this postwar shift in piety likely reflected "certain historic traits reassert[ing] themselves," including the equation of faith with personal success. Another key component of this upsurge was the perceived need to combat the "godless" political system espoused by the Soviet Union (1991, 83).

Public interest in Christianity was reflected in many of the popular books and films of the decade. Throughout the 1950s, popular books such as Henry Morton Robinson's *The Cardinal* (1950) and Catherine Marshall's *A Man Called Peter* (1951) spoke to the American public interest in Christianity, with both serving as the basis for successful Hollywood films. Another film, *The Ten Commandments* (1956), became the then top-grossing film of all time. Indeed, notions of patriotism in 1950s America almost always included the element of Christian faith, referred to by Jeansonne and Lührssen as a "civic religion." Christianity was utilized as a tool of American exceptionalism in the sense that America was perceived as God's "chosen" nation (2006, 312). Belonging to a church could now be seen as a way of

affirming the American way of life, and in this context “[w]hat was revived was not so much religious belief as belief in the value of religion” (Whitfield 1991, 83,86).

By the 1960s, however, some Americans had begun searching for alternative spiritual beliefs and philosophies. The New Age Movement, as described above, contained no set dogma or specific practices. Some practitioners absorbed aspects of Eastern philosophies and religions such as Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and even the martial arts into their personalized spiritual practices. Self-help books appeared in bookstores throughout the country, covering topics such as connections between sex and spirituality, astrology, alternative medicine, noncompetitive exercise, and psychic phenomena (Jeansonne and Lührssen 2006, 315). Included in this new influx of literature were numerous “pop psychology” books such as Thomas Anthony Harris’s *I’m OK, You’re Okay* (1969), and writers such as Deepak Chopra and Wayne Dyer continually fused traditional Eastern and Western beliefs in professing humanity’s greater purpose to “become one” with the universe. These writers and speakers introduced meditation, yoga, and alternative medicine to a broad American audience, and by the 1990s such practices had become mainstream (2006, 453-454).

As Pascal Boyer notes, the New Age mysticism that often accompanied these practices essentially stresses the idea that each individual has an internal “power” that allows for a multitude of physical and intellectual accomplishments. In this framework, all humans are connected to esoteric yet benevolent universal forces, and its practitioners typically embrace ideas and practices that include the aforementioned meditation and alternative medicine, but also have expanded to include reincarnation, channeling, and environmentalism (2001, 20). Many of the movement’s central ideals can be traced to the

previously mentioned social issues and anxieties arising out of the Cold War, including fears over environmental collapse and destruction, as well as a dissatisfaction and mistrust over Enlightenment privileging of scientific progress in furthering the growth of humankind. Yet New Age thinking also has curious roots in 19<sup>th</sup> century Theosophy, as well as the latter movement's obsessions over race.

Brenda Denzler has noted the influence that Theosophical philosophy has had over both New Age thinkers and early UFO contactees such as Adamski (2001, 46). Theosophy itself was founded in the 1870s in England by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, and by the 1890s had reached its peak period of influence in the United States. In large part a reaction against Darwinism and rationalism, Theosophy argued against the central evolutionary implication that hierarchies in creation (human dominance, in particular) were random. Borrowing from new findings in such areas as archaeology, astronomy, and comparative religion, Blavatsky and her followers constructed a mystical worldview that fused divination with updated scientific knowledge—essentially enabling a retention of the idea of order and progress in the universe. As Christopher Roth points out, much of the New Age vocabulary—auras, astral projection, gurus, spirit guides—can be directly traced to Theosophical writers (2005, 44-45).

In its synthesis of science and religion, Theosophy drew on Eastern religions, which for the first time in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were being made available to broader western audiences due to increased western communication with Far East cultures. Much of Blavatsky's writings were concerned with human origins and physical variation, and in the second volume of *The Secret Doctrine* she discusses human history as a succession of seven "Root-Races," with the first Root-Race arriving from the moon. This race gradually mated with various earth animals to create anthropoid apes and the first crude races of humans.

Leading up to and through the Victorian period, the Anglo-Saxons (an Aryan subrace) dominated the period as part of a “divinely ordained sequence.” This chronology both overlaps and draws from 19<sup>th</sup> century genealogies put forward by various historians and ethnologists who proposed disparate forms of Social Darwinism. As part of Theosophical doctrine, however, European dominance was divinely destined to give way to a sixth Root-Race that would combine elements of African and Far Eastern racial make-ups (Roth 2005, 46-47).

Although Theosophy as a movement waned in the U.S. after World War I, a Theosophist splinter group remained established in Point Loma, California, one of the few remaining bastions in the U.S. at the time for alternative religions (alternative, of course, to mainstream Christianity and science). Out of this group came individuals such as Richard Shaver and Ray Palmer, who in the 1940s published accounts of extraterrestrial races living in the earth’s core that were the original ancestors of the modern human races. Their accounts, in turn, influenced the beliefs of the first wave of UFO contactees, specifically including George Adamski and George Hunt Williamson (2005, 48-49). These early “pioneers” helped usher in two now commonplace elements of New Age and ufological thinking: alien contact and the ancient astronaut theory (the idea that extraterrestrials were directly involved in the cultural and physical development of humankind) (2005, 53).

According to Roth, in the writings of early contactees and occult leaders, we find a curious and gradual shift from an Old World theosophical focus on South Asian civilizations to a New World occultism focused more on futuristic technology and the role of America in the greater world (2005, 58). Here, race and appropriation are central to what has become the New Age movement. In the United States, the Theosophical movement and its associated

theories of race converged with ideologies of manifest destiny. The shift from an entirely eastern focus to an interest in perceived tribal peoples, particularly Native Americans, has been a key element in much New Age and ufological ideology (2005, 72).

Phil Deloria has explored historical white American playacting of Native Americans as a means of first creating a national identity, and later as a mediation of authenticity in an anxiety-ridden industrial nation (1998, 7). Deloria argues that white Americans, since the Revolution, have been fixated on defining themselves as a nation. He notes that over 150 years ago, the British writer D.H. Lawrence had focused on the issue of American identity and contended that it was essentially incomplete. He believed this was quite likely due to American's tendencies to define themselves by what they were not; be it British or Indian. He also felt a dual nature present in American identity that attempted to savor a civilized order yet embraced a "savage" sense of freedom. It was in this savage freedom that many historical writers, including James Fennimore Cooper, found inspiration from ideas of the American Indian. Indians, representative of instinct, freedom, and a symbiosis with nature, provided a Euro-American catharsis from their own perceived confinement in the civilized social order. Yet, as Deloria notes, the evocation of this Indian (noble savage) ideal was problematized by the very presence of the Indians themselves. In order to claim American identity as their own, white Americans were left to either destroy Indians and their culture completely, or assimilate them into their own (1998, 3-4).

For many Americans, the Native American became an idealized symbol of strength, valor, and individualism—even as they were constantly portrayed in popular culture as destined for eradication as justified by manifest destiny. While portrayed as having a harmonious relationship with their natural environment, their perceived lack of technological



prowess remained a viable justification for their downfall (Roth 2005, 72). This, of course, was something that New Agers and contactees could rectify: embracing the environmentalism, strength, and ecological sensibilities of the Native Other while simultaneously participating actively in the rapidly advancing technological age. This notion of Native identity helped to construct a distinctly American Theosophical identity out of a curious blend of eastern, western, and indigenous mysticism, spirituality, and philosophy.

For Kenneth Gergen, this overlapping system of identity is also largely symptomatic of the effects of technology on the sense of self in contemporary western culture. With technological developments in the realms of transportation and communication, a set of strong, central personal relationships weakens. Coupled with this development is an exposure to an increasing amount of information and opinions about the larger world that provides an endless number of claims to the truth. According to Gergen, without concrete authoritative “truths” provided in the realms of organized religion and other traditional cultural authorities, the idea of an autonomous, definitive self has rapidly disintegrated in American culture. Therefore, the idea of group identification takes precedence, and the individual is allowed to maintain a series of group allegiances (ethnicity, gender, political, cyber, and spiritual) that can overlap while simultaneously pitting themselves against each other and mainstream culture (2004, 347-352).

This conception of competing allegiances and systems of belief provides a useful template for understanding the multitudes of attitudes, anxieties, and ideologies that shape contemporary alternative belief systems. For instance, while conspiracy theories have traditionally functioned to bolster dichotomies of “us” versus a sinister “them,” in a contemporary postmodern world they have specifically come to express doubt about the

legitimacy of American governmental authority as well as provide uncertainty about how historical events unfold, and what voices are permitted to tell these master narratives. New Age and ufological philosophies can thus contain a strange balance of fascist and racist ideology while paradoxically representing a populist sensibility that resists hegemony in favor of a better, collective future (Fenster 1999, xiii).

At the present time, alternative belief systems in American culture have converged into a loose synthesis that curiously weds remnants of Cold War anxieties with New Age utopianism. For instance, by the late 1980s, New Age beliefs rapidly converged with voices in the UFO community, particularly after the publication of Whitley Strieber's *Communion* (1987). Harkening back to the contactee movement of the 1950s, alien abductions such as those reported by Strieber took the form of personalized spiritual journeys rather than horrific kidnappings at the hands of space invaders. Abduction accounts have recently been the focus of scholars whose primary interests lay in the formulation of new, quasi-religious movements. As a movement in and of itself, the UFO phenomenon as a whole may be contextualized as a conduit for a contemporary American fascination with alien life. Jodi Dean argues that understanding this fascination requires not only focus on the stories and experiences, but also attention "to the practices and technologies that enable the stories to be told," including various books, magazines, television specials, and websites that transmit information about UFOs and aliens. In a "techno-global information age," the extraterrestrial explanation predominantly fills the traditional role of the supernatural other, and in part may suggest both a reconciliation of oppositional epistemologies and a direct response to the political hegemony of science (1998, 170, 180). Moreover, witnesses of such seemingly extraordinary phenomena will inevitably be drawn to extraterrestrial explanations in pursuit

of what Bill Ellis describes as a “convenient cultural language” for phenomena that a rationalist paradigm would allow as solely the result of misperception, hoax, or insanity (1988, 268).

Modern UFO investigators regularly attempt such reconciliations in their research by taking scientific rhetoric and reappropriating its cultural meaning to support their own “findings.” According to Anne Cross, these researchers do so by drawing on three key features of science: the use of empirical methods; espousing a body of knowledge they label as “scientific”; and carrying out their research modeled after a scientific specialty (2004, 3,9). Furthermore, many “ufologists” stress the use of scientific methods in their various conferences and presentations while simultaneously criticizing mainstream science as being elitist. Since their work has largely been pushed outside university, government, and corporate support structures, ufologists have been forced to draw upon informal, non-scientific sources of support. Hence, the community has come to present itself as a science to attract laypersons, while simultaneously presenting itself as an *alternative* for those disenchanted with conventional science (2004, 20, 29). In this way, the UFO community negotiates a position that satiates both spiritualistic and scientific yearnings, and it challenges scientific claims to authority while conveniently borrowing its cultural language.

Brenda Denzler, in following this line of argument, contends that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, western science had become embodied in notions of secularity, rationalism, and naturalism. For Denzler, abductions, in particular, suggest a revitalized spiritual reaction to this perceived theological suppression. Rather than embracing previous interpretations of abductions as literal kidnappings by extraterrestrial scientists interested in conducting experiments on human subjects, abductees in the 1990s began reporting an increase in

concern with spiritual matters after their abductions, and reframed onboard medical examinations in a more religious context, implying that the entities were in some way assisting in managing human souls after death (2001, 70,135,137). If science and religion might be construed as two polarities in which American culture finds itself trapped, the abduction phenomenon finds itself in the negotiable realm between. In such a movement, belief is valued above empirical evidence, while the aliens serve as a practical conduit to God or the cosmos – a fusion of popular religion with technology and science fiction (Denzler, 152-159). In the words of Patricia Felisa Barbeito, alien abduction accounts appear perched “on the brink between a mythologized past and an unknown future, between the equally harsh dictates of nature and technology” (2005, 213).

Aliens and abductions, within this framework, continually work to merge New Age and conspiracy-tinged UFO discourses by seeking out social connections in a seemingly disconnected world. This is done, in both a figurative and literal sense, by seeking a reciprocal cosmic connection. Debbora Battaglia argues that this new association with the Other relieves people from the duty to maintain a homogenous connection with normative social structures (2005, 12). On the other hand, in a postmodern “age of insecurity” where trust is displaced with conspiracy, belief in a secretive extraterrestrial presence reflects our “close encounters” with fears concerning access to knowledge. This comes about, as Gergen would undoubtedly agree, as a result of *mobility anxiety* due to the rapid generation of information around us as well as the fractured sense of community (people constantly on the move) (2005, 21).

As shown above, there exist a plethora of historical and cultural ideologies that allowed for the formulation and maintenance of alternative belief systems in American

culture. The Cold War era itself had a large role in giving rise to such ideological shifts. Amongst seemingly legitimate fears of nuclear annihilation, communist (outsider) infestation, government secrecy, and hand-wringing over scientific progress, the specific notion of visitors from beyond allows for a placation, in different contexts, of all of these fears. The beliefs and experiences of contactees (and later abductees, millennialists, and associated cults<sup>22</sup>) laid the groundwork for the formulation of new, quasi-religious movements that warn against nuclear annihilation and unencumbered scientific research. UFO investigators, on the other hand, through their fears of alien infestation and governmental complicity touched on very real anxieties over a persistent, ambiguous, yet omnipresent outsider threat that continually haunted many Americans since the victory in World War II (Engelhardt 1995, 7). Alien beings thus could take on the role of saviors or destroyers of the planet, bringing with them an eternal utopia or apocalypse. Additionally, belief in technological “angels and demons” through this period likely satiated a growing need for the reconciliation of science and religion. As Cold War anxieties laid the groundwork for belief in beings from above, themes of cultural paranoia, outsider infiltration (or intervention), and cosmic yearnings all gestated increasingly as the postmodern information age truly came into fruition.

By the same token, the New Age movement itself arose out of the ashes of archaic, yet still powerful Theosophical notions of race and planetary destiny. Early contactees reassembled tenets of this philosophy to formulate a cultural message that fit within the parameters of American exceptionalism and manifest destiny. As the New Age movement progressed into the postmodern world, its followers were allowed to appropriate a variety of ethnic and spiritual identities while navigating a plurality of social identities. Social

allegiances and identities thus have become contextual and contingent, and practitioners of non-traditional belief systems can now be allowed to take an oppositional stance against the very power structures from which they benefit.

### **Popular Culture, Collective Memory, and the Cultural “Other”**

When discussing the socio-political climate in which the UFO phenomenon and other fringe beliefs evolved, we cannot underestimate the impact of popular culture. Over the past sixty years, books, films, and television shows have articulated the very social anxieties the American public has grappled with in both the context of the Cold War and the ensuing post-Cold War fallout. Science fiction, in particular, has paralleled and informed the growth of the UFO phenomenon and the complex social struggles it encompasses. Before turning to that discussion, however, I will briefly address my specific usage of methodology in examining popular culture artifacts.

Paul Boyer has noted that an analysis of popular culture remains an excellent way for scholars to understand historical reactions to and commentaries on then contemporary issues. For Boyer, popular culture is thus a window into understanding cultural ideology in a given period of time (1994, 258). I contend, however, that our analysis of popular culture should extend beyond basic correlations and assumptions about cultural representations. Instead, scholars need to position popular culture as a battleground over contested meanings.

Stuart Hall argues that any study of popular culture must inherently begin with analyzing the cultural battlegrounds of the laboring classes of societies and how the social order around capital necessitates their cultural “re-education” (1981, 227). However, he states that rather than conceptualizing popular culture as being “imposed” from above or, conversely, as a resistance to the transformation of the working class, scholars should

examine the *grounds* on which such transformations occur. In other words, Hall perceives popular culture as an “arena of consent and resistance” which the dominant classes attempt to “disorganize and reorganize” (1981, 228, 235, 239).

John Fiske contends that popular culture, as a commodity, must bear the interests of consumers, and, as a living, dynamic process, cannot simply be imposed from above, but rather developed from within (1989, 23). Reinhold Wagnleitner and Elaine Tyler May, for instance, in discussing American exportation of popular culture, argue that the “receiving communities” transformed American cultural products to fit their own specific needs, and thus indigenized whatever aspect of American-ness they deemed useful (2000, 2-3).

Furthermore, Fiske warns against setting concrete definitions for “the people” in question. What constitutes the people or “the popular” depends on a variety of contexts, since such terms ultimately represent a shifting set of allegiances crossing various social categories. Individuals move throughout these formations “fluidly,” and while their allegiances may coincide with categories such as class, ethnicity, and gender, they don’t necessarily have to. However, Fiske reminds us that such reformulations do occur within a structure of power relations, and social allegiances typically invoke notions of oppositionality, “us versus them” binaries that are more determinant than notions of similarity, or even class identity (1989, 24).

Such competing formulations tie into Kenneth Gergen’s ideas of multiple, competing selfhoods in the postmodern world, and therefore discussions of popular culture must move away from basic arguments over class struggle. Fiske argues further that formations of people tend to move as active agents (rather than subjugated servants) across various social categories, and by default are capable of adopting seemingly contradictory positions (1989,

24-25). This notion would explain the merging of New Age thinking with cultural paranoia in many UFO circles (“trust no one, but come together as one”). For Fiske, then, popular culture cannot simply be dismissed or relegated as a tool of “dominant culture.” Whereas popular culture remains an arena in which dominant classes seek consent, Fiske also notes that popular culture texts often must appeal to the immediate social situation of the audience (1989, 25). Therefore, the role of the popular culture analyst is not to uncover “true” meanings of the texts; rather, it is “to trace the play of power in the social formation...” (1989, 45).<sup>23</sup>

With such commentary in mind, it is best to position alternative belief systems and the popular culture that inform them as a direct struggle against a perceived rationalist, empirical, and materialistic worldview imposed upon Americans for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> and now the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such a struggle can (and does) have occasional ties to class, racial, and gender formulations and affiliations, yet such allegiances, as Fiske and Gergen argue, are fluid and interconnected. Thus, individuals can navigate their way through seemingly oppositional social formations; within this framework middle-class white men can position themselves against the perceived threat of CIA assassination plots. Popular culture comes into play here by helping to *create* new socio-political identities through the rearticulation of fears and desires that are deeply meaningful to people’s lives (Ross 1989, 52).

Here we turn to the explosion of the science fiction genre in American popular culture. American science fiction owes much to late 19<sup>th</sup> century European literature, particularly those popular stories set within the context of an industrial “machine age” and the continuance of colonial imperialism. Christine Cornea provides numerous European examples of stories describing strange journeys to uncharted territories, as well as speculative



narratives about future worlds and scientific ingenuity. The most well known example of early science fiction is the work of Frenchman Jules Verne, author of *From the Earth to the Moon* (1864) and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1869). Verne's English counterpart, H.G. Wells, also a pivotal figure in the establishment of the genre, wrote such "scientific romances" as *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897), and *The War of the Worlds* (1898) (2007, 11).

In terms of science fiction cinema, Cornea regards Georges Méliès as the medium's pioneer. Creating over 500 short films between 1896 and 1914, Méliès sought to articulate the anxieties of an increasingly industrialized Western society. Utilizing filmic "trickery" to establish special effects, his images of crashing rocket ships and air balloons reveal to commentators such as Elizabeth Ezra "an old world...in confrontation with the new" (2007, 12).

The first wave of American science fiction came in the form of pulp magazines such as *Amazing Stories* during the 1930s. In addition, there were numerous American science fiction comic strips and comic books during this period. In particular, the famous character Buck Rogers first appeared in *Amazing Stories* during the 1920s, with the *Flash Gordon* comic strip later appearing in 1934. According to Cornea, it was the film version of Flash Gordon's adventures, *Flash Gordon: Space Soldiers* (dir. Frederick Stephani, 1936), that truly brought the science fiction genre into its own. Later science fiction films soon followed, including *Buck Rogers Conquers the Universe* (dir. Ford Beebe and Saul A. Goodkind, 1939) as well as the superhero serials (featuring Batman and America's favorite fictional alien, Superman). Despite the appearance of science fiction films during this time, relatively few sci-fi feature films were produced in the U.S. during the 1930s and 1940s, and

the serials thus remain the most notable examples of American sci-fi film before the 1950s (Cornea 2007, 20-21).

As with the rise of the UFO movement, science fiction in the 1940s and 1950s underscored key social shifts in postwar America that included the nation's new role as a global power, its emerging corporatization, and the standardization in consumption. Specifically, Cornea references M. Keith Booker's idea of an emergent "doubleness" in American popular culture—the tendency "to reflect upon the nature of being human in the featuring of non-human counterparts." Within this context, the monsters and aliens of early American science fiction came to symbolize a wide variety of threats to the social establishment, and the abundance of threats necessitate a consideration of multiple embedded meanings (2007, 34).

Particularly after the dropping of the atomic bomb in 1945, science-fiction writing began gaining a measure of respectability in literary circles and began appearing in mass-circulated periodicals such as *Collier's* and the *Saturday Evening Post* (Boyer 1994, 257). Many of the texts expressed obvious fears about mutually assured nuclear annihilation, while some began expressing reservations about the potential abuse of power such technology could bring. In one early science-fiction story written in 1946, saboteurs smuggle parts of an atomic bomb into New York City. Although they are captured, the fearful reaction to the incident necessitates the creation of a police-state in the United States. Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) detail the accounts of human colonizers of Mars that helplessly watch in horror as atomic warfare envelops the Earth. In George O. Smith's "The Answer" (1947), the United Nations secretary-general sends an aggressive nation's bureaucratic leaders a number of plutonium-tinted "protest letters" that collectively trigger a nuclear

explosion and annihilate the aggressive nation (1994, 258-259). Finally, in Arthur C. Clarke's 1953 story "The Nine Billion Names of God," a prophetic vision warns humans about the dangers of scientific research, with Clarke specifically critiquing the supposed innocence of scientists in how others utilize their knowledge gains (McKee 2007, 239).

In many of these narratives, visions of nuclear annihilation are formulated into battles between solitary humans and alien interlopers. Such simple, if frightening stories highlighted public ignorance about new scientific discoveries, while providing a comprehensible, if outlandish, presentation of nuclear physics. Therefore, such science fiction helped non-scientists compensate for their lack of access to encroaching scientific knowledge, while simultaneously expressing a clear anxiety over a national (in)security state that had, in fact, conducted radiation experiments on its own citizens (Hendershot 1999, 50, 103-104).

By the 1950s, sci-fi cinema had taken center stage. Regarded by many as the "golden age" of the genre, the period produced an unprecedented number of Hollywood feature films including *Destination Moon* (dir. Irving Pichel, 1950), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (dir. Robert Wise, 1951), *The War of the Worlds* (dir. Byron Haskin, 1953), and *Forbidden Planet* (dir. Fred M. Wilcox, 1956) (Cornea 2007, 30). In fact, approximately 500 film features and shorts created between 1948 and 1962 can be classified as science fiction in some manner, leading Patrick Lucanio to conclude that "never in the history of motion pictures has any other genre developed and multiplied so rapidly in so brief a period" (1987, 1).

These new American films were distinct in their rejection of the utopian idealism of earlier European films such as *Metropolis* (dir. Fritz Lang, 1927) and *Things to Come* (dir. William Menzies, 1936). Rather, 1950s American sci-fi reflected postwar anxiety toward

science and technology, drawing from British Gothic horror and the kaiju films of Japan, including *Gojira* (“Godzilla,” dir. Ishirô Honda, 1954) (Cornea 2007, 58).

As with earlier science fiction literature, many of these films articulated an overt anxiety over the newfound powers of science. Patricia Cornea finds a repeated questioning of the role of science in its “supervision of a patriarchal order” in such films as *Invaders from Mars* (dir. William Menzies, 1953), *The War of the Worlds*, *This Island Earth* (dir. Joseph Newman, 1955), and *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (dir. Fred Sears, 1956). Standing in stark contrast to the hopeful positivism displayed at the end of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, films such as *This Island Earth* stress the loss of personal autonomy occurring as a result of unchecked scientific advancement, whereas *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* pointedly replaces a spiritual-like wonderment at the unknown with militarized fear and aggression (2007, 39,42,45,47,49).

Again paralleling the literature, many of these films were concerned with fears over nuclear radiation. However, as Cyndy Hendershot maintains, many works of the period indicate that radiation fears were associated with sexuality and a loss of manhood. For instance, *Invaders from Mars* (dir. William Menzies, 1953) presents a Martian figure evolved beyond the need for both the body and sexuality, highlighting an apocalyptic vision that includes the loss of sexual difference. Again, such ideas were adopted from earlier European models, including H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine*, in which the human race is represented by the Elois, a feminized androgynous race forced underground by the powerful Morlocks. In *The War of the Worlds*, the Martians are characterized by their vulnerable, sexless bodies. In order to protect their physical weakness, they rely on technology and a totalitarian philosophy (1999, 41, 46, 84).

Thematically, many of these 1950s films also shared an emphasis on the interplay between a continuous world and the monsters that invade it, be they in the form of scientific experiments run amok, or invasion from outer space (Lucanio 1987, 17-18). An especially popular subgenre of these sci-fi “monster” films was what Lucanio refers to as “the alien invasion film.” He argues that nearly all of these films follow a basic exposition that includes the widespread ridicule of the initial observers of such invaders. Later, when the invaders aggressively make their presence known to the broader population, the observer (typically a “science hero”) assumes a leadership role in planning countermeasures against the alien threat. After the invaders are repelled, humanity in general “acknowledges that it has been arrogant in presuming upon its role in the cosmos” (1987, 25-26). Cinematic alien invaders during this period, while nearly universally aggressive, nevertheless instilled a much-needed sense of humility within a presumptive populace.

Such invasion films during the 1950s heavily incorporated the imagery of flying saucers. For instance, aliens travel to earth via saucer in films such as *The Thing from Another World* (dir. Christian Nyby, 1951), *The Atomic Submarine* (dir. Spencer Gordon Bennet, 1959), *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*, *Invaders from Mars*, *Invasion of the Saucer Men* (dir. Edward Cahn, 1957), *Invisible Invaders* (dir. Edward Cahn, 1959), *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (dir. Edward Wood Jr., 1959), *This Island Earth*, *Visit to a Small Planet* (dir. Norman Taurog, 1960), *The Mysterians* (dir. Ishirô Honda, 1957), and *Devil Girl from Mars* (dir. David MacDonald, 1954) (Lucanio 1987, 61). Clearly, such films derived their imagery from the concurrent rise of the UFO phenomenon, yet the associated cultural meanings derived from alien encounters (both on-screen and in the skies above) remained essentially uniform *and* connected.

This relationship between “real life” sightings and cinematic representations remains equivocal. Clearly, the Hollywood film industry embraced the symbol of the flying saucer, and soon their reported descriptions and filmic portrayals became indistinguishable. In this respect, the lines between fact and fantasy were becoming increasingly blurred in the public imagination, and several alien invasion films willingly explored this ambiguity. For instance, in what would later become a common paranoiac motif in many science fiction films, *It Came from Outer Space* (dir. Jack Arnold, 1953) and *Invasion of the Saucer Men* present groups of people struggling to persuade a skeptical public of the arrival of alien spaceships. As Cornea states, such films simply represented the reactions of a cynical, complacent public unwilling to heed the warnings of their peers. Other films, including *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* and *The Angry Red Planet* (dir. Ib Melchior, 1960) adopted authenticating newsreel-style footage and news reports to announce the arrival of flying saucers (2007, 35-36).

Most of these films represented aliens as a malevolent force bent on containing or destroying the inhabitants of Earth. The earliest of these films, including *The Flying Saucer* (dir. Mikel Conrad, 1950), *Red Planet Mars* (dir. Harry Horner, 1952), and *Invasion USA* (dir. Alfred E. Green, 1952), drew direct parallels between alien invasions and fears over Soviet aggression, with the notable exception being *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Invasion films in particular seemed to borrow from the Western motif of “settlers under siege by Indians or outlaws” as seen in films such as *The Alamo* (dir. John Wayne, 1960) and *The Unforgiven* (dir. John Huston, 1960) (Lucanio 1987, 92). Beyond inspirational sources, however, these movies emphasized what Lucanio terms “a continuous, or historical, world”

that emphasizes ideas of human wonder, aspiration, potential, and humility along with related terrestrial anxieties (1987, 11, 14-15, 44).

The science fiction films of the 1950s brought, by and large, menacing and boundaryless villains that, as Engelhardt notes, were much easier to identify on screen than Communists. Such creatures included pods, “things,” blobs, radioactive animals (ants, spiders), and, of course, aliens from other worlds. These monstrosities acted as a grab-bag of social fears about immigrants, communists, and nuclear threats, and in the end “invariably threatened an end to all that was good” (1995, 102). Specifically, commentators such as Cyndy Hendershot contend that in this metaphoric vein, science fiction films from this era (much like the concurrent growth of the conservative movement) embody a complex postwar paranoia that, although originally stemming from the atomic bomb and fear of communists, also came to reflect social anxieties tied to gender roles, sexuality, domestic problems, and scientific progress (1999, 2).

Symbolically, alien menaces in such films have often been read as transparent stand-ins for communist invaders. Yet the thinly-veiled communist threats arguably contained a deeper, more domestic concern. Cornea points to arguments made by Mark Jancovich and others about the tendency to use Soviet threats as a “code” for criticism of various aspects of American life. In other words, while the typical alien could often be identified with Soviet communism, it could also be implied that the appearance of the alien threat was due to broader developments within American life. For Cornea, the alien Other presented in many of these films primarily conveyed a fear of *conformity* above all else (2007, 34).

A key example of such a film is Don Siegel’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), in which a doctor discovers his town’s population is gradually being taken over by alien

replicants. As with other films, including *It Came from Outer Space* and *Invaders from Mars, Invasion* constructs a truly “paranoiac” reality in which what “they” (aliens) are doing to “us” (the U.S.) acts as a stand-in for the relationship between the U.S. and its citizens (Hendershot 1999, 45). Given such considerations, the film may jointly be interpreted as a warning against *both* communism in general and the McCarthyist conformism that the threat of communism produced. Even more broadly, the film “argues against *any* philosophy that attempts to bring about stability at the expense of emotion” (McKee 2007, 53).

In terms of scientific progress, Christopher Frayling maintains that such films articulated concerns over the increasing gap between specialized knowledge and public understanding. Popular films continue to express such concerns in the present day, and throughout the twentieth century scientists are represented in the medium as either exceptionally mad or saintly, with the “mad scientists” significantly outnumbering their saintly counterparts (2005, 11,40). The primary message conveyed about scientists in such films is that every scientist is vulnerable to the abuse of power afforded him, and the noble scientist capable of creating utopian possibilities is equally capable of world destruction (Hendershot 1999, 23).

Although the idea of the scientific “maverick hero” has cropped up frequently in more recent science fiction (Jeff Goldblum in *Jurassic Park*, Dustin Hoffman in *Outbreak*, Jodi Foster in *Contact*), Frayling notes that such representations typically invoke a “New Agey” approach in which the maverick stands outside an institutionalized mainstream scientific community. In such narratives, these new scientific heroes serve as the protectors of science against the incursions of big business, the government, and the military. Moreover, the fears conveyed in these films ultimately underlie the original sci-fi anxieties



over the general public's lack of participation in the country's decision-making process (1999, 215). For instance, in *Jurassic Park* (dir. Steven Spielberg 1993), the character of Ian Malcolm (Goldblum) makes the argument that all modern science is marred by selfish goals, specifically in the manner that scientists become preoccupied with accomplishment without considering the moral implications of corporately-funded scientific research (McKee 2007, 28).

In lieu of these anxieties, science fiction provides otherworldly solutions to the reckless pursuits of the scientific establishment. Films such as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (dir. Steven Spielberg 1977) and *E.T.: The Extra-terrestrial* (dir. Steven Spielberg 1982) provided a messianic alien intervention into corrupt human politics (Frayling 2005, 216). These blockbusters also satiated audiences with linear tales that reverted back to easily identifiable binaries between good/evil and male/female. *Close Encounters*, in particular, eschews both trust in the federal government and domesticated reality through the actions of the protagonist Roy Neary (Richard Dreyfuss), who leaves his family to take up a mystical quest with newfound alien saviors. As Cornea states, this theme involving "removing oneself from a material/political reality" became increasingly prevalent in the science fiction films of the late 1960s and early 1970s (2007, 114-116).

Such popular notions of extraterrestrial saviors highlight yet another aspect to the imbedded meanings within science fiction films: cultural negotiations between rationalism and spirituality. Recently, Gabriel McKee has argued that science fiction often functions as a form of mystical faith, helping humans understand both who we are and what we will become. In several aspects, he views science fiction as "the religious texts of the future" (2007, xi-xii).

For McKee, science fiction acts as a bridge between the absolutes of faith and science through its combination of rationalism with imaginative speculation. He points out the various “magic” beings science fiction writers have described in their bodies of work: extradimensional beings, galactic minds, and various powerful intelligences. Human interactions with these magical beings often take the form of spiritual conversions. For instance, in the closing moments of Stanley Kubrick’s popular 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, an American astronaut travels to the source of an alien transmission, culminating in a transcendent experience in which he becomes reborn as a “star child.” According to McKee, this rebirth evokes the “born again” Christian conversion narrative and suggests that an encounter with an advanced extraterrestrial intelligence would be primarily spiritual in nature, “a transformative event that alters one’s very being.” In many ways, such alien descriptions provide new ways of thinking of concepts of God and universal creative forces, concepts that incorporate and fuse aspects of faith and science (2007, 1,178).

The idea of alien beings as godlike deities is certainly not a new concept in science fiction. H.P. Lovecraft’s 1931 novel *At the Mountains of Madness* relates the discovery of prehuman ruins containing the remains of the originators of life on earth: alien beings referred to as “the Old Ones.” In a similar vein, *Godzilla* presents a giant reptilian creature that acts as a mystic, quasi-spiritual protector of the natural order, a punishment for science’s contemptuous treatment of the natural world (2007, 12-13).

As McKee argues, however, the saviors of science fiction offer a more limited sense of redemption than traditional religious deities, often temporarily intervening in human affairs rather than transforming our reality in a broader sense. An example of such a figure is Klaatu from *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. A classic Christ figure, Klaatu first attempts to

organize a meeting of the world's governments, but is met with resistance by both the Soviet and American governments. After escaping imprisonment from the U.S. military, Klaatu hides himself within the home of a family and takes on a false name, the Christ-evoking "Mr. Carpenter." After the army finds him and kills him, the robot Gort takes his body back to their spaceship and "resurrects" him. Upon his revival, Klaatu delivers his final "sermon":

I came here to give you these facts: it is no concern of ours how you run your own planet, but if you threaten to extend your violence, this Earth of yours will be reduced to a burned-out cinder. Your choice is simple: join us and live in peace or pursue your present course and face obliteration.

As McKee notes, rather than force an immediate decision, Klaatu then ascends in his spaceship, leaving humanity alone to decide its fate (2007, 134). Along with Klaatu, McKee provides other examples of messianic figures in science fiction, including the humanoid alien protagonist Thomas Jerome Newton in Walter Tevis's 1963 novel *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, Robert Heinlein's messiah in his 1961 novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*, as well as the ultimate alien messiah: Superman. Originally created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Superman represents a "superpowered alien" dedicated to protecting the human race. McKee further notes that Superman's origin story—in which his Kryptonian parents send their son across the galaxy in an "interstellar life raft"—neatly parallels the infancy narrative of Moses (2007, 135, 143, 147).

More recently, science fiction has often turned to issues regarding the Western tensions between science and faith. For instance, in the movie *Contact* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1997) radio astronomer Ellie Arroway (Jodie Foster) first discovers an extraterrestrial signal broadcast from space. She and her colleagues proceed to decipher the message and discover blueprints for an apparent spaceport. The spaceport is constructed, and

eventually (after an original attempt tragically fails) Arroway is selected for the “journey.” After entering the machine, Arroway appears to travel through a wormhole to an unknown planet. Once arrived she proceeds to briefly interact with an alien being (one which takes on the likeness of her deceased father) before being whisked back through the wormhole to earth. Upon her return, however, it appears to those outside the machine that a malfunction has occurred, and that Arroway has hallucinated the entire experience. As McKee notes, the ardent skeptic is now put in the ironic position of defending her experience as a matter of faith. In a monologue near the end of the film, Arroway states:

I had an experience I can't prove, I can't even explain it, but everything that I know as a human being, everything that I am tells me that it was real. I was given something wonderful, something that changed me forever; a vision of the Universe that tells us undeniably how tiny, and insignificant, and how rare and precious we all are. A vision that tells us we belong to something that is greater than ourselves. That we are not, that none of us are alone. I wish I could share that. I wish that everyone, if even for one moment, could feel that awe.

For McKee, the film closes by suggesting that faith and knowledge are not irreparably at odds, rather, that science and religion are united in their pursuit of truth (2007, 156).

Within this context and other science fiction narratives, science and space exploration are consistently construed as believable pursuits of the unknown, a notion that parallels the approach of faith and transcendent experience in broadening the scope of human understanding. Again, the message that such science fiction conveys is that religion and science are not necessarily at odds: both represent a quest for knowledge, and often this is pursued along an “unseen and...unproven” frontier (2007, 180-181).

As science fiction films branched out into addressing faith and spirituality, the familiar thematic standby of “nuclear jitters” continued in films through the 1960s and beyond, with an increasing emphasis on positioning the American government as the

“enemy.” In *Seven Days in May* (1964) a right-wing general carries out a coup d’état against the U.S. president. The classic Stanley Kubrick film *Dr. Strangelove* (1963) presents a comical vision of the end of the world that directly results from the bumbling leadership in the U.S. war room (Engelhardt 1995, 186). According to Christopher Frayling, the title character of the film represents “a combination of mad scientist (Frankenstein-style), prosthetic scientist (who has lost touch with his humanity), corporate scientist (detached from the consequences of his decisions, and working for the ‘Bland Corporation’ - a clear reference to the Rand Corporation) and genius-specialist working for the military” (2005, 105). Along with creating a great scientist archetype in film, Kubrick also manages to articulate every perceived negative relationship scientists shared with the military establishment.

Increasingly in many of these films, the Soviet Union, while still clearly an enemy and threat, nevertheless took a back seat to American leaders ready to launch the first strike. Indeed the “we” and “they” became more and more blurred both to popular culture peddlers and a receptive audience (Engelhardt 1995, 186).

This “blurring” of traditional binaries, particularly those clearly established in the 1950s invasion films (human/inhuman, us/them, real/fake, good/evil), arguably come to a head in the science fiction films of the 1990s and 2000s. Neil Badmington (2004) discusses the competing roles and meanings ascribed to alien visitors in more contemporary films such as *Mars Attacks!* (dir. Tim Burton, 1996), *Independence Day* (dir. Roland Emmerich, 1996), *Red Planet* (dir. Antony Hoffman, 2000), *Mission to Mars* (dir. Brian De Palma, 2000), and *Signs* (dir. M. Night Shyamalan, 2002). Badmington contends that while such films offer familiar binaries that distinguish “alien” from “human,” role reversals (humans invade Mars in *Red Planet* and *Mission to Mars*) and cosmic communitas (alien beings seed life on Earth

in *Mission to Mars*) serve as a reconsideration of humanity's place in the universe. Recent films such as *District 9* (dir. Neill Blomkamp, 2009) and *Avatar* (dir. James Cameron, 2009) further explore these reversals in their narratives. Rather than serving as traditional invaders, the alien "prawns" of *District 9* exist as a group of quite literal illegal aliens confined to a refugee camp in Johannesburg, South Africa, while in *Avatar* the humans act as the aggressive alien invaders of the indigenous Na'vi's homeworld.

Indeed, "alien invasion" (whatever its form) remains a popular theme in numerous modern films. *Mars Attacks!* provides a parody of earlier works such as *War of the Worlds* (the key to saving humanity from the Martians rests in the hands of crooner Tom Jones), while *Independence Day* provides a more traditional, somber invasion narrative that at once invokes nationalism and global unity (at least in a militaristic sense) and a veiled critique of the American military-industrial complex (prior knowledge of an alien presence was withheld from the public). Each film acknowledges the themes and binaries of past science fiction films in different ways. *Mars Attacks!* mocks these binaries; *Independence Day* chooses to embrace them and repackage them into more contemporary concerns.

Badmington also contends that both films, as with *Signs*, utilize the invasion motif to show how such events collectively unify their human characters. In *Independence Day*, humans both unify as a whole in a militaristic response, and as individuals in the form of a makeshift wedding ceremony (between key protagonists Steven and Jasmine) towards the end of the film. In *Signs*, the unification occurs at the familial level. Each of these films individually address Jacques Derrida's "Crisis of *versus*," or attempt to reestablish concrete boundaries between "humanness" and "otherness" (2004, 23, 55-57).<sup>24</sup> More recently, *The Invasion* (dir. Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2007), a remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and the remake of

*The Day the Earth Stood Still* (dir. Scott Derrickson, 2008) have also returned to the invasion motif, with *Invasion* focusing on family struggle (a mother attempting to save her son) and *TDESS* conveying a vague environmentalist message.

Badmington classifies these texts as reactions to “posthumanism,” in which the aforementioned binaries that have traditionally defined humanism have been deconstructed. Posthumanism, then, embraces the concept of the human as cyborg, increasingly tied to technology and blurring the lines between machine and organism. Aliens in these newer films, he argues, provide a “defense mechanism” against such a merger, at the very least allowing us to differentiate ourselves against *some* concrete Other (2004, 88, 90). Indeed, the aliens, monsters, and robots present in science fiction arguably speak to a traditional comparison between humanity and Otherness, a process through which the “idea of what it means to be human” can be established, reinforced and even contested.

Beyond such derivations, Patricia Cornea notes that postcolonial theory also introduces the idea of hybridity into the mix, a temporal identity that fluidly moves between various social processes into what Homi Bhabha refers to as a “Third Space.” According to Bhabha, as humans have moved away from singularities of identity such as class and gender, an awareness of multiple, often interconnected subject positions have been identified, including those of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, and sexual orientation (1994, 2). Bhabha understands racial hybridity as a “halfway between” state of being that challenges historical notions of difference and heterogeneity of race and sexuality. This hybridity allows for both camouflage and personal agency in a third space between “the rules of engagement” that resist binary politics (1994, 20,54,277).

The notion of racial hybridity presented in Bhabha's postcolonial theory can be read in 1980s science fiction films such as *Enemy Mine* (dir. Wolfgang Peterson 1985), *Predator* (dir. John McTiernan 1987), and *Alien Nation* (dir. Graham Blaker 1988), which all explore race relations and hybridity through the coupling of white males with extraterrestrial counterparts (Cornea 2007, 176-178,182). In John Sayles's *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984) an alien protagonist (Joe Morton) comes to Harlem disguised as a young African-American male. Because he does not speak, local African-Americans project their own notions of identity onto him. In one scene a Puerto Rican named Hector (Jaime Tirelli) notices his muteness and speaks to him in Spanish, assuming the alien is from Puerto Rico. Cornea notes that Hector also projects his own ideas of cultural/racial identity onto the alien, thus problematizing "Black" as an organizing category and highlighting contextual resemblance and difference (2007, 185). Racial hybridity continues to be a subject in contemporary science fiction. In *Avatar* (2009), humans in 2154 are conducting a mining operation on the moon Pandora in a distant star system. Impeding their progress, however, is an indigenous sentient species known as the Na'vi. Determined to learn more about the Na'vi and their homeworld through infiltration, the human colonists grow "avatars," or Na'vi-human hybrids, which are remotely controlled by humans. Gradually, one hybrid controlled by Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) successfully infiltrates the Na'vi culture, yet later turns against the human colonists through his recognition of the Na'vi's special relationship with their biosphere. The film, echoing early narratives of colonialist-indigenous hybridity such as *Dances With Wolves* (dir. Kevin Costner 1990) and *The Last Samurai* (dir. Edward Zwick 2003), promotes a racialized, idyllic Third Space between human ingenuity and exploration and an alien (indigenous) symbiosis with the natural world.



Yet the film further attempts a disruption of other traditional binaries, particularly those distinctions between artificial and physical reality so frequently addressed by “cyborg” science fiction narratives (Graham 2002, 200).

Hybridity in science fiction may also be examined from Donna Haraway’s feminist perspective. For Haraway, the cyborg of science fiction speaks to the issue of “posthumanism,” or the modified, technologized successor species to modern *Homo sapiens* (Graham 2002, 8-9). As with Bhabha’s racial hybrid, Haraway’s cyborg destabilizes set boundaries between both species and gender (1991, 152-153). More specifically, the cyborg exposes the gendered binaries in how modern science defines its task (i.e., the study of “Mother Nature” and “Mother Earth”), feminized bodies, and associations with emotion, in relation to the androcentric discourse of the Scientific Revolution, which has historically served to exclude women from scientific pursuits (Graham 2002, 207). Of course, issues of gender have long been explored in cyborg fiction, and Elaine Graham notes the critiques of hypermasculinity embedded in such well known science fiction films as *Robocop* (dir. Paul Verhoeven, 1987) and *The Terminator* (dir. James Cameron, 1984), particularly as they relate to anxieties over the ability of technology to overtake the sovereign self (2002, 210).

Arguably, however, the *Alien* quadrilogy remain the most popular sci-fi narratives invoking a feminist notion of hybridity. A longtime subject of feminist interest (e.g., Melzer 2006), the films are iconic for their inclusion of the chief protagonist Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), a character that continually blurs filmic gender stereotypes throughout the series, as exemplified by her androgyny, proactivity, grit, and continual lack of explicit sexual relationships with her male (or female) counterparts. Yet Ripley’s hybridity is perhaps explored to its fullest in *Alien Resurrection* (dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997), in which her

character is “revived” from death as a human-alien hybrid. This hybrid Ripley possesses even more masculine enhancements, including increased musculature, aggression, strength, and agility. Furthermore, the hybrid clearly speaks to anxieties over genetic engineering and enhancements, ultimately challenging both gender and species boundaries between humanity and Otherness. In this context, Ripley’s final form represents a monstrous, yet liberatory posthuman future.

As Hall and Fiske contend, in such ways popular culture remains representative of battlegrounds for contested meanings. A prime example of the use of the cosmic Other to empower marginalized voices occurred in the late 1960s with Afro-futurist music of “Sonny” Sun Ra and his Arkestra band. As his ethnographer John Szwed notes, Sun Ra appropriated “space for race” in his music by using outer space as a metaphor for exclusion and “reterritorialization,” claiming the cosmic outside as his own. Here, claiming space as homeland repositions a minority position and makes the margins standardized (1997, 140).

Yet, as Cornea points out, Bhabha’s notion of hybridity can be incorporated not only by the colonized, but also by the colonizer, both as a method of appropriating the Other’s culture (New Age Movement) but also in fashioning new identities. An excellent example of such an approach is Whitley Strieber’s bestselling “non-fiction” book *Communion* (1987), which attempted a recontextualization of the later UFO/abduction scenario. Strieber had much prior interest in New Age philosophies and purported to have had a background in Catholicism, Episcopalianism, Wicca, German mysticism, Russian mysticism, and Zen Buddhism (Klass 1989, 129-130). In the book, Strieber combines these philosophies, and, drawing specifically from Catholicism and the Holy Trinity, Strieber’s ultimate understanding of his experiences becomes envisioned in his understanding of the “triad.”

Strieber notes that “many ancient traditions” view humans as having three parts: body, mind, and heart. According to Strieber, the fundamental idea behind the triad is the notion of two opposing forces coming together to create a positive third force. Here, he positions humans, his “visitors,” and the formulation of a Starchild-like “third and greater form” (1987, 280-283). Admitting that this idea of the triad had been the “central effort” of his life, Strieber confides that this spiritual transformation can best be found in the growing body of abductee narratives (1987, 287). Strieber offers a solution to the 20<sup>th</sup> century war between theology and secularism that seeks to mesh spiritual enlightenment with scientific discovery, and that negotiation arrives in the guise of the alien. In this context, the alien continues to satiate this popular tension. While Sun Ra reconfigures outer space to subvert power relationships, Strieber reconfigures the alien to reconcile seemingly oppositional epistemologies in the formulation of a new, holistic identity.

Another aspect of popular culture analysis useful for this discussion involves the effects of collective memory. As Marita Sturken argues, individuals interact with cultural products in complicated ways, and cultural (collective) memories represent a battleground of contested meanings, images, and stories that vie for a place in history. Cultural memory, thus contextualized, represents shared collective memories that exist outside “formal historical discourse yet [are] entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning” (1997, 1, 3). How does she come to such a conclusion?

George Lipsitz stresses that although traditional historical thinking remains a necessary way of understanding the human experience, its relation to and location within popular culture imbue it with more impressionistic and allegorical aspects. Furthermore, for some populations, commercialized leisure *becomes* history—it represents a “repository” of

collective memory that includes and even favors immediate experiences within the context of time. Popular culture, whether in the form of movies, comic books, songs, or newspapers comes to provide an important and meaningful connection to both individual and collective pasts (Lipsitz 1990, 4-5).

Patrick O'Donnell, for instance, contends that within the postmodern world, a new type of cultural paranoia exists that remains primarily concerned with fluid temporality in regards to historical memory. Within popular culture, O'Donnell notes a "paranoid temporality" existing in numerous post-1970's Hollywood films that include the *Back to the Future* trilogy (disjunctive overlay of time), *Contact*, *Groundhog Day*, *Nick of Time*, and *Forrest Gump*. Such films promote fantasies about themes of identity and control "founded on temporal simultaneity and synchronicity" (2000, 2,5). Such paranoia, as expressed within popular culture, allows for contemporary thinking to produce multiple representations of identity and reconstruct the past in a way that makes it directly meaningful to present circumstances (2000, 17).

With the advent of mass communication, concepts of time, memory, and history become fundamentally altered. Common heritage and experience can be shared with people we never meet, and memories no longer need to be associated with biological or geographical connections (Lipsitz 1990, 5). Sturken analyzes memories of the Vietnam War, and how such memories are gradually reshaped and reworked through exposure to television images and feature films. In terms of alternative belief systems influenced by collective memory, the Roswell incident perfectly embodies Lipsitz and Sturken's ideas about resituating present experiences and attitudes within the past.

As discussed earlier, the incident itself occurred on July 8<sup>th</sup>, 1947, when Air Force intelligence officer Major Jesse Marcel was dispatched to a rancher's farm in New Mexico to retrieve wreckage from a supposed "saucer" crash. The following day, Air Force General Roger Ramey announced that the wreckage was in fact a weather balloon. However, the incident was almost largely forgotten and removed from the public mind until the late 1970s, when UFO investigators began collecting testimonies of witnesses who claimed there had been an Air Force cover-up. *The Roswell Incident*, written by Charles Berlitz and William Moore, was published in 1980 and contained interviews with nearly thirty people claiming first-hand knowledge of the crash. Stories of crashed disks, dead aliens, and government attempts to silence witnesses were included. The book became a bestseller, and it was quickly followed up by a series of books, television specials, and films throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and into the new century debating the veracity of the alleged event (Goldberg 2001, 192-193,196-197).

With all this exposure, the UFO phenomenon and Roswell itself became increasingly mainstream, transcending their status from "icons of conspiracism" to American popular culture mainstays. In the 1990s, films like *Independence Day* and television shows including "The X-Files" and "Roswell" solidified the status of the Roswell incident as a classic Cold War narrative (2001, 215). The significance, again, is that an event so entrenched in the contemporary collective memory of Americans only came to prominence over thirty years after it occurred, and it did so via the avenues of literature, television, and film. Popular conceptions of the incident would undoubtedly have been different had a controversy existed at its inception. As shown earlier, as the Cold War progressed, popular culture fears turned increasingly toward internal, sinister forces within the U.S. government rather than against

destruction at the hands of an outside threat. Investigator Stanton Friedman even coined the incident the “Cosmic Watergate,” reflecting a reconsideration of past events through a then-contemporary lens (Story 2001, 208). Such a reconsideration allows for the construction of “counter-memories” created between the gap of lived experience and popular culture, and, as Lipsitz argues, such a cultural expression speaks equally to residual memories of the past as well as hopes for the future (1990, 12-13). Whether or not an examination of the relationship between popular culture and collective memory represents, as Lipsitz suggests, “a new kind of knowledge,” the fact remains that such an approach promises to broaden our understanding of the influence of popular culture on memory and contemporary systems of belief. More specifically, popular culture conceptions of the Other present a bevy of competing, contradictory, and sometimes congruous visions of conspiratorial, apocalyptic, utopian, and technospiritual realities. In this context, marginalized voices exist outside traditional notions of social power structures, and notions of agency and resistance remain relational to history, culture, and varying social allegiances.

Again, we must turn to the parallel, yet interconnected histories of science fiction cinema and the UFO phenomenon. Both utilize the concept of the alien as commentary on the same historic social issues: communism, mutual annihilation, authoritative science, spirituality, race, and hybridity. Yet neither appear to hold a direct overbearing influence on the other; it remains unclear if the UFO phenomenon played the dominant role in influencing filmic depictions of aliens, or vice versa. Rather, it appears evident that the meanings humans ascribe to the concept of the alien usurp their mere manifestations in both the celluloid and the skies above.

## **Conclusion**

The UFO phenomenon unquestionably served as a vehicle for the popular introduction of quasi-religious ideologies rooted in 19<sup>th</sup> century Theosophy. For early contactees such as George Adamski, supposed encounters with alien “space brothers” provided a public platform from which to espouse diatribes against nuclear armament and environmental destruction, and to reaffirm racial hierarchies while assimilating various global religious and philosophical ideals. These contactees directly influenced the New Age movement of the 1960s and the later alien abduction narratives, which equally allowed for the personalized appropriation of ethnic identities both in the conceptualization of alien beings, and in formulation of new, “hybrid” identities amongst practitioners. For many of its proponents, the UFO phenomenon acted as an imperfect bridge between secular scientific progress and increasingly divergent religious traditions. Hence, this “technospirituality” allowed for a loosely aligned collection of protests and reconciliations in a modernized, troubled world.

Lastly, the cultural anxieties and quasi-religiosity historically conveyed through the UFO phenomenon neatly parallels similar concerns in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century science fiction. As with UFO occupants, the aliens of science fiction have often acted as symbolic stand-ins for communist invasion, science run amok, government corruption, racial anxiety, and religious epiphanies. While a clear relationship exists between filmic depictions of alien beings and their alleged physical manifestations in UFO narratives, no definitive evidence exists that suggests a direct causality on either end. Rather, a study of aliens in science fiction suggests that the meanings fictional characters derive from their encounters with

extraterrestrials are indistinguishable from those of the UFO community. In each case, the alien exists solely within the confines of our contemporary imaginations.

Despite this wealth of information, historical approaches to understanding the UFO phenomenon do not tell the entire tale. How does one define a “UFO community?” How many individuals in a sample population claim to have seen a UFO? How do individuals distinguish UFO sightings from mundane or even paranormal phenomena? Is it possible to construct useful taxonomies of anomalous experiences? These are questions addressed in the following chapter, in which I discuss the results and implications of a UFO study conducted in New Mexico.



## Chapter 4

### A Survey of UFO and Paranormal Experiences in New Mexico

As I have previously argued, UFOs and their associated anomalous belief systems must first be examined within their sociocultural contexts, particularly their negotiations within Cold War paranoia and the explosion of American science fiction. Scholarship limited to such analytical perspectives, however, remains incomplete. By focusing solely on the historical contexts within which such beliefs arise, it is tempting for many academics to reduce their relationship to one of simple linear causality (e.g., “Nuclear jitters and science fiction movies created actual UFO reports”). Due to this tendency, little attention is paid to the actual experiences reported by witnesses. In this chapter, I will discuss the results of a survey I conducted from 2007 to 2008 at the University of New Mexico, which was designed to gauge the frequency of reported experiences related to UFOs and the paranormal in a sample population. First, I will discuss my rationale for privileging the role of experience in contemporary UFO beliefs, then turn to a discussion about the results of the survey itself.<sup>25</sup>

#### Privileging Experience

Belief in unidentified flying objects (UFOs) and so-called paranormal phenomena has long been of interest to researchers from a variety of academic disciplines, particularly among folklorists (e.g., Bennett 1999; Dégh 1977; Dewan 2006b; Ellis 2003; Hufford 1982a) and psychologists (e.g., Clancy 2005; Jung 1964; Royalty 1995; Sharps et al. 2006).

Depending on one’s theoretical perspective, such beliefs have been variously explained as a result of certain demographic characteristics, personality constructs or disorders, religious desires, or subjective experiences (Clarke 1995, 371). Regardless of their basis, a majority of Americans professed belief in ghosts (57%) and UFOs (52%) in a recent national poll

(Young 2008). Given the sustained, broad popularity of such beliefs, we found surprisingly little attention paid in the relevant literature to the experiential component of UFOs and the paranormal, despite arguments made by folklorists espousing its potential importance (Hufford 1982a).

Traditionally, the study of such anomalous<sup>26</sup> experiences has been reduced to a question of authenticity: “Are these experiences real or the result of misperception or hoax?” Most scientists inevitably come down on the side of the latter conclusion, while those devoted to a more sympathetic study of such phenomena, including numerous parapsychologists and ufologists, continually seek to prove the extraordinary claims of so many with hard, empirical data.<sup>27</sup> More recently, the few scholarly works that have addressed these phenomena generally concentrate on the researchers, practitioners, and ‘believers’ involved.<sup>28</sup> Such works have effectively provided insight into psychological needs and desires as a function of social transitions, for instance, yet too often lack the first-hand research and comprehensive analysis of anomalous experiences needed to avoid being reductionistic. It is the contention here that, at least in part, the study of such a complex topic as UFOs remains compelling because, in the words of religious scholar Brenda Denzler, “it involves not only the *belief in* something but for many in the UFO community an unarguable *experience of* something” (2001, xiv-xv,xvii).

Although most academic inquiries into UFO and paranormal beliefs focus on a psychology of error, other recent research suggests that personal experience plays a significant role in the formulation, maintenance, and alteration of beliefs associated with UFOs and the paranormal (Clarke 1995; Dewan 2006b; King et al. 2007).<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the psychologist Joel Royalty has argued that research shows standardized critical thinking tests

conducted in the past have not shown a correlation between lower scores and belief in the paranormal, but that paranormal experience was a significant indicator of global paranormal belief (1995, 481). For the study discussed in this chapter, I have taken a potentially controversial perspective that does not preclude the existence of phenomena that present scientific knowledge cannot account for. The intention of this positioning is not to advocate the reality of UFOs as extraterrestrial spacecraft, nor to promote the idea that some paranormal phenomena are indicative of postmortem energy transference. Rather, I contend that by categorically rejecting such hypotheses—regardless of their perceived likelihood—researchers dramatically reduce their inquiries into alternative belief systems by focusing almost entirely on psychological or sociocultural factors while ignoring other elements of belief. One such element that unquestionably deserves closer scrutiny is the role of personal experience.

In 2008, a study of UFO and paranormal beliefs was designed with a specific focus on their experiential elements. Modeled after a prior study (Dewan 2006a), this research was an attempt to gather broad based information on UFOs, ghosts, out-of-body experiences (OBEs), “hagging” or sleep paralysis,<sup>30</sup> and other anomalous experiences with the intent of making basic determinations regarding the frequency and typology of reported experiences within a sample population in New Mexico. An additional goal involved the exploration of specific socio-demographic variables (including gender, age, ethnicity, and religious affiliation) and their correlation with said experiences.<sup>31</sup> The final goal of the study was to investigate the impact of anomalous experiences on preexistent individual belief systems in the arenas of religion, spiritual and supernatural belief, and extraterrestrial life.

The questionnaire devised for this survey represents a rarified attempt to identify frequencies of reported UFO and paranormal experiences in a controlled population. Furthermore (and to the best of my knowledge), the present survey is the first attempt to gauge the frequency of anomalous experiences in a sample population in New Mexico. Previous attempts at such measurements, although fairly uncommon, still collectively provide a useful comparison for the results collected here. For instance, a 1974 Gallup Poll survey suggested that approximately 11% of the U.S. adult population had witnessed a UFO, doubling the percentage of a similar survey conducted in 1966 (Hynek and Vallee 1975, 289). A survey conducted by the sociologist Andrew Greeley (1975) suggested that roughly one-fifth of the American population had experienced *frequent* paranormal occurrences, including contact with the dead, clairvoyance, ESP, and déjà vu. During the 1980s, the sociologist James McClenon provided extensive research into reported paranormal experiences at various colleges and universities. McClenon found that 80% or more of the students at these educational institutions reported déjà vu, while 35% or more reported ESP. Additionally, 20% to 25% of these respondents reported contact with the dead, 18% to 20% reported out-of-body experiences, and 32% to 50% in selected samples reported sleep paralysis (1994, 27).<sup>32</sup> The folklorist David Hufford distributed a questionnaire pertaining to the Old Hag/sleep paralysis, and in 1982 estimated that between 10% and 25% of any given sample population reported having such an experience (1982, 50).

The psychologist Dave Clarke surveyed a sample population at a New Zealand university in the early 1990s, and found that 46% reported experiencing telepathy, 36% reported incidents of precognition, 23% clairvoyance, and 19% reported astral projection. However, response rates for ghost and UFO sightings were much lower, at 9% and 2%,

respectively (1995, 375). In 1997, a Gallup Poll survey reported that approximately 12% of Americans had thought they had seen a UFO, while 71% agreed with the idea that the U.S. government was hiding knowledge about UFOs (Newport 1997). That same year, a CNN/Time Magazine poll suggested that 75% of Americans had never personally heard of anyone else witnessing a UFO, yet 80% believed the U.S. government was hiding knowledge of the existence of extraterrestrial life forms (1997). A 2001 Gallup Poll indicated that paranormal beliefs had increased in the U.S. over the past ten years, with women more likely to believe in ghosts and communication with the dead, and men more likely to believe in extraterrestrial visitation (Newport and Strausberg 2001).<sup>33</sup>

Gallup conducted a more recent survey in 2005 on UFO and paranormal beliefs in the U.S., and found that more Americans (37%) believed in haunted houses than in any other paranormal event, while 24% of those polled believed extraterrestrials had already visited Earth. Supporting the results of their previous survey, Gallup pollsters found that women were more likely than men to believe in haunted houses (42% versus 31%) and communicating with the dead (25% versus 18%). Conversely, men were significantly more likely (29% versus 19%) to believe that aliens had visited Earth (Lyons 2005). An Associated Press-Ipsos poll conducted in 2007 found that 34% of Americans professed a belief in both UFOs and ghosts, and 48% believed in ESP. An additional 30% reported experiencing sleep paralysis, 23% reported seeing a ghost, and 14% reported seeing a UFO. Lastly, 5% of respondents reported having seen monsters in their closets (Gross 2007).<sup>34</sup>

In my 2006 survey of anomalous experiences in a sample population at a university in North Carolina, which the present survey is most closely modeled after, frequencies of UFO and paranormal experiences mostly adhered to prior surveys. In response to the question,

“Have you ever seen anything unusual in the sky?”, 22% of respondents answered “yes.” When asked, “Have you ever seen any mysterious lights that you could not explain in either conventional or natural terms?”, 19% answered “yes.” In response to a question about general supernatural experiences, 22% reported witnessing an event that might be considered supernatural. Of that 22% of students, 38% also claimed to have witnessed a mysterious light/UFO as well. Overall, 10% of the sample population claimed to have had both a UFO-like experience and some other supernatural experience, suggesting that individuals reporting one type of paranormal/UFO experience were statistically more likely to report having another (Dewan 2006a, 35).

Gender differences in reported UFO experiences coincided with prior surveys. Males were more likely than females to report witnessing something unusual in the sky (29% versus 17%), and they were also more likely (23% versus 17%) to report observing mysterious lights. Unlike prior surveys, however, males also reported having more supernatural experiences than females (23% versus 21%). Among the two largest ethnic groups in the survey—Caucasians and African Americans—there were no significant statistical differences in the reporting of UFO-like experiences. However, African Americans in the sample reported a much higher incidence of supernatural experiences (34% versus 17%). Lastly, differences between Protestants and other religious groups were discernable, with Protestants less likely to experience UFO-like events, but more likely to experience supernatural events (2006a, 39).

As I have already noted (2006a), the majority of previous studies of UFO and paranormal beliefs and experiences have surveyed non-random populations (e.g., paranormal and UFO organization members) and lack a scientific methodology. Furthermore,

experiential-centered surveys have often utilized specific terminology (UFO, ghost, alien) that may not account for alternative, descriptive cultural models for anomalous phenomena. Finally, although many respondents in this survey reported that they had discussed their experiences with others, none (save one individual) made mention of reporting their experiences to media outlets nor to UFO/paranormal organizations.

### **Method and Design**

The primary objective for this work was to compile a database of UFO and paranormal experiences, particularly in the central New Mexico region. This larger database included statistical frequencies of said experiences, as well as more detailed first-hand accounts from witnesses compiled from in-depth interviews. The survey was devised and distributed as a written questionnaire. To ensure maximum feedback, it was distributed and collected during the same class periods.

The data used for this study was collected from February 2008 to April 2009. The survey was modeled after past experience-centric surveys, including those of Hufford (1982a), McClenon (1994), the psychologist Kenneth Ring (1992), and my own prior study (2006a) of anomalous experiences in North Carolina. As with this prior survey, questions that were devised to gauge the frequency of reported experiences were mostly devoid of value-laden terms such as “UFO” or “ghost.” Respondents were first asked if they had ever seen anything unusual in the sky. They were then asked a more pointed question: had they ever witnessed any mysterious lights that they could not explain in either natural or conventional terms? Even more directly, respondents were then asked if they had ever had an encounter with an intelligence or entity they believed was connected with a UFO or UFO-related phenomena. Next, respondents were asked if they had ever awoken from sleep

unable to move, and with the sense of a presence nearby. This was followed by, “Have you ever seen or sensed the presence of someone who had died?” Respondents were then asked if they ever had an experience in which they felt outside of their bodies, and lastly were asked if they had any other experiences they considered either “supernatural” or “extraordinary” in nature.

In addition to these basic questions regarding anomalous experiences, respondents were also asked if they knew of anyone else that had had a similar experience. Next, they were asked to list any books they had read, as well as any television shows or movies they had watched that specifically dealt with the subject of UFOs or supernatural phenomena. This was followed by the question, “If applicable, have you ever discussed your experiences with others?” Finally, respondents were asked—again, if applicable—whether their personal experiences had altered their beliefs in organized religion, spiritual matters, the supernatural world, and/or extraterrestrial life.

Although not comprehensive, this series of questions was designed to encompass a fairly broad range of anomalous experiences, even those that respondents might have felt had natural or conventional explanations. With this methodology, it was believed students would be able to provide accounts of a wide variety of perceived anomalous experiences without having to fit as many into traditional, predefined categories used in most prior surveys that have yielded low response rates.

### **Participants**

The participants were 601 undergraduate students, graduate students, and retired faculty members at the University of New Mexico. The undergraduate and graduate



students, who accounted for all but 15 of the individual survey results, were either enrolled in or instructing introductory courses in English, linguistics, American Studies, and philosophy.

Forty percent (239) of the survey respondents were male, while 60% (362) were female. The ages of respondents ranged from 17 to 88, with the average age at 23.9 years ( $SD=9.76$ ). Fully 79% (473) of the respondents were between the ages of 17 and 24, with 21% (128) 25 years of age or older. In terms of ethnic identification, 46% (278) were Caucasian, 37% (221) were Hispanic, and 6% (35) were Native American. African Americans (22), Asian Americans (21), and those identified in the “Other” category comprised the remaining 11%. Somewhat surprisingly, 33% (198) of respondents listed no current religious affiliation. Twenty-nine percent (177) identified their current religious affiliation as Catholic, 25% (148) identified as Protestant, and 7% (41) identified as “Other.” Buddhism (8), Judaism (6), and Islam (5) accounted for only 3%, with another 3% (19) leaving the question unanswered. The vast majority of respondents (551) were presently attending college, while the remaining 8% either held a Bachelor’s degree (32) or had earned an advanced degree (18).

Overall, the group was relatively homogenous in regards to age and educational level, with the major ethnic differences divided into the two major groups of Caucasian and Hispanic, and the major religious differences divided between people with no affiliation, Catholics, and Protestants.

### **General Results**

In response to the question, “Have you ever seen anything unusual in the sky?”, 36% (215) of the total respondents answered “yes,” while 64% (386) answered “no.” When asked, “Have you ever seen any mysterious lights that you could not explain in either

conventional or natural terms?”, 29% (174) answered “yes,” while 71% (427) answered “no.” By contrast, only 3% (20) of the total respondents answered “yes” to, “Have you ever had an encounter with an entity or intelligence that you believe was connected with a UFO or with a UFO-related phenomenon?” For the question, “Have you ever awoken from sleep unable to move, and with the sense of a presence nearby?”, 26% (155) answered “yes,” and 74% (446) answered “no.” In response to the question, “Have you ever seen or sensed the presence of someone who had died?”, 37% (224) answered “yes,” while 63% (377) answered “no.” When asked, “Have you ever had an experience where you felt you were outside your body?”, 22% (132) said “yes,” and 78% (469) said “no.” Lastly, 17% (99) of respondents answered “yes” to the question, “Have you ever had any other experiences that some may consider either supernatural or extraordinary in nature?”

### **Demographic Results**

In examining statistical results divided by gender, several differences were discernable (See Figure 1). Out of the 362 females in the survey, 31% (113) had seen something unusual in the sky. Among the 239 males, 43% (102) answered “yes” to the same question,  $\chi^2(1, N=601)=8.232$   $p<.01$ . Similarly, 25% (92) of females reported witnessing mysterious lights, while this percentage rose to 34% (82) among males,  $\chi^2(1, N=601)=5.538$   $p<.05$ . Although response rates for encounters with UFO-related entities were low for both groups, males reported these encounters with slightly more frequency (5%) than females (2%). The experience of waking from sleep paralyzed and with the sense of a presence nearby was reported more frequently among females, of which 27% (98) claimed to have had this experience versus 24% (57) among males. A higher percentage of women also reported experiences with the deceased, with 41% (149) answering “yes” to the question, versus 31%

(75) of males,  $\chi^2(1, N=601)=5.889$   $p<.05$ . For out-of-body experiences, 18% (65) of females answered “yes” compared to 28% (67) of males,  $\chi^2(1, N=601)=8.530$   $p<.01$ . Regarding miscellaneous supernatural experiences, 16% (58) of females answered in the affirmative, with a similar percentage, 17% (41), among males.

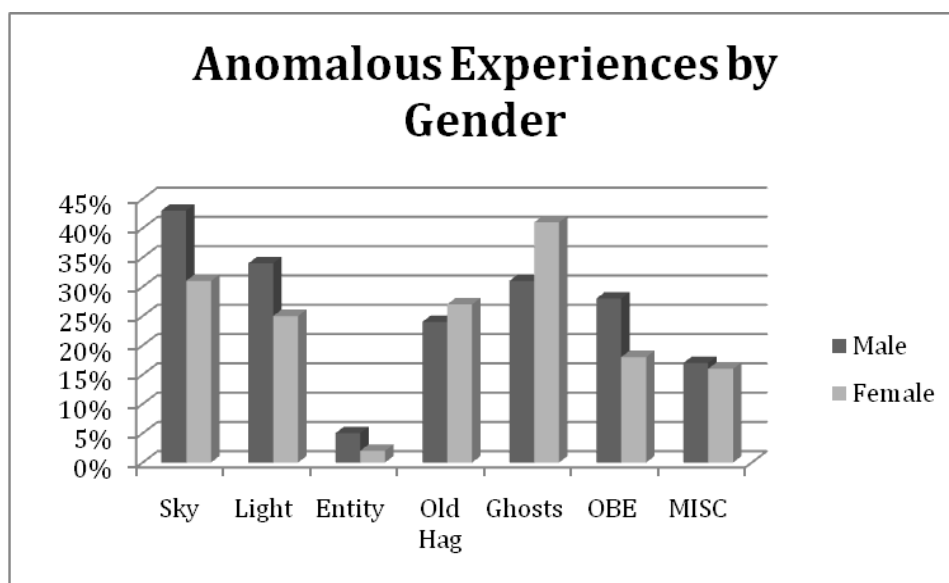


Figure 1. Anomalous Experiences by Gender

An examination of ethnic differences in reporting anomalous experiences also yielded interesting results (See Figure 2). For the witnessing of unusual objects in the sky, Caucasians accounted for 51% of the total positive responses, with Hispanics accounting for 36%, Native Americans providing 5%, and the remaining groups (African Americans, Asian Americans, and those in the “other” category) providing the remaining 8%. Among those witnessing something unusual in the sky, 39% (108) of the 278 Caucasians answered “yes.” Thirty-four percent (76) of Hispanics answered “yes” to the same question. Among the third largest ethnic group, Native Americans, 31% (11) answered in the affirmative. For the mysterious lights question, Caucasians again accounted for 51% of the total positive

responses, with Hispanics providing 35%, Native Americans 7%, and all other ethnic groups providing the remaining 7%. Within each ethnic group, 31% (87) of Caucasians answered in the affirmative, while 27% (60) of Hispanics reported witnessing a mysterious light. Native Americans, although a relatively smaller sample, reported mysterious light experiences with the most frequency, with 34% (12) answering “yes” to the question. The remaining frequencies included those of African Americans (27% of 22), Asian Americans (19% of 21), and those listed in the “other” category (14% of 21). In response to the question concerning contact with UFO-related entities or intelligences, both Caucasians and Hispanics provided a 3% (9 and 7, respectively) positive response rate, while Native Americans provided a 6% (2) rate. Only one of the twenty-two African Americans sampled and one of the twenty-one listed in the “other” category claimed such an experience, and none of the twenty-one Asian Americans provided a positive response to the question.

