WRAITHS AND WHITE MEN: THE IMPACT OF PRIVILEGE ON PARANORMAL REALITY TELEVISION

by

ANTARES RUSSELL LEASK

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Timothy Morris, Supervising Professor
Neill Matheson
Timothy Richardson

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ABSTRACT

WRAITHS AND WHITE MEN: THE IMPACT OF PRIVILEGE ON PARANORMAL REALITY TELEVISION

Antares Russell Leask, Ph.D.

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Supervising Professor: Timothy Morris

Modern paranormal TV walks the fine line between infotainment and propaganda that older white men are rational while marginalized communities, such as youths, lower social classes, women, and minorities are hysterical and gullible. White privilege is performed and glorified in reality paranormal television at the expense of marginalized groups. This view is inherently classist/racist/sexist/homophobic and does not reflect prevailing cultural norms, but points to a reemergence of the prejudiced idea that belief in the supernatural is a mark of cultural inferiority. Throughout history, marginalized groups have been considered those more prone to superstition, so with the renewed rise in racist and sexist views in the current political climate, this is an indication that it is once again acceptable to show--and mock--minorities as believers in the supernatural for the purpose of entertainment. While Anthony Bourdain used his fame and television shows such as Travel Channel's *No Reservations* and CNN's *Parts Unknown* to bring awareness and acceptance to other cultures, and shows such as the original (Bravo) and rebooted (Netflix) *Queer Eye* promote inclusion and equality, modern paranormal reality TV continues to divide society along class, racial, and gender lines through the guise of separating believers and non-believers. The voice of the skeptic functions as an expression of white male privilege in American paranormal reality TV, perpetuating stereotypes about race, class, age, and gender.

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Chapter One: "If You Hate These Shows So Much, Why Do You Keep Watching Them?"

Modern paranormal TV walks the fine line between infotainment and propaganda that older white men are rational while marginalized communities, such as youths, lower social classes, women, and minorities are hysterical and gullible. White privilege is performed and glorified in reality paranormal television at the expense of marginalized groups. This view is inherently classist/racist/sexist/homophobic and does not reflect prevailing cultural norms, but points to a reemergence of the prejudiced idea that belief in the supernatural is a mark of cultural inferiority. Throughout history, marginalized groups have been considered those more prone to superstition, so with the renewed rise in racist and sexist views in the current political climate, this is an indication that it is once again acceptable to show--and mock--minorities as believers in the supernatural for the purpose of entertainment. While Anthony Bourdain used his fame and television shows such as Travel Channel's *No Reservations* and CNN's *Parts Unknown* to bring awareness and acceptance to other cultures, and shows such as the original (Bravo) and rebooted (Netflix) *Queer Eye* promote inclusion and equality, modern paranormal reality TV continues to divide society along class, racial, and gender lines through the guise of separating believers and non-believers. The voice of the skeptic functions as an expression of white male privilege in American paranormal reality TV, perpetuating stereotypes about race, class, age, and gender.

Understanding that these paranormal reality shows are primarily presented as entertainment, they are still perpetuating outdated stereotypes and are worthy of study into how their arguments are created and how the "reality" stars are being used rhetorically to increase the divide between skeptics and believers through the lens of privilege and marginalization.

I have aligned this work with a handout provided at an educational staff development workshop after the racially charged protests in Charlottesville, Virginia:

Privileged and Marginalized Identities from the Social Justice Training Institute

Privileged Group	Identity	Marginalized Group
Late 30s-Early 60s	**Age**	Younger, Older
White	**Race**	Person of Color, People who identify as Biracial/Multiracial
Male	**Sex**	Female, Intersex
Cisgender	**Gender Identity and Gender expression**	Transgender, Gender Nonconforming, Gender Queer, Androgynous
Heterosexual	**Sexual Orientation**	Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer, Questioning
Upper Class, Upper Middle Class, Middle Class	**Social Class**	Working Class, Living in Poverty
Graduate or Four Year College Degree	**Education Level**	High School Degree, First Generation to College, Less Valued School
Christian	**Religion**	Muslim, Jewish, Agnostic, Hindu, Atheist, Buddhist, Spiritual, LDS, Jehovah's Witness, Pagan
U.S. Born	**National Origin**	Born in Country Other Than U.S.
Non-disabled	**Ableness/Disability**	People with Physical, Mental, Emotional, and/or Learning Disability
"American," Western European Heritage	**Ethnicity/Culture**	People from Cultures and/or Ethnicities Other Than Western European
Fit Society's Image of Attractive, Beautiful, Handsome, Athletic	**Size, Appearance, Athleticism**	Perceived by Others as Too Fat, Tall, Short, Unattractive, Not Athletic
Proficient in the Use of "Standard" English	**English Literacy**	Use of "Non-Standard" English Dialects, Has an "Accent"
U.S. Citizen	**Immigration Status**	People Who Do Not Have U.S. Citizenship
Suburban, Valued Region of	**Geographic Location**	Rural, Urban, Less Valued

the U.S.		Region of U.S.
Light Skin, European/Caucasian Features	**Skin Color/Phenotype**	Darker Skin, African, Asian, Indigenous Features
Nuclear Family with Two Parents in a Heterosexual Relationship	**Family Status**	Blended Family, Single-Parent Household, Foster Family, Multigenerational Family, Same-Sex Parents
Extroverted, Task-Oriented, Analytical, Linear Thinker	**Work Style**	Introverted, Process-Oriented, Creative, Circular Thinker

Through comparing this chart and the stereotypes presented in these paranormal reality shows, the pattern emerges that those who present as believers in the paranormal are also those who belong to marginalized communities. Since the way these television performers are being presented is a result of the choices of the producers, network, and actors themselves, it is a concern that problematic stereotypes are being presented and perpetuated to an audience of mostly white males, in contrast to the growing acceptance of diversity in current American culture.

With new shows airing with each new TV season, it will be more efficient to group topics together from the Social Justice Training Institute handout and connect the shows to concepts rather than the opposite.

The main topics and sub-topics from the original chart then become Chapter Two: Race, covering identities surrounding English Literacy, Immigration Status, and Skin Color/Phenotype Age. Shows considered in this chapter will include *Destination Truth, Expedition Unknown, Ghost Hunters* (and spin-offs), *Ghost Brothers* (and spin-off), *Ghosts in the Hood,* and *Ghost Nation*. Chapter Three: Social Class will look at Religion, National Origin, Ableness/Disability, Ethnicity/Culture, Size, Appearance, Athleticism, Geographic Location, Family Status, and Work Style and the shows *Ghost Asylum, Ghosts of Shepherdstown, Fact or Faked: Paranormal*

Files, Haunted Towns, and *Ghosts of Morgan City.* Chapter Four: Age will focus on Age and Education Level through the lens of *Ghost Adventures, Ghost Stalkers, Paranormal State* (and spin-off), *Paranormal Lockdown,* and *The Othersiders.* The last chapter, Chapter Five: Gender and Sexuality covers how Gender Identity and Gender Expression and Sexual Orientation help construct *The Girly Ghosthunters, Dead Files, Long Island Medium, Psychic Kids: Children of the Paranormal, Mama Medium, No One Dies in Lily Dale,* and *Kindred Spirits.*

While it will be impossible to discuss all paranormal reality shows -- Wikipedia currently lists 60 such shows -- this format will allow me to look at a broader range of television texts and how they are impacted and in turn impact privileged and marginalized identities.

Although there are similar tropes and stereotypical characters in paranormal reality TV, the academic division between kinds of privilege still need to be differentiated. As Peggy McIntosh writes in “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” “Since racism, sexism, and heterosexism are not the same, the advantages associated with them should not be seen as the same” (McIntosh). Each stereotype is perpetuated to fit and recruit a certain audience and there is value in considering each individually.

The demographics for the channels that air these shows is also telling--Destination America, home to the shows *Haunted Towns, Ghost Brothers, Terror in the Woods, Mountain Monsters, Ghosts of Shepherdstown, Paranormal Survivor, Alien Files*, and *Haunted Case Files*, is split between males and females, predominantly age 35-54, with some college but not a degree, who are married, own their homes, and make $30,000-49,999 (“Destination America”). The History Channel, the Travel Channel, and SyFy have similar demographics, but with an increased male viewership. The question then becomes: If these shows are perpetuating stereotypes for the purpose of entertainment, is the focus the stereotype of the cast members, the audience, the ghosts, or all of the above? With the exception of Destination America, which has a slightly larger female audience, these channels, and therefore shows, are primarily being watched by older white men, stereotypically skeptics,

who are gaining enjoyment from watching the marginalized communities get scared by the paranormal. The effect of these stereotypes does not even need to be overt or purposeful. As Carl Jung warns, “The chief danger is that of succumbing to the fascinating influence of the archetypes, and that is most likely to happen when the archetypal images are not made conscious” (Jung 39). The stereotypes in paranormal reality TV are inherently play to the viewers’ subconscious. To some extent, these TV personalities are asked/compelled by the network and producers to accentuate certain elements of their personalities or cultures, remembering that, “[...] to confess a particular identity is to belong to difference” (Connolly xiv). Through these differences, performers are categorized into believer and non-believer and follow their stereotypical roles.

Of the 28 shows surveyed in this study the breakdown by channel is:

- 25% Destination America (owned by Discovery Communications)
- 25% Travel/Trvl (owned by Discovery Communications)
- 17% SyFy (owned by NBC Universal)
- 14% A&E (owned by A&E Networks)
- 7% TLC (owned by Discovery Communications)
- 4% WE (owned by AMC, which also owns the horror channel Shudder)
- 4% HBO (owned by Warner Media Entertainment)
- 4% Canadian Space Channel (now CTV Sci-Fi channel, and owned by Bell Media)

Destination America, the Trvl Channel, and TLC are also all owned by Discovery Communications, giving them 57% of the shows considered, reaching 214 million viewers in the United States in 2018.

At the height of its original run, the most recognized paranormal reality TV show, *Ghost Hunters*, averaged 3 million viewers per episode. While that is only 1 percent of the American population, it is still significant as it points toward the larger number of Americans who believe in the supernatural, or those who are at least healthily skeptical of the possibility

but still willing to tune in. Colin Dickey writes in *Ghostland* that, “According to one study, 73 percent of Americans believe in life after death, and 20 percent believe in communication with the dead” (Dickey 80). Whether they get their information from TV or around the campfire, the paranormal is still an aspect of most Americans’ regular, if not daily, lives. Yet while the majority believe in ghosts, or heaven, or another option, those who actually seek to communicate with the dead are stereotypically from marginalized communities -- those who are considered by the majority to be too ignorant to know any better.

Using the paranormal as the defining line between educated and uneducated is not new. Owen Davies writes in *The Haunted: A Cultural History of Ghosts* that in the 18th century, “[...] the issue was not whether ghosts existed but the extent to which a belief in them was a mark of ignorance and credulity” (Davies 127). Although belief can often now be split down the male/female dichotomy, at that time, it was more of a class issue than a gender issue, as upper class women also used the belief in ghosts as a reason to look down on others:

> The moralising novelist Elizabeth Bonhote (1744-1818) patronisingly portrayed the lower classes as being so cowed by superstition that they could barely step outdoors at night without being frightened near to death: “After the sun has withdrawn his rays, though the bring beams of the moon illuminate their paths, they see an imaginary ghost in every tree, gate, or stile; and when they retire to their apartments by themselves, are in a continual dread, lest their curtains should be undrawn by the hand of some visible or invisible spectre.” (Davies 134)

Belief in the paranormal has always been a reason for those with privilege to mock the education and beliefs of marginalized communities.

Even worse than the lower class’s belief in the paranormal, for some, was the fear that servants would pass these views onto the upper class children in their care. As now, children learn from those with whom they spend the most time:

> In [Erasmus] Darwin's view, the only cure for childhood exposure to ghost stories was to increase the general knowledge of the laws of nature to "counteract the fallacies of our sense". The more practical solution, of course, was not filling children's heads with fanciful stories in the first place. This was not as easy as it sounded, since servants rather than parents usually tended the infants of the educated and wealthy and were employed to keep them occupied. (Davies 137-8).

Belief in the paranormal has always been a question of class and gender and age -- and more than if you believe, are you in a position to be able to share that belief without fear of ridicule and whether or not ridicule is enough to stop believers from sharing their views with others.

The fear that lower class women will endanger the rational minds of upper class children is already flawed, however, as many considered women and children to be of the similar social rank: "It will be remarked that among the special characteristics of crowds there are several--such as impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason, the absence of judgement and of the critical spirit, the exaggeration of the sentiments, and others besides--which are almost always observed in beings belonging to inferior forms of evolution -- in women, savages, and children" (Le Bon 23). Members of marginalized communities—minorities in gender, race, and age—are frequently grouped together as ignorant and incapable of rational thought.

The appeal of modern reality shows marks a change in this attitude, and the supernatural in general is far more socially accepted in our modern times. Ghost stories, once relegated to pulp fiction and scary movies are now structured as shared lived experiences in popular reality shows. The more people who watch, the more belief in the unknown becomes respectable. In *Ghostland*, Colin Dickey writes of the compelling nature of supernatural belief, that, "Though this belief lies outside the ways that we normally explain the world--contradicting science and complicating religion--it's a difficult belief to shake. That we continue believing in ghosts despite our rational mind's skepticism suggests that in these stories lies something crucial to the way we understand the world around us. We cannot look away, because we know

something important is there" (Dickey 4). Dickey's comment on the "rational mind" is telling, as it immediately privileges science over faith, the provably known over the believed unknown. Dickey asks us to both "know something is there" and to be rational simultaneously.

Paranormal reality TV, the current incarnation of a historical search for paranormal truth, often does the opposite -- asking us to believe something is there although no evidence is produced to help viewers make informed decisions. The willing suspension of belief becomes willing suspension of rationality as entertainment becomes truth and science becomes entertainment. Nothing has to be seen to be believed. The idea that there is something to be seen is valued more highly than what can be seen, which is not new: "Appearances have always played a much more important part than reality in history, where the unreal is always of greater moment than the real" (Le Bon 38). Audiences continue to view these shows to attempt to see something extraordinary that they can believe in, whether or not it can be proven rationally real.

In a contrast between active and passive participation, the experiential event of ghost tourism is a rising phenomenon, but most Americans are armchair ghost hunters, living vicariously through their television sets or streaming devices. The rise in paranormal reality TV has affected ghost tours in local communities, as what used to be a casual stroll to learn about the history and legends of a city now often comes equipped with devices to "prove" those legends are true -- sometimes part of the cost of the tour, sometimes for an extra charge. The darker a city's past, the better for paranormal investigators, professional or amateur. For example, rather than being a solemn monument to tragedy, Salem, Massachusetts, has turned the guilt of its past into a bustling tourism industry. As Dickey explains, "Salem, with its broom-riding witch logo on its police cars, has turned tragedy into spectacle. The same unresolved questions that drive scholars to understand the town's past also fuel its kitsch popularity [...] We recall the events of Salem, but we can't quite remember why they matter" (Dickey 34-5). Paranormal research is frequently now more schtick than science -- and while ghost tourism

often literally puts the audience into the story and investigation, television allows viewers to participate from the comfort of their non-haunted home.

While these shows are of cultural importance because of their persistent adherence to stereotypes, there is a critical background for the study of paranormal reality TV as well. Carol Clover's primary critical focus is horror films, but her theories can also apply to paranormal reality TV. She writes, "White Science refers to Western rational tradition. Its representatives are nearly always white males, typically doctors, and its tools are surgery, drugs, psychotherapy, and other forms of hegemonic science. Black Magic, on the other hand, refers to satanism, voodoo, spiritualism, and folk variants of Roman Catholicism. A world of crosses, holy water, séances, candles, prayer, exorcism, blacks, Native Americans, mixed-race peoples (especially Cajun and Creole) and third-world peoples in general, children, old people, priests, Transylvanians--but first and foremost women" (Clover 66). White Science fits in with male-driven shows such as those of Josh Gates and *Ghost Hunters*, while her concept of Black Magic covers the shows populated by gender, racial, and cultural minorities, such as *Girly Ghosthunters, Ghost Brothers,* and *Ghosts in the Hood*. Clover's divide between White Science and Black Magic aligns nearly perfectly with the chart created by the Social Justice Training Institute. Clover's work also aligns with Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, the "second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals" (Jung 43), as these reality stars fit into clear expected archetypes based on assumptions and stereotypes. Paranormal reality TV is built on, and exploits, the tensions between White Science and Black Magic.

Paranormal reality TV provides weekly drama --a Gothic soap opera with all the elements the audience has come to expect. As Mark Edmundson explains in *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of Gothic,* "You cannot have Gothic without a cruel hero-villain; without a cringing victim; and without a terrible place, some locale, hidden from public view, in which the drama can unfold" (Edmundson 130). Reality paranormal

TV provides all these things, plus the facade of the "real." Reality TV, whether it claims to be a scientific investigation or strictly for entertainment, draws upon the masses to be a part of the spectacle, which increases audience belief: "From the moment that they form part of a crowd the learned man and the ignoramus are equally incapable of observation" (Le Bon 25). And what is reality TV but the biggest crowd ever--especially when combined with the internet?

The need for drama is not solely relegated to modern times. Richard Davenport-Hines notes, "Schlock has always been a part of gothic too. The German *schauerromantik* literature of the eighteenth century was trash; so were the multitude of English gothic stories and novels written under the influence of the Germans or of Walpole's much misunderstood novel [*The Castle of Otranto*]. Edmund Burke might extol pain, danger and terrible objects as sources of the sublime, and thus of higher ethical forces, but most gothic output has been soap-operatic. It has supplied entertainment, shocks, facile emotional thrills and factitious intensity by manipulating stereotypical characters in mechanistic plots" (Davenport-Hines 5). Paranormal reality TV, our modern Gothic expression, follows genre and societal norms – never asking the audience to extend their thinking outside the expected and accepted paradigm.

Further: "Gothic is an evasive *genre*. From the earliest period of its revival it has displayed burlesque traits. Goths reject the bourgeois sense of human identity as a serious business, stable, abiding and continuous, requiring the assertion of one true cohesive inner self as proof of health and good citizenry. Instead goths celebrate human identity as an improvised performance, discontinuous and incessantly re-devised by stylised acts" (Davenport-Hines 7). Reality TV uses identity performance both to glorify certain identities and to create a conformed sense of community within them.

Part of the appeal of reality TV is its ability to create a sense of belonging to something greater -- to be part of the crowd of those in the know. Collective belief systems are essential in attempting to know the unknown: "When it has undergone the influence of some dozens of centuries the learned men of the future, face to face with these contradictory accounts, will

perhaps doubt the very existence of the hero, as some of them now doubt that of Buddha, and will see in him nothing more than a solar myth or a development of the legend of Hercules. They will doubtless console themselves easily for this uncertainty, for, better initiated than we are today in the characteristics and psychology of crowds, they will know that history is scarcely capable of preserving the memory of anything except myths" (Le Bon 28). Social constructs creating agreed-upon truths validate widely held beliefs. In an uncertain world, paranormal reality TV creates mythical certainty for those already predisposed to believe, while their failures to produce peer-reviewed results reinforced the views of skeptics.

Importantly, this is a Western European view. One of the favorite strategies for American paranormal researchers is to taunt the spirits to give them reason to appear and communicate. Other cultures are more respectful of the dead. For the First Nations Ojibwa people of Canada, there is much more in our world than can be observed and rationally explained. Harris Berger, in *Identity and Everyday Life: Essays in the Study of Folklore, Music, and Popular Culture,* writes of research into tribal beliefs: "For example, drawing on the work of A. Irving Hallowell (1976), [Richard] Handler suggests that the traditional Ojibwa category of the person includes beings that modern Western philosophy would normally exclude--supernatural entities, inanimate objects, and the dead" (Berger 126). Further, these beings are not separate from our perceived reality, they interact and are "Not merely individuals from beyond the grave, the dead are believed to express themselves through the actions of the living, and the boundary between the identity of the individual and that of his/her ancestors is considered to be porous [...] Here, identities are expressed in both human and nonhuman action, and human actions do not maintain a one-to-one correspondence with human identities" (Berger 126-7). These beliefs open up a whole new realm of understanding that is open to communication with and possession by the dead and other spiritual beings, and is an important reminder that while Western European theories dominate ideas of Self and Other, they are not the only ideas.