In response to the question about waking from sleep unable to move and sensing a presence nearby, Caucasians accounted for 40% of the total positive responses, Hispanics accounted for 42%, and Native Americans answered at 10%. Within ethnic groups, 22% (61) of Caucasians answered in the positive. The response rate climbed to 29% (64) among Hispanics, and was ultimately highest among Native Americans, with 43% (15) reporting the experience. The positive response rate was 23% (5) for African Americans, 19% (4) for Asian Americans, and 19% (4) for “other.” For perceived encounters with the deceased, Caucasians provided 46% of the total positive responses, Hispanics provided 38%, and Native Americans provided 10% of the responses. Within ethnic groups, 36% (101) of Caucasians answered “yes.” Among Hispanics, the positive response rate was slightly higher, standing at 38% (84), with the response rate again highest among Native Americans,

who provided a 60% (21) positive response rate to the question. This rate was also high among African Americans, with 41% (9) claiming some form of contact with the deceased. Frequencies of such experiences were lowest among Asian Americans, with only 10% (2) providing a positive response. Those in the “other” category provided a rate of 24% (5),  $\chi^2(5, N=601)=16.58$   $p<.01$ .

Regarding OBEs, Caucasians accounted for 48% of the total positive responses, while Hispanics provided 36%. Within ethnic groups, 23% (63) of Caucasians responded in the positive, with Hispanics providing a similar rate of 21% (47). African Americans reported the highest frequency of OBEs, with 32% (7) answering in the affirmative, while Asian Americans provided the second-highest response rate at 29% (6). This frequency dropped to 17% (6) among Native Americans, and stood at only 10% (2) within the “Other” category. For miscellaneous supernatural experiences, response rates were mostly similar across ethnic categories. Caucasians (14%), Hispanics (16%), African Americans (14%), Asian Americans (14%), and those in the “Other” category (19%) all provided similar frequencies in response to the question. The major outlier in this case was found among Native Americans, who provided a 40% (14) positive response rate to the question,  $\chi^2(5, N=601)=15.26$   $p<.01$ .

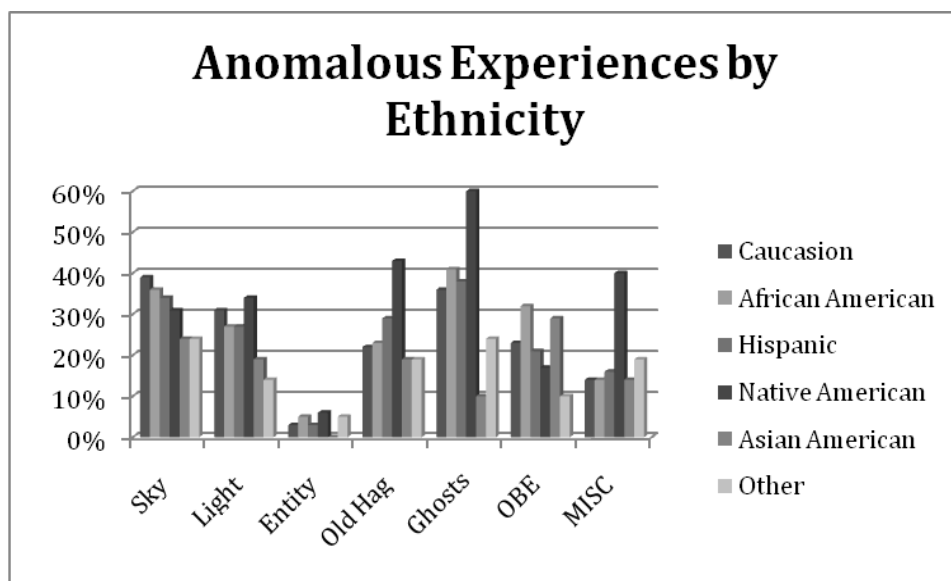


Figure 2. Anomalous Experiences by Ethnicity

The respondents' current religious affiliation also appears to play a factor in response rates (See Figure 3). For sightings of unusual objects in the sky, Catholics accounted for 27% of the total positive responses, Protestants accounted for 28%, and those with no religious affiliation accounted for 36%. Within religious groups, Catholics provided a 33% (59) positive response rate. This number was slightly lower among Protestants, with 28% (42) answering "yes" to the question, while the positive response rate climbed to 39% (78) among those with no religious affiliation. Those identifying themselves within the "other" category in religious affiliation were the fourth-largest group, and provided a 37% (19) positive response rate.<sup>35</sup> Although a very small sample (6), Jews provided the highest response rate at 83% (5). The small sample of Muslims (5) also provided a high rate, standing at 80% (4). Buddhists (38%) and those providing no answer to the question (50%) comprised the remaining 5% of the total responses,  $\chi^2(7, N=601)=16.88 p<.05$ . For those claiming to have witnessed mysterious lights, Catholics accounted for 28% of the total positive responses, Protestants provided 18%, and nonbelievers accounted for 37% of the

total. Within religious groups, 28% (49) of Catholics answered “yes” to the question. As with unusual objects in the sky, Protestants reported lower frequencies of witnessing mysterious lights, with 22% (32) responding positively. Individuals with no religious affiliation provided a 32% (64) positive response rate, while those in the “other” category answered at a positive rate of 34% (14). Among the smaller religious samples, Jews and Muslims again reported higher frequency rates (67% and 40%, respectively), while Buddhists (50%) reported high frequencies as well. Those providing no answer to the question comprised a positive response rate of 28%. Regarding sightings of UFO-related entities, there were minimal variations in frequency reports among religious groups. Catholics (3%), Protestants (3%), individuals with no affiliation (5%), individuals listing “Other,” (2%), and Jews (17%, with only 1 reporting) provided all positive responses to the question, with Buddhists, Muslims, and those not answering the question on religious affiliation accounting for no reports of UFO-related entities.

For the question related to sleep paralysis, Catholics provided 28% of the total positive responses, Protestants provided 17%, and individuals with no affiliation comprised 39% of the total. Within religious groups, Catholics provided a positive response rate of 25% (44) to the question, while once again Protestant response rates were lower, standing at 18% (27). Individuals with no religious affiliation provided a rate of 30% (60). Similarly, 29% (12) of those in the “Other” category reported having such an experience, while Jews (33%), Muslims (40%), Buddhists (38%), and those refraining from answering the question (28%) collectively accounted for the remaining 8% of positive responses to the question. For affirmative responses to contact with the deceased, Catholics provided 34% of the total responses, Protestants provided 20%, and nonbelievers provided 35% of the total. Within

religious groups, Catholics provided the highest response rate, with a frequency of 42% (75). Protestants provided the significantly lower (if still relatively high) response rate of 30% (45), and individuals with no affiliation responded positively at 39% (78). Response rates were similar for the “other” category (39%), Buddhists (38%), and those not answering the question (33%). Muslims responded with a lower rate of 20%, while no one in the equally small Jewish sample reported having an encounter with the deceased.

For OBEs, Catholics accounted for 24% of the total positive responses, Protestants accounted for 17%, and nonbelievers accounted for 46% of the total. Within religious groups, Catholics responded with a positive frequency rate of 18% (31) versus a rate of 15% (22) among Protestants. The response rate climbed considerably among individuals with no affiliation, standing at 30% (60). Among the smaller samples, Buddhists (63%) provided the highest positive response rates, with Jews reporting 33%, the “Other” category reporting 20%, and Muslims reporting none,  $\chi^2(7, N=601)=24.10$   $p<.01$ . Lastly, for miscellaneous supernatural experiences, Catholics and Protestants together accounted for 46% of the total positive responses, and those with no affiliation provided 33% of the total. Within religious groups, Catholics and Protestants provided similar positive response rates, with both reporting at 14% (25 and 20, respectively). Those with no religious affiliation reported a slightly higher frequency of 17% (33), while positive response rates were higher among those in the “other” category (34%), Buddhists (50%), and Jews (33%); Muslims again did not provide any positive responses to the question,  $\chi^2(7, N=601)=21.90$   $p<.01$ .



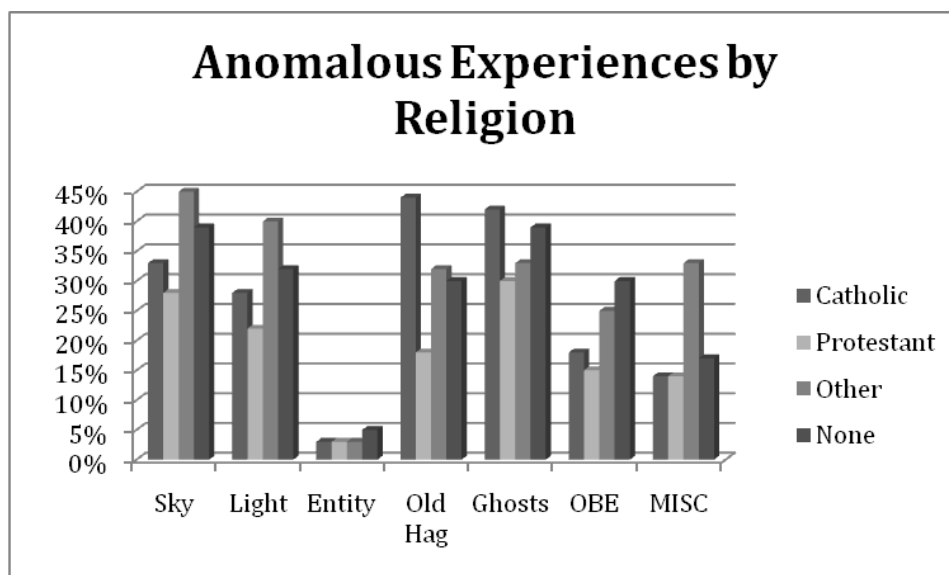


Figure 3. Anomalous Experiences by Religion

Educational levels were also taken into consideration when measuring responses. For sightings of unusual objects in the sky, 35% (194) of those presently attending college answered “yes” to the question, versus 42% (21) among those already holding a bachelor’s or advanced degree. Frequencies of mysterious light sightings provided similar slight variations, with 29% of college students (158) answering in the affirmative compared to 32% (16) of graduates. For encounters with UFO-related entities, college students provided a positive response rate of 3% (18), while 4% (2) of graduates answered the same. Both current students and graduates reported a frequency rate of 26% (142 and 13, respectively) for the question concerning paralysis and the sense of a presence. Experiences involving contact with the dead yielded a significant difference between the groups, with 36% (200) of current students responding in the affirmative, compared to 48% (24) of graduates and holders of advanced degrees. Concerning OBEs, current college students reported a slightly lower frequency (21%, 118) than graduates (28%, 14). These relative frequencies only

shifted in regards to reported miscellaneous supernatural experiences, with current students providing a positive response rate of 17% (94) versus 10% (5) of graduates.

A related category involves differences in reported experiences based on age ranges of 24 and under, and 25 and over. For sightings of unusual objects in the sky, individuals 24 and under provided a positive response rate of 35% (163), while this frequency stood at 41% (52) among those 25 and up. The younger demographic also reported fewer encounters with mysterious lights, responding at 28% (130) versus 34% (44) for older individuals. Positive response rates for encounters with UFO-related entities were comparable, with 3% (16) responding in the younger age group and 3% (4) in the older group. In response to the question relating to sleep paralysis, those 24 and under provided a positive response rate of 25% (120) compared to 27% (35) for ages 25 and older. Experiences involving contact with the deceased stood at a frequency of 35% (164) for the younger demographic, while the older demographic reported a significantly higher frequency rate of 47% (60),  $\chi^2(1, N=601)=6.416$   $p<.05$ . Concerning OBEs, those 24 and under responded in the affirmative at a frequency of 21% (101) and those 25 and older reported in at 24% (31). In response to reported miscellaneous supernatural experiences, both age demographics provided similar positive response rates, with younger individuals reporting at a frequency of 17% (79) versus 16% (20) for older individuals.

### **Other Results**

As a whole, 36% (214) of all respondents in the survey reported having no anomalous experiences. Fifteen percent (93) of respondents reported having one of the listed experiences, and fully 49% (294) answered positively to having two or more anomalous experiences. Out of all respondents, 35% (212) answered “yes” when asked if they knew of

someone who had had a similar experience. Interestingly, 47% (181) of individuals who reported having at least one anomalous experience stated they knew of someone else having a similar experience,  $\chi^2(1, N=601)=62.91$   $p<.001$ . Relatedly, 57% (222) of these respondents had also talked about their experience(s) with others,  $\chi^2(1, N=601)=194.7$   $p<.001$ .

Among those reporting at least one anomalous experience, 8% (30) stated that the experience(s) had impacted their personal beliefs about organized religion,  $\chi^2(2, N=601)=18.72$   $p<.001$ , 19% (72) reported an alteration in their concern with spiritual matters,  $\chi^2(2, N=601)=56.85$   $p<.001$ , 31% (120) reported a shift in their beliefs about the supernatural world,  $\chi^2(2, N=601)=95.32$   $p<.001$ , and 20% (77) reported a shift in their views on extraterrestrial life,  $\chi^2(2, N=601)=75.79$   $p<.001$ . Overall, 40% (154) of respondents reporting at least one anomalous experience reported that a shift in their thinking occurred in relation to at least one of the above categories.

Responses to the question regarding subjects' prior exposure to UFO and paranormal-related media were generally homogenous, with approximately 60% of those that answered the question listing various cable channel programs and documentaries such as "Monster Quest," "UFO Hunters," and "Ghost Hunters." Another 30% listed various Hollywood films such as *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1982), *The Sixth Sense* (dir. M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), and the recent remake *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (dir. Scott Derrickson, 2008) as their primary source of knowledge in such areas. Approximately 10% of respondents listed radio programs such as *Coast to Coast AM* or various books on UFOs and ghosts, and no respondents listed internet sources.

## **Discussion**

Positive responses to the questions, “Have you ever seen anything unusual in the sky?” and “Have you ever seen any mysterious lights that you could not explain in either conventional or natural terms?” appeared in a higher frequency (36% and 29%) than most other prior surveys of UFO experiences and anomalous lights, which have suggested that approximately 11-14% of sample populations will report witnessing a UFO. Again, I believe this statistical discrepancy is primarily rooted in the phrasing and terminology used by researchers. The term “UFO” is popularly used to signify an extraterrestrial spacecraft, and respondents predisposed towards disbelief in such phenomena may avoid categorizing their experiences as such. However, the positive response rates to these questions remain higher than those provided by my prior study (22% and 19%, respectively), which phrased the questions in exactly the same manner (See Figure 5). This discrepancy may also be rooted in specific local factors. New Mexico is home to the town of Roswell, famous for its related stories of a crashed flying saucer in 1947. The looming presence of the military-industrial complex in the state may also be a key factor, which includes Sandia National Laboratories, Kirkland Air Force Base, Los Alamos National Laboratory, White Sands Missile Range, and Holloman Air Force Base. These installations, coupled with the Albuquerque Sunport, may partially account for the unusually high number of craft and mysterious lights reported by local witnesses. When asked to describe their experiences in more detail, the majority of respondents that had witnessed something unusual in the sky (approximately 90%) described anomalies commonly associated with UFO phenomena, including strange formations of lights, hovering metallic disks, and large black triangles that often exhibited erratic aerial maneuvers. The remaining 10% of respondents witnessing unusual aerial anomalies

identified the objects in more prosaic terms, describing weather balloons, satellites, meteors, experimental aircraft, and other conventional or natural explanations. Although many in this group provided similar descriptions of the anomalies they witnessed, the key differences were expressed in their *explanations* of the experiences. Positive responses to the question regarding mysterious lights also yielded a high number (approximately 80%) of experiences often associated with UFO phenomena, with the remaining 20% describing more ambiguous sightings (i.e., orbs, smaller hovering lights, glowing apparitions or figures) that were not immediately recognizable (either to researcher or respondent) as belonging to a traditional category of anomalous phenomena. The relatively low response rate to the question pertaining to contact with a UFO-related entity or intelligence (3%) further supports the notion that specific terminology limits such response rates, although in traditional UFO accounts contact with actual physical entities and abduction experiences are far rarer than conventional UFO sightings.<sup>36</sup>

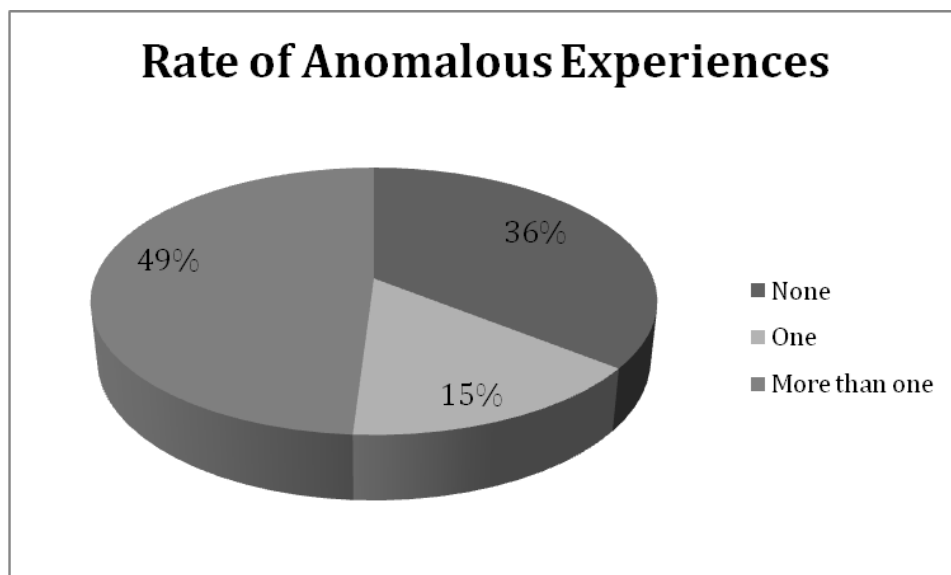


Figure 4. Rate of Anomalous Experiences

The question, “Have you ever seen or sensed the presence of someone who had died?” also yielded a surprisingly high response rate (37%), particularly when compared to prior studies of ghost or spirit encounters that have suggested a frequency rate between 9% and 25% in sample populations. As with UFO accounts, the use of such a broad-based question, which allows for sight and “feeling” and eschews specific cultural language, may partially account for a higher response rate and range of experiences than those limited to such questions as, “Have you ever seen a ghost?” When asked to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences, those that provided them all described phenomena commonly associated with ghostly traditions, including visual sightings of human apparitions (often deceased relatives), floating balls of light, seemingly disembodied voices, displacement of personal belongings, and a variety of experiences describing the “sense” of a ghostly presence nearby. Positive responses to the question, “Have you ever awoken from sleep unable to move, and with the sense of a presence nearby?” (26%) adhered to the higher rates in the range of Hufford’s survey of Old Hag/sleep paralysis episodes (10%-25%) and are slightly lower than McClenon’s reported range of 32% to 50%. Most respondents who described such experiences in more detail provided accounts similar to those collected by Hufford, including temporary paralysis, a pressing sensation on the chest, and often the sense of a malevolent presence close by. In some of these cases apparitions were visible, and respondents described a variety of figures that included black shadows and more distinctly human figures, including both living and deceased relatives. No respondents described witnessing humanoid “alien” beings as popularized in abduction narratives (e.g., Strieber 1987).<sup>37</sup> Reported episodes of OBEs in the study (22%) were slightly higher than McClenon’s range of 18-20%. Descriptions of these experiences were highly variable with

the majority (approximately 60%) describing floating outside of their bodies during states of sleep, stress, or, in several cases, under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs. The remaining 40% of OBE experiences were associated with the sight or sense of ghostly apparitions and/or a sense of paralysis. Miscellaneous “supernatural” experiences, which were reported at a rate of 17%, fall just under Greeley’s 20% range, and well under McClenon and Clarke’s sample frequencies for déjà vu, ESP, precognition, clairvoyance, and astral projection. This lower reported frequency may likely be due to the ambiguity and general phrasing of the question itself, which relied primarily on each respondent’s personal conception of anomalous or supernatural phenomena rather than by asking specific experience-based questions. Respondent’s descriptions of such “miscellaneous” experiences were highly variable, including claims of psychic abilities, dream premonitions, doppelgangers, synchronicity, and more ambiguous religious experiences (e.g., “I felt the love of God in my heart”).

As with prior surveys, differences in reported anomalous experiences were clear along gender lines. Males reported witnessing UFO-like phenomena at a higher rate than females, who in turn reported encounters with the deceased at a higher rate than males. This reporting coincides with the results from prior Gallup polls that suggested a higher rate of belief in UFOs among males, and ghosts among females. This discrepancy might possibly be explained by the different interpretive frameworks used by men and women in Western cultures. Male interests (and overrepresentation) in the natural sciences and science fiction may naturally lead to a greater interest in extraterrestrial life and, hence, the subject of UFOs.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, UFOs likely provide a more common interpretive and experiential framework for anomalies witnessed by men. However, speculations on higher female

interests and experiences related to ghosts and supernatural phenomena are more difficult to surmise. Although women were more likely to report waking from sleep and feeling paralyzed, men were more likely to report having OBEs and miscellaneous supernatural experiences. This suggests that broad categorizations of supernatural phenomena provide no clear divisions in frequencies along gender lines, although it remains apparent that women consistently report traditional ghost sightings at a higher frequency than men. Regardless of the reasons for these differences, it remains clear that gendered interests in anomalous phenomena are highly correlated with the experiences reported. Anomalous experiences and their subsequent interpretations, at least partially, are dependent on gender differences among witnesses.

In terms of ethnicity, Caucasians were slightly more likely to report witnessing unusual objects in the sky than the other two major ethnic groups, Hispanics and Native Americans, although Native Americans reported a higher number of mysterious lights than Caucasians and Hispanics.<sup>39</sup> Collectively, there were relatively minor variations in reports of UFO-like experiences along ethnic lines, which is supported by my prior study of UFO reports among Caucasians and African Americans in North Carolina. Ethnicity appears to play a more significant role in the frequency of more paranormal-like experiences. As discussed above, Hispanics (29%) were more likely to report waking from sleep paralyzed than Caucasians (22%), while Native Americans reported the highest frequency (43%) in this area. Caucasians and Hispanics provided a similar response rate for encounters with the deceased (36% versus 38%), while Native Americans again reported such experiences with the highest frequency (60%). Such variations were significantly lower in regards to OBEs, although Native Americans again provided the highest response rate (40%) for miscellaneous



supernatural experiences. Overall, frequency variations for paranormal experiences do not appear to be significantly different between Caucasians and Hispanics. Native Americans, however, as with African Americans in my North Carolina study, account for a disproportionate amount of sleep paralysis, ghost sightings, and general supernatural experiences. Possible explanations for this discrepancy are presently limited, although various tribal cosmologies, spiritual affiliations, and sensibilities may provide for a greater spectrum of paranormal beliefs and experiences than those conveyed by other ethnic groups in the study.<sup>40</sup> For many of the Native American respondents, anomalous experiences were deeply personal, cultural matters rooted in spatial identity. Indeed, we might speculate that the greater frequency of paranormal experiences among indigenous populations (Native Americans and, to an extent, Hispanics) is directly related to older cultural ties to *place* in the form of landscape, locales, and historiography.

These considerations are also related to religious affiliation, and several key differences are also apparent in this area. As discussed above, Catholics provided a slightly higher response rate to witnessing UFO-like phenomena than Protestants, which supports the findings of my prior comparison between Protestants and other religious groups. This also may support the contention that more conservative Protestant cosmologies may dissuade belief in UFOs and extraterrestrial life (Denzler 2001, 149). This is coupled with the frequency reports of UFO-like phenomenon among those with no religious affiliation, who scored the highest in this area. This increase in UFO-like experiences among “nonbelievers” may be explained by the spiritual role UFOs have come to inhabit in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, in which the traditional supernatural “other” has been partially replaced by the technologically savvy extraterrestrial (Dean 1998, 170, 180). We might further speculate

that, at least among some of these individuals, the UFO may represent a middle ground between traditional religious ideals and more “scientific” imaginings of celestial beings.

Although response rates were high across the religious spectrum for encounters with the deceased, Catholics (42%), nonbelievers (39%), and those in the “Other” category (39%) were significantly higher than Protestants (30%). Nonbelievers scored highest in the OBE category, while reports of miscellaneous supernatural experiences were generally similar across the board. Throughout the study, Protestants consistently reported lower frequencies of paranormal experiences than other religious groups. This contradicts my prior study, which suggested that Protestants in North Carolina were more likely to report supernatural experiences than other religious groups. As with a decrease in frequencies of UFO experiences, we may speculate that more rigid Protestant cosmologies, dividing the majority of the supernatural realm between Heaven and Hell, allow for a more limited spectrum of paranormal belief and experience. This suggestion, however, is highly speculative, and clearly more detailed studies are needed in this area.

In most cases, differences in educational levels did not appear to significantly impact frequencies of reported experiences. Individuals holding bachelor’s or advanced degrees reported UFO-like experiences and OBEs with a slightly higher frequency than those presently attending, while both responded with the same frequency rate regarding waking from sleep and feeling paralyzed. By far, the greatest statistical difference was in the reporting of contact with the deceased, in which nearly half of graduates and advanced degree holders responded in the affirmative. Such a discrepancy is initially puzzling, although the most likely explanation is rooted in the fact that college graduates and people holding advanced degrees are typically part of an older demographic. Indeed, the frequency

rates for educational levels neatly coincide with those based on age ranges. As with graduates, those 25 and older typically reported a higher frequency of anomalous experiences than their younger counterparts. Logically, these older individuals would possess a much broader array of life experiences, including those in the anomalous category. Furthermore, although the comparatively smaller sample size of graduates/advanced degree holders limits any broad-based conclusions, their responses indicate that anomalous beliefs and experiences are not necessarily negatively impacted by advanced education.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the most telling statistic involves the overall rates of reported experiences, with individuals reporting no anomalous experiences in the minority, and nearly half of the individuals in the studying reporting having two or more such experiences (See Figure 5). This supports my prior findings in the North Carolina survey, which suggested that individuals reporting UFO-like experiences were more likely than those in a general sample to report other anomalous experiences (2006a, 40). Without getting into a discussion of the nature of said experiences, several conclusions may be reached. First, the findings suggest that individuals who believe they have had an anomalous experience of some kind share a greater propensity for experiencing multiple anomalous events. Furthermore, whether this propensity is rooted in acute perception or delusional tendencies, it strongly supports the notion that personal experience plays a fundamental, perhaps *central* role in the formulation, maintenance, and dissemination of anomalous beliefs and traditions that include UFOs, ghosts, and psychic phenomena. This argument is further strengthened by the fact that 40% of respondents having at least one anomalous experience stated that the experience(s) had altered their beliefs about organized religion, spiritual matters, the supernatural world, and/or

extraterrestrial life. Clearly, the role of experience in anomalous belief can no longer be ignored.

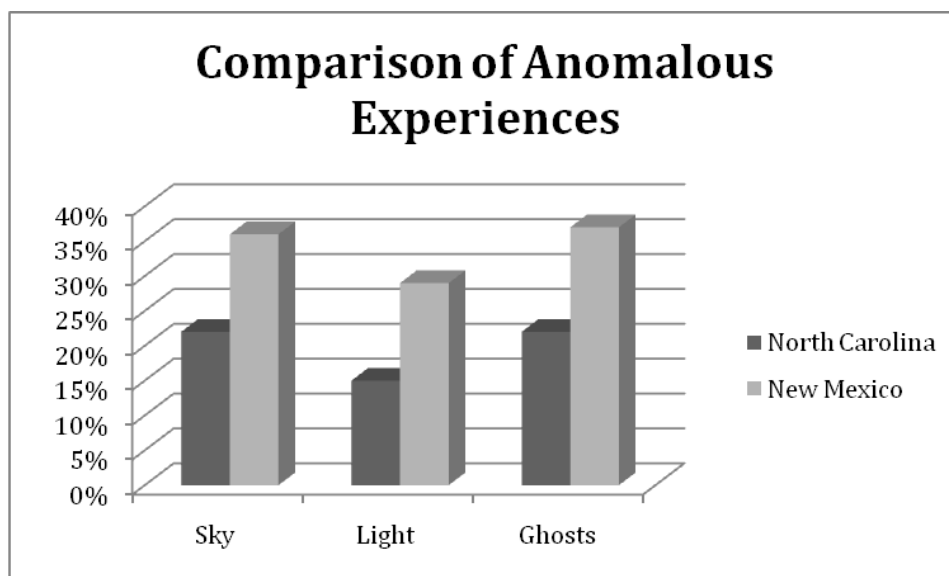


Figure 5. Comparison of Anomalous Experiences

## Conclusion

The unusually high response rates for anomalous experiences in this survey, particularly regarding UFOs and ghostly phenomena, is likely based on several key demographic factors. As stated above, New Mexico is home to an established tradition of UFO folklore—particularly the Roswell Incident—which remains a common fixture in the collective imagination of the population. This, coupled with the highly visible presence of government and military installations in the region, may partially account for the especially high number of mysterious craft and lights witnessed in the New Mexico sky. In addition, the high response rate for individuals without any concrete religious affiliations may be indicative of an openness or curiosity towards anomalous beliefs and experiences that fall outside traditional religious models, particularly those of Christianity. Furthermore, without

discounting previous examinations of UFO and paranormal beliefs by psychologists, sociologists, and folklorists, I contend that a focus on the experiential component of such beliefs remains a more useful analytical tool for preliminary inquiries into their causality. I argue this while rejecting the premise that anomalous beliefs represent a marginalized escape from reason, since the results of this study indicate that a significant percentage of our sample population already harbor them.

There remain several significant factors that limit these conclusions. First, and most obvious, are demographic constraints that arise from the limited sample. This survey, as with many designed to gauge anomalous beliefs and experiences, relied on a university population comprised mainly of students in the 18-24 age range. Relatedly, the educational levels of respondents were limited to those presently attending college or already in possession of degrees. While it may be reasonable to hypothesize that a broader sample of age and educational level might yield an even higher positive response rate for anomalous experiences, some studies (and the limited sample here) suggest that younger populations have a higher propensity for reporting paranormal experiences (Greeley 1975), while others suggest the opposite (Bourque 1969).<sup>42</sup> Regardless, it cannot be stated with any measure of confidence that the results of this survey are necessarily indicative of experiential frequencies in the greater New Mexico population.

Another potential limitation of this survey concerns the phrasing of certain questions. As mentioned earlier, terms such as “ghost” and “UFO” were eschewed in favor of more general descriptions. For example, rather than asking, “Have you ever seen a ghost?” I instead asked respondents if they had ever *seen or sensed* the presence of someone who has died. Such a question allows for a wider variety of sensory perceptions not limited to the

visual sphere. Similarly, respondents were not asked if they had witnessed a UFO, but instead asked if they had seen anything “unusual in the sky” or “mysterious lights.” This manner of phrasing also allowed for a wider variety of phenomena, and several respondents answered these questions in the affirmative while later describing seeing what they interpreted as strange weather balloons, falling satellites, or experimental aircraft. However, as evidenced by several follow-up interviews, some respondents predisposed to disbelief were uncomfortable categorizing their experiences as “UFO encounters,” even though their descriptions often typified “traditional” UFO sightings.

Lastly, although this study privileges the role of experience in the formulation of belief, no measure was made of preexisting belief or disbelief among respondents that reported having anomalous experiences. Prior research in this area suggests that the relationship between belief and experience is complicated, and that direct causality from either perspective oversimplifies the formulation of cultural belief languages (Ellis 2003; Dewan 2006b). Furthermore, a number of respondents did not fill out the back page of the questionnaire, in which respondents were asked if their experiences affected their cosmological beliefs. Together, these factors limit any conclusions drawn from the study regarding the influence of belief on experience or vice versa.

Despite such limitations, the present study highly reinforces the notion that individual experience plays a significant role in the formulation and maintenance of beliefs involving both UFOs and paranormal phenomena. Furthermore, although the interplay between personal belief and experience remains ambiguous and complex, the results of this survey indicate that any past or future academic examinations of anomalous beliefs—regardless of

discipline—that fail to account for their experiential component are, at best, simplistic, incomplete, and reductionistic.

In the following chapter, I will explore the folkloric elements of the experiences reported by these respondents, with a specific focus on both the cultural traditions utilized by witnesses in order to make sense of their experiences, and an investigation into the actual shared elements of the experiences themselves.

## Chapter 5

### The Dynamics of UFO Folklore

Conforming to basic patterns, the legend conceived in our technological age can be the vehicle of new ideas.

-Linda Dégh

What one has not experienced, one will never understand in print.

-Isadora Duncan

Although statistical analyses of reported anomalous experiences may hint at their frequencies within sample populations, the information gleaned from such studies does not account for the contextuality, dissemination, performance, and social function of said experiences, nor their relationship with existing traditions of belief. Rather, these concerns are best addressed through a folkloric perspective, one rooted in theoretical approaches to understanding contemporary social phenomena and their adherence to established cultural traditions. As students of past and contemporary beliefs among a variety of cultures, folklorists are exceptionally well-equipped to trace the nuances of the UFO phenomenon as a dynamic, global body of lore.

In this chapter, I will outline the usefulness of folkloric approaches to understanding the UFO phenomenon, and construct a working taxonomy of the various anomalous beliefs and experiences housed within this greater UFO tradition. I will then trace the emergence of these beliefs out of older, broader folk traditions. Next, I will turn to the anomalous firsthand accounts collected from witnesses both within and outside of New Mexico, providing a rationale for my deeper emphasis on the primal importance of memorates within UFO lore.<sup>43</sup> Finally, I will scrutinize the cultural belief language of UFOs that simultaneously shapes and is informed by these memorates, particularly focusing on the effects of religious and



scientific beliefs, cultural logic, exposure to media, conspiracy thinking, and spiritual reconciliations.

### **UFOs and the “Folk”**

A so-called folkloric approach to understanding UFO and paranormal beliefs may conjure images of quaint, rural beliefs and practices. Because of this archaic association, some cultural commentators scoff at labeling contemporary belief systems and their associated experiences as “folklore.” Barre Toelken, however, reminds us that we must discard archaic notions of what folk belief entails. Toelken argues that modern folklorists should not limit their scope to “backward” elements of culture, but instead study “any expressive phenomena” that appear to behave in similar ways to established (documented) traditions (1996, 2-3).

How then, might folklorists approach contemporary belief systems that include UFOs and alien abductions? Peter Rojcewicz maintains that folklorists, armed with an enriched understanding of UFO beliefs and experiences, are “more likely to perceive the numerous continuities between UFO-related phenomena and various folk traditions” (1987, 148). Indeed, folkloric approaches to examining contemporary alternative belief systems provide rich insights into the modern formulations of such beliefs and how they draw from preexisting traditions. While such insights are inherently useful in further contextualizing belief within historical and cultural frameworks, folklorists must also be careful to weigh the experiential components of belief in providing explanations for their continued dissemination.

As Linda Dégh has argued, folkloristic and anthropological approaches to examining UFO-related belief systems and their associated experiences should not include a

determination as to whether such phenomena belong to the natural or supernatural world (1977, 244). Instead, a folkloric approach should primarily focus on both the beliefs that arise out of such encounters and their role in contemporary legend formulations. In accordance with my position in Chapter 4, the personal memorates discussed in this chapter are neither assumed to be “real” or “false.” Rather, as with the relationship between legends and beliefs, the teller (experiencer) is, in most cases, attempting to convince the audience (me) of the authenticity of the encounter, even if she herself is not entirely certain of its nature (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1976, 98).<sup>44</sup> Whereas supernatural signs, omens, and miracles served as the dominant explanatory traditions of celestial phenomena in early societies and cultures, similar supernatural traditions—including the UFO phenomenon—compete with the rationalist paradigm today, despite predictions of their demise over thirty years ago (Bullard 2000, 151). This rationalist paradigm, described by Brenda Denzler as shaping a scientific methodology “committed to understanding nature solely in terms of discoverable processes that operated according to abstract principles and laws,” remains embedded in a largely secular worldview that stands in obvious contrast to said supernatural traditions (2001, 70). And yet, for folklorists, believers and “disbelievers” remain mere folk groups in a broader legend debate (Dégh 1977, 244).<sup>45</sup> Given this “ideological competition” between supernatural and secular traditions, we may partly focus our folkloric analysis on how said traditions conform to or challenge cultural attitudes about rationalism, spirituality, and their role in 21<sup>st</sup> century American life.

Beliefs and narratives concerning UFOs, ghosts, and other anomalous experiences are also part of folklore in the sense that they represent ideas and explanations that fall outside generally accepted notions of the world (either a political or social majority) and are

maintained through their circulation on regional, national, and sometimes international levels. Thus, a folkloric approach to understanding such narratives requires the researcher to examine them in several ways. Along with situating these narratives within particular cultural and historical contexts, folklorists must also seek to locate the parallels, adherences, and potential origins of these accounts within existing folk traditions. Finally, a folkloric perspective should examine how such narratives are performed, retold, disseminated, and circulated within their respective communities (Dewan 2006b, 186).

In the past (2006b), I have contended that first-person anomalous accounts belong within the genre of *personal experience narratives*, first defined by Sandra Dolby Stahl as “prose narrative[s] relating a personal experience; [they are] usually told in the first person, and [their] content is nontraditional” (1989, 12). Furthermore, according to Stahl’s definition, the content of the personal experience narrative is based on actual events experienced by the storyteller. However, Stahl states that such accounts generally do not enter into tradition, and that they usually do not contain supernatural (or “supranormal”) content. Stahl reserves these types of accounts for the aforementioned *memorate* category (1996, 556-557). As I have argued in Chapter 4 and elsewhere, these memorates exist as the primary folkloric elements in the continued subsistence of contemporary UFO beliefs (2006a; 2006b). Before focusing on these accounts, however, I wish to clarify both modern folklore taxonomy, as well as demonstrate how UFO memorates function within broader bodies of lore.

Memorates, first defined by Carl Wilhelm von Sydow (1948, 1977), are typically understood by folklorists to be first-person narratives about a supranormal event that render something that *might* be real or remembered. Von Sydow distinguished these accounts from

legends in that they lacked traditional content and stylistic qualities that are characteristic of traditional legends. In von Sydow's view, if a particular memorate generates enough interest in a population and is consequently retold by different people, it may become a memorial legend. Modern folklorists now concede that memorates may also include second and third-hand accounts of the original narrative that retain the original's primary details (Sweterlitsch 1996, 472-473). As with my prior research in this area (2000b), and based on correlating classifications by Dégh (1971, 1977), the first-person accounts of UFO and related anomalous experiences discussed in this chapter will be treated as memorates. In this context, however, I treat the memorate as a subcategory of the personal experience narrative.<sup>46</sup>

Folklorically, how these memorates interact with existing UFO legends is of great importance. For instance, Ellis notes that Dégh and Vázsonyi (1983) broadened the original definition of a legend as an oral narrative to include a performance of a recognized legend through real actions. By this definition, the larger UFO phenomenon may be seen as a group of various legends; from interpretations of mysterious lights to accounts of alien abductions following the "classic" motif. Ellis understands legends to be part of a dynamic "cultural 'belief-language'" that aids in making sense of unusual experiences (1991, 40-42).

UFO memorates may be partially explainable as arising through *ostension*, a literal acting out of existing UFO legends. This legend enactment may occur in three ways: pseudo-ostension, quasi-ostension, or proto-ostension. In the case of pseudo-ostension, a hoax is perpetrated that serves to reinforce the existence of a particular legend (Ellis 2003, 162-163). A prime example of pseudo-ostension in ufology was the television program "Alien Autopsy: Fact or Fiction?" that aired on the Fox television network in 1995. The

footage, which depicted the autopsy of a flying saucer occupant, was promoted by some ufologists to further support the Roswell legend (Nickell 2001, 17-18). Quasi-ostension, on the other hand, involves the misinterpretation of naturally occurring events in terms of an existing legend (Ellis 2003, 163). Within ufology, an example of quasi-ostension could include an experiencer misinterpreting a shooting star as a UFO, or “common” sleep paralysis as an alien abduction. Finally, proto-ostension involves an attention-seeking act of an individual who claims an existing legend as their own personal experience (Ellis 2003, 163). Philip Corso’s outlandish claims in *The Day After Roswell* (1997) arguably represent such an act, as he attempts to situate himself in a primary role as a caretaker of alien technological artifacts recovered after the Roswell incident. Indeed, ostension in all its forms likely plays a significant role in the formulation of UFO memorates, although I contend that pseudo and proto-ostension is less immediately evident in the accounts I will discuss in this chapter. Rather, such modes of ostension are more frequent among so-called “ghost trips” and other “legend-ritual” complexes that involve nonrandom personal experiences (Lindahl 2005, 168).<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, while quasi-ostension remains a viable explanatory model for the formulation of numerous UFO memorates, folklorists must be wary of limiting their approaches to this direct, causal relationship (Virtanan 1990, 3).

The memorate-legend dichotomy in folklore is certainly controversial, and UFO experiences highlight the problem of categorizing these experiences and associated beliefs. How UFO memorates sometimes progress into belief legends is not entirely clear, although folklorists may speculate that this occurs through repeated retellings of particular memorates. Conversely, there is the question of whether these memorates are largely the expression of preexisting folk beliefs (Sweterlitsch 1996, 473).

Accounts involving strange aerial lights, or stories describing crashed saucers and dead humanoids that continually circulate in local or regional communities over an extended period of time may be conceived as legends, yet both experiencers and storytellers must contextualize these legends in order to make sense of them. To do so, these experiences are incorporated into larger traditions. Such ‘global bodies of lore’ often contain supernatural or ‘superscientific’ elements and, in the specific case of the UFO phenomenon, serve as a primary context for *both* the initial perception and subsequent interpretation of many of these experiences (1991, 43-44). To generalize, beliefs informed by personal experiences may be linked into local or regional legends, while legends in turn are linked into global bodies of lore. Belief informs memorate; memorate informs legend; legend informs belief. This method of categorization enables one to contextualize many contemporary belief systems such as those of ghostlore and UFO experiences. This dichotomy will be explored in greater detail later in the chapter.

### **The Folkloric Spectrum of UFO Experiences**

Before turning to the function and primal role of UFO memorates, I will first identify the varieties of beliefs and narratives encompassed by the contemporary UFO phenomenon, as well as their adherence to prior folk traditions. First, the modern UFO phenomenon has come to be associated with numerous anomalous traditions, including alien abductions (Bullard 1989), cattle mutilations (Ellis 1991), Men in Black (Rojcewicz 1987; 1989), crop circles (Peterson 1992), a plenitude of supernatural beings (Keel 1991; Kelleher and Knapp 2005), and even strange noises that include unexplained sonic booms (Barrow 2007) and “humming” in various towns and regions (Deming 2004). Indeed, the UFO phenomenon (or the hypothetical extraterrestrial visitor) appears to act as at least a partial folkloric sanctuary

for nearly all contemporary anomalous beliefs. Although this may be explainable in terms of the UFO phenomenon's usefulness in bridging traditional religious and supernatural beliefs with 20<sup>th</sup> century technological innovations, some commentators have continually stressed the paranormal elements of UFO experiences, as well as the tendency for many UFO researchers to ignore these aspects (Vallee 1969; 1990).<sup>48</sup> Such anomalous accounts, as shown earlier in the chapter, often exist within fluid narrative genres that resist static categorization (Dégh 1971, 57). Furthermore, individuals in sample populations who report having a "UFO-like" experience are statistically more likely to report encounters with the deceased, OBEs, and other paranormal experiences. Thus, while providing an overarching template for UFO experiences remains difficult, for our purposes here, the UFO phenomenon, as a folk tradition, is bound together by its close association with the extraterrestrial hypothesis.

Turning back to my main agenda: how may a folkloric approach provide insight into contemporary, alternative belief systems such as ghostlore, out-of-body astral traveling, and alien abductions? The answer lies in the ability of a folkloric approach to trace cultural patterns, consistencies, continuities, and diversions along a chain of pre-existing folk belief. As a broad folk tradition, we should expect to discover familiar narratives within UFO lore that, contrary to exhibiting a newness in form, function, or meaning, instead reflect "an adjustment to a modern environment" (Dégh 1971, 57). As a case study, we could look at contemporary accounts of alien abduction. In a typical abduction narrative/scenario, the experiencer will wake up at night in bed and sense or feel a strange presence in the room. The individual may then be transported by the presence (often represented by a small,

humanoid form) to a “ship,” where he may undergo a variety of experiences, including invasive medical procedures and dialogue with various entities.<sup>49</sup>

Such accounts share key elements with other genres of life narrative and oral traditions. Alien abduction accounts, in a folkloric sense, share much in common with older global traditions of human contact with non-human entities. In *Passport to Magonia* (1969), Jacques Vallee draws parallels between modern accounts of human-alien interaction with European (and particularly Celtic) fairy lore. Furthermore, contemporary abduction narratives also possess elements traditionally belonging to religious narratives, including imagery (e.g., apocalypticism; saviors and tormentors from the heavens), and language in the description of encounters (e.g., fear and awe) (Scribner 2007, 143). More specifically, Thomas Bullard argues that abduction accounts greatly resemble prior supernatural traditions, and he outlines several key shared motifs. One such motif is the visit to (and from) an “Otherworld,” a place traditionally inhabited by gods, demons, spirits, or fairies. For abductees, Bullard argues, this Otherworld is internalized within a spaceship. The humanoid beings often described by abductees—usually small, hairless, and with large heads, matches the attributes found among Celtic fairies and Germanic dwarfs. Such “dwellers” of the Otherworld often possess extraordinary powers, and the beings described by abductees exhibit “magic” through their superscientific abilities (Bullard 1989, 162-163).

Bullard also points out parallels between abduction experiences and puberty rituals and initiations. For many cultures, these initiates experience death and rebirth visions that often include their bodily dismemberment and reassembly at the hands of supernatural beings. The medical procedures carried out on alien abductees (notably Betty Andreasson and the “original” American abductees, Betty and Barney Hill), create what Bullard terms “a



turning point in their lives,” and imbues their lives with a stronger sense of purpose (1989, 162-163).

Similarly, accounts of alien abductions also share numerous parallels with past American narrative traditions. In the first appendix of their book *Reading Autobiography* (2001), authors Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson provide a listing of fifty-two genres of life narrative. Under the genre of captivity narratives, Smith and Watson include “UFO stories” among Indian captivity narratives, slave narratives, spiritual autobiographies, convent captivity stories, and narratives of seduction. For the authors, all captivity narratives share the obvious common element of a protagonist “who is, or has been, held captive by some capturing group” (2001, 190). Between the mid-seventeenth and the late nineteenth centuries, thousands of Indian captivity narratives were published in the United States and were included among the nation’s first group of “bestsellers” (Barbeito 2005, 203). Richard Slotkin argues that the captivity narrative holds a prominent position in the early construction of the American mythology. For instance, early Puritan accounts of abduction (often female) by native “savages” were genuine, first-person accounts of actual experiences. The captive, once returned to civilized society, would refashion her ordeal into a heroic quest that often resulted in an epiphany of religious conversion or salvation, a conversion in which the captive would acquire an “altered” outlook on both nature and natives. Combining this new outlook on wilderness/Indian with their existing Puritan roots, the captives would come to resemble, as Slotkin calls them, “spiritual half-breeds” (2000, 21, 95, 114).

Scholars such as Michael Sturma (2002) and Patricia Felisa Barbeito (2005) have recently begun noting the parallels between such older Indian captive narratives with contemporary accounts of alien abduction. Sturma argues that whatever their true nature, a

comparison can be made between abduction accounts and “other incidents of transculturation where individuals suddenly find themselves in alien surroundings” (2000, 14). He notes that both types of narrative have drawn in a wide readership, and both contain a central metaphor of “crossing frontiers” and partaking in a forced experience within another culture (2002, 320-321). Furthermore, in both cases, an individual is usually taken from a familial setting in a remote area and often in the dead of night. The captive, at least initially, is filled with a sense of helplessness, and Sturma argues that as an initiation, both Indian and alien captors tend to strip the captured persons of their clothing. This, he maintains, serves to metaphorically strip the captive of the “outward trappings” of his own culture in preparation for initiation into a new one (2002, 321-323).

Continuing this initiation, physical punishment is often administered to the captives in both types of accounts. While Indian captors would force their white captives to run through a gauntlet of blows, alien abductors are often reported to subject ‘abductees’ to painful, intrusive medical procedures (2002, 324). For instance, in Whitley Strieber’s bestselling *Communion*, a book in which he details his own abduction experiences, he relays several instances where he felt personally violated by the entities, even likening one particular intrusion to a rape (1987, 21).<sup>50</sup> Carter Meland argues that such punishment in both Indian captivity narratives and alien abduction accounts is “not merely suffering for suffering’s sake”; rather, the captivity of the Puritan ultimately becomes an avenue for the purification of the Christian soul, while the torment Strieber and other abductees endure necessitates a period of reflection and meditation that ultimately lead to the reordering of personal cosmologies (2003).

Captivities and abductions, as Sturma notes, indeed are often represented (or recontextualized) as spiritual journeys. For Puritans, capture by savages was equated with a satanic kidnapping, and their survival of the ordeal attributed to Divine grace. For abductees, personal transformation is often equated with an increase in philosophical, spiritual, and environmental concerns (2002, 328). As Meland argues, Strieber views his medical examinations as allowing for the “breaking” of his ego and an attachment to an archaic, modernist worldview. The suffering and repeated degradation Strieber and other abductees experience is subsequently rationalized as a means of both shattering their comfortable life perceptions and providing an enriched spiritual transformation. Meland calls this transformation a “[p]sychical liberation through physical pain” (2003).

Accounts of captivity, while not native to American soil, increased in popularity and dissemination with the first arrival of the Puritans in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Captivity aspects of such traditions, for Tom Engelhardt, provide origin myths for broader American war stories and place Indians in the position of invaders, rather than the other way around (1995, 23). This notion of victimization carries forward into contemporary, personal invasion accounts of aliens, albeit without the historical additions and morphologies of 20<sup>th</sup> century Others noted in Chapter 2 (i.e., communists). Yet elements of conversion are also traced through this continuum of tradition, and in that vein we find continual historical attempts to overcome secular, mechanistic cosmologies in favor of spiritual transformation-whether through the form of Christianity or cosmic communion. Within such a framework, tracing folkloric traditions allows for an enriched understanding of the continual presence of specific thematic elements in American arenas of belief and experience.

### **The Primacy of Memorates and the Experience-Centered Approach**

The above analytical framework, while certainly useful, remains limited in its investigative scope by ignoring the impact of memorates on broader folk traditions. In this chapter, I privilege the role of memorates in my examination of contemporary UFO beliefs in American culture. This approach is primarily informed by the results of prior survey work (Dewan 2006a) and the present study discussed in Chapter 4, which strongly suggest that contemporary beliefs associated with the UFO phenomenon are often rooted in personal experience. Whereas myths are traditionally believed literally or metaphorically, and legends contain a certain built-in measure of believability, memorates remain unique in that they endorse belief by attesting to personal experience (Motz 1998, 340). Yet how do we “interpret” anomalous personal experiences, or measure their impact on existing folk traditions? The work of folklorists such as David Hufford, Peter Rojcewicz, and Bill Ellis in recent years has necessitated a broadening of perspective in understanding supernatural or alternative belief systems. Hufford states that most academic theories have assumed that folk belief—especially beliefs concerning the supernatural—is false or unfounded, “non-rational” and “non-empirical.” Hufford’s experience-centered approach directly contradicts this assumption. He proposes that much folk belief about the supernatural is reasonable and rationally developed from experience. In other words, he argues against the assumption that all spiritual belief relies entirely on faith (1995a, 11).

His ideas were fully elaborated in his book, *The Terror That Comes in the Night* (1982), which focuses on the “Old-Hag” tradition found in Newfoundland. The tradition is reported to involve waking up from sleep unable to move, often with the sensation of something pressing down upon the chest and accompanied by the presence of an apparition

in the room (1982a, 10-11). In Newfoundland, this experience was commonly interpreted to be an encounter with a supernatural creature, not a living human, either acting on its own or called upon by a human to carry out an attack (1982a, 8). Hufford found similar (yet lesser known) traditions in the United States, and asked the simple question: “Why is a particular believed narrative stable across time and space?” (1982a, xi).

In answering this question, Hufford contrasted two distinct approaches to the study of supernatural phenomena: the traditional cultural-source approach and his own experience-centered approach. According to Hufford, the cultural-source approach rests on several key assumptions. First, such an approach assumes that no first-person account exists for many such narratives in their present form, with the current stories in circulation having developed during oral transmission. Accounts that do circulate in first-person form are then generally dismissed as misinterpretations of ordinary events, themselves drawing from existing supernatural traditions. Other explanations for variations in first-hand accounts, from this perspective, include lies, errors in the memory of the experiencer, hoaxes perpetrated on or by the experiencer, genuine experiences caused by hallucinogens or other “methods known to produce powerful subjective experiences,” or simply the experiences of individuals prone to having psychotic episodes (1982a, 13-14).

Collectively, these assumptions underpin the cultural source approach, which explains the experiences as either fictitious products of tradition or imaginary subjective experiences shaped (or occasionally even caused) by tradition (1982a, 13-14). Advocates of this dismissive view of the reality of supernatural experience instead subscribe to what Hufford terms “traditions of disbelief” (1982b, 47-55).<sup>51</sup> In this sense, skepticism or

scientific thinking in general is often understood by many individuals as “counterintuitive facts” rather than a cognitive tool (Singer and Benassi 1997, 391).

In contrast, Hufford’s experience-centered approach holds that certain elements of some supernatural traditions exist independently of culture (1982a, 15). Here then, the roles of perception and interpretation are differentiated. While existing cultural traditions provide the basis for the interpretation of experience, the core experience itself may be universal and entirely separate from such traditions. Although not directly stated by Hufford, the underlying position taken is that individual perceptions of extraordinary experiences are cross-culturally uniform, and it is only in the subsequent interpretation of the experience that cultural traditions play a role.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, despite some surface variation in the interpretation of causality, people from separate cultures often share common core elements in the recounting of these experiences.

Hufford’s approach suggests that it may be possible to delineate some consistent “core” elements of experience in anomalous traditions.<sup>53</sup> If we return to the example of the alien abduction, many abduction narratives do indeed appear to share common core elements. In Strieber’s *Communion*, many of his encounters began as he awakened to find himself paralyzed in his room, with the sensation or actual sight of small, humanoid beings surrounding his bed:

Sometime during the night I was awakened abruptly by a jab on my shoulder. I came to full consciousness instantly. There were three small people standing beside the bed, their outlines clearly visible in the glow of the burglar alarm panel...I thought to myself, *My God, I'm completely conscious and they're just standing there*. I thought that I could turn on the light, perhaps even get out of bed. Then I tried to move my hand, thinking to flip the switch on my bedside lamp and see the time.

I can only describe the sensation I felt when I tried to move as like pushing my arm through electrified tar. It took every ounce of attention I possessed to get any movement at all (1987, 170-171).

Indeed, in multiple occasions throughout the book, Strieber's interactions with the beings involved the full or partial paralysis of his body. Similarly, in *The Communion Letters* (1997), a collection of letters sent in by his readers documenting their own experiences, numerous encounters began in the same fashion:

I woke up later and rolled over on my back, and was immediately hit with the vibrating, heavy paralysis. I knew exactly what was happening and actually formed the words "I know this" with my inner voice...I then tried to move, with great difficulty, and to lift my arms in front of my face; I had little control over them, though (1997, 19).

I awoke in the middle of the night, lying flat on my back in bed, in what I recognized as an altered state of consciousness. In each of my hands I was holding a light-blue object...I seemed to "know" telepathically that the being standing beside my bed (one of the smaller gray visitors) was teaching me to use these two light-blue objects to raise my energy level...(1997, 34-35).

I would have what I called a "dream," although I felt that I was totally awake because I could move my eyes. My body would be completely paralyzed. I couldn't yell or scream, but wanted to. I could feel the pressure of something or someone coming toward me, then I'd feel pressure on top of me, and then I wouldn't be able to see. I never saw anyone, but when I'd come out of it I could feel my body tingling all over, and I'd finally be able to scream, and would wake up my wife (1997, 87).

As with Strieber's accounts, many of the respondents reported having strikingly similar encounters with humanoid beings that usually begin with the victim waking in the middle of the night with the inability to move and the "sense" of a presence nearby. Similar to Hufford's Old Hag tradition and sleep researchers' conceptions of sleep paralysis (relating to hypnagogia and hypnopompia), much of the event is centered on the basic notion of terrifying paralysis-sometimes at the hands of indeterminate interlopers. As reported in the previous chapter, 26% of the respondents in my anomalous experience survey reported having the experience of waking from sleep unable to move, and sensing a presence nearby. In several interviews I conducted with witnesses, this core experience was generally

described as a frightening event. Josh, a 36 year old Caucasian optometrist from Alaska, recounts an experience in his bedroom that occurred in the early 1990s:

Josh: Bottom line is that I was just lying in my bed and I was woken up by my brother and a friend. This was about midnight, I would guess, and I had gone to bed at maybe ten or eleven. I just went to bed before they showed up. So, they woke me up, “Bang, bang” on the door. And my mom had bells on the door. I could hear them coming into the house. I hear them come down, I hear my brother say to his buddy, “Hey, let’s wake up Josh!” “Oh, I don’t know, should we wake him up?” And I’m awake. And then they come down, and I can literally hear them walking by my room, walk into the room and they said, “Should we get him up?” “No, let’s not get him up.” And I’m laying there, just totally wanting to get up, trying to get up, at this point totally freaking out because at this point I can’t open my eyes. I can’t move any part of my body, and the scariest part—it was scary to me because it was terrifying because I was fully conscious, 100%, of what was going on around me and whether I wanted to go with them or not, it didn’t matter. But the scariest part was that I couldn’t even open my mouth to say, “Hey guys, come wake me up! Or hit me! Do something.” I was fully out of it. . .my body, I could not move it. And I feel like that was really different because I’m a pretty light sleeper. So normally if someone came into the house—we didn’t even lock our doors—I’ve woken up every day for the last ten years without an alarm clock. I know what’s going on around me when I’m sleeping, so this same thing happens and I couldn’t do anything. But the scariest part was not being able to say, “Hey guys, hit me, wake me up! I want to go with you!” And you felt the adrenaline rush, you felt everything else that you would expect when you’re scared, but you can’t do anything about it.

Josh’s account is typical of a general “sleep paralysis” episode, and his experience does not include the sense or sight of a presence nearby.

Similarly, Faye, a 22-year-old British exchange student living in New Mexico, recounted a similar episode that she experienced between 15 and 20 times:

Faye: It was probably about a year or so ago now. I just woke up in the night. I don’t remember what I was dreaming about. This happened a few times—I wake up in bed, and I feel like the bed is huge and I feel really, really small. I feel like I’m about to fall out. I think it’s in my head, I think I can’t move because I’m gonna fall even though I’m slap bang in the middle of the bed and there’s no chance of me falling out. This happened a few times, actually. I just get this feeling of being tiny and just unable to move. It’s happened quite a few times, actually, but it’s always in the middle of the night and I settle myself and go back to sleep.

As with Josh’s account, Faye’s experiences also occurred without the sense of a presence nearby. Additionally, she stated that she always falls asleep on her stomach, yet when the experience occurs she always awakened on her back.<sup>54</sup> Although puzzled by their



experiences, neither Josh nor Faye associated them with an anomalous presence, perhaps because no such presence was felt during the episode. Other individuals, versed in sleep research terminology, actively separated such episodes from their other anomalous experiences. Tommy, a 26-year-old Caucasian receptionist in Florida, distinguished his “sleep paralysis” episodes from a childhood memory of a strange encounter with a green light in his bedroom:

WD: How often do you have these episodes of sleep paralysis?

Tommy: I’d say they happen once every couple of months... The most recent one was probably one of the most scary ones. When I woke up in my bed, instead of my fiancé laying next to me, there was this little girl that just exuded everything evil that you could imagine. And I was too afraid to look at her face, and I literally couldn’t move. It just felt so terribly scary that there was this unknown, redheaded girl. My mind was thinking, “This girl is a banshee or a harpie or something. Something terrible.”

WD: During any episodes, did you ever feel like you were outside your body?

Tommy: Yes.

WD: How often does that occur?

Tommy: Very, very rarely. That’s probably only happened twice in my life.

WD: Can you describe what has happened, or how you have felt during these episodes?

Tommy: Literally, I’m in the room and I’m looking at myself sleeping in the bed. And I’m aware that that’s me, but at the same time I can’t process that I’m asleep and I just can’t understand how this is happening.

Although Tommy dismissed these experiences as hallucinations associated with sleep paralysis, the variations in his experiences suggest that the core sleep paralysis/Old Hag experience may contain variable common elements. While Strieber and his readers may have reported the presence of small humanoids by their bedsides, some of my respondents reported the presence (seen or felt) of more ambiguous entities. For example, Cal, a 65 year old Caucasian who holds a Ph.D. in math and physics, reported three episodes of nocturnal

paralysis. Two episodes involved the presence of a dark, malevolent being, and the other involved a “being of light”:

Cal: Sometime in the late part of the 70s—probably ’78 or ’79—I recall being asleep in bed and then being pounced on [by] what I perceived as a very real being that tried to snuff my life out. It was a very paralyzing, strange experience. And it wasn’t to be forgotten any time soon. The very same thing happened to me sometime in 2001, in November of that year. That experience happened here in Albuquerque. So I consider those experiences from the dark side. On the other hand, I had a spiritual awakening in 1995. My wife had been very unhappy, and we’d hired a woman out of prison, and she was a very joyful happy person. My wife had been miserable and depressed for a lot of years until Anna Marie got her going to church, and they dragged me along. I was glad to see her getting happy again. Sometime on the evening of August 25<sup>th</sup> of 1995...I was over on Major Street here in Albuquerque. I was in a twilight state going to sleep, and I was yanked out of my skin upright, and I met a being of extraordinary light. I never saw the face of this person, but they came forward and put their arms around me and poured love and energy into me from another type...like every cell in my body was being flooded with light. And from that time forth I felt like the rest of us here on this planet were just like dead men walking [laughs]. Compared to that experience, I call us the “dim people.” We’re not full of much light here. So anyway, that was the light side, and I’ve had the dark side as well.

Cal reported that in every case he awoke on his back, yet he was only fully paralyzed during the two encounters with the “dark being.” However, during his encounter with the being of light he was quickly able to move around freely. He moved on to describe this being in greater detail:

Cal: This person was dressed in this luminous white—it was like a long-fitting robe. But I never saw the person’s face, and I puzzled over that for many years about why during this vision—if you want to call it that—I didn’t see this person’s face. But the person came and put his arms around me and poured love into me with such intensity and energy. It wasn’t like you felt it in one part of your body—it was like every single cell in my body was being lit up. And so it was like being infused with...I don’t know how to describe it. One time I had [a] sliver in my hand. I went in to have it taken out, and they couldn’t find the thing so they put a tourniquet on my arm. And they cut the blood supply off for a long period of time. And the best I can say is that when took that tourniquet off, I felt like every cell in my arm was being re-enlivened again—it was a really sweet feeling. That’s the only...it’s not really comparable, but it’s something similar except it wasn’t a local thing. It was like every single part of my body was being infused with light and energy.

Here, Cal contrasted the paralysis accompanied with the presence of the dark beings with the warm, infusing embrace of the benevolent being. Clearly, the sense of paralysis had an extremely negative connotation for him.

Ryder, a 46 year old Caucasian retiree in California, recounted the appearance of a sinister presence in a dream:

Ryder: Yes. That happened once. When I was living in New Mexico. 1990. February. It was about two o'clock in the morning. I was having this dream about this black dog that had moved back behind my head, and it turned into this black hole that hit me on the back of the neck. And I woke up, and I was paralyzed for about ten minutes. I could barely breathe. I just couldn't move a muscle. It was excruciatingly painful. I waited a couple days before seeing a doctor, and he told me that I had severe muscle spasms and prescribed ibuprofen for awhile.

Ryder interpreted this "black hole" as a real, malevolent presence that attacked him. Like Cal, his negative experience was associated with a sense of helpless paralysis. Other respondents described their nocturnal encounters with more traditional, ghostly presences.

Ramon, a 54 year old Native American writer living in Placitas, New Mexico, recounted an early childhood experience that piqued his lifelong interest in the paranormal:

Ramon: One experience that I do remember took place when I was around—it was not a very positive experience with a ghost in our house in Los Angeles—but I was roughly eight or nine years old. And it happened at night. I heard the dishes in the kitchen rattling. Then I heard footsteps coming...up to my bedroom door. The door was open, and I felt somebody stroking my hair and then pulling it. And then someone was talking to me in my ear, in words that I was not able to distinguish. I could feel the breath with each word that was being spoken, the puff of air that comes from a person breathing. And here's another thing: do ghosts breathe? I don't think so. But why was it breathing? I don't know. There's a lot of questions that I just don't have the answers to. But nonetheless, this spirit was breathing on me, and each night it would come and go even further: shake the bed, the next night pull the covers, stroke my face. On and on. Finally, I got so pissed at it, I told my mom. She would say, "Well, you know what you should do. Why are you coming to me? You know what you need to do." And I said, "Yeah, okay. But I just needed to tell you!" So the last night it came up to me, instead of closing my eyes, I opened them and I saw who it was: it was an older man in a brown suit and white shirt, and he was looking at me. And I asked him, "Why do you keep visiting me?" And he looked at me—he was heavyset—and he starts to laugh and laugh and laugh at me. I never heard the voice, but I could see his figure laughing at me. And that just gave me the extra strength and courage to say, "You know what? I want you to leave! I don't ever want you to come around here again!" And with that, he looked at me again and laughed and laughed, and then slowly just disappeared. And I never had an experience with him again.

Although he reported no paralysis, Ramon's experience also occurred while he was in his bed, and the unwanted presence made physical contact with him, including, among other

things, pulling his hair. Ramon's account also entailed the shaking of his bed, an element incorporated in several other paralysis narratives, including that of Daniel, a 45-year-old Hispanic web designer in Albuquerque, who recalled a similar episode in his bed while waking unable to move:

Daniel: And then me and my old roommate rented a house in the south valley, and when I was in bed I woke up and the bed was vibrating. And I'm trying to think of a logical reason why the bed would be vibrating, and I couldn't think of anything! You know, you're woken up in the middle of the night...and then all of a sudden, the bed just jumped. It was an old-fashioned bed and it was pretty heavy, but it jumped about three inches off the floor. I was pretty freaked out.

Daniel, like Ramon, associated the experience with a ghostly visitor, primarily due to prior experiences in the house he associated with a spirit. Furthermore, all of these reported experiences are not merely limited to a sense of paralysis. In each case, a physical interaction or apparitional appearance accompanies the initial immobility.

Sylvia, a 54-year-old Hispanic postal worker in Medanales, New Mexico, also described waking up paralyzed and sensing a ghostly visitor in a house she believed to be haunted:

Sylvia: Once. When you said something, it just triggered something else. Something woke me up in the middle of the night, and I felt my mattress compress down, like if somebody had just sat at my feet. It scared the living daylights out of me. It really scared me. And I said, "Okay, whatever you are, and whatever you're doing here, you just scared me. If you want to talk to me, talk to me." I thought it was a human being, a real person. I really did. I thought there was somebody in my room. I thought I had gotten broken into, or my sister had come in, or something. Somebody was there. It really just scared me. And all of a sudden, I felt something get off the bed. But my door didn't open, it stayed closed. And then it was gone. My bedroom has a door to it.

Like Daniel, Sylvia believed that ghostly inhabitants occupied the house she was living in, and therefore arguably interpreted the presence in her room as a ghost. In these ghostly accounts, belief language plays a vital role in how witnesses interpret their experiences.

Other respondents described experiences more closely associated with UFO-like phenomena, even though their accounts lacked the presence of physical beings. Jann, a 46-year-old Hispanic college student in Albuquerque, described waking up and seeing a brilliant light coming from her window:

Jann: Thinking back it was fall, but I can't remember exactly the year (ed.—2007)...I have a two-story home in the south extreme part of Albuquerque, where I'm the last block in the city limits for the southwest part in a new subdivision...So what happened is that I was sleeping and I was facing the door of my bedroom leading to the hallway. And I was sleeping, and all of a sudden I just woke up. I didn't hear a sound, nothing. I just woke up, sat up from bed, and saw the brightest light I had ever seen before! I didn't think much of it, but I just knew it was something I had never seen before. No sound, no nothing. Just that bright light. And it was coming from the side of the stairwell window. And I have bamboo blinds and I know I close them in the evening. So that was unusual. But for some odd reason, I saw it and then just went back to sleep! In the morning, I said to my kids, "Did you guys hear anything last night?" "No, no, no." And they didn't hear anything or see anything in their bedrooms, which face the front of the house. Mine is in the back. Nothing. Nothing. All I can tell you is that it was the brightest light I had ever seen. It was coming from the north...I have a north-facing stairway window, and it was shining to the south. Just a beam of light across that filled the doorway of my bedroom, leading to the stairs...But all I know is that it was the brightest light I have ever seen, and afterwards I thought, "I wonder what that was? What could that have been?" So, it just makes me wonder if it was something that was out of the ordinary. I don't want to say...I don't know, it was *something*. You know, maybe extraterrestrial? I don't know. It seemed that way.

During the experience, Jann awoke paralyzed on her side, although she was unsure if this was a physical paralysis or simply due to fright. Regardless, this experience triggered another, seemingly unrelated memory of paralysis in her mind:

Jann: You know, it's kind of a weird thing. I hate to say this, because it sounds crazy. I was awoken, I set my alarm and sometimes I wake up before that. For some odd reason, I had woken up, but I had woken up to...I thought I heard someone talking. But it wasn't someone's voice that I recognized. In that sense. And I had just had a family member die, and so I'm thinking...I wasn't sure it sounded like that person or not. You know, talking to me when I was asleep...it sounds weird.

Here, Jann made an association between the two memories based on their shared experiential component of paralysis, even though she categorized the first as a possible UFO experience and the second as ghostly encounter.

Joanie, a 63-year-old Caucasian teacher in Albuquerque, also described a strange nocturnal event involving both paralysis and thematic elements associated with abduction lore:

Joanie: This happened, I believe, in 1961 in Los Alamos to my brother and I. He was ten, I was about sixteen. We were alone in the house at night one night, and I guess since I was taking care of the house, so to speak, I may have been on edge. But I woke up and felt that someone was in the house. There were some kind of metallic-sounding steps coming down the hall. We had asphalt tiles. But it sounded like somebody walking on a metallic ladder, as if they were getting closer, and closer, and closer. And so I was frightened. As I raised up on my elbows to get out of bed, I was suddenly paralyzed. And I know that that's called sleep paralysis, but I remember the tingling in my eyeballs and tingling all over my body, like when your arm falls asleep. And I had a wind-up clock by my bed, which stopped. I could not see anything or hear anything else. The house seemed very empty, in a funny way. It was very dark. I was not perceiving any lights outside, although it was sort of a moonlit night. And that seemed to last for a long time. I would guess it was about fifteen minutes, but I really have no idea. All I know is that I couldn't move. And I swear to you that I was awake. And then all of sudden, we heard a piercing sound, like "Braaaaaay!" And I realized I could move, and as soon as I was able to move I hopped up out of bed and went into the hall to see what was to be seen. My brother was standing there saying, "What's that horrible noise?" And we located this sound coming from the kitchen. The stove timer had gone off. And it was like 3:30 in the morning. And of course, that distinct sound at night sounded really, really loud. Neither one of us had touched the stove timer; I don't think either one of us knew how to do it. But that's the extent of our story, except I was pretty sure I was pregnant. I had missed four cycles, and after that I wasn't pregnant any more. Kids told me the next day that there had been some strange UFO-type sightings in the vicinity, in the Espanola valley. It was reported in the newspaper that there were UFOs flying around the Espanola valley and perhaps down in Roswell. I never saved the newspaper clippings or anything, and I never really thought any more about it. I just sort of ignored it as a weird anomalous experience. But it was very, very frightening. And that's about all I can say. I didn't see anything or feeling anything except the paralysis.

Joanie, obviously already familiar with sleep paralysis as a medical term, nevertheless connected her experience with UFO lore due to local UFO reports and the sudden termination of her pregnancy, a motif common in alien abduction reports popularized by Budd Hopkins (1983; 1987) and David Jacobs (1992). Yet she interpreted another paralysis experience in a more paranormal light due to the experiences and interpretations of others:

Joanie: Um, I think one other time when I was about eighteen. It seemed to me—and you're going to laugh—that we had a couch that was sort of haunted. And I guess that's really a funny way to put it, but it seemed like the so-called Angel of Death, or person in a shroud, would come and visit people that slept on that couch. And I know that that did happen to me once. It happened because of that couch. My grandfather had died on this couch, and after

awhile my husband and I inherited the couch and we had it at our house. My grandmother had the same sort of vision of this shrouded figure standing over her when she slept on that couch. And also my father-in-law, who was a very agnostic atheistic person from Scotland, woke up screaming one night when he slept on that couch. He said in this weird Scottish Brogue, "I an no goin' with ya!" [Laughs] He saw a weird shrouded figure standing over him, too. And I know that we had some weird anomalous things happen because that couch was around. One time, a whole pile of Gillette razor blades were found under the couch. None of us had ever used such a thing. Those things didn't even exist at this time—those things went out of business. So, what we finally did was give the couch to Goodwill and that seemed to solve everything [laughs]. One time I distinctly remember waking up and seeing this shrouded figure over me, and it seemed like they were arguing about it, and I couldn't scream, I couldn't get their attention that I was awake. But that was like a nightmare.

In both accounts, Joanie awakened paralyzed and saw or sensed a presence nearby, yet, like Jann, she came to two separate interpretations of the experiences based on circumstantial elements (terminated pregnancy and local UFO reports versus grandfather's death and relatives' experiences). Joanie and Jann could thus have multiple episodes of nocturnal paralysis, yet interpret them individually based on a broader set of experiential components.