In any case, American paranormal reality TV follows the prevalent Western views that have been passed down through generations. Ideas of Self and Other were important to Enlightenment leaders, "such well-known figures as John Locke, René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Denis Diderot, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Voltaire. They were liberal thinkers, to be sure, and their rejection of the occult was to have a lasting effect on the serious study of the paranormal. Once traditional scientists considered the occult 'irrational,' it would be largely rejected by main-stream science, and tossed back to the theologians who did not want the subject, either" (Birnes 60). The stereotype that men of science and religion eschew the occult while outsiders such as emotional, and racial and socio-economic minorities do, has pervaded society since the 17th century and has a lasting input on modern American popular culture.

Francisco Goya titled one of his paintings "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters." Is reality television specifically designed, as its detractors claim, to keep the American public mindlessly rooted in the "sleep of reason?"

MTV's *The Real World* premiered in 1992, ushering in the reality TV craze in American popular culture. The show, exploring what happens when a mismatched group of young adults are forced to live together "to find out what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real," spawned countless imitators including competitions such as *Survivor* and *Big Brother* (and SciFi's *Mad Mad House* (2004), in which normal people competed to see who could live the longest with a group of "Alts": a witch, a naturist, a modern primitive, a vampire and a voodoo priestess), talent shows such as *American Idol* and *Project Runway*, shows created to encourage understanding and social change such as Anthony Bourdain's *No Reservations* and the original and rebooted *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and shows focusing on specific aspects of "real" American life, such as *Toddlers and Tiaras*, *Dance Moms*, and, of course, Bravo's *The Real Housewives* franchise. Although *The Real World* once held the dubious honor of being the longest running reality show in history, it was not the first.

The Real World was inspired by the 1973 PBS series *An American Family*. The show focused on the "real" lives of an everyday American family, created the reality TV drama, and questioned how "real" life can possibly be with an audience watching. Anthropologist Margaret Mead said the program, "may be as important for our time as were the invention of drama and the novel for earlier generations: a new way to help people understand themselves" (Harrington). To say the focus of the show was entertainment, as is the basis for current reality TV, is not quite valid. In David Lim's review of the HBO docu-drama *Cinema Verite* (focusing on the making of the 1973 show—a case of a fiction imitating life imitating "reality") in the *New York Times*, he writes that "Mead devoted her career to the study of human behavior, and the Louds, the stars of 'An American Family,' were the subjects of a highly public sociological experiment — or, as we now commonly think of them, the first family of reality TV" (AR22). Similar to modern reality TV, there are accusations that the producer "instigated drama" (Lim AR22).

Most importantly, according to Lim, "For the viewing public, the controversy surrounding 'An American Family' doubled as a crash course in media literacy. The Louds, in claiming that the material had been edited to emphasize the negative, called attention to how nonfiction narratives are fashioned. Some critics argued that the camera's presence encouraged the subjects to perform. Some even said it invalidated the project. That line of reasoning, as Mr. Gilbert has pointed out, would invalidate all documentaries. It also discounts the role of performance in everyday life, and the potential function of the camera as a catalyst, not simply an observer" (AR22). Discounting documentaries would, by extension, discount reality TV.

Human performative nature must also be taken into account. The Louds family knew they were constantly on camera, which changed the way they interacted with each other: "Performance is a type of social interaction in which one person is orienting his/her action toward the perceptions and responses of another, and in which the performer is paying special attention to the aesthetic dimension of the action undertaken" (Berger 30). The human need to perform clouds the social experiment of reality TV.

In questioning the validity of “nonfiction narratives,” Lim also calls into question the response of fictional narratives to the audience expectations created by *An American Family*, *The Real World*, and the legion of offspring such shows spawned (a Wikipedia page with a listing of reality television program includes 813 shows from 1948’s *Candid Camera* up to 2020, although does not include any paranormal/cryptozoology reality shows). Modern American popular culture demands access. While cameras are still not allowed in the United States Supreme Court, they are now allowed in local courts from which snippets of cases are frequently broadcast on the nightly news, and Court TV (now Tru TV) exists to provide ultimate access to cases deemed “important” or “interesting” --showing the progression of access due to public demand.

Despite its prevalence, reality television is most definitely considered low culture. In *Gods Behaving Badly: Media, Religion, and Celebrity Culture*, in a section entitled “On Celebrity Religion: A Word to Its Cultured Despisers,” Pete Ward addresses this by noting: “The chattering classes like to affect an indifference to celebrity. They do not watch reality TV, and they would never buy a gossip rag. Most are agreed that the whole celebrity thing is froth, ephemeral, the antithesis of all things of value. In the main, this approach to celebrity is a thinly veiled version of an elitist view of culture. The religious version of this merges taste with some kind of ecclesial preference. Here celebrity culture is seen as representing the spiritual collapse of contemporary society, proof that for the large part we are living in an empty and vacuous society” (2). While some viewers watch these shows ironically for the drama and un-reality, the shows still inspire true followings. Reality TV stars are niche celebrities, further specializing their fan base. The fan base, in turn, becomes elitist in their own right, spurning those not in “their” know.

Ward, quoting Gary Laderman of Emory University, further explains, “The first part of the twentieth century gave birth to what Laderman calls ‘new gods,’ who are worshipped on the ‘sacred altar’ of celebrity culture. The religious practices associated with celebrity worship

invest in ‘mythologies that promise immortality’; celebrity worship grants not only spiritual rewards but also the possibility of the ‘reformulation of personal moral values and ultimate concerns’” (4). We seek the Other, through reality TV and the cult of celebrity, to tell us who we are and how we should live, even how the world should function. For nearly every hobby and lifestyle, there’s a reality show full of examples of right and wrong and moral instruction to differentiate between the two. Paranormal reality TV, with its (pseudo)scientific investigations, extends the dichotomy to real and unreal, Truth and falsehood.

Pete Ward is not taking the religious angle lightly. He discusses the views of William Robertson Smith, an anthropologist from the nineteenth-century, the belief that, “the myth was derived from the ritual, and not the ritual from the myth; for ritual was fixed and the myth was variable, the ritual was obligatory and faith in the myth was at the discretion of the worshipper” (Smith qtd. in Ward 60). The American public is highly ritualized in two aspects of life: religion and pop culture. Sunday morning church services give way to Sunday afternoon football. We have created rituals around book releases, film releases, and watching our favorite television shows. J.G. Frazer’s statement that “in antiquity the civilised nations of Western Asia and Egypt pictured to themselves the changes of the seasons, and particularly the annual growth and decay of vegetation as episodes in the life of gods, whose mournful death and happy resurrection they celebrated with dramatic rites of alternate lamentation and rejoicing” (Frazer qtd. in Ward 61) echoes the typical American audience member’s reactions to the end of a sporting event, to the end of a book in a series, or the cliffhanger at the end of the season of their favorite television show. Ward writes that, “while these celebrations were dramatic, they were also in a sense magical, because they ensured the continuation of the seasons and the cycle of growth and decay that shaped agrarian life” (61). Yet while the ancients celebrated the continuation of the natural seasons, we celebrate the continuation of television seasons. We greet the return of reality stars as devotees welcoming back wayward gods.

Through this almost religious devotion, the viewing audience expects accessibility to all aspects of not only public figures, but also to reality stars. Pete Ward admits that "Classic essentialist accounts of religion 'sort of' fit celebrity culture, and they 'sort of' don't fit" (62), and the same can be said of using them to justify Americans' slavish devotion to all things pop culture; social media has added an entire other aspect to how audiences interact with celebrities -- now they can be their "friend" or quite literally their "follower" through social media without considering the larger ramifications of what those words mean.

Also, through social media, audiences can focus only on those celebrities who speak to them and their belief systems. Instead of being forced to read about whomever *People Magazine* is covering that week, people can seek out those specific celebrities with whom they share interests. While most of America has some sense of reality stars, as Pete Ward writes, "Celebrity is not simply an aspect of popular culture -- celebrity is part of popular culture's DNA. Even if we have very little interest in celebrities, we seem to know about them" (Ward 1-2).

Paranormal reality stars, however, are not quite this exposed. Very few of them have made an impact outside of Destination American and the Trvl Channel. Those who know, know, and those who don't have little idea that this whole world exists. While paranormal or cryptozoological TV shows are in nearly constant rotation, the personalities they feature don't get the same level of attention as the Kardashians or Real Housewives. While these performers are famous in their niche market, they are still commodities in a niche market.

Paranormal reality TV stars matter because of the belief systems they represent, which is why it is concerning when they continue to perform stereotypical roles. As Ward states, "Celebrities matter not because of who they are but because of what they represent. It is the meanings that become attached to celebrities as they appear in the media that form their currency in the circulation of popular cultures. Celebrities, in other words, are part of the signifying system of popular cultures. They function as symbols in the flow of communication" (Ward 3). Following this logic, paranormal reality stars represent some semblance of the Real,

but a producer's idealized real rather than someone to whom we can necessarily relate. Even coming from marginalized communities, these are still the cool kids at the lunch table; they are still the members of their communities who were chosen to be on TV to represent the community as a whole. The question then becomes, if this is the idealized real these shows choose to portray, how many marginalized communities see their truth in these shows where women are nearly always emotional spiritualists and minorities are portraying clear stereotypes--brown and black people running in terror from a white ghost?

Josh Gates, the star of *Destination Truth*, as much as he tries, is not a romantic hero, he is not Indiana Jones. *Ghost Adventures'* Zak Bagans is not a romantic hero. On one episode he defends the honor of Pearl Bryan, a woman killed by her boyfriend and thrown down a well, on another he defends Lizzie Borden's father of psychic charges of rape. What is clear, is that Gates and Bagans' only true concern is their own self-image and their own conception of themselves as a (literal) White Knight saving those who can't save themselves. The ghost story still has to fit their white patriarchal narrative.

Gates, Bagans, and the other white male reality stars don't need anyone to validate their status as White Saviors, as their privilege validates them and their viewership doesn't really care about their credentials anyway. Mark Edmundson writes that "A deep ambivalence about authority lies near the heart of our culture of Gothic" (Edmundson 21). Science holds no authority over the paranormal. Science is not important. What is important is how we feel, what we sense, and who guides us along our journey. Evidence is unnecessary. To quote a Gothic rock band, "Words are very unnecessary; they can only do harm." While all paranormal groups seek legitimacy through being the first to "prove" life after death, none of them have been able to, yet their viewership grows rather than diminishes. We are still following the white man to find answers. While women and minorities sometimes come along, their presence is for clerical, spiritual, or entertainment value – they aren't there to find the Truth, and what answers they may find must first be validated by their male co-stars before being accepted.

Even so, part of the growing viewership is the need for community. As Edmundson explains, “Apocalyptic Gothic is a collective Gothic: as terror Gothic would haunt the individual, so exercises in apocalyptic Gothic would haunt the society at large” (Edmundson 23). This is the appeal of paranormal reality TV: it is a shared lived experience. It validates and creates community about the ultimate fear of not being safe in one’s own home.

The attack on the home is significant -- the American dream of owning one’s home changes to a nightmare when that house is haunted by ghosts, ghoulies, or demons. Yet through the sense of a larger community, these hauntings are mitigated. Reality stars and psychics can help cleanse the house while their TV viewership cheers for them and the plagued and tortured homeowners.

The paranormal is all around us. Literary conventions have become reality. As Mark Edmundson writes, “Gothic conventions have slipped over into ostensibly nonfictional realms. Gothic is alive not just in Stephen King’s novels and Quentin Tarantino’s films, but in media renderings of the O.J. Simpson case, in our political discourse, in our modes of therapy, on TV news, on talk shows like *Oprah*, in our discussions of AIDS and of the environment. American culture at large has become suffused with Gothic assumptions, with Gothic characters and plots” (Edmundson xii). Reality TV enables us to both experience and escape from the real. We are experiencing someone else’s real. Ghosts are EXCITING, whether they’re making your house unlivable or not. They’re interesting. Most of us don’t have ghosts and/or demons in our homes – we have to experience them vicariously through others on TV and social media.

Paranormal reality TV is both an escape and an investigation into what is real. Tananarive Due, who executive-produced “Horror Noire” and teaches a course on horror at UCLA explains, “‘Headlines scare me. True crime stories scare me….Real, human monstrosity is not fun for me to watch,’ Due says. ‘When those people are supernatural or when there’s a fantasy element, when there’s a monster, now I’m ready to watch because the monster in a horror movie can be a stand-in for real-life monstrosity that lets me engage with it from a

distance, but also leech out that trauma and expel it in a way that can feel fun'" (Izadi). Paranormal reality TV brings those monsters even closer to home. While it's not *your* home, it's still *a* home. The monsters are "real," but the viewer is still able to watch them with a detached critical eye, or, the viewer can choose to believe. Freddy Kreuger will never be real. But that chair that moved by itself the Ghost Hunters recorded in the lighthouse? That is still a possibility.

Reality TV provides communal "reality" that supersedes the need to investigate as an individual. We no longer need to experience, we have people who do that for us. While, "Phenomenology begins with the idea that our theories about the world must be grounded in our experiences, and it asks us to return to those living experiences and describe them without the prejudices of any particular philosophy or ideology" (Berger 27), reality TV removes the responsibility of evaluating experience from the viewer. When we can't have experiences of our own, reality TV provides us a front row seat to all the action.

Television can both unite and divide. Edmundson considers this paradox, that, "As a *Harper's Magazine* panelist put it, 'The alienating engine that I perceive in society is broadcast media, particularly television...The reason people are hermetically sealed in their homes is that they are worshipping the glass tit of fear, which is telling them the world is too scary to go out in" (Edmundson 30). Paranormal reality television echoes the same notion – with any luck, the ghosts are out there, stay safe at home and let the professionals handle it. This is actually the tagline of the paranormal research group Tennessee Wraith Chasers: "Chasing ghosts without proper training will get you killed."

Broadcast news first moved toward infotainment, then reality TV began, bringing fear of the "real" directly into people's homes. Where once studying the paranormal, or looking for Bigfoot, was a minor individual pursuit, now it comes in every flavor on any channel. The audience craves excitement – whether a politician's dirty laundry or Bigfoot's. Edmundson notes, "One disaster succeeds another on apocalyptic news--and because we wish it to be so.

The ratings prove as much. We need, it seems, to be frightened, haunted, scared into a stupor" (Edmundson 31). The news, and reality TV, reassures us that the bad guys (and ghosts) are out there, while we are safe in here.

News shows began making these changes in the 1980s, when Psychic Sylvia Browne "came to popularity in a tabloid-hungry era when media outlets were more and more willing to showcase fringe beliefs in order to give their audiences something salacious" (Dickey 99). And with stereotypical "characters" on the shows, audiences don't have to think too hard -- they see exactly what they expect to see; they are entertained exactly the way they expect to be entertained.

The tactic of letting those with more horror experience take charge of the transition between the real horror on the news to fictional horrors helps with reality, "reality," and fiction, especially as those lines blur: "Another popular strategy among those with delicate constitutions: reading the entire plot on Wikipedia before stepping foot into a theater" (Izadi), but also applies to the format of the paranormal reality show. The investigators tell the "true" stories that are laid out in advance at the beginning of the show so viewers know what to expect...and what to look for. The same way those afraid of horror films read the plot in advance so they know what to avoid, the reality show provides a self-fulfilling prophecy of what is to come. If viewers are told that a woman in black is often seen in the upstairs bedroom, they are more likely to "see" her when investigators enter that room.

Edmundson writes about the traditional Gothic tower as an extension of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, but all of reality TV is a Panopticon. Technology lets us see everything, everywhere, in every light spectrum, and to hear everything in every frequency. Social media continues the proliferation of images and videos of these reality stars and results of their investigations. Audiences can compare what they "saw" and "heard" with the investigation's findings and those of other audience members. Shows are constantly updated with new information, or as in the case of *Ghost Adventures: The Screaming Room*, audiences watch the

Ghost Adventures cast watching old episodes of *Ghost Adventures*, much like Chris Farley interviewing celebrities on *Saturday Night Live*: “Remember that? That was cool.”

While modern media allows us to experience much more of these reality stars as modern idols than was possible in the past, we are still merely observers. We still have to rely on the perceptions of these performers to tell us what we are hunting -- and if we have found it. As Berger explains, “Of course, this ‘seeing as’ is a necessary condition of having an experience at all; even the most random reality before us is brought into experience by organizing its aspects into meaningful wholes--if only be ‘seeing them’ as random and formless” (Berger 28). But reality TV takes us away from the actual experience and forces the audience to experience through the experiences of others, to see as they see, separating the reality of the viewer’s gaze from the reality – and/or the performance – of the investigation.

Paranormal reality TV still exists on the fringes, as the Gothic always has. As Anne Williams writes in *Art of Darkness: Poetics of Gothic*, “Calling the ‘Gothic novel’ the ‘Gothic romance’ allows this poor relation an introduction into the drawing room, even if she must remain on the margins -- a neurasthenic cousin, or a Madeline Usher, always in the process of disappearing but never permanently buried” (Williams 3). The appeal of the ghost hunt is that the ghost is always on the fringes of perception, always waiting to be found. Paranormal reality TV is a guilty pleasure that can either make the viewer feel understood or make them feel superior to the fools on the screen. Oftentimes this perception depends on both the privileged/marginalized identification of the viewer as well as the privileged/marginalized identification of the performer. Harris Berger explains, “[...] all talk about identity involves an interpretive act in which one set of meanings (themselves already the product of interpretation) is projected into the interpreter’s vision of the social world” (Berger 125). Individual and community identity is fluid and based on performance and perception.

Colin Dickey took his research out of academics and joined the Ghost Hunters of Urban Los Angeles, writing, “Around the time GHOULA formed in 2008, more and more shows started

appearing on basic cable, shows called *My Ghost Story, Fear, Ghost Hunters, Ghost Hunters International, Ghost Hunters Academy, Most Haunted USA, A Haunting, Paranormal State, The Othersiders, Celebrity Paranormal Project*, and on and on and on. Nearly all these shows follow a basic routine: a 'crew,' usually in matching T-shirts and usually consisting of three or four guys and one woman, in a default pose of a tough, cross-arms stance staring straight at the camera, investigating a reputedly haunted locale" (Dickey 143). The conformity to a specialized paranormal research community and process came early: "Almost as soon as it had begun, the scene was co-opted, standardized, and commodified, and the thoughtful ones all scattered to the winds" (Dickey 148). Similarly, paranormal reality TV performs what is viewers expect, both in terms of cultural stereotypes and of the shows themselves.

Reality TV is the folklore of our generation, and elitists have always looked down on folklore: "The vulgar Marxist tells us that folklore theory does nothing more than divert attention away from the more pressing issues of social base. The traditional humanist tells us that folklore theory gives us a richer understanding of the nature of expressive culture and what it means. The cynic says that, outside of the academy, folklore theory is almost completely inconsequential" (Berger 27).

Carol Clover writes of the same trend, that, "Although many folklorists disown horror movies as products too mediated by technology, authorial intention, and the profit motive to be seen as folklore in any authentic sense, the fact is that horror movies look like nothing so much as folktales -- a set of fixed tale types that generate an endless stream of what are in effect variants: sequels, remakes, and rip-offs" (Clover 10). The same argument can be made for paranormal reality TV.

Reality TV, and paranormal reality TV in particular, has all the hallmarks of the folklore of our culture: "Students of folklore or early literature recognize in horror the hallmarks of oral narrative: the free exchange of themes and motifs, the archetypal characters and situations, the accumulation of sequels, remakes, imitations" (Clover 11). The urban legends studied and

collected by Jan Harold Brunvand are retold and relived in technicolor. The archetypal characters and situations become stereotypes and the situations become routine, soothing the audience with its repetitive reality.

Colin Dickey notes that racial stratification can be seen here as well, asserting that, "Folklore always bleeds and blurs, and it would be overly reductive to state a hard and fast distinction between ghost stories told by whites and those told by the black community. There are, of course, stories of black ghosts that serve the same function as white ghosts--marking a location, explaining the unexplainable, commemorating an event. But what is clear is that history is not just written by the victors; it's written by the literate. The prohibition against enslaved Americans learning to read or write had the immediate purpose of denying them agency and keeping them under control, but in the long run it also meant that the stories, lives, and opinions of millions of Americans were lost to time" (Dickey 115). Are these minority-driven shows reclaiming cultural stories to help a primarily white audience understand, or playing along with the expectations of white producers and a white audience?

Infotainment, by necessity, must entertain while providing just enough investigative results to keep the audience watching. It must combine art and science. In addition, the presenters must be sensational enough to keep the viewing audience coming back: "In this regard, philosopher Sydney Hook makes an interesting comparison between the arts and sciences: 'Raphael's Sistine Madonna without Raphael, Beethoven's sonatas and symphonies without Beethoven, are inconceivable. In science, on the other hand, it is quite probable that most of the achievements of any given scientist would have been attained by other individuals working in the field'" (Shermer 41-2). If paranormal research is considered a science, then the identity of the researcher doesn't matter -- stereotypes cloud the issue rather than clarify it. But if infotainment is an art, personality is essential.

As Colin Dickey writes in *Ghostland*, "I tend not to put too much stock in reality shows like this. Any paranormal activity on *Ghost Adventures*, or any of the many similar shows,

inevitably is presented via highly selective and suggestive editing; re-creations tend toward melodrama and often are presented to the viewer as fact. As most viewers know by now, reality television is anything but real, and this is no less true of supposed paranormal encounters" (Dickey 125-6). Paranormal reality TV is layered and nuanced. The viewer is given the opportunity to live a shared experience with investigators living their own experience, often shared with a camera crew and producers. While the reality stars have the benefit of post-production, the audience can only live the experience they are provided through the television.

Yet Dickey also understands that these stories *should* be helping. They should be bridging gaps in our multitude of cultural experiences: "Ghost stories, theoretically, should be an antidote to this. Based on oral tradition and handed down through the years, outside the purview of acceptable history, such folklore should--and often does--act as an alternate history, a record of the oppressed and forcibly illiterate, the marginalized" (Dickey 115).

I have presented on this topic at four conferences and the same older white man has asked the same question twice: "I don't watch these shows myself, but if you hate them so much, why do you continue to watch them?"

It's taken me awhile to figure out a response to that. I don't hate these shows. They're great entertainment -- there's a show called *Wrestling with Ghosts* that centers on professional wrestlers hunting ghosts (and there's something to be said about the reality of both ghost shows and professional wrestling). And it's elitist to say these shows are a danger to modern American society for their outdated gender and racial views. But they do continue to perpetuate the stereotypes that older white men are rational and youth and women and minorities and gays are spiritual at best and hysterical at worst.

Chronology and Scope of Shows Mentioned

(Spin-offs grouped together by release date of original show)

Show	**Primary Investigators**	**Channel**	**Premiere**	**End (Blank denotes show still on the air)**	**Number of Seasons**
Ghost Hunters	Jason Hawes, Grant Wilson	SyFy	10/6/04	10/26/16	10 seasons, 230 episodes, 10 specials
Ghost Hunters International	Barry Fitzgerald, Kris Williams	SyFy	1/9/08	4/4/12	3 seasons, 62 episodes
Ghost Hunters Academy	Dave Tango, Steve Gonsalves	SyFy	11/11/09	7/7/10	1.5
Ghost Hunters Reboot	Grant Wilson et al	A&E	8/21/19	10/30/19	Season 12: 11 episodes, 2 specials, Season 13 in 2020
Ghost Nation	Jason Hawes, Dave Tango, Steve Gonsalves (produced by Josh Gates)	Trvl	10/11/2019		2 seasons, 16 episodes
The Girly Ghosthunters	Dana Matthews, Corrie Matthews, Jen Kieswetter, Nicole Dobie, Schultzy	Canadian SPACE channel	1/14/05	4/15/05	1 season
Destination Truth	Josh Gates	SyFy	6/6/07	8/14/12	5 seasons, 55 episodes

Expedition Unknown	Josh Gates	Trvl	1/8/15	5/29/19	7 seasons
Paranormal State	Ryan Buell	A&E	12/10/07	5/2/11	6 seasons, 83 episodes
Paranormal State: The New Class	Hoosier State Paranormal	A&E	11/21/10		1 special episode
Psychic Kids: Children of the Paranormal	Chip Coffey, Edy Nathan, Chris Fleming, Kim Russo	A&E	6/16/08	11/28/10	3 seasons, 21 episodes
Ghost Adventures	Zak Bagans, Nick Groff (seasons 1-9), Aaron Goodwin, Billy Tolley, Jay Wasley	Trvl	10/17/08		10 seasons, 213 episodes, 47 specials
Ghost Adventures: Aftershocks	Zak Bagans, Aaron Goodwin, Billy Tolley, and Jay Wasley	Trvl	4/26/14	11/5/16	4 seasons, 25 episodes
Ghost Adventures: Screaming Room!	Zak Bagans, Aaron Goodwin, Billy Tolley, and Jay Wasley	Trvl	2/2/2020		1 season, 10 episodes
Ghost Adventures:Quarantine	Zak Bagans, Aaron Goodwin, Billy Tolley, and Jay Wasley	Trvl	6/11/2020		4 episode mini-series

The Othersiders	Jackie Zho, KC Costonis, Riley Litman, Sam Hirsch, Zack Burke	Cartoon Network	6/17/2009	10/30/2009	2 seasons 23 episodes
Fact or Faked: Paranormal Files	Ben Hansen, Jael de Pardo, Austin Porter, Devin Marble, Bill Murphy, Lanisha Cole	SyFy	7/15/10	5/16/12	2 seasons, 36 episodes
No One Dies in Lily Dale	Michelle Whitedove, Greta Lestock, Anne Gehman, Gregory Kehn, Sherry Lee Calkins	HBO	7/5/2011		Documentary
Dead Files	Steve DiSchiavi, Amy Allan	Trvl Channel	9/23/2011		12 seasons
Long Island Medium	Theresa Caputo	TLC	9/25/11	12/13/2019	14 seasons
Ghost Asylum (Pilot: Ghostland Tennessee)	TWC: Chris Smith, Steven “Doogie” McDougal, Scott “Porter”, Brannon Smith	Destination America	9/7/14	6/5/16	4 seasons, 30 episodes
Haunted Towns	TWC: Chris, Doogie, Porter, Brannon	Destination America /Trvl	8/15/2017	8/9/2019	2 seasons, 14 episodes

Ghost Stalkers	Chad Lindberg, John Tenney (produced by Nick Groff)	Destination America	10/19/14	11/20/14	1 season
Paranormal Lockdown	Nick Groff, Katrina Weidman (from Paranormal State)	Destination America	3/4/16	5/5/19	3 seasons, 37 episodes, 10 specials
Ghost Brothers	Dalen Spratt, Juwan Mass, Marcus Harvey	Destination America	4/15/16	5/15/17	2 seasons, 20 episodes
Ghost Brothers: Haunted Houseguests	Dalen Spratt, Juwan Mass, Marcus Harvey	Trvl Channel	8/16/2019		2 seasons
Ghost Brothers: Haunted House Party	Dalen Spratt, Juwan Mass, Marcus Harvey	Trvl Channel	7/2/2020		1 season
Ghosts of Shepherdstown	Nick Groff, Elizabeth Saint, Bill Hartley	Destination America	6/12/12016	8/28/2017	2 seasons, 14 episodes
Ghosts of Morgan City	Ben Hansen, Sarah Lemos, Jereme Leonard	Trvl	6/21/2019	8/2/2019	1 season, 8 episodes
Kindred Spirits	Adam Berry and Amy Bruni (both GH alums), Chip Coffey (always there? Or just joining for season four?)	Season one: Destination America and TLC Season two: TLC Season three: Trvl	10/21/16	New season January 2020	3 seasons, 28 episodes

Ghosts in the Hood	Jasmine Orpilla, Defecio Stoglin, Maunda, Dave Pardu, Matty Richards	WE	1/5/2017	2/9/2017	1 season, 6 episodes
Mama Medium	Jennie Marie	TLC	11/5/2018	12/10/2018	1 season, 6 episodes

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Chapter Two: “I’ve Done Some Things I Can’t Explain”: The Performance and Glorification of White Privilege in Paranormal Reality Television

This section will continue the exploration of how white privilege is performed and glorified in reality paranormal television. The focus will be more on how investigators/actors such as the cast of *Ghost Hunters* and Josh Gates perform the expected role of privileged white males, and therefore paranormal skeptics, with some contrast with shows that feature gendered and racial minorities more prominently as cast members. I will consider production aspects that allow Josh Gates to behave badly when experiencing other cultures — particularly by mocking those cultures — for the sake of the entertainment of his base audience, Jason Hawes’s stoic investigatory techniques as functions of white privilege, and the historical implications of minority belief in ghosts as well as how that belief is currently performed on paranormal reality shows.

White males being presented as the experts in paranormal research is nothing new, of course. For a time, not only were the experts male, but also the ghosts! Owen Davies writes in *The Haunted: A Social History of Ghosts* that, “Regarding the gender of ghosts, it is true that in the medieval English and continental sources most were male, as were most percipients. It has to be taken into account, of course, that the authors were usually members of the clergy living in exclusively or predominantly male social circles” (Davies 14). Female ghosts didn’t enter the stories until more women began reading them, a historical case of knowing your audience. It’s comforting/not comforting to know that mansplaining has always been with us, and is a reminder that authors have always adjusted their “facts” to appeal to their audiences.

Since this work discusses North American paranormal reality TV, it comes as no surprise that not only are the ghosts regularly considered to be white, and often male, but most ghost hunters exclusively try to communicate with them in English, although *Ghost Hunters* did use some Romanian while researching Vlad the Impaler. Another ghost show thought the ghost

Electronic Voice Phenomenon they had recorded was unintelligible, until their client started crying upon hearing his father's ghostly voice speak to him in Polish.

These characteristics match up with the grouping of the SJTI's identities concerning English Literacy, Immigration Status, Skin Color/Phenotype, and Ethnicity/Culture all falling under the umbrella, for our purposes, of Race.

Colin Dickey, in *Ghostland: an American History in Haunted Places*, expands on the use of ghosts to be what we culturally expect them to be while discussing Shockoe Bottom, a neighborhood in Richmond, Virginia. The investigation shocked him because of the number of white ghosts, until he considered that: "Local historian and paranormal investigator Pamela Kinney speculates that this [the number of hauntings in town] is because Virginia was home to the earliest settlements in North America. Which makes sense so long as we all agree that by 'settlements' we really mean 'settlements of Europeans.' Which is to say, the kinds of ghosts you look for, and the kind of ghosts you see, depend on your frame of reference" (Dickey 104). He continues by considering the lack of ghosts at Monticello: "What does it mean to whitewash the spirits of a city? Does Virginia have ghosts that it is still not ready to face?" (Dickey 110).

When the ghost hunters do consider spirits who are different from them, it is usually to build up the exoticness of the Other. For example, most of the white male paranormal reality television teams have investigated Chloe, the ghost slave at Myrtles Plantation. As Colin Dickey explains, her "tale plays up several basic stereotypes common to American folklore and reads more as an amalgamation of stock characters than the story of a real person. It has strains of both the Jezebel figure, a sexually precocious slave who disturbs the natural order of the nuclear household, seeking to supplant the white wife; and the 'mammy' figure, a motherly slave who earns her spot in the white household by loving and caring for the master's children" (Dickey 40). In most versions of the story explained on paranormal reality shows, Chloe is her Master's mistress, but is afraid his affections are waning. She makes a plan to remind her Master of her importance to the household by lightly poisoning the children, and then saving

them from their sickness. She miscalculates the amount of the poison, though, the children die, and in most versions of the story she is hanged and haunts Myrtles Plantation, ever remorseful. There is something to be said about how many times this story is repeated on paranormal reality shows and has become ingrained in popular memory, despite having no historical truth.

Chloe represents both the Other and the Self. Colin Dickey elaborates: “Appearing in some versions as notably light-skinned, Chloe, as historian Tiya Miles points out, also conforms to the cliché of the ‘tragic mulatto’: a woman, alluring because of her mixed-race heritage, who seeks entrance into white society but is rebuffed by her white lover” (Dickey 40).

Chloe’s story is also perfect for paranormal researchers to do what they want with it: “The lack of clear details or historical substantiation means that the legend of Chloe is adaptable: each person who tells her story can borrow from the various stereotypes as needed, emphasizing different aspects over others to suit the telling” (Dickey 40). Although paranormal teams who investigate the same locations regularly get different results, nearly all reality TV shows continue to follow the same sad tropes while “investigating” Chloe’s legend.

Even the Myrtles Plantation website does not have a clear story to explain Chloe’s story and its connection to the plantation. “The Legend of Chloe” page features a 1992 picture purportedly showing a ghost slave girl, and although they call the subsequent souvenir “The Chloe Postcard,” the website doesn’t get into the story behind who Chloe may, or may not, have been. For balance, while “Chloe” is photographed between the General’s Store and the Butler’s Pantry, there is also a photograph of a young white girl staring out from the windows of the mansion, also without any reported backstory. The Myrtles Plantation website understands how these ghosts appeal to tourists, and boasts that the Plantation and its ghosts have been featured on “Discovery Channel, National Geographic Channel, The New York Times, Travel Channel, HGTV, Good Morning America, Fox 8” (“Legend of Chloe and Ghosts”).

Chloe’s story is a cautionary tale of the Other disrupting the social order, and is presented as such on paranormal reality TV. Shows such as *Unsolved Mysteries*, *Ghost*

Hunters, Ghost Adventures, and Most Terrifying Places in America all feature white men lamenting the loss of white children and the black or mulatto slave girl eternally living out her guilt, shame, and servitude.

White belief in the paranormal often calls for exoticism. Paranormal investigators often partake in Native rituals -- everything from smudging to Voodoo -- to sample the exotic while still maintaining their privilege. Amy Allan on *The Dead Files* frequently suggests the haunted contact a Reiki Master or perform New-Age solutions to solve problems with spirits. Even some of the "toys" paranormal investigators, and rich Victorian women in their parlors, use to contact ghosts contributes to this Otherness: "[William] Fuld's exotic name for the board was an attempt to capitalize on the American public's fascination with the mysterious Far East. He let it be known that Ouija was the Egyptian word for 'good luck,' though there was no absolutely factual basis for this claim. It's more likely that he got the name from the city of Oujda, which is located in the eastern part of Morocco" (Hawes 111).

White investigators frequently appropriate other cultures, especially exploiting any Native American ancestry, as proof of their spiritual gifts. Ryan Buell of *Paranormal State* writes, "It may be the Native American in me coming out, from my father's side. I have an innate sense that there are hidden things in the world that stay out of our way. The best place for them is where man hasn't conquered the terrain, the wilderness" (Buell 254). Chip Coffey, a psychic who frequently worked with Buell, although they have since parted ways, makes a similar statement: "Perhaps my 'psychic destiny' was written long before I was born. My maternal great-grandmother was a Native American medicine woman whose own abilities were known throughout the Southeast during the early years of the twentieth century. And my mother also had unique abilities that she believed she'd inherited from her grandmother" (Coffey xxii).

This project began when I used paranormal reality TV shows in my College Composition II class. I was tired of reading the same essays on abortion and legalizing marijuana, so I decided to let my students explore something new. My class and I noticed that Josh Gates, one

of the most prolific stars in this genre, is frequently disrespectful to his crew and people he encounters from different cultures and wondered why this was acceptable. For example, we watched Gates in *Destination Truth* from Season 3, Episode 12, when he and his crew visit China and make fun of the locals (talking "Goat Chinese" to the animals, shooting off fireworks in the street) and perform various other disrespectful actions. This chapter will begin by looking at *Ghost Hunters*, Josh Gates, and how their shows privilege patriarchy and heteronormativity. It will then consider minority-driven shows such as *Ghost Brothers* and *Ghosts in the Hood*. For white male paranormal investigators, having some connection to the racial Other gives them more credibility when discussing the paranormal Other, but they still retain their White Male Privilege, no matter what other culture they borrow from in their investigations.

- *Ghost Hunters* (SciFi/SyFy 2004-2016, revival on A&E 2019-present)

"Ghost hunting, like a lot of other things we human beings do, has gotten a lot more sophisticated over the years, a lot more technological in nature, and a lot more demanding. If you're going to conduct a paranormal investigation in a professional manner, you need to be savvy in any number of specialized applications. That's why it makes sense for you to have access to a team of experts" (Hawes 1). That's a lot to unpack in the first paragraph of Grant Wilson's introduction to *Seeking Spirits: The Lost Cases of the Atlantic Paranormal Society*, one of the several books he and Jason Hawes co-authored in their time together headlining SyFy's *Ghost Hunters* television show, based on their time together in TAPS, The Atlantic Paranormal Society. Sophistication, technology, specialization, and access -- all benefits Wilson and Hawes are privy to because they are mature white men.

From the beginning of the series, Grant Wilson and Jason Hawes are portrayed as hard-working blue collar typical Americans chasing ghosts in their free time from their plumbing business. While (in the beginning) there are two women on The Atlantic Paranormal Society team, one of the women works in the office and only answers phones and gives the men their

assignments, while the other woman works solely in “research.” Through the eleven seasons of the original run, women begin to join the investigations, and there will be two women featured on the 2019 A&E revival out of a cast of seven. While Grant and Jason admit to having had paranormal experiences, they are presented primarily as skeptics, which is a function of their white male privilege.

Like Josh Gates, the TAPS team quickly branched out from investigating single-family homes into more prominent locations, such as the Queen Mary, Eastern State Penitentiary (twice), Myrtles Plantation and Gettysburg. Their technology is also state of the art -- their show brought ghost hunting into national prominence, along with the cool toys that come along with it. As Colin Dickey writes, “Ghost hunting in a thriving, growing business, thanks to a glut of reality TV shows that have emerged over the past decade: starting with Syfy’s *Ghost Hunters* in 2004, in which a crew of investigators travel to reputedly haunted locations to trot out gadgetry in search of definitive proof of the hereafter” (Dickey 75-6). Although not all paranormal reality shows have the same level of technology, all have some sort of tools to help them “find” ghosts. As the burden of proof always sits with the investigator, Dickey continues, “Ghost hunts without technological devices these days are almost unheard of; one could almost say that ghosts don’t exist without the technology that records them” (Dickey 85).

In the original *Ghost Hunters*, the TAPS team traveled in two black vans that mimicked Hawes and Wilson’s day job Roto Rooter vans. In the introduction to each show, the image of the vans was superimposed on each other -- the normal and the paranormal in a constant battle for focus.

Ghost Hunters has had several spin offs -- *Ghost Hunters International, Ghost Hunters Academy, Kindred Spirits,* the revival of the original show with Grant Wilson returning, and the competing *Ghost Nation*, with *GH* original team members Jason Hawes, Dave Tango, and Steve Gonsalves.