While Whitley Strieber and his readers consistently seem to report the appearance of humanoid beings during their paralytic episodes, the entities reported by the vast majority of my respondents did not fit this description. In fact, only one respondent, a 29-year-old Caucasian waitress in Albuquerque, reported awakening paralyzed and seeing humanoid entities.<sup>55</sup> Here, Michele described her childhood dreams/memories:

Michele: Okay, so this occurred to my best memory between the ages of four and eight. And I lived in a little city outside of Dallas, Texas. I'm going to be honest, and I don't know how you feel about this, but the way I refer to this experience in terms of its origin is...I don't know. I don't know if it was actually a dream or an actual experience. It's a very vivid memory that always stuck with me, and I even talked about it when I was a kid. Anyway, the situation is that I come to consciousness and I'm laying on this metal table and I can't move. The first thing I realize is that I can't move. And around me are these aliens. And I don't know if on either side it's three or four, but on either side of me on this table there are three or four of the stereotypical, pop culture gray aliens with the large almond eyes and slit mouths. And at the head of the table, where my head is, there's this other alien that is different looking. He's kind of brownish, his head isn't as almond-shaped, and he's shorter. And for some reason I know that they're communicating telepathically. And this alien at the head is in charge. He's kind of directing them. And for some reason, I feel like I'm undergoing some

kind of medical procedure. And he's in charge. And I'm not exactly scared. The main thought that keeps going through my head is "Leave me alone. What do you want? Leave me alone! Can I just go back home now? What's going on, and why can't I move?" And I just know they're communicating telepathically. Honestly, that pretty much sums up the experience. But I know it happened several times, multiple times over several years and that's really all the memory of it I have. My mom told me that I mentioned aliens being real when I was a little kid, and I would get really excitable about it. But I didn't seem overly frightened, and she didn't question me about it. She just thought I was being a kid, talking about dreams. I was always kind of curious about them, and then when I was about thirteen or fourteen my curiosity was piqued, and I still had this memory with me. Growing up, I had this memory the whole time. It never left; I was always aware of it. But I really didn't start exploring it until I was older. And then by thirteen or fourteen, my fear in the experience resurged and it was really strong. I developed a deep fear of aliens [laughs].

Michele's account most closely resembles those promoted in abduction literature, and yet she further separated these experiences from more basic episodes of nocturnal paralysis:

WD: Aside from these experiences, have you ever had any other instance where you've woken up unable to move, and sensed a presence nearby?

Michele: Yes, definitely.

WD: How often has that occurred?

Michele: It does not occur anymore, but it happened mostly during my teenage years. Definitely when I was fourteen, fifteen, sixteen.

WD: What would typically happen?

Michele: There would just be a sense of paralysis. And I would try to move, and I couldn't. It would take awhile until I could actually move, and it was odd. And it didn't happen frequently, it only happened a couple times over several years.

Michele distinguished the first set of memories from her other episodes of paralysis based on the inclusion of the humanoid beings. In the first narrative, the sense of paralysis was quickly overshadowed by the both the presence of the beings and her recognition of awakening in an unfamiliar place. The paralytic episodes of her teenage years, however, lacked such peripheral elements and were thus classified as separate, unrelated experiences.

Utilizing an experience-centered approach, can we locate and isolate a core experience universally shared by most, if not all the preceding accounts? Based on these



interviews and the research conducted by Hufford (1982a), here is a list of “core elements” often associated with the overall experience, in the order of their reported frequency:

1. Awakening from sleep unable to move, usually in the supine position
2. A sense of a presence nearby, or the appearance of a light source
3. A pressing sensation on the chest that may or may not be accompanied by difficulty in breathing
4. A concrete sense of fear or dread
5. Visual perceptions of immediate surroundings become altered, either in proportion, color, or point of view
6. A loud noise, or “bang” is heard, sometimes reported as initially awakening the individual
7. A pungent, musty odor
8. A physical presence is observed nearby that may take on a variety of forms witnessed individually or in groups: shapeless mass/cloud, vague humanlike form, identifiable human form, small humanoid form, shadowy figure<sup>56</sup>

Beyond such core elements, witness’s accounts diverge further and may include associations with lucid dreaming, levitation, out-of-body experiences, astral projections, and/or intense physical pain. Experiences may occur at the onset of sleep or upon awakening, and last several seconds to several minutes, and, in extreme cases, hours. Furthermore, although the vast majority of these experiences involve only one person, I have collected at least one account in which two individuals in the same bed reported having the experience simultaneously. *The experiential elements beyond the core paralysis are the primary determinants in how both experiencers and researchers classify such accounts.* This is how a core narrative of paralysis can become associated with a wide variety of folk traditions that include alien abduction (Strieber 1987), ghostly visitations and threatening witches (Hufford 1982a; 1995a), demonic encounters (Ellis 2003), shamanic journeys (Sevilla 2004), and sleep paralysis and associated hallucinations (Clancy 2005; Shaha et al. 2006).

As Hufford has pointed out, proponents of alien abduction often attempt to differentiate “authentic” abduction accounts from mere episodes of “sleep paralysis” by focusing on shared experiential elements peripheral to the core paralytic experience. Meanwhile, many sleep researchers remain overeager to lump all abduction narratives under the umbrella term of sleep paralysis while ignoring those shared peripheral elements (1995a, 38-39). As shown, sleep paralysis episodes need not be accompanied by ghostly, shadowy, or alien visitors. Furthermore, abduction accounts and ghostly encounters need not contain the core experience of paralysis, nor occur while awakening from sleep. Rather, the core experience of waking paralysis appears to be the only elemental factor that folklorists may comfortably excise from cultural traditions, which themselves are intricately interlaced with peripheral experiential elements.<sup>57</sup> Regardless of the “true” nature of this core experience, it appears to exist as a consistent element in a variety of cultural traditions of belief.<sup>58</sup>

Can a similar experience-centered approach be used to locate universal patterns and similarities in the reporting of UFOs? Although upon first glance a comparison of accounts involving strange lights and objects in the sky would seem more straightforward than examining the complicated role of the Old Hag/sleep paralysis, historical accounts of celestial objects reveal a diverse body of sightings across global cultures, including ancient Egypt, Japan, Mesoamerica, and medieval Europe (Bullard 1992; Vallee 1969). As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, UFO sightings remain distinct in their specific ties to their frequency of occurrence after World War II, coupled with their cultural associations with extraterrestrial visitation. In these prior chapters, I have also discussed the specific socio-historical contexts for UFO sightings in the United States, particularly in regards to the Cold War and the rise of nuclear technology, communist fears, public ambivalence about science,

cultural paranoia, and the rise of science fiction. I also noted, however, that in many cases individuals appeared to be witnessing *something* unusual in the skies above them. Hufford's approach reminds us to avoid solely relying on a cultural source approach to account for such sightings.

If we allow ourselves to focus on sightings of celestial objects post-World War II, while acknowledging that these sightings exist within a much broader continuum of global lore, are distinct patterns evident?<sup>59</sup> Historically, official investigations into UFO sightings such as Project Blue Book have suggested that most reports describe either daytime observations of metallic disk-like objects, rocket-like objects, or sharply defined luminous objects appearing as lights at night. Additionally, historical reports have revealed a wide-variety of colorful descriptive terms for celestial objects that include: arrowhead, ball, balloon, birdlike, cigar, cushion, dart, discus, dots, dumbbell, globular, hamburger, jumbo jet (without wings), oyster shell, pinpoint, rhomboid, Saturn disk, smudge, tadpole, teardrop, triangle, and wedge. Furthermore, from the 1980s onward, sightings of boomerang and triangular-shaped objects have steadily increased (Haines 2001, 533-534).

Such sightings, as opposed to local or regional anomalous traditions, generally resist specific spatial or temporal associations, nor are they typically associated with the "legend tripping" commonly associated with ghost lore. Thus, sightings are often random events "unsolicited" by observers. According to Jacques Vallee's past research, most sightings tend to occur at night, peaking between the hours of 10 p.m. and 3 a.m., and typically last from five to twenty minutes. Nearly half of these sightings involve two or more witnesses, and they typically occur in more isolated regions (Hynek and Vallee 1975, 6-8, 20-24).

Given this information, we can examine both how well my respondents' observations conform to historic patterns and if these observations collectively suggest an experiential core. For this discussion, I have focused on 34 accounts collected from 20 people. Out of those 34 accounts, 21 sightings occurred at night, 12 during daylight hours, and one at dusk. Only 10 accounts involved a single witness, while fully 24 involved two or more witnesses. Twenty-two sightings occurred in rural or remote areas, and the remaining 12 occurred in either cities, suburban communities, or other more populous areas. Only 9 of the sightings spanned less than a minute, while 25 occurred within the span of several minutes up to an hour.

This basic observational data mostly conforms to prior studies of UFO reports. The majority (62%) occurred at night, lasted several minutes or more (74%), and tended to occur in rural areas (65%). The only unusual statistic present was the percentage of multiple-witness sightings (71%), which was much higher than Vallee's estimations.

While this information provides helpful insights into the environmental contexts of the experiences, an examination of the characteristics of the experiences themselves locates specific elements that respondents consistently categorize as "anomalous." In 19 of the 34 sightings, respondents described erratic movements as primary characteristics of the objects or lights they witnessed. Specifically, several witnesses described lights "zigzagging" in the sky. Mitchell, a 21-year-old Caucasian college student in Georgia, recounted his observation of a white light slightly larger than a star:

Mitchell: I was driving back to my parent's house in the middle of nowhere in Georgia at about 2 a.m. I'm not sure of the date, but it was summer 2005. As I was driving down a long straightaway, I noticed off in the distance a light coming from the horizon on my right. It was flying towards my left while making really jagged up-and-down zigzags. It kept flying left for about 20 seconds and was directly in front of me—but off in the distance—when all of a

sudden it stopped completely and hung there for a few seconds before zooming off back the way it came in a straight line at a ridiculous speed. It was out of my sight into the horizon it came from in maybe 2 or 3 seconds.

In this account, the erratic movement of the light remains the most puzzling aspect of Mitchell's sighting, and without such movement he would have likely dismissed the light as an aircraft or satellite.

Jonathan, a 43-year-old Caucasian painter in Albuquerque, described a strikingly similar sighting he had in 1984 in San Patricio, New Mexico, while hiking alone at night in the desert:

Jonathan: When I was walking alone one night, it was probably after ten, and there's an arroyo, a couple of ranges behind my folks' house heading south from the Ruidoso River. And I was walking around this plain, near a roundish mountain. And there was this old canyon in the back, and within this canyon are some extraordinary rock formations. And my favorite place to go was a rock formation that you could sit in, it even had arm rests. I could just sit there and check out the stars, and it was pretty secluded. You could kind of hear cars in the distance, but that's about it. Nobody can see you, nobody can hear you. It was a very pleasant place, and I was just sitting down staring up at the stars, and I saw out of the corner of my eye in my range of vision this pinpoint white light—I think it came probably from the east—It just came into view. It may have just appeared abruptly, but it zigzagged from the left and hauled ass the opposite way, zigzagging, and then it just popped out and disappeared. And I was thinking stupid things about shooting stars arching and disappearing, but this wasn't really towards the earth. It kind of arched and disappeared up towards the northwest quadrant. The fact that it zigzagged at such tremendous speeds—I mean "whish, whish, whish!" really fast was strange. Now, weather balloons can't go that distance at that speed, nor can any aircraft that I know of, so I was very bemused by it. I think I told my folks the next morning about it. I said, "I think I saw a UFO!"

Like Mitchell, Jonathan would have dismissed the light as a conventional craft or natural occurrence (a shooting star, in this case), had the light not zigzagged across the sky.

Yet another respondent, Merlin, a 50-year-old Caucasian mechanic in Wisconsin, also described a similarly moving pair of lights he observed in the 1970s:

And the second one appeared I think in 1974. It was in the evening, I was traveling up in the northwest part of Wisconsin to visit my grandparents. It was probably a weekend, or a Friday, but I can't be positive of that. And I think it was in the month of July. And it was dark, and as we were walking up to the door of the house, my mother, father, and I looked up and saw two lights traveling parallel really high up. We couldn't hear a thing, it was so high up. Flashing very, very rapidly and zigzagging across the sky, like a sawtooth pattern.

Aside from such zigzagging motions, many respondents noted other strange movements that include erratic stops and starts, abrupt changes in direction, and lights and objects appearing, then reappearing in other places. Malla, a 67-year-old Caucasian artist and former Los Alamos National Laboratory employee living in Albuquerque, recalled a sighting she shared with her family in 1976:

Malla: I had three in Missouri. My folks had a retirement farm in Missouri. And one night, my two sisters and I were sleeping out on the porch, a screened-in porch, because it was hot and muggy. And I couldn't sleep, and I happened to look out the window and I saw a light way up in the sky that was darting in all different directions...just dart here and there in straight lines...not in curved lines. And I knew it was something up there because the stars didn't move, but this thing was moving, darting around. I woke my sisters up, and I went in and got my mother up so they could all witness it. And we all four saw it. And to this day, I have no idea what it was. But it was a light, it couldn't possibly have been a weather balloon or anything like that. It was a light darting around.

Although in the interview Malla did not entertain the possibility that the light could be a meteor or piloted aircraft, her focus on the erratic movement of the light coupled with the equally amazed reactions from her sisters and mother provided her with sufficient proof that her sighting could not have a conventional explanation.

Aside from erratic and abrupt movements, many respondents consistently commented on the extremely high rates of speed at which objects would move. Daniel, for instance, described a fiery object he observed late at night in Albuquerque with a friend:

Daniel: I was helping a friend with a paper route. This was about three years ago. We were up in the Northeast Heights, and we saw this bright light, like a rocket, go right over the city really fast in the middle of the night...about two or three in the morning. It wasn't a comet, it was going perfectly horizontal. And I couldn't believe that radars [wouldn't have picked it up]. Well, they wouldn't tell us anything anyway.

Although the light made no sudden stops or changes in direction, like Malla, the equally amazed reaction from his friend provided Daniel with further confirmation of the light's anomalous nature.

Indeed, confirmation from other witnesses remained a crucial factor in respondents' attitudes toward their experiences. In one of his childhood sightings in northern Utah, Cal and his friends were struck by the "non-astronomical" movement of a red light:

Cal: The first one that I remember, I was sitting on a boxcar in a lumber yard with some friends at night, just horsing around. And we were just looking up at the sky, and I remember over in the southwestern quadrant, very high in the sky, I saw these pinpoints of light flashing. This was probably very early in the 1950s. And the light was red, and it looked like it would bloom out a little bit. It would start small, and bloom out a bit. But then it would move around. It wouldn't stay localized in the sky. And it went on like that for a little while and then was gone. And I just remembered thinking it was a very peculiar kind of thing, it didn't appear to be star because it didn't stay there. It would just stay for a little bit at one point, and then appear in another little point. Within a small area, but it would be moving around. It was a very curious kind of thing, and it just struck me as being non-astronomical... We were all very curious about it. It was exciting. I remember I was excited enough to remember it and talk about it for awhile. In those days I don't think we talked about UFOs and the term wasn't that much used, I don't think. We recognized [it] as something that excited our imaginations, anyway.

Once again, the movement of the light coupled with reactions from other witnesses provided the experiencer with the confidence to reject more nature, mundane explanations for their sightings. In another childhood sighting in Utah, Cal recalled being startled by the sudden acceleration of an object he had been tracking in the sky:

Cal: One night I noticed up in the sky...it would not have been in the zenith of the sun, it would have been over the mountains to the east. It was kind of a silvery, saucer-shaped object just quietly coming over the mountain. And it glided along that way for a while and then disappeared. But it was one of those very strange things. There was no noise with it, and I don't know if we expected it to be an airplane. I don't know if I was smart enough at that time to know if it had been the sunlight reflecting off of something, but I don't think so. I think it was late enough in the evening that it was just a bright elongated piece of light that drifted over the mountains moving quite quickly. And then, all of the sudden, zip, it was gone! One of those sped up kind of things.

Although here Cal was consciously wary of the potential limitations of his childhood mind in making such observations, he nevertheless felt comfortable lumping this sighting in with others specifically due to the rapid acceleration of the object.

Lastly, Ramon recounted a large group sighting he took part in in 2000 while driving home at night to Santa Fe with his partner:

Ramon: The second time I witnessed anything was when I left a Joan Baez concert in Albuquerque, and I was headed north. The concert ended around 10ish, and we didn't leave Albuquerque until around 11 in the evening. As we went up La Bajada, if you know Santa Fe at all, to the left is La Cienega and the Santa Domingo pueblo. Well, that area was in total darkness, but up ahead in the highway—again, this was at night—we saw cars stopping or already stopped on the highway. As I slowed down as we were passing, people were on either side of the highway looking directly to the west. We parked the car, and then got out and asked one guy what everyone was stopping for. And he pointed out that there was a flying saucer to the west. So, we looked and there were people on the beds of trucks sitting there. It was like a big outdoor picnic, it gave that impression. And we looked to the west, and sure enough in the distance was a very large—I would say the size of two football fields—cylindrical object. I could tell it was cylindrical because of the way the lights were moving, and its shape in the darkness. But it was darker than the background darkness of the night. It had these interesting-looking lights that would successively go on and off all around the rim of the object. And then it blinked them all at once, and then it went dark. Then behind it rose a smaller version of the larger object. And it rose up into the air quite high, I would say fifty to a hundred feet or so. Again, it was the same exact copy of the larger object, only a much smaller version...about a third of the size. And it started to rise, and then it abruptly stopped when it reached a certain height. Then lights started to blink around its rim, and then it stopped. They went bright, and then they stopped. The larger object turned on its lights, and it blinked twice. The little object blinked once, and then it shot straight into the stratosphere and disappeared. The larger object blinked twice, and then totally went dark and shot up after it. I mean, just that quickly. When the first object went up, everybody started clapping like they had just seen something grand, which of course they did. And once the larger object followed, everybody just let go with whoops and hollers and clapping hands.

Again, the movement of celestial objects, particularly nocturnal lights, serve as primary, initial indicators of anomalous events in the majority of narratives presented here. A strong secondary feature—also voiced by Ramon in describing the crowd's response—remains the confirmation of the anomaly by others who are present. The lights observed by Cal, Malla, Jonathan, and others were deemed insubstantial until they displayed aerial maneuvers that these witnesses could not associate with natural (i.e., stars, comets) or conventional (i.e., weather balloons, helicopters) phenomena. Yet other accounts, such as the above anecdote from Ramon, also described strange colors and shapes that witnesses struggle to identify. Thirteen respondents specifically mentioned unusual color or light patterns. For instance, three New Mexico narratives included flashing red and blue lights witnessed in the



sky. Alexandra, a 28-year-old Caucasian artist in Albuquerque, described a childhood memory of flashing lights outside her bedroom window around the year 1990:

Alexandra: I feel like I was seven, but I might have been ten. I think my sister was in the sixth grade, so that would mean that I was in the fourth grade. And we lived in Abiquiu, or near Abiquiu in Medanales, New Mexico out in the country. And I'm pretty sure it was my sister's birthday. We woke up in the middle of the night, and there were flashing lights. I'm pretty sure they were red and blue, and maybe yellow or white. But there were a lot of flashing lights outside our window. My sister and I woke up, and we were both really scared and making a big deal out of it. My parents came into the room because we were making so much noise, and my mom came in first. And then she got really scared, and told us it was just a helicopter or something like that, or an airplane. But then she went into the other room and woke my dad up. And he came in and he got really, really nervous. I remember my sister and I were really expecting—or at least, I was expecting my parents not to be really nervous. But they were—my dad was really nervous. I think he wanted to go outside and check it out. But my mom got really upset, which is really unlike her. And it's just really not in her character to get nervous about things. She's usually the first person to go check stuff out. But she got really nervous, and she didn't want him to go outside. And she started to get mad at him, and he started to get really macho and insisted that he go check it out. He went outside, and we didn't see him or anything. He then came back inside and he was really, really nervous and freaked out. And he said something along the lines of it being a helicopter, and that we needed to just get in our beds and not pay attention to it. But he was really nervous and scared, and kind of shaky...And then the next day, my sister and I were really worked up about it, and we went out to the horse area, which is underneath where we saw the lights. It's this arena of really loose sand where we would ride our horses. There was this small cone-shaped pile of black dirt. I picked it up and it was really, really heavy. And I'm almost certain—I haven't talked to my parents about it—but I'm almost certain that my mom was out there with us, and that she was really perplexed by what it was. And that's all I can really remember.

The colors of the lights remained the strongest, most memorable feature for Alexandra, and she went so far as to speculate that she may have confused a childhood memory of a police car or helicopter.<sup>60</sup>

These red and blue lights were quite similar to lights also witnessed in Medanales by Sylvia around 1985:

Sylvia: I was approximately 31, and that was the biggest and most exciting for me, anyway. I was sitting in the living room, and I had just come back from...spending four days in the city. It was the Christmas season, it was the middle of winter—the 28<sup>th</sup> of December. I remember that very well. I was sitting in the living room, and I just happened to look out the living room window facing south. My house is south-facing. And I see these huge lights. Just standing there. And I remember two lights for sure, two huge lights. My first thought was, "What the hell?" I thought it was like blue and red cop lights, you know how they flash? These were not flashing. They were just two huge lights. One was red, one was blue. I stared at it for a while, about five, six, or seven minutes, and I said, "Wait a minute!" My mother lives about two hundred feet away from me, maybe more. It was freezing, so I

wrapped myself in a huge coat, I slipped on my shoes, my kids were asleep and I didn't want to wake them up, so I walked across the yard. Two yards, to see my mother. I woke her up, I knocked on her bedroom window—she was reading, her lamp was still on—and I woke her up. I said, “Mom, come out here please. Now!” And she goes, “What’s wrong with you? What are you doing waking me up at this time of the evening?” And I said, “Mom, please come out here, this is important!” And she thought I was going nuts. She walks out in her nightgown, and it’s freezing. I said, “Look at that.” And she goes, “What is that?” I said, “I have no idea, you tell me! What do you think it is?” She says, “I don’t know.” So she ran back in and put something on. A robe, I think, or a jacket. And we walked back outside and stared at it for awhile. By this time, it had been a good fifteen or twenty minutes. It’s just standing up there in the air, and it’s pretty big and bright. So there’s no mistaking that there’s something up there. I said, “How can we see this better?” And she goes, “I’ve got some field glasses in the weaving studio.” And that’s only like fifty feet away from where we were standing.

So I went back in the house, got her keys for the weaving studio, I went back out, I’m trying not to be overly excited and screaming during this. I’m trying to keep my cool, ‘cause whatever it is I don’t want to scare it! I’m a nature watcher, and I know you’ve gotta be calm. And I walked out from her house, went to the studio, went inside, unlocked the door, got the field glasses, walked out the studio...it disappeared. Just disappeared. Gone. I said, “Mom, where did it go?” She said, “I don’t know!” I said, “Mom, it was right there, right?” She goes, “Yeah.” I said, “I’m not crazy right? I saw that, right?” She goes, “Yeah.” She then says, “I’m freezing out here! I don’t want to think anymore!” So we went back into her house and we discussed it for a little while. We both couldn’t figure it out. But that was a good twenty, twenty-five minutes of lights just hanging there. No noise, no anything. And it just disappeared. So anyways, she went back into the house, and by this time I’m totally intrigued. I come back into my house and put a hat on, put some gloves on, and wrapped myself up a little better because I was going to go back outside again! And I watched the sky for awhile...nothing, nothing, nothing. Well, all of a sudden I see these lights again—further away, though. This time they were toward the west. And it was toward the Jemez’s [Mountains], which is north of the Los Alamos area. It was just cruising back and forth from Los Alamos north toward the Abiquiu area. And it was just nice and slow—no noise, no anything. Nothing! And then it just disappeared again! And that was the end of that, and that was about a good forty-five, fifty minutes that I was outside.

Like Alexandra, Sylvia initially thought that the appearance of red and blue lights was indicative of a police presence. However, she rejected this explanation based on the light’s silence, stationary position, and continued luminescence. And, as with earlier witnesses, her mother’s equally puzzled reaction served as further confirmation.

More recently, Barb, a 22-year-old Hispanic college student in Albuquerque, also witnessed blue and red lights in the New Mexico night sky:

Barb: It was the Sunday after Thanksgiving of last year [2008]. We were driving my brother back to school—he and some friends go to NMI [New Mexico Military Institute]. And we took two cars down there because we were taking back some of his friends. And me and my mom were following my dad. It was probably around 7:30, because they had to be back at 6.

And at first I couldn't see the light because I had my iPod on and I wasn't paying much attention. Then I saw it, and it was going through the sky, and at first I thought it was a car light. But I didn't really pay much attention to it until my mom noticed and from there we started watching it. And my dad was driving maybe just a few feet in front of us, so we called him to see if he saw it. And he was saying he didn't see it at all. But we know we saw it, it was really dominant. And it was flashing lights, so we thought maybe it was a car, but there were no cars around. And from there, it was kind of like a strobe that went across the sky. It would go back and forth. We didn't see any strobe lights anywhere, and we were paying attention for trucks or gas stations or anything, and it was on the stretch where Roswell to Vaughn, maybe, where there's nothing? It was on that road. And it went on for a good thirty or forty-five minutes, at least. And they just kind of kept flashing. The colors did vary. It lit up the sky to a certain extent, which is why I don't understand why my dad didn't see it, but he was really paying no attention to it. It was mostly me and my mom talking about it. As soon as we approached [the main] highway and cars started coming up, we didn't really see anything else after Vaughn. But it was kind of freaky.

Whether these lights are flickering stars, helicopters, or interstellar police cruisers, the similarities in such accounts—and the fact that each witness found them anomalous—speaks to possible core celestial events shared by multiple individuals. Many accounts included descriptions of lights of various colors flashing, pulsing, or swirling in unusual patterns, and nine narratives noted unusual shapes and sizes of objects associated with such lights. Tommy recounted two childhood sightings in rural Ohio in which he witnessed enormous objects flying silently overhead:

Tommy: The one was in the dead of winter up in northeast Ohio, and I was about 9 years old. And I looked up into the sky, and it was dark, about 7:30 up there, and it was almost a square craft with lights on all four corners and then a bright blue and a red one in the middle. And then the other one seemed much larger, and I was out on a lake at night. And I'd say I was about 13 or 14 at the time, and it had to be about 200 yards long. It had one red light at the top, at the very forefront of it, and two red lights all the way in the back. This thing literally blacked out the stars as it went over the lake.

While Tommy found the formation of lights strange, he was ultimately (and understandably!) most awed by the apparent size of the larger object and its ability to black out sections of the night sky. This feature alone was most vital in Tommy interpreting the formation of lights as large, solid craft.

Another example of an oddly-shaped object emitting strange color patterns came from Troy, a 29-year-old Caucasian journalist in Finland:

Troy: I can't remember the specific year, but it was some time in the late 80s. I want to say maybe 1989 or even 1990, but late July in any case. I can't give a specific time either, but it was around midday. I was in my teens at the time and we were playing in our yard. The houses were arranged in a sort of cul-de-sac with rowhouses all along the roads, except with a few foot paths between buildings leading to the cliffs behind the houses. We were playing near one such foot path. There were maybe half a dozen of us, all kids aged 10-15. It was high noon and someone spotted an object in the sky. It was a prismatic sphere, hovering some way in the sky. Since it was just a prismatic sphere of light, it's hard to say how large and how high it was, but it gave me the impression that it was maybe a few hundred meters in the air and seemed to be quite large. Anyways, the thing hovered in the air for a good 40-60 seconds while we gazed at it in amazement - as kids we were of course into UFOs and aliens in a big way and everyone thought it was definitely the real deal. After the 40-60 seconds had passed, the thing took off at an immense speed, flying over the houses and towards the cliffs. It didn't blink away or vanish, it just went from hovering still in the sky to flying at a fast but trackable speed. A few of us stayed there to watch the thing go, while the rest of us sprinted through the foot path—which allowed a clear view to the sky—and onto the barren cliffs, which overlooked a strait, thus again allowing clear view all the way to the horizon. It didn't take us long to run through the gap, but by the time we got to the cliffs there was no sight of the thing.

Troy further described the object as emanating shimmering colors, including red, blue, yellow, orange, and green. In line with other accounts, the presence and reaction of the other kids reaffirmed the exciting nature of the event.

Other shapes of objects reported by respondents included cylindrical, cigar-shaped, pyramid-shaped, and, of course, saucer-shaped. In addition to these depictions, several accounts included descriptions of the aforementioned triangular crafts that have been reported with more frequency in recent decades. Jef, a 23-year-old Caucasian salesman in North Carolina, witnessed such an object near Raleigh several years ago:

Jef: Let's see, it was around 9 to 9:30 pm, and it was in November. My stepgrandmother had passed away, and we were leaving her wake and it was myself and my girlfriend in one car, and my brother in a car in front of us. And we were about five minutes from our house, and we take highway 70 and take a right on a road called Guy Road, and it's kind of flat. There's some trees and forests, but you can see over the top of them. There's kind of a glow from a Super Wal-Mart down the road that kind of permeates the sky. To our left, there's a...it looked like a low-flying plane almost, but not really. It was nothing we'd ever really seen, because it was pretty...the size and the height of it looked out of place for our area because we're just a Raleigh suburb. The nearest airport is about an hour away from us. And for it to

be that low, it didn't seem right. But it was three white lights, and at the center of the three was one red light that didn't strobe, but it pulsed. It would stay bright for two or three seconds and then dim for two or three seconds and then get bright again. And it wasn't really anything special until it started...like it crossed over the top of the road and then turned so that it was going alongside the road in the same direction we were. And I called my brother ahead of us to see if he saw anything or if he was seeing the same thing we were. And he confirmed that he did, and it started like way off to our left, and now it was on our right. And the road kind of winds, and we went down the road for ten minutes before we got home, and the whole time it was kind of crisscrossing sides. And it's not that we were going under it as far as the road is concerned, because I know a lot of people say that your orientation to the object can be confused by the direction you're going. But that road pretty much goes the same direction the whole time, and it was the object that was going back and forth over the top of the road.

And we finally got to a point about two or three minutes away from our house where they were building some new apartments. There was an empty parking lot, and they had just built a gas station. So we pulled off there, both of us, and by now the thing was out ahead of us but it had turned and it had come right back over top of us and got to about a forty-five degree angle and turned to its right. And when I say turned, it didn't bank, it just kind of started going that direction instead, and that was more towards where our house was at the time. So we got in our cars and went back home. And, when we got out of our car, it was kind of over top of where our high school was, which was like...you've got our house and if you went two acres through the woods, you'd hit highway 70, and on the other side of highway 70 would be the high school. And so it was over that general area, and the high school had all of its football field lights on, so there was kind of a glow coming from that region. But it was over that way, and it must have gone off...it kind of turned to its right again and then went off beyond the trees. And we were about to go inside, and then it came like directly towards us, coming from the east, if I'm getting my directions right, because that's the direction you go towards the beach, so it's gotta be the east. And it got to about another forty-five degree angle and from there we could kind of see its size and from my best estimate was...like, from tip to tip, as wide as Orion's Belt, if that gives you any kind of indication when it was at that distance from us. And when it got to about there, it banked up and went to the left and just kept going. We didn't see it again after that. And there wasn't really a sound attached to it. With the light, you couldn't make out any definite shape, just the formation of the lights that were on it. But I figure that if it was a plane that low, we would have heard something.

Afterwards, Jef and his companions watched a television special on the History Channel that referenced a wave of sightings of triangular craft over Belgium in the late 1980s.<sup>61</sup> They concluded that those sightings most closely resembled what they had just witnessed.

Other respondents described similar triangular craft. Corman, a 24-year-old Asian American bingo hall employee in Texas, recounted a sighting of a strange triangular craft near an army base in 2000:

Corman: I can't remember a specific date, I think it was in the autumn. It was at night, and we were driving through the field at Fort Hood and I saw something that looked kind of like a

helicopter off on the side of the road. Not far from the road, no more than fifty feet. And as we got closer to it, it picked up and by the time we got right next to it, it started moving right beside us, right down the road. It followed us for about a good two-hundred, two-hundred fifty feet and then it just veered off. I mean, it just went totally perpendicular and took off down the field. I had never seen anything move like that. I was like, “Holy shit, what is that?”

WD: So it was somewhat triangular-shaped. Was it illuminated at all?

Corman: No, all it had was three lights on the bottom, and it was painted jet black because we had the highbeams on and I couldn't even see it. All I could see were the red lights...They were kind of like angular from the bottom. Like pointing off—they were on the corner, if you would. I think there was one white light on the front.

Although initially puzzled by his sighting, Corman later consulted online sources, and, like Jef, found numerous similar descriptions of triangular craft that served to confirm his observations.

Aram, a 29-year-old Caucasian freelance journalist, described an even closer and drawn-out encounter with a triangular craft while camping with a friend on the banks of Lake Powell, Utah:

Aram: In early 2000, I was halfway done with a seven-month long trip around the circumference of Lake Powell—in Utah and Arizona...This was on the San Juan arm of Lake Powell, where the San Juan river flows into what is today Lake Powell. It's one of the most isolated areas of the lake. There's no marina, there's no place for boats to fill up with gasoline, and so as a result it's a very isolated, remote locale that seems to attract very little boat traffic. And at the time, we would go weeks with literally only seeing a couple people at a time. Anyway, one night we were pretty much at the very end of the San Juan arm, right where the river flows into Lake Powell. It was very isolated and we had had a long day. My friend...and I were not in the best of moods. We were in our tent at the end of the day...and I was looking out across the water, and we were both reading. We were about to fall asleep, and all of a sudden I noticed this weird light kind of blinking on the opposite shore. And at first I thought it was the headlight of a car. It was blinking and moving around on the opposite shore. And then I saw another one, and then another one, and then all of sudden in the middle of them all—there were probably six or seven white lights at this time kind of swarming around on the opposite shore, I couldn't tell if they were on the shore or above the shore. It was kind of hard to see, and this was across a wide body of water, a wide half-river, half-lake at this point. And in the middle of them I see this weird orange light that just seemed to start rising and falling, and rising and falling. At this point, I got my friend's attention—I had been just watching silently up to this point. I said [to my friend], “What is this? Look at this!” And so we started watching looking across the water, and we see this strange thing blinking and just rising and falling. And all of a sudden, we start to hear some sounds over from the opposite shore. And this is a ways away—it's got to be maybe half a mile away or a third of a mile away. And so everything is kind of distant at this point.

But all of a sudden, the activity around this orange light seems to get more intense, and the orange light seems to be rising higher and going down lower. And all of a sudden, we start to hear this roar, just this insane whooshing roar. And this orange light seems to rocket from a fixed position on the shore directly toward us, and just grows so huge as it does so. And all of a sudden we've got this enormous aircraft—I mean, it just seemed like a commercial airliner was about to descend on our tent and destroy us. It seemed like a battleship in the sky at the time. It was so enormous and we were both yelling at each other, “What is going on!” And we could barely hear each other at all. And there was just this rush of sound. This thing was so huge and came so close to the tent that the tent was literally flapping back and forth in the wind after it went over. And neither of us could stop babbling at each other. We were just so rattled from it. But then immediately, another orange light seemed to go right into the same place on the opposite shore. And the lights began swarming around it again. Whatever this was had just whooshed past us and gone away over the cliff that we had been camping by. So it was just gone. Just as fast as we had seen it, it was gone. And we didn't know what we had seen... Anyway, within a minute this happened again. And it came even closer to our tent this time. My first thought was that something was shooting at us. It just seemed like maybe we were in trouble for spying or something! It seemed directed at us, almost. It came so close to us, and it was so terrifying. So then after this happened again—and it was just equally rattling even though we knew what to expect—these lights blinked around on the opposite shore and moved around for the rest of the night, I mean until we fell asleep.

The next morning it was all we could think about, so we paddled over to the opposite shore—and we were following the shorelines anyway. And we could not see any sign of disturbance over there. And at the time I was much less skeptical than I am today. But that really rattled us. It made it seem like something even more paranormal. We were expecting to see tire tracks and dug-up dirt and a lot of disturbed ground. But there was just nothing! It looked like nothing had happened on this other shore. There was a sandy beach there and plenty of area that could have been marked up or disturbed, but nothing. It was a really strange experience and even though we kind of came to have some more, perhaps, grounded conclusions as time went on about what had happened exactly, it still remains such an epic memory. It was just so strange and weird and huge at the time.

(Later)

WD: How high above you was it when it passed, in your estimation?

Aram: In my journal—and I've since reread this account so this might warp my memory of it a little—but in my journal I put “fifty feet above the tent.” And I think that that might be a slight exaggeration, but I think it's pretty close, because the tent both times was literally rattling and flapping back and forth in the wind. The wind that this thing generated had an immediate effect on our tent.

WD: Was it ball-shaped? How would you describe its shape?

Aram: No, I remember it as triangular. I think that that could be because there were lights on the wings or on the body of it. So I remember it as triangular with lights outlining the perimeter of it.

WD: Was the entire thing illuminating an orange light, or were there just lights on it? Did you get a sense of an actual craft?

Aram: The orange light was in the center, and then there were white lights either on the corners or outlining it.

WD: Did the rest of the craft have any color at all—and I know this was at night.

Aram: Gray or black, mostly black with the blotting out of the stars.

WD: Could you describe the sound as it went overhead a little more?

Aram: It was just an absolutely deafening whoosh. It was a roar. I don't know if I can imitate it, but it was so loud that my friend and I were yelling back and forth at each other, and we could not tell at all what the other was saying. It was so deafeningly loud.

WD: Like a jet roar?

Aram: Yeah, maybe you could compare it to sitting outside an airport when planes are taking off or something. Maybe. But it was so immediate and so close, that it felt magnified.

Aram's fascinating account again describes a craft similar to other accounts: typically a dark, triangular object with white, yellow, or orange lights demarcating edges. Often, these accounts also include a red or orange light at the center of the object. Aram's account differs from others, however, in his description of the "deafeningly loud" roar the object made as it passed overhead. Strange noises associated with sightings were found among several other accounts. For instance, Mitchell recounted another sighting that occurred while he was lying in bed at night in college in 2005, in which a strange humming noise he heard from outside his window revealed a floating white ball of light. Such accounts, however, are in the minority. Perhaps the most universally shared element of the accounts I collected was the reported lack of noise emitted by the lights and objects. Many respondents found this lack of noise the most puzzling element of their experiences:

And I knew it couldn't be an aircraft because, in the first place, they wouldn't be flying that low. And in the second place, they weren't allowed to fly there. And besides, it made no noise.

And it went right above our heads very slowly. I could paint a picture of it. And it made absolutely no noise whatsoever.

But that was a good twenty, twenty-five minutes of lights just hanging there. No noise, no anything.

We were watching it for several minutes, and then all of a sudden it just disappeared. No noise, completely still.



There was no noise with it, and I don't know if we expected it to be an airplane.

And there wasn't really a sound attached to it.

And I would have thought I would have heard something.

I'm used to being around helicopters when they're trying to take off, cause you need a lot of power to get that lift. So they make a terrible amount of noise, but that thing was just incredibly quiet.

There was no motor sound or anything.

What could that have been? No sound, no nothing. And that's what made me realize maybe that it wasn't something normal.

While the lack of sound emitted from a strange, far off light source isn't in and of itself very unusual, the majority of "close" sightings are also noted for the complete lack of any associated noise, and this feature again remains one of the most consistently cited anomalous elements of the accounts I have collected.

Finally, a small minority of these accounts contained experiential elements consistent with some of the more exotic anomalous encounters popularized in UFO literature. Many of these accounts would fall into J. Allen Hynek's "Close Encounter" classification system:

*Close Encounters of the First Kind:* this category is the simple Close Encounter, in which the reported UFO is seen at close range but there is no interaction with the environment.

*Close Encounters of the Second Kind:* these are similar to the First Kind except that physical effects on both animate and inanimate material are noted. [For example] vegetation is often reported as having been pressed down, burned or scorched...[or] inanimate objects, most often vehicles, are reported as becoming momentarily disabled....

*Close Encounters of the Third Kind:* in these cases the presence of "occupants" in or about the UFO is reported (1972, 28-29).

Since the 1990s, UFO researchers have added a fourth category, reserved specifically for abduction accounts (Bryan 1995). One element reported by several respondents was the seemingly intelligent behavior of the objects they witnessed. An example of this type of behavior is conveyed in Murphy's account. Murphy, a 25-year-old Caucasian college

student in Pennsylvania, described a frightening nighttime encounter he experienced with a friend as teenagers:

Murphy: I was sixteen at the time, so this was almost ten years ago. Me and my best friend at the time went out to his grandparents' log cabin...and stayed there for a week, I think...On the third or the fourth day we went for a walk for about half an hour. We'd just talk about little philosophical things, you know, like the nature of the universe, is there a god, what is the nature of God if he exists, all of that stuff. And interestingly, we got out there about half an hour later, it was already starting to get dark when we left and we turned around to make the return trip home. This was in a very heavily wooded area with not even a very well-paved road, just straight graveling. And very windy. And when we were walking back we started talking about an episode of "South Park" where there's aliens or something like that. I think it was the first episode of "South Park." And it just seemed really ironic thinking back on it that we were talking about that, and then this thing happened.

So as we were walking, this was a very clear area out there, you know, there's no light pollution so you can see the stars very clearly. I just happened to look up and look at the stars as we were walking, and I noticed that there was a bit of what looked like a star going in a circle. And it was really weird. And I pointed it out to my friend, and he looks at it and he just says, "Well, it's probably just a falling satellite." And I'm like, "Well, you're probably right." So we just continue walking. And you know, I just got really curious. I wanted to see what was happening with this falling satellite. Is it becoming clearer? And I look up, and I see it's getting bigger and it's still going in a circle. And it's getting brighter. And at that point, I say "Hey, it's still there." And he's like, "Well, it's probably just a falling satellite." I'm like, "Okay." It just seemed so weird because it wasn't like a very erratic pattern. The way it moved just seemed really deliberate. So we continued walking for a little while longer and I take a look up, and I don't see a little white dot circling above us. What I see is like this multicolored thing just like hovering there. And I would say it was a good bit of a ways up, because it wasn't like very close, but it was close enough that you could see what looked like an interchange of colors of light underneath this object. It went from like green to blue to red to orange, and just like vibrated back between them. And the definitive shape of the object was circular. It was very circular. There was no distinguishable alteration from that form or anything like that. It was very circular. And I stopped my friend and told him to look up, and I said, "That doesn't look like a falling satellite." And he looks at me and just goes, "Run!" So we run as fast as we can. We ran for a very long time until we couldn't possibly have run any more.

We were way out of breath at that point, and by that time we felt like we were safe. We'd gotten away from whatever it was that was there. And we didn't see it for a while. We looked around and didn't see anything. So we walked for another ten minutes or so, and by then we were almost home. We were coming over the hill, and as soon as we crested over the hill there was just this really weird feeling. You know, like static electricity in the air, when your hair just stands up for whatever reason? And we just look up, and we see this light, this orange light, just shoot up past us into the treeline and up into the sky. It just shot over the sky and then just suddenly went up. Like really quickly. And it just disappeared.... It was really deliberate in its presence. It was like it wanted us to know it was there. It was the strangest feeling from when we first spotted it, and it was moving down on us. Something just didn't feel right. There's that feeling that, you know, a premonition that something wasn't normal about what was going on, and seeing that thing move. And as soon as it was there, it felt like really saying, "Look at me." I mean, it wasn't literally saying that, it was just a feeling like, "Your attention is going to be moved directly toward me for the time being, and it's not going to be moved toward anything else. There can be a car barreling down the road

at 100 miles per hour, it's not going to matter because you're going to be looking at me." There was a definite sense of that.

As evidenced by his response, Murphy clearly felt that the object "wanted" them to pay attention to it, and specifically felt that, due to their relative isolation and the behavior of the object, that the display was meant solely for the two boys.

Another example of an object seemingly "responding" to an observer came from Zo, a 77-year-old Caucasian male from Florida, well known for his involvement in the UFO community. Zo, already heavily interested in UFOs at the time, seemed to manufacture his own sighting out of simple stargazing:

Zo: In 1954 I was in Miami, Florida. I used to drive down from New Jersey at least once a year. One time I was down there visiting friends, and for the only time in my life I was in a bored mood. I decided that since I was interested in UFOs, how come I didn't spend any time outdoors looking for them? And, really, that was the only time in my life—before or after—that I spent a couple hours staring at the sky. And I have no idea if that meant anything, but anyway within a few blocks of where I was staying...there was a building under construction. It had a stairway, and I went up to the second floor that was unfinished. And I had a complete view of the sky in all directions, and nobody would notice me, see? They wouldn't be looking up there, and I wouldn't look like a weirdo standing virtually in one place. In those days, the sky was not as polluted as it is now, so you could see hundreds or thousands of stars in the sky, and you would notice without thinking of the well-known constellations that stars form groups of three, four, five, six, or seven that are near each other, and have approximately the same brightness. So you look at them, and you see them as a group. So I got bored, and I was just playing games with myself, you know? I noticed, as anyone would, that the stars were in apparent meaningless groups of approximately the same brightness. And I think I was looking at a group of five, and for no particular reason I started thinking that any one of these apparent stars that I'm looking at in this group could be a flying saucer standing still. If it had the same brightness and it wasn't doing anything unusual, you would think it's a star when looking at it, but it isn't! You know? It's a fake star, in some way. So for no particular reason, I focused on this one group of five, and then I picked out one at random in the group and I said, "What if that star was to be a flying saucer?" And I didn't even get the thought out completely, the words "flying saucer" in my mind—if those were the exact words—when the star took off to the left in approximately a straight line, although slightly tilted down. So in a period of five seconds or so, it was moving fast, but you could see it. It wasn't just a blur or anything. It moved swiftly to the left and I moved a little bit, because there was something in the way. And eventually, it disappeared behind a building. And then I looked back, and there was one (star) missing. Now that's a little odd! I'm not absolutely sure that there was one missing, but I think so. But the rest of it, I'm sure of. What is a sighting to me, the only interpretation I can make of it without being an utter crackpot is that some intelligence was doing something to reach my attention. It was deliberate. It's not an ego thing in that it had to be me, but I don't think anyone else was looking at that particular star at that moment, but maybe they were.

WD: And wondering about flying saucers...

Zo: It was responding to my thought. I mean, that's what I saw. I find that very strange. I mean, I never made a religion of it or anything, but that was something that happened to me at that time.

Zo echoed some of Murphy's sentiments: while the shape, color, and movement of the object or light were potentially anomalous, the experience remained privileged in his mind because he was convinced it was reacting or even communicating specifically with him.

Perhaps the most overt claims of witness-object interaction came from Ryder, a 46-year-old Caucasian retiree in California:

Ryder: Okay, the first one was around 1983. It occurred on a hiking trip in the daytime. There was this black object that hovered in the air about two hundred feet above the ground. We saw it all day, including while we were hiking. When we got back from our hike up in Palm Canyon—which is near Borrego Springs, California, about twenty miles west of Salton Sea—the object in question was... well, to look at it, it was jet black. It had no reflection on it whatsoever. This was full daylight. While we were hiking we went up higher than the object was above the ground. It stayed there and hovered all day. And when we got back, one of our friends hadn't gotten back yet, so we had to sit there and wait. We all thought it was a kite. And I was sitting there staring at it, and it started responding to my thoughts. I could think, "Move up," and it would move up. I'd think, "Move down," and it would move down. And I told my friend, "Hey, this thing is responding to my thoughts!" He said, "It's a kite." And I said, "Okay, watch this." So I put the thought in, "Do something a kite can't do." It then moved in a small circle, emitted a lot of brown smoke, and a bunch of flashes. He then said, "Yeah, that's not a kite." Another friend with us had a camera, and I asked him to take a picture of it for me. But he refused, and he wouldn't even look at it. I never understood why, and I never saw him again after that day... About two minutes later, our friend returned and we left.

Taken at face value, Ryder's account is the clearest example of a connection between his thoughts and the actions of an anomalous object, as he explicitly commanded the object to perform specific actions, to which it obliged.

Other accounts focused on the supposed physical impact the light or object left on its immediate environment. In Alexandra's account, the mysterious pile of black dirt she finds after her sighting lends further mystery, and, therefore, *credence* to her overall experience.

Another example is recounted by Mary Jo, a 51-year-old Hispanic artist living in Taos, New Mexico, who believes a UFO ruined her vehicle:

Mary Jo: It was about three years ago, and I was coming from Santa Fe. I had been at a meeting there and it was late evening. I got to the mouth of the canyon coming in towards Taos headed north about 11 o'clock at night. And I was driving a big SUV, it was actually a Hummer. I was coming through there, and I was by myself. I noticed that I hadn't met any cars, and that was just a little observation, I thought that was interesting, you know, I hadn't met any cars and there was no one behind me. I had my music on, and all of a sudden as I was passing the Embudo Station restaurant I just had this overwhelming fear. It was just a strange feeling. It was kind of like a panic attack, an anxiety attack. And I thought, "How strange!" You know, I've always loved to drive alone, I don't mind it at all. I'd driven this a thousand times. And it was no big deal. And all of a sudden the lights inside of my vehicle started to go off and on. They would fade in and fade out, and the Onstar prompt in the vehicle started to sound off too, the female voice started to say "Onstar! Onstar! Onstar!" It was kind of strange. And I thought, "That's so bizarre!" And I felt like it was going to stop at any time, like the electrical system was suddenly going haywire.

The next thing I knew, just to the west over the river where all those little hills are—just behind that Embudo Station restaurant—and headed further north, there was this big beam of light that was just bouncing in and out of the coves of those hills. And I realized that that's what it was. And this huge chill went through me, because I knew that it was a UFO. The light was sort of oblong, kind of like a disk, it looked like just one big beam of light. And it was going in and out, in and out. And then the strange thing was that I just kept driving and thinking, "Oh my gosh, this is so strange and I'm all alone out here! No one else is seeing this." And it followed me, it just kind bounced in and out over the river all the way until just before entering the horseshoe turn. And that's when I met the first vehicle headed south. And it was almost like a breath of fresh air that that happened. And I didn't see it again. And my truck started to drive normally, and by normally I mean the lights were back on and I felt more at ease and everything. And when I got to Ranchos de Taos, which is south of town, my daughter called—my oldest daughter that lives in Black Lake—and she said, "Mom, where in the world [have you been]? We've been worried sick about you! You called me about 11 o'clock before you entered the canyon to tell me where you were, and it's 12:15!" And typically, that drive without traffic is about a half hour from start to finish, which means getting home. And you can just take it and go with ease. But I didn't even realize the time. The strange thing is that when she called me, my phone beeped that I had a message and it was Renee, and so I was calling her back and she was calling me at the same time and nobody had any rings or anything like that, it was like we were just there. I said, "Hello?" And that's when she said, "Oh my gosh Mom, where have you been?" And I said, "The phone didn't even ring, I was just about to call you!" And she said, "I just picked up the phone to call you. I hadn't even dialed yet, and there you were!" You know? So anyway, I thought, "What in the heck? 12:15? I can't believe this!" And the clock in my truck had actually stopped working, and it stopped with this whole electrical thing going on right at about 11 when I started into the mouth of that canyon.

According to Mary Jo, the next day her vehicle failed to start, so she had it towed to a repair shop. The mechanic on duty claimed to have fixed the source of the problem, but two days later she came across further problems:

Mary Jo: Two days later [my] daughter had come into town from Black Lake and wanted to go to Santa Fe, and I said, "Let's take my vehicle and make sure it's operating correctly." I said, "I'm still uneasy about what happened the other night." So, interestingly enough, we were going through the canyon, and I kid you not, right in front of the Embudo Station Restaurant where I had had the experience begin a few nights before, it completely died! Just right there. I had to force it off the road, and everything—the automatic, the steering—just everything completely quit. And that feeling came back, and I said to her, "I cannot believe that this happened in the exact same spot!" And this time it just completely died. Since there's no cell phone service in that canyon we had to walk a few feet to the restaurant and call the same tow company from Taos and have the guy come and get the vehicle—same driver. And he said, "This time, you ought to take the truck to the dealership in Albuquerque." So he did, he took it all the way there, and we had friends pick us up and bring us home. And the mechanics at the Hummer dealership there said, "What in the world happened to your truck?" They said that the electrical system was completely messed up. They had to reprogram absolutely everything. You know? And so I did mention the incident to them, and the guy said, "Oh, I believe that that can happen. I do believe in that sort of thing."

Mary Jo's driving adventure fits neatly into Hynek's second category of close encounters, and the Hummer's mechanical problems appeared to coincide not only with the appearance of a strange light, but also twice at the same location. For her, these associations elevated the experience beyond the coincidental to the anomalous. This interpretation was further reinforced by her apparent period of missing time, a narrative element popularized in many abduction accounts (i.e., Hopkins 1983). As such, a series of core experiential elements collectively allowed for Mary Jo to come to the conclusion that she had had an encounter with a UFO.

Given these considerations, how do these accounts compare to older UFO reports? As discussed earlier, respondents' sightings tended to occur at night in rural locations, and often lasted from several minutes onward. These elements correspond closely to prior studies of UFO reports. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of their responses involved the number of multiple witness sightings. Beyond these comparisons, we may also take this information as well as the descriptions of the objects themselves to construct a tentative list

of potential core experiential elements shared in many of these accounts. Based on these descriptions, here are the common experiential elements typical of modern UFO accounts:

1. Sightings of lights or objects tend to occur at night
2. Sightings usually occur in rural areas
3. Sightings often last over a minute
4. A significant number of sightings involve multiple witnesses
5. The most common anomaly reported in sightings is the lack of noise associated with the object or light
6. The second most common anomaly reported is the movement of the object or light, which may include zigzagging movement, sudden starts and stops, disappearances and subsequent reappearances in different locations, and rapid accelerations or tremendous overall speeds
7. The third most common anomaly reported is the description of lights, particularly those witnessed at night. Such lights are described as appearing in a variety of colors but the most common colors are white, yellow, red, orange, blue, and green. These lights may remain constant, flicker, change color, flash, or rotate. Also, they may appear singularly, in pairs, in groups, or connected together as part of a larger body.
8. The fourth most common anomaly reported is the shape of objects or lights, which are more often associated with daytime sightings. The most common shapes reported are: triangular, saucer-shaped, circular, cylindrical, and cigar-shaped. Aside from these shapes, some of these accounts also describe objects or light formations as being massive in size in comparison to commonly known conventional craft.
9. A minority of sightings also allegedly involve an intelligent response from the objects or lights in question, including responses to witnesses' thoughts or actions, directed physical impacts on the immediate environment, and appearances that coincide with memory gaps in witness accounts that relate to popular alien abduction narratives.

Certainly, these features do not fully encompass all aspects of UFO encounters, nor do those encounters necessarily need to include more than one of these features. Indeed, locating a core “UFO experience” that remains universally shared and separate from cultural influences is a daunting, and likely impossible task. After all, a hallmark of UFO sightings is their inherent diversity. Yet by utilizing an experience-centered approach, we do find common patterns and descriptions in many accounts that highlight both the specific features that witnesses find anomalous (i.e., noiseless, oddly-shaped, oddly-colored) and the realization that in most cases witnesses are actually observing *something* (explanations aside) in the sky above that is likely more than the product of mental processes. This is not to suggest that UFOs represent a “real” physical presence or scientific anomaly, but rather to

expand our academic inquiry by at least *acknowledging* that familiar patterns in witness accounts are indicative of a shared, experience-based folk tradition.

### **UFOs as a Cultural Belief Language**

While acknowledging the primacy of the experience, or memorate, in the sustenance of the UFO tradition, the experiences themselves are necessarily processed and contextualized by individuals according to the existing belief traditions available to them. As with my examination of the experiences themselves, my approach in this section involves a search for patterns in the thoughts, actions, rationale, and performances of my respondents in their attempts to both communicate, contextualize, and ultimately find meaning in their personal experiences. This goal, however, should not be read as an overt attempt to establish some semblance of a UFO *community*, since, as Jodi Dean has pointed out, “[N]ot everyone who has seen a UFO identifies with the larger group” (1998, 18). Furthermore, such an attempt would largely undermine my central argument in the previous chapter: far from existing as marginalized, statistical anomalies, UFO-like sightings transcend demographic barriers and occur frequently throughout the greater American population. Rather, I wish to articulate the *spectrum* of belief language utilized by my respondents, and seek out any potential patterns in their cosmologies.

### **Informed Worldviews: On Spirituality, Science, Paranoia, and Movies**

In the previous chapter, I noted that in my survey individuals claiming no specific religious affiliation reported the highest frequency of anomalous experiences. Such a broad categorization of belief (or disbelief) may potentially house a variety of spiritual outlooks, including those of atheists, agnostics, and individuals claiming either eclectic or highly personalized religious beliefs. The respondents interviewed for this chapter were certainly



not uniform in their religious affiliation, although interesting patterns or tendencies in belief remain evident. Out of the 31 individuals, only 3 identified themselves as being religious without qualifications. Each of these individuals was Catholic. Thirteen individuals provided more ambiguous answers about their spiritual outlooks. Several described their affiliations as “loose” or “soft,” while others described themselves as “uncommitted” or “nondenominational” Christians.<sup>62</sup> A prime example of such self-identification was provided by Josh:

Josh: I would say I'm still a Christian, but I do believe in a lot of the Buddhist teachings, I believe a lot in what the Dalai Lama says and a lot of the tenants that are seen across a lot of different religions. Long story short, I don't like any form of controlling people, so whatever religion entails at this time I'm not really crazy about it.

Although identifying as a Christian, Josh was wary of specific denominational affiliations or commitments, and clearly maintained an interest in Eastern religions and philosophies. Furthermore, he felt that individuals less inclined for “independent” thought likely had a greater need for organized religion.

Similarly, Merlin and Cal, who both described themselves as nonsectarian Christians, also subscribed to a “synthesis” of beliefs:

Merlin: Jeez. I believe there might be a Creator, but I look at it as something way beyond anything the Bible would have you understand. I don't think the Bible was talking about the Creator at all. I think they misinterpret the whole thing. My beliefs are a synthesis of a lot of beliefs. I believe in the karma thing. It was even asked on [an internet forum] what kind of religion [aliens] might have [laughs]. And I said, “They might not even have a religion, who knows? Maybe they understand things so well that it's hard to say.” Like I always said, if there is some collective energy or vast energy that made all things, it's gonna be so vast that we wouldn't have the minds to grasp what it would be.

Cal: My basic information is as a Christian. And I don't fit into any particular denominational role. My views about things don't really line up with any group that I can think of. The best I could say is that my basic orientation is Christian. That's my upbringing, my training. So that's where my interpretations tend to lie. I used to joke that I've fallen down on every church in Albuquerque. None of the things around here really fit me.

Here, both Merlin and Cal conveyed an unease or unwillingness to concretely identify their spiritual affiliations, with Merlin rejecting biblical notions of God in favor of a more ambiguous “collective energy,” and Cal promoting a personalized understanding of Christianity that resists denominational orthodoxy. Indeed, such qualified responses were typical of those claiming loose affiliations.

The remaining 16 individuals described themselves as agnostics, atheists, or simply possessing no religious affiliations. Out of this last group, only three individuals described themselves as atheists. Patterns of belief are thus apparent. Although UFO encounters and ghost sightings are certainly not exclusive to the domain of agnostics and spiritually “flexible” individuals, it is interesting to note that in both the survey and the interviews I conducted, such individuals appear to have these types of experiences with greater frequency.<sup>63</sup>

In Chapter 3, I discussed the relationship between New Age spirituality and the UFO community, and how the idea of the UFO may exist as a “technospiritual” bridge between traditional religious beliefs and the secular, technological innovations of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. While this connection may be partially useful as an explanatory device in examining UFO beliefs among the nonreligious,<sup>64</sup> it is presumptive to suggest that such individuals are simply more inclined to “want” to see UFOs. Although their experiences impacted them in a variety of personal, meaningful ways (to be discussed later in the chapter), few respondents stated that their UFO experiences directly affected their preexisting religious attitudes. Michele, the lone abductee claimant, provided a more nuanced description of how her experiences impacted her spiritual outlook:

Michele: Um, in terms of religion, when I was younger and I still retained my Catholic faith that I was raised with, I think it probably contributed to my doubting of what Catholicism

taught. I don't know, we were taught humans are the only intelligent life. I don't know, my dad had some experiences that he attributed to demonic forces and I always thought that that was assuming too much. All I can say is that it contributed to my doubts about religion, because it seemed to surpass what religious knowledge conveyed...With my experiences, particularly the alien and the skinwalker, I don't really know what happened. I know it happened, and I know what I saw is awkward, but I don't say, "Okay, well this Navajo explanation of it is accurate." But I don't at all deny what happened, either. I don't know what it means. The OBE more than anything, that one makes me more accepting of the idea that there's a lot of things we don't understand about our existence yet, in terms of a spiritual life. I still don't necessarily believe in a spiritual life, though. I'm kind of skeptical.

While traditional folkloric or anthropological approaches to studying religious experiences focus on the cultural framework within which anomalous experiences are understood, Michele's response speaks to the potential power of the anomalous experience to impact or alter prior spiritual cosmologies. Furthermore, although it is important to avoid overgeneralizations regarding the spiritual makeup of UFO witnesses, the majority of respondents here expressed either ambiguity or outright disdain for traditional religious dogma. And while their interpretations of their experiences may be directly informed by their prior cosmological viewpoints, we must not make the mistake of reducing the *experiences themselves* to the products of spiritual relativism or eclecticism. Having said this, a discussion of respondent attitudes about religion necessitates a corollary discussion regarding their attitudes about science. If the idea of the UFO as a technospiritual bridge is to retain analytical merit, we should also expect to uncover similar ambiguous, noncommittal attitudes among respondents concerning scientific inquiry as an epistemological model.

Overall, when asked general questions about science as a practice, as well as skeptical approaches to understanding UFO and ghost sightings, most respondents provided vaguely favorable opinions. However, many were wary of being "too rational" or "too skeptical," arguing that such perspectives may limit our collective understanding of the world around us. In this vein, Merlin provided an exemplary response, in which he first praised the scientific

model for its dynamic approach to knowledge production, then cautioned against an overly skeptical approach of inquiry:

Merlin: I think science is very important. I think we have to use that to gauge our way as we learn things. But I don't think there are always absolutes, no. Science has proven that it's not always absolute. They'll think that something is the way it is, and find out later that maybe they need to readjust things. Physics is the same way, you know? When they talk about quantum physics, they'll think one thing and then they learn that this isn't right. So they're always revising things. I always agree that going about things scientifically is the best way to go.

WD: How do you feel about skepticism?

Merlin: I think it's important to be skeptical, but you don't want to be overly skeptical. I think there's a lot of people with the UFO phenomenon, the psychic phenomena, cryptozoology, that are overly skeptical. For the average Joe to be overly skeptical, that's not that important. For the scientists to be overly skeptical, I think that hurts the phenomenon because they could be the people that could be out there proving one way or the other rather than giving a cynical opinion about it. I think that's what keeps a lot of serious scientists out of those phenomena.

On one hand, Merlin espoused the revisions and readjustments integral to scientific inquiry as proof of its epistemological superiority. Yet he also conveyed a dualist idea of skepticism: a critical mode of inquiry lacking among laypersons, contrasted with a cynical dogmatism among many scientists.

Similarly, Aram, who viewed himself as a skeptical person wary of paranormal claims, acknowledged the need for skepticism while concurrently expressing his distaste for its propensity to disprove claims rather than assist in scientific discovery:

Aram: But I always hesitate to affiliate myself with the skeptical movement, because I feel like personally I'm more interested in pure science than in skepticism. I would much rather study the big bang and evolution than why people don't believe in those things, and why they're wrong. I think that the real science, the positive aspect, is much more intriguing to me than the negative aspect. Unfortunately, I think you have to know that side too, though.

Aram's understanding of skepticism carried an explicitly negative connotation, despite his own critical attitudes concerning the UFO phenomenon.

Such perspectives specifically frame skepticism not as a basic analytical approach inherent in all proper scientific inquiry, but rather as a specific subset of such inquiry rooted in smug cynicism and dogmatic disbelief. Thus, for many respondents, this idea of skepticism was viewed in a very negative light. Zo, for instance, fashioned skepticism as a related binary to the extremism of individuals heavily invested in the UFO phenomenon:

Zo: I know all about the will to believe, and so do these people. They're unaware of the fact—the extremists like this guy and some others—that it's the opposite side of the same coin. They have just as strong a will not to believe, and they can rationalize just as well. They call themselves skeptics, but they're not. A skeptic is perfect; that's what everybody should be. But they're just as far one way as the believers are the other way. And there's nothing that will ever convince them otherwise. In other words, they have an answer. If there is no better answer, then you're crazy. Usually they come up with something that doesn't fit anyhow...That's the trouble. That's why the extreme debunkers can wither all this stuff. It's not scientific in the sense that it cannot be reproduced on demand under the same conditions.

Thus, according to Zo, “true skepticism” has been overtaken in American culture by a popular movement of debunkery and occasional defamation.

Other respondents, while again both acknowledging the viability of skepticism and limiting its definition to doubt and cynicism, nevertheless resigned themselves to the idea that without personal experiences of their own, individuals skeptical of UFO and paranormal claims can never fully understand them. Cal specifically harbored this viewpoint, while Ramon further distinguished systems of belief from what he knew to be true through experience:

Cal: I think that's probably okay. If someone hasn't had experiences like this, then bless them! What can I say? If they haven't been pounced on, if they haven't seen beings of light...I've had lots of people around me that when I've told them about these things, they are not skeptical that I experience things like this, but their skepticism is rooted in the fact that these kinds of thing have not been in their lives. And sometimes, they'll say “Well, I envy you, but I haven't had anything like this happen to me.” So it seems like most people that are skeptical are not hostilely skeptical, they're only skeptical in the sense that they just haven't had these experiences themselves. People I get close to and tell spiritual things like this, there's usually not any direct hostility to it. And they're not incredulous; they don't necessarily think I'm crazy. They just simply say, “Well, this is outside my realm of experience.” I don't really meet people that just pooh-pooh it, usually. Of course, usually I don't open up to people that are like that anyway, so...

Ramon: The skepticism is good. I don't have a problem with that at all. When I lecture, I get people who say, "I don't believe in this." I go, "Well, that's fine. But I don't believe in them, either." And they look at me, like, "What? You don't believe in ghosts?" I say, "No, I don't believe in them. I *know* they exist." So, it's not a belief system with me, or a question of faith. It's just a question of what is and what isn't. And for me, I know they exist. For me to say they don't exist would mean for me to say that my ancestors who appear to me or guide me or whatever don't exist. I'm not going to deny their existence! That would be silly of me to do that, and disrespectful. I know they do, and I've had so many opportunities to know that they do, you know? So, that's the answer to that.

In his response, Cal clearly privileged the role of personal experience in the broader formulation of one's everyday reality, while framing the skeptic as a person who simply lacked the experience necessary to broaden his own such understanding. Ramon, on the other hand, suggested that personal experience *transcends* belief and allows for a greater, objective *knowing*.

As with religion, respondents' attitudes toward science and skepticism remained complex. Like UFO investigators and New Age proponents, most of the respondents expressed generally favorable attitudes toward science as a practice, and either identified themselves as skeptical or reiterated its importance as an analytical tool. While some believed their personal experiences could at least eventually be explained in scientific terms, other felt their experiences were ultimately unexplainable in scientific language. Nearly all also felt that skepticism often exhibited an arrogant, limited approach to understanding the greater world. *Personal experiences thus act as a fulcrum in their concurrent desire for scientific validation and their need to criticize the perceived limitations of the scientific inquiry.* As Jodi Dean has argued, this perspective allows for individuals to "employ the tools of reason to produce what mainstream science considers nonreason" (1998, 57). Furthermore, as will be discussed below, many respondents employed a loose skeptical

affiliation in order to distance themselves from the claims they were making while simultaneously reinforcing them.

Alongside struggles to negotiate spiritual and scientific realms (or abolishing such distinctions), some respondents also provided interesting insights into government conspiracies, particularly their thoughts on potential “cover-ups” of information on UFOs. Most respondents avoided making specific claims, choosing instead to focus on their own personal experiences. Several, however, offered up unsolicited opinions on government culpability in the present UFO controversy. Daniel felt that a variety of federal agencies and organizations were suppressing information from the American public:

Daniel: Well, I know we're not alone. We can't possibly be alone, with all the planets out there. And I'm sure they're lying to us about what's on Mars. And I doubt that we went to the moon. It's funny how we went way back when and now we can't do it again when their computer was as powerful as a calculator...And then there's the shiny object on Mars, that looks like a building. And it was clearly not natural, but in the news they were interviewing this so-called expert who discounts it as a rock. And I know they altered the colors of the Mars photos.

WD: So you think the US government is withholding information from the public?

Daniel: Oh yeah.

WD: Why do you think they would do that?

Daniel: For security reasons. I really don't know, because if they have these advanced weapons you'd think they would use them in these wars to get it over with.

Daniel: Just all these government experiments. They could be emanating some frequencies that could be changing our thoughts or something like that.

WD: Government organizations?

Daniel: Yeah. I like driving around, and in the middle of the desert you see these radio towers. Why? I mean you could tell if they were translator stations for television, that's pretty obvious. But not just regular towers. They're not cell phone towers, because they're in the middle of nowhere. And then they're talking about that Taos Hum. I was watching this talk show where this guy mentioned that the government was doing an experiment in Alaska, something to penetrate the ionosphere, or send communications all around the earth with it. I forget the name of it. Anyways, I heard they were doing the same thing in Taos and that was causing the hum.

Anything in the news is filtered or suppressed. When I was looking in the news about 9/11 and the tower, and there's all these interesting things on YouTube about it—there's one cool one where after it collapsed, there was some guy saying that that the beams started melting.

Here, Daniel exhibited a pattern of thought discussed in Chapter 2, in which multiple conspiracies connect together in a way that suggests the totality of his daily reality may itself amount to a conspiracy. Specifically, his focus seems to rest on a technological gap between government programs and what is currently accessible by the American public. For Daniel, the fact that the moon landing, achieved with the relatively “simple” technology of the 1960s, has not yet been duplicated by 21<sup>st</sup> century technology is not necessarily indicative of a moon landing hoax. Rather, he sees this as evidence of NASA's suppression of information concerning humankind's proposed manned mission to Mars. Perhaps due to his interest in technology as a web designer, Daniel does not share the idea of a limited technological capacity hidden by the U.S. government that is typically promoted by proponents of a moon landing hoax. Instead, he envisions an advanced, secret technological realm in which advanced weapons are built to ward off aliens, mysterious towers in the New Mexico desert are used to control human thoughts, and information technology is used by a complicit media to carefully filter information to the American public. In this context, Daniel's reality itself amounts to a conspiracy.

Daniel's overarching web of conspiracy was not actively promoted by other respondents, who often chose to differentiate their conspiratorial beliefs from “out there” paranoia. For instance, Jonathan discussed his rationale for why he thought a weather balloon didn't crash in Roswell, while carefully distancing his beliefs from “wacky theories”:

Jonathan: There's actually a film about Roswell that you've probably seen that interviews some old timers. And one guy was on the base, and his girlfriend disappeared off the face of the earth, and they warned him that if he said anything about such and such that they would find his bones drying in the desert. We knew that guy! But, yeah, totally. I believe in the



Roswell episode because why would they threaten these people for no reason? If they said it was a weather balloon, which is absurd? I think the government, the Soviets, and governments all over the world have suppressed tons of information. I mean, there's so much evidence! Staggering evidence now.

WD: Why do you think they would do that?

Jonathan: They don't think we're ready for it, possibly. They think that there might be hysteria. Um, maybe they're in some kind of nefarious plot with Reptilians and all that stuff. Maybe there's some kind of dialogue with them being suppressed, some kind of deal going on. There's all sorts of wacky theories. But I know that something at least is being suppressed. It's pretty damn convincing. Look at the foo fighter sightings from these conservative Air Force types...not the druggy hippie types that long for UFOs, but practical people as well.

For Jonathan, the primary rationale for a global UFO cover-up was rooted in the containment of public hysteria. He immediately tempered this thought in a joking manner by bringing up "Reptilians" and wacky theories, yet concluded by citing reports from presumably practical (not wacky) Air Force pilots as evidence that his core claim is reasonable.<sup>65</sup> Jonathan, although also engaged in conspiracy thinking, remained more self-aware than Daniel in discussing the subject, and quickly worked to anticipate any potential ridicule of his claims by immediately contrasting them with those espoused by "druggy hippie types."

Perhaps Daniel and Jonathan's personal sightings of strange celestial objects played an important role in their formulation of government UFO conspiracies, although neither explicitly stated as such. Indeed, it is just as presumptive to speculate that their potentially preexisting beliefs about government suppression of UFO sightings played a primary role in their interpretations of their sightings as anomalous events. The only individuals that directly cited their own personal experiences as evidence of government suppression of UFOs were Bert and Gordon, two retired air traffic controllers in Albuquerque.<sup>66</sup> Both men were involved in several events in the 1970s in which they communicated with pilots who were chased by unknown craft. After he implied that he felt some government organization had to

be aware of such incidents, I asked Bert if he felt the federal government was capable of withholding such information from the public. He replied:

Bert: Yes. My feeling about that is that especially after working for them, that they feel they have to protect everybody from everything their way. But I would not be surprised...let's just say there was something that they were aware of. I don't think they'd want you to know. Too many social ramifications.

Bert's response echoed Jonathan's in that he believed public hysteria to be the primary rationale for Air Force silence on the subject. Gordon also felt that, partly based on his experiences, the Air Force was not fully forthcoming with information on UFOs. However, he also added his belief that modern information technology made the continuation of such policies near impossible:

Gordon: I think that that was almost a past tense thing. You know, with the media attention now and worldwide media blitzes that go on, I think it would be awfully hard to do now. In other words, like the Roswell incident? If that truly is a cover-up, I don't think it could happen in this day and age. That's just my own personal conviction.

Whereas Daniel viewed technological advances as devices for suppression and control, Gordon viewed them as tools for an increasing, democratic transparency in global politics. Both men at least partially witness the greater world through a conspiratorial lens, yet differing beliefs about the extent, capabilities, and practicality of conspiracy networks allow for competing models of cultural paranoia.