For the most part, *Ghost Hunters* is an outlier as it is one of the few shows to focus more on investigation than entertainment and is offered as a show that takes itself seriously. There have been accusations of trickery leveled at the show, and there have been Twitter battles with other shows such as *Ghost Adventures*, especially when they both investigated Bobby Mackey's Music World and came to very different conclusions.

Although *Ghost Hunters* has presented evidence they claim is paranormal, Josh Gates and the cast of *Ghost Hunters* (especially Jason Hawes's stoic investigatory techniques) perform the expected role of privileged white males, and therefore paranormal skeptics. Co-Founder Grant Wilson explains the need for caution, that, "If the public at large is ever going to understand the spirit realm and its relationship to the world we know, it's going to require proof of that realm's existence. And why shouldn't it? We're a civilization of skeptics. Before we accept something, we want to be certain that it's real" (Wilson qtd. in Hawes 20-1).

Conversely, Wilson writes, "I've always considered my personal experiences just that -- *personal*" (Wilson qtd. in Hawes 8), although he now makes his living exploiting the personal experiences of others. Wilson skirts his own issues with paranormal belief by making himself the savior of all those affected by ghosts and spirits. He believes that, "One of the reasons people depend on us, I think, is that we've been where they are. We've had our close encounters with the supernatural, been scared half to death by them, and been lucky enough to come out whole and sane. So when we sit down to talk with a woman who sees things other people don't see, or a man who hears voices late at night, we can appreciate their confusion and their pain. We can *identify*" (Wilson qtd. in Hawes 3).

Echoing Josh Gates's professed belief in witnesses, Wilson writes, "We don't go into an investigation assuming that anyone is lying. Far from it, in fact. We have nothing but sympathy for anyone affected by the paranormal" (Wilson qtd. in Hawes 203). Although some of their investigations end up with a result of faulty wiring causing spooky feelings, or an elderly man picking up his neighbor's radio on his too-sensitive hearing aids, Wilson and Hawes do listen to

the people who have asked for their help, even though they may not always agree on what the goal of the investigation is.

Hawes has a clearer view of the team's mission (which may have contributed to the duo's split), and while he still professes to have an open mind, his primary goal is to debunk hauntings. Wilson writes, "Jason has a saying that describes our philosophy when it comes to paranormal investigation: 'If you set out to prove a haunting, anything will seem like evidence. If you set out to disprove it, you'll end up with only those things you can't explain away'" (Wilson qtd. in Hawes 76), and appears to agree with his partner in this skepticism and its effect on their credibility: "That's one reason we've developed a reputation for integrity in our field. We're more skeptical about our evidence than other people are. We consistently hold ourselves to a higher standard" (Wilson qtd. in Hawes 77).

Part of *Ghost Hunters*' appeal, especially in the later seasons, was its inclusion of viewers in investigations. As Alissa Burger explains in her article "Ghost Hunters: Simulated Participation in Televisual Hauntings," "Viewers are encouraged, through the use of technology, editing, and live episodes, to act as simulated participants in *Ghost Hunters* investigations. Both the regular season episodes and the live Halloween investigation usher viewers through a process of simultaneous identification and distancing: fans are included as an integral part of investigation and invited to critically position themselves alongside TAPS team members. However, when the investigation comes to an end, through the ritual presentation of the analysis, findings, and reveal, the presenters are re-established as the only true experts" (Burger 173). You can look, but you can't touch. In the end, the white men are still in charge.

And like Gates taking his audience to open an ancient tomb, paranormal reality shows allow their audiences to be there from the safety of their own home. Unlike other shows such as *Ghost Adventures*, both Gates and *Ghost Hunters* have large professional camera crews following them around, which makes the willing suspension of disbelief that much more difficult, but also helps the audience see things the investigators might not (which they can then share

on the associated social media networks). Burger elaborates: “The combination of crew cameras and hand-held video cameras carried by individual team members *simulates* participation by creating a sense that viewers are positions alongside the TAPS team members through pivotal moments of the investigation, ‘experiencing’ the suspense of the hunt and the thrill of witnessing paranormal activity” (Burger 164).

Nevertheless, the audience can never fully participate, even though the outlets of social media and live shows. There is still a layer of production that forever separates television viewers from the investigation. Burger writes of how Hawes and Grant use this to establish their dominance as they alone can reveal to the client what really happened: “The editing techniques used to distance the viewers’ participatory identification in the evidence review stage serves two additional purposes: they resituate the TAPS team as unquestioned experts, no matter how much fans have felt ‘part of’ the investigation; and they create suspense to build toward the scientific climax of *Ghost Hunters*, ‘The Findings’” (Burger 169). The “Findings” section of the show allows Hawes and Wilson to present the evidence they have collected and their conclusion concerning the paranormal activity to the frightened homeowner or concerned business manager.

Grant Wilson left the original series in 2012, but has returned for the revival (without Hawes) which premiered on 21 August 2019 on A&E. It will be interesting to see the style of the revival without Hawes’ stoicism. The new *Ghost Hunters* cast has seven members, two women and five white men. Of the cast, only Wilson is from the original show. According to Jason Hawes, this recasting is the reason he refused to participate: "I was the initial person that was asked to do the reboot of *Ghost Hunters*, and I turned that down because [A&E] wanted to recast the team," Jason revealed. "Steve and Dave, they've been with me forever and we're a big family, and I have the utmost trust and faith in them and their knowledge” (Cacich).

Jason Hawes and Grant Wilson have never admitted to a disagreement or inciting event that led to the break-up of the original *Ghost Hunters* team, but the official TAPS website no

longer lists Wilson as a co-founder, instead giving Hawes all the credit: "Founded in 1990 by *Jason Hawes* with the sole purpose of helping those experiencing paranormal activity and investigating claims professionally and confidentially all while implementing the latest in paranormal research equipment and techniques" ("Home").

After looking at the polished network websites of most paranormal reality shows, the TAPS website, which appears to have been created on WordPress is shockingly rudimentary. Although Hawes is credited in a few places, there is not author listed for statements such as: "T.A.P.S was around before Television fame and will be long after" or "T.A.P.S is the most visited Paranormal site in the World" ("Home"). The page continues its boasts with, "T.A.P.S brings decades of experience in investigating with its pioneering of equipment and techniques that has changed the field of paranormal investigating forever" ("Home").

The grammar of the website is far different from sites produced for either show by the network, and is different from Hawes' diction either on the show or the multiple books he and Wilson wrote together. Information such as "The Original show Ghost Hunters was about T.A.P.S. T.A.P.S is a group that existed for 15 years before the Television series and handles cases in the New England area. T.A.P.S was not casted to make a television show, The show was built around the T.A.P.S Organization and featured their goal of truly helping those in need" ("Home") does not fit in with his writing style, which makes the purported "official" TAPS website even more of a conundrum, especially since Hawes is listed as the contact for the site.

The site even features a page of Exorcism prayers, credited to Hawes, although it includes the disclaimer: "Please be aware. We have added this for the purpose of knowledge. Trying to perform an Exorcism of any sort is a dangerous endeavor and should only be performed by a trained professional" (Hawes "Exorcism Prayers"). The page offers prayers for Catholics, Christians, and from Hebrew scriptures, which includes the questionable statement that "Evil spirits which cause mental disturbances are mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures. But

they were not dispatched or controlled by Satan; they were sent by God to torment people" (Hawes "Exorcism Prayers").

The site also champions Hawes' new show *Ghost Nation*, claiming that it "first premiered October 11th 2019 on Travel Channel and quickly shattered all viewership records for the Network. Jason Hawes, Stephen Gonsalves and David Tango decided it was time to come back to television with their style, rules, honesty and beliefs. Also wanting to showcase all those involved in the field of Paranormal studies and to show that the field is much larger than T.A.P.S." ("Home"). Although the show did well in its debut, the shattering of records is overstated: "Concluding a successful debut season, which launched out of Travel Channel's annual "Ghostober" event on Friday, October 11, the series has pulled in over 5 million viewers to date. The premiere of "Ghost Nation" was the second-highest rated debut for the network in 2019" (Sarcona).

The show did, however, help the network break records: The series was one of the highest-rated programs during "Ghostober," Travel Channel's annual October programming event encompassing 31 days of all-new spooky premieres. It was truly one hell of a month for Travel Channel, culminating as the highest-rated October in network history" (Sarcona).

A Paranormal News tab on the site features articles with leading titles such as Allison Cacich's "No Matter How Hard They Try, There's No Replacing Jason Hawes on 'Ghost Hunters,'" which does identify Wilson as an integral part of TAPS and discusses his new show saying, "Grant Wilson, co-founder of The Atlantic Paranormal Society (TAPS), serves as lead investigator alongside *Ghost Mine* alum Kristen Luman. The father of three initially left the show in 2012, but was asked to join the reboot, which debuted last summer," while still praising the loyalty Hawes shows to his original team: "After rejecting 40-some-odd offers to do another show, Jason said he couldn't pass up the opportunity to work with Discovery, Inc., who allowed him to bring Steve and Dave on board" (Cacich).

Ghost Hunters season 13 and *Ghost Nation* season two have both been scheduled for 2020 releases for their respective channels, with the Travel Channel's general manager saying of the latter that, "'Ghost Nation' was an exciting launch for us, and it's clear our viewers are just as eager to see Jason, Steve and Dave back on the case, doing what they do best [...] 'We're beyond elated to do another season with them, super serving their loyal fan base with more locations and deeper investigations'" (Sarcona).

Jason Hawes and Grant Wilson were pioneers in the field of paranormal reality television. *Ghost Hunters* was the first mainstream show to feature paranormal investigations, and their status as white working-class men gave them immediately privileged status, while endearing them to their fans. The success of their show and the privilege gave them the opportunity, like Josh Gates, to investigate famous locations and to act as experts in the field. Although the Hawes/Wilson partnership has dissolved, they both have continued success with the fame and access their status has brought to them.

- *Destination Truth* (SyFy 2008-2012)
- *Expedition Unknown* (Travel Channel 2015-2017, Discovery Channel 2017-present)

My second grade daughter recently asked if she could finish watching the educational show she had started watching with her grandparents. Of course, I'm not going to say no to education, but I winced as she put on an episode of *Expedition Unknown*. She promised me she was learning history and science and geography, but I steered my questions toward social issues: "does he treat people well?" "Is he nice to the people around him?", hoping she would reconsider the lessons she was learning from *Expedition Unknown* host Josh Gates.

Josh Gates's autobiography, *Destination Truth: Memoirs of a Monster Hunter* begins with a quote from Indiana Jones: "Fortune and glory, kid. Fortune and glory." While Jones did not personally seek fortune and glory, he is still a representation of the white male questing to save the natives from their backward ways -- much like Gates. But Josh Gates, unlike Indiana

Jones, has no problem with fortune and glory. Gates describes himself as a “professional vagabond, international monster hunter, and paranormal Hardy Boy” (Gates Foreword).

The reference to the fictional Hardy Boys is not entirely random, as Josh Gates is an unreliable narrator of his own memoirs, a fact he mentions up front when he issues the disclaimer that, “In several places I’ve taken geographical liberties, changed a few names to protect the guilty, needlessly slandered several people, misused the word ‘nascent,’ and in one instance made something up entirely because it sounded very adventurous in my head” (Gates Foreword). This is a strategy that has served Gates well in his career as a reality show star. One of his first appearances was for a competition show on ESPN called *Beg, Borrow & Deal*, for which competitors raced across America with one outfit, no money, and had to bluff their way cross-country to reach the finish line two and a half weeks later, while also competing in periodic sports challenges. Gates reports his team won because, “I’m not much for sports, but I *am* full of bullshit” (Gates 17).

Gates walks the infotainment line frivolously and without apology. He “holds degrees from Tufts University in Archeology and Drama” (“Dossier”), although, tellingly, he only mentions the Archeology degree in the introduction to *Expedition Unknown*. He uses this combination of knowledge and performance -- he calls himself a guy who “dig[s] in the dirt with a flair for the dramatic” (Gates 6)-- to host and executive produce *Expedition Unknown* for the Discovery Channel (the show premiered on the Travel Channel). Before that he was the host of *Destination Truth* on SyFy; which can now be seen on the Travel Channel, and the host of *Ghost Hunters Live* (“Josh Gates”). Either unaware or uninterested in the legendary feud between the two shows, for Halloween 2018 Gates hosted *Ghost Adventures Live* on the Travel Channel, or TRVL as it is currently marketed. And he also has a new show, *Legendary Locations*, for TRVL.

Much like the Tennessee Wraith Chasers, Gates has good ol’ boy appeal but unlike them, he has a tendency to behave badly. He frequently mocks fellow cast members --

especially women (which is doubly interesting because his wife was a *Destination Truth* co-star) -- and makes fun of every culture with whom he comes in contact. He behaves like a frat boy out on the village with the company credit card, which is essentially what he is. As Lauren Chestnut points out in her article, ““Neocolonial Scenarios in the Syfy Channel's ‘Destination Truth’: Scientific Discovery, Tourism, and Ethnography,“ “team leader Gates' signature sarcasm compromises any semblance of proper academic ethnographic research” (Chestnut 130). He exhibits every stupid American-abroad stereotype there is, such as setting off fireworks on the street in China, and is rewarded with an ever-expanding fan base, new shows, and new syndications.

In 2010, Syfy reported that, “For the full third season* ([...] *Season Three ran in two parts), Destination Truth averaged series-highs with a 1.6 Household rating, 1.3 million Adults 25-54, 1.3 million Adults 18-49 and 2.2 million total viewers” (“Syfy’s Destination Truth”). Despite complaints about the similarities between Gates’s new show and his old show -- one blogger, Jason Colavito, complained that “Gates’s trip to Romania to look for *strigoi* was [a] virtual remake of the *Destination Truth* episode he did many years ago on Syfy in which he also went to Romania to hunt for vampires. In both cases he found nothing and spent most of the time highlighting how nice everyone is and how crappy the infrastructure of rural areas of Eastern Europe is” (Colavito) -- in March 2017, the Travel Channel reported that, “Travel Channel's ‘Expedition Unknown’ continues to break records, delivering its highest-rated episode in the series' history on Wednesday, March 15, at 9 p.m. ET/PT. It was the network's highest-rated prime time show since October 2015. Attracting more than 1.4 million total viewers, the episode captured the #9 spot for all viewers A25-54 and the #8 spot for M25-54 in its timeslot among all ad-supported cable networks” (“Travel Channel’s Hit Series”). *Expedition Unknown’s* popularity goes beyond a strong male demographic; however, it was renewed for a third season because “ratings for the [2016] season [...] are 143% ahead of its time slot's average a year ago among persons ages 25 to 54 and also has more than doubled results in other key demographics

including 183% for women ages 25 to 54" ("Travel Channel Renews"). There are a lot of people watching Josh Gates's multiple shows, even with his penchant for behaving badly and poor treatment of others.

Despite his success, this wasn't the career Josh Gates envisioned while waiting tables as an out-of-work actor in LA. Though he fits Owen Davies's description perfectly: "The twentieth century heralded the rise of the 'ghost hunter', the media-friendly maverick psychic investigator who came to each case with an open mind but who, like any good detective, treated every case as a mystery waiting to be solved rationally. The ghost hunter was not so much driven by the desire to prove profound truths about religion and the human condition [...] -- as by the thrill of the hunt and the prospect of perhaps one day finally coming face to face with spirits" (Davies 95), Gates was just another waiter with dreams of stardom.

When *Destination Truth* was pitched to him, he recalls, "I proceeded to point out that my resume doesn't exactly read like Van Helsing's" (Gates 19). The producer, however, was undeterred. "'You're perfect,' Neil explains, 'They don't want a nut. They want a real traveler, a guy who isn't afraid to turn some rocks over. Someone funny" (Gates 20). SyFy, who markets itself as: "a media destination for imagination-based entertainment" ("Syfy's Destination Truth"), envisioned *Destination Truth* as a companion piece to *Ghost Hunters*, but initially even Josh Gates found the premise ridiculous: "The idea that I've got a shot at being a modern-day Indiana Jones isn't something that I'm willing to consider with any amount of gravitas" (Gates 20).

As popular as he may be with an acting/adventuring job he was initially uninterested in, Josh Gates is your cringe-worthy inappropriate uncle. As Lauren Chesnut points out, "Besides the clear culture shock and the environmental beauty (and dangers) of each location, Gates' sarcastic barbs are frequently directed toward local government authorities (their equipment is frequently lost or caught up in airport customs), transportation (nearly every rental car, boat, or beast of burden is not up to basic functioning standards), housing accommodations (usually seedy or ramshackle if the team is not forced to camp at their location), and most especially, the

information available to the team. Gates often subtly ridicules local informants as they describe experiencing hauntings or having terrifying encounters with frightening and bizarre animals" (Chesnut 136).

Gates's problematic behavior and beliefs are not only in his presentation on TV; his memoirs are a collection of problematic quotes without a shred of self-awareness. He pokes fun at friends, "My first recruit [to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro with him] was my great friend Aaron Epstein, because if there's one thing the Jews are known for, it's accomplishments in high-altitude mountaineering" (Gates 8), but more often openly mocks the cultures whose legends he is researching. He makes fun of medical care: "When traveling in rural Africa, it's important to not actually *go* to a hospital until the patient is on the brink of expiration, otherwise things are apt to get worse" (Gates 13), yet he and his "Team Truth" seek out treatment in most of the locales they visit. He never brings up his issues to the locals; it's always a broken fourth wall grievance offered to the audience with a knowing wink -- WE are better than THEM.

He is disrespectful of the needs, priorities, and lifestyles of others. He doesn't only complain directly, "I've experienced 'island time' in my travels, but Papuans have taken ass dragging to a whole new level" (Gates 63), but is also resentful of those who have agreed to work with his team. When a family wants to do a ceremony before allowing the team to investigate a woman's possession, Chesnut notes: "For the Marley family, Jacob's wife's possession and the ceremonies surrounding it represent direct contact with the spirits. However, for Team Truth, they represent a foreign, even repugnant set of rituals that have merely caused them to waste time they could have been using to make sure their cameras and digital recorders were prepared to gather scientific evidence of the spirits" (Chesnut 150).

He both complains about travel arrangements and uses them to glorify his team's adventurous spirit: "On a trip to a haunted Tanzanian island [...] Gates quips in voice-over, 'Since Southwest Airlines hasn't opened up that busy Los Angeles-to-haunted-island direct route, we needed to transfer to an aging prop plant to take us the rest of the way to our

destination'" (Chesnut 142). After an emergency landing, Gates uses the opportunity to take a dig at another show: "You don't see that [bleep] on *Ghost Hunters*" (Chesnut 142). He grumbles about adversity, but uses it as his badge of honor, one more comparison he can make between himself and Indiana Jones.

He is elitist about language. About Tok Pisin, the native language in the Nokon Village of Papua New Guinea he writes: "the language is bonkers. I try to follow along, but half the time it sounds like they're drunk or talking shit about me" (65). Gates makes everything about himself and expects everyone different from him to be immediately below him. On interviewing a Malaysian naturalist considered the local authority on Bigfoot, he's surprised: "I'm half expecting him to be a loon, but instead he turns out to be a fascinating and passionate scientist" (Gates 40).

He typically combines racism and misogyny, such as when talking about working with Malaysian paranormal groups: "Perched on the couch are three very attractive young women all dressed in black. They sit silently alongside an older man named 'Uncle' who sports a mesh tank top and bright camo pants. Together the four of them make up a paranormal group called The Seekers and boast a Malaysian television show of the same name. [...] The best I can tell, the premise of *The Seekers* show is that Uncle cavorts around in the dark with three submissive Malaysian girls twenty years his junior, looking for ghosts. I have no idea how he pulled off this arrangement, but the man is clearly a genius" (Gates 42).

On the same investigation he tells a love story:

> I spin around on my stool to catch sight of one of the most beautiful women I've ever laid eyes on. She's alone at a corner table. I may be in love. Gupta [his security guard/translator] sidles up beside me at the bar and leans into my ear. 'Josh. That's a man.' My introduction into the pervasive 'ladyboy' culture is a harsh one. Incidentally, here's a bit of rock-solid travel advice: when getting hammered in a bar in Southeast Asia, make sure to kick the tires before you drive off the lot. As we spill out of the bar,

> I'm still in disbelief about the transvestite, but at least Gupta has finally earned his paycheck. Back at the hotel I head to my room and collapse. I smell like Chinese incense and American cigarettes and drift off to fitful dreams about spiders and cross-dressers. (Gates 41-2)

When an adventuring television personality who appeals mostly to males 25-54 writes about his greatest fears being "spiders and cross-dressers," and compares a love interest to a material possession, it sends a message to those viewers that these fears and beliefs are valid. Gates, of course, is an entertainer first and foremost, but doesn't seem to understand his position and social responsibilities as a white male in a position of authority.

His misogyny is not always sexual, sometimes it's just demeaning, such as when, after having a rock thrown at him in a dispute over whether or not he's allowed to film in a location he writes, "Luckily, Buddhist monks throw like little girls, and I'm able to dodge the projectile" (Gates 149).

In Rabaul, New Britain, he is both self-depreciating and derogatory about others: "A few of the locals assist in erecting a base camp, using machetes to create bamboo supports for our rain tarp. In the span of about three minutes they turn the site into the Professor's hut from *Gilligan's Island*, fashioning a table, two chairs, and a roof out of bamboo, putting my own camp-building efforts to utter shame. I half expect them to install a coconut phone" (Gates 72). Even while impressed by the locals' professionalism and skill, he still has to compare them to a fictional white man, to whom they still don't measure up.

Gates has several of these glimmers of self-awareness, where he is so close to finding similarities instead of differences. His moments of self-depreciation are endearing in their relatability and his humility sometimes exposes his humanity. He recognizes that, "So I do my best to stand there like a grinning American idiot (not difficult). Because if there's one thing that people around the world can get behind, it's feeling superior to Americans" (Gates 106).

Eventually, Josh Gates seems to understand that his questing is helping him to find things bigger than himself and white patriarchal culture. He is shocked to discover that, “I’m quickly realizing that we aren’t just here looking for Bigfoot; we’re here to document a mystery” (Gates 38). Through his travels and discussions with members of other cultures he comes to understand that, “The interviews illuminate one of the critical lessons learned while making *Destination Truth*: that *truth* itself is relative. Our Western obsession with objectivity and demonstrable evidence hold little sway in certain cultures” (Gates 65-6). He quotes Vincent Chow, the Malaysian naturalist, the one he was happy “wasn’t a nut” and credits him for teaching him a profound lesson: “The true secret to seeking the unknown is in the *looking*, not the *finding*. The journey is what matters” (Gates 41). Gates is continually having these near-misses with figuring it all out. He comes so close to being more culturally accepting, before slipping back into his comfortable, and comforting, white privilege.

Destination Truth was first envisioned in a more straightforward documentary format, but then, according to Gates, SciFi executive Mark Stern asked “for an interesting adjustment, wanting to see more of our actual travels, humor, and the logistical obstacles we faced in the field. In other words, any efforts we made to scrub the show into something shiny weren’t nearly as interesting as the messy realities of the travel itself” (Gates 56-7). Now, instead of focusing on the investigation, the focus is on the entertainment of the journey, which muddies the “Truth” in the show’s title. Production aspects of the show allow Josh Gates to behave badly when experiencing other cultures — particularly by mocking those cultures — for the sake of the entertainment of his base audience. Gates writes about how this sets his shows apart from others: “The show [Destination Truth] combines the investigative elements that fans of the immensely popular *Ghost Hunters* franchise already love but places those investigations in a totally different context; the final product is a fast-paced mash-up of travel, comedy, myth, and mystery” (Gates 84). This change between show concepts has evolved as his shows has evolved, as blogger Jason Colavito notices, “In this season [Ex Un 2], Gates’s show has

abandoned the argument and investigation in favor of emphasizing its travelogue aspects" (Colavito).

Partially because this is the way the show was designed, but mainly because it is the way it is performed, Gates and his team are oblivious to the ramifications of their actions on their viewership's understanding of other cultures. Their show follows a prescriptive pattern of white patriarchal privilege. Chesnut explains, "Clearly, (neo)colonial themes run throughout each program: issues of ethnography and representation come up in Josh and the other team members' interactions with local 'natives,' their ability to travel to remote locations and to consume local cultures and their mythologies (enabled by neoliberal economic policies that encourage global North-to-South touristic travel), and in the discourses of scientific discovery that echo the classic explorers' expeditions of the Age of Discovery" (Chesnut 132-3). It is doubtful that Gates, his team, or his producers, have thought about the harmful narrative they are perpetuating.

Because of his white privilege, from the start, Josh Gates' investigations were extreme and featured prominent locations. He hosted the first overnight investigation of the Tomb of King Tut. He also researched Ankor Wat, Chernobyl, and searched for Amelia Earhart and Captain Morgan's flagship. These famous locations are exactly what his audience wants: "[...] a recent broad study of Americans interested in paranormal topics by three Baylor University sociologists found that many people motivated by these subjects 'are interested in the paranormal because they hope to take part in, whether personally or by proxy, a major *discovery* for the world at large'" (Bader et al. 38, emphasis original, qtd. in Chesnut 134). Like Gates, his audience grew up with Indiana Jones as the archetype of what an archaeologist/professor/adventurer should be. Since few of us will ever have the opportunities Gates has been afforded, watching his shows provides the chance to live vicariously through him, without the viewers having to worry about their race, sex, socio-economic status, or general place in society. As the doors open for Josh Gates, they open for us all.

Gates almost got his chance for a major discovery when he was present at the opening of a 3,000 year old sarcophagus on live television on 7 April 2019, a move reminiscent of Geraldo opening Al Capone's vault, which Gates references in his 2020 ArchaeoCon talk. Gates was not part of the press preceding the event, but Andy Dehnart of realityblurred.com interviewed the show's Discovery Channel executive producer, Howard Swartz, who told him that, "'part of the fun of this is archeology live,' and that means 'things happen—surprises, discoveries happen—in real time'" and that he did not share Gates's concern that it would be a debacle like Geraldo's experience: "'it's a 3,000-year-old sarcophagus that we believe has not been opened,' and is 'unmolested by time or robbers.' He said that the Egyptologists and the archeologists … think there's a good chance of finding something'" (Dehnart).

Swartz echoes the idea that Gates's and the channel's money and access allows the viewer to take part in experiences they would not otherwise be a part of, telling Dehnart, "Discovery's primary promise is to take viewers to these places they've never been before and deliver on these exciting opportunities to expose them to new things, and archeology is one of those core Discovery DNA genres for us," and "we want to make this as appealing to as broad an audience as possible" (Dehnart).

There's a flaw to Swartz's inclusion; one that Dehnart didn't notice until later: Gates's entire team on the excursion, American and Egyptian, are men. So while touting the special as being an example of inclusion, it's still an all boys' club. As Dehnart writes, "So: all men. Are there no female Egyptologists? I did some extensive research, spending 10 seconds on Google, where I immediately found this helpful list: 'Top 10 Egyptologists to Follow.' It's 60 percent women. I wish I'd asked about this in my interview, but at the time, I didn't even notice that the cast so far was all men, which is embarrassing" (Dehnart). Inclusion is only important in the ratings -- only white men can be entrusted to do the actual work.

The audience expectations of Gates' shows, my daughter aside, is to be entertained more than to be educated, and since his shows do frequently re-investigate locations they've

been to before, his shows are comfortable in their lack of surprise and intrigue. Audiences know what to expect. Colavito writes, “Overall, *Expedition Unknown’s* second season has the feel of a retread, a ‘been there, done that’ instant rerun that revisits sights from previous series, read out loud articles I’ve already read online, and generally has less depth than *Wikipedia* entries on the same subject. Even so, the program is well-shot, generally enjoyable to watch, and decent TV ‘wallpaper.’ I guess I just need to adjust my expectations from ‘engaging’ to ‘entertaining’ and leave it at that” (Colavito). This is a contrast from reality shows by personalities such as Anthony Bourdain or Andrew Zimmern, who use the platform of television fame to share their respect for other cultures. Chesnut points out, “While the travel and touristic elements of the show are some of the most compelling points of analysis, *DT* would probably not be considered as part of the same genre as other programs that emphasize travel or food in exotic locations” (Chesnut 134) Yet Discovery Communications, Inc. still markets Gates alongside these kinds of shows. Courtney White, the Travel Channel Programming and Production Senior Vice President boasts: “Like Andrew Zimmern [*Bizarre Foods*] and Jack Maxwell [*Booze Traveler*], Josh Gates resonates with our fans -- with over 5.4 million people tuning in each week to join him on his worldwide adventures. This season, we’re upping the ante with bold, ambitious adventures and mission-driven storytelling -- you can’t help but get hooked” (“Travel Channel Renews”). Unlike these other shows that seek to educate their audience by taking them to places they may never travel to in their lives, the focus for Josh Gates’s shows is the storytelling, and frequently that narrative is white and male, at the expense of the cultures he is exploring.

White privilege is inherent in Gates’s ability to re-do the same investigations over and over, and it is a trope with paranormal shows led by white men. It’s hard to have imagined Anthony Bourdain rehashing old concepts, but Josh Gates does it, *Ghost Hunters* does it, *Ghost Adventures* does it. While minority-led shows are always having to prove themselves, white men can just keep doing the same thing over and over. This is also because these shows have much longer runs than shows with minority casts, which typically only run a season or two.

While Gates complains incessantly about his quality of life on his adventures, when it comes to things he can control, his technology is state of the art, and his travel, domestically at least, is the best available. When he can't control something, such as the information his sources give him, he changes the narrative until it fits his needs. Chesnut explains, "Local eyewitnesses to the reality of Mongolia's 'devil worm' or the Chupacabra in Latin America are not considered to be valid (or validatible) sources of knowledge or truth. Instead, following in the footsteps of colonial-era explorers, Team Truth uses their superior financial and technological resources in an attempt to force local knowledge and beliefs into measurable, Western scientific parameters" (Chesnut 131).

Gates' humor is a function of his performance as a skeptic. He aligns himself with other white male skeptic paranormal investigators and explains that

> My good friends Jason Hawes and Grant Wilson from *Ghost Hunters* tell new investigators that they will be 'hit, punched, grabbed, slapped, and pushed' by things they can't see. The idea being that if you hunt for ghosts long enough, one of them will eventually reach out and smack you. But even though I've experienced the same phenomenon [sic] that they so often describe, I remain an entrenched paranormal skeptic. That's probably a good thing. Like Jason and Grant, I don't think every creak and moan is a ghost. If I did, I'd have the same investigative acumen and Shaggy from *Scooby-Doo*. (Gates 188-9)

This both puts Gates firmly on the same side as Hawes and Grant (back when they were on the same side), and is a knock on younger paranormal investigators--going back to the divide between different generations of investigatory strategies based on whether they grew up with *Scooby-Doo* villains as white men in masks (the generation of skeptics: Gates, Hawes, Grant) and those who watched episodes where *Scooby-Doo* were actually paranormal (believers Bagan, Groff, Buell).

Josh Gates is frequently dismissive and disrespectful of other cultures. He exemplifies Elizabeth Minnich's belief, explained in Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" that "whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow 'them' to be more like 'us.'" (qtd. in McIntosh). Gates's show is an example of neo-colonialism. Scholar Lauren Chesnut writes that, "Examining *Destination Truth* (*DT*) through the lens of performance scholar Diana Taylor's notion of 'scenarios of discovery' demonstrates that Gates and his crew's paranormal and cryptozoological discovery missions in many ways mirror colonial expeditions" (Chesnut 129). Gates too often positions himself as a White Conqueror, taking native beliefs and whitewashing them to serve his own narrative, and "The continued reenactment of this popular scenario, she [Taylor] argues, 'normalizes the extraordinary conceit that discovery is still possible, that "undiscovered" peoples still exist, without questioning the obvious: *Undiscovered by whom?*'" (Taylor 54, emphasis original qtd. In Chesnut 130). Gates introduces new cultures and beliefs to his audience, but posits himself as the explorer, conqueror, and savior. Instead of letting natives tell their own story, it has to be filtered through his white male lens first.

When Gates compares locals to Gilligan's Professor making a coconut phone, he is reinforcing Chesnut's notion that, "These discursive threads tend to reinforce colonial-era modes of cultural comparison that frame white Westerners as modern and authoritative, while 'locals' are portrayed as backward, superstitious, and incapable of speaking for themselves" (Chesnut 129). He's annoyed when a native ceremony pushes back his technology set up time, rather than trying to learn from and understand those he is investigating.

Since there is a television show involved, the exchange of knowledge becomes a financial transaction, that, as per usual, privileges the white Western man. Chesnut explains, "Whether a mere public relations ploy or a monetization of ancient belief systems, the celebration of local cryptids is a situation that highlights 'blatant inequalities between the tourist

with the means to travel and the local people who have little choice but to sell their traditions'" (Steeves 431 qtd. in Chesnut 135-6).

When he does have diverse cast members in the rotating Team Truth, such as Colombian actress Jael de Pardo (who also worked on *Fact or Faked: Paranormal Files* with Ben Hansen), these crew members have far different experiences. de Pardo writes, "When you're on the road for work and the production company is hiring locals to help with things, you get to know more about the culture because you hang out with the people living there" (Hernandez). de Pardo's experience contradicts Chesnut's observation that, "Immersing themselves in the local culture in order to better understand the phenomena they are investigating from a native point of view would really be outside either the team's goals or expertise" (Chesnut 144), yet it is only the marginalized cast members who openly express this acceptance and appreciation of the culture around them. And those voices are rarely heard, "Normally Gates is the clear leader: he always drives (no matter how much he complains about the vehicles), and he alone assigns teams and jobs during actual investigations" (Chesnut 137).

Gates struggles to understand his responsibility to his viewers, to acknowledge that his experience becomes their experience: "Although Team Truth is generally not interested in 'discovering' people, their use of native informants and filmed sampling of local commerce and cuisine in many locations--which usually involves Gates and other team members goading each other into eating something un-appetizing-looking or jokingly trying on local garb--inevitably transmits messages about different cultures to viewers" (Chesnut 144).

Despite these shortcomings, Josh Gates was a featured speaker at ArchaeoCon 2020, held in Washington D.C. and sponsored by the Archaeology Institute of America. Although he was introduced by AIA as archaeologist, which would have horrified Lauren Chesnut, as she wrote of him, "[...] team leader Gates' signature sarcasm compromises any semblance of proper academic ethnographic research" (Chesnut 130), to his credit, he immediately corrected this error: "I play an archaeologist on TV...I am a television presenter...I have the privilege of going

around the world and working with people like these and literally playing in their sandbox" -- saying that he is sharing stories of real archaeologists. He also mentions the privilege of getting to work with archaeologists three times, although, to contrast, he mentions Indiana Jones five times (plus three more to answer specific questions). When asked about his most Indiana Jones-like experience he quips, "That's not an appropriate story" to lots of laughs from the audience.

During his ArchaeoCon talk Gates calls himself a "TV host adventure guy," once again not fully understanding his impact on and responsibility to his audience, something that was clearly apparent as two children were dressed up like him and at least two adults were wearing "Josh Gates 2020" shirts. He is clearly a role model to his fans, but rarely makes this connection or acts the part.

Gates is as engaging in person as he is on TV, and he does encourage his live audience to make travel a priority, telling them, "I just want you to go away...often." He knows his audience is these children who worked so hard on their Josh Gates costumes, not the scholars in the room. He uses his humor to try to find a balance; he starts his talk by reading paper titles from the conference program -- both praising them for smartness and making fun of the specificity and obscurity of academia.

His talk comes again and again to the idea of finding and sharing stories more than being scientific or academic, so maybe, at the end of it all, Josh Gates is just misunderstood. He tells the audience at ArchaeoCon that, "My passion, really, is stories" and that "Every story has value...because someone takes the time to tell it." He even backtracks on his TV persona, saying of those he interviews, "Did I think they were crazy? And almost universally I didn't."

To hear Josh Gates speak in person, he loses much of his television bravado and shows the respect for people, land, and ritual that his TV persona mocks, with statements like, "That's really at the core of the human condition...we all want to understand something that we don't,"

"Have respect for this environment or it will come for you," and "This is a burial we're making entertainment out of."

The Josh Gates millions of viewers watch on TV forgets that Indiana Jones was an academic first and an adventurer second. He loses Jones's sense of awe in objects and culture and people. While Indiana Jones sought the science in the story, the Josh Gates who performs on television is just looking for a good laugh.

- *Ghost Brothers* (Destination America 2016-2017)
- *Ghost Brothers: Haunted Houseguests* (Travel Channel 2019-present)
- *Ghosts in the Hood* (WE TV 2016)

People of Color have always been stereotyped as believers in the supernatural. Paranormal investigators try to build up their credibility by mentioning Native American ancestors. African-American communities are expected to be well-versed in the ways of Voodoo. Minorities are constantly and immediately Othered by the white majority.

For African-American culture in general, the origin of their cultural awareness of the supernatural is partially inherited and partially the result of years of oppression and trickery. William Birnes and Joel Martin write of the effect of slavery on paranormal beliefs in *The Haunting of America: from the Salem Witch Trials to Harry Houdini* that, "Surprisingly, slavery, one of America's most hideous and onerous institutions, kept interest in the occult alive and purposeful as a result of African traditions brought here" (Birnes 112). Birnes and Martin write of the ancestral beliefs of slaves, but slave owners often manipulated these beliefs to keep control over slaves. Colin Dickey considers slave memories recorded in the 30s and the way that: "Some interview subjects didn't believe, some knew rumors of ghosts were just whites intimidating them, some spoke of ghosts as terrifying things, as comforting things, as exhausting things" (Dickey 113).

As Gladys-Marie Fry explains in *Night Riders in Black Folk History*, “Belief in the appearance of supernatural creatures, such as witches and ghosts (in reality, whites masquerading as such), was another form of deception and often was the basis for rumors which spread swiftly through the Black community. The emotional excitement of this kind of news led to its rapid transmission, as each individual felt strongly motivated to pass exclusive news along to someone else. Opportunities for verification were minimal, and each repetition of the rumor only strengthened the general atmosphere of fear and terror from which it originated” (Fry 52). With modern technology, and TV, and social media, this habit continues and knowledge and rumor spreads even faster.

Sometimes, paranormal stories performed the typical protective function of urban legends:

> A woman named Florida Clayton recalled how, as a child, she and her peers would often see a covered wagon that would appear in Tallahassee, where she lived, always in some secluded spot. While the kids would be tempted to approach this mysterious wagon and investigate it, they were told by adults that inside was ‘Dry Head and Bloody Bones,’ a ghost who ‘didn’t like children.’ Only as an adult did Clayton learn that the wagon was in fact owned by a slave hunter, who would steal children and take them to Georgia to be sold, and that her parents and other adults had invented the Dry Head and Bloody Bones ghost as a means of protecting them. (Dickey 113-4)

While enslaved parents used these tricks to protect their children, slave owners used the same deception against to intimidate adults: “During and following the period of black slavery in America, one of the means utilized by whites in controlling the Black population was a system of psychological pressure based on fear of the supernatural. The primary aim of such pressure was to discourage the unauthorized movement of Blacks, especially at night, by making them afraid of encountering supernatural beings” (Fry 3). White men “would arrive at the home of a black family in the dead of night, dressed in sheets or other makeshift costumes (the formal

robes associated with the Klan would come much later), claiming to be the ghosts of Confederate soldiers killed at various battles" (Dickey 209).