In other words, conspiracy thinking among UFO witnesses must not be described in universalist terms. Daniel provided a complex "conspiracy of conspiracies." Jonathan provided a practical conspiracy. Gordon and Bert provided experiential conspiracies. Zo, by far the most well-versed respondent in UFO literature and its associated conspiracy claims, provided one final model of conspiracy that speaks not to a hidden, malevolent order, but to a competing image of bureaucratic confusion and incompetence:

Zo: They keep trying to get the government to tell all they know, and I'm very conservative on that. I'm sure the government will deceive us in any way they can, and I'm not a lover of governmental power, but I don't think they know any important information, or know anything more than we do. And I don't think any president is ever going to get up and say, "Okay, this is the time for disclosure. We have to admit that for at least fifty years we've been occasionally chasing objects, and we have no idea what they are. And we've never captured one or shot one down, but we've had this trouble with them entering our airspace when we don't want them there. And we can't keep them out when they choose to be there, but we're working on it, and we'll let you know if we ever find out." Do you ever see a president standing up and saying anything like that? I don't think so.

See, I don't believe in Roswell. I think it's the biggest crock of shit I've ever heard of. And I'm not an expert, but I've followed Roswell very carefully, and I've spoken there at the museum. I was not invited back. Julie Schuster of the museum hates me, but that's another story. Anyway, I think that's just about all that they know. If they had more serious knowledge, that would be another reason not to tell us. But it's bad enough that they have to be embarrassed. Do you understand all these billions of taxpayer dollars that we spend, one of the main purposes is for the military, especially the Air Force, to keep our skies safe from invaders. They don't have to be from another planet! They can be from another country or domain. The thing is, if they have all that equipment and all that money and expertise, and they cannot guarantee to keep this from happening, that makes them look inept. Doesn't it? I don't think they want to be thought of as inept. . . If the government wasn't inept, in my opinion, we wouldn't be in Iraq. They chose which intelligence they wanted to believe, and they made, I think, the biggest mistake in modern history. So they do make mistakes that are far more important than not being available to identify flying saucers.

Zo presented a frightening counter-conspiracy of sorts to that of Daniel. While both made allusions to the advanced technology (and particularly *weaponry*) capable of being produced by the military-industrial complex, Zo rejected Daniel's web of secretive, malevolent order in favor of an image of overfunded, quivering ineptitude. For Zo, this was an even more disturbing conspiratorial framework: those "in the know" actually know little more than the average citizen, and spend an inordinate amount of time and money attempting to cover that reality up.

The conspiracy thinking exhibited by my respondents all have common sources rooted in the cultural and historical factors earlier referenced by Dean and Knight, namely Cold War politics and the "mainstreaming" of cultural paranoia through television, film, and later, the internet. As such, well-known conspiracies such as the Roswell incident are as

fully embedded in their cultural belief language as religious, spiritual, and scientific models of reality.

Of course, contemporary cultural belief languages are largely constructed out of popular culture artifacts, and, as discussed in Chapter 3, various films, television shows, books, and internet sites have played a significant role in shaping easily accessible cultural templates for understanding aliens and UFOs. Given the now ubiquitous presence of grays, saucers, and other UFO imagery in the public realm, we may assume with some measure of confidence that all respondents draw from these readily available templates in contextualizing their experiences-regardless of their individual interpretations. Yet it remains important to determine which mediums and which specific media outlets most respondents draw from. Do most people who believe they have seen UFOs read books about UFOs? Are specific films or television programs mentioned with more frequency than others? How often is their information gleaned from the internet? Also, and perhaps most importantly: do witnesses tend to immerse themselves in UFO-related media in order to make sense of their experiences, or does prior exposure to *E.T.: The Extra-terrestrial* or “UFO Hunters” primarily shape interpretations of later encounters?

Unsurprisingly, these answers cannot be adequately addressed by engaging in either-or arguments. Regardless of the extent of witnesses’ prior exposure to UFO media, no UFO sighting in the modern American world can exist in a cultural vacuum that excludes the UFO phenomenon as a cultural model, or, in Ellis’s words, a body of lore. However, we can call into question various generalizing claims about media exposure by examining witnesses’ responses to these inquiries. Firstly, out of the 31 total individuals interviewed (including those who had experiences more ambiguous than traditional UFO sightings), 14 stated that

they had read a book (or books) on UFOs at some point in their lives. Some of these respondents, including Bradley and Corman, contextualized their exposure to such literature as the product of simple childhood curiosity:

Bradley: Yeah, I was interested in the subject when I was a kid, when I was younger. So I read a lot of UFO magazines and UFO books.

Corman: When I was a kid I was pretty into it...seven or eight. And then I kind of dropped the whole alien notion after I started reading military history and when they were testing jets before there were jets, and the secrecy surrounding that kind of stuff. I pretty much dropped the whole alien pretense and realized the government does test top secret aircraft. And it's more than likely that's the case.

Perhaps not without coincidence, neither Bradley nor Corman interpreted his experience as being UFO-related. Taking on more skeptical attitudes, both subtly framed concerted interest in the subject as a more juvenile endeavor. In their attitudes, we find the corollary of the tactic of avowing prior skepticism—discussed later in the chapter—among proponents of UFOs and the paranormal: an avowal of prior gullibility.

Other respondents, including Murphy, Merlin, Aram, and Zo,<sup>67</sup> revealed that they had read numerous books on the subject. None, however, overtly claimed that their familiarity with the literature provided them with a more enlightened perspective:

Murphy: Yeah, I've read books on the subject of UFOs. I've looked at skeptical analyses of what UFOs could be. I've looked at folklorists' views of UFOs. I've read the whole Roswell story.

Merlin: Yeah, I've read hundreds of books...Donald Keyhoe's books, [J] Allen Hynek's books that I've read. Also a number of other authors that don't come to mind that I've read. I've got a library. Everything I've ever read I pretty much have a copy of.

Aram: Let's see. I really enjoyed Ruppelt's book. I just thought that was great. I really like the tone of his book. He was a very professional, scientific person that was not afraid to dismiss things that deserved to be dismissed, and yet also you can tell he wanted to be open to these possibilities. And he never seems to dismiss a detail for the sake of being able to close a case. I really liked that, that's probably my favorite skeptically-leaning stuff. Kevin Randle is also kind of a guilty pleasure, with his Roswell stuff. I really continue to enjoy his books. He seems to do a good job within the framework of belief he's working in. I think he's true to his own ideas. Karl Pflock's Roswell book is probably my favorite skeptical UFO read. I also really liked *Watch the Skies!* Have you read that one?

Zo: Let's see. My favorite author on the subject is J. Allen Hynek. He was a scientist that was initially skeptical of UFOs, but gradually came to believe that there was something more to them. I've read very few UFO books. I'll just tell you some of the other writers that I think well of. I haven't read Vallee's books, but I'm very impressed by his point of view. Keyhoe impresses me less, because I knew Keyhoe and he was very opinionated and peculiar, and I guess I'm influenced by the fact that he hated me! Another long story. But he had some ideas that were good. Jerry Clark put in a monumental effort with his encyclopedias. I don't own them anymore, but I did have them all at one time. They're a monumental work. It's a wonderful thing that he did. He and I don't get along, either, but he certainly made a tireless contribution to the field that no one else will ever duplicate. Major Keyhoe, I thought he was obsessed with the Air Force thing, and I didn't get along with him too well. You'll find that there's quite a few people I haven't gotten along with. I wasn't terribly impressed with him, but as far as getting the public interested in this kind of thing, he certainly did a good job. The contactees, I don't believe. It can be more complicated than them just making it up, but basically it's nonsense.

Although none of these particular respondents touted or boasted about their familiarity with UFO literature, it is interesting to note that these four men are among those respondents that harbored the most ambiguous attitudes about the subject. While Murphy and Merlin remained fairly sympathetic to the extraterrestrial hypothesis, they were also more open to a wide variety of explanations for UFO sightings. Aram and Zo, on the other hand, were a bit more skeptical in their attitudes. Aram, while generally doubtful of exotic explanations for UFO sightings, retained a hopeful, "guilty pleasure" in reading books either sympathetic to the subject or open to various explanations. Zo, while firm in his belief that a genuine scientific mystery likely existed at the heart of the UFO phenomenon, overwhelmingly rejected (and often mocks) the majority of claims promoted by UFO sympathizers. All of these individuals shared an unwillingness to affiliate themselves with the traditional binary groups of "believers" and "debunkers."

Other respondents listed one or two books as their primary literary sources. Jonathan read Whitley Strieber's *Communion* and *Transformation*. Mary Jo read books by Stanton Friedman. Michele read both *Communion* and von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* Others simply had a hard time remembering specific books and authors. Beyond literature,

respondents overwhelmingly discussed television programs over films as sources of information on UFOs and aliens. Various History Channel specials, “UFO Hunters,” “The X-Files,” “Sightings,” and “Unsolved Mysteries” were specifically cited as influential UFO media in their lives.

For example, Jef revealed how his exposure to the History Channel affected his thoughts on the Roswell incident:

Jef: When I was coming up, my parents would watch “The X-Files” and I’d sit in and watch, and then some of the History Channel’s specials. You know, I’ve always been fascinated by Roswell and stuff like that, more for the historical background. I know what the country was going through at the time. Things just don’t add up, and the conspiracy theories that tie into that. And we really haven’t had anything like that in years, and that was either the government being very young in their secret plane tests, or somebody just got it completely wrong...And there’s too many other side stories, and that’s just what got me fascinated, I mean, just looking at all the History Channel specials...a fair amount of what they say is pretty credible. So, if they’re putting this on the air, it’s gotta have some historical relevance. On the flipside, though, if there was anything the government really didn’t want out there, it wouldn’t be allowed to go to air. So, I don’t know. It’s interesting to me, the “what if?” factor.

Jef’s comment, “So if they’re putting this on the air, it’s gotta have some historical relevance” is particularly insightful for two reasons. First, it reveals the continual ability of the medium of television to authenticate such subject matter, particularly through the pseudo-documentary style of various cable programming. In Jef’s mind, the sheer amount of UFO programming on the History Channel speaks not to mere ratings considerations, but rather as evidence that the UFO phenomenon is a credible, important historical subject. Secondly, this may also partially explain why so many respondents turn to television rather than film for information on aliens and UFOs. Aside from “The X-Files,” every show cited by respondents utilizes the aforementioned pseudo-documentary style whilst discouraging skeptical or “debunking” viewpoints. While films and television shows about extraterrestrials and spaceships such as *District 9* (dir. Neill Blomkamp, 2009) and ABC’s

recent remake of the 1980s miniseries “V” remain popular among American audiences, their fictional, metaphoric narratives do not carry the legitimizing authority of the History Channel and its brethren.

In fact, in several cases, respondents particularly sought out television programs on UFOs to *compare them to their own experiences*, such as with Mary Jo and Linda, a 77 year old Caucasian homemaker in Albuquerque:

Mary Jo: I find myself when there’s anything on the Discovery Channel or the science channels, I’m always intrigued. I always watch it. Cause I want to hear other people’s stories and their experiences. You know?

Linda: And none of the TV shows have had the kind of sighting I had. It was an *intense* light.

Mary Jo’s response further cements the idea that such programming is often viewed as a medium through which individuals can legitimize their own life experiences, an act much more difficult to achieve through fictional, cinematic narratives.

Yet for others, including Sylvia, UFO specials are potentially corrupting devices that may distort or diminish the “special” status of their personal experiences:

Sylvia: I’ve seen a couple documentaries on PBS, but my experiences are my experiences, I’m not going to put something else into my mind to add to what I have experienced.

Sylvia’s opinion on such programming, although intriguing, was not shared by most of her fellow respondents. For Mary Jo and many others television was an excellent venue in which to compare and validate their own experiences.

Naturally, the internet presents a likely superior venue in which to do so, and yet only two respondents, Merlin and Ryder, stated they searched for experiences similar to their own through internet websites. This is also particularly puzzling given the vast amount of information on UFOs available online.<sup>68</sup> Perhaps this is simply due to timing and the



diversity of ages among respondents: in several years time, most individuals with ready access will increasingly rely on the internet (or devices with online capabilities) for the majority of their information. Thus, we might gradually expect less reliance on or interest in traditional television programming on UFOs. The possibility also exists, however, that television retains a cultural authority that the online realm, with its relative diversity of perspectives, currently acts to disrupt. Whatever the causes, most respondents chose television as the means for experiential validation.

All the above factors, including preconceptions about religion, spirituality, science, and conspiracies, as well as popular culture influences, play an important part in how witnesses select a belief language in which to situate their personal experiences. Many respondents came to the conclusion that their experiences were caused by anomalous factors, be it in the form of the paranormal or extraterrestrial contact. An analysis of these interpretations yields several revealing clues into how people come to associate events in their lives with otherworldly forces. Murphy, who witnessed a strange light that appeared to follow him and friend in rural Pennsylvania, described his process of discounting natural and conventional explanations for his sighting, even as he remained reluctant to characterize the light as a UFO:

Murphy: The only conclusion we could really come up with...the first time we encountered it, it was just like hovering there. And the second time we encountered it, it just looked like it was...judging by the orange light that was underneath the object, it just looked like it was the same thing that was just going away from us for whatever reason. And it moved in such a weird way. I mean, I've seen meteor showers before and I've seen airplanes. I mean, I live near Pittsburgh and there's an airport near there, and we see planes all the time. So, you know, it's not really a case of mistaken identity. You can't mistake a plane for something like that. Meteor showers are a once in a lifetime event sometimes, but they're not easy to mistake for other things...some people may, though. This just didn't seem right. It just didn't move like it should have if it was a meteor... Well, the only thing I can think of is...I can't think of a rational explanation for it. I mean, I'm a philosophy major. And I have to think logically about these things. And I can't just outright say that it was visitors from space. I can't say it, because I have no proof. And I can't say it's not an experiment from our government either. Maybe it's a craft that was being experimented with at the time, it could be anything. The

only thing I can really come to a conclusion about is that there's a lot that I don't know about in this world. When I think about it, it made me feel really small. Really, really small... The only thing I can really think of at this time is just that what I experienced, I still don't know what to make of it. I don't have a way of quantifying what happened. It was the most surreal experience that ever happened to me in my entire life. It wasn't a good experience or a bad experience, or some meaning. It just happened. The only thing I can think of is that I'll just have to think about how it fits into my life and what I've learned from it. I definitely am more open now to things outside of our realm of understanding currently. I mean, who knows? If humanity ever gets past its own barriers and its own self-destructive nature, maybe one of these days these things will be common knowledge, and we'll progress from there.

While he was confident in dismissing the object as being a meteor or plane, Murphy also conceded that he possessed no empirical evidence supporting contact with an extraterrestrial spacecraft. However, the unclassifiable nature of his sighting still allowed for him to contextualize the experience as mysterious or anomalous, which ultimately provided him with the license to imagine a possible reality beyond conventional understandings.

Additionally, his personal experience allowed for Murphy to negotiate a “middle ground” between his self-identification as a skeptic and his belief in real world mysteries:

Murphy: I would definitely describe myself as skeptical, if at least somewhat open. I'm the type of person that thinks most things that happen that people attribute to something “out of this world” probably have logical explanations. But I also believe that there are a few legitimate cases where something really definite is going on here. And I think my case is one of those.

Murphy's response is telling. He implied both a desire to project virtues such as logic and rationalism while simultaneously arguing for underlying limitations in present scientific understandings of the world around us.

Other respondents echoed this sentiment. Josh, reflecting on his experience of sleep paralysis, provided a similar outlook:

Josh: Personally, I feel that the human brain and the body have a very complex connection, and I think that you could be at different states of consciousness and I picture on one hand this absolute heightened awareness where you're on top of the world, whatever you're doing. Maybe there's something in between states where there's multiple levels of consciousness, and I think that I somehow got into one of those, in between sleep. And maybe I drifted deeper, and maybe there's a certain form of those brainwaves or a form of sleep where maybe

I didn't get to where I should have been, where my body is in one state and my brain is in another, or something like that. I don't know. That's kind of where I lean with it.

WD: Do you believe in other unseen realities?

Josh: Physical stuff around us that we can't see? Oh, yeah, 100%. My feeling is that's what a gamma ray is or that's what atoms and molecules and gas particles that we can't see. So I'm very comfortable with stuff going on around us that we can't sense or feel.

Josh felt his experience was mysterious and not readily explainable as mere "sleep paralysis," yet he also argued that it would *eventually* be describable in scientific terms.

Troy, as with Murphy, presented a "neutral" interpretation of his experience:

Troy: I believe we saw a UFO in the literal definition of the word. An unidentified flying object. Whether this object was an alien spaceship or a natural phenomenon, I can't say. I'm convinced it wasn't man made, though, seeing as back in the early nineties Finland's military equipment was pretty much entirely of Soviet origin and we didn't have anything remotely capable of what we saw.

Troy, as with several other respondents, reappropriated the term UFO to convey a more literal definition, yet he also discounted a conventional explanation based on his knowledge of Finland's military aircraft. Like others, he appeared superficially content to explain his sighting in terms of what it *couldn't* be. Again, like Murphy, his sighting allowed for him to comment on the limitations of modern science:

Troy: I've always been fascinated by the paranormal and the supernatural. Like I said earlier, I was brought up as a Jehovah's Witness and part of their dogma is that Satan and his demons—corrupted angels, really—are real and sometimes can manifest themselves in ways we can detect. In other words, I was brought up to believe ghosts and demons and such were real. I outgrew this thinking in my early teens, but the fascination remained. I've read numerous books—both fiction and factual—I enjoy watching related TV shows and movies...I don't know if I actually believe in aliens, ghosts and such, but I do think there's a hell of a lot in this universe that we can't explain scientifically yet.

This perspective allows respondents like Troy and Murphy the ability to criticize scientific assumptions about the world without necessarily advocating belief in UFOs or the paranormal.

For many other respondents, however, taking such interpretive leaps was not an issue.

While Jonathan also ruled out shooting stars and conventional aircraft, he felt that an extraterrestrial visitation made logical sense:

Jonathan: Well, as I stated before, it wasn't a weather balloon nor any aircraft that I can think of. It wasn't a shooting star, because they don't zigzag either. My interpretation is that it was something we don't know about. Possibly extraterrestrial. On the other hand, maybe extraterrestrials have been here for thousands of years and live here, so maybe it wasn't extraterrestrial, but terrestrial! (laughs) But to see something zigzag at lightning speeds was amazing. I can't think of anything that fast...helicopters? No way.

Jonathan's interpretation of his experience makes more sense given his prior interest in both UFOs and a variety of paranormal subjects. He also equated having an "open mind" with being receptive to paranormal phenomena; additionally he made a connection between extraterrestrial visitation of Earth with the likelihood of life elsewhere in the universe:

Jonathan: I find the subject fascinating. My father was into, as I am, Jung. Carl Jung and his ideas on UFOs...I always keep an open mind, and try to keep an open mind about so-called paranormal stuff. Some consider it normal, not paranormal. I certainly have no disbelief in them as a result. I think as I stated before, I think it's arrogant of us to assume we're the only entities in the universe for crying out loud. What an ego trip. There appears to be a lot of planets out there, and where there's water there's life, they say. And we've now found water on Mars! So my sighting didn't necessarily solidify my belief in them, but it certainly didn't hurt.

Whereas skeptical scientists often share Jonathan's idea of a populated universe, many invariably list specific reasons why contact with other intelligent beings would be near impossible, including presumed limitations in interstellar travel and communication.<sup>69</sup>

For UFO witnesses who subscribe to the extraterrestrial hypothesis, however, such proposed limitations are either ignored or dismissed. Indeed, Jonathan's idea of human "arrogance" in dismissing alien visitors was shared by several other respondents:

Jann: I know they exist, but it's not something I like to share. People have their prejudices about that, you know? But I think they're out there. And we do live in New Mexico, where it's open land. We're smart enough to know that we're not the only creatures out there, the only beings out there. So that's what I think about that.

Sylvia: There is intelligence out there, there is higher intelligence, definitely. I really feel that we as human beings on this earth are so damn stupid, excuse my language. If they have this kind of intelligence, they know how stupid we are. They do, they see our warmongering. Why would they want to be involved in something like that?

It is easy to interpret such statements as quasi-religious appeals to an authority beyond warmongering, “primitive” humans. The alien visitors in this context are passive, if visible spectators of secular human folly, whose mere presence serves as a promise of greater meaning beyond terrestrial politics. While we must be careful to not reduce UFO encounters to modern, repackaged religious experiences, it is difficult to ignore the fact that, as I noted in Chapter 4, UFO witnesses are statistically much more likely than non-UFO witnesses to report having other anomalous experiences that include ghost sightings and psychic experiences. Out of the respondents interviewed for this chapter, 14 (45%) individuals talked at length about other paranormal experiences, while at least five others alluded to such experiences without going into greater detail. Malla, for instance, reported having numerous premonitions throughout her life, including before the Kennedy assassination. Mary Jo witnessed a ghostly apparition outside her home. Sylvia felt that she was visited by her dead grandmother. Daniel believed his house was haunted by a former tenant. Merlin reported several astral-projections in his childhood. Michele had a childhood OBE, and later had a skinwalker encounter in the New Mexico desert.<sup>70</sup> Ryder thought he had been visited by a World War II Navy captain whose submarine had been sunk by the Germans. He also claimed that he discovered a way to travel through time, and that his discovery was the inspiration for the early 90s television show “Quantum Leap.”

As previously discussed, the categories or belief languages commonly used to differentiate anomalous experiences (i.e., UFO phenomenon, paranormal) belie a more fluid,

overlapping spectrum of experience. Thus, we may expect UFO witnesses to have other anomalous experiences. Or, perhaps individuals having one type of anomalous experience become more receptive or open to other potentially strange encounters. As an example, the alien abductees Jodi Dean discusses in *Aliens in America* began to reinterpret the everyday or mundane events in their lives as *uncanny* after becoming convinced of the physical reality of their abduction memories. Ordinary, annoying events such as tape recorders getting jammed, motion sensors malfunctioning, and even unannounced telephone calls, all take on a darker, more sinister tone once they are refashioned into a cosmology that allows for extraterrestrial intruders (1998, 113-114). This cosmology, may, in part, come into being as a coping mechanism, or a method of dealing with increased psychological stress (dependent or independent of their anomalous experiences) that potentially makes individuals “highly susceptible to new concepts and philosophies,” a process familiar in studies of traditional religious conversions (Ellis 2003, 151-152). With the mundane transformed into the uncanny, meaning is inscribed upon any potentially unusual event. *In other words, the belief language of individuals that allows for the presence of aliens and ghosts necessitates a fundamental transformation of their everyday realities.* When Mary Jo convinced herself that her house was haunted, the misplacement of items in her house suddenly took on a more ominous tone:

Mary Jo: Things like that, maybe jewelry being moved, you know you put your ring somewhere and the next day it's in a completely different place where you would never put it? Things like that. I think I'm sensitive to that kind of thing and it doesn't really bother me. But you know that it exists.

Mary Jo's understanding of certain everyday occurrences is thus transformed: rather than human forgetfulness, missing rings are caused by mischievous spirits. The likely presence of

such beings in her house allowed for both a reassessment of past events and a new interpretive framework for present and future occurrences.

For many respondents, this perception of reality represents a shift in their thinking partially borne out of one or several anomalous experiences. Yet for respondents like Ramon, their preexistent cultural identity already allowed for an alternative framework for understanding the world. Ramon, who has held a lifelong interest in ghost accounts (and has created a successful writing career out of this interest), identified primarily as Mescalero Apache (but also Otomi, Spanish, German, and Basque) and felt his indigenous organization of the world established no arbitrary distinctions between “natural” and “supernatural” realms:

Ramon: I see my life as a river, and I see all the different spiritual aspects as tributaries that feed into that river. And how do I frame it? I frame it as just being a part of human existence that I'm more attuned to than the general population. And I'm aware of that. I don't think that I'm any different than anyone else in terms of physicality or mental capacities. But I have had the opportunity as a child to be born into this, and be given that direction or teaching on how to follow through on these so-called hunches or possibilities or instincts. I definitely take that information and go with it, and just don't brush it aside as a figment of the imagination. I deal with it right then and there. And that, I think, is what sets me apart from others. It makes me more sensitive to it, I guess.

As mentioned earlier, while Ramon was respectful of those who remained skeptical of ghosts or a spiritual realm in general, he made a further distinction between the concepts of *belief* and *knowing*, arguing that his conception of reality did not involve belief systems or matters of faith, but a simple understanding of what does or does not exist. Perhaps because of this perspective—but also due to his adventures as a collector of ghost narratives—Ramon provided the largest number of anomalous experiences that included UFO sightings, numerous ghostly encounters, visions, premonitions, and encounters with a wide assortment

of both malevolent and benevolent entities. Yet Ramon also felt that his status as a gay man, or *hi'oka*, further cemented his ability to negotiate unseen realms:

Ramon: First of all, because I'm gay I think there is a male and a female...But because of Catholicism, what people think Christianity is to this day, they think it's a negative thing. It's a Western view of the world. They think it's negative. But preindustrial people throughout the history of humankind have never looked at that prior to Christianity as being a negative. In fact, it's something that would be revered, "Oh, you have this child! Oh, perfect!" They were soothsayers, they were people who charted the stars, people who rode into battle. Etcetera, etcetera. They gave children names in the naming ceremonies, and dealt with the forces of good and bad equally. Now, in a lot of these cultures and specifically Native American cultures, you'll find that these people were so revered that they were given their own tipi or dwelling place. They had a status in society because they can harness both male and female forces. And because of that, you might have an excellent medicine man who does what he does excellently. You might have a woman who's an excellent medicine woman who helps in childbirth and all these other things in their own realm. But when you have one person in the middle—be it male or female—that can adapt and grasp both circles and forces and come into one new being, that is very sought after. And even the dark forces go, "Whoa! We can't handle this." You know? They can't deal with it. So, there are certain songs, dances, poetries, and music that all is part of that third person, that third gender. It's a third gender, is what it is. A lot of people are afraid of it, and what do humans do when they're afraid of something? They condemn it. In modern Western culture, that's what they do. They look at something like that as being odd and not of the norm. So it must be wrong! No, quite the opposite! It must be right, in this case...

WD: Given what you do, do you see yourself as taking on a more contemporary *hi'oka* role in your work?

Ramon: Well, I do. I can't help but to. To say I don't see myself that way would be to deny that portion of myself that's innate. Yeah, I draw upon that in encountering things. That's why I know when I encounter negative forces that do approach me in broad daylight or at night, and I give a mental language to them, I never speak verbally. I attack them that way, I say, "You have no power over me, you know that! So why are you wasting your time?" And I'll hear screaming and laughter afterwards, both trying to scare me and trying to say, "Alright!" You know? They'll remove themselves from me. And then I go on with what I'm doing, you know? But I'm saying, "I'm tired of you. You're just wasting my energy here. Go away." But when I say that, I draw upon what you just mentioned. I draw upon being different, being uniquely positively different as an added bonus to combat such things. And it's never failed me, and I can only get better with it.

Thus, for Ramon, both his Native and sexuality identities allowed for a receptiveness to a spiritual realm that modern Western society largely limits or outright rejects. And although he saw no specific connections between his UFO sightings and his spiritual experiences, Ramon also conceded that his spiritual worldview may have allowed for an "openness" to other experiences:



WD: You mentioned you don't really see a connection between UFO sightings and more spiritual experiences. But has it ever struck you as curious that you've had experiences on both ends?

Ramon: Oh sure, yeah. Now see, because I'm focused on what I'm doing and not into the UFO stuff, maybe that has a lot to do with it. But if I was to stop what I was doing and then focus on that other thing, who knows? I might run around with a pointed aluminum hat. You never know. I know maybe in ancient times there were people within cultures that had experiences in both realms. And I do know that there are some Lakota people, spiritual people, men and women—particularly men—who communicate with them. That's why a tipi is in that shape. There's reasons for all these things that modern day people have lost. That doesn't mean it's lost forever. But it does exist, and maybe at that time so-called medicine men and women had the ability to both deal with spiritual issues and, for lack of a better word, UFO issues, and communicating with "higher-thinking" folk. You never know. I'm open to it, and I don't dismiss it as being hokey or fanciful stuff. No, I'm open to it unless it smacks of bozo-ish bullcrap, you know? If there's evidence to show that things do exist such as that, like the Vedic people from India, the Chinese, the ancient Greeks. They all had a wealth of knowledge. How did these folks do it? The Egyptians, the Polynesian people. There's reasons why culture is the way it is. So I think there's a lot to be said for people who can harness both realms. It's not easy. You don't just wake up one morning and say, "I'm just going to learn how to do it." It doesn't come to you like that. It comes in spurts and periods, and then lapses in time. I've learned that. So you can't say, "I'm going to learn how to hunt ghosts by going to a library and reading a book." No you're not! "I know how to chart the skies and look for UFOs! I'm going to go out to the desert and look up at the night and see what I see." You might not ever see anything. But, if you go out into the desert at night and you take care of things that you have to take care of within your life and prepare yourself in a way that you should, you might definitely see something and experience something. And I'm not saying by taking any kind of chemical stuff at all. You just might be able to do that, and maybe with the help of another entity. You just might do that. See what I'm saying? There's a lot of preparation, and a lot of wisdom. Wisdom is different from knowledge. You need a lot of wisdom in order to take that path, whether you can do it alone with a living breathing human, or with one that has already passed. I don't know. It's interesting though, I have to say. I'm very fascinated by it.

For Ramon, both UFO sightings and ghost encounters—while fundamentally different experiences—nevertheless required a personal, spiritual commitment on the part of the experiencers.

Other respondents remained more overtly skeptical about their experiences, even if they had trouble providing natural or conventional explanations for them. In such instances, individuals unprepared to subscribe to UFOs as a belief language instead opted for the category of "secret military project" in which to situate their sightings. Three individuals who witnessed large triangular crafts all came to this conclusion. Jef, who, with his

girlfriend and brother, witnessed such an object gliding over his town, felt an extraterrestrial explanation seemed far-fetched:

Jef: Hmm. I feel like it has to be something military. I mean, I like to believe there's life on other planets, but for them to bolt on over to earth and hover around Clayton, North Carolina, doesn't seem too logical to me. I don't know. I've been told it was probably something military, something they're working on...Harrier jet technology using jets to glide around, and then my stepdad, staunch Republican, kind of Rush Limbaugh kind of guy, he says that it's probably something military monitoring Johnston County Airfield, because that's like another half hour in the other direction, but it's a tiny airfield. And they said that there were some of the Blackwater mercenaries or somebody was coming through that area, and so they were using that airfield as a stop-point to get on another plane and go somewhere else. So he thinks it might have been military, like some kind of unmanned thing monitoring Johnston County. But I really don't think it was extraterrestrial, it's just something we haven't figured out yet that the government is playing with, in my opinion.

Jef's primary rationale for his interpretation rested on his belief that Clayton, North Carolina was a less-than ideal candidate for alien tourism, and that a nearby military airfield presented a more plausible source for the craft. Furthermore, while Jef was open to the possibility of extraterrestrial beings visiting Earth, his interest in military secrecy provided him with a more suitable personal framework for contextualizing his sighting:

Jef: I think a fair percentage of them have to be something from elsewhere. I mean, the way some are depicted as moving erratically, I don't think the human body could take that. But I think there's a lot of them are probably the government trying to come up with some new way to do whatever it is they do...go off and blast other people to smithereens. Watch other people, or whatever the military is doing at this point, and they're always trying to find out new ways to do it. And for whatever reason, they can't tell us. So that's probably what the majority of them are. And then as far as a lot of the photos and things like that go, just looking at the internet—you can do wonders with Photoshop, so it's really hard to know what to believe anymore. I almost feel like the older the picture, the more credible it is. But if you're snapping it with a digital camera and there aren't thirty-thousand shots from it from other witnesses, then you can't believe everything. I guess there could be something out there, but I don't know.

Jef's response, which included mentions of Blackwater and blowing up other people to "smithereens," reflects an inherent distrust of the motivations and transparency of contemporary military projects and operations.<sup>71</sup> This distrust extends further into the technological capabilities already accessible in civilian life, notably the ability of everyday

people to digitally manipulate images and create seemingly convincing photographs of UFOs or Michael Jackson's ghost. For Jef, a secretive military capable of effectively hiding experimental technology remained more easily incorporated into his belief language than UFOs and extraterrestrial visitation, particularly within the context of the U.S.'s ongoing global conflicts.

Corman came to a similar conclusion regarding his own sighting of a triangular craft:

WD: So your interpretation was that it was a military aircraft?

Corman: Yeah. I mean, it was really quiet. I'm used to being around helicopters when they're trying to take off, cause you need a lot of power to get that lift. So they make a terrible amount of noise, but that thing was just incredibly quiet...Having grown up in a military town, knowing a lot of people—I mean, we're talking about people with Top Secret security clearance around here, it's not uncommon for them to test experimental aircraft around here. It is the biggest military base in the US, at least. I mean, just the amount of space on Fort Hood is unbelievable. It would literally take three hours to cross Fort Hood if you follow the roads. The roads twist and turn, and the fields are just enormous. It's not uncommon to hear about strange things going on out there. They'll be testing new weapons no one knows about. And at first, people will say "What was that?" Then a month or two later they'll drop the classification on it and people will start talking about it. "Oh yeah, we were testing this new grenade launcher and it does this and that!" And we'll say, "Okay." So, it's really not uncommon to see weird things. When I saw this thing, it was no big deal, really... When you see a group sighting and a lot of people see the same thing, that's more than likely the case. I mean, they're probably testing some new navigation system and they got lost, basically. And that happens a lot, actually. But other than that, it's usually always test aircraft unless it's like one of those people who claim they got abducted. You know, that's a little bit out there.

As with Jef's account, the proximity of a military base was a primary indication in Corman's mind that the object he witnessed was an experimental aircraft. Furthermore, based on his experiences growing up near Fort Hood, Corman deduced that most UFO sightings were likely test aircraft, save for "out there" instances of claimed alien abduction. For Corman, such exotic experiences existed outside his accepted belief language, and were therefore likely the result of personal delusion or fabrication.

Lastly, Aram, who, with a friend witnessed a triangular craft fly overhead while camping at Lake Powell, Utah, conducted his own research in attempting to come to a concrete conclusion about his sighting:

WD: Do you know of any known military sites nearby?

Aram: This is the best I've been able to put together since then as far as what I think it was. And yes, there was some military activity in Mexican Hat, Utah, which is not far from where we were. And what they test out there are B-1 bombers. When we asked around with park rangers later on trying to figure out what we might have seen—and we did ask around a lot—everyone seemed to go back to these B-1 bombers. And when I did a little research later on, it seems that one of the strengths of these things is that it can take off from a very short runway. And so, in my mind trying to figure this out, I wondered if maybe that apparent rising and falling that we saw was actually some sort of motion along a very short runway. Even if that was just a stick rock beach or something.

I think because I saw something else on this lake elsewhere, and because so many rangers said it was a B-1 bomber and treated that as the natural conclusion—the people that should have known—and because of the independent research I did on Mexican Hat later on, I think it was probably B-1 bombers being tested. I can't say that with a hundred percent certainty. I do personally rule out any extraterrestrial hypotheses because it seemed very orderly and test-like. The way that there was this set up, that there was one and then another, and a clean-up effort or monitoring, or something. It just seemed more organized than a random UFO appearing over a forest or something.

After his sighting, Aram investigated the “launch site” of the objects (which appeared undisturbed), sought out the advice of local residents and park rangers, and conducted internet research on B-1 bombers. Although he wavered slightly in concretely identifying the objects as bombers, his prior understanding of “typical” UFO sightings did not adequately match his encounter, and thus he ultimately interpreted the events as test flights, despite the apparent lack of runways. Based on these considerations, “secret military testing” remained a more viable folk template for Aram's experience than “UFO sighting.” This conclusion also makes sense given Aram's relatively informed attitude about the subject of UFOs:

Aram: Well, I have mixed feelings on it. For one, I absolutely think it is so fascinating. I could listen to Art Bell every night and never get tired of it. I really have a deep-rooted affection for it that goes back to when I wanted to believe, and did believe. Now, I think I still want to believe, and I believe that numbers-wise there has to be life on other planets. I don't see how there couldn't be with so many stars and so many galaxies and so many possible planets around those stars. But I'm very skeptical that anything has crossed that

expanse and come to see us here. You know? I'm not closed at all to the possibility that someday we may get radio signals or maybe even something more from it, but I haven't seen any compelling evidence so far that it's already happened. It just seems so human—all of these experiences. These aliens travel light years to come to warn us of things pop culture is already warning us about. Global warming, nuclear radiation, etc. No one's coming, as Carl Sagan says, to help us solve Fermi's last theorem or whatever. They're all just coming and saying things that anybody could say, basically. And it makes me very guarded about it. And plus, as a freelance writer and columnist I've investigated several of these things. And they never turn out. Every story I've ever investigated always leads back to a really unreliable witness or bad reporting, bad storytelling. Things that don't add up at all. Or multiple sources will all boil back to one, and then that one will kind of fall apart. So, that's kind of made me more guarded. Really, more than anything, that has. It seems that when you investigate any ghost story or UFO story, if you investigate with the mindset to either prove or disprove it, it's a setup for disappointment. That's probably my perspective on it right now.

Aram's willingness to subscribe to UFOs as extraterrestrial spaceships has gradually eroded over time due to both compelling skeptical arguments and his own personal disappointment in investigating local New Mexico cases. Thus, with the UFO model further weakened as an explanatory device, Aram had further cause to turn to a competing belief language to make sense of his experience.

The skepticism espoused by many of these respondents may also be viewed as a defensive tactic common in paranormal storytelling. So-called “avowals” of prior skepticism potentially guard the narrators against accusations of gullibility or wishful thinking, while aligning them with more positively associated abilities that include demonstrative critical thinking coupled with a sense of “open-mindedness” (Lamont 2007, 690). Such narrative strategies were common amongst the respondents:

Michele: I still don't necessarily believe in a spiritual life, though. I'm kind of skeptical.

Ryder: You know, I've seen some things, and before that I was a skeptic. And I know that if I meet with a skeptic, I could say that I've seen things but I don't know what they are.

Tommy: Yeah, I'm extremely skeptical. I tend to push those people toward the brink of, “I really, really, doubt it.” But there are some things that I can't explain.

Murphy: I would definitely describe myself as skeptical, if at least somewhat open. I'm the type of person that thinks most things that happen that people attribute to something “out of this world” probably have logical explanations. But I also believe that there are a few

legitimate cases where something really definite is going on here. And I think my case is one of those.

Regardless of their ultimate interpretations of their experiences, the notion of skepticism was commonly evoked as a preemptive defense against any charges of an uncritical acceptance of UFO visitors or ghostly apparitions.

Some respondents, like Ramon, went a step further by distancing their own personal experiences from “bullcrap”:

I’m open to it, and I don’t dismiss it as being hokey or fanciful stuff. No, I’m open to it unless it smacks of bozo-ish bullcrap, you know?

This performative tactic is highly recognizable in memorate-telling as a form of what Gillian Bennett describes as an “internal dialectic.” In bringing their private experiences (which often support paranormal traditions of belief) into the public realm, narrators become acutely aware of rationalist challenges from their audience. To counteract this, they conduct an imaginary debate with themselves to offset these challenges (1999, 124-125). In this way, these UFO memorates are distinct from legends or personal accounts passed along second or third hand because the tellers are much more emotionally invested in them. For example, while a person recounting a local ghost story might deliberately detach herself from the incidents of the account, an individual describing a personal ghost encounter has more of an investment in telling the account as “truth,” and will focus more on sensory impressions and alternative interpretations (Ellis 2003, 125, 134).

Various rhetorical tactics are employed by narrators to assert the truthfulness and objectivity of their accounts, including reflexivity (“It sounds crazy, but it happened to me!”), alternative explanations (“It might have been a dream”), reluctance (“I’m not necessarily

saying it was an alien spaceship”), ignorance of the facts (“I think there were three of us there, but it happened so long ago I’m not sure”), and testing (“I turned to my friend and asked him if he was seeing the same thing I was”) (Oring 2008, 135-137).<sup>72</sup> Although this deliberate construct of impartiality in storytelling is visible in many of the respondent’s accounts, those narrators who wish to advance specific interpretations must necessarily discount the alternatives (e.g., “It couldn’t have been a helicopter, since it made no noise”) (2008, 144).

The “defensiveness” of respondents to audience contestation of their accounts was also reflected in who they chose to share their accounts with. Some individuals, like Sloane, Malla, and Sylvia, avoided discussing their experiences with most people for fear of ridicule:

Sloane: Over the years, I just know that there are other people that have weird things happen to them, and people laugh at them. So you don’t say too much about it to people, because they’ll just assume you were drinking or something.

Malla: I don’t talk to anyone about it.

WD: Why is that?

Malla: Well, because people think you’re a nut! If you tell people that you’ve seen UFOs, they say “Oh yeah, sure you have!” You know? So it’s easier not to mention it to anyone. So I don’t.

Sylvia: Nope. I think I’ve talked to my best friend about it one time, and this one other man maybe but that’s it. I try not to.

WD: Why is that?

Sylvia: Well, people think you’re crazy. Why bring up something that’s going to make your life a little bit more difficult? I work with the community, you know?

Although they all found the subject of UFOs a fascinating topic of discussion, each woman still felt that discussing their experiences publicly risked ostracizing them from their peers.

Michele also was wary of sharing her abduction memories with other people, but her reasoning was based more on fear and embarrassment:

Michele: When people are just telling stories—ghost stories, entertaining or crazy things that have occurred in their lives—the skinwalker story and the OBE are stories that I love to share. But the alien story I don't like to discuss for two reasons. One is because it scared me and it's only been the last two years since my fear of aliens has somewhat dissipated, and I would still call my dad at five in the morning if I was scared. So one I don't tell the alien story because I get scared, and two I feel like a freak. I don't even necessarily believe in aliens, but I don't disbelieve in them. I probably lean more towards believing in them, but I don't straight up believe in them. So, I feel like it's kind of embarrassing to tell that story.

As opposed to her other anomalous experiences, Michele's uncertainty about the physical reality of her abduction memories, coupled with the terror she felt in discussing the subject, caused her great reluctance in discussing the subject of UFOs.

For others, including Jann, Merlin, and particularly Mary Jo, discussing their experiences with others allowed them to both validate their own experiences and encourage others to talk about their own. Mary Jo explained her public openness:

Mary Jo: I don't hesitate to talk about it. If it comes up, someone will ask, "Didn't you used to drive a Hummer?" And I'll just say, "I did, but I got it fixed and traded it in." "Well, why did you trade it in?" "Because this is what happened, and it never was the same again." You know? People listen and pay attention, and especially in our neck of the woods here there are a lot of people that do believe in these kinds of things. Culturally, I think that a lot of our Hispanic people have had experiences. A lot of times they do sweep it under the rug and they don't want to think about it. But I'm fascinated by it and wonder about it, and I want to know more. So, sometimes by sharing I think that I might learn something from someone else.

Like Mary Jo (and supporting the findings discussed in Chapter 4), a slight majority of respondents felt no particular restraint in discussing their experiences with others, unless they deemed them too insignificant to regularly share. However, as noted above, a number of these individuals also professed a measure of personal skepticism to distance themselves from the extraordinary narratives they told.

Perhaps the most important question posed to respondents involved their articulations of any greater or deeper meanings they took away from their experiences. Some respondents stated their experiences merely confirmed their prior beliefs about UFOs and aliens, while



others—including Tommy and Alexandra—claimed that their experiences made them terrified of alien images. Other individuals, including Troy and Jef, felt their experiences—however strange—nevertheless had a minimal impact on their lives:

Troy: I wouldn't say it really affected me in any profound way. Maybe it has subconsciously played into my fascination with the supernatural but really it's just a neat story to tell.

Jef: I mean, it's a good story to tell people when UFOs come up. And I kind of knew that all governments do secret, shady things, and I just kind of chalked it up to one of their things. Something they're doing that can't be explained. As just a little sheep in the government's flock, there's things we don't need to know about, because if the media got ahold of it, then everyone would know about them. And if we're coming up with something that can hover around in the sky, whatever its purpose is, if they're not telling us, we're probably not ready to know, or people elsewhere aren't ready to know. It doesn't really make me feel smaller than I already do. It's just a good story at this point.

Regardless of their individual interpretations, both Troy and Jef focused primarily on the entertainment value of their respective experiences.

Many simply asserted that their experiences sparked a greater interest in the subject of UFOs. For example, Bradley began devouring more UFO books after his childhood experience, which in turn made him more skeptical about the subject. Merlin's experience also triggered an interest in UFO literature that bordered on being an "obsession":

Merlin: The first one got me started reading on it. I think it was *LOOK* magazine. My parents actually picked it up, and I saw the pictures and it bloomed from there. And by the time I was in high school, I was carrying around books with me reading them at school and at home. You couldn't get my nose out of them. I was almost obsessed, reading constantly. Then I was done reading them, I actually put "read," dated them, when I read it, and then went on to the next one.

While these respondents maintained that their experiences primarily served to increase their interest in the subject of UFOs, some witnesses, like Sloane, went so far as to claim their experiences triggered an almost otherworldly interest in a variety of subjects:

Sloane: Well, like I say, there for a few years I liked the idea of being able to anticipate things. That was kind of a plus. But that seems to have worn off, maybe because as I got older....[laughs]. You get to the point where it's like you're back in synch now. I felt like I was out of synch with stuff for quite a while. And I couldn't stop reading. I would be reading

ten books at once. It's just like I had this voracious need initially to try to find out. But then I'd find myself in all kinds of books: architecture, science, stuff about the brain. I thought, "Well, did I get brain damaged or something, for goodness sakes?" What could have occurred, you know?

Beyond merely stimulating further interest in UFOs or astronomy, Sloane's response indicated some outside manipulation of her cognition and a creation of newfound psychic abilities, a claim shared by many alien abductees (Strieber and Strieber, 1997).

For other respondents, their experiences sparked an interest in broader issues that often involved a reevaluation of humankind's place in the universe. Murphy, for instance, felt his experience shifted his interest in aliens from a mere childhood diversion to a more adult reflection on human consciousness:

Murphy: Beforehand, I was moderately interested as a child. Most kids are into space aliens and stuff like that, visitors from Mars. They think stuff like that is cool. When you actually experience it though, it's very different. I mean, it really did change a big aspect of my young adulthood at that time. It stopped being, "Wow, this is cool!" to "Wow, this is really something that we just can't completely comprehend right now." I personally think that due to my own experience, that we as a society, if all of a sudden we were to find out that there were these things, I don't know if we would be able to handle it. I mean, if we had definitive proof that these things existed and everybody knew, I think that there would be a bit of a problem with us really having a lot of moral dilemmas with this issue.

WD: In what way, would you say?

Murphy: I think it would bring in the question of people's religious beliefs. A lot of people think that since we exist here on this planet, we're the definitive species in the universe. When you think about, humanity is a very centralized, collective consciousness in that we have our own network of histories and everything like that that we always review. And to have something completely alien to our own history and our own existence come out of nowhere, I think it would just really upset that for awhile.

Murphy's experience allowed him to question modern, insular perspectives on humanity.

Similarly, Sylvia felt she had been exposed to a broader, invisible realm:

Sylvia: I can't describe it, I can't. I don't know how to. It opened up windows into another realm that I had never thought about. It made me think how intelligence, how much energy and power is around us. And we should respect it, we really should respect it. That's all I can think about.

Sylvia's newfound understanding of an immense power surrounding the everyday lives of humans arguably nurtures a commonly expressed need for humility and a spiritual sense of belonging or connection to something greater.

Like Sylvia, Joanie's experience made her more open to the world around her as well as sparking a desire to search for the uncanny in her past:

Joanie: I think maybe it made me more open to paying attention to things that go on. I know that because of that and because of memories of things happening in my childhood earlier that were weird, I'm probably more open to synchronicities that happen. I notice a lot of synchronicities. Like if I'm thinking about a person, then the phone will ring. That kind of thing. I think I'm just more open to maybe realizing that things are not as easily explained as everyday people believe. I don't think that what we see is what we really have in reality. I'm trying to read some quantum mechanics and other sorts of things like that, to sort of put things together. But I think it just makes me more open-minded rather than having any decisions or interpretations in place. It's more like questioning. My husband teaches physics, and he does not have any beliefs in anything paranormal or anything like that. When some sort of weird thing happens and I say something to him, he goes, "Oh, balderdash!" So I guess I feel like I'm just thinking about a perceptual reality that may not be what we think it is... But I tend to think that there may be multiple universes or some other dimension where other entities can just open a door and walk in. They don't fly in in spaceships, they just open a door. That's the way I look at it, but I'll never know for sure. There's no way of ever knowing for sure. I don't know if I can understand all the physics in it, but I'm trying. I think that now with string theory and membranes and stuff like that going on that eventually they'll figure out the science behind it.

In her response, Joanie also revealed the familiar method of invoking science (in this case, experimental physics) to help legitimize her speculation on multiple universes and hidden connections in her life. Furthermore, both Sylvia and Joanie's responses reflected a commonly shared belief among other witnesses, including those of the more "freely" spiritual Cal and the more skeptical-leaning Zo, of UFO experiences reflecting unseen, even terrestrial realms either closed to or ignored by most modern peoples. This, arguably, presents the broadest, most primal appeal of UFO sightings: the ability to formulate or maintain quasi-spiritual ideologies that undermine the perceived dogmatic rigidity of both traditional religious doctrine and the "magic-free" reality imposed by scientific inquiry, thus

retaining the ability to “keep alive the ‘rumor of angels,’ the knowledge of the transcendent in a secular world (Motz 1998, 342). In other words, the UFO (joining other paranormal traditions) in American life often serves to satisfy the modern spiritual cravings of agnostics. In this context, the appeal of the alien is not rooted in specifics, such as fantastic technological discoveries or an end to global conflicts, but rather in the mere promise of some sentient *other* beyond ourselves. While this sentiment may easily be understood as a “God replacement,” the desires for many UFO experiencers have less to do with cosmic power vacuums, and more with simple cosmic *companionship*.

The meanings individuals say they derive from their experiences shed an important light onto the role of anomalous experience in the maintenance and evolution of cultural belief languages. While certainly not all of the respondents walked away from their experiences reporting personal epiphanies or claiming psychic powers, the majority of responses by both the respondents here and the survey participants from Chapter 4 indicate that personal experience plays a fundamental, even primary role in both the legend-memorate folk dichotomy *and* the assessments, reassessments, and shifts in the spiritual belief languages that individuals subscribe to. Specifically, the most common cosmological shift among UFO witnesses has less to do with extraterrestrials, and much more to do with contesting human isolation.

## **Conclusion**

Folkloric approaches to understanding so-called non-rationalist contemporary beliefs allow for, in a metaphoric sense, an excavation of narrative traditions that contextualizes said beliefs within a broader cultural and historical framework that moves beyond explanations of historical circumstance and particularism. At the same time, this continuum of cultural

mythology must not subsume the experiential components of tradition; components that suggest cultural source hypotheses on their own are insufficient for understanding how traditions of belief continually adapt, perpetuate, and disseminate within American culture.

From an experience-centered perspective, many UFO encounters share specific core elements indicative of (often nocturnal) celestial anomalies not easily categorized by witnesses in natural or conventional terms. The UFO phenomenon presents a common contemporary cultural belief language in which to situate these puzzling experiences, yet also exists as a modern “catch-all” category for a variety of anomalous lore not immediately recognizable or classifiable within traditional religious or paranormal categories. Furthermore, a shared notion of UFOs and, more specifically, extraterrestrial visitation among many of my respondents likely reflects broader contemporary struggles to reconcile perceived knowledge boundaries between traditional religious faith and scientific rationalism, while concurrently contesting their respective claims to epistemological authority.

As shown, memorates play a central role in the formulation, maintenance, and dissemination of UFO folklore, and such narratives are themselves rooted in anomalous personal experiences. Yet, among folklorists like Honko, Ellis, Hufford, and Bullard, these personal experiences are often thought to exist independently of cultural-belief language, which itself is imagined as a device for “naming” encounters *ex post facto*. In the following chapter, I challenge this viewpoint through a discussion of schema theory and the impact of cultural belief language on memory and perception.

## Chapter 6

### Memory, Culture, and Experience

I like to remember things my own way. How I remembered them, not necessarily the way they happened.  
-Fred Madison, *Lost Highway*

The personal past is a cultural past.  
-Linda Garro

In the previous chapter, I argued that a dynamic folkloric approach to understanding UFO memorates revealed a complex interplay between preexisting cultural attitudes (religion, science, and government) and “actual” personal experiences. Yet despite attempts by some folklorists to maintain clear distinctions between these realms of knowledge, cognitive anthropology instead suggests that our personal experiences, including both memories of past events *and* our immediate perceptions of the world around us, are organized and processed within specific cultural models of thought.

A primary objective of cognitive anthropologists is to uncover and articulate specific cultural models that individuals rely on to make sense of the world around them. Holly Mathews has suggested that folk narratives are an excellent starting point in this process. Furthermore, she encourages the use of an eclectic methodology in attempting to locate cultural models in natural discourse (2005, 152). Similarly, Quinn argues against a rigid methodology in favor of a more personalized adaptation (2005, 35). Here, I will examine UFO memorates in an attempt to locate the specific cultural models my respondents utilize in order to make sense of their personal experiences. My methodology for doing so is informed primarily by the various guidelines proposed in the anthology *Finding Culture in Talk* (2005), which will be discussed in more detail below.

In this chapter, I will incorporate several key concepts and methodologies from the field of cognitive anthropology in an attempt to better understand how UFO witnesses draw from cultural models in perceiving and remembering their personal experiences. First, I will briefly outline how cognitive anthropologists understand shared cultural experiences and “schemas,” then explore the relationship between experience and memory, with a specific focus on shared narratives, and how these narratives can aid researchers in assessing how schemas reshape our understanding of meaningful, anomalous past events. I will then discuss how the use of basic metaphors and propositions in the language of my respondents reveals broader cultural attitudes about the subject of UFOs, and how individuals draw on certain (and sometimes conflicting) cultural models to both make sense of and narrate such “troubling” experiences. Finally, I will consider UFOs as a controversial topic within public discourse, again focusing on the language of my respondents in determining what aspects of UFO-related beliefs are generally understood to be controversial, debatable, and taken-for-granted in American culture (Strauss 2004).

### **Cultural Meaning and Schema Theory**

In discussing the pertinent process involved in imagining creatures from other worlds, cognitive scientist Thomas Lawson argues that we must first accept that human minds operate under certain “constraints.” Rather than speaking to broad limitations of the human mind, he instead speaks to the specific conditions within which a given mind works. For instance, most people’s short term memory limits the number of digits they can recall after one exposure. Based on such contextual limitations discovered through evolutionary and developmental psychology, cognitive scientists now commonly believe that we human beings process our perceived reality through a “folk” cognition, including folk physics,

biology, and psychology, that allows us to utilize commonsense approximations of how this reality works (2007, 266-267). In recent years, anthropologists have specifically searched for various “cultural” constraints that inform this cognitive process.

According to Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn, the human psyche and the “outside world” should not be understood as isolated realms, although they each contain distinctive characteristics not found in the other. Rather, they argue that it is best to understand the mental and physical worlds as “separated by permeable boundaries” (1997, 8). A critical assumption shared by most cognitive anthropologists is the idea that people in a given group share certain understandings of the world around them that have been learned and internalized through their shared experience. Furthermore, these people rely on such shared understandings to comprehend the thoughts, feelings, motivations, and actions of both themselves and others in the group (Quinn 2005, 2-3).

As Quinn argues, this is not to suggest that culture is the sole constraint on an individual’s actions. Rather, another key source is the individual’s own lifetime of experience, particularly formative or traumatic experiences that indelibly provide structure to the individual’s ongoing concerns (2005, 23). For instance, a dog attack that occurs in one’s childhood would likely shape that person’s ongoing attitudes about a variety of interrelated subjects involving dogs (i.e., dangerous breeds, pet ownership, personal security). However, this is complicated by the idea that such experiences are themselves at least partially influenced by prior cultural attitudes (i.e., “I saw a pit bull walking toward me. Pit bulls are supposed to be dangerous, so I ran away. Then it attacked me. Therefore, pit bulls are dangerous!”).



Cognitive anthropology further shows us that the narratives people share include not only their overt content, but also covert, underlying presuppositions about the world around us. In this sense, the narrators are simultaneously constructing or reinforcing cultural meanings while drawing on shared understandings of the world around them (Hill 2005, 158-159). Culture is often implicit: rules for games, treatment of guests. Ordinarily people cannot explicitly articulate such rules (D'Andrade 1995, 143). Indeed, as Strauss maintains, certain "taken-for-granted" ideas frequently take on an internalized power that dissuades individuals from considering alternatives (2005, 203). Thus, a primary goal of cognitive anthropology is to locate and articulate the underlying cultural assumptions we tend to subconsciously share (or at least acknowledge) about the world, as well as to determine not only what we think, but how we think about it.

Relatedly, our interpretations of personal experiences are rooted in cultural meaning; that is, the typical interpretation of an event evoked in us occurs as a result of our similar life experiences. Roy D'Andrade notes that by the mid-1970s, both psychologists and anthropologists began recognizing that human cognition utilized complex structures of thought, which psychologist George Mandler referred to as *schemas*. These schemas, according to Mandler, are best understood as "bounded, distinct, and unitary representation[s]" that are developed through prior experiences. Rather than carbon copies of these past experiences, however, schemas are better understood as abstract representations (1995, 122).<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, simpler schemas can be embedded within more complex schemas, and through their identification it becomes possible to examine associations between different domains. For example, D'Andrade shows how a simple "writing" schema relates pens, pencils, chalk, and typewriters to paper, blackboards, and newspapers, which in

turn can relate to English, French, authors, correspondents, and so on (1995, 124). In other words, the identification of one schema may reveal its location and function within a greater *network* of schemata.

As psychologists further explored the role of schemas in human cognition, a byproduct of this work was the uncovering of particular American cultural models that included cultural schemas for things such as restaurants and birthday parties. The focus on cultural models was soon accompanied by that of cultural meanings, which are best understood as momentary states created through the interaction of two structures: extrapersonal world structures, and intrapersonal mental structures (schemas). Thus, cognitive anthropologists began working from the assumption that a different interpretation of the same event would be evoked in people with different characteristic life experiences (Strauss and Quinn 1997, 6). For example, two separate individuals awakening at night and witnessing a strange humanoid apparition standing over their respective beds may arrive at different conclusions about the nature of the apparition. One who has an extensive background in UFO literature might interpret the experience as an alien abduction episode, while the other might have more familiarity with ghostlore, and thus interpret the experience as an encounter with a spirit. Therefore, individual psychology and the surrounding culture must be studied in conjunction in order to fully understand how these experiences are perceived and interpreted.

Schemas may also be understood as generic versions of some aspect of our world, again built up from (often early) experience and stored in our memories (Quinn 2005, 38,45). As Mathews notes, we may also look at schemas as “learned expectations about the way things usually go” (2005, 112). To the degree we share certain experiences, we end up

sharing the same schemas. This is a primary way in which cognitive anthropologists have come to understand how people have the same culture or subculture (Quinn 2005, 38). The meanings we arrive at through life experiences and constructed schemas thus allow for the formulation of a variety of shared understandings of the world around us. Furthermore, cultural anthropologists have since come to identify a wide variety of cultural schemas: event-based, orientational, narrative, propositional, metaphoric, and image-based (D'Andrade 1995, 126, 132).

Meanings are based on cultural schemas shared among people who have had similar socially mediated experiences. Schema theory in cognitive anthropology holds that “information processing is mediated by learned or innate mental structures that organize related pieces of our knowledge... (S)chemas. . . are not distinct things but rather collections of elements that work together to process information at a given time” (Strauss and Quinn 1997, 49). Schemas may be considered then as general knowledge of any sort, from simple to complex. Yet schemas are more than just representations. They also act as processors and mental recognition devices that create complex interactions from minimal input (D'Andrade 1995, 136).

Schemas can reconstruct our past events, determine the meanings imparted to ongoing experiences, and give us expectations for future experiences (Strauss and Quinn 1997, 48-49). Yet, as D'Andrade notes, the complexity of a particular schema is entirely dependent on the quality of the prior examples to which the individual has access. In his words, “good recognition depends on being trained with good examples” (1995, 140).

Strauss and Quinn provide an example of how a network of schemas is triggered and utilized in the event of entertaining guests. For example, if I know that guests at my house should be offered drinks (and I in turn do so), that knowledge has been inscribed somewhere in my brain. Applying that knowledge entails drawing logical inferences or satisfying a series of if-then rules (“if these people are my guests, then I will offer them drinks”). In turn, I may also revise this knowledge through deleting propositions (“I don’t necessarily have to offer drinks to my guests”) or amending them (asking them if they would like water or a beer). Rather than a language of thought, however, Strauss and Quinn stress that such a process involves the situational activation of certain schemas. Thus, schemas are highly context sensitive, since they consist of interlinked networks. Do we offer undesirable guests drinks? Do we offer different types of beverages to children? Do we offer different beverages in the morning versus in the evening? Situational meanings are thus dependent on a broad network of associations learned over time (1997, 51-53).

Since cultural schemas are ingrained into our thought processes, interpretations of experiences, Strauss and Quinn argue, typically arise automatically and are not pondered (1997, 59). Anomalous experiences such as UFO sightings, however, are apt to challenge this presumption due, in part, to their likely emotional impact on the observer. Furthermore, if a witness passively observes a strange object in the sky and years later watches a television special on UFOs that provides accounts similar to his, he may be inclined to recall and reflect on the event due to its now meaningful status.<sup>74</sup>

Schemas are potentially developed from a great number of cultural sources. Strauss and Quinn provide another example of how a young boy might create schemas about addressing other people. For instance, he would likely grow up having addressed a wide

variety of people: friends, parents, other relatives, teachers, and strangers. Through observing other people he knew, he would learn how they addressed others. Additionally, he would likely learn situational greetings from characters on television or in movies. With these examples alone, he would have exposure to hundreds of examples of people addressing one another in various contexts (1997, 74).

Strauss and Quinn maintain that cultural meanings and schemas are not synonymous. While we may consider meaning to be an individual's interpretation of a particular situation, schemas are more specifically "the learned patterns of connection among units" which are activated in given social situations. Furthermore, individuals need not have identical life experiences in arriving at similar schemas (1997, 83,123). Popular culture, for instance, provides a variety of public messages that may allow for shared public understandings. An example of such repeated, highly visible messages may be found in the ubiquitous flying saucer imagery found in 1950s science fiction films. While not all public messages become widely shared, the relatively wide distribution of the flying saucer "cultural product" ensured that many Americans would encounter it in some form (1997, 123). As shown in Chapter 3, popular culture over the past sixty years has consistently provided near universal models for UFOs and associated "close encounters" with extraterrestrial beings, themselves syntheses of symbolic social anxieties and first-hand experiences. Given this, how might we account for divergent experiences?

Individuals may not come to shared understandings (i.e., "UFOs are alien spaceships") due to a variety of demographic differences that include ethnic identity, religious affiliation, income, occupation, gender, age, and education levels. Evidence for divergence in anomalous experiences based on such factors was provided in Chapter 4.

When individuals lead different lives, their resulting experiences will diverge, as will the schemas they construct from these experiences. Furthermore, with a large and relatively complex society such as that of the United States, more opportunities are presented for radically divergent experiences (1997, 131).

Despite expected divergences in how Americans might perceive an “extraterrestrial encounter,” it is fair to maintain that a UFO encounter schema provides a basic template for imagining or interpreting such a scenario. Of course, “imagining” extraterrestrial beings—regardless of their basis in reality—remains rooted in key anthropocentric assumptions. Lawson, for example, cites a study in which subjects were asked to imagine animals on other planets. Over 90% of the properties of the imaginary animals or beings were the same as those found in real terrestrial creatures, including eyes, legs, and bilateral symmetry. Here we find a key example of a cognitive constraint in imagining aliens (2007, 267-268).<sup>75</sup> Therefore, it is best for us to think of the encounters discussed in this chapter as primarily rooted in specific cultural understandings of UFOs and aliens.

Given this information, how do we identify and articulate UFO schemas in American culture? Holly Mathews (1992) has argued for locating schemas in talk, particularly in folk narratives. Her examination of the La Llorona<sup>76</sup> legend told in a Mexican community locates schemas that themselves reveal cultural meanings that direct behavior. Mathews maintains that the stories she collected, which vary based on the gender of the narrator, succeed as morality tales since the characters draw upon culturally shared schemas about gendered values of marital obligations and success. Specifically, certain characters in the narrative receive punishment when they violate certain cultural expectations generated by these schemas (1992, 128-141). In this way, Mathews is able to analyze folk narratives in a way

that allows for both the identification of schemas that inform cultural expectations *and* how these underlying schemas act to shape behavior in the community. Such folk narratives are thus excellent sources for scholars attempting to locate and explicate certain shared schemas. Uncovering such schemas in memorates, however, requires a slightly different methodology due to their variation in form and function. Yet since many UFO memorates arguably share a core experience, we may locate schemas about anomalous events in their telling.

Here, it is perhaps most useful to spell out the basic UFO schemas relied upon by my respondents. In Chapter 5, I identified a set of “core” experiential elements shared among them in their UFO sightings, that, collectively, help us build a loose UFO scenario schema: UFOs are seen at night; UFOs appear in rural settings; UFO sightings last for more than a few seconds; UFO sightings involve multiple witnesses; UFOs do not make any noise; UFOs move erratically; UFOs display an array of multicolored, flashing lights; UFOs are not shaped like conventional aircraft; UFOs interact intelligently with their surroundings. These are the most common experiential elements that my respondents report as being anomalous and, therefore, *UFO-like*. Of course, their understanding of their experiences *as possible* UFO sightings is directly informed by over sixty years of popular culture representations, from *The Day the Earth Stood Still* to “The X-Files.” The UFO schema thus typically adheres to prior visual representations while possessing one or more attributes that differentiate it from conventional aircraft or naturally-occurring (i.e., meteors) phenomena.

Since experiences related to alien abductions are far less common than “typical” UFO sightings, respondents must overwhelmingly rely on popular culture representations—particularly abduction literature such as *The Interrupted Journey* (1966) and *Communion* (1987)—to formulate abduction schemas. The abduction motif, which was discussed in

Chapter 5, has gradually become popularized through a series of books, movies, and television programs that have collectively informed a contemporary abduction schema: abductions occur at night while in bed (i.e., Whitley Strieber) or on rural highways (i.e., Betty and Barney Hill); alien captors are small humanoid beings; the victim is transported to a ship; a medical exam is conducted; substantial gaps in memory occur; the victim later finds physical traces of the ordeal, including scars, bumps, lesions, or discoloration of their skin; the victim is left with a greater purpose in life. Two or more of these elements are typically present in most abduction accounts, and collectively they provide a general recognizable schema for alien abduction in contemporary American culture.

These basic UFO schemas serve as reference points for my respondents both in their ability to immediately classify their experiences as UFO encounters and to provide them with a greater sense of meaning, which will be discussed below. Relatedly, when we learn schemas, we learn differences between what is normal, expected, and/or typical. For instance, in American culture, many of us likely retain a schema of “family” that includes a father, mother, and children. A family that falls outside that schema (i.e., two mothers, one parent, or raised by wolves) while perhaps “acceptable” in our minds, may nevertheless represent a deviation from our expectations of a typical family unit (Strauss and Quinn 1997, 78). At the same time, an examination of UFO encounters as anomalous events in individuals’ lives can also tell us much about shared cultural understandings of “normal” life experiences. In the following section, I will focus on the role UFO schemas play in the remembrance of past anomalous events.



### **Shared UFO Experiences and the Remembered Past**

Cognitive anthropologists have long speculated that cultural representations likely have a significant impact on human perception, memory, and reason (D'Andrade 1995, 182). In the case of memory, it may be impacted by a variety of conditions, including: how well-formed the relevant schemas are, the degree of attention provided by the rememberer, the number of similar past experiences, and the strength of emotional involvement in the event. Further, while our focus here is not necessarily on an objective *accuracy* of recall, researchers assume that events encoded by well-formed schemas will be “better remembered” than events lacking such schemas (1995, 184).

Again, as with all memories, cognitive anthropology tells us that personal recollections of UFO experiences are not mental copies, or “photographs,” of stored originals. Rather, they are schematized, mental reconstructions of past events that are reassembled in particular circumstances for particular purposes (Garro 2001; Schrauf 1997, 439-440). A cultural lexicon allows for the rememberer to construct descriptions of what is to be remembered, and the interaction of these descriptions and the event itself essentially creates the memories (D'Andrade 1995, 189). As Robert Schrauf has found, the cognitive analysis of autobiographical memories reveals several key elements: “(R)ecollection of the personal past is (1) essentially a reconstruction of the past, (2) prompted by a person’s affective states and ongoing beliefs and goals, and (3) constituted by the sociocultural world of the rememberer” (Schrauf 1997, 429).

Robert Schrauf provides a useful description for the process behind memory formation and recall. During an experience, a process of revision in light of the person’s beliefs and expectations occurs immediately, if not simultaneously, with the experience.

Once the memory is then encoded, subsequent recalling of the memory acts as a reconstruction that involves the affective (emotional) states and social circumstances (i.e., campfire story) of the rememberer. Furthermore, sociocultural factors shape one's expectations about reality, and what he or she remembers directly depends on the background of his or her expectations (1997, 429-30). In Schrauf's own work, he uses the example of how a Spanish Holy Week "brother" recalls his transition from marching in an annual procession in Andalusia to becoming a *costalero*, who is charged with the more prestigious task of carrying the ritual float. The brothers interviewed by Schrauf, in narrating their transition from *Nazareno* (marcher in the processional) to *costalero*, all followed a similar cultural "script," which allowed them to share their personal stories while reducing the need to impart superfluous details. The brothers relied on such scripts ("my life as a brother"; "the year our team of *costaleros* was formed") as a higher-order mental schemata that provided a basic structure for the more idiosyncratic, specific elements of their individual narratives (1997, 440). It should be noted, however, that Schrauf's study addresses autobiographical memory across a long span of time and is not directly applied to single, specific memories of events, although the ability to apply this method of approach to specific memories appears to be implied.

Indeed, UFO memories are typically much more temporally narrow than, say, a memory of becoming a *costalero*. Following memory classifications created by D'Andrade, UFO sightings would likely fall into the category of *episodic memory*, or recollections of one's personal activities (i.e., remembering the color of a car involved in a hit and run accident, what you were doing during the events of 9/11). This is contrasted with *semantic memory*, or one's recollection of more generalized knowledge (i.e., Barack Obama is the

President of the United States, Santa Fe is the capital of New Mexico) (1995, 190).<sup>77</sup> In fact, the two types of memories continually interact and work to construct our personal realities. D'Andrade maintains, however, that semantic memories play a greater role in the formulation of these personal realities since they are more closely associated with cultural schemas. For instance, he cites a study conducted by social psychologists that asked male and female college students to list everyday events that they found stressful. The psychologists found that differences in their reporting corresponded with cultural notions about differences in gender. For instance, female respondents tended to cite concerns with destructive criticism, unfriendly people, peer pressure, and dissatisfaction with weight as stressful events. Yet when the psychologists checked this data against a second sample of men and women—who were asked to keep a daily log of stressful events over the course of eight weeks—they found that, aside from weight issues among women, there were no discernable differences in the types of stressful events reported along gender lines.<sup>78</sup> This suggests that individuals will more easily recall “schema congruent events,” even if such events do not comprise a substantial portion of their episodic memory (1995, 190-191). Given this, is it then possible that certain anomalous episodic memories (those that do not conform to our expectations) could potentially challenge and adjust these more powerful semantic memories?

This raises yet another important question: would the recall of a particularly traumatic or exciting event be fundamentally different from a more mundane, yet equally significant memory? D'Andrade notes that cognitive studies that examine memories of exceptional events reveal them to be relatively accurate, thus refuting the contention that humans tend not to notice exceptions in the world around them (1995, 191).<sup>79</sup> Linda Garro has argued that

individuals indeed tend to remember specific events that have some emotional impact on them, although questions about their “accuracy” remain largely unanswered (2001, 117). Our discussion here primarily treats memories of past events as social reconstructions, and, as such, questions concerning the veridical accuracy of witness recall is of secondary importance. However, it is worth noting that various factual inaccuracies are relatively common in episodic memories, with some studies suggesting that nearly half of what witnesses recollect could be “erroneous” (D’Andrade 1995, 192).<sup>80</sup>

Studies of informant accuracy involving UFO sightings are understandably rare, given the random occurrence of sighting events. A notable exception is a 1964 Air Force study conducted over Clearwater, Florida. In this study, an Air Force pilot purposely dropped flares over the area at night, and following the event Air Force personnel made a public request for any civilian accounts of the display. Eighty witnesses reported back, and in the analysis of the reports, the Air Force found that nearly all witnesses accurately described the color of the lights (red), a smaller number reported seeing the white and green lights on the aircraft that dropped the flares, the majority reported the lights as appearing in a straight line, and nearly half gave the correct time of the incident. The most inaccurate statements provided by witnesses involved the duration of the sighting and the altitude of the lights. Based on the totality of the responses, the Air Force classified 12% of the reports as “very accurate,” (all conditions reported accurately) and 37% as “accurate” (all but one condition reported accurately). Therefore, approximately half of the respondents gave what would be considered accurate reports. Interestingly, gender differences were noted, with more men providing “very accurate” reports (20% versus 8%) and women providing six times as many inaccurate reports. Lastly, no witnesses appeared to particularly embellish

their accounts with descriptions of beings or claims of communication with the craft, although the Air Force did not specifically ask for personal interpretations of their sightings either (Hynek and Vallee 1975, 167-171). Ultimately, the study simply reinforces D'Andrade's contention that approximately half of a sample of witness reports will be significantly inaccurate.

Garro (2001), in discussing scholarly conceptions of autobiographical memory, relates academic debates to the pertinent question of the act of remembrance: whether or not people simply retrieve "an essentially veridical record of an original event, faithfully capturing what actually transpired" (2001, 107). She points out that early anthropologists such as Franz Boas (2006) argued against the basic "truthfulness" of personal experience narratives in favor of a more dynamic approach that considered unusual elements of the narrative the tellers omit or transform in order to make them consistent with prior cultural knowledge and expectations.<sup>81</sup> Garro adds that although accuracy of memory is one of the primary issues involved in the study of autobiographical memory, the fact that such memories are, in essence, cognitive reconstructions, does not invalidate their accuracy. Rather than address questions of accuracy and inaccuracy, she instead stresses that scholars conceptualize remembering as "a multifaceted process" involving cultural, social, and cognitive facets that occur both before, during, and after an experience (2001, 105, 111, 117, 132-133).<sup>82</sup>

In other words, a simple "memory" of a past UFO sighting would be anything but, and many of my respondents were aware of this complexity, particularly those with childhood experiences. As Alexandra pointed out after describing her experience:

Sometimes when we're children I think we fabricate stories based on myths and things that we hear from other kids in school. And because you're a child, you're able to make it seem

real in your mind. And so, as you grow up you still tell yourself these same stories that are real stories, except that in a lot of ways it almost seems that you fabricate them.