While slaves could escape from men, the spectre of a spirit loomed larger. Fry cites a former slave's memory that: "These stories were about things that happened at night. And these were the things that kept you from going out. You see, now they knew that on a dark night, a dark man could get away and he could not be seen. So they'd tell you these various stories about these night things, I mean these things that kept you in fear not of the master himself, but of the supernatural. You knew that you may be able to avoid the master because perhaps he was sleeping. But you couldn't avoid the supernatural. So that he, that way, he left controls on you" (Fry 55-6).

Colin Dickey questions the veracity, motivation, and audience for these accounts, explaining that "As Wyn Craig Wade notes in his history of the Klan, despite the stereotype of black people being more susceptible to superstition than whites, 'the Klan legends of terrified "darkies" scurrying from ghosts of the Confederate dead probably say more about the aggrandizement of the white ego than about black gullibility'" (Dickey 207). The stereotype exists for the comfort of the majority, and is played out for paranormal reality television audiences and ghost tourism.

Dickey also provides "A reminder that many of New Orleans's ghost stories are more concerned with affirming stereotypes than with offering proof of the paranormal" (Dickey 234), especially in an area of the South with so many reminders and legends of Voodoo. Similar to systems of skepticism and belief in paranormal reality shows, "Wearing the mask and playing the game were commonly accepted mechanisms for survival during slavery. What whites saw was not an internalized Black Sambo image, as [historian Stanley] Elkins would have us believe, but a removable image, depending on the time, the audience, and the occasion" (Fry 6). "Reality" stars are asked to perform what the audience wants to see, rather than their authentic selves.

Often, this performance includes white men investigating black spaces, as seen in a Twitter exchange between ArchyFantasies2020, who writes of Jason Hawes' new show: "watching #GhostNation and I'm not sure how to feel about them investigating ghosts of potential lynchings. What can we say about this culturally?" and Blogger Jason Colavito who responds by calling out Hawes AND Gates: "That Josh Gates isn't as sensitive to subject matter as he claims. He is the exec producer, isn't he?"

Of the two main minority-led paranormal reality shows, *Ghost Brothers* has so far found the most success, with two seasons on Destination America and a current spin-off, *Ghost Brothers: Haunted Houseguests* on Travel Channel. This show is the first to follow an all African-American team of paranormal investigators, but is problematic in many ways. For starters, the team begins episodes by meeting at team member Marcus Harvey's barber shop, in a clear African-American stereotype. The first location the team visits is a plantation and slave quarters. Unlike shows focusing on white males, their website does not provide any information on their education. They travel in black SUVs and are presented as stereotypical minority believers.

Ironically, the *Ghost Brothers* introduction implies that it's not that white people are stupid for being scared of ghosts; the ghosts are real. It's that the white people are stupid for putting themselves in a position to find ghosts. In the opening voice-over a man who sounds white intones: "There's a new team of paranormal investigators here to answer two questions about ghost hunting: are ghosts for real? and" -- then a cast member appears on screen to interrupt -- "why is everybody white?" (Parris). The trailer continues with several reaction shots of the team looking scared, until team leader Dalen Spratt explains that they are a group of childhood friends who all had paranormal experiences (much like every other paranormal reality television investigatory crew) and are now unafraid to research the unknown, although Harvey does say, "I can see why they say black folks don't do this stuff" (Parris). "They" think that African-Americans believe in ghosts, but still perpetuate the stereotype that they are too afraid

of the supernatural to investigate it on their own. Although they have investigated the famous Winchester Mystery House, they mainly focus on more Southern locations such as the Magnolia Plantation and The Delta Queen.

While they sometimes have hi-tech gadgets, the *Ghost Brothers* team often hunts for spirits using iPhone apps. While my students loved that, it does not add authenticity to their show or claims. As Colin Dickey reminds us, “Ghosts have become a business of gadgets” (Dickey 75). The discrepancy in the quality of equipment is presented as more racial than socio-economic; the Tennessee Wraith Chasers appeal to lower class viewers but still have cool technology. *Ghosts Adventures’* Zak Bagans writes about this divide without realizing his own elitism, as he says that “the paranormal community is using state-of-the-art equipment and not Radio Shack transistors to achieve our goals” (Bagans *Dark* 108). He doesn’t consider that it’s only the white investigators using the most state-of-the-art equipment.

Ghosts in the Hood is another minority-focused show with a very short run (like the original *Ghost Brothers*), airing only six episodes on WE TV in 2016. The problematic stereotypes in this show are staggering. One of the cast members, Matt Richards, is a comedian, further damaging their reputations as scientific investigators, and the full cast is made up of minorities presented as believers. Matt is on the team because his uncle, team leader Defecio, promised to look after him as he pursues acting in Los Angeles, and “Although he has no real or practical ghost hunting skills to add to the group, Matt is always a source of comedic reprieve and a refreshing voice in the crew” (“Matt”). Defecio Stoglin, the CEO of OPO (Official Paranormal Operations) “has a keen and eager eye for investigating, but self-admittedly, he ‘doesn’t know everything about the sh*t’” (“Defecio”). The Asian female team member, Jasmine Orpilla, is considered the most mystical and other cast members poke fun at her spiritualism. Maunda Oyin, the African-American female cast member, similar to the white women on *Ghost Hunters*, is primarily used to research the cases, rarely investigating outside of daylight hours, and is the most skeptical of the cast. The Hispanic male, Dave Purdy, creates all

technology and is the only one who understands how to use it. His "'patent-pending' technologies are used to collect evidence of paranormal activity for the clients, and he is the lead on revealing the found evidence once the investigation is over" ("Dave").

The show's trailer starts with Defecio saying, "Shoot, we all know ghosts exist" and instructing the team (and audience) to stay calm before a montage begins of the team screaming ("oh hell no!") and running from various unseen entities. Matt's terror is unfounded, as the camera pans to the ceiling and he admits, "that's a balloon that...looks like a demon." The trailer concludes with an image of Matt smoking what appears to be a giant joint and a team member exclaiming "this investigation is over; this bitch is haunted as [bleep]." This show borders on being a minstrel show full of stereotypes of what white America would expect from a title like *Ghosts in the Hood*.

All the locations investigated on the show are in Los Angeles, including a Compton Funeral Home, "a grocery store possibly inhabited by Santa Muerte," and "a downtown L.A. bar where employees are too scared by a sinister presence to continue working" (Moore).

Like Ben Hansen on *Ghosts of Morgan City*, or the *Girly Ghosthunters,* the cast travels in an RV, though unlike those shows, with white casts, on this RV the team members worry if it will make it up hills. The RV also features a giant throne for investigators.

For the most part, minority-led paranormal reality shows are still performing the stereotypes that white audiences expect to see while shows with predominantly white casts get the cool gadgets, the cool cars, and the cool locations.

As I write this chapter, there are riots and protests across the United States and an unprecedented rise in racial tensions. While I experience *Ghost Brothers* as perpetuating stereotypes, horror scholar Tiffany Bryant writes of the show that, "The intersectionality of Blackness and masculinity affords for nuanced perspectives to be given to haunted spaces that had otherwise only been tackled by predominantly white male teams [with their occasional

(white) female team members]. The *GB* team brings their awareness of, and experiences with, American systemic discrimination—be that through racism, sexism, classism, etc.—to the program when they discuss a place's history, consider the potential identity politics connected to the documented spirits of a space, and determine strategies for inspiring spiritual contact" (Bryant). As an individual with privilege, it is difficult to make sure I am honoring all voices and I need to continually ensure I am not bringing my own preconceived notions to the works of people of color.

Really, honoring all voices and cultures has always been the stated goal of America, and a continual struggle. Colin Dickey acknowledges that, "There's precious little land in the United States that hasn't been contested, one way or another, through the years. Americans live on haunted land because we have no other choice" (Dickey 45).

Casual racism abounds in modern society and popular culture. When Zak Bagans writes about an investigation that involves meeting with a voodoo queen he feels a need to put the focus on himself and his wardrobe: "It's probably the only time I've worn a white T-shirt and doo-rag, but you have to do what you have to do when it comes to ghosts" (Bagans *Dark* 152). Jael de Pardo acknowledges it is her exoticism that helped her win roles on *Fact or Faked: Paranormal Files* and Josh Gates' *Destination Truth*: "Did being Latina help? Sure. I think that sometimes being a minority in a casting room filled with blondes can be a plus" (Hernandez).

The networks create entertainment for white audiences without giving much thought to how their performers represent and honor their races and that of those whose stories they are telling. Discussing Josh Gates, Lauren Chesnut recognizes the power of the storyteller versus the voices they are appropriating: "Team Truth takes possession of the lands, animals, beliefs, and peoples they encounter through their economic and technological ability to control the narrative for the purposes of making compelling television. Native informants are not the intended audience here either" (Chesnut 131). The intended audience is those who will increase ratings; increasing knowledge and understanding is not important.

There is a place for these men, with their white male privilege, as well as everyone, in paranormal reality TV. Society has always looked to someone else to look for ghosts. As Owen Davies writes, “It can safely be said that most people had no desire to ever find themselves in the presence of a ghost. To prevent such a meeting it fell to certain members of the community to step forward and confront the spirits of the dead in order to banish them from the world of the living” (Davies 65). Ghost hunters, then, help to preserve these cultural memories, and modern day ghost hunters, through television, keep these memories alive through media. This is a noble task, and one that should be taken seriously and with inclusion for all. Fortune and glory may not be the goal, but with a new generation of paranormal reality shows featuring more diverse performers, there is a greater chance that shows focused on privilege, patriarchy, and heteronormativity may end up where they belong, as Indiana Jones says, in a museum.

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Chapter 3: "Good Ole Boys Chasin' Ghosts": Performances of Class and Belief[1]

Making assumptions on a person's belief in the paranormal based on their social class is nothing new. The locations investigated and the technology used on paranormal reality TV often also depend on the social class of the investigators, and the quality of the investigation may depend on the social class of the witness. All classes purport to have had experiences, but how they are investigated and reported varies by socioeconomic status. Owen Davies, in his book *The Haunted: A Cultural History of Ghosts*, looks at class demographics throughout the history of paranormal research, noting the paranormal snobbery of the Victorian era: "Those who provided the SPR [Society for Psychical Research] with information were predominantly from the middle and upper classes. Their social, educational and religious experiences undoubtedly shaped their views on the nature of ghosts, and consequently how and why they were thought to manifest themselves. The SPR sources tell us little about the experiences, beliefs and legends of the rural and urban working classes, in other words the majority of the population" (Davies 9). The SPR, considering themselves serious investigators, were not interested in the experiences of the lower classes.

In earlier times, belief in the paranormal in the eighteenth century was divided by gender, but more importantly, by socioeconomic status. For example, Davies writes that: "The educationalist Sarah Trimmer (1741-1810) provided a moral ghost story in her periodical *The Family Magazine*, which was produced 'To counteract the pernicious Tendency of immoral Books, &c. which have circulated of late Years among the inferior classes of People.'" Trimmer's story centered on "Robert the ploughman and his sweetheart Betty." Poor Betty is already an underdog; she is lower class *and* female. But she finds an escape in "reading about spirits and witches late at night and tells Robert about how she had been much frightened one night the previous week. As an owl screeched, the door creaked and the wind whistled down the chimney

[1] Sections of this chapter may appear in the August 2020 issue of the *Supernatural Studies* journal.

she thought she heard ghostly footsteps; all was explained by a dog scratching a piece of furniture." This plays into the stereotype and literary trope that Betty, a young impressionable woman, brought the supernatural activity on herself, although it was easily debunked.Those around her are afraid to leave poor Betty to her own devices and call in the Church to lead her back to the proper path: "The dame who looks after her requests the parson to come and give her an instructive talk. He tells her that it was 'very wicked, as well as very foolish, to be afraid of ghosts' and orders her to burn all her story books, dream books, and fortune-telling books. Robert agrees that the parson had, indeed, provided very good advice" (Davies 139-40).

While Trimmer tells a clear tale of censorship of paranormal stories for the reader's own protection, literature has been used both for and against the paranormal. Mark Edmundson writes that, "The function of eighteenth-century terror-Gothic, suggests Leslie Fiedler, was 'to shock the bourgeoisie into an awareness of what a chamber of horrors its own smugly regarded world really was'" (Edmundson 55). The paranormal has been used to show the upper class the reality of the world, while still allowing them to look down on those who believe in ghosts, not too far from those in our time who look down on reality television.

Trimmer is just part of a long line of intellectuals who considered the lower classes too uneducated to know any better when it comes to the supernatural. Davies writes that Thomas Hobbes was not "expressing anything particularly radical when he stated that the 'opinion that rude people have of fairies, ghosts, and goblins' was born of their ignorant inability 'to distinguish dreams, and other strong fancies, from vision and sense'" (Davies 145).

This trend has continued into the modern era, as belief in the paranormal leads to immediate stereotypes: "certain sections of society were more uncomfortable than others about the way their beliefs might be perceived. It is significant that [Geoffrey] Gorer's survey in the early 1950s indicated that ghost-belief was slightly higher among the poor and the upper middle class," yet Gorer's survey also yielded the information that "that those most skeptical about ghosts and religion in the early 1950s were prosperous working-class men" (Davies 242). This

aligns with *Ghost Hunters*, the first paranormal reality show to gain prominence in America, whose two leading men are both portrayed as the most skeptical of any other paranormal show, but also work (or worked, when the show started) as plumbers.

There is a clear relationship between social class and *how* ghosts are hunted. A séance in a private home is an acceptable upper class activity (which calls to mind Sarah Winchester's séance room -- as much urban legend as cultural touchstone). Jason Hawes of *Ghost Hunters* writes, "The talking board became a big hit in the late 1800s--and not just among the middle class. It was also seen at the parties of the rich and powerful, who were intrigued by its promise of predicting the future" (Hawes *Seeking* 111). Communing with the spirits in an upper class drawing room is more historically acceptable (and literary, even Jane Eyre did it), than seeking out ghosts in their natural habitats. Those who have the means to communicate with the spirits in the comfort of their own homes--with the most fashionable psychic intermediaries present to assist—those who are able to bring the ghosts to them, are a higher class than those who are forced to seek out ghosts in the wild. Paranormal reality TV has moved the audience to this upper class; the ghosts are brought into their home for their entertainment as they watch those of a lower social class search them out.

As now, all ghost hunters have not been equal, and locations depend much upon class and access. Davies explains, "'Respectable' spirit investigators were happy to visit haunted farmhouses and middle-class homes, but they would not be seen dead searching for ghosts in the streets and churchyards of Victorian cities. If they had, they would have found themselves in tumultuous and boisterous company. While the pious or earnest investigator was drawn to haunted bedrooms for profound truth or lies, the urban working classes gathered on the streets for sensation and entertainment" (Davies 90). Paranormal reality TV exists for the same sensation and entertainment, and access is one of the main differences between reality shows fronted by white males in comparison to those with minority casts. *Ghost Hunters* investigates

the Queen Mary; *Destination Truth* explores the tomb of King Tut, but a show such as *Ghosts in the Hood*, with a multicultural cast, settles for a funeral home in Compton.

Ghost Hunters was the first widely-known and most prolific paranormal investigation show, airing on SciFi/SyFy from 2004-2016. Its hosts, Jason Hawes and Grant Wilson's, occupations as plumbers, played up early in the show's tenure, helped establish them as average middle-class Joes -- real life versions of the GOP's 2008 Joe the Plumber -- and the show as representative of everyday America's hopes and fears. Early in the original run of the show, the team focused on helping homeowners. Defending one's home, from invaders normal, paranormal, or imagined, is paramount to the *Ghost Hunters* mission, at least in the early seasons, and is a defense on the class status that home ownership confers. Shelter and safety are foundational concepts on Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and a household ghost undermines both of these very real needs. Moreover, homeownership is foundational to identity in our society. Colin Dickey writes in *Ghostland: An American History in Haunted Places*, "Home ownership has always been intertwined with the American dream; we have magnified this simple property decision in part because it represents safety and security. The haunted house is a violation of this comfort, the American dream gone horribly wrong" (Dickey 18). For *Ghost Hunters*' first few seasons, the stated purpose was to help homeowners understand and rid themselves of possible hauntings -- especially if there were children in the home. As plumbers, Hawes and Wilson could use their work expertise to identify leaky pipes or bad wiring as the cause of spooky feelings, and their primary mission was to use their skills to debunk reported hauntings.

And unlike the Real Housewives or the Kardashians, to steal a page from celebrity magazines, "They're Just Like Us!" Their ghost hunting past-times mixed with their normal working class lives and 40-hour a week jobs only endeared them more to their viewership, as the combination of reality TV and what Owen Davies comments is historically plebeian: "Like these other working-class festive events [Guy Fawkes celebrations, etc.], the authorities and the

press saw ghost hunts as uncouth and vulgar, a disgraceful mix of 'superstition' and a lack of civility" (Davies 92). Hawes and Wilson brought ghost hunts to the larger American public, but still not to the mainstream. This is nowhere clearer than in James Hibberd's article "SyFy Will Never Stop Airing 'Ghost Hunters'" where he notes that, *Ghost Hunters*, whose peak average was three million viewers per episode, is SyFy's "longest-running non-wrestling series" (Hibberd). The link between SyFy's successes -- with wrestling and ghost hunting -- echoes the working class appeal of both. Hibberd's title was not as prophetic as he thought, as *Ghost Hunters* ended its run on SyFy in 2016; the subsequent revival with original cast member Grant Wilson and a more multicultural cast airs on A&E, while Jason Hawes and two other founding *Ghost Hunters* team members created *Ghost Nation* on the Travel Channel.

There is a consideration of both the social class of those investigating and those being investigated. For the former, their class can change. *Ghost Hunters* started out investigating family homes; their goal was to protect that aspect of the American Dream and to help homeowners. But as their status (and ratings) rose, they moved to more famous locations. Not every paranormal group makes this leap and change in focus.

The danger also exists of investigators judging those they are claiming to help based on their social class. Zak Bagans of *Ghost Adventures* claims, "Some say that the people create the environment, but after all my travels, I think it's the other way around--the environment shapes the people. Those who live in a dirty place tend to be meaner, less trustworthy, and more violent. People who are brought up in a nicer place are likely to have better manners and care more about helping others" (Bagans *I Am Haunted* 46). Clearly not coming to his investigations with an open mind, Bagans does not acknowledge that his own sense of class impedes how openly he views others.

There are several identities from the Social Justice Training Institute's handout on Privileged and Marginalized Identities that can be included under the umbrella of social class:

Religion, National Origin, Ableness/Disability, Size/Appearance/Athleticism, Geographic Location, Family Status, and Work Style. In paranormal reality TV, most of these are glossed over. With a few outliers, most of the television personalities are North American, although this does bring certain stereotypes with it: When Britain first established the Society for Psychical Research is was written “Why this landmark in the history of the paranormal occurred first in England, not America was perhaps because Great Britain was a much older and longer established society and, some suggested, ‘better organized’ by the nineteenth century” (Birnes 302). So, to some extent, in certain circles, being American has always put one at a lower social class to start. In contrast with Native American traditions, the stereotypical American would rather shoot Bigfoot, or blow up a ghost in a box, than commune with the natural, or supernatural, world.