Alexandra's uncertainty of her memory was, in part, based on her acknowledgement of a longstanding childhood fear of aliens, which, she felt, may have played some part in shaping the memory. D'Andrade further lends credence to this idea. Citing a survey by Freeman, Romney, and Freeman on informant memory (1987), D'Andrade argues that memory recall depends on two main factors; how well organized the individual's schema is for that particular kind of event, and how typical the event itself may be. He states that a schema with better organization tends to positively affect overall memory. However, while a more typical event may be more likely to be remembered, such an event is also more likely to "be 'filled-in' by the schema rather than actual perception" (1995, 192). For example, Schank and Abelson (1977) provide an example of how a typical restaurant schema may gloss over specific details of a recent dining experience. Such a schema would link up several aspects of your restaurant experiences that have been built up over time. Typically, you enter the restaurant; a host or hostess shows you to your seat; you receive a menu from your server; you order your food; you eat; lastly, you pay your check and leave. Certain specific details of your most recent dining experience at a restaurant would predictably be forgotten, since the experience would be "chunked" into your memory in this schematic form. Therefore, if one were to ask you about your last trip to Applebee's, you would likely recount all the components of your restaurant schema, perhaps forgetting certain details (i.e., your waitress forgot your menu and you had to ask for one) along the way. In this context, we may likely "better" remember events where such schemas are violated (i.e., the host forgets to seat you, so you brazenly seat yourself) or when strong emotions are particularly

invoked (i.e., your server suggests you should forgo the french fries in favor of a small salad). Furthermore, while all memories are typically “scanty” and “biased,” an analysis of shared memories of events may lead to the recovery of “what actually happened” (D’Andrade, 1995, 193). I contend that analyses of shared experiences also aid in the location of specific schemas utilized by individual members of the group.

I have argued in the past (2006b) that an examination of multiple-witness UFO accounts may yield fruitful results in determining how schemas may “fill-out” ambiguous patches of our memories in order for them to make more “cultural sense.” The best example I found in my prior research was of an experience shared by a family of three in a small town in Pennsylvania in 1986. For a period of several weeks, each family member—daughter, mother, and father—witnessed the repeated appearance of a spectrum of lights over a field near their house. Although their descriptions of the lights were generally congruous, one interesting discrepancy was found between the mother’s and father’s descriptions of the object. Both individuals voiced their opinion that the light, or object, was “sweeping” the field below, as if it were searching for something on the ground. The mother stated that the object emitted an actual searchlight as it moved over the field, while the father—even after being pointedly asked—maintained that he had seen no searchlight, and was in fact surprised that an object “searching” for something below would not incorporate one. Based on this key discrepancy, I speculated that, over time, it was possible that a cultural schema had filled in part of the mother’s memory of the object. Since she felt that the object was searching the field below, a searchlight would certainly make sense! Of course, UFOs emanating beams of light are prevalent in the body of UFO imagery in popular culture, from which the mother had drawn most of her knowledge about the subject. Hence, a searchlight schema may have

crept into her memory of the event over time (or perhaps early on) both to fill in unclear details and make the sighting more closely adhere to her cultural expectations of a UFO sighting.

The above case may also speak to the power schemas have over our immediate perceptions of such events. Perception is, after all, directly influenced by cultural expectations. For instance, in a psychological study discussed by Thomas Kuhn (1996), subjects were asked to identify a series of playing cards that were briefly exposed to them. While most of the cards were normal, a select number were made 'anomalous,' such as a red six of spades and a black four of hearts. After cards were individually displayed, the subject was asked to identify the card he had seen. While subjects correctly identified almost all of the cards during even the shortest of exposures, the anomalous cards were usually (and immediately) identified as normal cards. For example, the red six of spades might be identified as a regular six of spades or a six of hearts. The cards were thus, in the words of Kuhn, "immediately fitted to one of the conceptual categories prepared by prior experience" (1996, 63).<sup>83</sup> When the exposure time of the anomalous cards was increased, subjects began to hesitate more in their answers, displaying an awareness of the anomalous card. As exposure times increased further and further, many subjects became increasingly confused and hesitant until finally, they would begin to correctly identify the anomalous cards, sometimes without hesitation. Perhaps most interestingly, several subjects were never able to correctly identify all of the anomalous cards. In fact, over ten percent of the anomalous cards were never properly identified by subjects (Kuhn, 1996, 62-64).

Relatedly, D'Andrade highlights a study conducted by Paul Kay and Willet Kempton (1984) that focused on cultural differences in perceptions of color between native English



speakers and speakers of Rarámuri, a Uto-Aztecan language of northern Mexico. For example, speakers of Rarámuri had only one term for both green and blue (*siyóname*). This lack of distinction directly affected how they judged differences in transitions between the colors versus that of English speakers (1995, 183-184). This study, along with numerous others, suggests that language plays an important role in how humans perceived similarities between things (i.e., colors, animals, music). Despite this connection, D'Andrade cautions against overstating the power of culture and language on perception, maintaining that "naïve perception can be influenced by cultural schemas, but not much" (1995, 184). Regardless, such studies suggest that the researcher must consider the likelihood that cultural schemas maintain the ability to directly impact our immediate perceptions of the world around us, *as well as* our continual reshaping of past events.

These studies further suggest that when an individual is confronted with a contextual anomaly, he or she unconsciously attempts to reshape it to fit into normal, expected categories that are based on his or her previous experiences. While some researchers may argue that stretching such categorical tendencies from an anomaly such as a red six of spades to, say, a UFO, is presumptive, the dominion cultural expectation has over perception is nevertheless convincing. An assumption allowed here is that certain types of natural phenomena or conventional craft are much less familiar to many observers than supernatural traditions. Therefore, it becomes hypothetically plausible that, faced with the brief appearance of a strange light in the sky, an observer might 'mistake' a gaseous cloud for a solid, metallic craft. On the other hand, a detailed observation of such a metallic craft over an extended period of time would be much more reliable.

This approach can shed an important light on how cultural expectations influence different perceptions of the same event. Again, the best avenue for undertaking such a study is to analyze UFO experiences with multiple witnesses. In examining such accounts, researchers can address a multitude of questions related to observer reliability and different cultural meanings (or lack thereof) associated with the same experience. For instance, how consistent might these individual accounts be with one another? What are the main discrepancies? Are these discrepancies similar to those found in multiple witness accounts of ordinary events? What is the cultural meaning applied in each observation? Would an observer with a strong UFO schema in place, for instance, perceive a strange nocturnal light as a UFO? Would a second observer with a strong airplane schema in place either witness an airplane or eliminate it as a possible explanation based on the object's adherence to his schema? Multiple witness accounts remain the best resources for addressing such questions.

While it would be nearly impossible for a researcher with limited funding to conduct a large scale study of this type, the ability nevertheless remains to compare separate accounts of single events.<sup>84</sup> Here, I will compare separate accounts involved in four different shared experiences.

The first shared experience was that of Bert and Gordon, two retired air traffic controllers currently residing in Albuquerque. Both men reported several instances in the 1970s of pilots calling in complaints of strange lights and objects near their aircraft. The only episode both men recalled being present for directly involved Gordon:

Gordon: The most distinct one that comes to mind, and the one that had quite a few people talking at one time was in 1979. I happened to be working the airspace between Tucson, Phoenix, Blythe, and Yuma. That was roughly the sector, and it was for high altitude. And it was a Navy...was it a Navy? No, maybe it may have been a Marine A6 that came on the frequency, and that has a pilot and a weapons officer onboard. And it wasn't particularly busy, and he says, "Hey Center, who've you got off my left wing?" And I said, "Well, I don't

have any known traffic off your left wing at all.” Now, there are restricted areas out there—you’re probably aware of them—where they do military operations and release flares and things like that. And we talked about that, and he said, “No, whatever this is, is right next to my wing.” I said, “Really?” Something to that effect. I said, “Again, I have no known aircraft. What are your intentions?” He was going to the west coast, maybe North Island (ed.-Naval Air Station in California) or somewhere around that area. But at any rate, he said, “If you can approve it, I’d like to get a lower altitude.” I think he was at 31,000 feet or thereabouts. I said, “Well, let me coordinate because there’s a sector below me, and I’ll be right back with you.” And I did that. I cleared him down to 10,000 feet, and he says, “Can I maneuver?” And I said, “Well, you can go to the right. I can’t clear you into the restricted areas, because you’re not part of the mission down there.” He said, “That’s good.” So he does his best evasive maneuver and goes down to 10,000 feet.

At this point, Gordon felt the incident had been resolved, although after his descent the pilot appeared even more agitated:

Gordon: Then he starts talking to me again, and now his voice has changed considerably. It’s up an octave or two, and shaky. He said, “Center, I don’t know what this is, but I cannot get rid of him. He’s still on my wing!” And I said, “Really? Okay. So again, your intentions?” He said, “I need to land, I need to get on the ground.” I said, “Well, you can go to Luke Air Force Base or Yuma, Arizona.” Something to that effect. He said, “I’ll go to Yuma.” I said, “Okay, let me coordinate.” That’s a military change-of-flight plan, so it takes a little coordination with the folks at Yuma, and I did all that and cleared him on in. So when he got on the ground, he called me on the landline. I got off the sector and I was on a break, and he said, “The weapons officer and I went to separate tables and we drew what we had both witnessed.” And then he said, “Let me explain it to you. It’s long, cigar-shaped, with many porthole-type lights on it.” And I’m sitting there thinking to myself, “Hmm, that’s interesting!” He said, “I’d really like to pursue this.” And I said, “Well, the only procedure we have in place for this is a 1-800 UFO number,” which happens to be up in Seattle, as I recall. And I gave it to him. I said, “We don’t really do anything more with them as an agency. We get these occasionally, and this is what we do.” That’s the way I was trained, and that’s what my supervisors told me to do.

By this time, Gordon had been ready to put the incident behind him. The pilot, however, remained steadfast in his determination to unravel the mystery:

Gordon: So anyhow, I get a call from him again about a week or two later. He called me from Cherry Point, which is back on the east coast (ed.-Marine Corps Air Station in North Carolina). He still wants to pursue this; he’s not happy with this. Because once you get the 1-800 number—I don’t know, I’ve never called it—I think they take your account—like you’re doing now—and they put it in some kind of logging system. And I said, “Well, I really don’t know what to tell you. Again, we don’t follow up with any more procedures. I appreciate your concern and I wish I could help you, but I’ve done about all I can do as an FAA air traffic controller.” And that was pretty much the end of the conversation. And I never heard from him again. So that was pretty much that incident in a nutshell. I remember it rather vividly, as you can tell.

Although he went on to describe several other similar incidents he was involved in (or at least privy to) during this period, the above event remained the most vivid in his memory.

Similarly, Bert recalled several incidents of his own, and also provided his own version of the event described by Gordon:

Bert: Now, there was a supervisor there that I mentioned I went to, and I mentioned it because he was a main player in it. His name was Gordon, and back at the time he was working in the sector south of Phoenix that had the airways between Gila Bend and Yuma. Their airway was J-2. And he was working, and again this was on speaker because it was late at night. He was working a guy probably around 26 or 28,000 feet. It was an F-4 phantom Marine call sign that was going into Marine Yuma. And the airway, everything on the south of it between from about ten miles south of the airway to the Mexican border was a restricted area. But this F-4 was on its way going into Marine Yuma, and he had a descent clearance probably down to about 10,000 feet. But he was still at cruise altitude somewhere around 26 or 28,000. And Gordon had just given him a discretionary descent, because there were no other airplanes in the sector. And the guy said, "Who's my traffic out there at about 12 o'clock?" [Gordon] said, "You don't have any traffic out there." He said, "No, there's somebody out there. I can see him, and he's coming right at me. It looks like it might be ten miles or so." So Gordon says, "Well, there's nobody out there, maybe he's down below the area of positive control."

I don't know if you're familiar with that, but below 18,000 feet you don't need a flight planner. Or you don't need permission to be out there flying. 18,000 feet and above is called positive-controlled airspace. You have to have an instrument flight rule's clearance in order to go above that altitude. They were basically the people who we separated in this positive airspace. So Gordon said to the pilot, "Well, maybe he's down low. We don't see anybody out there, but he could be out there flying VFR," under visual flight rules. And he said, "No, this guy is above me, and he's coming straight at me." And Gordon said, "Well, we don't have anybody out there." So the guy says, "Can I change altitude?" And Gordon told him, "You can have from 45,000 feet down to the ground." And the guy started maneuvering just to get out of the way, and he said this thing passed him, turned around and flew right up on his tail. And he said, "I'm gonna make some really abrupt maneuvers. I've gotta get away from this thing, I don't know what it is, but it's too close." So he made a bunch of combat evasive maneuvers, and this thing stayed right with him the whole time. And you could hear the panic creeping into his voice as he talked. And this guy was a Vietnam veteran that had flown ten event missions in that same type of airplane. It turns out later, because he had called numerous times afterwards, that he was a major. A career flier in the Marine Corps. He was frightened enough by the whole incident that he was willing to talk about it. But anyway, the thing started chasing him, and he was all over the sky, and he couldn't get rid of it. And he said all of sudden this thing just went away, like it had lost interest in him. Now, when he got on the ground, his radar man, who was riding in the backseat, they both got out of the plane and went into separate rooms before their debriefing. And they wrote down what happened without talking about it [to each other]. And they pretty much wrote down the same exact thing as to what went on. He called Gordon probably ten or fifteen times to talk to him about it, because he was trying to find out what had happened, too.

In comparing the two versions of the incident, we find a number of agreements, but also several minor discrepancies. Both men agreed that the incident took place in the late 1970s, with Gordon specifically stating that the year was 1979. In both Gordon and Bert's version, they stated that Bert stood behind Gordon during the incident. Furthermore, both were in agreement on most of the other general details, including Gordon's instructions to the pilot to descend, the apparent panic in the pilot's voice, and the lack of any visual confirmation on radar. Gordon recalled the aircraft as a Marine A-6 Intruder, while Bert remembered it as an F-4 Phantom. Although Bert stated that the pilot later called Gordon "probably ten or fifteen times" to talk about the incident, Gordon recalled only two such conversations. Altogether, however, the two versions of the event remain fairly similar, and the discrepancies between their accounts do not immediately reveal the presence of any obvious "filler" schemas. A shared schema is in place, however, that arguably dictates the "meaningfulness" of their narratives: a pilot reports a craft or object following nearby; radar operators report seeing nothing on radar; the pilot unsuccessfully attempts evasive maneuvers; the object or craft eventually disappears. This schema, developed over the course of several years among both men, likely provided a script through which Bert and Gordon could both identify unfolding events as UFO encounters and "chunk" certain divergent details into subsequent memories of similar events.

For example, Bert also made specific mention of another similar incident he was directly involved in, again during the late 1970s:

Bert: We were working probably at about eleven o'clock at night where all of these sectors had been combined because it was a slow time. Traffic had usually all but disappeared at that time of night. And we had had all these sectors combined. We weren't even wearing headsets. My boss and I were working, and we would put the radios on loudspeakers and basically talk to the aircraft through a telephone system, like an old handset. We were working an aircraft, and to this day I'm still very clear on it. It was a DA10, an assault

aircraft, a Falcon fan jet that had experimental engines on it. There was a new engine that they were testing...It was the only aircraft we had on the scope. I take that back, there was also one other group that was down, probably at 15,000 feet. It was a tanker from Luke Air Force Base, and there were some jet fighters that were down there practicing refueling...They were practicing and were not in any way related to what was going on. Over the speaker as we're talking, [the pilot] says, "Who the hell is that?"

Now, your first response to that when somebody is using any kind of language, especially foul language for the time...actually he probably was using a worse word than that. But my reaction was to key up the microphone and say, "November 731FJ," which was his call sign (N731FJ), "Say again?" He said, "Who the hell was that? That son of a bitch almost ran into me!" And we're looking at the radar, and no one else is there. And I said, "There's nobody out there but you." I said, "We have somebody down at 20,000 feet below you and thirty miles south of you in a refueling track, but nobody is up where you are." And he said, "Bullshit! That son of a gun almost ran into me and he's just off my wing right now!" I said, "Well, there's nobody out there." He said, "Well, I'm gonna go see what it is." And my boss, who was working there with me, keyed the microphone and said, "Well, don't you run into it!" So he took this Falcon fan jet and started chasing this light, which he described as a fire ruble. And he chased this thing and gave a running commentary over the radio for thirty or thirty-five minutes. And he talked about the thing actually flying circles around him, both vertically and laterally. He talked about it making ninety-degree turns, and this plane that he was flying and chasing this light with, was capable of about .92 mach, so it was really fast. And he said the thing was just literally toying with him. And one point, he started getting low on fuel and started talking about having to go back down and refuel, and he said all of sudden the thing started glowing very, very bright, and off it went. He said the light was just increasing in intensity, and all of sudden it was just like someone had thrown a switch and the light went out. Now we had talked to the pilots of the craft down below who had seen some flashing. The tanker pilot said he thought it might have been northern lights. He said there was definitely something flashing around out there at the time. And that was it. I talked to my [boss], who was the other person there. I have been out of touch with him for some time, and the only point he ever brought it up later was when he said, "Boy, I wish we had gone down and made a copy of the tapes."

This account closely adheres to the UFO schema established by each man (pilot sees object, nothing seen on radar, pilot cannot keep pace with object, object disappears), yet Bert was also able to recall specific details of the incident that helped distinguish it from his experience with Gordon, including the type of aircraft, its call sign, and the physical description of the anomaly provided by the pilot (fire ruble). In this instance, it remains likely that on one hand, Bert's memory of such events is predicated on their adherence to his UFO encounter schema. On the other hand, Bert clearly took care in retaining separate details of each encounter, establishing them as separate but connected events indicative of a broader pattern of strange, shared experiences among the air traffic controllers.

All told, Bert claimed that he was directly involved in five or six of these types of experiences, although he never tracked anything anomalous on radar on any occasion. Gordon claimed personal involvement in two of these types of experiences, and further stated that he had heard of 15 to 20 other similar episodes reported by coworkers during this period in the late 1970s. As with Bert, Gordon stated that nothing unusual had been tracked on radar during either incident he was involved in. Again, all of these accounts adhered to a basic UFO schema: a pilot radios in inquiring about a strange light or object approaching his plane. The controller, unable to provide radar confirmation of the object, gives clearance for a change in course or altitude. The pilot then makes said adjusts, but is closely followed by the unknown interloper. The establishment of this schema serves to create a template by which to measure other events (either experienced first hand or provided by others), as well as to demarcate those memories which are deemed related, and, therefore, meaningful.

Of course, a pertinent factor in these recollections is that of time. William Brewer's (1986) prior studies in autobiographical memory suggest that more recent memories understandably retain a large amount of specific details from the original event. Time, coupled with strong schema-based processes, however, can reshape the original memory to the degree that it becomes a new, "nonveridical" memory that is an amalgam of other extraordinary experiences and cultural expectations (Garro 2001, 118). As Bert himself stated:

Bert: It was quite hard to keep everything straight after all of those years. And the old memory tends to fade.

There is no evidence, however, that the first shared experience of Bert and Gordon is merely the product of fuzzy, combined memories. On the contrary, the overarching

similarities in their narratives is indicative of their general veracity. Yet I contend here that their subsequent exposure to UFO lore over time has made a significant impact on their interpretation of these events, particularly in each man's embrace of an extraterrestrial explanation. For instance, when I asked Bert if he had come to any conclusions about these incidents, his response suggested a considerable background knowledge of UFOs:

Bert: As I said, the idea comes to mind that we might have visitors. I don't know, I've read books about all kinds of things. From *Chariots of the Gods?* to other UFO stories, and people trying to explain their theories about the whole thing.

WD: What do you think about UFOs personally?

Bert: I think there is such a thing. Whether or not it's from another world, I don't know. Just by its name itself, a UFO is an unidentified flying object. I think the government is totally capable of keeping things quiet, which they have in the past. Now there was a book—I think it was in the early 70s—called *The Interrupted Journey*. Are you familiar with that?

Bert's response clearly indicated that he had read at least several books on the subject of UFOs, and furthermore conveyed his opinion that the federal government was "capable of keeping things quiet."

Similarly, Gordon also revealed some background knowledge in the subject of UFOs when I asked for his interpretation of the events:

Gordon: Well, I think we're getting close. And of course, some of the things that have been on TV have alluded to that. Some of the programs have. If I could actually see one in my backyard with the lights shining down on my shop, for example, I would have no illusions about the reality of it. In other words, it's probably not military aircraft that I know about. And I was a military pilot, too. And I have no knowledge, and nobody has ever shared anything with me that indicates we have aircraft that can do what some of these things can do. You know, a high speed turn on a dime, then change direction? That sort of thing. And then climb or descend at extraordinary rates of speed. I got a feeling, or my personal impression is that they're here amongst us. They may just be visiting and observing, but I think they're there. And that's where I probably might get some criticism from some people. But with my little knowledge about it and my conviction, that's the way I feel.



Although Gordon later stated that he had not read any books on the subject, he did acknowledge that television had impacted his thoughts on the subject:

Gordon: Then there are the things you see on...what was that one show? I'm trying to think of it, it was on TV for quite a while. It had quite a cult following. The lady and the man who did all the investigative work?

WD: "The X-Files."

Gordon: Yeah. I kind of relate. I think some of those shows were based on some sort of fact and research on sightings. I think some of them were on target. Some of them are there for sensationalism, I'm sure.

Gordon and Bert's memories of these types of episodes are thus impacted in some fundamental way by their subsequent exposure to UFO culture. For Bert, books by Erich von Däniken (1968) and John Fuller (1966) introduced both UFOs and extraterrestrial visitors into his personal belief language, while "The X-Files" presented Gordon with a viable, if partially fictional, reimagining of experiences similar to his own. While it would be presumptuous and over simplistic to conclude that their exposure to such media directly "changed" their memories, the historical reimaginings of von Däniken (ancient astronauts) and "The X-Files" (vast government conspiracies) speak to a subject addressed in Chapter 4: the power of popular culture to reshape our understanding of shared memories. In other words, without the cultural belief language put in place by these books and television shows, Bert and Gordon would likely imbue their memories with an altogether different meaning. Here, the past is reshaped based on the cultural expectations of the present, and the image of the UFO makes the experience—and thus, the memory—that much more meaningful and worthy of remembrance.

Bert and Gordon's narratives remain remarkably similar based in part on their shared interpretation of the experience as a likely extraterrestrial encounter. When we examine

shared experiences lacking such mutual investments, however, we may predict the number of discrepancies in accounts to increase. For example, I asked Ramon and his partner Rafael to separately provide their accounts of an enormous object they witnessed together one evening several years ago. Ramon (whose interests and experiences in a variety of anomalous experiences were discussed in Chapter 5) provided a substantial amount of detail in his recollection:

Ramon: [We had left] a Joan Baez concert in Albuquerque [in 2000], and were headed north. The concert ended around 10ish, and we didn't leave Albuquerque until around 11 in the evening. As we went up La Bajada, if you know Santa Fe at all, to the left is La Cienega and the Santa Domingo pueblo. Well, that area was in total darkness, but up ahead in the highway—again, this was at night—we saw cars stopping or already stopped on the highway. As I slowed down as we were passing, people were on either side of the highway looking directly to the west. We parked the car, and then got out and asked one guy what everyone was stopping for. And he pointed out that there was a flying saucer to the west. So, we looked and there were people on the beds of trucks sitting there. It was like a big outdoor picnic, it gave that impression.

Anyway, we looked to the west, and sure enough in the distance was a very large—I would say the size of two football fields—cylindrical object. I could tell it was cylindrical because of the way the lights were moving, and its shape in the darkness. But it was darker than the background darkness of the night. It had these interesting-looking lights that would successively go on and off all around the rim of the object. And then it blinked them all at once, and then it went dark. Then behind it rose a smaller version of the larger object. And it rose up into the air quite high, I would say fifty to a hundred feet or so. Again, it was the same exact copy of the larger object, only a much smaller version...about a third of the size. And it started to rise, and then it abruptly stopped when it reached a certain height. Then lights started to blink around its rim, and then it stopped. They went bright, and then they stopped. The larger object turned on its lights, and it blinked twice. The little object blinked once, and then it shot straight into the stratosphere and disappeared. The larger object blinked twice, and then totally went dark and shot up after it. I mean, just that quickly. When the first object went up, everybody started clapping like they had just seen something grand, which of course they did. And once the larger object followed, everybody just let go with whoops and hollers and clapping hands.

WD: How long was that total sighting in your estimation?

Ramon: From when I stopped—the larger object was already on the ground—when we stopped the car and walked around, from that point on until it disappeared I would say about six to seven minutes. We had a very good long look at it. We were standing there with our arms folded on our chests just looking at it and hearing comments that people were making on both sides of where we were standing.

Clearly, Ramon's recall of the event was rather impressive in its specificity of details.

Conversely, Rafael's account was much more brief and vague.<sup>85</sup> He stated the event occurred "several years ago," and at first appeared to confuse the event with another sighting. Like Ramon, he recalled driving north on I-25 and observing an object to the west, yet only remembered stepping out of the vehicle "for a minute or two" and made no mention of other people being present. Furthermore, while his description of the larger craft was similar to Ramon's, he stated that it disappeared rather than flying upward, and made no mention of the smaller craft.

While neither man had much background knowledge about the subject of UFOs, Ramon was certainly more interested in discussing both his own sightings (of which he had several) and his experiences rooted in paranormal traditions. As a writer, it is unsurprising that Ramon would provide more detail in his account. Furthermore, topics related to anomalous phenomena simply appealed more to Ramon than Rafael, and thus we may predict the discrepancies—in this case, the lack of detail provided by Rafael—in their accounts. As Strauss and Quinn point out, such discrepancies, or "nonsharing," may be due to the differing emotions and motivations two different individuals attach to the same event. While each may be exposed to the same information or share the same memorate, if they care differently about the information or event, they will invariably internalize it in different ways (1997, 133).

Another example of this "nonsharing" is found in the separate accounts of Nastika and Ivan, a retired couple who shared an experience in Mount Holly, New Jersey, in the early 1970s. The couple was entertaining guests one evening when their gathering was interrupted by a light in the sky. Below is Nastika's version of the event, in which she recalled two other couples being present:

Nastika: We were just, you know, having a social occasion. And nobody was a heavy drinker or drank heavily that night at all, so that was absolutely not a factor at all. But we were just chatting downstairs in a second story house. We had these sliding glass doors downstairs that opened out to our backyard, and so it was a large opening. And it was at night. I can't really remember who caught sight of it—I really don't—but somebody said, "Look! What's that?" And everybody kind of gathered over [by the window]. There was enough room so that people could all see, because it was completely glass—the sliding glass door. It was a strange light. You saw it, and then it moved! And it moved so quickly! And at one point, we were just kind of watching it move, and then in one sense...it was a little creepy or ominous, because it seemed to come...one of the zigs or zags came right toward us. And we were just all...kind of thinking, "What was that?" We had no idea what on Earth that was, or what it could be. And I think Ivan might have gone to get his gun or something like that. I don't know why he would do that, but that's really all I remember.

In Nastika's recollection of the event, we first notice that she prefaces her narrative by assuring the audience that although alcohol was consumed, no individuals were intoxicated. As discussed in the earlier section on controversial opinions, this is an example of a technique to prematurely anticipate and offset any attempts by the audience to dismiss the sighting as the result of overexcitement fueled by alcohol. After describing the event, I asked her what she and the others thought the light could be:

Nastika: It wasn't a whole lot longer after that that [our guests] left. I don't remember talking to [my friend] about it a whole lot, other than that it was just creepy and nobody knew what it was. I think the next day we all looked in the paper for an explanation. And I think people that were there made comments about what it could be, and what it couldn't be. Ivan knows something about planes. I don't know if it was [my friend] or the other lady that thought it might be some kind of plane or whatever.

WD: Do you think it could have been a plane?

Nastika: No, because there is no plane that could move that fast and in that direction. That was what caught everyone's attention. And it was high and it was low. There is no way, as it caught our attention, that it was something that could be easily explained. We just all understood that.

Nastika further described the light as intensely bright, close to the size of her thumbnail held up in front of her, and fairly far off in the distance. She stated that it appeared too far away to illuminate any of the ground below, and rejected the notion that it could have been a spotlight. She again stressed the zigzagging movement of the light as the

most upsetting, and when it appeared to rapidly move closer to the house she recalled backing away in panic. Lastly, she stated that the guests left not long after the sighting.

Below is Ivan's recollection of the event:

Ivan: My wife and I had some close friends over. A girl that she taught with...and her husband...They were friends of ours, and we'd seen them socially a number of times. We had finished dinner, which, as I recall, was . . . I'd grilled some meat on the patio in back of the house, and there was this double sliding glass door leading out to the patio, and inside, of course, in the basement, was a rec-room that was finished off, and there was a small bar there. And that's basically where we entertained friends. We had a stereo down there with speakers. Overlooking from the rec-room across the patio was an open area of our property. No houses directly in back. There were some small trees on our property, and then a split-rail fence that I had installed on the property line, and overlooking a field, or a pasture—there were no cattle or livestock or anything, I guess it was a field—probably fifteen or twenty acres. And then more trees, and then the village of Mount Holly. So there was an open area, and then a tree-filled area looking out over the backyard area of our home.

We had finished...we usually didn't socialize on a weeknight, it would have been on a Saturday night, and we finished eating, and we'd had some drinks. None of us were inebriated or anything like that. We were listening to music in the basement rec-room and someone called the group over to the sliding glass door. It was late at night, you know, after dark in the summertime it doesn't get dark up there until around 8:30 or 9:00, so it would have been after dinner, probably, I'd say, after 11:00 p.m. Late at night, I can't tell exactly when. So we went over, all four of us went over to the sliding glass door, and there was what appeared initially to be a helicopter hovering behind our house. I couldn't tell how far out it was; it was certainly not over the town of Mount Holly. It was closer than that, in towards our house over that open area over the back of our house. It looked like a single light, a real bright light. But I couldn't make out any aircraft, the outline of any aircraft. And we didn't hear anything. As best I recall, it wasn't anything . . . I was in the Air Force for four years on active duty, and I don't know of anything looking or acting like that, and I do know that [my wife's friend] got scared. She knew that at the time I was a law enforcement officer and that I kept a loaded weapon in the house, but it was two floors up. So she asked me to go get my gun. She was afraid for some reason, and I did. I left the group and ran upstairs. It was a split-level house. I ran up to the next level, and back to the bedroom and got my service revolver out of my [arm holster]. And I started back downstairs to where the group was at the sliding glass door, and I don't recall anything beyond that point.

When asked to clarify this last point, Ivan elaborated:

Ivan: I don't remember returning to the group; I don't remember going to sleep that night; I don't remember anything. And subsequently, I guess we got to bed, and everybody got home safely. The other couple got home safely because we met once again, whether it was at their house or out at a restaurant for dinner. A couple of weeks later we met, and something kicked into my head and I mentioned, "What was that all about, that night at our house? The light that we saw . . . what happened?" And everybody just drew a blank. Gradually, several of them—my wife and Donna—seemed to recall something—seeing a light and not remembering anything else. Didn't remember going to bed that night; didn't remember going home; and everybody just drew a blank. That's pretty much the way it was. . . I can remember back, being amazed that I couldn't recall anything about the night before. But it's kind of like we woke up and went about our business. We went to work on Monday morning and then we

worked all week. I worked in New York City and in South Jersey, and this never clicked in until several weeks later when we happened to be out with the same couple, and something just clicked about what happened that night.

Ivan further described the light, like Nastika, as being particularly intense, and estimated that it was probably about an eighth of a mile away from the house. Unlike Nastika, however, he did not recall the light making any movements, and instead focused on its eerie silence.

Of course, the other two main discrepancies in their accounts include the number of people present (Nastika recalled two other couples present, while Ivan only recalled one) and their memory (or lack thereof) of the rest of the evening. Furthermore, Ivan stressed the potentially threatening nature of the situation differently than Nastika. While Nastika reported backing away from the window in fright, Ivan remarked that one of the guests became upset. He then moved on to validate the primary UFO schema (strange light sitting silently above the house) by recruiting a secondary schema concerning a response to a threatening situation (retrieving his gun). In this way, the unusual (and threatening) nature of the sighting is bolstered by his subsequent actions.

Both Nastika and Ivan conceded that their experience was not something they regularly discussed, although they both stated that it was something that occasionally came up in conversations about UFOs over the years. In fact, several components of their memory of the event are likely the result of narrative “sharing” over time. For instance, Ivan clearly recalled retrieving his revolver from their bedroom and returning downstairs. Nastika, however, was uncertain about this seemingly important detail. When I pressed her on this matter, she provided a telling reply:

Nastika: I don't know if I remember him that night saying it or hearing him retell it later, to be honest. It was so many years ago. Unfortunately, our memory probably is affected by that, because Ivan has talked to other people. Like I said, I know that he talked and was in contact

with both Donna and Mike, who have since divorced. He kind of talked to me a little bit about it, but I said, “No, nope.” He knows I just don’t dwell on it.

Nastika’s response supports the idea that our “actual” memories of past events are, in reality, mental reconstructions prone to gradual narrative revisions over time. In this instance, Nastika had likely subconsciously incorporated aspects of Ivan’s account into her own narrative (even as she remained somewhat aware of it on a conscious level) as their shared account was retold time after time.<sup>86</sup>

As with Ramon and Rafael, such discrepancies are also likely related to how each individual internalized the event in his and her own way. When asked about her interpretation of the experience, Nastika was firm in her belief that the light was neither natural or conventional in origin, instead speculating that it may indicate the presence of “a life form that we don’t know or are not used to.” Although she came to this rather extraordinary conclusion, she also maintained that the experience was not something she dwelt on:

Nastika: It’s a feeling of...I’d be helpless to do anything about it. It does give you the sense of a power that I don’t have, or something we on Earth don’t have. And I really choose not to dwell on it. I think Ivan remembers more about it, because if he could, he would face it. Do you know what I mean?

[Later]

WD: Can you explain a bit more about why you don’t dwell on it? Is it out of a lack of curiosity?

Nastika: No, no. It’s really because being...otherworldly, there’s absolutely nothing I can do about it. Nothing. And I just choose not to. I feel like if I were really obsessed about it or whatnot, maybe if there was more proof or acknowledgement in our world, you would feel that somebody could eventually do something about it, or we’d learn more. But there’s not, it’s kind of a closed sort of topic. On top of that, I would be helpless to do it. It wouldn’t matter what I believed or whatever. I’m not going to be able to do anything about it. Number one, there’s not really support on the outside. There’s a power that they have that we don’t. Does that make any sense to you? So it’s kind of twofold.

Indeed, the experience appeared to have left a greater impact on Ivan, who subsequently began taking a much greater interest in the subject of UFOs. He later read multiple books on the subject, and was particularly impacted by Whitley Strieber's *Communion* (which Nastika also read). As discussed in Chapter 3, the popular impact of Strieber's book on American culture is indelible, in that it brought the idea of alien abductions into the national limelight. *Communion* and other works have not only popularized abduction narratives, but also helped establish a basic abduction schema amongst their readers (like Ivan). As discussed earlier in the chapter, the "missing time" element remains a key component of this schema, and it plays a significant role in Ivan's narrative. In this instance, I contend that Ivan's later exposure to abduction literature allowed him to reshape his hazy memory of the final moments of the experience into an abduction episode, even as he is admittedly quick to point out no recollections of humanoid interlopers. Rather, this "missing time" element of his narrative—popularized by Strieber and Budd Hopkins—transforms it from a mere strange sighting of a light to something much more troubling and uncanny.

Nastika, like Ivan, had no concrete recollection of specific events after Ivan went upstairs to retrieve his revolver.<sup>87</sup> However, she made no mention of this abrupt ending of her narrative as being particularly peculiar, and stated that their guests likely left shortly after the incident. Yet Nastika's conclusion of the event is also subject to the impact of cultural expectations. Whereas Ivan's interpretation was later affected by his exposure to abduction literature, Nastika's recollection of the conclusion of the evening was based, at least in part, on her assumption that her guests would have left shortly thereafter due to her estimation of the time (after 11pm). Here, she recruited a lower level schema of guest behavior ("polite



guests will leave before midnight”) to conclude the incident, which her audience is expected to both know and use to interpret her statement. This contention is bolstered by her uncertain language when discussing the end of the evening, using phrases such as “*I think* we talked about it the next day” and “We *probably* talked about it immediately afterwards.”<sup>88</sup> Thus, her recollection of the conclusion of the episode is based almost entirely on what she expected would have occurred.

Although Ivan’s conclusion to the event is certainly more exotic, it would be presumptive to dismiss his recollection as inaccurate in comparison to Nastika’s, since both narratives provide excellent examples of how cultural expectations and influences can impact our memories of past experiences—whether they be anomalous or mundane.<sup>89</sup> Another excellent example of this relationship is found in the bizarre shared account of Sloane and Rick, a retired couple living in Albuquerque. While driving back to New Mexico after attending Rick’s father’s funeral in Kentucky in the mid 1960s, the couple experienced a strange stopover in Tennessee. Rick described his version of the incident first:

Rick: Okay. We left [Albuquerque] to go back to Kentucky. My father had passed away. That was in 1965. I’d been long gone from home, and I had no underlying currents about being guilty about anything. Nothing like that. We were one happy family. But it hurt to lose him; he was only 44 years old. So we went back, and it was about the fifth and sixth of April in 1965. Anyway, we had stayed there, and we had gotten a late start, because my mother did not want us to leave, of course. But we headed out of Pikeville. We wanted to stay awhile longer, but she didn’t want us to...I said, “We’re never going to get down to Knoxville.” Anyway, we took off. We stopped and had coffee and donuts along the way-and I’m slowly getting to what you want to hear. I’ll just skip over some of the minor stuff. We were [driving] down in a real moist place...and we hit a cloud. That’s where it really started. We hit a cloud sitting in the middle of the road. And it was just like, “Shoooooop!” Just like that. I went into it, and I came out the other side and couldn’t see. The window was completely covered, as I recall, with a purple and yellow mist that completely covered the window.

Okay, and Sloane was sitting there, my wife, and I said, “Well, honey, get out there and clean that side.” She reached back and had what I think was a slip off of one of the pillows, and she started wiping the window down. I’m sitting there looking at her, and all of the sudden her hair just looked like it was standing on end. She jumped back in the car, and she said, “If you want the damn window clean, *you* clean it!” Her door was open, and I looked at her and I said, “Well, what?” You know?

At this point, Rick recalled feeling more confused than frightened, and even found humor in the situation until he exited the car himself:

Rick: Old brave beau, I got out of the car and walked around laughing. By the time I got to her side to finish cleaning the window, I started wiping and something...it was...I can't put it in words. It was like it was all over me, but I couldn't see anything at that time. And then, [I noticed] the smell from the water and the horseweed, which were about seven feet tall. Now, I've been in a lot of situations. I've camped out in the mountains by myself and all that. I'm not a scared person. I know everything that's in the woods, or that's supposed to be. And I went around the car, and the first thing I said, I leaned over in the car and I said, "Where is my damn gun?" Well, I didn't realize I had packed it in the back of the car. Okay. But there I was. And it was just like...now, at that point for me, it was just like you had clicked a light off. There was no memory, and the thing was I was reaching for my gun, and those were the last words I said.

Okay. We were down to about Knoxville, and we had gassed up, so when we got into this situation, whatever it was, we lost track of time. When I came to, I was sitting in the car, and she was in the car. The doors were open. My last memory was that both doors were wide open. And it was a little Malibu. I was in the car, I didn't have a belt on, and I looked at Sloane, and her hair was completely...it looked like you had poured grease on her. And it was just hanging down. Now, humidity won't do that much stuff. But anyway, I looked at her, and she said, "Go!" And a truck about that time came up behind us, a big semi, and I stayed in front of him. We got to a filling station. We had no gas, and I had just gassed up! You know? I don't know if we had sat there all this time running the gas almost completely out. But we went down, and we pulled over into a filling station. And Sloane was looking, and she said, "It's two o'clock in the morning!" We were supposed to meet her aunt for supper that night. So we had to call them...well, we didn't call them. We didn't do anything. We were just in like, stupid land. So, she was looking at the clock in there, and she says, "My God, is that two o'clock?" I remember her talking about the time, it just didn't register with me. Okay, then, we went on and we didn't really discuss this situation until about two years later. We went to Hawaii, and she was out hanging up clothes in the backyard. It was real damp over there, and the cane fields were there back then. Just like the horseweeds, about the same height. And all of the sudden, she came running into the house and said, "What happened?" And I looked at her, and I said, "What are you talking about?" She said, "What happened that night?" We had not discussed, not one word about it. That's what is amazing. Until almost two years later, I think it was.

Immediately, we find several similarities to Ivan and Nastika's narrative, including a period of missing time (at least in Ivan's memory) and a moment of panic during which each husband attempts to retrieve his firearm. Aside from the missing time motif, however, Rick's account contains no mention of strange lights or humanoid beings, a factor that will be explored more closely below. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that, like Ivan, Rick bolstered the threatening nature of the incident by referencing the gun schema, and, also like

Ivan, he framed the missing time element of the experience as the central anomaly. His wife

Sloane also agreed to share her version of the incident separately:

Sloane: Well, we had gone to Kentucky because of my father-in-law's unexpected death...And I was going to look up the exact date he died, but I think it was March 29<sup>th</sup> or 30<sup>th</sup>. So anyway, we drove, and thirty-two hours after we had gotten word we got there. We took care of all the attendant duties and so forth. Then we were there for about four or five days, and the incident occurred as we were coming back home...

So anyway, we made our way on down from Pikeville to Middlesboro, Kentucky. And I have relatives in Tennessee, and they had said that if we were ever back there, they would like for us to stop by...we were going to have dinner with them...But anyway, we had expected to be there anywhere from six to eight, and that's the time frame we told them. So we gassed up, and then we had food and coffee—I don't remember exactly what, it was a quick time there in Middlesboro. But then we took off for Knoxville, which was our prime goal...We were going down what seemed to me at least a double lane road, like two separate lanes. Each one of them double. And then we turned off the main area. There was a big lake there.<sup>90</sup> So we turned off—I think it was Tazewell, if I'm not mistaken—in Tennessee...I really don't remember how far outside of Middlesboro, probably maybe forty minutes or an hour. Anyway, we were going through there, and it was a pleasant night. It was like the fifth or sixth of April. So anyway, you could kind of smell the musty dampness of everything. It's really wet back there, as opposed to out here in the middle of the desert. And that was kind of a treat for me. I hadn't smelled that for a long time since I'd left Texas.

So anyway, we were driving and talking about what had happened at the funeral and so forth, and he was reminiscing somewhat about what had been going on. We were going through, I want to say, a depression in the road, like going downhill. Not a super hill, but a slight depression. We hadn't noticed anything really different, and this was a two lane road where they have the high weeds on each side of the road, and water was draining off, which I guess accounted for the dampness. So anyway, we hadn't really gone all that far. I would say half a mile, and we went into a cloud. That's the only explanation that I can [provide], except that it was so thick, we couldn't see to stay on the road. We were forced into stopping. Anyway, there was this...I don't want to say jelly-kind, but an oily substance of some sort that got on our windshield, and all of the windows, actually. It kind of distorted being able to see out of them clearly. It was like somebody threw cooking oil on top of the car. And so, we had to stop.

Like Rick, Sloane recalled his initial reaction as one of amusement:

Sloane: My husband was laughing at me. He said, "Why don't you get out and get something to clean that windshield off for me?" He said it jokingly, but I'm glaring at him. So I open the door, and when I did I had to step down into these really tall old weeds, like on country roads. So anyway, the only thing I had in the car was an old pillowcase in the back. We had planned on taking turns driving so we wouldn't have to stop very often. So I stripped the pillowcase off, and went around my side of the door, and I didn't really close the door. Of course, I was stumbling because it was dark already, and it was the first part of April. This was before there was any such thing as daylight savings time that I can remember. You know, that time between sundown and night when it really gets dark? It kind of fit into that area...

So I went on around the car, and it was just extraordinarily eerie. And I realized it was absolutely silent. And we had just been talking prior to that that you could hear all the

chirping, and we even had our windows down, because it was kind of a mild April day for that time frame. Back east, it stays cold a little longer than out here. And so, it was so quiet! Even when we were talking, it was like echoing off. It was like we were in this bubble, and it gave off this yellowish glow to where it was like broad daylight inside the car. I mean, we could see each other's features perfectly. So I'm outside and trying to clean up and get the grease off of it, and it's just a mess. And so then, like I say, I became more aware of my surroundings. Suddenly, the hair on my head is raising up. And I realized that I was covered in this oily substance, whatever that is, on my skin and especially in my hair. I looked like I'd been through a [indecipherable] at that point. So anyway, I just stood there for an instant or two, and it was frightening. So I scrambled back to the car, and I threw the rag at him, and he's laughing at me the whole time. And so I tell him, "If you want the damn glass cleaned off, then you get outside and *you* do it!" And there had been no other cars come by or anything since we had stopped. It was like we were the only two people in the universe. That's what it felt like there momentarily.

And so he's laughing, and he gets out, and I closed my door and I popped the lock. I locked it immediately. Whatever it was, I didn't want it in the car with me. I did not see anything. It was just a presence that I knew was there. And I felt like it was close enough that it could have reached out and touched me, yet I didn't see it. And he got out of the car, and left his door open. And he's suddenly not so jolly [laughs]. He quit laughing. And he's trying to get it off the windshield too, but then it was obvious. He began to feel exactly like I did; there was something close by. And his hair stood on end, and that's when he turned and came back to the door. And he said, "Where is my gun?" He stuck his hand in to reach for it, like I was going to get it, and I was about to say that it was in the trunk of the car. Back then, we had little kids, and we didn't want the gun where it would be accessible to the children. So we had put the gun in the trunk of the car purposely... So anyway, I opened my mouth to tell him, but nothing came out. And that's all I remember, was him reaching his hand in after me. He's standing outside the car.

Again, like Rick, Sloane's next memory was of the couple sitting in the car and facing forward:

Sloane: So, I couldn't possibly tell you how much of a timeframe it was, until we were both in the car and it was sudden, like I was aware that there was a truck at the top of this depression. It went down, and it flipped on its bright lights. And suddenly, there we were sitting in the middle of the road. Both doors were shut at that point, and I turned to look at him, and he's looking at me, and all we could think of, he said, "Let's get the hell out of here!" I don't know what happened. That's when we went down the road, still the same country road, and maybe ten or twelve miles into it he says, "We're nearly out of gas." And the point that I don't remember is... I just don't know. I can't say for sure if the car was actually running when I became aware again. I can't tell you. But we were almost out of gas. And we had just gassed up forty-five minutes ago back in Middlesboro. We almost were out of gas. I've often wondered if we sat there with the gas running during this period of time.

So anyway, we went on down this road to this service station—maybe ten miles or twelve miles—and it seemed so late. And so he stopped, and he said, "I'll have to get gas." So we went into the station. It was one of those old timey ones, like an old Texaco where you drive up and there's only one path, one on the outside and one on the inside. So anyway, we parked on the outside part of it, and I said, "Well, I'm gonna run around here to the ladies room and get this goo off of me." So he said, "Well, I'll go in." He was going to get some gasoline. And he asked the guy inside, "Has anything really strange or unusual happened

around here?” There were two guys in there, and he said “Get the hell out of my service station!” And I think my husband had already started pumping the gas, and that’s when he went back in there. And when Rick left, the guy locked the door! I mean, obviously, and didn’t even want the money for the gasoline. So at that point, I come out and I get back in the car, and I’ve still got all this stuff on me. I’m not sure how much of it, if any, he had on him or not. I seemed to remember, and it was bothering me. I felt like a piece of chicken getting ready to be cooked. So we got on into the car, and what I think is even stranger about the whole thing is that we never even talked about it from that moment on. We never mentioned it! And I had to call my aunt and explain that it was so late and we wouldn’t drop by but drive on through Texas and back up here. So, we never discussed.

When I asked Sloane what time she thought they had arrived at the gas station, she seemed unsure, but recalled looking into the window of the station and seeing the clock hands positioned in a way that suggested the time to be either 10:10pm or 1:50am. Either way, however, she felt too much time would have elapsed to account for their conscious memory of the event. She also stated that the following day, the car windows retained a “purplish” tint that she later assumed was caused by the cloud. Again in agreement with Rick, she claimed that her first real recollection of that evening occurred while the couple was in Hawaii:

Sloane: A year had passed, and my husband and I were in Hawaii. So we’re there in a little town called Ewa Beach. And I was out hanging out clothes on a clothesline out there. And all around us, it was like they mowed all around us, but we were surrounded by these very high weeds. And there was a marshy area over nearby. And so, all of a sudden I was hanging my clothing out there, and my hair started raising on end again. And I’m thinking, “Oh my God, it’s happening again!” And so I took off running, which was maybe sixty feet from the clothesline to the back door. And I jumped in the door, and I locked the door very tightly behind me. [Rick] comes in, and he says, “What in the world is wrong with you?” At that point, I said, “You remember when we were in Tennessee on our way home from Kentucky? What happened?” I said, “Something very similar happened just now out in the yard.” And that’s when, for the very first time, we began to actually discuss between us what we thought had transpired or had not transpired. So at that point, more or less, he was telling me what he remembered, and I was telling him what I remembered about the incident.

Rick and Sloane’s narratives share many more similarities than differences. They were in agreement on the most basic details, including the year (1965), timeframe (April 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup>, shortly after dusk), and location (north of Knoxville). Both described driving into a

“cloud” rather than fog, and each described its primary color as purple (with Rick adding that it appeared tinged with gold, and Sloane describing the interior of their car as being bathed in a yellowish glow). Both individuals described Sloane’s hair becoming greasy, but neither made any mention of Rick’s hair. The rest of the basics of their respective narratives are mostly in agreement, including their subsequent (fragmented) memories and later recall of the event in Hawaii.

Many of these similarities are to be expected, since we must assume the couple did share an unusual encounter of some kind. Furthermore, the couple readily acknowledged talking about the incident with each other repeatedly over the years, and thus we can expect a gradual “streamlining” of many of the details of their individual narratives. Take, for instance, Rick’s mention of Sloane’s hair “standing on end” in his account. Sloane uses this exact phrase in her own version, which is highly suggestive of Rick “borrowing” details of Sloane’s account for his own. Indeed, it would be difficult—if not impossible—to clearly differentiate the distinct, yet similar details of their accounts from those that are streamlined. Rather, as with Nastika and Ivan, we can only caution against promoting such similarities as proof of their general veracity.

Several significant differences were also apparent between the two versions of events. Although each was obviously confused by the cloud in the road, the anomalous “feeling” that caused Sloane the greatest discomfort was the sense of being watched, coupled (or caused) by the sudden silence (lack of animal noises) and the feeling of being in a “bubble.” Rick, on the other hand, reached his peak anxiety after smelling something foul in the high reeds, and subsequently felt overcome with a near paralyzing fear. Each reported that the other vocally

“snapped” the other out of his/her daze, and Rick made no mention of the unusual behavior exhibited by the gas station attendant in Sloane’s version.

Aside from some of these variations, both Rick and Sloane were not only convinced of the anomalous nature of their experience, but also felt that it related most closely to traditional UFO experiences despite the lack of most “UFO-like” traditional elements. As discussed in Chapter 5, many experiencers will seek out various cultural belief languages in order to make sense of what has happened to them, and the UFO phenomenon casts a broad net in terms of the various experiences and associated belief systems it has grown to contain. Like many others, Rick and Sloane sought out a cultural belief language to contextualize this seemingly bizarre episode, focusing primarily on the elements of “missing time” and their mutual astonishment at “forgetting” the incident for a year afterward. After the incident, Sloane felt “compelled” to start reading various books in the hope of finding experiences similar to theirs:

Sloane: When I got back, it was like I was compelled to start reading. It was like I had this little guide on my shoulder, and so I started going to the libraries and reading various categories of stuff. And that’s when I finally read a number of what they call “abduction cases.” The only one that was similar to what happened to us was the Barney and Betty Somebody?

WD: Barney and Betty Hill?

Sloane: Yeah, okay, something like that. When I read that, it reminded me of a few things that happened to us that I remember. I think it was something about the purple stuff. I wish I had my car still, and I at least had those purple windows. I do have something that happened, then.

WD: Did you have any interest in UFOs prior to this experience?

Sloane: No, and I don’t really have a big interest in it now, either. I was looking for an answer. I’d like to have an answer as to what it was that really happened.

Although Sloane presently insists that she has not come to any concrete conclusions about what might have happened to them, clearly the alien abduction literature provided her with

the best framework for contextualizing the experience. In fact, the couple later attended a UFO conference in Roswell and spoke with J. Allen Hynek, who expressed an interest in their case before suddenly passing away in 1986.

There is little question that Sloane and Rick shared an unusual experience. Yet their subsequent exposure to abduction literature likely caused them to accentuate or privilege certain details in their narrative that coincide with the traditional abduction motif, particularly that of missing time. This contention is further supported by the couple's subsequent experiences. For instance, on a later hunting trip Rick reported having another seemingly bizarre (and in his mind, *related*) experience that brought out similar emotions:

Rick: Now I don't want to get off on the other track, but the thing is the *fear*. Like I said, I have been in some situations, but I have *never* had fear like I had that night [in Tennessee], and I couldn't even see it. Okay, well, this goes back a little later to Mount Taylor [New Mexico]. I used to hunt a lot, and I was up there on Mount Taylor one day, me and a buddy of mine. And he's a Marine, a jarhead. We're sitting there, and all of a sudden I told him, "Drive me up this road." He looked at me and he said, "Where do you want to go?" I said, "Let's just go up this road." And it was just like I was a drone being driven up the mountain. I told him where to stop, and then I walked over. I said, "Look, come with me." And there was a mutilated cow. And I've been back to that spot three times, just for curiosity. And there's nothing growing there. It's a round circle where that cow was laying. It blows my mind, to tell you the truth. Why would I have that feeling to go up there and take him with me? He said, "Oh my God!" We sat down and talked about the story, and that night I left that mountain at midnight. He had woken up screaming, and I was sitting by the fire. He came out of the back of the camper and says, "I got to tell you, something's weird. A strange shape was after me." And I said, "I tell you what, I'm leaving!" You know, I don't have the wings on me to run from anything, but I have never been so humiliated, and I don't think there's a word to describe how you feel. And you don't tell people this, you keep it to yourself. People think you're crazy if you start doing something like that.

Here, the primary connection Rick made between the incidents was that same feeling of fear and helplessness. When I pressed Rick on the shape that his friend claimed to have seen, he elaborated on the entire day's events:

Rick: We were up there, and I'm a bow hunter, you know, to give the animal a chance. Well, I haven't killed an animal in many, many years. But I go to Mount Taylor with an underlying tow, to see if I can see something. Because I walked out of the blue and straight to where a cow had been mutilated. And then you read all this, and I don't know what it's doing. I wish



we did know. And then, I was hunting, and a big bull elk was coming by, and I'm watching him. Now, are you a hunter?

WD: No.

Rick: Okay. Well, a hunter is just what the word implies. For me, especially, because I had to hunt to eat when I was a kid. But you zero in on something, and that's where you're at. You stay and you hide, and whatever you need to do. But then, I had a bull elk forty yards from me, and all of sudden I got a cold sweat. I forgot about the elk, and I started scanning around me, looking. Okay, my first thought was bear or mountain lion. No, it wasn't that. It was something to do what that situation, because I got sort of weak. I'm just scanning, like something was there. Where was it? But I didn't see anything. I went back to the truck, sat down, my friend came in, and that was the night he told me about the thing. He was sleeping in the back of the truck, and he shook me and said, "Get out of the truck!" And we got out, and I said, "What's wrong?" He said, "There was a little guy looking in the window." And I looked at him and said, "A little guy?" He said, "Yeah! He looked funny. He was a little guy looking through the truck window at us." And I got out, and I'm a tracker, and I found nothing. And that was just after I had had that real letdown experience that I was being watched. So then I said, "Well, guess what? I'm packing up and going home!"

WD: Did he describe this little person in any more detail?

Rick: He just said he had a little round head, and by that point I'm just packing the truck to leave. He didn't know about the story, and I've known him forever. But I told him later, and he said, "Well, why didn't you tell me that?" I said, "Well, no need." And we were talking about the hunting trip about a year ago, and he asked me, "Well, what was that that we saw?" I said, "I didn't see it! You said you saw it." I said, "But I got scared on the mountain." He said, "No, you didn't get scared." I said, "Yes, I did." I said, "I packed my arrows and headed to the truck."

It sounds so ridiculous, but something is happening. I believe that very strongly, now.

For Rick, the connections between the events rest primarily with the same fear he felt during both incidents, as well as his use of the UFO phenomenon as a cultural belief language in making sense of the anomalous particularities (missing time, cattle mutilation, humanoid visitor). Here, Rick referenced his original experience with Sloane in processing his later experience. As Linda Garro reminds us, what is remembered is strongly directed by what is already known, and based on how we make sense of prior knowledge and experience (2001, 123). In Rick's case, his original experience in Tennessee both made his subsequent experience more meaningful and connected it to other later unusual experiences involving the observation of strange lights in the sky.

Similarly, Sloane made a connection between the original experience with certain abilities she felt she had subsequently acquired:

Sloane: After that incident I seemed to be able to anticipate when things were going to happen, like when the phone is going to ring. It's like my hearing got super sensitive. I could hear so many things like it was whispering in my ear. One of the things—my husband laughs at me—is that I kept hearing this crunching noise. I made him move all of the furniture, and it ended up being a cockroach eating on a little bit of cracker that the kids had dropped. It's like my hearing got super sensitive. And I could almost anticipate what people were going to tell me or say to me. When the phone was going to ring, when something was going to happen. If a car was going to get in my way. The only thing I can think of is that it's like I got taken out of time and then put back, but I was like three or four seconds ahead when they put me back. So like I say, I never saw a being, I never saw a thing, I never saw any little green men or spaceships. I didn't see anything like that.

Furthermore, aside from reading UFO literature, Sloane also stated that she began devouring books on a variety of technical subjects, including architecture and neurology. She also made mention of a strange blister she later found on her arm:

Sloane: I'm going to guess we were back here in Albuquerque. I'm going to say seven or eight years later, I had this big huge blister on my arm, and it looked like—don't laugh—but it looked like something had been removed out of my arm, and healed over. I still have a scar, and I noticed it in the shower the next day, and I thought, "Well, how in the world could I have cut myself?" I knew it hadn't happened when I went to bed that night. But there it was, a big cut in my arm and a big huge blister. I don't know how to account for that.

Sloane's understanding of these events in her life support Dean's argument (discussed in Chapter 5) about the tendency for individuals who have come to accept the reality of alien abduction to allow them to transform seemingly mundane events into uncanny ones.

Many abductees have claimed their experiences left them with the gift of newfound psychic abilities, interest in science and philosophy, or implanted objects under their skin (e.g., Jacobs 1992; Mack 1994; Strieber 1987). In such cases, the acceptance of exotic realities and beings allows such experiencers both a reconsideration of past events (frequent trips to the library or unusual skin lesions) and a newfound importance in their minds. In other words, it is doubtful that Sloane would retain such memories or find them particularly

meaningful without her prior knowledge and experience in the subject of UFOs. Nor is Sloane's understanding of such everyday events unique among my respondents. For instance, Joanie—whose paralysis experience as a teenager was discussed in Chapter 5—connected the incident itself with her lost pregnancy, even as she proposed sleep paralysis as the only likely explanation. Of course, Sloane would not call her experience with Rick an abduction incident either.<sup>91</sup> Yet both women were familiar with abduction lore, and both applied their knowledge of that lore in their attempts to make sense of their experiences as well as in their development of meaningful memories.

Past memories are dynamically related to one's understanding of the present world. The past is typically interpreted through a contemporary lens, even as such past events themselves create newfound meanings for present experiences (Garro 2001, 125). "Telling a memory" affects the memory itself, with repeated tellings gradually assigning it a canonical form. At the same time, however, the account is told with a purpose in mind, and that purpose will itself subtly change the account (Schrauf 1997, 445, 447). In the case of my respondents, their memories of the strange events in their lives are shaped and recontextualized based on their present understandings of what is to be considered anomalous and, hence, meaningful. For the majority of the respondents mentioned here, the UFO schema (with its various elements) serves as a primary, useful belief language in which to help make sense of prior experiences and reconstruct fragmentary memories. A cognitive approach, while revealing key insights into how schemas impact memories of such events, may also provide insights into how individuals process and express their specific viewpoints in their language, as well as convincingly communicate said viewpoints to their audience. In the following section, I will examine how my respondents use metaphoric language and

propositions to conceptualize UFOs, then apply specific methodological approaches introduced by Quinn et al. (2005) and apply them to my witnesses' accounts.

### **UFO Metaphors and Propositions**

When Naomi Quinn (2005) first began attempting to formulate a methodology for cognitive anthropologists to follow, she was primarily interested in “reconstructing” assumptions people made in everyday talk. Her early research on American ideas of marriage involved tape recording in-depth interviews and analyzing them, with the intention of reconstructing the implicit assumptions about marriage made by her respondents. This early research revealed the presence of certain key words and metaphors used by respondents in their discourse about marriage and the schemas that gave rise to them. She felt a focus on these metaphors was important due to their common use by speakers to clarify their points. Furthermore, she found metaphors to be particularly useful in this context given their status as culturally-laden shared examples. Armed with this approach, she found various shared metaphors about marriage that included: lastingness, sharedness, mutual benefit, compatibility, effort, success (or failure), and risk. Through the location and excavation of these metaphors, Quinn was thus able to articulate the cultural meanings her respondents shared about marriage (2005, 44-49).

Roy D'Andrade builds upon Quinn's research by advocating a process of “winnowing,” or selection of metaphors out of interview transcripts. Further agreeing with Quinn, he argues that once these metaphors were identified, researchers would be able to predict what concepts and causal relations respondents would use when reasoning about a given cultural topic (marriage, in this case) (2005, 86-87).

Among my respondents, one continual metaphor about UFOs appeared with some frequency. When asked about their general thoughts about the subject of UFOs or how they interpreted their own experiences, many respondents likened UFOs to portals or windows into hidden realms, other worlds, or merely other *possibilities*:

Sylvia: It opened up windows into another realm that I had never thought about.

Bradley: I'd have to say, there's probably more things in this world that we don't understand than we do understand. And I'm never going to rule anything out, but I tend to think that there's probably a rational explanation for everything. But there's always the outlier. There always might be something either that's not yet understood, or something we can never understand.

Joanie: I think I'm just more open to maybe realizing that things are not as easily explained as everyday people believe. I don't think that what we see is what we really have in reality. I'm trying to read some quantum mechanics and other sorts of things like that, to sort of put things together... I guess I feel like I'm just thinking about a perceptual reality that may not be what we think it is... But I tend to think that there may be multiple universes or some other dimension where other entities can just open a door and walk in. They don't fly in in spaceships, they just open a door. That's the way I look at it, but I'll never know for sure.

Here, Sylvia understood her experience in terms of a personal epiphany, or realization of a reality outside her everyday perceptions. Bradley, on the other hand, tempered his beliefs by directly appealing to rationalism, while still invoking the idea of a scientific “outlier” (UFO) that represents knowledge beyond our present understanding. Finally, Joanie referenced both her personal experience and interest in quantum mechanics as evidence of a more complex perceptual reality in which, in her words, other entities walk through doors rather than spaceships. Such metaphoric language serves to strengthen my contention in Chapter 5 that UFOs in American culture—both personal encounters and as subject matter—serve primarily as quasi-religious “promises” of realities, realms, intelligences, and *meanings* beyond the materialistic realm. In this sense, the cultural meanings derived from UFO experiences are often technospiritual reconciliations.

D'Andrade also maintains that locating basic propositions in people's talk about a given topic will, as with metaphors, reveal how they rely on shared cultural understandings to make sense of their personal experiences (2005, 91). Such propositions remain evident in respondents' statements about UFOs. Many respondents couched their feelings about UFOs in cautious terms, such as repeatedly stating the proposition that intelligent, extraterrestrial life elsewhere in the universe is a distinct possibility:

Mitchell: I have not read any books, but I think intelligent life is out there. I would love to see us make contact with other intelligent life in my lifetime, and I have high hopes that it will happen. Hopefully they're friendly!

Jonathan: I think it's arrogant of us to assume we're the only entities in the universe for crying out loud. What an ego trip. There appears to be a lot of planets out there, and where there's water there's life, they say. And we've now found water on Mars!

Faye: In regards to aliens and stuff, I think there's probably something out there. I don't think we could be the only things in the universe, but I think that if they were as intelligent as everyone makes out then I think they probably would have made...there probably would have been some more conclusive evidence.

The above statements reflect one repeated proposition about UFOs and extraterrestrial life that few, if any respondents vocally rejected: It would be arrogant of human beings to assume intelligent life did not exist elsewhere in the universe.

The second most repeated proposition relates to the prior metaphor of the UFO as a window into the unknown: UFOs and aliens may or may not exist, but there is still much humans do not understand about the universe. This proposition was reflected in several accounts:

Murphy: I would definitely describe myself as skeptical, if at least somewhat open. I'm the type of person that thinks most things that happen that people attribute to something "out of this world" probably have logical explanations. But I also believe that there are a few legitimate cases where something really definite is going on here.

Troy: I don't know if I actually believe in aliens, ghosts and such, but I do think there's a hell of a lot in this universe that we can't explain scientifically yet.

Tommy: Yeah, I'm extremely skeptical. I tend to push those people toward the brink of, "I really, really, doubt it." But there are some things that I can't explain.

Among these respondents, "skepticism" was generally encouraged as an admirable approach when discussing topics such as UFOs, yet several then insisted—echoing arguments made by sympathetic UFO researchers—that a small percentage of UFO reports should be taken seriously:

Jef: I think a fair percentage of them have to be something from elsewhere. I mean, the way some are depicted as moving erratically, I don't think the human body could take that.

Merlin: But I think that 90 percent of UFO reports are misidentifications. I think that the genuine ones amount to about five or ten percent.

Ryder: Varied. Most UFO sightings, lights that move in erratic patterns, who knows? Anybody can see a light in the sky. It could be a satellite, it could be Venus, it could be a weather balloon, it could be an airplane. It could be a hoax! I suppose that's why I've had more direct experiences where I couldn't deny them. They wanted me to see them.

To summarize, three basic propositions about UFOs (aside from their association with extraterrestrial life) and aliens appear to be culturally shared among most respondents:

1. Assuming intelligent life does not exist elsewhere in the universe is arrogant.
2. Whether or not UFOs and aliens are real, scientific knowledge about the universe is limited.
3. Although it is important to be skeptical, some UFO sightings may be genuine scientific mysteries.

These shared propositions speak to the cultural tightrope UFO experiencers must walk when publicly discussing the topic. Revealingly, the realm of the anomalous in public culture is thus one which must be regarded with open skepticism, while certain allowances are made for criticizing the potentially dogmatic materialism of a scientific epistemology.

As D'Andrade points out, our goal in these exercises should not be an attempt to present all ideas about society (or UFOs, in this case) Americans agree upon, but to present those "core ideas" Americans must be aware of in order to reason about the social world

(2005, 98). In the case of UFOs, most respondents appear to share the idea of UFOs as not just extraterrestrial spacecraft, but as richly symbolic portals into hidden realities that exist beyond our present scientific understandings.

### **UFO Encounters as Troubling Experiences**

Linda Garro (2003) has argued that when individuals are confronted with troubling or anomalous events in their lives, they must draw on various cultural frameworks in order to make sense of them. This process may sometimes lead to an internal cognitive ambivalence, in which the individual must work to “solve” the event in question. Additionally, they may also grapple with how to convey such potentially controversial experiences to an external (and possibly judgmental) audience. In this section, I will examine the methods used by my respondents to internalize and make sense of their UFO experiences, as well as their narrative tactics in communicating said experiences in public talk.

In regards to public expression, Claudia Strauss (2004, 2005) maintains that when speakers express an opinion on a given topic about which there has been prior discourse (and/or consensus reached) in their community, they are expected to mark, in Strauss’s words, the *cultural standing*, or degree of controversy, of that opinion. For instance, in eliciting responses from her respondents about social issues such as welfare, she is able to determine not only how they present controversial opinions in their discourse, but also how they internalize and attempt to resolve conflicting social discourses (2005, 239). As has been suggested throughout this work, the subject of UFOs remains a controversial topic in American culture. This fact also makes UFOs a relevant topic for cognitive anthropologists, particularly in analyzing how individuals manage controversial discourses. As Strauss and Quinn argue, many subjects or ideas are not easily identifiable as popularly marginalized or



approved, and thus in many instances people in every society are left to internalize conflicting ideas. For example, a person might simply choose one idea (i.e., “God exists”) and reject the rest (i.e., “God does not exist,” “Multiple gods exist”). Individuals may also select parts of competing discourses and integrate them into a single schema (i.e., “God exists, but is too complex for us to know”), or they may come to “unconscious compromises,” in which competing ideas are internalized in separate (but linked) schemas. In this scenario, the individual may act upon one, while later acting upon a conflicting schema to “balance” or alleviate any psychic conflict. Using our God example, one possible scenario could involve an agnostic who prays for his wife to survive a car crash (which she does), then subsequently dismisses the correlation in a later conversation. Other ways to internalize conflicting ideas include ambivalence (“I don’t know whether God exists or not”) and compartmentalization, in which competing ideas are internalized in separate, unconnected schemas in order to avoid putting them in conscious conflict (1997, 213-214). Again using our God example, such a scenario might involve a church-going scientist who successfully separates his research in evolutionary biology from his belief in the events described in the Book of Genesis.

The internalization of conflicting ideas about UFOs is certainly present among my respondents. Several respondents simply chose one idea (e.g., “I saw a UFO”) while rejecting the rest:

Jef: Hmm. I feel like it has to be something military. I mean, I like to believe there’s life on other planets, but for them to bolt on over to earth and hover around Clayton, North Carolina, doesn’t seem too logical to me. I don’t know.

Tommy: I would say that I have extremely vivid dreams to begin with, and I can just chalk it up to pretty much just a terrible nightmare. I’m an extremely skeptical person, and for me to accept it as anything more than that would be hard, although when I was younger it sure seemed a lot more real than it does now.

Jonathan: Well, as I stated before, it wasn't a weather balloon nor any aircraft that I can think of. It wasn't a shooting star, because they don't zigzag either. My interpretation is that it was something we don't know about. Possibly extraterrestrial. On the other hand, maybe extraterrestrials have been here for thousands of years and live here, so maybe it wasn't extraterrestrial, but terrestrial! (laughs) But to see something zigzag at lightning speeds was amazing. I can't think of anything that fast...helicopters? No way.

Although neither Jef nor Tommy were necessarily opposed to the possibility of extraterrestrial life, they each remained steadfast in their conviction that prosaic explanations for strange events were simply more likely. For Jef, alien spaceships exploring his small North Carolina town seemed unlikely, so therefore a military explanation (with a known base nearby) made more sense to him. Tommy openly pronounced his skepticism, and in keeping with that identification chose to explain his nighttime journey outside his bedroom as a nightmare rather than an abduction episode. Jonathan came to a different conclusion about his experience, and was one of the few respondents who openly interpreted his experience as an extraterrestrial sighting. In doing so, however, he listed specific reasons why he rejected various prosaic explanations ("It wasn't a weather balloon nor any aircraft that I can think of. It wasn't a shooting star, because they don't zigzag either"). This specific tactic was utilized by several other respondents, and will be discussed in more detail below.

As touched on earlier, many other respondents were less straightforward in their interpretations and struggled to balance their self-identification as rational, scientifically-minded individuals with their conviction that their personal experiences might defy rational explanations. Therefore, some developed schemas that reflected either ambivalence or integrated competing discourses (rational versus spiritualism):

Josh: Oh yeah. It's kind of like anything else, I wouldn't be here talking if I didn't think it was totally weird, because I am a scientist and I believe it could be physiological, but the bottom line was that I couldn't explain it.

Bradley: Looking back on it, I really don't know. I'm not a big believer in UFOs or anything like that. It could well have been someone playing a joke or something, but it just seemed

like a really intense light, so it would have had to be someone that was fairly close. And again, the color. I don't ever remember seeing a bright blue spotlight like that before. I'd offer to say it's unexplained.

Murphy: I mean, I've seen meteor showers before and I've seen airplanes. I mean, I live near Pittsburgh and there's an airport near there, and we see planes all the time. So, you know, it's not really a case of mistaken identity. You can't mistake a plane for something like that. Meteor showers are a once in a lifetime event sometimes, but they're not easy to mistake for other things...some people may, though. This just didn't seem right. It just didn't move like it should have if it was a meteor... Well, the only thing I can think of is...I can't think of a rational explanation for it. I mean, I'm a philosophy major. And I have to think logically about these things. And I can't just outright say that it was visitors from space. I can't say it, because I have no proof. And I can't say it's not an experiment from our government either. Maybe it's a craft that was being experimented with at the time, it could be anything. The only thing I can really come to a conclusion about is that there's a lot that I don't know about in this world.

Troy: I believe we saw a UFO in the literal definition of the word. An unidentified flying object. Whether this object was an alien spaceship or a natural phenomenon, I can't say. I'm convinced it wasn't man made, though, seeing as back in the early 90s Finland's military equipment was pretty much entirely of Soviet origin and we didn't have anything remotely capable of what we saw.

Bert: I think there is such a thing. Whether or not it's from another world, I don't know. Just by its name itself, a UFO is an unidentified flying object.

These individuals were clearly less confident in choosing one explanation over another, and as a result worked to combine the discourses in several ways. Josh and Bradley each professed prior skepticism, but were both obviously uncomfortable embracing prosaic explanations for their sightings. Rather, they each preferred to remain ambivalent by leaving their experiences as “unexplained.” In doing so, they alleviated the potential conflict between belief in UFOs and their professed skepticism.<sup>92</sup> Murphy, on the other hand, first defended the seemingly anomalous nature of his experience by utilizing the same tactic as Jonathan of listing and rejecting prosaic explanations (“I’ve seen meteor showers and I’ve seen airplanes”), but wasn’t comfortable in providing a more extraordinary interpretation. Instead, he cushioned his rejection of these explanations by invoking his background in logic and philosophy, and ultimately was only willing to concede that his knowledge of the world

was limited at best. Lastly, Troy and Bert mined out a “middle ground” between competing discourses by providing literal definitions (“an unidentified flying object”) of their sightings. All such conflict alleviations again point to the respondents’ shared sense of anxiety in engaging in open public discourse on the subject of UFOs.

This discussion leads us to Strauss’s research into how individuals harboring beliefs at odds with common public opinions either defend or censor their viewpoints. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) examination of discourse in novels, she proposes a focus on how speakers or narrators respond not only to their immediate audience, but also to previous social commentary on a given topic. First, when speakers voice their opinions on a subject about which there is “tacit agreement” of opinion in the given community, she argues that they are expected to acknowledge the public standing of that opinion. A failure to do so signals that the speaker either doesn’t know or care for the community’s opinion (2004, 161-162,172). Furthermore, these individuals invariably signal the degree to which they believe their opinions on that topic are publicly accepted through various strategies (2005, 203-204). Strauss drew many examples of such strategies from interviews in various media outlets in the mid-1990s concerning welfare reform. With proposed revisions to federal welfare legislation a frequent topic in the news, opinion polls revealed the common opinion among Americans that the current welfare system rewarded lazy behavior and out-of-wedlock birth, particularly among minority groups. As such, Strauss was able to locate various linguistic strategies used by individuals to relate opinions that were perceived as being common, debatable, or highly controversial (2004, 173). Using Strauss’s framework, we may ask if individuals who voice their opinions on UFOs register an awareness of viewpoints alternative

to their own. Relatedly, do they think of their own opinions as embattled, sensible alternatives, or common (2005, 232)?

According to Strauss, views that possess a high cultural standing in a community can be more powerful than the views most people actually harbor, and views that are considered controversial will likely be expressed sparingly and/or discretely, reinforcing the idea that few, if any, hold them. Rarely do individuals express controversial or widely ridiculed opinions as common (i.e., “since *Transformers 2* is the greatest science fiction movie ever made, it follows that...”), and in the rare instances in everyday culture where such statements are voiced, the speakers would likely be considered by most people to be “culturally or mentally incompetent, or speaking ironically, metaphorically, wishfully, or playfully, because they could not be serious” (2004, 162). In light of these distinctions, Strauss provides a “continuum of cultural standing” that organizes opinions as controversial, debatable, common, or taken-for-granted. For individuals who feel their personal views may be highly controversial in their audience’s community, she argues that sometimes they will censor them outright. For instance, in speaking with me, some witnesses were perhaps reluctant to profess their belief in certain phenomena such as alien abduction. Unless the witnesses were willing to potentially offend me, it remains likely that they were very careful about expressing opinions with which I might disagree (2004, 164).<sup>93</sup>

Alternatively, individuals may state their views in a guarded, hedging manner, using verbs like “may” or “should,” adverbs such as “possibly” and “probably,” or related adjectives “possible, probable.” They may use indirect language (“I’d rather not go into that”), denial (“I’m not sexist, but...”), or attribution to others through impersonal second or

third person language (“one possible view,” “you might say,” “a person once argued”). Bert, for instance, provided his opinion on UFOs in just such a guarded manner:

Bert: Oh, I don’t know. As I said, the idea comes to mind that we might have visitors. I don’t know, I’ve read books about all kinds of things. From *Chariots of the Gods?* to other UFO stories, and people trying to explain their theories about the whole thing.

Here, Bert used both guarded (“...[W]e might have visitors”) and impersonal language (couching his beliefs about visitors from space in the “theories” others have proposed) to convey his belief in extraterrestrials visiting the planet.

When asked later about alien abductions, Bert recounted a story he had heard from a Harvard professor about an abduction episode:

She was a friend of the family, and when I met her one night I was talking to her, and I told her I had been in the airplane business and everything. And she asked me something about it, and I told her this television show about these people back in Massachusetts who supposedly lost some hours of their lives.<sup>94</sup> And she said, “I’m very familiar with that. I’ve got a very good friend who is a psychiatrist, and he’s the man who hypnotized them.” And I said, “Well, what do you think?” She said, “I don’t know, but he was never the same after that. He was always kind of looking over his shoulder.” So I asked, “Does he really believe this happened?” And she said, “He never said it, but I think he did.” That’s something you never really want to hear [laughs].

Again, rather than state his outright belief in alien abductions, Bert opted to relate a story coming from a seemingly authoritative source (Harvard professor) in its stead.

Similarly, Jonathan attributed his belief in the paranormal to others:

Jonathan: I always keep an open mind, and try to keep an open mind about so-called paranormal stuff. Some consider it normal, not paranormal.

In attempting to express his belief in paranormal phenomena, Jonathan proceeded cautiously by both switching to the third person (“some consider it normal, not paranormal”) and asserting his general open-mindedness. Such strategies served to soften the potentially critical reception of their beliefs. Additionally, preemptive concessions (“this may not be a

popular opinion”), requests for permission (“if you will excuse that expression”), self-initiated repairs (“oh, I should have put that differently”), pauses, and hesitations are also commonly used as acknowledgements of uneasiness or discomfort with a topic. An example of this approach is found in the musings of Joanie, who exhibited clear discomfort when asked about her thoughts on UFOs:

Joanie: I never believed in aliens or UFOs or any of that stuff. I probably still don't, but I do kind of feel that there are entities that can visit...uh, I don't think they're necessarily aliens. I think that there may be entities that can pop into our reality from time to time. I don't know. I haven't really come to a major conclusion about it.

Here, Joanie was particularly hesitant and prone to self correction (making sure to distinguish “entities” from “aliens”), and she also felt the need to embed her opinion (visitation by interdimensional entities) within an avowal of noncommittal skepticism.

Lastly, speakers may use lamination, or layering of their speech. Strauss provides the example of a speaker blessed with the gift of hindsight who separates herself from the “self” as protagonist of her life story. This protagonist is limited to her then-confined understanding of the world. Often the self in this story may be depicted as young and foolish in contrast to the older and wiser speaker. In this way, the lamination serves as a method for attributing controversial views the speaker actually holds to another version of the self (Strauss 2004, 174-178; 2005, 232-234).<sup>95</sup> One example of this approach among my respondents was found in my conversation with Aram, who tempered his discussion of his UFO and paranormal experiences with the construction of a prior self influenced by religious convictions and lacking a proper skeptical outlook:

I used to really be into this stuff, and I still am now from a more skeptical perspective. I used to be very open and watchful for all of this stuff, and I still am, but like I said I kind of seek out explanations for it a little more now than I would have.... And because we were dumb young college kids, we never investigated [our UFO sightings] that fully. We just observed them and thought they were weird...I had experiences growing up that I kind of attribute now

to the religious mindset. Seeing things like...I don't know, I just don't trust any of those memories. I've had these experiences, but I really think that they were entirely mental. It's weird to recount them now as anything more than that.

Although Aram was eager to convey the seemingly strange nature of several of these experiences, he also felt the need to embed them in a broader critical framework of a prior self prone to flights of fancy and a willingness to believe. Based on their responses, the majority of respondents felt that belief in UFOs as extraterrestrial visitors and the reality of alien abductions were clearly controversial opinions, and as such those who held these opinions utilized the rhetorical tactics outlined above.

In the case of debatable opinions, Strauss states that speakers will typically express them with more openness and less hesitation, while still acknowledging their disputed status (2004, 178). Specifically, speakers will often mark them as their own by starting statements with "I think," "I view," "In my opinion," or "To me." In other such cases, individuals will present opposing points of view, then respond to them (2005, 235-236). As mentioned earlier, many respondents felt the need to list reasons why their sightings could not be the result of conventional or natural occurrences (i.e., "meteors don't zigzag"), in effect conceding that others might dispute their experiences as being anything more than mundane. Many also felt the need to mark certain statements as their own opinions:

Malla: *To me* it makes sense that there are other beings out there, and if there are and they're able to travel here, then they're much more intelligent than we are. *That's my personal opinion.* And the thing is, so many people who see things are called nuts or crazy. And I'm not nuts, and I'm not crazy. And I do know what I've seen. And no one can convince me that I didn't see things, because I did. I have nothing to gain and nothing to lose.

Cal: Well, I don't know. I had a really deep interest in science fiction during that time period, and I read every single book on that shelf in the library. I know that people around, and generally, I'm aware that people did not subscribe to the idea of life on other planets, but from that time forward I felt like there was extraterrestrial life. *I've maintained that position my whole life. So, I know it was not a popular opinion at that time. I know that people pooh-pooh it.*



Gordon: I got a feeling, or *my personal impression* is that they're here amongst us. They may just be visiting and observing, but I think they're there. And that's where *I probably might get some criticism* from some people. But with my little knowledge about it and my conviction, that's the way I feel.

Mary Jo: Well, *I do believe* that they exist, I do feel like we humans are not the only beings on this planet.

Jann: I know they exist, but it's not something I like to share. People have their prejudices about that, you know? But *I think* they're out there.

Merlin: Well, *I think* we've got visitors coming here. *I think* there's a variety of them.

Linda: *I know what I saw*, and I know it was something I couldn't explain.

Bert: *I think* there is such a thing. Whether or not it's from another world, I don't know. Just by its name itself, a UFO is an unidentified flying object.<sup>96</sup>

Each of these respondents explicitly marked their comments about extraterrestrial existence and earthly visitation as their own opinions, while several also acknowledged that other people would find fault with such perspectives (i.e., "I know that people might pooh-pooh it"). Furthermore, based on their responses we may conclude that the existence of intelligent extraterrestrial life is *at worst* debatable, while said intelligence visiting Earth is *at best* a debatable opinion.

According to Strauss, for common opinions speakers obviously assume that their viewpoints are widely shared, and thus avoid using qualifiers. The use of adages or well-known phrases in these instances is also common (i.e., "you make your bed, you sleep in it," "walk a mile in my shoes") and is a safe and easy way to directly express such opinions (2005, 236-237). Further, taboo or emphatic language may be used ("those people on Wall Street are leeches!"). A speaker can also reveal common opinion through his implied opposition to it, as in the use of explicit concession ("I do not dispute the fossil discoveries of paleontologists, but...") and implicit concession, or the borrowing and resignifying of the opposition's key terms ("government welfare") (2004, 183-184). As evidenced by responses

both in this chapter and Chapter 5, a common opinion expressed repeatedly by respondents was the assertion that being “skeptical” about UFOs and the paranormal was a good thing. Even amongst those who criticized an overly skeptical attitude (i.e., “I used to be skeptical of these things until I experienced it for myself”), their repeated usage and acknowledgement of the term is highly suggestive of its current status in American culture as the common, *proper* approach to the topic of UFOs. Yet among these respondents, the idea (or avowal) of skepticism was often used as a *recruitment* device to solicit agreement from the listener before presenting their more controversial opinions about UFOs or other paranormal beliefs.

Take, for instance, the following statements presented in Chapter 5:

Tommy: Yeah, I’m extremely skeptical. I tend to push those people toward the brink of, “I really, really, doubt it.” But there are some things that I can’t explain.

Murphy: I would definitely describe myself as skeptical, if at least somewhat open. I’m the type of person that thinks most things that happen that people attribute to something “out of this world” probably have logical explanations. But I also believe that there are a few legitimate cases where something really definite is going on here. And I think my case is one of those.

In Chapter 5, I argued that such statements reflect an awareness of a potential “rationalist challenge” from their audience. While this certainly remains true, Strauss’s approach suggests that they also use the notion of skepticism as a “good thing” to recruit audience agreement in preparation for their more controversial assertions. Here, when simply asked about their thoughts about skepticism, both Tommy and Murphy immediately identified themselves as being skeptical, suggesting that announcing oneself as a skeptical person was not a controversial act. This also speaks to the idea that “being skeptical is a good thing” is a common opinion in public discourse. Yet both men follow their skeptical self-identification proclamations with more controversial propositions. Tommy states, “But there are some things that I can’t explain.” Murphy states, “But I also believe that there are a few legitimate

cases where something really definite is going on here. And I think my case is one of those.”

*In each instance, the avowal of skepticism is a strategic attempt to convince the audience of the narrator’s adherence to normative belief, while simultaneously recruiting a sympathetic understanding of his “actual” controversial opinion: some UFOs are extraterrestrial spacecraft (or genuine scientific anomalies).*

Finally, ideas that are taken-for-granted do not have to be directly asserted, and consequently are often left unsaid. In other words, such ideas are presupposed rather than asserted, and when related propositions are in fact made, they are often done so in an explicit manner (“it goes without saying, but I’ll say it anyway”) (2004, 184-186; 2005, 238).

Among my respondents, I found it difficult to find any commonly repeated examples of taken-for-granted attitudes about UFOs specifically, save for the presumption that a discussion of UFOs was synonymous with a discussion of extraterrestrial visitation. Aside from respondents such as Joanie or Aram—who speculated on multiple explanations for UFO sightings—nearly all respondents made little to no distinction between UFOs and alien visitors, and often used the terms interchangeably.<sup>97</sup> However, as with statements of common opinion, taken-for-granted ideas were often used as recruitment tools for more controversial beliefs:

Jann: People have their prejudices, you know.

Bradley: There’s probably more things in this world that we don’t understand than that we do understand.

Jann presented a taken-for-granted attitude in an explicit manner: people are prejudiced against those who have other beliefs and life experiences. By recruiting her audience in with this statement, she sought a sympathetic viewpoint from them regarding her controversial

belief that UFOs are extraterrestrial spacecraft: some people are too prejudiced to treat UFOs (and her experience) fairly. Similarly, Bradley revealed the presupposed, taken-for-granted position that numerous scientific discoveries remain to be found in the world. This, again, is a clear attempt to convince his audience that his sighting of an anomalous object was not only possible, but indeed *probable* given how little humans currently understand about the universe.

Additionally, respondents may also string together several taken-for-granted propositions to make logical conclusions. For example, recall Jonathan's earlier statement about life in the universe:

Jonathan: I think it's arrogant of us to assume we're the only entities in the universe for crying out loud. What an ego trip. There appears to be a lot of planets out there, and where there's water there's life, they say. And we've now found water on Mars!

In this instance, Jonathan utilized two taken-for-granted propositions ("There are numerous other planets in the universe" and "Water is essential for life as we know it") and a relatively recent scientific discovery ("Water has been discovered on one of Earth's closest planetary neighbors") to construct the taken-for-granted conclusion that Mars and many other planets must contain life. This is a particularly useful strategy for convincing the audience of the logic behind his conclusion (which they may not agree with), as well as to subtly elicit their support for his original controversial opinion ("Some UFOs are extraterrestrial spacecraft").

Another narrative strategy that incorporates common opinions and taken-for-granted assumptions involves the use of schemas that the narrators assume their audience shares to interpret an event, without explaining the schemas themselves or their linkage to the narrators' interpretations. Repeated examples of this strategic device may be found in the shared narrative of Sloane and Rick. For example, both continually provided examples of

“schema violations” in their narratives in order to accentuate the anomalous nature of their experiences:

Sloane: He was going to get some gasoline. And he asked the guy inside, “Has anything really strange or unusual happened around here?” There were two guys in there, and he said “Get the hell out of my service station!” And I think my husband had already started pumping the gas, and that’s when he went back in there. And when Rick left, the guy locked the door! I mean, obviously, and didn’t even want the money for the gasoline.

Rick: Okay. Well, a hunter is just what the word implies. For me, especially, because I had to hunt to eat when I was a kid. But you zero in on something, and that’s where you’re at. You stay and you hide, and whatever you need to do. But then, I had a bull elk forty yards from me, and all of sudden I got a cold sweat. I forgot about the elk, and I started scanning around me, looking.

In Sloane’s narrative, both she and Rick were disoriented after their episode in the car, and Rick proceeded to walk into the service station and ask the attendant if anything unusual had happened. We assume that the attendant’s taken-for-granted response would be a simple, polite response, but instead he promptly and vehemently ordered Rick out of the station – a clear violation of a service schema. Its inclusion in Sloane’s narrative was thus a strategic attempt to further accentuate the unusual nature of the experience. In Rick’s excerpt, he referred to his experience on a hunting trip with a friend. He first spent considerable time explaining both how a proper hunter behaves in the field and his own expertise. When he saw a bull elk in his sights, the audience expectation would be for him to follow the hunter schema: maintain your composure and zero in on the target. Yet Rick violated this schema by getting nervous, forgetting the elk, and uneasily scanning the area around him. The audience was thus left to conclude that an unusual occurrence must indeed have occurred for an experienced hunter to violate the schema in this manner.

Respondents may also attempt an inverse strategy through distancing their experiences from common opinions about anomalous experiences. An excellent example of this tactic was found in a remark made by Sloane:

Sloane: I never saw a being, I never saw a thing, I never saw any little green men or spaceships. I didn't see anything like that.

This postscript to her description of her encounter was intended to relate to the audience the common opinion that a UFO encounter would include seeing spaceships or entities. The lack of these elements in her narrative was meant to convey its genuine authenticity and uniqueness as an anomalous event. Yet despite this specific strategy, both Sloane and Rick inferred that their shared experience was related to alien abduction episodes through subtle references to elements of the abduction schema. For instance, both focused on the element of missing time (and their subsequent, spontaneous recollection of the episode during a stay in Hawaii) without explicitly connecting them to later accounts they had read, such as the Betty and Barney Hill case. Additionally, Sloane stated that after the incident, she became a voracious reader of books (and UFO books in particular), gained significant perceptual enhancements (including the ability to “hear” a cockroach eating a piece of a cracker), and suddenly possessed the ability to anticipate future events. She concluded her account with one final anecdote:

Sloane: I'm going to guess we were back here in Albuquerque. I'm going to say seven or eight years later, I had this big huge blister on my arm, and it looked like—don't laugh—but it looked like something had been removed out of my arm, and healed over. I still have a scar, and I noticed it in the shower the next day, and I thought, “Well, how in the world could I have cut myself?” I knew it hadn't happened when I went to bed that night. But there it was, a big cut in my arm and a big huge blister. I don't know how to account for that.

All of these elements (sudden interest in UFOs, newfound psychic abilities, alien implants) exist as part of the common abduction schema, although neither Rick nor Sloane

ever explicitly suggested that they have been abducted. Rather, they each incorporated common assumptions about alien abduction in their narratives to both convince the audience of the anomalous nature of the incident and to connect it with the broader body of abduction lore. Again, such strategies are indicative of the delicate social navigation individuals must conduct in order to discuss their anomalous experiences in a public sphere.

Guided by Strauss's model, we may come to several tentative conclusions about the cultural standing of various opinions on UFOs in American culture:

1. Controversial Opinions: Extraterrestrial or nonhuman entities are visiting Earth, and/or are abducting human beings.
2. Debatable Opinions: Intelligent life exists elsewhere in the universe, and/or said intelligence has visited Earth at some point.

Common opinions and taken-for-granted attitudes about the subject of UFOs remain much less clear, since such opinions appear to vary considerably among the respondents. However, those respondents who believe that their UFO sightings represent truly anomalous events repeatedly show the tendency to recruit agreement from their audience through the use of such opinions (i.e., "I'm a skeptical person"; "People are prejudiced") in the formulation of seemingly logical conclusions. In other words, the responses examined here suggest that for many Americans, public expression of the belief in UFOs as the product of a nonhuman intelligence remains highly controversial, and those that wish to convey this belief or relate it to a personal experience must first recruit the sympathy of their audience through specific strategies: they must convince them of their own sanity and rationality, the biases of others, or the incomplete human understanding of the greater world. A failure to do so risks their exposure to public accusations of cultural or mental incompetence.

As a brief appendix to this discussion, Jane Hill has argued that scholars should also focus their attention on the “So what?” aspect of respondents’ accounts, including how each narrator argues for the “reportability” of their personal experiences. This strategy further allows for an enriched understanding of what our culture deems mundane versus exceptional (2005, 176,180). In other words, how individuals identify certain personal experiences as strange or anomalous provides further insights into shared cultural understandings of UFOs. Among my respondents, deeming an experience exceptional or anomalous was dependent on their ability to evaluate and reject prosaic explanations. Jonathan, for instance, felt that a zigzagging light was neither evidence of a meteor nor a helicopter. In other words, the anomaly—as the term suggests—exists as an obvious exception to the individual’s expectations of normal reality. In Jann’s words:

Jann: Only because, what else could that have been? We’re in the middle of the southwest, on the other side of our house is just open land. What could that have been? No sound, no nothing. And that’s what made me realize maybe that it wasn’t something normal. It was so bright. The blinds were closed! How could that light get through? That’s not the kind of light from the hallway. The brightness of it, and the lack of sound. Not something ordinary.

Jann’s response indicates that as the number of exceptional factors in an event increases, so will the witness’s conviction that an anomalous event has taken place.

As discussed in Chapter 5, several of these exceptional factors included in UFO encounters include seemingly unusual shapes, colors, and movements, and are usually coupled with a lack of sound. When witnesses attempt to contextualize personal experiences that contain such unusual or troubling elements, they must draw on certain cultural models to make sense of (and narrate) them. Garro (2003) addresses this issue in her examination of narratives of “troubling” experiences, including treatment of illnesses. Within these types of narratives, Garro views the troubling aspect as the “engine” that drives a conversion: the



troubling aspect is transformed into a Problem to be identified and dealt with. When these experiences are reported to others, they are not shaped with the preservation of facts in mind, but rather with the aim of creating meaning out of them. Furthermore, we may understand such troubling accounts less as finished, polished products, and more as in-the-moment ambiguous, often conflicting, processes (2003, 6-7, 21). Garro uses the narratives of individuals from a Cree community in Manitoba (CA) for her examples, and finds that when narrating their illness experiences the individuals tended to remain open to multiple, sometimes conflicting interpretative frameworks (i.e., seeking the aid of a medicine man versus a medical doctor) of their illnesses' causation (and cure) in order to avoid prematurely discounting conceivable framings, even as they disparaged them. In this way, the narrators' alternative frameworks for "knowing" allow them a broader framework in which to make sense of and potentially treat their problem (2003, 25-26).

Garro's examination of troubling narratives can certainly apply to UFO accounts. Although the "troubling" aspects of such experiences are typically different from illness narratives (save for a handful of strange UFO cases),<sup>98</sup> the narrators in both types of accounts still tend to draw from multiple interpretive frameworks in order to make meaning of their experiences. Furthermore, in order to better understand what has happened to them, they each tend to seek out and relate them to other narratives (Garro 2003, 6). For example, let us reconsider statements made by several respondents from Chapter 5. Here again is Murphy's interpretation of his sighting:

Murphy: The only conclusion we could really come up with...the first time we encountered it, it was just like hovering there. And the second time we encountered it, it just looked like it was...judging by the orange light that was underneath the object, it just looked like it was the same thing that was just going away from us for whatever reason. And it moved in such a weird way. I mean, I've seen meteor showers before and I've seen airplanes. I mean, I live near Pittsburgh and there's an airport near there, and we see planes all the time. So, you know, it's not really a case of mistaken identity. You can't mistake a plane for something like

that. Meteor showers are a once in a lifetime event sometimes, but they're not easy to mistake for other things...some people may, though. This just didn't seem right. It just didn't move like it should have if it was a meteor... Well, the only thing I can think of is...I can't think of a rational explanation for it. I mean, I'm a philosophy major. And I have to think logically about these things. And I can't just outright say that it was visitors from space. I can't say it, because I have no proof. And I can't say it's not an experiment from our government either. Maybe it's a craft that was being experimented with at the time, it could be anything. The only thing I can really come to a conclusion about is that there's a lot that I don't know about in this world. When I think about it, it made me feel really small. Really, really small.

Murphy drew from several interpretive frameworks, if primarily to assure the reader that he was aware of them and had taken them into consideration. He brought up both natural (meteor showers) and conventional (airplanes) explanations, then related his expertise as a rational thinker (philosophy major) to cast doubt on an extraterrestrial explanation, while finally conceding that an experimental government craft remained a possibility. His response also suggested an acknowledgement of the potentially controversial position that the object was a UFO, and reverted to the common "interpretation" that some things may be "outside of our realm of understanding."

We find a strikingly similar process of thought in Troy's interpretation of his own sighting:

Troy: I believe we saw a UFO in the literal definition of the word. An unidentified flying object. Whether this object was an alien spaceship or a natural phenomenon, I can't say. I'm convinced it wasn't man made, though, seeing as back in the early nineties Finland's military equipment was pretty much entirely of Soviet origin and we didn't have anything remotely capable of what we saw.

Troy, like Murphy, acknowledged and drew upon several interpretive frameworks: natural, conventional, and extraterrestrial. Also like Murphy, he justified his conclusion by pointing out why he believed Finnish "military equipment" could not be the source. The interpretive framework of Soviet military technology was thus acknowledged, considered, and forcefully

rejected in light of his understanding of its capabilities. Yet Troy, like Murphy, remained uncomfortable conclusively settling on an extraterrestrial explanation:

Troy: I don't know if I actually believe in aliens, ghosts and such, but I do think there's a hell of a lot in this universe that we can't explain scientifically yet.

Again, we find Troy echoing Murphy's understanding of his experience. He tempered his conclusion by reverting to the "outside of our realm of understanding" argument. This was an internalized attempt to reconcile his conviction of the object's anomalous nature with an outside "skeptical" worldview that frowns on such thinking. Additionally, this can also be considered a narrative strategy that both revealed the controversial nature of the belief in UFOs as extraterrestrial spacecraft, and his attempt to distance himself from that belief.

We even find this strategy evident among respondents who are more clearly skeptical about their own experiences, such as Jef:

Jef: Hmm. I feel like it has to be something military. I mean, I like to believe there's life on other planets, but for them to bolt on over to earth and hover around Clayton, North Carolina, doesn't seem too logical to me. I don't know. I've been told it was probably something military, something they're working on...Harrier jet technology using jets to glide around, and then my stepdad, staunch Republican, kind of Rush Limbaugh kind of guy, he says that it's probably something military monitoring Johnston County Airfield, because that's like another half hour in the other direction, but it's a tiny airfield. And they said that there were some of the Blackwater mercenaries or somebody was coming through that area, and so they were using that airfield as a stop-point to get on another plane and go somewhere else. So he thinks it might have been military, like some kind of unmanned thing monitoring Johnston County. But I really don't think it was extraterrestrial, it's just something we haven't figured out yet that the government is playing with, in my opinion.

Jef also utilized several interpretive frameworks, yet came to a more conventional conclusion after seeking out similar narratives or explanations from his stepfather. However, when later asked about his general thoughts about UFOs, his tone shifted:

Jef: I think a fair percentage of them have to be something from elsewhere. I mean, the way some are depicted as moving erratically, I don't think the human body could take that. But I think there's a lot of them are probably the government trying to come up with some new way to do whatever it is they do...go off and blast other people to smithereens. Watch other people, or whatever the military is doing at this point, and they're always trying to find out

new ways to do it. And for whatever reason, they can't tell us. So that's probably what the majority of them are.

Here, Jef still remained open to extraterrestrial explanations for other sighting reports, yet clearly wasn't comfortable associating his experience with them. This is evidenced by the contradictions in his responses. In one instance, he dismissed his own sighting as being extraterrestrial, since aliens traveling to Clayton, North Carolina, "doesn't seem too logical" to him. However, later he stated that "a fair percentage of them have to be something from elsewhere," due to their erratic movements. Note how he avoided stating where, exactly, the UFOs might be from, preferring the vague term "elsewhere." In this case, we have another example of an internal cognitive struggle with conflicting ideas: Jef simultaneously attempted to reconcile his strange experience, belief in the anomalous nature of some UFO reports, and need to appear logical to others.

In this way, we are better able to understand how respondents draw from competing interpretive frameworks as they *process* their own experiences. Far from coming to neat conclusions, these responses support Garro's contention that, in narrating troubling experiences, respondents engage in an ongoing process of reconciling contradictory interpretive frameworks. Furthermore, such responses reveal a persistent narrative strategy to distance the speaker from extraterrestrial explanations for their experiences, supporting the idea that many Americans find belief in UFOs as extraterrestrial spacecraft too controversial to publicly profess.

## **Conclusion**

Although cognitive anthropologists have not addressed investigations into the realm of anomalous experience, the study of these experiences through a cognitive approach may

yield interesting results regarding distinctions in recall and interpretation as pertaining to anomalous and everyday experiences. Cognitive schemas further represent a bridge between our folk traditions and our life experiences. Specifically, these schemas draw on cultural themes, yet at the same time are built up out of personal experience.

In examining the attitudes exhibited by my respondents, we find that the meanings they collectively ascribe to UFOs are born out of anthropocentric assumptions about extraterrestrial life, guided primarily through the 20<sup>th</sup> century popular culture representations of alien beings discussed in Chapter 3. The responses provided here (and in Chapter 5) suggest that many of my respondents tentatively embraced UFO belief language in an attempt to internally reconcile their conflicting attitudes about skepticism and spirituality, while concurrently seeking ways to safely convey such reconciliations in public discourse. This discourse further reveals how various aspects of UFO belief are stratified in degrees of controversy: a good American is a skeptical American, belief in extraterrestrial life is acceptable, belief in UFOs as extraterrestrial spacecraft is highly debatable, and belief in alien abduction should not be publicly professed.

Again, these responses speak more to broader underlying cultural assumptions about UFOs in America than they do to the respondents' individual attitudes, and we are left to conclude that, in the case of anomalous events, there are fairly strict limitations on an allowable "shared" reality. In other words, seeing strange lights in the sky is a somewhat abnormal, if acceptable claim in American culture that may or may not be subject to public ridicule. However, witnessing or worse, *interacting* with alien beings is generally understood to be a present impossibility, and expressing such a claim publicly would likely

expose an individual to ridicule from others. Therefore, belief in UFOs in American culture requires cautious, nuanced public expressions and qualifications.

A cognitive approach also reveals how various UFO schemas interact with our memories of anomalous events. In the case of numerous respondents, subsequent exposure to UFO-related media (books, movies, television shows) often caused a reconsideration, and indeed, reshaping of past events through their focus on those narrative details aligned most closely with various UFO motifs. Once these schemas—built out of this interaction between cultural exposure and personal experience—are formulated, future anomalous experiences will be perceived and interpreted based on the now developed cultural expectations about UFOs witnesses possess. Multiple witness accounts are particularly useful for outlining this process, since different individuals sharing the same experience will conceptualize it similarly or differently depending on the schemas they have in place. Rather than a litmus test for the veracity of the event, an analysis of shared experiences better serves to locate the cultural schemas witnesses rely upon as well as to uncover the narrative streamlining of their memories.

As the past several chapters have shown, UFO accounts may be understood at the level of core experience, as well as through its subsequent forms created through cultural filters and integration into the larger UFO body of lore. Hence “belief” in UFOs is, in actuality, often the end product of a complex interplay of mind, culture, and the physical world. And yet a discussion of belief in UFOs necessitates a discussion of its corollary: disbelief. As my respondents have repeatedly shown, their belief in the anomalous—be it UFOs, ghosts, psychic abilities, or universal health care—is consistently subject to public self-censorship, wariness, and concession to an ambiguous notion of “skepticism.” It is this

competing, ever present force in American culture that I will turn my attention to in Chapter 7.

## Chapter 7

### Skepticism and the Scientific Ideology

Where we have strong emotions, we're liable to fool ourselves.

-Carl Sagan

An ethos of logos without pathos yields virtuosity, not virtue.

-Paul Rabinow

Eggheads...what do *they* know?

-Homer Simpson

Prior to this chapter, I have focused my examination of the UFO phenomenon on the relationship between anomalous experiences and the available cultural belief languages that witnesses select and subscribe to in order to contextualize said experiences. Yet most scholars have ignored the role that *disbelief* plays in the folkloric continuum, and the occasional tendency, as Bill Ellis states, for “institutional experts” to harbor faith in the idea that all anomalous experiences must have simple, rational explanations (2003, 148, 153). In the cultural battle over normative belief and experience, the role of the disbeliever is unsurprisingly situated in binary opposition to that of believer, and is often associated with the more-familiar titles of “skeptic,” “rationalist,” “debunker,” or “scientist.” Such terms are hardly interchangeable, yet all symbolically encompass the adversarial role proponents of disbelief (unwittingly or not) play in public discourse on UFOs and the paranormal.

In this chapter, I will map out so-called “traditions of disbelief” and examine their position within the realm of scientific authority. First, I will discuss contemporary public views of scientists and science education, and how both have come to be viewed regularly by nonscientists with confusion and, often, disdain. I will then examine scientists’ attitudes



about science education, and how they correlate decreases in its application with the rise of religious and paranormal beliefs. Next, I will examine how scientists have historically positioned experimentalism as both a political model and a superior method for the production of knowledge. Lastly, my focus will shift to the scientific community itself, with a particular focus on the individuals that invoke the term “skeptic” in a focused campaign of ridicule and disbelief. Specifically, I will critique such skeptical responses to religion, UFOs and the paranormal, conspiracy culture, and SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence). Throughout the chapter, I will incorporate responses from university physicists and members of a skeptical society in Albuquerque, which were collected from first-hand interviews in New Mexico in the spring of 2008.

### **Scientists, Education, and Religious Threats**

In Chapter 3, I examined the role of science fiction in popular representations of scientists. As discussed, science fiction and conspiracy films from the 1950s and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century have often depicted scientists as at best untrustworthy, and at worst as corrupt, egomaniacal, and even insane. A cursory glance at public perceptions of scientists and their practice reveals strikingly similar descriptions, implying that popular culture historically (and presently) remains a primary imaginative force in the American public’s attitude toward the scientific discipline. Before analyzing the methodology of “disbelief,” it is important to first contextualize science’s current crisis of credibility in public opinion.

In 1957, Margaret Mead conducted her now-famous survey of 35,000 American high school children to specifically gauge “the cultural shorthand” students use in conveying images of scientists. In her conclusions, Mead stated that many responses shared the idea of the scientist as either working solitarily in a dingy laboratory or existing as an anonymous

cog in a giant corporate machine. If students imagined the scientist as working for the government, he or she was often forced to keep dangerous secrets and stood under constant surveillance. Mead argued that these stereotypical images suggested students held more respect than admiration for the scientific community, and she placed the emphasis for this blame on mass media images of scientists (Frayling 2005, 12-14).<sup>99</sup>

Christopher Frayling cites a similar study performed twenty-five years later as evidence that these stereotypes remained unchanged. In David Wade Chambers' 1982 study of schoolchildren aged five to eleven in Montreal, Quebec, he simply asked them to draw what a scientist looked like. The children often created images of men in white lab coats with eyeglasses, facial hair, surrounded by "symbols of research" (instruments and various laboratory equipment) and "symbols of knowledge" (books and filing cabinets). Chambers found that by the fifth grade, children had more frequently begun conveying "alternative" images of scientists, including drawings reminiscent of mad scientists such as Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde and Dr. Frankenstein. Unlike Mead's study, however, Chambers' group appeared to more heavily emphasize warfare, secretive experiments, and government science, while the repeated drawings of white lab coats suggested the influence of the increasing appearance of scientific "authority figures" in television and print advertising (2005, 14-15).<sup>100</sup>

Another study Frayling cites is that of Roslynn Haynes, who examined how scientists were presented in Western literature from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Haynes found general "core" descriptions in each period that began with 16<sup>th</sup> century "alchemists" who sought secret, forbidden knowledge. By the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century, the "absent-minded professor" came into fashion, and was notable for his single-minded obsession with a tiny branch of knowledge-at the expense of other social responsibilities. This literary figure was followed

by the “inhuman rationalist” of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, who favored detached scientific inquiry over human emotions and ignored moral considerations. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, this figure was accompanied by the “heroic adventurer” scientist. Lastly, by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the helpless scientist (well-intentioned tool of government or corporate interests) and social idealist (maverick hero rebelling against government or industry) also became popular caricatures (2005, 36).<sup>101</sup>

Frayling’s own research survey, modeled after these prior studies, was conducted in 2003. He found that the results were largely similar, and concluded that public understanding of the scientific community continues to derive primarily from popular culture representations, particularly comic books, cartoons, video games, and movies. Especially alarming for Frayling was the notion that American society’s views of science have “regressed” from a collective sense of awe prior to World War II to suspicion, fear, and now disdain (2005, 219-224). Clearly, science and its practitioners continue to suffer from public image problems born out of a variety of social factors. Scientists themselves, however, typically place the blame on science education in schools.

Studies in science education suggest that such ignorance arises as a direct result of the way scientific methodology is taught to students, from elementary school through graduate school. Rather than being taught as a cognitive tool, it is often taught as a series of concepts and facts, emphasizing belief over practice (Singer and Benassi 1997, 391). One of the most public advocates of science education, Carl Sagan, argued that the scientific community itself, along with the influence of popular culture, were primarily to blame for the perceived lack of solid public science education:

If science were explained to the average person in a way that is accessible and exciting, there would be no room for pseudoscience. But there is a kind of Gresham’s Law by which in

popular culture the bad science drives out the good. And for this I think we have to blame, first, the scientific community ourselves for not doing a better job of popularizing science, and second, the media, which are in this respect almost uniformly dreadful...[T]o whatever measure this term has any meaning, science has the...virtue, and it is not an inconsiderable one, of being true (1997, 383).

A fairly recent poll of working scientists' attitudes about the public would certainly support Sagan's concerns. The poll, conducted from December 1999 to March 2000, found that while the vast majority of the scientists surveyed believed that greater public understanding of science would be largely beneficial, most still had a low opinion of the nonscientist's ability to understand science. Furthermore, many scientists surveyed harbored an inherent distrust of the media overall, overwhelmingly blaming media outlets as a barrier against improved science education rather than the lack of communication skills among scientists themselves (Frayling 2005, 45).<sup>102</sup> Yet the structure of the scientific community itself has also been indicted by some commentators, who argue that due to their exponential growth and increased specialization, science and technology have become too complex for ordinary citizens, much less students, to comprehend (Goggin 1986, 14). Such technological progress and specialization, while yielding a greater sense of disciplinary control, nevertheless produce a narrowing of meaning (Rabinow 1996, 22). Clearly, perceived problems of science education in the U.S. cannot be reduced to singular causes.

Many of the scientists I interviewed had their own specific perspectives on this issue.<sup>103</sup> Their responses were provided in response to a perceived increase in interest in UFOs and the paranormal in American culture. For instance, Tom, a university physicist, agreed with the notion that scientists themselves are largely to blame for both their public personas and the overall decline in science education:

Tom: You know, when I see this fascination growing in the general public in paranormal thought, in occultism, I frankly think of that as being a demonstration of our failure as

scientists to more broadly educate the public. My understanding is that you see less of this in Europe, you see more of it in North America. For one reason or another, and again, sociologists would know more than I would know about this, there seems to be a real failure in general scientific education in the population.

In his critique of science education in the United States, Tom invoked an image of Europe, birthplace of the Enlightenment, as a continent less susceptible to belief in the paranormal, the occult, and, presumably, religion.

More specifically, Clayton, a retired physicist and member of a local skeptical society, placed blame both on students in school, and on a lack of public proponents of science education like Sagan:

Clayton: It's not cool to be bright anymore. That's apparent...[But] what has happened? I don't know. I miss Carl Sagan. He was the science explainer. And there are people in science who feel that he was too publicity-seeking...you know, that "it's below us," that it's not a true science. But Sagan was doing a lot of good work. Isaac Asimov was also a terrific explainer. But they are now gone. And I don't see any good science explainers anymore.

Clayton both imagined a time in American history where a solid scientific education was particularly valued among the youth culture, and when the scientific community itself was more willing to engage the general public.

Whereas Tom and Clayton lament vague changes in science education, Peter, another member of the skeptical society, had firsthand experience with this issue as a chemistry and physics teacher at a local middle school. He described an ideal (and his) way for teachers to convey scientific practice to students:

Peter: Well, the way I teach primarily is through labs. I'll use today as an example. So today was a really simple lab. My students were taking little samples of iron, zinc, magnesium, aluminum, and copper, which kind of run across the periodic table from left to right. And they're highly reactive on the left and get less reactive as you get to the mobile gases. And so rather than just tell them that this is the rule, that they're highly reactive here and less reactive here, my way of presenting that is, "You guys find out for yourselves." So you're going to test five things, you're going to add some hydrochloric acid, and you're going to see how much hydrogen gas is produced. And you're going to rate those based on—over about twenty minutes time—how much hydrogen gas is produced. And from that, you will draw a conclusion—not because I said so—but because your data supports it.

Like the Singer and Benassi study, Peter contends that more teachers need to convey scientific practice through laboratory experimentation. However, he scoffed at the notion that science education is in decline in the United States, even though he acknowledged that schools with better funding often benefit from better facilities and instruction:

Peter : I've got a daughter sitting over here and I've watched her go through middle school and now start high school. I think, in general, kids are getting a better education now than I did in the 70s. Now, is everything perfect? Of course not. I mean certainly, when I look at what I see my colleagues doing, what I see my daughter doing in her classes, that's certainly two steps above what I did when I was in sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth grade. [But] I think there are probably lots of places where it's not what it should be. We've been very careful to select schools...my daughter has not gone to her district school, she's been a transfer student and we've been real conscious of that. Had we just looked at the local school and said, "Go here" we probably wouldn't have been as happy.

Contrary to Clayton's nostalgic claim, Peter contended that, although certainly not true across the national board, science education in the United States has actually improved in the past thirty years.

Lastly, Trace, another retired physicist and member of the skeptical society, embodies an alternate, yet familiar perspective on the perceived crisis in education:

Trace: It's a battle I think between myth and reason. And it's a big battle, and it certainly includes religious fanatics, but it's much broader than that. It goes into many aspects of our lives. And it's amazing how powerful it is. I mean, just think of Christian scientists who refuse medical treatment for themselves and their children because they don't believe the germ-theory of disease. They believe that disease is God's punishment and the solution is prayer. Now, that's occurring today. And yet it's an idea that's thousands of years old and totally false. But you couldn't persuade them in a million years. They're not going to change... And what I'm seeing now is education just getting far, far worse. And everything being dumped on the education system now, they're babysitters. And their parents are, in many cases, lunatics. My parents, if the teachers said something about me, I'd get it! And now I hear all the parents threatening teachers and suing them and getting their kids' grades changed, and never believing anybody except their child, who they know is a liar and who they know has skipped school and has not done his homework. They know that, and they don't do anything about it. These kids, and I think I saw something about it on television, they're entering the work world and they expect exactly the same thing. They expect that the lunacy that they faced...like they'd play baseball and nobody would keep score. Or they would get trophies for participation but not for winning, and now they go into the real world, the business world, and expect things to be different or they leave. I've got quite a few business people telling me that you can't imagine the employees that they have today. They don't follow instructions, they don't show up on time, they leave whenever they feel like it.

We should have started with this, so that I could be more optimistic. I think it's feeding on itself...maybe this is a cycle in the evolution of culture. And the pendulum will swing the other way, I hope so. Go take a look on the web at the Creation Science museum in Kentucky. I mean all through it, they've got the bad guy labeled "Reason." Reason! So they have charts like the Ten Commandments, and on one side is reason which says "trying to figure out the real world." And the other side is God's word, and you're supposed to turn off your reason and have faith. I mean, it's the idea of fighting against reasoning! And that's why they go after younger and younger kids, that's why the Discovery Institute<sup>104</sup> is so eager to get this into public schools, so they can get kids young. Just like Hitler went after the youth to make sure they would be indoctrinated by the time they got to be adults, because I think like B.F. Skinner said if the environment is strong enough in one direction, that's the way most kids will go.

Trace's concerns, as with many of the scientists I spoke with, are rooted in the idea that a causal relationship exists between a decrease in science education and a perceived rise in belief in religious, paranormal, and "pseudoscientific" ideas.<sup>105</sup>

The differentiation in knowledge production between these two realms has its Western roots in Enlightenment ideals. Although opinions on the matter vary by individual, many secular scientists feel outright rejection of traditional religious belief systems is a present impossibility, even as they promote rationalism and the scientific method as superior tools in formulating universal constructs of reality. Perhaps unsurprisingly, all but one of the scientists I spoke with identified themselves as agnostics, atheists, or "secular humanists." Many of the respondents, when asked for their general thoughts on religion, were careful not to explicitly discount religion as an important system of belief, while concurrently extolling the superior virtues of scientific inquiry. Tom, for instance, disagreed with rationalist attacks on religious beliefs, even as he assumed such beliefs will eventually decline among the scientifically educated:

Tom: I'd say first of all I'm a very highly reverent person. I've always been very much put off by people that attack or challenge people's religious beliefs because again it's kind of challenging their sense of well-being...[But] I think that as we continue to advance science we'll see the same progression that's always occurred. You know, more and more [people] will kind of shift out of the realm of the dictate of the church or of religious opinion and more go into what's been objectively repeatable in science.

Joel, a geologist and member of the skeptical society, accepted religious belief as a normal part of most people's lives, as long as such beliefs remain distinguished from a scientific perspective:

Joel: By tradition, we are a religious people. And this is the way I work with my wife, who is a devout Baptist. This is our tradition and if you're going to live in this culture, you're going to need to know about it. From one point of view or another, and I don't have any objection to her bringing my daughter up in this tradition as long as we adhere to sound scientific principles. Because there are a whole bunch of people in her church who are staunch creationists. And I say, "Socialize with them, they're friends, that's just fine." "But you get your science at home, and not in the church!" (laughs)... I'm not the kind of person that can go to church on Sunday and follow any religious tradition and all of its tenets and then go home and be a scientist. A lot of people can. That's fine. I can't, and it took me until I was forty to really sort this out in my mind, and say, "Okay, here is the divide, and I'm going this way, I'm going the scientific way. I just have to." But I'm open to looking at what people say, and what their religious experience is. Because there's all sorts of scientific paydirt in that if you care to pursue it.

Although he described himself as a "recovering Catholic," Forrester, a university physicist, still found value in basic humanitarian messages imparted through much of religious ideology:

Forrester: I think religion is generally good, especially religions that are mostly...I guess like a common Christianity where it's mostly things like the golden rule. If you actually followed the teachings, you would be pretty much a good person. So I think it's all good. The thing was that Catholicism was not the right way to bring me up because the hypocrisy was way too obvious from a very early age. It was very evident that we were being brainwashed...[Now] I can go to a mass in a Catholic or Episcopal or whatever church, and if the minister is really smart I can enjoy it, [especially if]he puts a nice spin on the biblical thing and he's not telling you that you have to believe it this way or whatever.

Another common perspective by respondents positioned religious beliefs as useful, even biological reactions to fluctuating conditions in people's lives. Physicist and skeptical society member Mike embodied this viewpoint when discussing the role of religion during moments of personal crisis:

Mike: I think religion certainly has a place in human survival, especially when things are hopeless. Like if you've got cancer or if you're in a car accident or some bad thing. It gives you something to cling onto in the absence of anything else...I think it's perhaps like a survival mechanism.



The above statements suggest an ambivalence, or even discomfort, among some nonreligious scientists in talking about the role of religion in contemporary society. Their critiques remain guarded and carefully worded: Tom expresses “reverence” for religion even as he dismisses it as an outmoded conception of reality. Other scientists, however, were a bit more adamant in their categorical rejection of religion as a collective, viable worldview. Their responses often portrayed a more cynical outlook on the role of religion in the contemporary world, and several expressed alarmist fears about its actual or potential harm in human affairs. Bridget, a university physicist originally from Sweden, views religion as an archaic worldview that is no longer needed, and furthermore questions the financial motivation she sees amongst some American televangelists:

Bridget: In general, I don't think that religion is a...how can I say...all these different religions and churches, I don't necessarily see it as a good thing. I can see why they are [needed], but I don't think they are the answer to what it is. So my point, my view of that, is religion is rather something that came about because we didn't know science.

WD: Do you think beliefs in these types of things can be dangerous or detrimental in some way?

Bridget: I do think they can, especially if we go back to this thing of interpreting texts literally. I do think they can be harmful. And especially if you go and look at the role of women in those texts. I mean clearly, I don't want those texts to be interpreted literally. So I do think it can be used in a harmful way. But I haven't seen this that much in Sweden, maybe it's coming but I really don't like those churches that I see here on TV and they are just crying and [say] “Give us money.” What kind of religion is that?

Whereas Bridget was particularly concerned about how many world religions have historically mistreated women and the underlying financial motivations of modern televangelists, Trace's primary antagonism toward religious perspectives was rooted in those instances in which he felt they encroached upon the political sphere:

Trace: So religion, as far as I'm concerned, I'm tolerant unless they're intolerant. And if they try to push their views on me, or if they try to change the meaning of the U.S. constitution, or claim that the United States is a Christian nation, or tell me what is right and what is wrong, and if I don't follow them I'm going to Hell or they'll send me a death threat, then I'll get cross-wise with them. So to sum it up, I'm intolerant of intolerance.

Bridget and Trace thus provided “conditional” arguments against religion, particularly when they felt it “overstepped” whatever boundaries they personally imposed on it.

More pressingly, Clayton worried that the continual presence of religion in American life may eventually impact the country’s position as a global leader:

Clayton: Compared to Europe, the United States is probably the most religious society in the world. My concern is that if we see a proliferation of Biblical literalism, we’re going to see people getting very smug, and feeling that gee, we don’t have to look into things. It’s all going to be covered for us. And I see this attitude eventually making the United States a second-tier country, behind China, behind India, probably behind Japan.

Once again invoking an idea of an intellectually superior Europe and Far East, as well as a more secular American past, Clayton made a clear association between religious beliefs and a lack of intellectual curiosity.

Patrick, a magician and member of the skeptical society, expressed an even more alarmist fear about the role of religion in the modern world. His perspective, shared by several other respondents, was that nearly all religions invariably produce extremist sects that threaten global stability:

Patrick: In the last few years, I have become much more interested in religion. I’ve looked into a lot of things more...well, I’ve had a lot more time to do so. Whereas I was originally an atheist, I’m now more of an atheist than before! [laughs] In other words, every time I look at religion...I used to be kind of neutral. If somebody wants to believe, that’s okay. Now I’ve begun to see that it’s really a very bad thing. And this was maybe even before the 9/11 disaster, which of course is partly due to religious extremism. But there are other religious extremists in just about every religion that I know about. So, I don’t adhere to any religion, I don’t think that I ever could. I don’t foresee any reason why I would be religious.

Of course, Patrick’s biased generalization could have easily been applied to scientists and their own potential “extremists”: the builders of nuclear weaponry. Such cognitive dissonance, however, is more understandable given Patrick’s prior career as a weapons developer.

However, the most blunt assessment of religious belief was provided by Nelson, a university physicist, who also echoed Mike's biological explanation for why such beliefs (and their secular remnants) continue to survive in the modern age:

Nelson: In all human endeavors, particularly now in finance but certainly in religion, people are always looking for the next snake oil salesman. You sell what people want to buy. And that's what I think about organized religion in general.

Most secular Europeans are very strongly against genetic engineering, and it's part of their moral code. And it's a part of a moral code that has supplanted the Christian moral code that they used to have. But now it's part of their religion. And people are like that. They need moral purpose and I think it's biologically engineered into us through evolution. That's why I think religion will never go away.

The respondents also provided pointed distinctions between the religious and scientific realms, as well as various potential conflicts between the epistemologies. Tom and Clayton, for instance, argued that science and religion address fundamentally different realms of inquisition, and need not enter into conflict in public life:

Tom: The thing is that science tries to answer "how" and what the underlying mechanisms are and how they relate to one another. Usually religion is centered on trying to determine some more metaphysical and maybe mythical basis for one's relevance in the scheme of things. So they kind of are aimed at different purposes in a sense. Again, science is certainly not a belief system, it's the only objective method of determining the truth.

Clayton: They are areas that are separate. Science looks for natural explanations for natural phenomena, and that rules out supernatural explanations. Religion really deals more with how people should interact with each other and with God, if they believe in such a god.

Other respondents remained hopeful that science and religion could peacefully coexist, particularly in the minds of individuals participating in both spheres:

Peter: If you want to take any sacred texts and interpret them literally, there's a conflict. Because they can't both happen, you can't have it both ways! But I think people have the ability, if they choose, to have two spheres, to have that separation and actually live a totally logical life.

Joel: You can still believe in God and be a good scientist.

Despite actively promoting a scientific model of inquiry as inherently, Peter, Joel, and Tom were reluctant to overtly criticize or categorically reject religious claims.

Forrester went so far as to admonish colleagues who openly attack religious beliefs, arguing that in many cases such individuals are attacking claims that cannot be scientifically tested:

Forrester: I mean, my own belief is...I'm disturbed by scientists who are atheist or agnostic—I don't remember which means what—to the point of laughing at people who believe in God. Because it's illogical, there's clearly things science can't explain, or you can't devise an experiment to test. And therefore, it's not science and therefore you can't use your credentials as a scientist to denigrate it. To me it seems obvious. I mean, where did the universe come from? I don't know, you'll never know. And [it's] something we can't comprehend, and you have faith? That's fine.

Although the above statements reinforce the heterogeneity of attitudes about the relationship between science and religion amongst members of the scientific community, such viewpoints were in the minority within this sample group. Most respondents expressed considerable trepidation about the role of religious faith in contemporary American life, and often focused on issues such as stem cell research, intelligent design, and perceived anti-scientific policies promoted by the then-in-power Bush administration as examples of the negative impact of religious ideology on public policy:

Nelson: I think a big challenge is that it's very difficult to figure out...we all have this sort of moral basis; we think it's wrong to kill people in most circumstances. We think it's probably wrong to steal from people in most circumstances. But then you get around the fringes of morality and it's hard for people to figure those things out. And I think we turn to religion sometimes to do that. And then you get things like stem cell issues and abortion issues and things like that that are at the fringes of morality and people struggle to determine right from wrong in those situations. And I think that organized religion purports to make those decisions for people, and sometimes those decisions—for example, in the case of stem cells—are antithetical to scientific inquiry.

Patrick: If you look at religion historically, you find that they've done an awful lot of bad things vis-à-vis science, and they still are. The Catholic Church finally decided that in fact the solar system is heliocentric. Not geocentric. That was only a little over three hundred years ago. Not really very long in terms of historical perspective. Now there's a Creationist movement attempting to get creationism taught in school along with something they call intelligent design... Right now we have a great potential in stem-cell research. And this has been thwarted by a belief, again a magical belief, in this human soul that is not only

illogical—there’s no logical basis for it—but they neglect the fact that one, embryos as they call them, they’re actually blastocysts or something—not really embryos, but these little collections of cells will be destroyed anyway. And number two, which people don’t always realize, somewhere between half and maybe more of the fertilized eggs are aborted naturally. Usually within the first two or three weeks. So, many people who think that somehow this thing is a human being really are not thinking very logically when you consider these other factors. So, the upshot is that they’re holding up research in an important field. That’s just one example.

WD: Do you think that long-term, science and religion can coexist?

Patrick: I don’t think they will ever be reconciled. There’s always going to be some kind of a divide—science wanting to do certain things that are reasonable and religion saying no, no, no.

Again, many respondents conveyed an overarching fear of religious ideologies taking an increasing aggressive role in the political realm. Nelson, while expressing his dismay at the politicization of religious causes, suggested a past when religions did not interfere with politics. In our discussion, I provided a quick counterargument:

Nelson: Well, there are current difficulties with Muslim extremists, but most religions—I’ve never read the Koran—but most religions, I think, most traditional religions emphasize the proper treatment of your fellow man. And that is, I think, a good thing. In fact, I think that’s why I actually think that when people like Europeans or Americans become more secular and yet still have religious biology, that they become a little bit scarier. Because the new religions that they invent, they don’t call them religions, but the new religions that guide their actions are no longer focused on their treatment of their fellow man. They’re focused on other things. Actually, you can see this in the Pope’s announcement last week of the new seven deadly sins. Very few of which have to do with the treatment of your fellow man. And the Southern Baptist congregation came out and said, “The most important thing is that we stop global warming,” or something like that. And to me, that’s a symptom of a diseased religion in the sense that the proper focus of religion is how you treat your fellow man, or your fellow woman. And it just becomes political, if you deviate from that it becomes exclusively political.

WD: But hasn’t religion always been political?

Nelson: Uh...I don’t know if Jesus ever ran for political office. [Laughs]

WD: Well, he was certainly advocating rebellion against the Roman Empire, at least on a local level.

Nelson: I don’t know if he ever advocated violence against the Roman Empire, he might have advocated disobedience to the Roman Empire.

WD: Sure, but that still makes it a political act, though.

Nelson: Yeah, I suppose that’s true.

Like Clayton and several others, Nelson's assumptions about the historical role of religion in political life appear rooted more in an imagined, idealized separation of realms than in actuality.

Rather than being viewed as a constant (even if adversarial) presence in the political sphere, many respondents saw religious beliefs, motivations, and causes as an ever-increasing, threatening encroachment upon civil discourse. This method of conceptualization easily conjures metaphoric language familiar to Cold War containment: cultural battles, invading forces, infiltrators, nefarious hordes. Trace provided one such framework in which a cultural "war" is currently underway between advocates of science and rationalism, and proponents of irrational belief systems:

Trace: In fact, we're even seeing a war on science by the extreme religious fundamentalists in this country, and certainly among the Islamic extremists... For some reason now, though, these people have, for at least twenty years, and incredibly for the last ten years, have stealthily moved into positions of power—mostly government power, as well as developing a think-tank called the Discovery Institute...I don't know if you've been watching television or reading your mail, but extreme fundamentalism is blatant, it's open. They actually think, for instance, that teaching Sunday school is a qualification for running for political office...So things have gotten, in my opinion, very much worse in this area.

It's just an open attack, and you've got a government that pays no attention to science, then denies all the facts behind global warming, prevents studies of embryonic stem cells...it's gone far broader than evolution now, too. Many fundamentalists—not all, of course—but the extremists are essentially blaming science for the ills in society. The destruction of family values and so on. It's a war.

Trace broadened his critique to include a bevy of individuals and institutions—including some in academia—that exhibit a lack of critical thinking in their decision making processes, and ultimately viewed problems in religious thinking as symptomatic of broader trends in American thought:

Trace: You can't believe the amount of time I've spent trying to figure out what motivates these people. And it goes pretty deep, psychologically. And you're looking at the right field. It was Mark Twain or Will Rogers who said, "The less the evidence, the stronger the belief." And in fact, that's exactly true. And I've also been giving some talks on nuclear power, and the ignorance of people is incredible. But their unwillingness to hear the other side is also

incredible. It's not even that they want to argue with you. The moment you open your mouth, you're labeled as "one of them." Just like in religion. You're the Satan. So you see the same kind of thinking in both extreme liberals and extreme conservatives, this "I know the truth!"

Above all else, Trace and his colleagues appear to fear the idea of *extremism* above all else, which they seem to partially define as arising out of dogmatic, uncritical worldviews. This leads to another shared belief common among these respondents, and one espoused by scientists for centuries: science, as a practice, presents an ideal model for ethical political rule.

### **Science as a Political Model**

Indeed, many of the respondents viewed the scientific model as an ideal political model, and also argued that ethical issues in science, such as stem cell research, were best handled by the scientific community itself. Their underlying assumption seemed to be that rationalism, objectivity, and dispassionate observation inherently yield adequate ethical conclusions. For example, when asked if he viewed scientific practice as a potentially useful political model, Tom responded in the positive and equated a philosophy of science with one of egalitarianism:

Tom: Absolutely. And in fact, a philosophy emerging from science of egalitarianism, one of openness, one of centering on what's right, not who's right.

His response speaks to a core, critical assumption shared by many of his colleagues: science eventually "gets things right," and ideas win out over the personalities that promote them. Furthermore, scientists are inherently *ethical*.

On the controversial subject of genetic engineering, Clayton was asked if a more stringent code of ethics was needed, and, if so, who should be involved in that process:

Clayton: Yes. But it must be developed by the scientists themselves. Perhaps by the National Academy of Sciences. That would be a reasonable place.

Clayton's response reinforces the underlying anxiety felt by many scientists who worry about the participation of nonscientists in ethical debates surrounding their various disciplines.

In fact, the only respondent that argued for greater public participation in these ethical discussions was Nelson, who felt that isolated ethical discussions among scientists was potentially detrimental to the greater public good:

Nelson: I think the problem is that scientists, like supposedly everybody, we serve society, right? When society gives us an opportunity not to live in caves, we have an obligation to give back to that society no matter what our occupation is. And so scientists cannot set themselves up as high priests of some kind of cult where we don't have to listen to what other people care about. Our job is really to educate people as well as do our own research, and persuade people that what we think is moral and right, that other people will believe that.

Nelson's opinion was not vocally conveyed by his colleagues. Their idea of scientific practice, particularly experimentalism, as a viable democratic model has its roots in 17<sup>th</sup> century England. Experimentalism, or the belief that experimentalism yields truth, in actuality was borne out of a heated philosophical debate over 300 years ago. Steven Shapin and Simon Shaffer's seminal work *Leviathan and the Air Pump* (1985) examined the debate between Thomas Hobbes and Robert Boyle over Boyle's air pump experiments in the 1660s. At its heart, this debate involved the issue of acceptable methods of knowledge production. Terms such as "truth" and "objectivity," according to Shapin and Shaffer, are best understood as the historical accomplishments of individual judgments (1985, 14). In this debate, Boyle argued that relative assent was best accomplished through an "experimentally generated matter of fact" and a probabilistic framework for knowledge production, while Hobbes argued for absolute certainty and universal assent (1985, 23-24). Boyle argued that achieving universal assent was an impossibility, and instead advocated for the modern



framework through which the production of scientific knowledge was best produced, including the material (device or machine itself), literary (description and publication of methodologies, successes, and failures) and social (peer-review) (1985, 76-78).

The experimentalist framework, of course, won out. Yet many of Hobbes' critiques remain prescient. First, he was skeptical of the supposedly public and witnessed character of laboratory experiments and their ability to generate consensus. In other words, he expressed concern about public transparency in the experimentalist model and the possibility of guarded knowledge. He also felt that the experimental program was not a philosophy, which he defined as a practice of demonstrating how effects followed from causes or of inferring causes from effects. For Hobbes, experimentalism failed to satisfy this definition. He next rebuked the notion that experimentalists could establish a boundary between the observation of positive regularities (facts) produced through experiments, and their physical causation (theory). Hobbes also maintained that *all* experiments carry with them certain theoretical assumptions, embedded even in the tools of experimentation, and that these assumptions could always be challenged.<sup>106</sup> Lastly, and perhaps most critically, he viewed experimental spaces as private and exclusive rather than open and public. Since access to these spaces was indeed restricted, he felt that experimental constructions of fact were private and perhaps *partial* affairs. Such private spaces further necessitated "masters of the rest" who achieve greater authoritative claims to knowledge (1985, 111-113).

Hobbes' criticisms, particularly in regards to experimental spaces as private and exclusive, remain relevant to modern critiques of the scientific establishment. Historically, the witnessing of experimentation has required two conditions: first, the experience had to be accessible, and second, witnesses had to be reliable and their testimony creditable. Shapin

and Shaffer contend that the first condition has historically worked to open up experimental spaces, while the second has acted to restrict entry. The resultant space, in their words, has been the construction of the “public space with restricted access.” This, they maintain, is an adequate description of the modern scientific laboratory. Although they may carry no legal sanction against public entry, they remain reserved for “authorized personnel.” For the authors, this provides sufficient proof that democratic ideals and the requirement of professional expertise form, at best, an “unstable compound” (1985, 336). Of course, such public spaces with restricted access do not account for the innumerable classified projects funded by the U.S. federal government, to which public access is outright denied. On several levels, the modern scientific practice born out of 17<sup>th</sup> century European experimentalism has not lent itself to notions of democratic participation and transparency.

Shapin and Shaffer’s broader point is that knowledge produced (and authenticated) within intellectual spaces invariably becomes a political tool in the wider polity, and that the acceptance of said knowledge is entirely dependent upon the ability of its political proponents to insinuate themselves into various institutions and interest groups. Put simply, they state, “He who has the most, and the most powerful, allies wins” (1985, 342).

Regarding contemporary scientific practice, the authors believe that traditional characterizations of scientific discovery (e.g., “Eureka!” moments) perhaps do not adequately describe the actual process. Scientists are often fond of telling such stories of discovery, providing anecdotes of the type, “One day so and so had an idea.” However, in practice, this is a much more complicated process. While such stories focus on individual ideas, in reality the process involves institutional requirements, group traditions, seminar meetings, and various discussions (Latour and Woolgar 1979, 169-170). This seeming disconnect between

public characterizations and private, complex processes of knowledge production highlights deeper issues, as stated by Shapin and Shaffer:

Present day problems of defining knowledge, society, and relationships between them center on the same dichotomies between public and private, authority and expertise...[W]e regard our scientific knowledge as open and accessible to the public, but the public does not understand it. Scientific journals are available in public and university libraries, but they are written in a language alien to the citizenry...the public still does not enter into our “open” laboratories. Our society is said to be democratic, but the public cannot call to account what they cannot comprehend. Knowledge is open in principle but closed in practice. To entertain these doubts about our science is to question the constitution of our society. It is no wonder that scientific knowledge is so difficult to hold up to scrutiny (1985, 343).

Shapin and Shaffer’s commentary speaks to the tangible contradictions between how science is publicly promoted and privately practiced. Yet this experimental community has, since its conception, largely ignored this contradiction and maintained its image as a model of the ideal polity. Shapin and Shaffer note that early Royal Society publicists advocated their community as one free of dispute, scandal, and civil war. Rather, the community was one painted as peaceful, self-ordering, and able to generate consensus (1985, 341).

Carl Sagan, as with my respondents, continued to convey this idea in his own work. Although carefully acknowledging past abuses of scientific knowledge (including the atomic bomb), Sagan champions scientific progress as the best way “to improve social, political, and economic systems” (1996, 423). Using a similar technique of conservative commentators invoking God, he also envisions the foundation of the United States as occurring at the hands of those well-versed in scientific findings and attitudes, specifically pointing to Benjamin Franklin’s involvement in electrical physics and James Madison’s use of biological and chemical metaphors in *The Federalist Papers*. Sagan directly positions scientific progress against the majority of history (“before spacecraft, before telescopes...”), which he categorizes as a broad history of magical thinking. His futurist vision, a democratic and

(scientifically) educated world, remains the primary hope against the magical onslaught of “enveloping darkness” (1996, 425,434).

This artificial binary, according to the anthropologist Paul Rabinow, remains rooted in an older Enlightenment concept espoused by sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu, who envisioned two types of human subjects: those who act in the social world and those that don't. Within this framework, actors in the social world exist in a state of *illusio* and remain fundamentally unaware of their broader social context. The sociologist (or scientist), on the other hand, studies these actors with serious “interests” in their lives. Such scientists, through the rigorous self-application of ascetic techniques, are imagined to somehow “free” themselves from these trivial interests that produce *illusio* and thus allow for themselves a more objective perspective on the greater world. This state allows for indifference and impartiality, since the scientists would presumably have no vested interests in both their observations and the results of their experimentation (1996, 8-10). Indeed, this reimagining is best observed in the construction of the modern scientific article, in which all traces of fortune, misfortune, accidents, and uncertainties are withheld from the text by an anonymous, “everyman” author (Markus 1987, 29).<sup>107</sup>

In another controversial look at the construction of scientific “facts” in a laboratory setting, Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar's *Laboratory Life* (1979) provided an anthropological study of Roger Guillemin's laboratory at the Salk Institute. The authors sought to examine the relationship between the daily activities of these laboratory scientists and their construction of facts, as well as how said facts differed from their construction of accounts. They found that, far from the outside appearance of a body of organized, coherent,

and logical practices, such scientists continually struggled with making sense of a chaotic order of observations (1979, 36, 40).

More specifically, Latour and Woolgar found that, of all the scientific papers produced by the lab in a seven year period, only five percent were written for lay audiences, suggesting that the majority of publications (and knowledge) produced by the lab was meant for an exclusive scientific audience, and that the “lay papers” served an important, if limited, public relations function in the acquisition of funds (1979, 72). Rabinow, in his ethnography of molecular biologists, found that such a climate facilitates a lack of “self-questioning” among scientists, who, while occasionally debating potentially beneficial or dangerous political applications of their research, abstain from debating or discussing the parameters of their “textual or nondiscursive” scientific practice (1996, 22-23). To further problematize matters, past studies have suggested that the reputation of the researcher or primary investigator and her home institution were more influential in publication considerations than the quality of the work submitted (Longino 1986, 59). Moreover, financial and institutional investment and return appeared to be primary factors in guiding the laboratory’s research interests. Far from existing solely as dispassionate observers in a laboratory setting, in a broader context researchers also existed within an economic system as both individual capitalists and employees. In fact, economic forces, according to Latour and Woolgar, were heavily influential in determining both the career paths of researchers and the facts they constructed (1979, 190, 230). The larger point made by the authors is that laboratory research, despite its public conveyance, does not occur in a socioeconomic vacuum. Rather, their operations are reliant upon a variety of outside factors that include “the number of people in the field, the unexpectedness of the point, the personality and institutional

attachment of the authors, the stakes, and the style of the paper” (1979, 237). As Rabinow has suggested, it is not difficult for outside observers to reimagine the history of science “as a long series of experiments in determining the extent of the dispositions’ malleability, their elaboration and their enduring possibility of corruption” (1996, 17). In other words, the production of scientific knowledge cannot simply be reduced to the application of experimentation and subsequent observation, but necessarily includes a variety of nonscientific influences from both outside and within the laboratory setting.

Yet among its most public advocates, including the late Sagan, science as practice is continually presented as objective and value-free. While ethnographic examinations of laboratory research processes undermine these ideas, the growth of the military-industrial complex further problematizes them. As discussed in Chapter 2, since World War II various scientific laboratories, institutions, and practitioners have increasingly engaged in research projects that rely heavily upon the financial support of technology companies and the U.S. military. As Trevor Paglen has argued, the Manhattan Project set a secret, “black world” in motion that has increasingly encroached upon landscapes (e.g., New Mexico), the nation’s capital, and university campuses. As the Cold War lumbered on, the previously unthinkable notion of classified industries, secret billion dollar budgets, and “entire branches of science devoted to secret science” became both commonplace and generally unquestioned (2009, 94-95). Michael Goggin notes that, by the mid-1980s, the Department of Defense had become a major investor in university research (1986, 10). And although government support of scientific research has historically been justified by both its value to the military and in instilling technological competitiveness in the international spectrum, military support on university campuses continues to grow. In 1983, the U.S. military accounted for 16.4% of

the total research budget at American colleges and universities (Longino 1986, 65). Private industry also plays a major role in university research funding. By 1986, fully a quarter of biotechnology research at universities was being funded by industrial firms, and scientists with ties to such industries were five times as likely as their unconnected colleagues to abstain from publically publishing their research findings (Weil, 1988).<sup>108</sup>

Here in New Mexico, for the 2008 fiscal year the University of New Mexico was awarded a total of \$303.4 million in contract and grant awards. Of that sum, fully 63% came from federal and national laboratory funding (OVPR, 2008). Such economic aid, although increasingly vital for the continuation of various research projects at the University of New Mexico and around the country, nevertheless finds itself, among other considerations, as an integral part of the structure of a weapons economy they have an active interest in maintaining and expanding. Such interests outside university research impact knowledge by necessitating its growth in specific directions (Longino 1986, 65). Alongside increased military funding, concerns have also been raised about the center of power in science shifting from scientists and engineers to industrialists and profit motives (Dickson 1984). As Goggin lamented:

[T]he proprietary interest of private corporations, the secrecy that surrounds many industry-university agreements, and the restrictions that some patrons impose on investigators are in direct conflict with both the norms of science and the purposes of the academy (1986, 18).

Goggin's concerns about ever-encroaching corporate interests upon the scientific world were augmented by the increase in military funding of science research spurred by the then unprecedented defense spending actively promoted by the Reagan administration. The post 9/11 world of combating terrorism has arguably worsened this collusion. By Paglen's estimates, classified spending for the 2009 fiscal year—including various types of classified

scientific research—was \$34 billion, the highest total since the Reagan era peak in 1987 (2009, 182). Indeed, the argument has been raised by Helen Longino that since the military, intelligence organizations, and private industry now stand as the primary sources of funding for scientific research in the U.S., they exercise *de facto* control over it (1986, 59). These considerations are relevant to the past and present occupations of many of my respondents. Nearly all of them have had prior or existing experience conducting research at least partially funded by the U.S. military, private companies, or both. When asked if they felt political motivations existed among scientists, most respondents willingly conceded that such biases have occasionally clouded research. In his answer to this question, Tom acknowledged political motivations among some scientists, yet espoused pure experimentalism as a way to overcome them:

Tom: No doubt. In fact, a lot of times...I guess that's why I'm an experimentalist...as a scientist who has hired a number of people to my group...I look for a person who's trying to disprove what they think. Because that's kind of the scientific method. So the progress of science and the quality of a good scientist is how hard a good scientist tries to reject what they think at the time. Not how hard they try to find evidence to prove what they think.

WD: Do you think that's sometimes a problem in scientific research, though?

Tom: No doubt. Absolutely. In fact, the literature is full of examples of science gone bad. We've seen bad science occur many times more recently. I mean, the whole question about cold fusion was again an example where everybody got really excited about it before anybody was certain that it was repeatable. And so the basis of objective reality, is the objective ability to repeat the experiment. And so everybody got wound up...Congress, Utah, everybody. And then, they couldn't repeat it. Even today people are really emotional about it. And it shouldn't be an emotional point. Either you repeat the results or you can't.

For Tom, political motivations and conflicting interests are conceptualized as problematizing outside forces that occasionally disrupt scientific research, rather than inextractable, systemic factors inherent within all scientific inquiry.