The only disability shown by one of these reality stars is when Zak Bagans of *Ghost Adventures* wears a mask for respiratory problems (although he only discusses pneumonia and bronchitis), bemoaning the “physical dangers of entering dilapidated buildings teeming with black mold [and] asbestos” (Bagans *Dark* 160). Josh Gates lost considerable weight before his reality star career began, and *Dead Files*’ Amy Allan’s weight and hair style/color has fluctuated and come more into line with, as SJTI says, “fit society’s image of attractive, beautiful, handsome, athletic.” Paranormal reality stars are predominantly in heterosexual relationships (with *Ghost Adventures’* Nick Groff allegedly leaving the show after a demon followed him home from Bobby Mackey’s Music Hall and ruining his marriage). There is a web series where homosexual investigators search for homosexual ghosts, but there is very little mainstream inclusion for queer ghost hunters on TV, Chip Coffey being the notable exception. Most shows use opposing work styles together, with an introverted “serious” investigator and a more entertaining extrovert show lead.

This leaves most of the focus in social class is how geographic location and religion perform as social class to appeal to viewers. Unlike the typical assumption of Christianity as a

privileged status, since these shows purport to be about science, religion is the only category that is not a mark of privilege in paranormal reality TV. The Tennessee Wraith Chasers exemplify performance of geographic location, Ben Hansen changes his performance based on his location and the parameters of the show -- fine for a “reality” entertainment actor, but not a reality scientific investigator, and religion is a clear dividing point between the approaches of various paranormal teams.

- *Ghostland Tennessee* (Pilot Episode aired on Animal Planet 2013)
- *Ghost Asylum* (Destination America 2014-2016)
- *Haunted Towns* (Destination America 2017-present)
- *Haunted Live* (Travel Channel 2018-present)

The Tennessee Wraith Chasers entered the paranormal reality TV scene in 2013 after adapting their pilot *Ghostland Tennessee* (Animal Planet) to become Destination America’s *Ghost Asylum* and later *Haunted Towns*. The appeal of the team and the shows on which they appear is their self-proclaimed “serious backwoods Southern know-how.” This is the stereotypical “redneck” paranormal show, as evidenced by the fact that Animal Planet ran it before *Gator Boys*, and that the goal of this team is to catch the ghosts in a contraption of their own design. If the spirit is good, they perform an exorcism. If the spirit is evil, they take the box out into the woods and blow it up with explosives. Although they only actually went through with this act once (season 2 episode 8), it features heavily in the marketing of their shows, where they also warn viewers that “chasing ghosts without proper training will get you killed.”

When asked by the website Horror Fuel about this contraption, the Devil’s Toy Box, one team member, Doogie, explains how the group meshes their technological interests and spiritual beliefs, with a criticism of the techniques of other paranormal reality shows:

> Well, that was kind of a thing that was put together years ago. It's based on different belief systems. That thing is made of mirrors on the inside and outside it is all wood and usually has scriptures written on it. If anything gets in, it holds it in. The mirrors confuse the spirit. When it looks into the infinite the spirit can't get out. From history, we've always heard that mirrors are a portal, a gateway to hell. It's something we put together when we heard about it. I did a lot of research on it. People always say they want to help you out, but are you really helping someone when you say 'Hey, you've got a haunting, good luck with that.' You're not really helping. You're explaining some things to them, but we actually want to help them. With the Devil's Toy Box we have a shot of containing it and we're getting outside the walls of the place and we can let the spirit go where it needs to go. (McNeely)

He further explains that the one time they blew up the box in the woods it was at the request of the homeowner, but had a theoretical background, "We also have heard that you can take an energy and burst that energy with a stronger energy. That was the theory behind blowing up the box as well. We don't always blow things up. [laugher] (McNeely). Tennessee Wraith Chasers Leader Chris also laughs and unwittingly acknowledges the stereotype that they are performing: "We're Tennessee boys. We gotta do something explosive now and again" (McNeely). Since he says the box "usually" has scriptures written on it, this implies that the Devil's Toy Box is used often, even if it's not always blown up.

As they describe themselves in the "talent" section of the Travel Channel website: "The Tennessee Wraith Chasers (TWC) is a serious team of paranormal investigators that doesn't take itself too seriously" ("Tennessee Wraith Chasers' Bio"), with a stated goal on their own website that they "Research and Investigate Paranormal claims all around the south using scientific methodology along with good old fashion common sense." ("What It Is to Be a Wraith

Chaser"). Shows featuring the Tennessee Wraith Chasers also have a strong religious background, something most paranormal shows shy away from (with the notable exception of *Paranormal State* and occasional exorcisms or religious/spiritual ceremonies on other shows--more on this later). TWC's website explains this with the statement that, "TWC takes pride in that they base their paranormal knowledge on methodical testing and a strong Christian faith in God" ("About" *TWC*). While Christianity is prominent in American culture, it is seen as less valid in shows that claim to be scientific investigations at heart, and actually makes them a minority in the genre. While the team's focus on Christianity would normally put them on the privileged side, since it is featured prominently on their shows in a positive light, it is a detriment among other paranormal shows that claim to be purely scientific. Tennessee Wraith Chasers are considered true paranormal believers because they're good ol' boys from the South who are hyper-religious, but it hurts their credibility. Tied up in the group's "reality" shows are questions of class and religion. Marketed by the Travel Channel as "Good Ole Boys Chasin Ghosts," Tennessee Wraith Chasers primarily appeal to their niche demographic through performance of class and belief.

The Tennessee Wraith Chasers' career began with primarily investigating locations in, as expected, Tennessee, such as the Old South Pittsburg Hospital in Pittsburg and All Access Coach Bus Leasing in Gallatin, although their new show, *Haunted Towns*, has them traveling across America, making a point to investigate sites other paranormal teams have not, which is refreshing in a television community where teams regularly compete over whose investigation of a particular site is more valid.

The group uses technology that is state of the art, often homemade, and has at least once been used to explode a spirit. Unlike the vans used by *Ghost Hunters*, TWC travels in fully stocked pickup trucks, again both a nod to their Southern heritage and a clear stereotype.

The team member's last names are available on their biographies on the Tennessee Wraith Chasers website -- which appears to have been taken down as of May 16, 2020 -- and

on the “Travel Channel Hosts” page on the Travel Channel website, but not the Destination America website for *Ghost Asylum*, as if the channel wants to keep the TWC more down-to-earth and boy-next-door. The channel’s website literally forces viewers to be on a first name basis with the team. On the current Destination America website for *Ghost Asylum*, TWC is just listed as Chris, Doogie, Porter, Brannon. This omission, keeping their full names hidden from their adoring fans and nosey academics, both helps keep their folksy personas intact and is different from other paranormal teams who are clearly enamored with their own fame as TV personalities. Finding accurate and timely information about the members of the Tennessee Wraith Chasers has been daunting since their website was very recently taken offline, and some of the information on the Travel Channel website is the same as Destination America’s (both Discovery Inc. channels), but not all.

Authors aren’t listed on the Travel Channel Talent page, so the biographies are likely provided by the talent themselves (or their publicists), but the Tennessee Wraith Chasers’ biographies -- focused on their beliefs in ghosts and religion -- feel very different from those of other Travel Channel Talent, such as food personality Andrew Zimmern. His talent page focuses on awards and accomplishments. The late Anthony Bourdain’s page doesn’t have text at all, just links to a blog post and several recipes. On one hand, this makes the information posted about the Tennessee Wraith Chasers more intimate, while weakening their credibility as serious investigators. They don’t have a list of achievements and accomplishments in the paranormal field, just a system of beliefs.

Chris Smith is the leader of Tennessee Wraith Chasers, and like most paranormal investigators, came to the hobby because of a childhood experience he couldn’t explain. The way he explains it, the sighting also helped him find his team’s name: “While in his grandfather’s barn, he came face to face with a ‘shadow person,’ a shadow-like humanoid figure also known in some cultures as ‘wraiths’ that are usually seen in peripheral vision” (“Chris”). Chris elaborates on this experience in his typical folksy manner: “I knew what I saw and it scared the

hell out of me. I tell people that after I went home and changed my drawers, that I had so many questions. I really was curious. The first thing you experience is fear and the second is curiosity. That curiosity really fueled me to go out there and try to find answers. That was the starting point for me" (McNeely). From this initial experience, he learned his trade on the *Ghost Hunters* spin-off, *Ghost Hunters Academy* (SyFy) under *GH* cast members Steve Gonsalves and Dave Tango (currently on *Ghost Nation* on Travel Channel with fellow *GH* alum Jason Hawes). Chris only appeared on one episode of *Ghost Hunters Academy* (2009), and declined an invitation to come back for a later season. Chris, Doogie, and Porter won an episode of Travel Channel's *Paranormal Challenge* in 2011("About" *TWC*), continuing their reality show education through competing on reality shows.

Chris's belief statement notes that "Though a skeptic by nature, he's receptive to the idea that spirits are among us but seeks hard evidence to prove it. Chris is a native of Gallatin, Tenn., where he was raised in a strict missionary Baptist household" ("Chris"). His religious upbringing comes up in interviews often, even in discussions of technology. Chris likes the digital recorder, but "I also tell people that your own senses are the best piece of equipment you have, what you see, what you hear, what you smell. Trust your own God-given senses" (McNeely). Even in a discussion of equipment, his religious views feature prominently.

Chris provides more information about his reason for choosing the team's name to the website Horror Fuel:

> It's a word that not a lot of people are familiar with. We get wrath chasers a lot. The reason why I liked it so much is that when I was sitting around trying to figure out what to call this thing, there were so many paranormal teams around at the time. I was researching paranormal names at the time and they all sounded the same. They all had the paranormal, or research, or ghost in it. A lot of people back then would see those words and shy away, like "Ah, it's just another one of those crazy ghost people." But I thought that I had to find something different,

> something that stands out (I have a background in marketing). I know you've got to brand things for people to be curious about it. So, I wanted something that would make people see the name and wonder, "What's this about?" Online I was looking around for different words and things. I thought it was cool and connected to what we were doing and that came up and I was like "I like that word." Not everybody knows what it means, but everyone is going to want to know. (McNeely)

Importantly, Chris acknowledges the importance of marketing and branding in the world of ghost hunting and paranormal reality TV. While all team members state their purpose is to help people or solve the mysteries of the unknown, in the end, Chris Smith understands that his team's success comes down to marketing, branding, and TV ratings.

Steven "Doogie" McDougal, TWC's co-founder and Chris's second in command, has also had lifelong paranormal experiences. His biography on the Travel Channel website explains that "Doogie's interest in the paranormal began at a young age during his upbringing in a historic, and some say haunted, area of Tennessee. He has believed for many years that the house he shares with his wife and son is haunted ("Doogie"). Like other believers, he hopes to help "other people like him" who have had paranormal experiences. He is the team's people-person, as he "implements his uncanny people skills to put clients at ease. His number-one desire is to find hard evidence and reveal the truth behind the unexplained, whether or not it's supernatural, to calm the fears of others and strengthen his knowledge in the field" ("Doogie"). Doogie tells his very Southern backstory to Kelli Marchman McNeely of the website Horror Fuel:

> My story happened twenty some odd years ago. I grew up in a haunted area. We owned a couple of Civil War forts. I had heard all the stories and always had questions, like how do people see stuff? My grandparents lived right at the bottom of one of the forts. After my grandad passed away, she would see stuff in her

> house and had interactions. That really got me curious because my grandmother was living by herself and she was scared. I wanted to figure things out, but before I could she had passed away. I made it my life's mission to figure out what this stuff is and why certain people can see it. She's probably got it figured out by now, but it makes me feel better that I'm still fighting the fight for her and to figure out what she was going through and what she was talking about. (McNeely)

Most paranormal reality show teams focus on helping other, unrelated, families in need, so it is unusual and endearing that Doogie's first "job" was to help his own family with their paranormal experiences.

Team researcher and historian Scott Porter came rather late to the paranormal game; his first experience didn't happen until college when he saw his mother cooking breakfast in a pink robe, left the room, and came back to "find the kitchen empty. Porter then realized that his entire family had left earlier that morning to run errands and his mother doesn't own a pink robe ("Porter"). Porter's biography seems somewhat contradictory in that "He now studies other strange occurrences like his and looks to historical record and the Bible for answers. He hopes to help others who have had paranormal experiences by finding evidence that will substantiate what they have experienced, be it natural or supernatural. Porter brings an analytical mind to the team and quite often plays the devil's advocate when studying evidence" ("Porter"). From a scientific standpoint, it is hard to reconcile his "analytical mind" with his use of the Bible to find evidence, but this dichotomy again plays into TWC's performance of Southern stereotypes.

In contrast to the openly religious views on the paranormal by members such as Porter, and to temper the overall religious overtones of the show, one of the team members, Brannon Smith (younger brother of team leader Chris Smith), "is a physics and engineering major currently attending College [sic]. He plans to eventually earn a

master's degree in electrical engineering and a PhD in Theoretical Physics" ("Bios"). The younger Smith's educational plans are in line with his hobby, as while his goal is a PhD in Theoretical Physics, he plans to use it to continue creating equipment to contact and contain (and, if necessary, destroy) spirits. Brannon performs as more of a skeptic than Porter, despite his religious childhood:

> Like Chris, Brannon was raised in a strict missionary Baptist upbringing and is a skeptic of the paranormal. A student of physics and engineering, Brannon approaches each investigation like an experiment with a hypothesis that needs proving. He looks for logical explanations for what might seem like a haunting and tries to label them using theoretical physics. Only after exploring every possibly scientific avenue will Brannon entertain the idea that something could be paranormal. ("Brannon")

Brannon is also similar to *Ghost Adventures*' Zak Bagans in his confrontational spirit contacting techniques: "To help collect evidence, he often challenges supernatural entities head-on to provoke a response and gather data using ghost-hunting gadgets" ("Brannon"). Brannon's profile had been taken down from the TWC website, but he is still listed on the Travel Channel TWC talent page.

Chasey Ray McKnight was a TWC member and fan favorite from 2011-2015, but left the team and show to focus on his full-time job, wife, and four kids, explaining in a video to fans "I'm doin' for me and mine" (McKnight). Of the members of the TWC team, Chasey performed the least like a TV star and his biography makes him seem the most normal: "Chasey was born and raised in an historic area of Tennessee. He has served as a volunteer firefighter, county EMA operative, and an EMS first responder. His curiosity about the paranormal is fueled by an unexplainable event he witnessed while with his ill mother several years ago, and he's been looking for answers ever since" ("Chasey").

This anti-reality star persona aligns with his departure from the show, much to the disappointment of fans, who found him the most relatable Part of TWC's appeal is their informal language, such as when Chris discusses the need to change his drawers or Doogie recalls investigating small black shadows in Rocky State Penn: "That's where I got ass punched by a ghost [laughter]. Yeah, something punched me right where my leg meets my butt, just bam" (McNeely). TWC's down-home diction is part of their charm and audience appeal. However, in the *Ghostland Tennessee* pilot introduction, the rest of the team makes fun of Chasey Ray's extreme southern dialect and claim they often can't understand what he's saying.

Although they make fun of Chasey's speech patterns, and while Brannon is studying engineering to be more mindful of the team's needs, Chasey gets top billing in this area, and his biography notes that "Chasey is extremely tech savvy and very knowledgeable in relative physics and applied science, making him the Wraith Chasers' go-to guy for building new equipment used in investigations." Chasey is the most down to earth and relatable TWC member -- he is asking the same questions as the audience and "takes a very skeptical approach but is curious to learn about the factors that surround our mortality and what truly waits for us at the end" ("Chasey").

Chasey was replaced by Mike Goncalves, who does not have a biography on the Google-cache of the offline TWC website, although his Travel Channel information explains how his music background helps him as the TWC "tech guru" and the unique experience that "Mike has spent 15 years in the music industry touring the world and sharing the stage with some of rock's most notable icons. It was his countless hours spent in recording studios with state-of-the-art technology that made him curious to see if this advanced audio visual equipment would help uncover evidence that the typical paranormal investigator was missing" ("Tennessee Wraith Chasers' Bio"). Similar to his co-workers, his talent information also notes, "Mike is a family man, animal lover and

follower of Christ along with his fellow Wraith brothers" ("Tennessee Wraith Chasers' Bio").

The Tennessee Wraith Chasers are a product of their environment, geographically, religiously, and in time. When asked about their scariest experience, Chris says they were so frightened that "We were about to go Scooby-Doo and there be some Doogie and Chris size holes in the wall" (McNeely), putting them within a clear timeframe of kids who grew up watching Scooby-Doo in its various incarnations. Their appeal is in their performance of being good ol' Southern boys, riding in pickups and blowing up things in the woods. As part of this persona, they lose the privilege they would normally claim as rational white males, instead moving to the marginalized identities of Southern, working class, and too overly religious to be considered serious scholars. While the stereotypes associated with these identities hurt their status in the scientific community, it elevates them in the eyes of the fans -- and the ratings.

- *Fact or Faked: Paranormal Files* (SciFi 2010-2012)
- *Haunted Travels* (Kickstarter documentary 2017)
- *Ghosts of Morgan City* (Travel Channel 2019-present)

Ben Hansen finds his identity through changing "realities." Hansen came to national prominence with his SyFy show *Fact or Faked: Paranormal Files*. The show had an interesting premise: each of the six team members would come to each week's initial meeting with a "paranormal" video from the internet. The group would vote on which two videos would provide a valid investigation, and then split into groups of three to try to prove or debunk the activity shown. Hansen was the leader of the group, a former FBI agent determined to debunk fake paranormal internet videos. While the team sometimes found they could not provide rational explanations for some of the videos they researched, Hansen still functioned as the voice of reason for the group. While IMDB lists Hansen as "Himself/Team Leader" for *Fact or Faked*, on

his newer show, *Ghosts of Morgan City*, he is credited as an actor. For this show, and his even more recent appearances on *Haunted Travels* and *Portals to Hell*, he presents as a true believer -- wearing an Evil Eye necklace and accepting paranormal occurrences at face value. Hansen's skepticism, or lack thereof, varies depending on the demographics of the show he's on. Beginning his career as the stereotypical rational white male, when he moves to a show set in the South, so too does his mindset move to that of a more expected Southern paranormal believer. This section will explore the various faces of Ben Hansen and what that says about paranormal "reality" TV as a genre.

Ben Hansen's education establishes him as a well-education privileged white male: "He graduated with honors from the University of Utah with a Bachelor's degree in Sociology with Abnormal Psychology emphasis, certification in Criminology and Corrections, a Spanish minor, and a year of study abroad completed in Australia" ("Bio"), as does his early career working for "several private and public agencies, including investigating child sex crimes and severe physical abuse on the Utah County Sex Crimes Task Force. His training and work later brought him to work in the position of Special Agent for the FBI. His time serving at the state and federal levels gave him over six years of formal experience in investigating a wide range of crimes and national security details" ("Bio").

As with many of us of a certain age, Hansen was "Inspired by TV shows like *The X-Files* which were popular while he was in high school, [and] cemented an interest in both a desire to work in public service for an investigative agency and an insatiable desire to explore mysteries of the unknown" ("Bio"). The Tennessee Wraith Chasers reference the youth-led Mystery Inc. team from Scooby-Doo, but Hansen followed the more serious idols of Mulder and Scully.

Other than the potentially inappropriate motivation, the only shadow of a doubt on this illustrious career comes from a Wikipedia page which states, "The show follows a team of investigators, led by former FBI agent trainee Ben Hansen" ("Fact or Faked Paranormal Files"), but this is the only place that refers to him as a trainee as opposed to a full FBI Special Agent,

although his actual work with the FBI remains murky. Ed Stockley of the *Los Angeles Times* explains that: “In an interview, Hansen said he could not go into how long he worked as a special agent. He also said he had worked for a number of other government agencies. The FBI confirmed that Hansen was employed at Quantico, Va., where special agents are trained, but was not listed as assigned to any cases or a field office” (Stockly).