Similarly, Peter identified political factors that hinder certain research projects, while musing that most scientists likely look beyond such considerations in the name of general, continuous knowledge production:

Peter: I don't think you ever separate, especially what's done at the level way above me, it's as much politics as anything else. I mean, we had all these plans to build big supercolliders, and it was pure politics that said, "No, we're not building those," which is a shame, but that wasn't based on what we should be doing or anything. It was based on whose state was going to have it, and it was just bizarre.

WD: Do you think these questions aren't addressed enough among scientists?

Peter: Well, I don't think that scientists in general are political. The higher up people go, the more they're never doing science; they're trying to get funding and trying to do all kinds of other things.

WD: Would you argue that most of them, whether they're funded at the academic level or through the government, that in and of itself makes it a political act?

Peter: Oh sure, absolutely. There's always politics involved. I don't think, though, that short of if someone like Bill Gates came along and said, "Here's a couple billions of dollars, do what you want!" that you know, people are always—whether we're begging for money in the schools to run labs or someone's wanting to build a supercollider, yeah you have to...

WD: So doesn't that make scientists political in a sense?

Peter: Oh sure.

WD: Do you think they're not aware of that, or just don't think about it?

Peter: I think they think about it, but they also like to think they're serving this higher purpose.

As previously noted, most respondents did not dispute claims surrounding occasional political motivations among scientists, even if they often reserved such biases for those "higher up" funding the actual research. When the subject turned toward scientific objectivity, ethics, and weapons research, however, many respondents took on a somewhat defensive (pun intended) position, arguing that some research applications were justified in their secrecy and exclusivity. Trace, for example, saw political motivations in science as a

more recent bureaucratic problem (again highlighting his dislike of the Bush administration) even as he argued for continual weapons research in the face of a “lunatic world”:

Trace: If you're [asking if] some scientists are human and subject to human failures, the answer is yes. Absolutely. If you're [asking if] some scientists and engineers are beholden to the people who pay their salaries? The answer is yes, unequivocally. If you say, “Do they alter their results to meet their sponsors' needs?” I'll say, sometimes. Most scientists don't like to do that. But again, lately you've got the bureaucrats in Washington, for instance, overruling their own scientists... They're now controlling politically both scientific funding and results and publication, which I think is totally wrong. In terms of weapons research, if you're talking moral issues, some people have moral problems with that, some don't. Some people believe national defense is extremely important, and especially in terms of modern warfare where you want to keep casualties as low as possible. That kind of technology is very, very valuable. Very important. Weapons in the defense against weapons. The development of Kevlar and the new ceramics for bulletproof clothing, and the use of robotics instead of people. National security in this lunatic world is still very important. But I don't know if that's answering your question.

With this reply, Trace at once sought to justify a potential overemphasis on weapons research as both a deterrent of future human casualties while, like Tom, marginalizing political motivations in scientific research as stemming primarily from outside nonscientists.

Clayton echoed Trace's sentiments about the need for national security and the continual classification of weapons research, and further contended that much of the research at Los Alamos had potentially peaceful applications:

Clayton: A few years ago, I heard a very interesting talk by a Russian scientist who had just spent two months at Los Alamos working on a joint project. He ended his talk by saying, “Don't let the government shut it down.” And I'm convinced that the work at Los Alamos is worthwhile, but the classified work is almost surely connected with the technical details of the nuclear devices, or how do you get a thermonuclear reaction going, how small can you make it. These are all weapons questions. But questions like the effects of radiation on man and genetic effects, survival studies, I see these as basically unclassified and very useful projects.

WD: So many of these projects have very broad applications in the world?

Clayton: Certainly!

WD: But is it a concern of yours that many of these projects, or the newest and latest technology is primarily geared towards weapon technology?

Clayton: I don't see that it's a real problem. I really don't.

WD: Why?

Clayton: I'm concerned about nuclear proliferation. The fact that India and Pakistan both have nuclear weapons and still have unsettled situations is very disturbing. It appears that North Korea has at least one nuclear device and they have a very unstable national leader. I'm worried about the possibility that this unstable leader will for some reason detonate the device, and I worry even more about what our response might be. If not ours, then some other country. So I'm not sure if that answers your question.

Perceived outside threats, particularly trumpeted post-Cold War by the second Bush administration in its "War on Terror," appear to hold a particular resonance among many of the respondents. Again, Paglen's notion of national security trumping civil liberties on all matters of public discourse appears to particularly hold true among these individuals, even as they convey apprehension and anxiety over the then administration's aggressive foreign policy. Concerns over the potentially harmful application of scientific research are often dismissed with the argument that all knowledge can be used for good or evil ends, but that knowledge itself remains neutral and the application of scientific research in the real world remains unpredictable (Longino 1986, 58). This sentiment is perfectly expressed by Patrick, who maintains that science itself remains a neutral practice that can potentially be abused, and highlights that potential abuse as a justification for preemptive weapons research:

Patrick: First of all, science is neutral. It's neither good, nor is it bad. The way you use it may be good or bad. The same chemists who have done some wonderful things, dyes, that's probably what I'm wearing right now—good old I.G. Farben. They were the ones who supplied Zyklon B, which was what they used to exterminate, in this case, the Jews and other undesirables. So, the science was neutral. Zyklon was actually a rat poison. It was a good thing, but it got misused. The same thing with anything else—nuclear energy, same way. It can be used in positive ways or obviously in bad ways.

But as new technology becomes available, other countries are going to develop it. We at least need to have countermeasures, even if we don't use it. Nerve gas is the same way. We have to have a countermeasure. We have to know what these things are. We have to know what germ warfare is to be able to have a countermeasure for it. Because some of those things, like nerve gas, like germ warfare, are really much easier than atomic weapons, than nuclear weapons, to develop. So, do I have concerns about it? Well, a little. But you have to weigh that against the dangers. If you don't develop these things or investigate them, someone else will and then you'll be left vulnerable to attack or to blackmail. Either way.

Although Patrick's opinion was typical amongst respondents' attitudes about weapons research, Nelson, who earlier was a singular voice in suggesting more public involvement in ethical debates about scientific research, provided the most blunt (and arguably alarming) opinion on ethical issues surrounding weapons research in New Mexico. While he reinforced the notion that much defense-funded research has little to do with weaponry, he had no issue with advanced technologies typically falling into the hands of the U.S. military before the general public:

Nelson: Most of the work that's done in the hard sciences is not very political. Work, for example, in physics or in chemistry or in biology. Most work done in medicine...I don't see a political connection.

WD: Even if it's...take working at Los Alamos?

Nelson: I know a physicist at Los Alamos who's studying biological cell signaling with computer models. I mean, just because he works at Los Alamos doesn't make his work weapons related.

WD: Right, and I'm not necessarily saying that. But the idea that where you get your funding inherently guides what research you actually do.

Nelson: Yeah, to some extent. But again, I went to this conference in January funded by the Air Force. And this was a conference on biomaterials and biointerfaces. Very little of the work that was discussed at that conference...first of all, none of it was classified. And very little of it...I couldn't figure out why the Air Force was even funding it, for God's sake! I mean, very little of it seemed to have any impact on the Air Force's operational capabilities. It doesn't seem to me to be the case that people are running around trying to join the military-industrial complex, to enable the next big war, even if they're getting funding from Defense agencies.

WD: It seems like the people I talk to, whether we're talking about [conspiracy theorists] or simply people critical of the scientific establishment, their biggest concerns over the latest technology or discoveries in technology [centers] on this idea that the latest and greatest technology in American culture gets into the hands of the U.S. military first.

Nelson: Probably true.

WD: Does that bother you at all?

Nelson: No, not at all. They pay for it. [laughs]

Such responses are interesting when compared with respondent's attitudes about conspiracy theories. As either members of skeptical organizations or university physicists

interested in discussing conspiracies and anomalous beliefs, most individuals expressed concern or even outright bewilderment at the perceived increase in such beliefs among the general public. Yet, when asked to compare the “needed” secrecy surrounding various research projects funded by the federal government, and the often outlandish claims of individuals not privy to such information, most conceded that the popularity of conspiracy theories among Americans was at least partly the fault of the government itself. Tom articulated this problem succinctly, even if the process he describes undermines the idea of the scientific enterprise as open, transparent, and fully participatory:

WD: Do you think some of these classified projects, or shrouding projects in secrecy have contributed to a lot of UFO beliefs that are out there?

Tom: Oh, certainly. It’s natural to protect people; you have to do certain things in a classified environment. Whenever you do so, the lack of complete open and transparent exchange of information doesn’t give people the ability of inquiry and discovery. So when they can’t do that then their imaginations get away with it.

Clayton agreed with this sentiment, but placed much of the blame on the Bush administration, even as he described the compartmentalization of knowledge he witnessed at Los Alamos:

Clayton: Our current administration has really taken strong liberties with our constitution, especially with the bill of rights. I would not put them past having a conspiracy tendency. They certainly are very, very tight with their secrets... On the other hand, I’ve recently had some correspondence with a guy that’s convinced that 9/11 was an inside job... And I just cannot believe that. The scope of the plot is too great. You would have to recruit 18 or thereabouts Middle Easterners to fly the airplane that you want them to crash into buildings. It’s literally incredible.

WD: Do you think after 9/11 that these conspiracies picked up a bit more?

Clayton: Oh yes, oh yeah. 9/11 was such a horrific event, and people are looking for reasons. And conspiracy is one thing. I should mention that in my work at the weapons laboratory, I came into some very highly classified materials. And we had very very strict limits on who could know that... you know, who had access. And it was down to personal recognition. And I recall escorting the laboratory commander to be briefed. The laboratory commander wasn’t allowed to know what some of his employees were doing! [Laughs]

Patrick, like Tom and Clayton, acknowledged that often the very structure of the military-industrial complex lends itself to the public formulation of conspiracy theories, yet he made the argument that government secrets almost inevitably come to public attention over time, citing the relatively recent case of Abu Ghraib:

Patrick: Oh, that's exactly what happens. But, have you ever tried to keep a secret in the government? I have worked on some black projects. And after several years, one of those was completely opened up. And you can look in the Sandia phone book, which is not classified, and there's a whole bunch of people working on neutron generators. These were the most secret things back thirty some years ago. Very, very secretive that we could even build one. Well, like everything else, the word got out. But that's just one example. Some of the satellite projects have been very secretive. And again, when you keep things a secret, people often assume the worst. They're probably not that evil. The ones that I have worked on are not. If the word got out about some of these projects, countermeasures could be taken and would nullify their value to protect us. So, yes, I'm afraid that people do worry about these things and in their minds what they can't see, what they don't know they start assuming to be the worst. And I don't think that's always the case. Sometimes, some of our things that we've done have been pretty bad, okay? The treatment of the prisoners. But again, it didn't stay secret very long. It is very hard to keep things secret for very long. That's why I don't believe that there are aliens hiding around. Wright-Patterson Air Force Base is where they're supposed to be, right?

WD: One of the usual places, yes.

Patrick: [Laughs] They couldn't have kept that a secret that long. There's no way. Just too many people involved. So many of these things that people fear, if they thought about it logically they'd realize that you really couldn't have kept that secret that long. The same thing about the moon landing fake.

WD: That one seems to have cropped back up in recent years.

Patrick: Oh yeah. It's a fascinating one, but there's no way that you could keep it secret that long with so many thousands of people involved.

Joel, on the other hand, argued that secrecy and classification have exploded in the past decade, and that certain projects can remain classified and unknown to the public almost indefinitely. Yet, like his colleagues, he maintained that some level of secrecy is in the best interest of the public:

Joel: Oh yeah. The government has brought it upon itself. Just go back to Roswell, and it just goes on from there. There are any number of things that should be classified, and I'm glad they are...But anyway, just to take that as an example, we never knew about the F-117A until one crashed in the Sierras. There are all sorts of things going on at Area 51. There are skunkworks, aerospace projects that need to be classified. There are some things going on

there that need to see the light of day because we're discovering that people are getting sick and they're dumping all sorts of toxic stuff. And at some point, they need to clean up their environmental act. Things like that do need to come out. But the basics of what's going on there, you hear stuff like in *Independence Day*. Fabulous sci-fi, I loved that movie. "They had one there!" (Laughs). Terribly fanciful, I don't believe it for a second. But it gets carried too far. You see just in the last seven years the explosion of classification of stuff that's simply embarrassing. And I hope it sees the light of day.

WD: Do you think this has been mostly due to 9/11?

Joel: A lot of it is. And a lot of the public's tolerance for it is. They go hand-in-hand. And we need to totally clean house in Washington to sort this out and say, "Look, you were fooled on these things, and these are the detrimental effects it's had for the nation as a whole. And if we're going to go on from here, we have to put all of this in its proper perspective." So that's the sort of stuff that goes into the 117-A and the B-2 now and probably into the new generation of fighter planes too. It's incredibly expensive to do it right, to protect workers doing it, and to keep it pure enough and so on. And we lose our technological edge when that kind of secret comes out. So, yeah, we need to protect that. The old adage, "Los Alamos built the bomb, and Sandia made it safe." There are all sorts of things that Sandia does to make it possible to transport a nuclear weapon and accidentally have it drop out of an airplane and not explode, nuclearly anyway. And this whole field of permissive action links where the device is locked up and you can't get into it to do anything without utterly destroying it without exactly the right electronic tools. And they get more sophisticated all the time. In a much more mundane area, nonlethal warfare techniques that Los Alamos and Sandia work on, ways to put down riots without killing people. All that kind of research. I mean, this is our technological age. That's just the beginning of it. And we need to protect it, and that sort of stuff needs to be kept secret. Having the wisdom to put out the right kind of disinformation when you have to, and only when you have to is a whole different area.

WD: So you think the government is at least partly at fault for the continuance of some of these beliefs?

Joel: Oh yeah, yeah. I mean what's popularly called the Aurora Program. This Mach 5 airplane that's almost certainly flying, and how they ever kept it as secret as long as they have and as much as they have is beyond me. I mean, how do you hide something like that? Well, it turns out that you can't hide the sonic boom from seismographs. The data are there if anyone knows what to look for and where to look for it, and you just sort of ignore it. I didn't even know about that until one guy put it together, and I think there's sort of a gentlemen's agreement in the field that we just don't talk about that. No good's going to come of it, no one's scientific career is based on revealing this. We've got better things to do.

Here, Joel acknowledged that the federal government's secrecy has contributed to conspiracy culture in the general American public, while insisting that national security concerns necessitated the (at least partial) continuation of this policy.

Forrester, on the other hand, provided the salient point that much of conspiracy theory is rooted in the comforting premise of competency and control, as discussed in Chapter 2.

His experiences at Sandia Laboratories, however, contradict this notion:

Forrester: I guess it's not really irrational, but it's lead by a lot of irrational people. I mean, I think you can come up with rational conspiracies. I have worked at Sandia, the thing that most people probably don't know is how many incompetent people there are there. And to have those kinds of conspiracies would require a bunch of really smart people that aren't evident.

WD: So there's more incompetence in bureaucracy and government than anything else...even scarier.

Forrester: Yeah. I would actually wish that they could be hiding alien spaceships from us. Because that would imply a level of awesomeness that would protect us. But I don't actually think that's there.

Lastly, Trace provides the sentiment that, despite the continual (and even increased) secrecy emanating from the military-industrial complex, the modern information age allows for individuals truly seeking the "facts" to discover them. His admonishment of what he sees as uncritical thinking extends beyond conspiracy theorists and UFO believers to the epistemological relativism of many in academia:

Trace: I don't think so. We're living in an age where facts actually can be found, but it takes effort. And most people don't want to take the effort to actually know what's going on. Most people want to find information that quickly supports what they already believe, and it only takes a minute or two. So, it's a case of their ears being open to things they already believe, and closed to things they don't believe. And they've taken the idea of independence and academic freedom to ridiculous extremes of "I can believe whatever I want!" You know, "I can believe that trees talk." "I can believe that extraterrestrials land and abduct people and probe their anuses anytime they feel like it!" Or "Every strange light I see in the sky is a spaceship." And they don't know anything... There are three things necessary for thinking about something. First, you need evidence. And then you have to have logic and reasoning to know when something is logical or illogical, and have some background knowledge. And since all information is sort of uncertain or suspect, you need to understand probability and statistics. And people have pretty much no understanding of those topics. Just none! They don't know what it means! If they claim that the moon landings were faked and that they were filmed in Hollywood, they're unreachable. Do you know what I mean? You tell them, "No, it isn't true, there's tons of evidence for that." They say, "No, no, they can do anything in Hollywood, they can fake it!" Well, there's no response to that, because they could.



Perhaps some in the humanities are under the mistaken impression that scientists are somehow dimly unaware of the politics of science, such as the funding priorities, competition, discontents, and such. But Rabinow suggests many scientists simply tolerate the state of affairs (while occasionally lamenting it) “as long as there is a protected inner sanctum of science played by the rules” (1996, 182). There is also a tendency among some academics who examine the problematic evolution of the scientific enterprise to cynically dismiss scientific authority as the property of its most prominent funders. And although this is certainly an alarmist position, the fact remains that the general public harbors legitimate concerns over the “world-pictures” presented to them by a scientific community partially beholden to those who provide its funding. The previous discussion involving the politicization of scientific inquiry is not meant as a tool for distinguishing between “good” and “bad” science. Rather, it is meant to highlight the contextual influences in scientific research, as well as dispute the public model of scientific practice espoused by figures such as Carl Sagan in favor of an image of scientific governance maintained between military, corporate, academic, and public interests (Longino 1986, 59, 69-72). The artificial public conveyance of science and its practitioners, as well as their perceived threat from religious ideology in the political sphere, further serves as a model for skeptical attitudes and inquiries into the subject of UFOs and paranormal beliefs.

### **UFOs, SETI, and Anthropocentrism**

As the previous section has shown, often nonscientific interests play a major role in shaping both knowledge and attitudes toward potential scientific problems. Furthermore, the respondents that I spoke with for this chapter generally appeared less guarded and cautious when our topics shifted from political motivations among scientists and the role of religion in

contemporary American society to that of UFOs, the paranormal, and issues pertaining to what the respondents typically considered to be “pseudoscience.” Their relative eagerness to discuss UFO, paranormal, or occult beliefs in comparison to religion may in fact speak to a broader issue in American culture concerning the muted public discourse on the role of organized religion. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, UFO and paranormal beliefs are arguably fundamentally different in form, origin, and function compared to traditional religious doctrine, and yet among some skeptics they may act as “stand-ins” for masked, underlying arguments against all religious and spiritual beliefs.<sup>109</sup> However, the main topic of discussion with my respondents was, in fact, UFOs. Specifically, I asked them for their general thoughts on the subject, as well as why they thought belief in UFOs (regardless of their interpretation) remains so prevalent in American culture. Revealingly, most respondents viewed UFOs as being synonymous with extraterrestrial spacecraft, and therefore based their opinions on the subject in relation to the unlikelihood that extraterrestrial beings could conceivably visit the earth:

Tom: Again, because of the vast complexity of things, and this is something that I think people latch onto, I don't think any scientist in good faith can say that it's absolutely impossible to have a UFO or extraterrestrial beings... I can say it's probably quite improbable just for the vast reason of the improbability of us evolving the way we did. Okay, so now if you say that although it's vastly improbable, say life did manage to form around a star cluster a hundred light years away, okay, they would have to develop a form of energy storage that would be just profoundly more energy dense than nuclear energy in order to travel that vast distance and return. So is it absolutely impossible? No. But improbable? Quite improbable. So, that's, I guess, my take on extraterrestrials or UFOs. And I think most scientists would agree with that perspective.

Bridget: So UFOs...I don't believe in UFOs for the same kind of reason: just by probabilities. Our short time we have lived here on Earth and be able to detect anything like a UFO, and considering the travel times across the universe and the probability is so low that I just don't believe in those things, certainly not in those huge numbers. I don't believe in that at all. But I do believe there are other life forms out there, so I do believe in extraterrestrial intelligence based on the same arguments. Because if the universe is so big then there is no reason that life couldn't have evolved on other planets and in other solar systems. So I really believe it's out there, but I believe it's going to be extremely hard to find those things, to detect them, to get in contact.

Nelson: I think there are some objects that fly that are unidentified, but I don't think they're looking for Dennis Kucinich! You know, if one accepts the laws of physics as we know them, and when I say laws of physics I mean the laws that have been around for a long time, I'm not talking about recent work. But stuff like Einstein's work has been tested millions of times. It's really hard to get from one place to another in the galaxy. It would take an awful long time and a lot of effort. We went to the moon in 1969, and we haven't been back yet. I mean, the idea of going to another star...I'm not saying it couldn't be done, I just don't understand, first of all, why you would do it...well, I don't know, people might send robots. That would make some sense. If you want a simple answer I'm skeptical, I don't think that this planet has been visited by probes from other intelligences in the universe. I think it's highly unlikely, and the reason I think it's unlikely is that it goes back to the religious thing, that people believe what they want to believe, and there are people who want to believe that, and so if they see something that's unusual they'll give that explanation to it. But people are phenomenally unreliable in terms of reporting what they've seen.

Peter: You know, I'd like to think—and again, this is not my line originally—if there's not somebody else out there it's a huge waste of space. The chance of them coming to see us is so small, that there are lots of other things to think about and worry about, and assuming that the speed of light is the universal speed limit we're not going to be visited. You know, it would be the biggest discovery of our time, to make contact. The chance of that happening is incredibly small. I mean, I hope that somewhere out there life has evolved on other planets and there are sentient beings thinking about if somebody else is out there. But coming to see us? Nah. Highly improbable. Not impossible, but highly improbable.

Patrick: Very, very doubtful. There are too many parameters that must come together and coalesce at the same moment for there to be alien visitation. I could go over all of those...First, they have to find us. We have now been broadcasting for more than a hundred years, but the signals were pretty weak. For the last fifty or sixty years we've been broadcasting a stronger signal that somebody might have picked up. But that limits you...that's only forty light years away. Fifty light years away before they could have even detected us. And then, they still would have to come and visit us. How many years would that take? Because they can't travel faster than the speed of light. And there's not really much around here that's forty light years away. That's one thing. Otherwise, you have to assume that they're just drifting along through the universe and happen to drop by to see what's happening. That's kind of a stretch in a long way... [also] there's no guarantee that the aliens would even be interested.

Mike: Generally, I think there could be aliens, perhaps in our galaxy. Almost certainly in other galaxies. And that's just based on my knowledge of evolution and DNA and the common presence of amino acids and things like that, and interstellar materials, and the knowledge of how that works. I certainly think the odds for intelligent life are much smaller than life in general. So I think there could be life out there. What I'm not convinced of is that they've actually traveled to earth and that they're skulking around kidnapping people from trailer parks and hiding out. I think that if they actually made it here, they'd land on the White House lawn. They'd make their presence known.

Trace: I'd love for them to happen, but I think that the distance separating stars and planetary systems is so great, and the speed of light is such an upper limit that such travel is impossible.

Based on these responses, most of the individuals seemed to automatically equate UFOs with extraterrestrial visitation. Although almost none of the respondents felt that intelligent

extraterrestrial life did not exist elsewhere in the universe (or even our own galaxy), many believed that contact with such civilizations remained unlikely based on either statistical reasoning, technological limitations, or a perceived lack of evidence. In their minds, UFOs were equated with an extraterrestrial intelligence that was unlikely (for a variety of reasons) to come into contact with human beings. Out of all the respondents, only Joel, who has published academic papers on earthquake lights, voiced the opinion that UFOs deserved serious scientific study. Out of the remaining cases he couldn't classify in this category, he speculated that their origin may lie in either psychological factors or within previously unexplored areas of physics.

Respondents provided a number of explanations for why they thought UFO beliefs continued to sustain themselves over a long period of time in American culture. Tom and Trace argued that many Americans simply lack an adequate process of rational inquiry:

Tom: Everyone's born with a native curiosity. That's wonderful. That's great. Now, the question is: how will you define your process of inquiry to follow that curiosity? And most Americans—and this is not to say anything against Americans—most people in the world, okay? Most people have not refined their ability to objectively study something very far. But nonetheless, natural and wonderful childhood curiosity remains. And so, if you haven't trained yourself scientifically, you still have this remaining fascination for things. I think that's what makes [UFO shows] so popular for people who have not necessarily trained themselves into more objective reasoning through the scientific method. That said, I'm sure there are a number of Ph.D.s that are locked onto these shows, too. So, for every example there's a counter-example.

Trace: We're back to why people believe weird things. And there are good books by Michael Shermer and Carl Sagan on that. I think we're programmed to do that. I think it's part of the evolution of both our brain and the culture. And we jump to certain conclusions that evolutionarily were beneficial. But in a scientific era, they can be very harmful. We tend to see design in nature, and we don't recognize that we are applying it. We tend to judge cause and effect by their proximity in time, even though science now says that coincidence is just as good an explanation as causation, and we can understand more.

For Tom and Trace, natural or “biological” tendencies, including primal curiosity and the tendency to find patterns in nature, coupled with a lack of scientific training create a recipe for belief in things like UFOs.

Another common response to this question was rooted in the idea that human beings simply long for some kind of celestial contact, and that belief in UFOs or extraterrestrial visitors was likely symptomatic of deeper religious needs:

Bridget: That I have a hard time understanding. I think it's just more exciting because we all want to find that we're not alone in the whole universe. You want to see those things, and somehow it's much more exciting to believe that it's something unexplainable rather than [something mundane].

Nelson: Oh. [Long pause] That's a good question. It may be for some of the same reasons that people believe in God, and this is that if you look at...our lives are very chaotic. The news reinforces the notion that the world is a chaotic place, although it may not be that chaotic. The news media is trying to sell news. And our own personal lives can sometimes be very chaotic, and we don't have control of them. I think that people like to feel that someone is in charge, you know? [Laughs] Something's got to be taking care of things. And maybe it's God, or maybe it's...I don't know.

Mike: I think people want to believe in some higher purpose and in lieu of religion, which satisfies many people, just this idea of some people out there smarter than humans that might bail us out of all the trouble we've got ourselves into. This is inherently appealing to some people. And then, other people sort of fall into the idea that this is an enemy menace that we've got to be worried about. But it gives them a story to latch onto to make their lives more interesting, I guess.

A common theme in these responses is the notion that UFOs or extraterrestrial beings provide a functional role in people's lives similar to that of God or religion. After discussing why they thought belief in UFOs remained so high, respondents were asked if they had ever seen any UFO-like phenomena themselves. Many respondents stated that they had indeed witnessed unusual aerial phenomena, but all were able to provide prosaic explanations:

Tom: It looked like a Lear jet, but it had a kind of popping kind of ramjet sound to its engine or something like that. So that was something that I thought was very unusual. I've also seen things in the sky that were really kind of surprising to me like when I saw the Starfire range doing interrogation. I saw a lot of laser beams. And I didn't know what that was from. And I've also seen formation flying weather balloons looking for gradients in the atmosphere. And so after the sun sets they're still having the sun shine on them because they're not below the horizon that the earth's creating. And there, it's been very strange and I've found it pretty exciting trying to find a pair of binoculars. So I've seen many things that at the time I couldn't identify. The thing is that the vast creativity of people in engineering and everything else...it doesn't surprise me that there are things in the sky that I couldn't identify.

WD: So all the things you've seen in the sky, at least after the fact, you've been able to identify, at least to satisfy your curiosity?

Tom: Not necessarily. I mean, there've been things that I still really...you know, I'm a bit at a loss to describe. But again, what I think it's likely to be...you know, a lot of experimental aviation goes on and a lot of it goes on in classified research so it doesn't surprise me that it happens, especially here in New Mexico. Especially out in the middle of New Mexico where very few people live to have seen some things that are pretty unusual.

Bridget: That depends on how you see it. I see those things all the time, but the first thought that comes into my mind is not that it's something anomalous, it's just something that I haven't learned to understand with the basic physics yet.

Clayton: Oh yeah. A few years ago there was a strange light in the sky over Albuquerque, just a little after sunset. And it wasn't clear what in the world it was. It was not especially moving. However, I did dig out my son's telescope and it turned out to be a huge weather balloon being illuminated by the sun even though we were in the shadow already. But it was potentially convincing, and for a little while it was a UFO in the sense that it was unidentified.

WD: Right. Any other sightings that you've had in your life of strange things in the sky?

Clayton: Not very strange, but I've seen aircraft landing lights. As the aircraft takes off from the airport out here, and it comes towards us, it appears to be a light that's rising, and I could see how somebody might misinterpret that light.

Joel: I was telling my daughter about a couple sightings I've had that I couldn't explain. One of them was something that was flashing with red lights, but it didn't have any green lights. And I watched it long enough, and I was flying into the dawn... And it wasn't until maybe six months later I was flying at night and did the same thing-reach down to change tanks-and I saw the same thing. And I said, "Oh, that's interesting!" So I finally moved my head and repeated it, and finally realized that the flood light from the instrument panel was reflecting off the inside of my glasses. And the way I moved my head, that reflection had moved underneath me.

Mike: Yeah, you know, I've seen some unexplained things. I was on my way to a student government meeting back in my college days out in Hobbs, and I saw what I think was probably a meteor that blew up. And boy, did that look strange, and I really don't know for sure what it was.

Responses to paranormal experiences were similar. Several individuals reported cases of *déjà vu* and bizarre coincidences, and one person reported having a Near Death Experience (NDE). However, as with their celestial sightings, all the respondents felt that their experiences were either immediately scientifically explainable, or would be if more information were available to them. For these respondents, natural or conventional explanations for seemingly anomalous experiences are axiomatic. Individuals misperceive, misremember, or even fabricate experiences. Beliefs are the result of psychological or spiritual needs.

Regarding their exposure to UFO literature, most respondents had read few, if any, sympathetic books on the subject. Some mentioned reading fantasy magazines and books such as Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* (1968) in their childhood, while several others noted various television films such as the History Channel's "UFO Hunters." The majority of the literature they cited was that of the skeptical, or "debunking" variety, including books by Philip Klass, Michael Shermer, and Carl Sagan. As with many of the proponents of UFOs interviewed in Chapters 5 and 6, the respondents seemed to be mostly interested in reading literature that reinforced their prior beliefs on the subject.

The media treatment of UFOs remained a point of contention for several respondents. Mike, for one, lamented the tendency for media outlets to capitalize on the promotion of UFOs for the sole sake of financial profit:

Mike: The media likes to sell media, and they like to sell advertising and fill newspapers. So, I think probably some of the editors or producers should know better, and maybe they do know better. You know Staunton Friedman?

WD: Yes.

Mike: He's one of the big UFO guys. And I've met him up at Aztec at the symposium up there. And he makes a thousand dollars a pop with his talk, "Flying Saucers are Real." And if I could hit the lecture circuit, I don't think I'd be able to draw a thousand dollars a pop for my lecture, "Flying Saucers are Not Real." People just don't want to pay money to hear that.

WD: So is that the primary reason you think there's less skeptical programming on television?

Mike: It gets viewers. And I think they certainly could do a much better job of presenting skeptical views. I just think they don't have motivation to present that because it would lose viewers. And by presenting the mysterious and intriguing, they find that brings the ratings up a lot better. So they tone down that skeptical stuff. Sometimes they have what I call a "token skeptic" just to provide a semblance of balance, but I think that's mostly for show.

Mike's concerns over media treatments of UFOs and the paranormal were nearly universally shared by his colleagues. In reality, however, the media treatment of these subjects remains ambiguous at best. Popular television shows, particularly the History Channel's "UFO

Hunters” and the Sci-Fi Network’s “Ghost Hunters,” often leave little room for skeptical analyses of anomalous beliefs and events. As Mike stated, such shows typically provide limited airtime for “token skeptics” to have their voices heard, which are often overwhelmed by the numerous sympathetic opinions espoused by various UFO and paranormal “experts.” Yet UFO and ghost accounts typically received far less sympathetic treatment among newspapers and television news programs. As discussed in Chapter 2, occasionally the American media has taken a notable interest in UFOs, particularly during various UFO waves around the country. However, most UFO sightings or supposedly haunted locales are merely mentioned as lighthearted footnotes either in newspapers or at the end of television news programs, in which news anchors preface the brief story with such quips as, “And in lighter news...” Still, most skeptics—most famously including Carl Sagan—continually point to the news media as a cheerful coconspirator in the popularization of UFOs and paranormal beliefs.

As Goggin argues, often nonscientific interests, including contextual values and commitments, play a major role in shaping scientific knowledge (1986, 62). An excellent example of such interests guiding research questions can be found in the history of SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence), the collective umbrella name for a project that largely utilizes radio telescopes to “search” the sky for potential extraterrestrial transmissions. Starting in 1960 with Frank Drake’s Project Ozma, the larger project originally received funding through NASA in the 1970s. By the 1990s, however, Congress cut federal funding for the project, and it has since continued on through mostly private funding (Kaku 2008, 131-132). Among most scientists, the SETI program stands in stark contrast to the UFO community as a publicly acceptable and valid method of scientific



inquiry, despite the project's obvious lack of results. Scientists involved in this field of study often criticize ufologists for their failure to commit themselves to what can be observed, and yet they themselves often abandon this "hard connection with reality" when they speculate about extraterrestrial intelligence (Michaud 2007, 6). For example, science writer Ray Villard's online blog for the Discovery Channel, "Cosmic Ray," typifies the largely arbitrary separation pro-SETI scientists imagine between the SETI program and UFO enthusiasts. Villard categorically dismisses any possibility of UFOs as advanced aircraft piloted by extraterrestrial beings, further arguing that alleged photographs of UFOs "can all be trashed as predominantly hoaxes, simple camera optical effects, or natural phenomena" (Discovery 2008). He adds that any photographs or videos that seemingly resist these categorizations must nevertheless be dismissed as such through the application of Occam's Razor. For instance, while acknowledging that one particular 1950 photograph of a saucer-shaped object perplexed the Condon Committee, Villard still dismisses the photograph as an elaborate hoax, arguing that the cultural climate of the 1950s (talk of space travel, fears of communism, the creation of the atomic bomb) provided sufficient motivation for hoaxery. Thus, according to Villard's reasoning, we can satisfactorily dismiss the photograph in question as such. Villard certainly may be correct in classifying the photograph as a clever hoax, but his thought process in this instance is anything but rational or scientific. He also refers to proponents of UFOs as "fanatics."

In a blog entry dated July 14, 2008, Villard provides a "top ten" list for why flying saucers cannot be real. Among typical reasons listed (little to no empirical evidence for artifacts and global conspiracies, "implausible" biological descriptions of occupants, distances between solar systems and the unlikelihood of a shared window of coexistent

civilizations, popular culture “projections”), Villard also argues for behavioral implausibilities (no “obvious” motive for a *biological* intelligence to visit the earth, more nighttime sightings than daytime sightings, no rationale for the large number of sightings taking place [where’s the mothership?]). Having said this, Villard concedes that the existence of extraterrestrial artifacts in the solar system “is not totally crazy,” although his preferred extraterrestrial presence is one consisting of subtle debris or indentations made on asteroids or other satellites, evidence of “dispassionately collected data” (Discovery 2008). Villard’s aliens, as with UFO occupants, are primarily rooted in anthropocentric concepts.

As Jodi Dean has argued, UFO believers imagine aliens as inhabiting our own spaces and places, even inhabiting these shared spaces before human existence (and ironically making the human the interloper or “alien”) (1998, 20). SETI scientists, on the other hand, imagine aliens as mirror images of themselves, and prefer their interspecies interactions to occur via the exchange of radio signals rather than face-to-face interactions in their very bedrooms. Due to this mentality, SETI scientists exclude any form of direct contact in their research (Michaud 2007, 153). David Grinspoon points out that “radio aliens” are more appealing to scientists because they are much better behaved than their abduction-friendly compatriots, and that scientific reasoning in this area comes “perilously” close to beliefs reserved for the category of pseudoscience (2003, 323). After Villard’s blog entry ridiculing the irrational behavior of supposed UFO occupants, his August 29<sup>th</sup> entry muses on the issue of Fermi’s Paradox and the various possibilities of an extraterrestrial presence in the galaxy. In listing solutions to the paradox, Villard ends with the possibility that extraterrestrial life already surrounds us, and yet “[W]e don’t recognize it. It’s hard to imagine what you can’t imagine. Our intellects are too feeble or Earth-centered to recognize the signature of an alien

consciousness” (Discovery 2008). In one breath, Villard dismisses the behavior of UFOs and their presumed occupants as irrational and ridiculous, while in the next he concedes that extraterrestrial intelligence and behavior would likely seem strange and nonsensical to human minds. Interview respondents largely shared this sentiment, and agreed that SETI was a much more viable, scientific alternative to seeking out extraterrestrial life:

Tom: Oh, yeah. I think it’s fascinating, because the thing is that...by all means. The whole idea here is that if you were a hundred to a thousand light years away from the earth today you would very likely—and if you were as advanced as we are today as a society—you would very likely have receivers capable of detecting organized information from the part of the sky we’re in. That would be fascinating. By all means, it would be wonderful to search for that... It’s a very valid form of scientific inquiry. But the interesting thing about that is that if something is discovered, the first response of the community would be to try extremely hard to disprove it. And that’s again something that fundamentally separates the mental process of science from something from non-science.

Bridget: I think that SETI a very interesting project, and I think that maybe it should be done because it’s the only chance we have of finding something out there...searching for extraterrestrial life. But again, I do think that the chances of seeing something is basically not going to happen.

Clayton: It’s worth it. It is a relatively inexpensive endeavor, with relatively good goals designed. It probably won’t work, but if it works, it’s revolutionary. Especially in terms of religious components in that if man were created by God specially here, and we suddenly find that there’s another creature somewhere in the universe who also has radio capabilities, that certainly weakens our claim for special creation.

Mike: I don’t have any problem. I think it’s a good thing to be looking for signals from space. I did come across an interesting quote recently. It said the problem with SETI is that we’re expecting too much of the aliens. We’re expecting them to broadcast certain kinds of signals and that we should maybe be looking for a broader range of phenomena than we are looking for. But you know, I think it’s a good project, and certainly worthy of effort in that regard.

Many respondents, although generally supportive of the project’s aims, nevertheless felt that SETI was unlikely to succeed. Patrick, for one, thought that SETI had a slim chance of success, but found it to be relatively harmless in terms of its financial costs:

Patrick: I say it’s harmless. It might turn up something. So I don’t disapprove of it.

WD: But you’re not very optimistic?

Patrick: No. I'm not optimistic, and I would be more upset if they were spending billions of dollars on it like they are on the war. Because I think that would be a wasted effort. But yeah, I don't object to SETI.

Nelson was a bit more pointed in his criticism of the project, and felt that SETI was a scientific endeavor in name only:

Nelson: You know, this SETI program, which has found nothing as far as I can tell...I have to suspect that life is pretty rare in the universe. Rarer than these people who made some kind of equation.

WD: The Drake Equation?

Nelson: Yeah. Somebody made up some probabilistic argument about how frequently life occurs. But that's snake oil in and of itself, the Drake Equation, because you can't judge a probabilistic event from one occurrence. You just can't do it. So they make stuff up and put it in the form of an equation because you want to sell it and make it sound more intellectual than it actually is. But it's quite possible that the conditions for life are rarer than we suspect. You know, that it's more of an accident than we might be led to believe by scientists that are anxious to keep their funding going. I mean, it's an exciting idea, too! You don't want to say it's not an exciting idea, but we really don't know how life started on earth, and so we don't know whether those conditions are all that special. I haven't studied the Drake Equation or anything like that, but I think that some of the things that go into it are, you know, "How many stars have planets? How many planets are in the right temperature range, etcetera, etcetera, to have frozen water and liquid water." But there may be a lot of other things going on as well. Life may not emerge simply from a planet... Since they don't know how life arose on this planet, they don't know what terms to put in the equation to describe how likely it is elsewhere. I suspect that there's life elsewhere in the universe. There are hundreds of billions of galaxies, but it's conceivable to me that there's no intelligent life anywhere else in our galaxy, and if that's the case, then just write it off!

WD: Forget about a friendly wave?

Nelson: Right!

WD: Do you still see SETI as a useful scientific endeavor?

Nelson: Well, I would say it's not a useful endeavor scientifically. I don't see manned space exploration as a useful scientific endeavor either. But that doesn't mean that I necessarily think that it shouldn't happen. Some things that we do that the government subsidizes for reasons other than the most efficient use of dollars to create knowledge. I haven't thought much about SETI and whether they should get their funding cut or whatever, but if you were arguing on a purely scientific basis you would say their funding should be cut. But I'm not sure that their funding should be cut.

WD: Lack of results?

Nelson: Yeah, lack of results and better places you could spend the money, probably.

Indeed, some critics of the SETI program argue that it is scientific in name only. David Grinspoon, an astronomer involved in the burgeoning field of “astrobiology,” maintains that any study of extraterrestrial life, whatever the discipline, reveals as much about human biases and hidden assumptions as life in the universe (2003, xvi). He also points out that a new field of study such as astrobiology makes for “weird science,” since humans are part of the phenomenon we seek out (and are the only known sample), we don’t know exactly what extraterrestrial life would look like (but remain confident that “we’ll know it when we see it”), and that we are biased by a very emotional desire to find life (2003, 252-253). In other words, dispassionate observation becomes an issue not just for proponents of UFOs, but also for SETI researchers and astrobiologists.

Grinspoon also points out the assumptions behind where astrobiologists choose to search for life. Out of necessity, researchers must narrow down their investigative parameters and assumptions about life in order to provide any semblance of scientific inquiry into the issue. For instance, much of life on Earth requires water, so water worlds are primarily sought after. This, argues Grinspoon, is again born out of pragmatic necessity, and not scientific deduction. But it has now rapidly become a consensus reality among most individuals involved in the field (2003, 263-264). As Nelson’s comments suggest, searching for extraterrestrial life may be politically accepted as legitimate science, yet searching for alien *intelligence* remains fairly controversial. Some critics of SETI have used methods of ridicule familiar to UFO researchers, using clichés such as “little green men” when discussing their research (Michaud 2007, 4, 148-149). Indeed, SETI aliens, as equal anthropocentric constructs, are no more realistic than those purported to visit the earth in science fiction films or narratives written by alien abductees (Grinspoon 2003, 355).

Michael Michaud argues that SETI's goals and assumptions about extraterrestrial intelligence can be framed in one sense as a religious quest in its own right, since the project's ultimate aim is to seek out a superior Other (2007, 202). Thus, the imaginative alien of both the UFO believer and SETI scientist primarily reveals human attitudes about the Other rather than any notion of empirical evidence, yet the SETI alien remains more publicly plausible and acceptable, since its seekers carry with them the weight of scientific authority.<sup>110</sup>

Despite these considerations, many science writers interested in speculating on extraterrestrial intelligence leave little to no room for a discussion of UFOs as potential extraterrestrial visitors. Clifford Pickover's *The Science of Aliens* (1998) discusses all kinds of possibilities involving alien life, including their biological makeup, galactic abundance, sexual practices, politics, means of communication, and methods of interstellar transportation. In terms of alien visitation, Pickover discusses numerous scenarios, including the "zoo hypothesis" first proposed by radio astronomer John Ball in 1974, which speculated on the possibility that an extraterrestrial intelligence had already "colonized" our solar system, yet had largely left humans to our own devices and instead chosen to monitor us in silence. Pickover devotes only a short chapter to UFOs, with a specific focus on alien abductions. He rejects abduction accounts based on a lack of "hard evidence," and insinuates that such accounts might best be explained by overactive imaginations or medical conditions such as temporal lobe epilepsy (1998, 174, 178-179). Even in a work based primarily on pure speculation regarding alien intelligence, the author reduces his discussion of UFOs to alien abductees, which are summarily pathologized.

More recent works on astrobiology or "fringe science" have been more ponderous when discussing UFOs, and have mostly avoided the tendency to outright dismiss them. For

example, Grinspoon's *Lonely Planets: The Natural Philosophy of Alien Life* (2003) devotes a sizable chapter to UFOs. In addition to speaking with UFO witnesses and taking their accounts seriously, he also attacks what he views as "straw men" arguments among skeptics, who he accuses of sometimes dismissing all unusual beliefs or experiences by focusing on the most "silly" examples. He also laments the tendency for some skeptics, like UFO proponents, of making up their minds in advance, and further of harboring dogmatic, condescending attitudes over impartial inquiry (2003, 352-353). Michael Michaud's *Contact with Alien Civilizations* (2007) also devotes a chapter to UFOs. He argues that researchers should avoid taking on an either-or position (UFOs are extraterrestrial craft or hoax/misidentification). And although he lends credence to some of the more noteworthy UFO sightings in American history, he dismisses abductions, like Pickover, as stemming from unknown mental events (2007, 152). Michio Kaku's *Physics of the Impossible* (2008) also devotes a section to a discussion of UFOs. After discussing several possible prosaic explanations for UFO sightings (Venus, swamp gas, meteors, atmospheric anomalies, radar echoes, weather balloons, aircraft, hoaxes), he acknowledges that perhaps as many as five percent of reported cases cannot yet be sufficiently explained, and further contends that some of the more bizarre flight characteristics of UFOs (zigzagging motions, hovering silently, interfering with car ignitions) may not necessarily exist outside the realm of current scientific understanding, pointing to discussions of monopoles (magnets with one pole) and nanotechnology (2008, 148-152). Most recently, Paul Davies's *The Eerie Silence* (2010) provides yet another viewpoint on SETI's successes and failures. At the end of his first chapter, Davies devotes five pages to a discussion of UFOs. Referencing the same five percent of unexplained cases as Kaku, Davies contends that such cases would likely be

explainable given more available information (2010, 19). Although he does concede that a fraction of said cases may involve rare atmospheric or psychological phenomena, Davies maintains that most sighting reports—particularly those involving humanoids—remained anthropocentric, “bearing all the hallmarks of human rather than alien minds” (2010, 20). In his brief dismissal of the topic of UFOs, Davies (himself current chair of the “SETI Post-Detection Taskgroup”) again hammers home a now familiar argument: whatever their limitations, SETI scientists are better equipped at recognizing, or, more accurately, *imagining* alien behavior than ufologists and the public. Although this perspective on the subject remains common amongst many involved in SETI, some science writers (notably Grinspoon) have begun to acknowledge the relative absurdity of abstaining from discussing UFOs when covering either speculative physics or contact scenarios with extraterrestrial intelligences.

In consideration of issues involving “pseudoskepticism” and nonscientific arguments against UFOs and paranormal phenomena rooted in a scientific ideology, respondents were asked if, in their minds, skepticism ever amounted to a belief system itself, and if they thought some skeptics held an emotional investment in “debunking” anomalous beliefs. Bridget found examples of physicists struggling to square the existence of dark matter with traditional Newtonian physics:

Bridget: Sometimes maybe. And sometimes because, it's a bit interesting. I can take an example which I find quite interesting in relation to this dark matter problem. So we have invoked theoretically all these odd particles that might exist but we haven't detected them yet. And then there is another theory called the moment theory, which is modified Newtonian dynamics, which says that basically maybe the Newtonian dynamics are a little bit more complicated than we thought they were. So they've added a few terms to it and with that they can actually explain a lot of the things that we see. The thing that is really hard is so many scientists don't want to accept that maybe we should change Newton's laws a little bit. So they rather want to believe in strange particles and I find this quite interesting. It's not that easy to change scientists' minds as you might think. [Laughs] They're not always open-minded. I'm not sure if you'd call it belief or not.



Joel, the lone respondent that considered UFOs worthy of some scientific study, also felt that scientists sometimes arrogantly refuse to consider alternative approaches to a wide variety of issues in science. He also believed that sometimes skeptics overlook interesting anomalies in the world, and provided this as a reason why he is also a member of a scientific organization more open to studying subjects like UFOs:

Joel: There are a lot of people that are so egotistical that they're incapable of recognizing that there might be another approach. They may just be barking up the wrong tree. Everything that they're doing is fine, but it's like looking for the Higgs boson at too low an energy. You can look forever and you'll never find it. You need a particle accelerator that's even more powerful...and we may be there, who knows?

Another society that I support, the Society for Scientific Exploration (SSE) is a group of credentialed scientists who want to look at the data that are swept under the rug. You know, the anomalies are where it's at. If you follow conventional science, you'll be a conventional scientist and you won't make any fundamental discoveries.

Through his involvement in SSE, Joel found a balance between a safe, skeptical approach that largely ignores anomalous data with a more permissive, risky approach that may potentially yield new scientific discoveries.

Forrester also found a troubling "belief system" in the scientific community occurring partially as the result of the sheer explosion of both information and its specialization in academia in the last century. He argued that scientists are often left with little more than faith that scientific facts in areas outside their own specialty rest on a solid body of research:

Forrester: I think as a scientist, you have tons of beliefs about things that can be explored scientifically, but you don't have enough resources or time to examine those things... It is a democratic sort of thing, but it's not by votes but by knowing who to trust in your field and the neighboring fields. And yeah, essentially a belief system is built up but you have this trust that all those beliefs have been tested by somebody reliable. So I recognize that everything I believe in scientifically I haven't checked. For example, evolution. You know, I believe in it, but have I ever done any sort of evolutionary study? No. And almost nobody has. And, so I guess it's a vulnerable system. And I think recently it's been weakened a little bit because it's exploded too fast in the last part of the last century and it got ahead of the information technology...[N]owadays, there's just so much published by people, I have no idea who they are. The level of quality of publication is down, so if that kept going unchecked then maybe the belief system would collapse. I think the information technology is catching up nowadays where's it's not excusable to not have everything connected. But it's still behind, we still have the same peer-reviewing system that we had before I was born, and it's antiquated and

old, in my opinion. But people older than me or my age still stick to it like it's the only way to do things. So one of my hopes is to make revolutions in that system. So I guess it's a belief system, but you have this trust that all things have been tested well by someone.

Forrester's concerns rest less in specific scientific inquiries, and more in the specialization and compartmentalization of knowledge that characterizes the modern scientific community.

The only respondent that did not voice reservations about skepticism occasionally exhibiting a dogmatic "tradition of disbelief" was Clayton, who provided a counterpoint to Joel's contention by making the astute point that scientists, as much as anyone, are *naturally* drawn to mysteries and anomalies:

Clayton: I really don't. I really don't. Mystery is the basic lifeblood of science. Scientists love mysteries because they give them something to investigate. And so, if [our skeptical organization] was presented with a real mystery, then clearly we would investigate that with enthusiasm! So although we're skeptics, we feel that people have things that really should be investigated.

Clayton's argument, although reasonable on a broader level, nevertheless remains based on a homogenized, simplistic image of detached scientific inquiry that has been contested by numerous commentators in this chapter.

In fact, the majority of respondents were willing to concede that sometimes skeptics themselves could be guilty of dogmatic thinking, cynicism, and emotional investments:

Peter: Sure, there is certainly that possibility that skeptics become so skeptical, yeah, that they become dogmatic. Yeah, it's that old thing about the left and the right-if they go far enough it's a circle and the far left guys meet the far right guys and they're really not that far apart. And I would hope, in my personal experience and in my personal bias, is that NMSR is not that dogmatic. But yeah, there's certainly that possibility.

Patrick: Oh yeah, very much so. People become emotionally invested in their theory, their pet theory, blinded to any other possibility... If you're a true skeptic, then it simply means that you will investigate. You're neutral, you're not a believer, but you're not a disbeliever.

Mike: I would respond that there's different kinds of skeptics. And what you were just describing sounds to me like what I would call the cynical skeptic who just refuses to believe anything, just because. And so no matter what you present to them, they won't believe it just to be ornery. And so I just sort of class those as cynical cynics more than skeptics. The sort of skeptic that reads the *Skeptical Inquirer* generally, I hope, most of the readers are open to learning new things. I mean, that's what drives science, throwing out that hypothesis when it

gets disproved. And that takes the highest form of an open mind to detach yourself from your cherished story or your hypothesis and let it go because it just doesn't fit the data anymore. And so I'm open to believing that aliens have come to the earth, I just want some really hard evidence for that. What I usually say on TV interviews and whatnot is, if you had a vial of alien blood we could look at it and see what kind of DNA—even if they had DNA—that would be the biologists' holy grail. We would really love to study that. If you've got a piece of an alien spaceship that we could study, that would be a wonderful thing. So I'm willing to be convinced, I just want some actual data that backs that up. And scientists do believe and accept some very unusual things like electrons poofing from one location into another, even if it's across an energy barrier. Or, when you have a couple slits and you're shining an electron beam at them. Some of these experiments show that yeah, this one electron went through both slits at once, because of its wave nature rather than a particle nature. That we can accept those kinds of things is a testament to scientists having an open mind if you have the data to back it up.

Trace: I once made a chart quite a while ago. You're pressing my memory, but it was gullibility on one end, and cynicism on the other, and various stages in between. Starting from believing everything you're told to being cynical and disbelieving everything you're told. And I place skepticism in the middle. Because it requires an open mind, but not one so open your brain falls out. You have to say, "How do you know that?" "What's the evidence for that?" But if it goes to the point that you're presented the evidence and the evidence is overwhelming and you choose not to believe it, then you've left the world of skepticism and you've gone over either into cynicism or denial. I wouldn't call people who push it to that length "skeptics." I think I have this real antipathy toward the extremists. Political extremists, religious extremists, and skeptical extremists.

At least on one level, most respondents agreed with the idea that, in the world of organized skepticism, "extremist" viewpoints could potentially hinder objective inquiries.

Such sentiments, however, were often accompanied by respondents reinforcing the idea of skepticism as a superior method of epistemological inquiry. For example, a common sentiment was articulately expressed by Patrick, who contended that while sometimes scientists do get caught up in dogmatic thinking, eventually over time scientific theories inevitably righted themselves and continued on the "correct" pathway. He used the controversy in geology over continental drift as a key example:

Patrick: It has been in the past. Again, I could use the term checks and balances, but there are procedures that eventually will wear the thing down, and when it gets on an incorrect path it will veer back to a correct path. The most recent example of that was continental drift. That was just impossible! There was just no way possible that that could have happened! Even though when we looked at the continental shelves put together...they fit! And then somebody discovered that there was this goo oozing out of the ocean that was pushing the continents away, and at that point the scientists said, "Oh, obviously, we were wrong." And they admitted that they were wrong and everybody got on board with the continental drift theory,

which is a very important one. So yes, it can be dogmatic. But I think that there are also internal things that enable it to finally get back on the right track. This is where it differs from religion. Once religion gets on the wrong track, it doesn't have a way of getting back easily, if ever. So there's a definite distinction that I see between those two.

Patrick's point is well-taken, and highlights a key distinction in the "soft" theoretical dogmatism of the scientific community versus the canon and doctrine of organized religion or the unconditional advocacy of anomalies apparent in ufology and parapsychology.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of these discussions with respondents was that while they were mostly willing to concede that some skeptics could become extremist in their disbelief, when prompted no one claimed to know of any individuals that fit such a description. Indeed, locating such a figure within the local skeptical organization proved as fruitless as searching for the Easter Bunny. In this important regard, the dogmatic, cynical, undesirable skeptic lacks a concrete personification in their minds, and is instead banished to a hypothetical realm. Whether due to concerns over public solidarity or simply cognitive dissonance, it appears the skeptics I spoke with conceptualize such problematic considerations within a distinctly fictional realm.

### **Scientific Belief and the Threat of the Fringe**

In his book *Why People Believe Weird Things* (1997), *Skeptic* magazine publisher Michael Shermer, in discussing public tendencies to rely on seemingly authoritative voices, notes that IQ scores have taken on "nearly mystical proportions" in American culture, and uses the example of the common belief in the paranormal among Mensa members as proof that IQ scores need not necessarily be equated with high intelligence (1997, 56-57).

Shermer's position typifies that of a growing segment of the scientific community toward alternative beliefs in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century that include alien abductions,

alternative medicine, extrasensory perception (ESP), and other “fringe beliefs.” In this section, I will examine how “skeptical” responses to alternative belief systems are culturally situated in an ideological dichotomy, and how alternative beliefs are *pathologized* by growing members of the scientific and psychological communities in an attempt to solidify a rationalist perspective of normative social behavior.

The term “skepticism,” as Marcello Truzzi notes, “properly refers to doubt rather than denial.” He adds, however, that over time proponents and critics of the paranormal have created their own distinct definitions of the term, at times differentiating between “soft” and “hard” skepticism (1987, 3). This imagined spectrum of skepticism is apparent in the musings of many of my respondents, particularly those of Peter, Trace, Patrick, and Mike. Therefore, while skepticism should not necessarily be equated with negative critical approaches, it is understood by most parties to exist closer to disbelief in relation to attitudes about UFOs and the paranormal.<sup>111</sup> In essence, science as a discipline, which extols rationalism, naturalism, and secularity, cannot prove or disprove the validity of supernatural phenomena that are derived solely from potentially unreliable accounts of witnesses. While some scientists have taken these accounts seriously, what amounts to anecdotal evidence cannot be reproduced in any laboratory experiment. Thus, investigative focus must be shifted to the individuals making extraordinary claims (Denzler 2001, 70-71,84).

Traditionally, the study of supernatural experiences has been reduced to a question of authenticity: “Are these experiences real or the result of misperception or hoax?” Most scientists inevitably come down on the side of the latter conclusion, while those devoted to a serious study of such phenomena, including numerous parapsychologists and ufologists, continually seek to prove the extraordinary claims of so many with hard, empirical data.<sup>112</sup>

More recently, the few scholarly works that have addressed these phenomena generally concentrate on the researchers, practitioners, and ‘believers’ involved.<sup>113</sup> Such works have effectively provided insight into psychological needs and desires as a function of social transitions, for instance, yet too often lack the first-hand research and comprehensive analysis of anomalous experiences needed to avoid being reductionistic. The study of such a complex topic as UFOs remains compelling because, in the words of religious scholar Brenda Denzler, “it involves not only the *belief in* something but for many in the UFO community an unarguable *experience of* something” (2001, xiv-xv,xvii).

Although occasionally psychologists (Schwartz 1983, and Mack 1994 and 1996) and physicists (Talbot 1991) have ventured into the experiential supernatural realm in their studies, the majority of scientists (natural and social) have considered these seemingly bizarre beliefs unfounded and irrelevant to scientific knowledge as a whole. For instance, James Lett has argued that by simply utilizing reason, all paranormal claims are found to be “either propositionally meaningless or factually erroneous” (1997, 54). Why might this be the case?

As David Hufford has argued, the academic world has long used systems of ideas to legitimate its practices, often in the name of “the public good.” In its use of ideology, the academic realm presents itself, as the most basic source of authentic knowledge about what is useful, good, and, perhaps most importantly, *real* (1983, 22). In recent centuries, the success of the physical sciences (measured largely by their associated technologies) have disproportionately accounted for the establishment of academics’ ascendancy to an epistemological elite-which, of course, includes the academy’s internal organization and status hierarchies. Hufford contends that the consequences of such hierarchies directly

impact the direction and scope of scholarship, specifically the pressure to adopt concepts and methods for ideological purposes rather than for their appropriate relation to the task at hand. In terms of the study of belief among scientists and particularly psychologists, he argues that these repercussions have narrowed legitimizing inquiries into one overarching analytical approach: “Why do some people hold these false beliefs?”(1982b, 22-24). Such a mindset has even come to inform anthropological approaches to occult beliefs (whether covert or overt), where some have turned to cognitive psychology to trace the continual manifestations of “errant” beliefs (Singer and Benassi 1997).

Attitudes toward supernatural belief within the scientific community begin largely with the Enlightenment philosopher David Hume, who argued that such beliefs could not logically be associated with either experience or reason (Hufford 1983, 26). Because this belief has largely persisted through the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond in Western culture, Hufford contends that scholars should begin striving to take legitimate “external” points of view by stepping outside of these established academic traditions-upon doing so, he states there can be found two competing streams of tradition about the supernatural in contemporary society: traditions of belief and “traditions of disbelief.” Such traditions of disbelief primarily operate in modern Western culture by criticizing the grounds of supernatural belief.<sup>114</sup> Generally these criticisms begin with the argument that supernatural traditions typically do not arise out of experiential referents; instead, their development occurs as a result of repressed psychological desires, social function (“opiate of the masses”), “creative urges” that lead to hoaxes and fabrications, and folk etiology (Hufford 1982b, 48-49).

When first-person experiences are associated with supernatural traditions, explanatory devices fall into several basic categories: hallucinations (as a result of alcohol,

psychotropic substances or psychosis), illusions (misperceptions of external stimuli), and misinterpretations of ordinary things or events. When such explanations are deemed insufficient, Hufford makes the critical point that practitioners of disbelief typically resort to the statement that a current case or experience may contain elements not yet understood, but that a natural explanation is inevitable. This is understood as a statement of faith that is “quite secure against argument” (1982b, 50-51,53).<sup>115</sup>

Morton Klass characterizes this line of thinking within the scientific community as a *scientistic ideology*. This refers not to the broader domain of science, but to the specific belief that only through science (scientists using the scientific method) can humans penetrate and understand the material universe. For Klass, this represents a “scientistic religion” that, in contemporary society, stands in opposition to two competing approaches to knowledge (1995, 152-153). The first approach, syncretic belief, reinterprets new beliefs introduced into society and creates new values that change the cultural significance of old forms (i.e.-UFOs negotiating religion and secularism). The second involves the belief system of “post-rationalists” who reject singular claims to knowledge (1995, 141,152-153,158). As mentioned earlier, for some researchers, scientistic ideologies come into practice as a result of the way scientific methodology is taught to students, from elementary school through graduate school. Rather than being taught as a cognitive tool, it is often taught as a series of concepts and facts, emphasizing belief over practice (Singer and Benassi 1997, 391). Yet whatever its causality, it appears firmly cemented within modernist academic ideology.

David Hess argues that this scientistic ideology has recently taken on a social mission of “demystification” regarding paranormal and alternative belief claims. Encounters with Bigfoot, aliens, and ghosts represent a “flight from reason” that comes as a direct reaction to



an ever-advancing case for scientific knowledge coupled with an ever-receding basis for religious faith. In a world where postmodernists argue for a multitude of truth claims, skepticism can thus be construed as a reformist attempt to rescue Western culture from the darkness of irrationality (1993, 11-14).

Scientific ideology is further separated from scientific practice by this positioning of an argument that supposedly transcends the worldly values of social prestige and material success that remain the domain of New Age profiteers. Hess argues that this imagined separation ironically relates to Emile Durkheim's idea of the sacred, where skepticism positions itself (and science) as sacred through its rejection of "this-worldly," material interests. Furthermore, in this cosmological model skeptics rely on a shared set of cultural categories with New Age writers that include dichotomies of disinterested/commercial, spiritual/material, holistic/mechanistic, mind/body, rational/irrational, scientific/religious, future-associated/past-oriented, and frontier/backwater (1993, 63,69).

This ideology remains essentially dogmatic in its persistent attacks on alternative claims to knowledge. Such attacks come from different areas and touch on different subjects, yet nearly all adhere to Hufford's listing of explanatory devices. For instance, Janet Oppenheim credits the rise of Spiritualism in England and the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the marriage of agnosticism and psychical research, with investigators such as Henry Sidgwick having at the root of their inquiries a religious yearning to use science to disclose the flaws of a materialist view of life and to suggest elements at work in the world unknown to man (1985, 152). Similarly, Michael Shermer laments the "wish fulfillment" of modern texts seeking to discover intelligent design in the universe or

postulating about the ability of technology to one day assist in human immortality (1997, 256-257).

SETI scientists, skeptics, and UFO proponents all typically subscribe to the same cultural categories when discussing UFOs: UFOs exist either as extraterrestrial spacecraft or must be dismissed as belonging to a previously recognized explanatory device: misidentification of natural phenomena or conventional aircraft, hoaxery, or delusion.

UFO beliefs have long been a subject for such skeptics to attack. Perhaps the original well-known UFO skeptic or “debunker” was Donald Menzel. In the 1950s, Menzel, a Harvard astronomer and Air Force consultant, concluded that the UFO problem consisted mainly of mirages, reflections, ice crystals floating in clouds, refraction, and temperature inversions. He believed that saucer reports would eventually vanish, and lamented UFO sightings as a “frightening diversion in a jittery world,” while referring to himself as the man “who shot Santa Claus” (Jacobs 1975, 73).<sup>116</sup> Philip Klass, a long-despised skeptic amongst UFO believers, provided an alarming take on the practices of UFO investigators who hypnotize their witnesses in order to extract memories of alien abductions. In *UFO Abductions: A Dangerous Game*, Klass surmised that such untrained investigators hypnotizing “psychologically disturbed” persons could prompt a number of suicides (1989, 196-197).

The world of alternative knowledge thus becomes, in the worldview of scientific skepticism, a bevy of hoaxes, misidentifications, and wishful thinkers fearful of a loss of spirituality. Furthermore, many skeptics position such thinking as a direct threat to the well-being of both contemporary and future societies. A prime example of such thinking among skeptical writers is evidenced in astronomer Carl Sagan’s *The Demon-Haunted World*

(1996). The subtitle, “Science as a Candle in the Dark,” perfectly encapsulates Sagan’s positioning of science as a discipline against paranormal belief. In speaking of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its suppression of “pseudoscience,”<sup>117</sup> Sagan discusses the post-Communist rise of UFO sightings, poltergeists, faith-healers, and “old-time superstition” in the same breath as the decline in life expectancy, increase in infant mortality, and epidemic disease. For Sagan, the correlation between belief and physical health is clear, and in this context UFO sightings and belief in psychic abilities are positioned as “mental” illnesses (1996, 17).<sup>118</sup>

As Hess notes, many skeptics allude to belief in parapsychology and other anomalies as a pathological disease; one that requires a scientific remedy (1993, 14). Psychologists, in particular, have lead the scientific field in pathologizing belief and experiences related to anomalous phenomena. This line of thinking, according to Rabinow, is partially rooted in early European medical training, which privileged “the normal” while understanding disease or malfunction as a deviation from this norm. With medical practice aimed at scientifically establishing normative health, its ultimate goal was formulated as an attempt at “reestablishing the norm from which the patient had strayed” (1996, 83). Carl Jung was a forerunner in this area with regard to UFO beliefs. Jung was initially struck by the deep symbolic significance of the flying saucer, whose circular shape suggested the mandala, a symbol of order, perfection, and wholeness. Jung considered this an apt symbol for the 20<sup>th</sup> century, since the technological features of the UFOs were easily relatable to modern man (Matheson 1998, 279). Jung further postulated that this circular ‘visionary rumor’ was “an attempt by the unconscious collective psyche to heal the split in our apocalyptic age by means of the symbol of the circle” (1964, 285). The pathologizing of UFO witnesses was

certainly a tactic utilized in numerous official government investigations that arose out of Blue Book. For instance, during a symposium on UFOs held by the House Science and Astronautics Committee in 1968, a scientific investigative protocol was revealed for assessing the reliability of UFOs witnesses. In one case study, a thirty-seven year old unmarried man who had claimed to see a UFO underwent a battery of physical and psychological evaluations. Laboratory studies of the man's urine and blood were conducted, and the fact that he was both a smoker and consumer of alcohol cast doubt among investigators concerning his eyesight. During his psychiatric evaluation, it was revealed that the man had been breast fed for two years as a child and was a frequent masturbator. Based on these factors, evaluators placed his reliability as a witness within the fifth percentile (Dean 1998, 43).

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, more "clinical" psychological inquiries into paranormal and UFO experiences proposed that such experiences came about as a result of individual dysfunctional temporal lobe activity. By the mid 1980s, psychological inquiries began focusing on ideas suggesting that such individuals also likely had fantasy-prone personalities and thus were more likely to believe their experiences to be paranormal in nature. By the early 1990s, researchers such as Nicholas Spanos and Patricia Cross were suggesting that intense paranormal and UFO experiences were more likely to occur in individuals who were predisposed toward "esoteric" beliefs in general, as well as those with stronger propensities toward "fantasy production" (1993, 625,631).

In a 1996 issue of *Psychological Inquiry*, psychologists Leonard Newman and Roy Baumeister attempted one of the first academic roundtable discussions of the growing reports of alien abduction among Americans. In their target article, Newman and Baumeister

characterized abduction accounts as remaining consistent with patterns of “deconstructed mental states” that seek to escape notions of selfhood, particularly paralleling sexually masochistic fantasies of rape and violence (1996, 121). Additional skeptical responses to their hypothesis varied in content, although the vast majority of respondents were still willing to pathologize the behavior of abductees.<sup>119</sup> For instance, Michael Ross and Ian R. Newby contend that abduction memories arise almost exclusively during hypnotic therapy sessions and are unlikely in this state to distinguish memory from fantasy (1996, 176). Martin T. Orne and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine agreed with this contention, and argued further that such memories must be dismissed out of hand as autobiographical experiences since they appear “so out of the ordinary” and defy contemporary scientific validation (1996, 168). Donald Spence characterizes the rise of abduction belief as a threat to Enlightenment reasoning, equating a 21<sup>st</sup> century escape from freedom with an escape from reason. He argues that a systematic psychological deconstruction of abduction accounts might be one of the best scientific tools to “counteract” such movements that threaten scientific authority (1996, 179).

In terms of more recent scientific reactions to paranormal belief and experience, Harvard psychologist Susan Clancy has been the latest to provide what she describes as a “multilevel synthesis” of past psychological explanations for abduction belief and experiences that include a combination of sleep paralysis, memory distortion, fantasy-proneness, culturally available scripts, hypnotic reinforcement, and scientific illiteracy. Her conclusions are revealingly predicated on the assumption that extraterrestrial visitation of the earth is unlikely, as she cites a 1969 study by the Academy of Sciences that discounted an extraterrestrial hypothesis for UFO sightings (2005, 137-138). In terms of paranormal

research, recently researchers James Houran, V.K. Kumar, and others have embraced the notion that haunting and poltergeist episodes are akin to “psychogenic” illness, and contextualize paranormal experiences in general as misattributions of internal psychological anxieties to perceived external (paranormal) sources-potentially creating a collective hysterical contagion as beliefs are spread to the group level (2002, 119,121). In another recent study, researchers argued that individuals exhibiting psychological tendencies toward attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dissociation, and depression were more inclined toward paranormal beliefs (Sharps et al. 2006, 586). As Peter Lamont has noted, given that most in the psychological community remain skeptical about the existence of paranormal phenomena, most psychological research in this area remains dominated by a “psychology of error” (2007, 681).<sup>120</sup> Although largely presumed erroneous, some commentators take their critiques even further. For instance, *Skeptic* magazine’s response to the Heaven’s Gate cult mass suicide in 1997 implied that belief in UFOs and pseudoscience could potentially lead to violence and death (Anon 1997, 10).

Such research reinforces the idea that scientific inquiries into alternative belief systems follow a broad pattern of pathologizing and marginalizing said beliefs and positioning them in direct opposition to scientific notions of normative cultural beliefs. Another tactic often utilized in the attempt to dissuade these beliefs involves the decidedly unscientific practice of ridicule. An excellent example of this sustained skeptical practice can be found in the Showtime series “Penn & Teller: Bullshit!” Hosted by magicians Penn Jillette and Raymond Teller, the show acts as a skeptical mirror to television shows that unabashedly promote belief in UFOs and the paranormal and utilizes humor and ridicule to debunk a variety of beliefs and claims. While providing a more cartoonish and entertaining

critique than more traditional skeptical approaches—such as those found in *The Skeptical Inquirer*—the show harbors a similar underlying sense of disbelief, and, at times, contempt for individuals harboring viewpoints deemed as incredulous to the hosts. Penn and Teller’s critiques are often just as libertarian in scope as rationally based, and the show often attacks viewpoints perceived to be a threat to any form of civil liberties, including the drug war (“War on Drugs” 2-04 2004), traditional family values (“Family Values” 3-02 2005), environmentalism (“Environmental Hysteria” 1-13 2003), and gun control (“Gun Control” 3-09 2005).

For the show’s very first episode, “Talking to the Dead” (1-01 2003), Penn and Teller take on mediumship and, in particular, then-popular television personalities John Edward and James von Prague, known primarily for their claims of contacting and communicating with the deceased. While the episode provides an admittedly convincing demonstration that such “abilities” are dubious at best (including a discussion of the various tactics utilized by such performers through “fake” readings), it is interesting to note the tactics utilized by the show are often similar to the “celebratory” programming they wish to debunk. These tactics include sample bias in the form of selective interviews (i.e., airing only those interviews with audience members skeptical of John Edward) and hasty generalizations (implying the falsification of mediumship practices disproves all claims of paranormal contact). Furthermore, the notion of “impartial” inquiry among the skeptics utilized in the show is quickly undermined by their actions. For example, the producers of the show hire James Underdown—identified as Executive Director of the Center for Inquiry-West in Los Angeles—to sit in and observe a taping of John Edward’s show. Even before he provides his thoughts on the taping, Underdown confides that he gets “pissed off” when he witnesses

individuals like Edward on television. While making this confession, a placard sits in front of him on his desk that reads, “The Bunk Stops Here.” If nothing else, this brief segment reveals a clear emotional investment in Underdown’s (and by association Penn and Teller’s) paranormal inquiries.

Another episode from the first season tackles the subject of alien abductions (“Alien Abductions” 1-03 2003). In this episode, the focus is on a UFO conference held in California, as well as the patients of a psychotherapist who hypnotizes them with the aim of extracting memories of alien abduction. The conference itself is framed as a financially profitable circus of zany characters, including various speakers making unsubstantiated claims about alien implants and secret Reptilian races ruling the planet. Attendees face a sustained wave of ridicule, as in the case of an elderly woman who is handed a silver-painted sex toy by the producers. She then remarks that the object looks quite similar to a device she witnessed aboard an alien spaceship. Abductees and their psychotherapist (who apparently receives a hefty sum for her services) are similarly mocked, with interviews interspersed of psychologists skeptical of their claims, as well as a film critic who implies that movies and popular culture as a whole are partly responsible for belief in aliens.<sup>121</sup> Following a similar tactic from the first episode, the producers present alien abductions (and its believers) as the centerpiece of the UFO phenomenon, and from this focus move on to make generalizations about both UFOs as a whole as well as extraterrestrial visitation. Ultimately “Penn & Teller’s Bullshit!” while presented as a rational, dispassionate inquiry into various claims about the world, in reality consistently invokes ridicule, selective bias, generalizations, political persuasion, and emotional appeals as its primary tools of argument. While such tactics (including humor and a healthy dose of profanity) admittedly make for more



entertaining programming, reason and dispassionate inquiry often remain secondary, if entirely absent, tenets of the show.

While Penn and Teller's outlandish show cannot be presented as an archetypical skeptical approach to anomalous beliefs, it does exhibit several familiar nonscientific assumptions about normative belief and behavior. Increasingly, public campaigns to dissuade non-rationalist beliefs are a common knee-jerk reaction within the scientific community to protect "all that is not within the canon, in the name of proper scientific method" (Collins and Pinch 1993, 142-143). As Ron Westrum argues, such belief systems position themselves directly against the rationalist belief system of the scientific community, and thus "threaten the latter's claim to a monopoly of true descriptions of the nature of the physical world" (1977, 272). Furthermore, skeptical scientific responses often serve to actively *discourage* the public reporting of paranormal experiences, as experiencers are thus exposed to potential ridicule both from scientists and the popular media (Patry and Pelletier 2001, 213). Thus, alternative belief systems and scientific narratives come to inhabit a battleground of contested knowledge in contemporary American culture, with scientific ideology taking on a hegemonic role in this process in its attempt to dissuade belief in realms deemed outside of normative belief and behavior.

## **Conclusion**

The perceived crisis of scientific authority in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century derives from a myriad of sociocultural factors. As Frayling notes, the meanings of science largely come not from the scientific community itself, but rather a range of outside sites that include popular culture and deficiencies in scientific education (2005, 32). The explosion of scientific specializations and the new knowledge they produce, coupled with an increased culture of

privatization, industrialization, and militarism within much scientific research has arguably established an ever-increasing disconnect between nonscientists and the inner workings of all laboratory life. Despite these developments, many scientists invariably dismiss or outright ignore outside factors that manipulate the trajectories of their research, instead promoting their idealized vision of the modern scientific establishment as a political model for democratic governance.

Within this framework, many in the scientific community reimagine the so-called “culture wars” as a barbarian invasion, in which the greater scientific community—extolling rationalism, reason, and objectivity—must fend off the rising waves of irrationality, relativism, and absurdity promoted by religious fanatics, New Age proponents, UFO buffs, and postmodernists within academia. At the front lines of this battlefield are the skeptics, charged with the important task of maintaining and promoting a logical epistemology while concurrently debunking claims of psychic abilities, alien abductions, and haunted mansions. The primary tools of this trade include public ridicule, appeals to scientific authority, and an attempt to pathologize and marginalize those beliefs and related experiences that skeptics agree upon as falling outside of normative Western behavior.

This final tactic is most revealing in terms of broader cultural trends. As in the example of SETI versus the UFO community, many skeptical attitudes about UFOs and the paranormal are often rooted in competing anthropocentric cosmologies about both the nature of reality and humankind’s ultimate place within it. Therefore, the present public battle between skeptics and proponents of anomalous beliefs represents less a debate about the existence of ghosts and aliens, and more a struggle over what Lipsitz terms “contested meanings.” Ultimately, what is at stake is the control over officially sanctioned models of

reality, and the extent to which alternative, competing models are allowable in public discourse.

## Chapter 8

### Conclusion: Re-centering the Sideshow

Nothing exists except atoms and empty space; everything else is opinion.

-Democritus  
Greek philosopher (460 BC - 370 BC)

In discussing the relationship between collective memory and commercial culture, George Lipsitz argues that an examination of marginalized belief and performance can create new insights into cultural contestations of meanings and teach us that fringe “sideshow[s] can sometimes be the main event” (1990, 20). In the case of the American UFO phenomenon, this assertion certainly rings true. I have argued here for a more holistic approach to understanding UFO beliefs (and other marginalized anomalous beliefs) in contemporary culture. The examination of such beliefs requires a new, synthetic scholarship that integrates multiple avenues of analysis. As early as 1964, folklorist Lauri Honko was making a similar argument pertaining to the study of memorates, including the incorporation of genre identification, frequency analysis, perception psychology, and memorate-legend interaction in order to fully understand how personal experience contributes to collective belief (1964, 108-109). Indeed, more recently scholars such as Stuart Appelle have begun calling for an end to academic resistance to disciplinary boundary crossing (2000, 9). As I have argued here in the case of modern UFO lore, scholars should strive to contextualize such beliefs not simply within historical particularities, but also within a folkloric continuum of tradition. Such an approach allows researchers to trace contemporary beliefs through their mythological origins, as well as to determine how these beliefs contribute to an ever-expanding narrative tradition. The experiential components of these traditions, however,

must not be ignored, and the use of Hufford's experience-centered approach allows for the incorporation of alternative explanatory devices that ensure folkloric analyses of belief do not promote reductionism.

To briefly review my avenues of investigation, I have argued first for a proper historicization of the UFO phenomenon; one that reveals its clear connection to (and reliance upon) the social repercussions of the Cold War and its effects on shifting American ideologies. The advent of the nuclear bomb, Communist fears, and the growing National Security State all lent themselves to increasing anxieties over infestation/invasion, annihilation, scientific progress, and internal power abuses and corruption. More specifically, the relatively rapid advancement of such anxieties encouraged an expanding climate of cultural paranoia that gradually shifted its collective gaze away from invasive, outside threats to an inward critique of the very structure of American bureaucracy. The outside threats of Communist invasion thus gave way to threats from within, and by the 1970s the early Cold War accusations of Donald Keyhoe and others regarding UFO cover-ups perpetrated by the Air Force and CIA suddenly resonated more with an increasingly distrustful American public. In this context, both the Roswell and 9/11 conspiracy movements are natural outcomes developed through an ever-increasing, self-reflective, *paranoid gaze*.

Although the social evolution of the UFO in American life has been closely related to this shift in cultural paranoia (and will be discussed below), the marked appeal of the UFO phenomenon as a partial counter-science narrative is an equally important factor, and it remains indelibly linked to a shift in public attitudes about the scientific enterprise. The formulation of the Manhattan Project forever changed public perceptions of science, and

rightfully so. Famous physicist and project member Niels Bohr himself knew this, reasoning that the introduction of secrecy into the scientific community would change science into an overtly political pursuit, primarily benefiting the ambitions of those in control of its findings. During World War II, Bohr admirably attempted to lobby both the American and British governments to develop a postwar policy of international transparency regarding nuclear technology, yet neither Winston Churchill nor Franklin Roosevelt would take his suggestion to heart (Paglen 2009, 82, 91-92). After the war, scientists inspired by Bohr (including fellow Manhattan Project scientist Leo Szilard) formed the Federation of American Scientists to combat nuclear proliferation and increased state secrecy, but their attempts were in vain. As Trevor Paglen notes, merely a few short years after building the atomic bomb, the idea of classified industries, billion dollar black budgets, innumerable security-cleared personnel, and even entire branches of secret science in the United States went from the unthinkable to something few bothered questioning (2009, 94-95).

Paglen's research into the "black world" of the military-industrial complex reveals a troubling, shadowed American history. It is a history of taxpayer-funded secret scientific research and highly compartmentalized security channels. It is a history of intelligence agencies such as the CIA infiltrating antiwar groups, and even putting members of Congress under surveillance. America is now a country in which the economy has become increasingly dependent on military spending and the intelligence community is secretly budgeted close to \$50 billion annually. It is a country in which its citizens have been instilled with the idea that they have no right to know how the government spends their money (2009, 69,73,196,276). In Paglen's words, "Our own history, in large part, has become a state secret" (2009, 280).

This state secrecy retains firm legal backing. The earliest precedent is found in “*United States v. Reynolds*.” The case involved the crashing of a B-29 during a secret Air Force test flight out of Robins Air Force Base in Georgia in 1948. Nine of the thirteen passengers were killed in the crash, and the families of the dead sued the Air Force, claiming negligence. The lawyers for the families sought an official crash report but were denied by the Air Force, who claimed that said documents were “a privileged part of the executive files.” As Paglen notes, no mention was made by the Air Force of national security or state secrets. After a U.S. District Judge ordered the Air Force to hand over the report, in April of 1950 government lawyers invoked what they termed a “state secrets privilege,” contending that providing a public copy of the report would endanger national security. After further denying the judge a copy, he ruled in favor of the families. The Air Force appealed the decision, and a year later the Third Circuit Court concurred with the judge’s original decision. When taken before the Supreme Court, however, the decision was reversed. The court was led in majority opinion by Chief Justice Fred Vinson, who argued that “extraordinary times” justified extraordinary powers. This decision, in effect, provided the executive branch unprecedented powers (Paglen 2009, 152-158).

Another landmark court case in the 1990s, “*Kasza v. Browner*,” involved a lawsuit brought forward by sheet metal workers employed at the “Area 51” Air Force installation in Nevada, an installation the Air Force continues to deny actually exists. In the suit, the workers claimed that in the 1980s they were exposed to (and sickened by) noxious smoke from nearby burner pits. They sought Air Force acknowledgement of the burning, and their disclosure of the types of chemicals they had been exposed to in order to receive proper medical treatment. They also sought an apology. Air Force officials responded in court that

the base did not exist, although they later grudgingly admitted to the existence of an “operating location” in the area. The Air Force then moved to invoke the state secrets privilege, stating a federal court had no jurisdiction over the matter. The judge, Philip Pro, agreed with them and dismissed the lawsuit, concluding that the presentation of Air Force wrongdoing in a public court would compromise state secrets. In November of 1998, the Supreme Court refused to hear a final appeal. Along with “*United States v. Reynolds*,” the case set an important legal precedent and has subsequently been used in several government motions to dismiss cases because of “state secrets,” including “*El-Masri v. Tenet*” (an innocent man kidnapped by the CIA in Macedonia and tortured in a secret prison outside Kabul) and “*Arar v. Ashcroft*” (an innocent Canadian citizen transported to a prison in Syria and tortured) (2009, 145-151,165).

Given this troubling historical progression, stories about crashed saucers, aliens in hangars, and underground alien bases in the southwest take on a *cultural logic* that is hard to dispute. *In one critical sense, many alien narratives—particularly those involving the American government’s collusion—are outlandish expressions of very terrestrial, reasonable anxieties over public access to hidden knowledge.* From Keyhoe to Art Bell, the crashed UFO speaks more to a reasonable frustration with the federal government than to alien visitation. Of course, this has not been lost on Hollywood, whose alien visitors have continually reflected changes in broader social anxieties. The alien invaders from 1950s films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* reflected a concern with outside infiltration, whereas the post-Watergate aliens of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *E.T.: The Extra-terrestrial* represent benevolent beings hindered by a secretive American government.



The messianic role of Spielberg's aliens in *Close Encounters* is not only a staple of the sci-fi alien, but also a long-standing characterization of the UFO occupant. The influence of older Theosophical ideas of race and Social Darwinism had a significant impact on the development of New Age and UFO beliefs in a manner that allowed for the advent of alternative spiritual beliefs outside the realm of traditional Christianity—systems of belief that nevertheless privileged American manifest destiny. From George Adamski's Nordic Venusians to Whitley Strieber's gray "visitors," the alien interloper has long-promised both the contactee and abductee techno-salvation from terrestrial horrors, whether by outright escape (i.e., Heaven's Gate cult) or sensible self-improvement (i.e., *Communion*). Particularly in the case of the latter, the "do-it-yourself" spirituality informed by the New Age movement allows for the marriage of previously competing allegiances and ideologies. This integration of Cold War anxieties with Theosophical cosmologies has eventually led to a curious cosmological hybridity that contains strong elements of both cultural paranoia and utopianism. For instance, the alien abductee can wed magic with technology, paranoia with universal brotherhood, and environmental activism with suburban complacency. In the abduction narratives of Strieber and others, the alien has grown out of a mere racial characterization to a facilitator of new hybrid identities.

Given such varying sociocultural elements involved in the formulation and subsequent evolution of narratives involving UFOs and alien beings in American culture, it is unsurprising—and perhaps understandable—that much scholarship on the subject relies primarily on the "cultural source hypothesis" discussed by Hufford. Most academic treatments—even those sympathetic to the potential public ridicule of experiencers—insist on an analytical framework that seeks out the alien source from within: the sexual, the

paranoid, the gendered, the colonized, and the colonizers. Since a tradition of disbelief embedded in much of academia discourages leaving the anomaly as a distinct entity, those related experiences are reduced to various psychosocial causalities. With this relegation of personal experience to the role of cultural byproduct, researchers have invariably turned all their focus away from claims and onto claimants. However, as my survey of New Mexicans has shown, experience—whatever its relationship with preexisting local or global bodies of lore—plays a prominent, perhaps even *central* role in the continuation of said lore.

Certainly, my research suggests the interplay between personal belief and experience remains ambiguous and highly complex, and because of this very notion we should not privilege one over the other, even if it is convenient or professionally “safe” to do so. *Acknowledgement of an anomaly need not be synonymous with advocacy.* After all, the relatively high incidence of sightings of strange aerial phenomena over New Mexican skies need not suggest an extraterrestrial presence, since the UFO-rich history of the region, coupled with the real and imagined secrecy emanating from local laboratories and military installations, may create a tendency in some people’s minds to come to more exotic conclusions about what they witness above them. As discussed in Chapter 4, there remain a myriad number of natural or conventional explanations for why so many sightings may be occurring. Even so, this supports the idea that, sometimes, folks *see weird stuff* that is not merely a hallucinogenic manifestation of their cultural anxieties or desires. To reduce these experiences to cultural sources both ignores a relatively common aspect of everyday human life and the presence of specific, core elements of said experiences that are often reported by individuals from a variety of different backgrounds. In other words, sometimes a weird-looking plane will fly

over your backyard, regardless of the explanatory framework in which you perceive and interpret it.

Despite this “defense” of personal experience, it frustratingly cannot exist as a separate entity to be objectively observed outside of the sociocultural framework in which it occurs. The folkloric approach presented in Chapter 5 reveals a variety of contextual, performative, and functional components to UFO experiences, and how said experiences remain situated within a broader folk tradition. As a product of the memorate-legend dichotomy, UFO experiences are both informed by and belong to older bodies of lore. Abduction accounts share experiential and thematic elements with European supernatural attacks and kidnappings at the hands of fairies, spirits, demons, as well as native captivity and conversion narratives historically popularized in American fiction. Similarly, UFO sightings represent technologically-shrouded updates of celestial signs, wonder, omens, and miracles that temporally extend across all cultures.

The general experiential adherence of UFO encounters to pre-existing folk traditions is also accompanied by their basic *functional* adherence. While UFO narratives certainly speak to contemporary concerns with science and technology, for many observers the primary meanings taken away from UFO encounters remain the same as the wonders and miracles of the past: the inspiration of awe, humility, and a sense of something profoundly greater (if hidden) beyond our current understanding of the universe. Although some commentators might describe this as the basic ideological transformation “aliens are the new gods,” I think the interpretations provided by many of my respondents speak to less concrete desires and understandings of the world. Specifically, many appear wary of religious parallels, even as they acknowledge the “godlike” attributes of the celestial crafts and their

occasionally observed occupants. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the basic desire of the UFO witness is far simpler than communion with a savior from the heavens. Rather, their desire is one shared by SETI scientists: they seek some confirmation that humanity is not alone. The difference, of course, is that the UFO observer receives that satisfaction.

Although I have contended that experience—or, perhaps more properly, the *memorate*—plays a prominent role in the formulation and maintenance of UFO lore, the cognitive approach outlined in Chapter 6 provides tantalizing insights into the specific ways culture interacts with experience. Based on my review of multiple witness accounts, events that closely adhere to a witness's preexisting schema for a UFO sighting are both more likely to be remembered and categorized as UFO events, *and* specific details of the sighting that may not adhere to the schema will be glossed over or forgotten. Again: past events are made meaningful through our present cultural expectations. The ubiquitous presence of the UFO in popular culture establishes formative schemas for strange encounters as well as provides a contemporary cultural belief language with which to reconsider past events.

This cognitive approach also provides an important insight into how witnesses tend to convey their experiences to a public audience. Both a cognitive and folkloric analysis of my respondents' answers suggest that UFO belief language, particularly in support of extraterrestrial visitation, offers a viable vehicle through which seemingly disparate ideas about skepticism and spirituality may be reconciled. Communicating this reconciliation publicly, however, remains a risky endeavor, since the UFO occupies a very narrow space between the debatable and the ridiculous. This oppositional tension necessitates a broadening of our analysis of belief to include that of skepticism, disbelief, and the promotion of the scientific method as an epistemological and political ideal.

In this vein, UFOs also tell us much about the various attitudes we hold toward the modern scientific enterprise. As discussed in the previous chapter, public attitudes toward science and its practitioners have been continually shaped through various simplified popular culture representations that increasingly treat scientists with fear, mistrust, and outright disdain. Such attitudes are further supported by tendencies in public education to teach scientific fact rather than scientific methodology, emphasizing belief over practice. Although popular culture and science education indeed appear to be important factors in public mistrust of the scientist, many scientists continue to lament these factors while ignoring an obvious, unsettling third discussed above: much of the scientific enterprise in American society has become intertwined with decidedly unscientific undertakings in both industry and military research.

Public misunderstandings of scientific practice coupled with their continued distrust of the scientific enterprise has clearly frustrated many in the skeptical community, who in turn lash out against those beliefs—namely religion, the paranormal, and pseudoscience—they feel nurture scientific ignorance. Yet aside from commentators such as Richard Dawkins, many members of the skeptical community remain reluctant to challenge the tenets of major world religions, particularly Christianity and Islam. Rather, their criticism remains directed at systems of belief that a majority of Americans are less likely to subscribe to, including new religious movements (i.e., Scientology), psychic claims, haunted houses, and, of course, UFOs. However, when members of the scientific establishment—highlighted in statements from my skeptical respondents—*do* lash out at religion, it is often partly done so to justify the longstanding relationship between the American military and scientific establishment. Nearly all such respondents—of whom most would identify as socially

liberal—appeared comfortable transitioning from the Communist threats of the Cold War to the post 9/11 Muslim terrorists as reason enough for heightened military spending, classified research, and compartmentalized knowledge. As Rabinow again reminds us, however, it is not that such individuals are necessarily unaware of the politics of science, but more that they are tolerant of this state of affairs so long as the integrity of the scientific research, whatever its ultimate application, remains unfazed (1996, 182). Thus, in this light, it becomes more apparent why skeptics might be more comfortable attacking the claims of alien abductees rather than the Air Force or pharmaceutical companies.

Indeed, the UFO as a “stand-in” is a major component of the contemporary skeptical community in American culture. In this context, the overarching issue is not one concerning the likelihood of alien messages left in crop circles, nor human-alien hybrid baby assembly lines. Rather, this is a perceived, and, in many ways, *real* struggle against those epistemologies of which they stand in opposition. Recycling the metaphoric language of the Cold War, the Carl Sagens and Michael Shermers of the world ironically cast rationalism and science in a messianic role, ever hopeful that the light of knowledge will someday eradicate the darkness of irrationality, fallacy, superstition, and Bigfoot. On one hand, science is held up as an ideal democratic political model: experimentalism will eventually show what is right, and what is right invariably will be what is ethical. On the other hand, UFOs, ghosts, and, indirectly, religion are not simply dismissed as outmoded, erroneous belief systems, but further construed as cognitive pathologies, diseases to be eradicated lest the greater world fall into chaos and darkness.

## **The Politics of Belief**

This skeptical stance, when coupled with the propensity for many UFO proponents to “critique” a scientific establishment viewed as secretive, guarded, and in collusion with nefarious militaristic forces, has predictably created a hostile public climate of accusations and counteraccusations that center on very fundamental concerns about epistemological authority. In this vein, the UFO may be wielded as a weapon to attack *anyone’s* claim to such authority. For a recent example, during a debate between Democratic presidential candidates on October 30, 2007, moderator Tim Russert asked Congressman Dennis Kucinich about UFOs. Citing a claim made by Kucinich’s friend Shirley MacLaine in her then recent book, Russert asked the representative if he had indeed witnessed a UFO outside of MacLaine’s home in Washington state. Kucinich uneasily confirmed the account, stating flatly, “It was an unidentified flying object, okay? It’s like, it’s unidentified. I saw something.” Next, like any savvy politician, Kucinich attempted to defuse the awkward exchange with a humorous barb directed at then President George W. Bush, adding, “I’m also going to move my campaign office to Roswell, New Mexico, and the other one in Exeter, New Hampshire, okay? And also, you have to keep in mind that more – that Jimmy Carter saw a UFO and also that more people in this country have seen UFOs than I think approve of George Bush’s presidency” (Brusk 2007).

The following day, journalists, bloggers, and various readers all weighed in on the incident. Some saw the line of questioning as a blatant attempt by Russert to publicly humiliate Kucinich. Others found the exchange to be a distraction from a discussion of pressing national issues. Many UFO enthusiasts were angered at the seemingly flippant treatment of the subject (Hammons 2008). Some individuals expressed amusement at

Kucinich's "admission," particularly in light of earlier comments he had made questioning Bush's mental health (Silva 2007). More directly, conservative commentator John Gibson questioned Kucinich's sanity, arguing that Kucinich felt "free to say Bush is crazy one day and admit something the next day that many, if not most, people think proves a person is crazy" (2007).

Gibson's statement is provocative for two reasons. First, he expresses little to no reservations in dismissing UFO witnesses as being "nuts." His directness in this matter reveals a statement of common opinion, in which he assumes "many, if not most" Americans would agree with him. Secondly, and perhaps more critically, his dismissal of Kucinich's sighting serves as a dismissal of his opinions on *all* social issues, including his positions on the war in Iraq, the environment, the War on Drugs, and gun control. Whether or not this was actually Russert's original intention in asking the question is beside the point; clearly, individuals opposed to Kucinich's political viewpoints were willing to use his UFO sighting as rationale for marginalizing him as a presidential candidate. Thus, the skeptical notion of the paranormal "pathology" discussed in Chapter 7 remains a powerful, hegemonic device in the continued public struggles over maintaining an overarching consensus on normative belief and experience in American life.

Indeed, while an American politician may be allowed (and even encouraged) to publicly promote a Christian cosmology, he or she risks political marginalization by straying from that particular spiritual model, whether by subscribing to a non-Christian faith, the occult, or atheism. The public perception of the "weirdness" of UFOs and their related beliefs remains a powerful force, evidenced again recently in the admission of former Arizona governor Fife Symington, who held the office during the Phoenix Lights incident in



1997.<sup>122</sup> At the time of the mass sighting (witnessed by thousands), Symington made light of the incident, including calling a press conference with his assistant dressed in an alien costume. Ten years afterwards, however, the former governor reversed his attitude, claiming that the Air Force's explanation of military flares was "silly," and that he himself had witnessed the object in question, describing it as a "massive, delta-shaped craft" that both "defied logic" and "challenged my reality" (Symington 2007). Symington claimed his initial ridicule of the event was an attempt to lessen public panic, but it is not unreasonable to speculate on other motivations for doing so; namely, the inevitable political fallout ensuing from the public admission by a state governor of witnessing a UFO. Whether Symington and Kucinich saw military flares, extraterrestrial spaceships, or the planet Venus, such incidents ultimately reveal more about how we regulate belief in contemporary American culture.

Although the respondents interviewed throughout this work likely do not risk the fallout from public disclosure that affected Kucinich, I maintain that individuals who publicly discuss such experiences *do* risk some measure of social marginalization. As discussed in Chapter 6, my respondents navigated this public minefield by utilizing specific narrative strategies. For instance, many witnesses included several basic propositions in their accounts: (1) scientific assumptions about intelligent life in the universe are "arrogant"; (2) scientific knowledge about the universe is presently limited; (3) skepticism is an admirable tool that should nevertheless not be relied upon to prematurely dismiss potentially genuine scientific mysteries. Furthermore, the frequent usage of guarded and impersonal language, preemptive concessions, and laminations in their language revealed their continued uneasiness in openly expressing the belief that extraterrestrial beings are visiting Earth. Indeed, whether fielding uncomfortable questions while in pursuit of public office or simply

conversing with friends over coffee, the UFO continues to straddle a tenuous line in public discourse between the normal and the absurd, the mysterious and the pathological. For the UFO observer, a failure to acknowledge and carefully navigate this liminal space carries the substantial risk of public marginalization and ostracization.

### **Mirror, Mirror: Resistance, Reconciliation, and the “Real”**

In Michael Crichton’s novel *Sphere* (1987), a team of scientists are sent to the bottom of the ocean to study what turns out to be a crashed American spacecraft from the future. The crew later discovers that the vessel itself houses a spherical extraterrestrial artifact that possesses the power to manifest a person’s subconscious anxieties or desires into reality. Predictably, the team manifests a bevy of nightmarish creatures and explosive devices, and nearly destroy themselves in the process. Crichton’s novel is meant to show that, even amongst our most intelligent, rational actors (represented by a biologist, physicist, psychologist, and mathematician), we remained limited by our innate fear of the world around us. We walk into the sphere harboring our personal and collective dreams, fears, and anxieties, and emerge with those deeply mythic visions of destruction and despair, but also redemption, renewal, and salvation. Of course, it is not difficult to parallel this science fiction narrative with the UFO phenomenon in American culture. As has been noted throughout this work, UFOs and alien beings are, unsurprisingly, richly symbolic manifestations of a variety of human anxieties about race, gender, sexuality, religion, and technology, and also indicative of how such social categories and institutions may evolve, diminish, or utterly transform in the future. Whatever the “true” origin of UFOs (which I have argued here likely lacks a singular source, cultural or otherwise), humans can only perceive or imagine them through specific cultural, historical, and psychological lenses. For

this reason, we cannot divorce flying saucer sightings over Washington D.C. in the 1950s from early Cold War paranoia and the concurrent rise of alien invasion films. Nor can we ignore the overtly environmentalist, quasi-spiritual messages of the humanoid beings reported by Whitley Strieber and John Mack's patients, and how those messages closely mirror each author's lifelong interests. And how believable would the resurfaced Roswell legend be in the late 1970s without the precedents set by the JFK assassination, the Vietnam War, and Watergate? Although certainly not a comprehensive analytical framework, it remains true that UFOs teach us much more about our own concerns than they will about any nonhuman intelligences. Yet we must remember that said "human concerns" also include those of skeptical scientists—from Penn and Teller to Carl Sagan—and any other academics studying the subject.

While some within the skeptical community might view this statement as a sort of postmodern relativism in which all viewpoints on a subject matter are treated equally, I again remind the reader here that my intention in discussing the subject of UFOs has not been to prove or disprove their existence, but rather to examine the interplay between belief and disbelief, and how the various individuals inhabiting this spectrum of belief create meaning out of them. Rather than as some ambiguous object of study, we must conceptualize belief as an *act* involving specific individual choices within particular historical, geographical, and social contexts (Motz 1998, 349). To deny the location of disbelief and skepticism within this process is academically untenable.

Beyond mapping this spectrum of belief and locating the various meanings ascribed to UFOs by believers and disbelievers alike, I maintain that researchers of this subject matter should go one step further and, as suggested by Bill Ellis, fundamentally change our normal

academic paradigm by looking at UFO and paranormal claims not as deviant, but as relatively common parts of social life (2003, 156). Certainly, my survey results presented in Chapter 4 would support this notion, with 36% of a sample population in New Mexico claiming to have witnessed something unusual in the sky, 29% witnessing unexplainable lights, and 37% seeing or sensing the presence of someone who had died. Yet mere acknowledgement of the commonality of such experiences is not synonymous with “normality,” and it is the normality of anomalous experience which is so hotly contested in public debates. At the heart of the UFO phenomenon lies an important debate about knowledge on several important levels. Firstly, what voices are allowed to be heard? Donna Haraway asks in her discussion of cyborg narratives, “Who gets to count as a rational actor, as well as an author of knowledge?” (1997, 89). As noted earlier, many UFO investigators have long sought to separate themselves from the quasi-religious factions of the UFO community and establish some semblance of scientific credibility, even as they seek to critique the perceived arrogance of the scientific establishment. Many skeptics, in turn, have sought to either suppress such voices in public discourse, or at the very least, eliminate the serious discussion of UFOs as a scientific problem. Indeed, their efforts have been largely successful in the latter case, as the current “science of UFOs” remains deeply marginalized, with little opportunity or incentive for serious study (Wendt and Duvall 2008, 610). Furthermore, although the explosion of internet culture in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century has admittedly provided UFO proponents with a larger public forum, they nevertheless remain ostracized from scientific circles.

In again turning to these contestations, we may look at the mere existence of the UFO phenomenon as an embodiment of political resistance rather than scientific “problem.”

Recently, Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall (2008) have written about the implications of a UFO “reality” (in the form of an extraterrestrial presence) on American sovereignty. Adapting ideas from Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, they argue for the presence of a UFO “taboo” among scientists and government officials that has less to do with scientific evidence and more to do with the problematic political implications of entertaining the possibility of an extraterrestrial presence visiting Earth. In this light, the UFO would directly pose a threat to established notions of anthropocentric modern rule (2008, 612-618).

Congruous with my assertions in Chapter 7, Wendt and Duvall address the most common arguments made by scientists against the “E.T. hypothesis” (“There is no evidence”; “Testimonial evidence is unreliable”; “We are alone”; “Aliens cannot traverse great distances”; “They would land on the White House lawn”; “We would know”) and argue that such assurances are often anthropocentric and presumptuous, and collectively do not provide sufficient grounds for entirely dismissing the possibility, however remote, of extraterrestrial visitation (2008, 615-617). Furthermore, since UFOs are scientifically “unknowable” in the sense that they are unsystemic and seem to appear randomly, they continually “haunt” the notion of normality assured through scientific authority and state sovereignty (2008, 623-624). In other words, the continual presence of UFOs over American skies acts not only as a potentially destabilizing political and scientific force, but also as a means of *resisting* said forces. To witness a UFO and, subsequently, to acknowledge that sighting publicly is to resist epistemological hegemony. Not bad for a lonely night of stargazing!

Taken on its own, the idea that merely witnessing a UFO is in itself an act of political resistance (against the authoritative knowledge claims perpetrated by the military industrial

complex) may be overreaching, yet the UFO nevertheless acts to disrupt normative experience. Within this contested sphere, the aliens behave much like Haraway's cyborgs, in that they act as destabilizing forces for fixed, distinct categories between species (1991, 152-153). The modern image of the UFO occupant, popularized by Strieber and others, is noted for its androgyny (lack of genitalia and musculature) and slight, childlike size. Of course, in some narratives they also produce human-alien hybrid offspring. The blurring of boundaries within the broader UFO phenomenon remains limited not only to gender and ethnic identities, but also social institutions (science and religion) and political philosophies (conspiracy culture and environmentalism). This funhouse mirror of the 21<sup>st</sup> century human condition serves to reveal the fragility or arbitrary nature of many of these boundaries (Graham 2002, 12). The alien, or "not quite human," continually challenges ethnic, sexual, and political affiliations, and, furthermore, embodies Jacques Derrida's notion of "undecidability" in its refusal to conform to either polarity of a given dichotomy, but is both at once (Wendt and Duvall 2008, 622).

Expanding on these ideas of resistance and blurred boundaries, the narratives provided by my respondents suggest that the UFO often functions to *reconcile* perceived differences in various cultural categories. As mentioned repeatedly, the UFO allows for the reconciliation of spiritual yearnings with the encroachment of technology. Yet other reconciliations are also apparent in UFO narratives. An excellent example is found in the ethnographic research of Susan Lepselter (2005), who lived and worked amongst residents in Rachel, Nevada (a tiny community in close proximity to Area 51) in 1997 and 1998. Lepselter found that the town's temporary and permanent residents were comprised of UFO tourists, drifters, local farmers, café workers at the local "Little A'Le'Inn," and lastly military

personnel and government workers from the nearby base. While working as a waitress at the Little A'Le'Inn, she befriended several of her coworkers, and soon became fascinated at the seeming juxtaposition between the massive, secretive Area 51 with tiny Rachel and its struggling residents.

Lepselter found that her coworkers struggled with issues familiar to many Americans: financial despondence, classism, reliable work and transportation, bureaucratic struggles, and racism. One afternoon, while driving back with several of her coworkers from the DMV, the group became unsettled after getting pulled over by police officer, seemingly for no reason other than the racial makeup of the vehicle's occupants: two white women and one black man driving through a rural western town. This unpleasant experience was quickly forgotten, however, after the group later witnessed a gleaming metallic object hovering over a mountain as they approached Rachel. When they finally reached the town, all talk about racist cops and troubles with the DMV were forgotten; the UFO had taken them "out of the world of ordinary power," and into the massive, previously hidden world of Area 51 (2005, 138-140). For Lepselter's coworkers, whether the object was an alien spacecraft or secret military plane was of little consequence. In Lepselter's words, "What mattered was its potential for transformation and the strange pleasure of tearing holes in the real" (2005, 140). The event perfectly embodies the potential power of the UFO, or, more broadly, the anomalous or uncanny, to act as a strategic device to reconcile seemingly separate realms. Beyond transcending the importance of their everyday struggles, the UFO contextualizes them within a broader, previously hidden framework. In other words, the UFO emerges out of the secretive world of Area 51 and brazenly displays itself for the residents of Rachel, making them feel connected to something entirely greater than their individual lives.

Symbolically, then, the power of the UFO primarily rests in its ability to both resist and reconcile various power structures in modern American life. As conveyed by my respondents in Chapter 5, UFOs may bridge secular rationalism with traditional religiosity in the form of a more ambiguous technospirituality. Yet witnesses can also reference the alien while espousing a broad notion of skepticism used to attack both the critical thinking skills of a gullible public and the cynical dogmatism of the scientific community. Additionally, some respondents—like Lepselter’s coworkers—viewed their sightings as evidence of hidden connections and meanings, from the conspiratorial machinations of the American government to the simpler, more generalized promise of a hidden world just beyond their line of sight. The symbolic power of the UFO thus cannot be underestimated, and it remains critical to our understanding of the UFO’s continued usefulness within our contemporary belief language. Yet, as researchers, we must fervently guard against the tendency to both simplify a social phenomenon as a mere social device and to focus on specific, relatively rare aspects of the phenomenon as representative of the whole (i.e., alien abductions). In doing so, we perpetuate the oversimplified analyses of past research and severely limit opportunities for gaining new knowledge. In many ways, it is admittedly best to examine the UFO in symbolic terms. However, while empirical evidence for a physical phenomenon remains lacking at best, we owe it both to the spirit of interdisciplinary research and the anecdotes of witnesses to at least acknowledge the experiential component embedded in our modern lore, even as cognitive anthropology warns us against isolating experience from preexisting cultural models.

What stance, then, should researchers take when addressing the “reality” of UFOs? While some scholars have taken the admirable stance of full disclosure of disbelief, I have



maintained that such a position—even if ultimately correct in its dismissal of the more outlandish (pun intended) possibilities—nevertheless risks a gross oversimplification of social phenomena for the reasons outlined above. Furthermore, given little epistemic justification to outright reject exotic explanations (however remote), Wendt and Duvall argue for an agnostic approach, that, unlike positions held by scholars such as Jodi Dean that simply sidestep or ignore the physical component of the phenomenon, resist the UFO taboo imposed through political and scientific authorities and “see” it as a truly unidentified object (2008, 613,627-628). Indeed, to “see” the UFO requires us to not only acknowledge its presence as an observed object, but also the potential for the object—the UFO, in this case—to be a potential producer of knowledge (Haraway 1988, 592).

By making such allowances, however, the researcher may find himself or herself in tricky territory. A public declaration of this type of agnosticism comes not without professional risk, with Wendt and Duvall predicting resultant difficulties in funding and publication due to its challenge to normative structures of disbelief (2008, 628). While I have personally experienced the “giggle factor” that comes with merely promoting subjects such as the UFO phenomenon as viable areas of academic research, I find myself in support of Wendt and Duvall’s agnostic position, albeit with certain qualifiers. How do we improve upon our existing knowledge of the UFO phenomenon without engaging in reactionary, oppositional stances against real and perceived power structures? Can we challenge Carl Sagan’s anthropocentrism without waging war on the scientific method? Obviously, such questions relate not only to debates about UFOs, but also to ongoing, so-called “science wars” between members of the scientific community and postmodern critics. The basic problem, outlined by Donna Haraway, remains the same:

So, I think my problem, and “our” problem, is 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, one that can be partially shared and that is friendly to earthwide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness (1988, 579).

Twenty-two years after this eloquent phrasing of our (post?)postmodern epistemological dilemma, perhaps the beginnings of a practical solution to this problem can be found in the unlikely candidate of the UFO phenomenon. An interdisciplinary, nuanced examination of the cultural context of UFO belief, disbelief, and experience reveals an overwhelming multitude of social processes at work, yet we do not come away from this examination with a proclamation of the scientist as false witness. Rather, a close inspection of scientific attitudes about UFOs and the paranormal, coupled with an examination of the historical development of the scientific establishment, forces us to look upon scientific knowledge as a dynamic approximation of the physical world, subject to inherent cultural biases and assumptions of its funders *and* practitioners. We do so, yet acknowledge that science as a whole has broadened our collective understanding of the world at an astonishing rate! As Haraway states, we must move beyond notions of the “God trick” of a singular, objective overview of the world through “contestation,” “deconstruction,” “passionate construction,” and “webbed connections,” and we must rid ourselves of the idea of knowledge production through passive detachment (1988, 582,585). We must do so, however, without getting carried away with gross overgeneralizations and relativisms; a critique of the scientific enterprise need not be synonymous with a reactionary antiscientific dogma. After all, the scientist, feminist, poststructuralist, and transnationalist all share the same basic goal: better accounts of the world around us (1988, 590). In examining the bevy of assumptions, biases, anxieties, and

meanings concerning UFOs that all parties, from ufologists to Air Force officials, skeptical commentators, academics, and college students collectively bring to the table, we come to a much better understanding of the dynamic mechanisms of knowledge production.

### **Occam's Beard: The Trouble with Belief**

Taken in its totality, the goal of this project has been to problematize singular approaches (and their subsequent explanations) to answering a question that, on its surface, may seem simple: Why do people believe in UFOs? Of course, the approaches presented in this dissertation speak to a multitude of interwoven factors, including historical contexts, popular culture influences, available traditions of belief and related schemata, technospiritual reconciliations, epistemological resistance, and, of course, the sightings themselves. All of these factors, on both the personal and collective levels, continually work to formulate, maintain, disseminate, and adapt a social phenomenon that stubbornly refuses to subside in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Yet, when speaking of UFOs and other paranormal phenomena, many skeptics are fond of evoking the scientific principle known as Occam's Razor, which is often paraphrased in laymen's terms as "All things being equal, the simplest solution tends to be the best one." For instance, is it more likely that the strange light you witnessed in the night sky was a communications satellite rather than an extraterrestrial space cruiser? Was your failure to locate your car keys more indicative of the presence of a mischievous poltergeist than your own absentmindedness? In such scenarios, Occam's Razor reminds us that exotic explanations aren't needed so long as simpler, mundane explanations remain tenable. This certainly makes sense to me, and I find it to be quite a useful principle for a variety of scenarios. Problems arise, however, when social scientists—and, more frequently, the

media—overuse this methodological guide when applying parsimonious explanations to a variety of social phenomena. For example, what is the simplest explanation for the semi-regularity of school shootings in America? Bullying? Social ostracization? Easy access to guns? Desensitization to violence through movies and video games? Are certain underlying factors present in similar attacks in other cultures, such as the recent spate of stabbings of school children in China? Obviously, relevant factors will vary from case to case, even if broader patterns are evident in a majority of cases. Furthermore, the same type of repeated event may occur for different reasons in different cultural settings, even though the underlying phenomenon may be strikingly similar. As academics, journalists, and everyday citizens, however, we often have the urge to seek singular explanations out of situational convenience.

The UFO, as a social phenomenon, continually resists such simplifications. In the words of ufologist Jacques Vallee:

[An] important lesson from this experience concerns the uselessness of Occam's Razor. This expression is applied to a rule of thinking in science that states that one should never invoke a complex hypothesis when a simple one will fit. It all depends, of course, on what one means by "simple." The theory of a spherical earth spinning around the universe with over fourteen different motions is incredibly complex when compared to the elegant theory of a flat, motionless earth, with the sun and the celestial bodies simple lamps carried around by angels.

Occam must have had a beard (1990, 85).

Here, Vallee was speaking of the need for UFO investigators to separate witness testimony from both psychosocial factors and the actual physical object. I have argued here, particularly in light of schema theory and the ability of cultural models to directly shape our immediate perceptions of the world around us, that it is near impossible to extract dispassionate observations from their sociocultural framework. Conversely, this nuanced understanding of the relationship between belief and experience reveals simplified

explanations to be fragmented, outdated and of little use to future scholarship. In other words, the application of Occam's Razor to complex social phenomena simply doesn't work very well.

Ultimately, the interdisciplinary approach utilized in this dissertation, although focused on the UFO phenomenon, is presented as a more viable, holistic model for *all* contemporary belief traditions, particularly those often perceived as "alternative" or existing outside of the familiar, normative structures of organized religion and scientific materialism. This realm of belief in American culture, is, as I have argued, best conceptualized as a battleground of contested meaning. For New Age proponents and the UFO community, such alternative belief systems allow for a negotiation of imagined oppositional Western/non-Western dichotomies of science/religion and multiculturalism/nationalism. Furthermore, individuals are permitted to create highly personalized cosmologies that reflect an ever-increasing shift in social allegiances in the realms of religion, ethnicity, and politics. These systems of belief are aligned in direct opposition to a scientific ideology that continually attempts to position its own definitions of normative behavior and belief against irrational fringe belief. For this community, fringe belief is conveyed as a direct threat to Enlightenment ideals and notions of cultural progress. Science is symbolized in a Romanesque way as a beacon of light and hope against the barbarian hoards of irrationality, superstition, and fantasy that have taken on a recurring role of "infesting" human cognition. As discussed earlier, both belief systems rely on a shared set of Manichean binaries that construct culture categories as a broad set of oppositional epistemologies. For New Age thinkers, they continually seek to reconcile these categories. Scientific thinkers, on the other

hand, seek to eliminate cultural categories that stand in opposition to rationalism and materialism.

As far too few scholars appear to realize, what is at stake here is nothing less than control over what powers gain authority in determining the parameters of normative belief. Following Kuhnian notions of dominant scientific paradigms, the absence of competing schools of thought among the sciences make tracing scientific progress much easier to do (1996, 163). Additionally, science is allowed to firmly and collectively position itself against what it sees as competing and potentially dangerous claims to truth. Taking this into consideration, the UFO phenomenon and other alternative belief systems in contemporary American culture suddenly take on a more centrally-shared role in a continual struggle for cultural authority. By re-centering the sideshow of fringe belief on the academic radar, scholars can now move substantially closer both to understanding the causality and function of belief in contemporary American culture, and in demarcating, as Stuart Hall states, the play of power in social formations.

Of course, the interdisciplinary approach I have presented here is not without its limitations. Although I maintain that a focus on the experiential component of belief remains the most fruitful entry point for academic examinations of alternative belief systems, the survey I have designed to locate said experiences does not allow for an adequate inquiry into the role of *prior* individual attitudes that may impact subsequent life experiences. As the folkloric approach and cognitive anthropology teach us, prior cultural models and traditions of belief have a substantial impact on not only how we interpret our experiences, but also on how we immediately perceive them. Although I have been able to explore these dynamics in in-depth personal interviews, any future broad-based survey of anomalous experience should

include a basic line of questioning concerning respondents' attitudes about UFOs, the paranormal, and other alternative beliefs prior to their experiences. Such questions would, of course, also be useful regarding disbelief and those respondents who do not claim to have had anomalous experiences. Furthermore, a concerted focus on multiple witness accounts will also be incredibly useful for future scholarship in this area, since such accounts allow for an excellent, relatively easy entryway into a comparison of individual cultural models, belief traditions, perceptions, and interpretations of shared, anomalous experiences.

As the 21<sup>st</sup> century marches on, and with it, the steady advancement of information technology, it will be interesting to observe the evolution of UFO narratives. Jodi Dean (1998) and Richard Doyle (2005) have already begun considering how the UFO and alien function within a techno-global information age, and the symbolic evolution of the alien will, in part, continue to reflect our collective anxieties about technology and its impact on human life. But the alien will also continue to reveal our struggles over new definitions of ethnicity, gender, nationhood, and our ability (or lack thereof) to access knowledge and be active participants in its continual production. I can think of no better subject than the UFO—at once a physical and richly symbolic manifestation that normative culture continues clumsily to grapple with—as an entry point for a nuanced, interdisciplinary inquiry into how we as humans come to organize and interact with the world around us, from the spiritual to the scientific, the rational to the delusional, the apathetic to the conspiratorial, the cynical to the wondrous.

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- Penn & Teller: Bullshit!* Episode no. 13, first broadcast 18 April 2003 by Showtime. Directed by Star Price and written by Penn Jillette, John McLaughlin, Teller, and David Wechter.
- Penn & Teller: Bullshit!* Episode no. 17, first broadcast 22 April 2004 by Showtime. Directed by Star Price and written by Michael Goudeau, Penn Jillette, Star Price, Teller, and Emma Webster.
- Penn & Teller: Bullshit!* Episode no. 28, first broadcast 2 May 2005 by Showtime. Directed by Christopher Poole and written by Steven Bortko, John McLaughlin, Steve Melcher, Randall Moldave, Eric Small, Jonathan B. Taylor, and Emma Webster.
- Penn & Teller: Bullshit!* Episode no. 35, first broadcast 27 June 2005 by Showtime. Directed by Christopher Poole and written by Steven Bortko, John McLaughlin, Steve Melcher, Randall Moldave, Eric Small, Jonathan B. Taylor, and Emma Webster.
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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Name has been changed.

<sup>2</sup> Strieber's book will be discussed in more detail in later chapters.

<sup>3</sup> Unlike Tumminia, I do not include sci-fi fandoms as part of this UFO community, since their interest in ufology may be tangential or nonexistent.

<sup>4</sup> In regards to belief studies, David Hufford (1995b) has argued for more self-reflexivity and forthright disclosure from scholars concerning their personal opinions (i.e., belief or disbelief). Although the usefulness of said disclosure is debatable (Ritchie 2002), in the spirit of openness I confess here that my personal attitude concerning the "reality" of UFOs conveniently matches my academic treatment of the subject. In other words, I do not categorically reject the possibility that some UFO sightings may represent scientific anomalies, even as I acknowledge that the personal anecdotes discussed in this dissertation are in no way empirically verifiable. Furthermore, although I make no effort to "interpret" the experiences described by my respondents (for reasons which shall become obvious), I generally subscribe to the popular notion that many UFO sightings—given adequate information—have natural or conventional explanations.

<sup>5</sup> Although, like Brown, I largely treat the UFO phenomenon as an American cultural export, Brown's understanding of UFO-related phenomena remains limited in that she does not acknowledge or identify their similarities to prior global folk traditions. This is a topic I address in Chapter 5.

<sup>6</sup> Quoting from Kistiakowsky's 1980 entry "Reminiscences of Wartime Los Alamos" (49-65).

<sup>7</sup> According to Trevor Paglen, the only scientist present who held reservations about bringing the research under an umbrella of secrecy was Bohr (2009, 81). His specific warnings against the scientific community's collusions with governments will be discussed in the conclusion.

<sup>8</sup> Taken from a quote in Richard Rhodes's *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (1986).

<sup>9</sup> The CIA would later get a significant addition to its power and resources in the secret CIA Act of 1949, which, among other things, allowed for the formal creation of a black budget to fund the agency. According to Paglen, the act represents the only statutory basis for a black budget in American legislation through its key provision of exemption from Congressional oversight. In a practice that continues today, the CIA's budget remained hidden within the line items of other government bodies (Paglen 2009, 189-191).

<sup>10</sup> Aside from the CIA, the modern American intelligence community also had its roots in Herbert Yardley's post World War I cryptanalysis unit known as the Black Chamber, which held the first secret intelligence budget in U.S. history and would later evolve into the National Security Agency (Paglen 2009, 76-77).

<sup>11</sup> For all the ongoing public debate about NASA's annual budget, Paglen notes that the NRO's budget was revealed to be the highest in the intelligence community when it was finally made public in 1992 (2009, 124).

<sup>12</sup> NASA's public demise and its relationship with the rise of internet culture will be discussed in Chapter 7.

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that the post-WWII wave of UFO sightings in the U.S. was predated by a period of sustained sightings of "airships" over American skies between 1896 and 1897. For a detailed discussion of these sightings, see Jerome Clark's *The UFO Encyclopedia Vol. 2* (1992) and David Jacobs's *The UFO Controversy in America* (1975). For a more recent, skeptical examination, see Robert Bartholomew and Benjamin Radford's *Hoaxes, Myths, and Manias: Why We Need Critical Thinking* (2003).

<sup>14</sup> In Ronald Story's *The Encyclopedia of Extraterrestrial Encounters* (2001), he proposes various nonprosaic explanations for foo fighters that include plasma discharges and secret German anti-radar devices (203).

<sup>15</sup> Clark also notes that a later Air Force reinvestigation of the incident in 1952 led to a more credible explanation of the object as a Skyhook balloon.

<sup>16</sup> This was explicitly stated in E. Moore's memo "Top Secret Supplement to Daily Activity Report." December 8, 1948.

<sup>17</sup> Ramet also notes that several later Soviet UFO sightings were likely (transparently) concocted to cover up actual factory explosions and the destruction of Soviet fighter jets due to faulty firing systems.

<sup>18</sup> Jacobs cites two 1952 articles involving Menzel here, including Menzel's "The Truth About Flying Saucers" and an interview with Menzel titled "Those Flying Saucers."

<sup>19</sup> This protocol was established in Robert C. Brown's March 5<sup>th</sup> memo titled "Utilization of 4602<sup>nd</sup> AISS Personnel in Project Blue Book Field Investigations," as well as his December 1953 memo titled "Division of Responsibility ATIC-ADC."

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, the entry “University of Colorado UFO Project” in *The Encyclopedia of Extraterrestrial Encounters* (2001) and Diana Hoyt’s discussion of the Cold War context of the Condon Committee in “UFOCRITIQUE: UFO’s, Social Intelligence, and the Condon Committee” (2000).

<sup>21</sup> The UFO community’s oppositional role against the military industrial complex continues today. For example, scholar Trevor Paglen’s recent attempts to find information on secret military bases on American soil initially turned up little information, save for references in UFO literature (2009, 13).

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Leon Festinger et al.’s *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group That Predicted the Destruction of the World* (1956).

<sup>23</sup> Fiske also argues here that popular culture always remains on the side of the subordinate, since consumers negotiate the ultimate meaning of texts. On this point, Fiske risks promoting what Jim McGuigan refers to as an “uncritical populism” that naively divorces popular readings from any dominant complicity (2002, 587,589). For a more detailed discussion of popular culture as a contested terrain between producers and consumers, see Lawrence Levin’s “The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences” and the responses of Robin Kelley, Natalie Davis, and T.J. Jackson Lears in *American Historical Review* (1992).

<sup>24</sup> Here, Badmington refers to Derrida’s translated work *Dissemination* (1981).

<sup>25</sup> I am indebted to Alison Fields and Gabriel Waters for their substantial contributions to this chapter. These individuals assisted me in calculating many of the statistics discussed here, as well as in the creation of the figures used. Another version of this chapter, co-written with Fields and Waters, is currently being expanded into an academic article.

<sup>26</sup> Terminological issues exist when attempting to classify UFO and paranormal experiences. Some scholars distinguish between the terms “supernatural” and “paranormal” in reference to traditional religious experiences versus ghost sightings, extra-sensory perception (ESP), out-of-body experiences (OBEs), and telekinesis (Beck and Miller 2001, 277-278). Furthermore, most scholars and researchers have traditionally treated UFO experiences and paranormal experiences as separate phenomena. Although this second distinction is debatable, we use the term “anomalous” to refer to the wide body of experiences and related lore that typically fall outside the realm of traditional Western religious experience, including but not limited to UFOs, alien abductions, apparitions, psychic phenomena, and nonhuman entities. We use this term while acknowledging that “anomalous” is also potentially problematic, since it may imply such beliefs and experiences are non-normative and may not be perceived as such by those that harbor them.

<sup>27</sup> In regards to ufology, the two most outspoken critics of claims of scientific legitimacy are Donald Menzel (1977) and Phillip Klass (1975). Among those advocating a sympathetic scientific study of UFOs are J. Allen Hynek (1972) and Jacques Vallee (1990).

<sup>28</sup> In the case of scholarly works on ufology and its participants, see Festinger, Riecken, and Schacter’s *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group That Predicted the Destruction of the World* (1956), Matheson’s *Alien Abductions: Creating a Modern Phenomenon* (1998), and Cross’s “The Flexibility of Scientific Rhetoric: A Case Study of UFO Researchers” (2004).

<sup>29</sup> Traditional skeptical approaches to examining UFO and paranormal beliefs will be addressed in Chapter 7.

<sup>30</sup> Although the terms “Old Hag” and sleep paralysis are not necessarily synonymous (for example, sleep paralysis descriptions traditionally have not included the hallucinogenic aspects of the Old Hag), both traditions typically begin with the experiencer waking from sleep, unable to move, and sensing a nearby presence. For more detailed discussions, see Hufford (1982a) and Clancy (2005).

<sup>31</sup> A further goal—addressed in the following chapter—was to collect and investigate in-depth narratives within the surveys in order to measure their influence of and by specific folk traditions and genres.

<sup>32</sup> McClenon is also among the few academics to attempt cross-cultural comparisons of reported paranormal experiences. In addition to students at several American institutions, McClenon also surveyed those at three Chinese colleges and a Japanese university.

<sup>33</sup> The greater propensity for women to harbor paranormal beliefs has been supported by other studies (e.g., Randall 1990).

<sup>34</sup> Brenda Denzler’s survey of members of a UFO community revealed that 53% reported having a UFO experience (2001, 173). This suggests that, perhaps unsurprisingly, individuals with an active interest in the subject of UFOs are much more likely to allege first-person experiences.

<sup>35</sup> Those identifying their religious affiliation as “other” were 29% (12) Caucasian, 15% (6) Hispanic, 26% (11) Native American, 15% (6) Asian American, and 15% (6) “other” ethnicity. Among Native Americans, 31%

(11) identified their religious affiliation as “other,” versus 29% (10) citing no affiliation, 26% (9) Catholic, and 14% (5) Protestant.

<sup>36</sup> For frequencies and types of UFO encounters, see Hynek (1972) and Hynek and Vallee (1975).

<sup>37</sup> At least two respondents provided positive responses to the Old Hag/sleep paralysis question and later in the questionnaire alluded to having abduction experiences, although neither described a concrete connection between the two experiences.

<sup>38</sup> Brenda Denzler’s demographic examination of a UFO community suggests that men are significantly overrepresented (2001, 164).

<sup>39</sup> The sample sizes of African Americans, Asian Americans, and those in the “Other” category were deemed too small to include in this discussion.

<sup>40</sup> The folklorist Barre Toelken has discussed how events or experiences he witnessed among the Navajo would likely be considered supernatural or “mysteriously-out-of-the-ordinary” among non-natives, yet for the Navajo such experiences rest instead on a set of different cosmological assumptions (1995, 47).

<sup>41</sup> Future studies focusing on this specific demographic may consider other factors, including the type of degree held and current profession.

<sup>42</sup> A 1998 survey found that younger people were more likely to believe in heaven and hell, extraterrestrials, ghosts, and *déjà vu*, while older people were more likely to believe in ESP and the healing powers of prayer (Rice 2003, 100-101).

<sup>43</sup> The interviews referenced in this chapter were collected in 2008 and 2009 and approved by the University of New Mexico Institutional Review Board. Interviewees were located primarily through survey responses, newspaper advertisements, and approved solicitations at three websites. To protect their anonymity, all respondents’ names have been changed to pseudonyms.

<sup>44</sup> The performative aspects of UFO storytelling will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

<sup>45</sup> “Disbelief,” both as folk practice and a cultural (dis)belief language, will be explored in Chapter 7.

<sup>46</sup> Another terminological issue occurs with the usage of *myth*. Extraordinary accounts, including those of UFOs, are often described as being mythic in nature (Ellis 1991, 43). Thomas Bullard (2000) maintains that the term *myth* has been used differently by various writers in different fields. In everyday usage, the word myth is used to describe a false belief. He notes that skeptics such as Donald Menzel often use this definition when describing UFOs, arguing that UFOs are mistaken efforts to understand the unknown. Bullard states that folklorists define myth as a creation story of a culture that explains the origins of humankind and the universe. Anthropologists add that myth is true to its believers and false to nonbelievers, while psychologists see myths as expressions of the unconscious mind. Myths may be understood to be all of these things, except in the context of everyday usage. Therefore, when something such as anomalous light experiences are said to contain mythic aspects, it is not meant to imply that such experiences are inherently untrue (2000, 159-160).

Still, competing definitions of *myth* hinder the ability to classify supernatural beliefs as such, and it is probably best, when discussing the term, to refer to the traditional folkloric definition as outlined by William Bascom (1984). According to Bascom, myths share certain defining characteristics. Generally, they are sacred narratives involving non-human characters, and are considered to be truthful accounts of events occurring in the distant past. Myths account for the origin of some present state of reality; be it in the form of the larger world, mankind, or aspects of nature. These characteristics help to distinguish myths from other forms of prose narrative, including legends and folktales (Bascom 1984, 9). If we are to commit to this traditional definition of the term, it would be difficult to categorize many contemporary anomalous (or non-mainstream) beliefs or encounters as such.

<sup>47</sup> “Nonrandom” is used here to characterize experiences associated with legend-tripping, in which individuals actively seek out locales associated with supernatural traditions.

<sup>48</sup> The spectrum of various beliefs and experiences included within the UFO phenomenon will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

<sup>49</sup> Examples of this motif can be found in such studies as those of John Mack (*Abduction* 1994, *Passport to the Cosmos* 1999), Budd Hopkins (*Missing Time* 1983, *Intruders* 1987, *Witnessed* 1996), and David Jacobs (*Secret Life* 1992).

<sup>50</sup> Sturma also notes that captivity narratives frequently capitalize on “forbidden intimacies,” and in Strieber’s and other alien abduction narratives, cross-cultural romantic relationships are replaced with reproductive experiments (2002, 326-327).

<sup>51</sup> This concept will be examined more closely in Chapter 7.

<sup>52</sup> Hufford's position appears to ignore the potential role of culture in the individual's immediate perception of her experience. This matter will be explored in Chapter 6.

<sup>53</sup> This has proven to be a difficult task in the past, in light of previous attempts to do so (Hufford 1977, 239-240).

<sup>54</sup> Curiously, Faye also stated that the experience tended to occur most frequently when she moved into a new residence. Shelley Adler's (1991) study of fatal "nightmares" among Hmong immigrants in the U.S. suggests a correlation between sleep paralysis/Old Hag episodes and residential transitions.

<sup>55</sup> It should be noted, however, that the majority of individuals reporting abduction-like experiences that I came into contact with eventually declined to be interviewed for this project.

<sup>56</sup> So-called "shadow people" represent a relatively new apparitional entry into the group of beings or presences associated with sleep paralysis/Old Hag. Although none of the respondents used for this project reported encounters with such beings, several individuals I have spoken with outside the survey sample did provide such accounts, and the phenomenon has enjoyed popularity on the internet, which include several websites devoted to the topic (for instance, [www.shadowpeople.org](http://www.shadowpeople.org)) and its own Wikipedia entry ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shadow\\_people](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shadow_people)).

<sup>57</sup> Some researchers would contend that even the core experience of waking paralysis varies, at least in frequency, in global sample populations (Sevilla 2004, 40).

<sup>58</sup> Although I choose not to provide a scientific explanation here, even folklorists wary of dismissing such core experiences as "mere" cases of sleep paralysis are gradually acknowledging their (at least) partial biological origin as disturbances in sleep patterns in which the brain functions as if asleep while the body fails to respond to impulses to move (Ellis 2003, 96).

<sup>59</sup> I also taxonomically distinguish UFO sightings here from other contemporary anomalous light traditions that include "ghost lights," also referred to as "Will-o'-the-Wisps," "*ignus fatuus*," and "jack-o'-lanterns" (Dewan 2006b; Stansel 1973).

<sup>60</sup> Alexandra's confusion may be rooted in how flashing red and blue lights are part of an American cultural schema of police vehicles. This subject is explored in much greater detail in Chapter 6.

<sup>61</sup> This is commonly referred to among ufologists as the Belgian UFO wave of 1989-90, which included an attempt by Belgian F-16s to intercept a group of strange lights on the night of March 30, 1990 (van Utrecht 2001, 101-103).

<sup>62</sup> Although the term "nondenominational" may also be used to identify inherently denominational congregations that follow their own doctrine and policy, the individuals that used the term here all described themselves as wary of specific doctrine and/or dogma.

<sup>63</sup> A possible explanation for this association may lie in how religious worldviews affect individual's interpretations of their experiences. Of course, religious interpretations of aerial phenomena are not limited to the Middle Ages. For example, a devout Christian may witness a similarly strange light in the sky as a UFO enthusiast, yet interpret the anomaly as a vision from God. The Apostle Paul reported such an encounter on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-19).

<sup>64</sup> For convenience, I use the term "nonreligious" to refer to all individuals that maintain no specific denominational religious affiliation.

<sup>65</sup> In ufology, Reptilians may simply represent beings reported during UFO encounters, or more specifically an extraterrestrial intelligence that has infiltrated various leadership positions around the world. For example, see David Icke's *The David Icke Guide to Global Conspiracy (And How to End it)* (2007).

<sup>66</sup> Bert and Gordon's experiences will be discussed in depth in Chapter 6.

<sup>67</sup> Even though Zo claimed he had not read many books on UFOs, compared to the relative exposure of other respondents and his substantial familiarity with various members of the UFO category, I qualify him as being well-versed in the literature.

<sup>68</sup> As of this writing, a simple Google search for UFOs provides over 37 million results.

<sup>69</sup> These ideas are discussed in much greater detail in Chapter 7.

<sup>70</sup> The skinwalker, or *yenaaldlooshi* ("by means of trotting like a canine"), is a creature represented in numerous Navajo legends commonly believed to be a "witch" who wears canine hides as outer clothing or is capable of changing into canine form (Toelken 1995, 55-56).

<sup>71</sup> Blackwater (since renamed Xe Services LLC) refers to one of numerous private military contractors, including DynCorp and Triple Canopy, involved in controversial paramilitary actions in Iraq and Afghanistan (Paglen 2009, 266).

<sup>72</sup> These narrative tactics will be further explored in Chapter 6.

<sup>73</sup> Quoting Mandler's *Mind and Body: The Psychology of Emotion and Stress* (1984, 55-56).

<sup>74</sup> One of the specific goals of this project has been to evaluate how these experiences may alter a person's worldview, particularly his or her cosmology. Very few attempts have been made so far to study this kind of change, yet several of the accounts provided by respondents in the survey, as well as the work of others that have undertaken such studies, suggest that dramatic shifts in cosmology do occur frequently, and that the consideration and reevaluation of such events may continue throughout a person's *lifetime* (Ring 1992, 173-193).

<sup>75</sup> Lawson cites Thomas Ward and C.M. Sifonis's 1997 article "Task Demands and Generative Thinking: What Changes and What Remains the Same?"

<sup>76</sup> "La Llorona," or "The Weeping Woman" is a popular supernatural legend told in the American southwest, Mexico, and much of Central America. Whereas the versions Mathews collected in Mexico appear to focus on reaffirming marital propriety, the majority of accounts I have collected in New Mexico are generally told as a warning to children about playing near arroyos. For more information on variations of La Llorona, see Walraven (1991).

<sup>77</sup> However, UFOs may certainly be part of semantic memory ("UFOs are believed by many to be alien spaceships") and thus influence our broader cultural belief language.

<sup>78</sup> D'Andrade cites a study by Hamilton and Fagot (1988).

<sup>79</sup> D'Andrade specifically references David Hamilton's discussion in *Memory: Interdisciplinary Approaches* (1989).

<sup>80</sup> D'Andrade references a study by Bernard et al. in *Annual Reviews of Anthropology* (1984).

<sup>81</sup> This study, which involves Boas's collection of Kwakiutl folktales, was originally brought to the attention of cognitive scientists by Bartlett (1932).

<sup>82</sup> Studies of recall and remembrance remain pressing issues in current neuroscience. Jill Neimark's (2004) article in *Discover* highlights the ongoing work of Harvard psychologist Richard McNally and his colleagues into the study of memory repression and remembered events such as sexual abuse and alien abductions. The prevailing wisdom among these scientists is that such recollections are false memories constructed by the mind as a consequence of a variety of possible factors including actual trauma and fantasy-prone personalities. Their understanding of memory closely parallels that of cognitive anthropologists: memory is a dynamic reconstruction of the past rather than a series of mental "snapshots" of past events.

<sup>83</sup> Kuhn cites Bruner and Postman's (1949) study published in *Journal of Personality*.

<sup>84</sup> UFO skeptics such as Philip Klass (1975) have used this method traditionally to note discrepancies (and, presumably, erroneous observations) in accounts with multiple witnesses.

<sup>85</sup> Rafael did not wish to be recorded during his interview; therefore a transcription of his account is not available.

<sup>86</sup> This also speaks to the problem of researchers retrieving "veridical" accounts from such shared narratives, since the individual accounts (i.e., those of spouses, partners, or friends) will often impact one another and thus be reshaped over time.

<sup>87</sup> Again, Nastika conceded that she may or may not have actually recalled Ivan retrieving his gun.

<sup>88</sup> Emphases mine.

<sup>89</sup> As a postscript to this discussion of Ivan and Nastika's experience, it should be noted that Ivan was later able to get in contact with the couple (since divorced) that both agreed had been present during the encounter. Ivan recalled that at one point, the wife had sent him a letter in which she mentioned seeing the "UFO," yet subsequently she claimed little memory of the incident. My attempts to interview her were unsuccessful. Furthermore, when I contacted the husband via email, he claimed no recollection of such an incident.

<sup>90</sup> Here, Sloane is likely referring to Norris Lake.

<sup>91</sup> This again highlights a potential problem in gauging accurate frequencies for reported abduction episodes, since the evidence in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 suggests that abduction claims are considered highly controversial in public discourse, and thus respondents will be uneasy or unwilling to publicly frame their experiences in such terms.



<sup>92</sup> One might also argue that Josh and Bradley are simply exercising “true” skepticism by refusing to come to any concrete conclusions about their experiences without further empirical evidence. How the term “skepticism” is popularly understood will be addressed in Chapter 7.

<sup>93</sup> This particular matter deserves further scrutiny, since, as Strauss notes, cultural standing is relative to the opinion community of the speaker’s audience. Thus, the type of communicative event that is occurring is of vital importance (2004, 187). Linda Garro and Robert Schrauf are also concerned with this issue, arguing that the interviewer/audience and interview setting make a potentially substantial contribution to what is remembered (Garro 2001, 107; Schrauf 1997, 430). A formal interview is a fundamentally different form of communication from everyday conversation. Key differences, including the authoritative role of the interviewer, the presence of recording devices, conversational imbalance, and a formal setting will all impact how a speaker communicates his opinions or experiences. In all my interviews, I never voiced any personal opinions about the nature of UFOs or other anomalous experiences. While it is certainly possible that some of my respondents self-censored out of fear of ridicule, it is equally possible (and likely) that others divulged information that they would not have in everyday conversation, as evidenced by some of the remarks included in Chapter 5.

<sup>94</sup> Here, I believe Bert was actually referring to the Betty and Barney Hill case, which occurred in New Hampshire.

<sup>95</sup> Strauss notes that this is a common practice in all forms of conversation and writing, particularly in academic journals, since the cultural standing of the author’s views amongst her academic peers is significantly constrained. Specifically, the academic writes while anticipating responses from editors and peers based on schemas about the various acceptable and controversial opinions in her given discipline (2004, 168). Of course, this work has been based on and guided by my own schemas about accepted and outlandish ideas about UFOs.

<sup>96</sup> Emphases mine.

<sup>97</sup> While this association may seem superficial on one level, it figures as a critical component of the assumptions made by skeptical scientists about the subject of UFOs, particularly regarding the assumption that the unlikelihood of extraterrestrial visitation negates any potential scientific importance in studying UFOs. This topic will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7 and in the conclusion.

<sup>98</sup> I refer here to cases falling under Hynek’s (1972) classification category of Close Encounters of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Kind, in which witnesses report physical effects of the environment being present. For example, the Cash-Landrum UFO encounter of 1980—in which witnesses reported radiation sickness after witnessing a UFO—would be one such instance of a “troubling UFO illness narrative” (Schuessler 2001, 124-126).

<sup>99</sup> Frayling cites Mead and Rhoda Métraux’s article “Image of the Scientist” (1957, 384-90).

<sup>100</sup> Frayling cites David Wade Chambers’ article “Draw-a-scientist” (1983, 255-265).

<sup>101</sup> Frayling cites Haynes’s 1994 book *From Faust to Strangelove: Representations of the Scientist in Western Literature*.

<sup>102</sup> Frayling cites Catherine Hughes’s February 2001 article “Shackled to Stereotypes” in *Science and Public Affairs* (21-23). Another telling statistic in Hughes’s survey was the fact that 70 percent of the scientists polled acknowledged that their research had potential social and ethical implications, and yet 61 percent felt they personally could not address such concerns due to the time constraints of their jobs and the larger discipline culture of “publish or perish.” This issue will be explored in greater detail later in the chapter.

<sup>103</sup> As with prior interviewees, all scientists interviewed for this chapter have been given pseudonyms.

<sup>104</sup> The Discovery Institute is a non-profit organization best known for its advocacy of Intelligent Design as part of public high school biology classroom curriculum.

<sup>105</sup> Pseudoscience, and its perceived parameters, will be discussed more in depth later in the chapter. For its usage among scientists, Kenneth Feder provides a useful definition, distinguishing science as “a process of understanding the world around us through the application of logical thought,” while separating pseudoscience as a system of belief that “abandons logic, and claims are made and conclusions reached that cannot be verified or proven” (1996, 5).

<sup>106</sup> Similarly, Helen Longino makes the point that selection of hypotheses is relegated to the context of discovery (i.e., “I will test for depression among people who claim to see ghosts”), and is not subject to logical constraints. For Longino, this makes science vulnerable to contextual interests since theory precedes experimentation and observation (1986, 60-61).

<sup>107</sup> Quoted by Rabinow (1996, 179). Rabinow also points out that, in the human sciences, no one writes as a “social-scientific everyman” (1996, 180).

<sup>108</sup> Quoted by Rabinow (1996, 133).

<sup>109</sup> This is not to say that religion is never the subject of intense public criticism among intellectuals. See, for instance, Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* (2006). However, skeptical attacks on UFO and paranormal beliefs remain far more common in bookstores and on television.

<sup>110</sup> Although he concedes that scientists may ultimately be no better qualified to predict how intelligent alien beings might behave or appear, Grinspoon also notes that this argument can provide a strong loophole for UFO proponents (or any critics of SETI) to defend against any skeptical arguments against "illogical" alien behavior (2003, 380).

<sup>111</sup> Truzzi himself chooses the term "pseudo-skepticism" to refer to a negative critical approach to UFOs and the paranormal (1987, 3).

<sup>112</sup> In regards to ufology, the two most outspoken critics of claims of scientific legitimacy are the late Donald Menzel (1972) and Phillip Klass (1975). Among those advocating a sympathetic scientific study of UFOs are the late J. Allen Hynek (1972) and Jacques Vallee (1990).

<sup>113</sup> In the case of scholarly works on ufology and its participants, see Festinger, Riecken, and Schacter's *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group That Predicted the Destruction of the World* (1956), and Matheson's *Alien Abductions: Creating a Modern Phenomenon* (1998).

<sup>114</sup> This idea has taken hold with other folklorists interested in formulations of belief and disbelief, particularly Gillian Bennett (1999).

<sup>115</sup> Susan Ritchie (2002) notes that Hufford's understanding of a secular academia is reductionistic in that he does not consider the influence of Protestantism on modern methodologies in belief studies (2002, 447-449).

<sup>116</sup> Jacobs cites two articles involving Menzel here, including Menzel's 1952 article "The Truth About Flying Saucers," and an interview that same year with Menzel in *Time* titled "Those Flying Saucers."

<sup>117</sup> Kenneth Feder distinguishes science from pseudoscience (for scientists): Science is a process of understanding the world around us through the application of logical thought. "Pseudoscience," on the other hand, abandons logic, and claims are made and conclusions reached that cannot be verified or proven (1996, 5).

<sup>118</sup> Sagan's skeptical arguments have also been criticized for their occasional appeals to authority. For instance, Gregory Schrempp contends that Sagan relies on an antiquated, ambiguous "folk psychology" to delineate those beliefs he wishes to disparage (1998, 248-249). In this instance, Sagan's rudimentary understanding of folkloristics remains largely uncontested.

<sup>119</sup> Two exceptions to this were found in the responses of Caroline C. McLeod, Barbara Corbisier, and John Mack's "A More Parsimonious Explanation for UFO Abduction" (156-167) and Robert Hall's "Escaping the Self or Escaping the Anomaly?" (143-148). McLeod, Corbisier, and Mack in particular argue for psychologists to step outside dichotomies of "real-unreal" and "belief-disbelief" (167).

<sup>120</sup> Lamont cites a number of studies that associate paranormal belief with a variety of factors, including low IQ (Smith, Foster, and Stovin 1998), lack of science education (Otis and Alcock 1992), low income (Wuthnow 1976), old age (Emmons and Sobal 1981), ethnic minorities (Tobacyk, Miller, Murphy, and Mitchell 1988) and women (Randall 1990).

<sup>121</sup> Ironically, during this discussion a clip is shown of the film *Fire in the Sky* (1993, dir. Robert Lieberman), a film based on the alleged real-life abduction experience of Travis Walton (1978).

<sup>122</sup> Here, I refer to a series of lights witnessed over Phoenix (and other parts of Arizona and Mexico) on the night of March 13, 1997. For details, see Peter Davenport's summary of the events in *The Encyclopedia of Extraterrestrial Encounters* (2001).