Whatever his role with the FBI, at some point he left to pursue a TV career: “Feeling as though he might someday return to public service, Ben also felt compelled to seize an opportunity presented to him to assist in forming a new investigative reality TV show” (“Bio”), using his specialized training to set him apart from other paranormal investigators as an interview with Bill Burke of the *Boston Herald* notes: “‘I like to focus on the human aspect of interviewing,’ said Hansen, who spent time working in the FBI’s special victims unit. ‘I’ve conducted thousands of interviews. I love getting into talking to witnesses and things of that nature and just overall putting the investigation together’” (Burke). Hansen has a varied range of specialized skills, which “include becoming a licensed land and sea airplane pilot, amateur radio operator, licensed falconer, certified SCUBA diver, hang glider, EMT, Search and Rescue dog handler, and Eagle Scout in Boy Scouts (in large part thanks to his mother)” (“Bio”).

Hansen’s success with *Fact or Faked* came from his performed skeptic position of his educated white male privilege. In an interview with Steve Eramo in the early years of the show he touts that he is: “much more methodical than most people” and that he does “a lot of report writing, logging of evidence, EVP sessions and things like that that you’d never see on the show because it’s just my nature. And I feel that paranormal investigations are lacking in that as well” (Eramo). *Fact or Faked* was designed to be different from other paranormal shows of the time, including *Ghost Hunters*, which aired on the same channel. *Fact or Faked* was younger, hipper, more multicultural. Its approach to the paranormal was radically different, harnessing the youth energy of the internet to find the Truth:

Departing from the mainstream paranormal shows prevalent at the time, this new

> show would not only conduct observation-based field investigations; it would focus primarily on alleged evidence already on hand. The age of the Internet has brought with it the sharing of thousands of alleged paranormal viral videos and photographs. People with a sincere curiosity for the unknown are often left with the tremendous and exciting task of sifting through the hoaxes and naturally explainable cases. Ben and the show developers felt that after a methodical process of experimentation, whatever evidence remained unexplained...also became more compelling. From this concept was born the SyFy hit television show *Fact or Faked: Paranormal Files*. (“Bio”)

His success on his current show, *Ghosts of Morgan City*, is the complete opposite, as he comes from his persona as a believer, no clear evidence necessary. His ability to move between these identities is dizzying -- sometimes changing mid-stream, such as in this passage from his Facebook page where he begins as an academic looking at the paranormal from a sociological point of view while working with Chapman University’s Professor Christopher Bader:

> Over the last few years I've guest-taught some of his Sociology classes at Chapman and lectured there on the subjects of ghosts and UFOs. From a purely Sociological perspective, the paranormal subjects and how belief is created and maintained is fascinating. Even if you don't think there's anything to the reality of UFOs, ghosts, cryptids, etc., the subjects of why we believe and how we do is still worth studying. (Hansen)

He then inexplicably changes roles in the next paragraph to rally marginalized fans behind him -- and his friend’s book:

> If you count yourselves as one of "us" then you'd also probably agree that in many ways we're outsiders to mainstream society. But within our subcultures there are factions and degrees of belief as well. The ability to maintain one's beliefs in a balance between all of

the differences and occasional contradictions is the subject of Chris's latest research book. He uses Bigfoot researchers and our trip to Bluff Creek (photos attached) as an example to illustrate his latest theories. If you love social sciences like I do, I think you'll find it fascinating. The book is now available on Amazon. Great job Chris Bader!" (Hansen)

Hansen's change between shows and identities is not only shown through focal changes on his Facebook page, but was visually marked when he started wearing an evil eye necklace, writing to a Facebook fan, "The necklace I had on tonight's episode of Ghosts of Morgan City on Travel Channel is a Greek symbol to ward off the matiasma, or evil eye. I'm 1/4 Greek and picked it up the last time I was visiting family in Athens. I wear it every episode of this season" (Hansen). His wardrobe on his newer show is more relaxed as well, another visual marker that he is far from his FBI past.

Hansen's current show, *Ghosts of Morgan City* (Travel Channel), centers on St. Mary parish in Louisiana and is a spin-off of *Ghosts of Shepherdstown* (Destination America), based in West Virginia. Both shows focus on allegedly haunted areas in poorer working class states and air on Discovery Inc. channels. Hansen became involved through his friendship with *Ghost Adventures* alum Nick Groff. The premise is small-town sheriffs and government officials trying to figure out how to deal with the "uptick of paranormal activity," which could be life imitating art as paranormal reality TV becomes ever more prolific.

Frank "Boo" Grizzaffi, the Mayor of Morgan City, lauds the grit of Louisiana citizens in the face of the paranormal, but is overwhelmed as he notes, "when our people are scared, that's something to not take lightly" (Dunnebacke). The sheriff in Shepherdstown, after having success with paranormal investigators (and a TV show) advises the sheriff in Morgan City to do the same. Police Chief James "Bo" Blair, doesn't believe in ghosts, but trusts his citizens and follows the advice.

Ben Hansen is listed as a paranormal investigator, so he doesn't take lead on this show as he did on *Fact or Faked*. Whereas the team on *Fact or Faked* was multicultural and presented as open-minded skeptics, the *Ghosts of Morgan City* team present as believers -- Hansen has lost his gruff FBI persona in favor of readily accepting accounts of paranormal activity. He works with Jereme Leonard, who speaks in a stereotypical Southern drawl and wears a cross, in contrast to Hansen's Evil Eye. In the Pilot episode Hansen asks Leonard, "so you're part of this culture, how much of this do you believe?" to which Leonard replies "All of it" (Dunnebacke). Leonard is steeped in Cajun superstition and Southern pride, remarking, "Being in the paranormal field down here in the South I think is unlike any other place in the world" (Dunnebacke).

The South is almost a character in itself: "'We knew we had a whole new series when we heard about all the unnerving hauntings in the bayou,' said Matthew Butler, general manager, Travel Channel. 'Morgan City and surrounding St. Mary Parish are filled with rich history, deep-rooted superstitions and larger-than-life characters, and it's all set against the beautiful, yet eerie backdrop of Cajun Country'" (Bergeron). Southern stereotypes and caricatures abound in the show.

Also different from *Fact or Faked*, the last team member, Sara Lemos, is billed as a "psychic medium." On Hansen's first show, none of the team members were particularly paranormally sensitive. Lemos takes a backseat to the men on the show, though, literally. Much like the casts of *Girly Ghosthunters* or *Ghosts in the Hood*, the group travels in an RV with the men in front (Leonard usually drives) and the woman in the back.

Throughout the show Hansen holds a handheld camera, but only professional camerawork is shown. He makes a point of asking permission to film, but his camera's Point of View is rarely shown. When it is shown, it is the professional film crew filming through his lens as the focus of a larger shot. Hansen's handheld camera is meant to give the viewer a sense of

agency, that they are with him in the investigation, but that point of view is never shown, so the viewers remain passive, only shown what the production crew wants them to be shown.

While Hansen says he “doesn’t jump to the conclusion that it’s paranormal right away,” in the Pilot episode of *Ghosts of Morgan City* he immediately jumps to the conclusion that the female spirit seen in the mist could have been the ghost of someone who died on that road trying to warn the witness. As soon as the hypothesis is presented to him, it immediately becomes the drive for the rest of the episode.

The episode also has gender issues: The female ghost communicates with a female witness and a female psychic, but Ben Hansen is the one sent to interview the witness. He then talks to a female historian who tells him the story of the first woman hanged in Louisiana and introduces the theory that the apparition is Ada LeBeouf. He immediately accepts the paranormal explanation and rushes to share it with the rest of the team. While the narrative of the show if focused on the female ghost and witness, the power structure remains focused on the male leader and he is the only one to make decisions regarding the direction of the team.

Similar to Tennessee Wraith Chasers, the team brings in their “Tech Inventor,” KD Stafford, who makes custom devices to communicate with ghosts and help them materialize, in this case, a Photonic Ghost Generator, which uses a Jacob’s Ladder and the bayou mist to help the spirit materialize. Much like *Ghosts in the Hood*, only the inventor knows how the tech really works, and none of the other investigators – male or female – are invited to learn how to operate the gadgets.

The Morgan City headquarters for their paranormal investigation is in an old archive building and during set up the cast makes a point of putting a cross in the team room. The site provides an academic setting, but the introduction of a religious icon changes the connotation to shift the focus back to the spiritual realm.

Unlike many of his peers, Hansen’s goal originally seems to be to prove a scientific hypothesis rather than to help the spirit world; in 2016 he told LA Times reporter Jessica

Peralta, “Personally, I think it’s a little presumptuous of me or anyone else to say that their [trapped spirits’] fate is dependent on us helping them” and “I’m actually quite brash in that sense because I frankly don’t care why they’re there. I just think it’s interesting how our technology is starting to catch up where we might be able to evidence their existence” (Peralta).

But again, this changes in 2019’s *Ghosts of Morgan City*, when he states it is the team’s goal to help spirits and at the end of the Pilot the team does a ceremony to “release Ada to the other side, ” using stereotypical native tropes such as burning moss, smudging the area, and observing a pelican flying away and claiming it represents Ava’s soul crossing over. To be fair, though, the ritual also helps Ada’s living descendants feel better about the entire haunting situation.

Between these two main shows, Hansen hosted the 2017 Kickstarter-funded documentary *Haunted Travels*. He introduces himself by saying, “Several years ago I was introduced to the world of the paranormal. What I learned and experienced changed my life forever” (Cawley). Since this show was aired seven years after the start of *Fact or Faked*, and his demeanor changes so radically between *Fact or Faked* and his newer shows, the assumption has to be that either his persona change is completely artificial and the work of production teams, or something he encountered on *Fact or Faked* caused this personality change. This difference is echoed on his personal website, with the statement: “Many people recite the phrase, ‘I’ll believe it when I see it.’ After having investigated so many powerful eyewitness events, Ben found that the innate human longing for rational explanation still frequently inhibits many from exploring high strangeness. It’s probably more accurate to say, ‘Aliquandro videre non est satis’ -- Sometimes seeing is not enough” (“Bio”).

Hansen has written that his primary interest is UFOs, and on this topic he seems to be just as mysterious. Jimmy Church makes several confusing statements about his interview with Hansen for Coast to Coast AM. He starts by calling Hansen the “host of Smithsonian Channel’s ‘UFOs Declassified” (Church); he is not; Brad Carter is. Hansen appeared on one episode in

2015 and is given credit as “Self - UFO Investigator” and as a consultant for two episodes on the show’s IMDB page (“UFOs Declassified”).

Church continues that through Hansen’s FBI career “He says he was trained and also trained himself to read people's body language and speech patterns,” however, the International UFO Congress, which sells a video of Hansen speaking at their 2017 conference, says that “while not formerly [sic] educated in the area of body language analysis, he has a lot of experiencing working with experts” (“Ben Hansen”), a clarification that is hardly reassuring. Hansen’s experience in reading body language leads to the reason Hansen is on his show: “He was so well-known at this, that one of his videos on the subject was cited by Jimmy Kimmel when he interviewed President Obama and asked him a question about UFOs on national television” (Church). Again, this description of Hansen is misleading and confusing. If Church is referring to Kimmel’s interview with President Obama, but Kimmel never mentions Hansen by name, just that “there are a lot of people who are going to examine your facial expressions here.” Hansen had earlier posted an analysis of Kimmel’s interview with President Clinton and the President’s body language when questioned about UFOs. Church would have been more convincing if he had mentioned the *Los Angeles Times* article from the day of the interview, “Will Jimmy Kimmel get Obama to talk aliens?” in which Patrick Kevin Day writes of Kimmel’s earlier interview that Hansen “didn’t take Clinton at his word and released a 36-minute analysis of the exchange on YouTube, which picked apart Clinton’s every reaction and response. Not surprisingly, considering Hansen’s interests, he found Clinton’s nonverbal communication indicated he wasn’t being completely open about what he knew about Area 51” (Day).

Both videos are posted on the YouTube page for Hypocenter 101, affiliated with Hypocenter Productions. The page has two videos of possible UFO anomalies during a Blue Angels show, two videos of the Mongollon [Arizona] Monster Bigfoot Excursion, and

seven videos on the playlist “Presidents on Talk Shows Discussing UFOs and ETs.” The videos all feature Ben Hansen, begin with the logo of whichever show he was on when the video was filmed, and a disclaimer that the opinions in the video are his own and not those of “any former employer.” Hypocenter 101 has 7.22 thousand subscribers and the average video views is 111.65 thousand, mostly viewers between the ages of 25 and 34 (“Hypocenter 101”).

Hypocenter 101 is important because Hypocenter Productions is a partnership between Dr. M. David Hansen “Doc”, and his son, Ben. The elder Hansen has a background in TV production, which helped his son get his start in reality TV. According to the company’s “About” page, “Always willing to try new things, Ben fell into the world of TV as a change of pace to law enforcement. While he had taken one college course in TV and film acting, Ben was quickly reminded that he was a horrible actor. He learned however that he enjoyed the role of TV hosting because he was allowed to be himself” (“About Hypocenter”). The company helps Ben with his speaking engagements, creates night vision optics, works with aerial commercial drone filming, underwater cinematography, and “In the past few years, Hypocenter Productions has been contracted in over 50 cable TV airing reality episodes or documentaries and provided expert consulting, executive, and assistant producing to more than a dozen full length pilots and sizzle reels. We excel at finding content. We excel at finding other people who have content. And we specialize in making content entertaining and educational” (“About Hypocenter”). The younger Hansen “is also the Chief of Media and Entertainment for PrepperCon, the largest disaster preparedness/survival consumer expo in the country” (“Bio”) and Hypocenter produces the convention as well as “ the world’s first and only prepper fashion show called PrepperFash” (“About Hypocenter”). Hansen has time for these activities because *Ghosts of Morgan City* does not appear to have been renewed for a second season; the Travel Channel page for the show has Season 1.0 and Season

3.0, with the same episodes listed for both seasons.

Hansen's persona is cloaked in mystery and misdirection. When it serves him, he performs as the former FBI agent skeptic. While it originally seemed Ben Hansen moved from skeptic to believer, his more recent published work on UFOs and in Morgan City point to the serious investigator having been the act and the believer as his true personality. Regardless, when a different setting calls for a different personality, he provides that as well, moving between privileged and marginalized identities at will.

In mainstream American society, Christianity is a mark of privilege, but on paranormal reality television, with implied scientific investigations, religion weakens credibility. Religion and the paranormal have a tenuous relationship anyway. Most Western religions either don't recognize ghosts or immediately designate them as angels or demons.

Those who claim to be sensitive to spirits often question how this ability fits in with religion; certainly, there are many instances in the Bible of angels talking to mortals. Of course, the Bible relies on interpretation: "When asked if the concept of reincarnation could be found in the Scriptures as some have argued, [American psychic Edgar] Cayce wisely answered, 'You can read reincarnation into the Bible, and I can read it right out again'" (Birnes 33). Chip Coffey, who has worked on shows such as *Paranormal State* and *Psychic Kids* was raised Catholic, something he is able to reconcile with his abilities and investigations, while not overstating his abilities. He believes, "No psychic knows everything; that's God's job. Omniscience is a divine power, not a psychic power, and while I believe that my abilities come from a divine place, neither I nor any psychic I know would ever claim to have divine power" (Coffey 15).

Coffey was a frequent guest on *Paranormal State*, which focuses on a paranormal club at Penn State University, and is known for its religious overtones. However, religion is something lead Ryan Buell doesn't see as the real focus of the show: "Some viewers have said that the show [*Paranormal State*] has a Catholic or Christian bias. That's definitely my

background and personal belief system, so I do view the world through that prism, but PRS has no religious affiliation and I don't impose my beliefs on anyone" (Buell 27). Buell does use the show, and his biography, to discuss religion and how it relates to the spirit world through providing answers based on his spiritual, paranormal, and personal experience to help viewers answer big questions about the afterlife: "I received an e-mail from a young man who told me that he was gay, and wondered if he was going to hell. 'Since you deal with spirits, have you ever come across evidence that suggests that they do go to hell or they are in torment?' This broke my heart. We humans can be so cruel to one another, but the teachings of Jesus Christ are that of love and compassion. I've decided to share my sexuality and struggle over faith in hopes that others will no longer feel as though they are alone or that they can't be religious" (Buell 193).

Zak Bagans, from *Ghost Adventures*, sees a disconnect between religion and the paranormal, one that can make investigations more difficult. He believes, "Even mentioning that ghosts might exist can cause instant damnation and persecution among the religiously devoted and staunchly pragmatic, which causes many people who have had a paranormal experience to remain quiet about it" (Bagans *Dark* 7). William Birnes and Joel Martin have a less-damned view, writing in *The Haunting of America* that, "It appears the Church decried most psychic phenomena not because they were 'evil,' but because they were remnants of earlier pagan or non-Christian beliefs" (Birnes 51). In *The Haunted*, Owen Davies also talks not of damnation, but depression: "In 1934 Ernest Bennett observed that, 'In some middle-class circles it is generally not considered good form to mention ghosts except in a jocular way; and many devout Christians who anticipate, with some assurance, eternal happiness hereafter, regard any mention of disembodied spirits as an unpleasant and depressing topic'" (Davies 242).

Davies also notes the evolution of society when it comes to all belief systems, be it religious or paranormal: "There is no doubt, though, that religious belief has become more individualistic, flexible and pluralistic, no longer tied to institutions or denominations. The

continued vibrancy of the belief in ghosts is, perhaps, an example of this. They act as transferable anchors of spirituality. One can renounce one's Christian faith and become a Muslim or a Neo-pagan and retain the same belief in the return of the dead while abandoning all other Christian tenets" (Davies 244). While this is true of society, those who wish to be taken seriously as scientists studying the supernatural avoid espousing religious beliefs. Religious zealotry is a marginalized identity in the world of paranormal investigations as the only damnation found is that of one's credibility.

Equating social class and belief in the paranormal is not a new comparison. William Birnes and Joel Martin write of this relationship in the past and today in *The Haunting of America: From the Salem Witch Trials to Harry Houdini*: "While Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke and Voltaire influenced America's Founding Fathers, psychic practices were relegated to astrologers, fortune-tellers, and assorted healers, again left to drift aimlessly, and to serve mainly the 'lower classes,' although anyone who has researched the paranormal knows only too well that psychic experiences cut across all socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and religious boundaries. Perhaps because of the Enlightenment, the educated and elite did not want to be associated publicly with a belief in the supernatural; an attitude that many stubbornly cling to today" (Birnes 111). This stereotype is too deeply ingrained to die, and it actually helps make paranormal investigators who perform as believers more relatable to their audiences.

The Tennessee Wraith Chasers connect to viewers through their performance of Southern stereotypes of overly religious paranormal believers willing to blow stuff up when necessary. This trope that Southerners shoot (even ghosts) first and ask questions later is dangerous. Nevertheless, TWC has a clear vision for their show and team branding. They embrace Southern ideals and methodology, and their audience knows who they are and what to expect from them.

Because of his changing personas, Ben Hansen is less believable. While he may have had a change of heart somewhere along the way, the confusion about who he is and what he believes makes his intentions unclear. His lack of clear identity allows him to move from show to show and change his performed belief systems based on the needs of the show. Although he is famous for his paranormal reality shows, Ben Hansen is more an actor than an investigator.

Social class is evident in the regional stereotypes used by the Tennessee Wraith Chasers and Ben Hansen in their various shows. Discussions of religion also damage the ethos of these reality personalities who claim to be conducting serious scientific investigations into the paranormal. The educated and elite are willing to be associated with investigating the supernatural, but openly believing in it is still relegated to the lower social classes.

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Chapter Four: Bros Before Ghosts: The Younger Generation of Paranormal Reality Stars

When Scooby-Doo is mentioned, most people's immediate response is to quote the recurring line "And I would have gotten away with it too, if it weren't for you meddling kids!" To borrow from a popular meme, the original Scooby-Doo series (1969-1976) taught the youth of America that there were no monsters--just humans in masks, and those humans were usually old white men in a position of power. By decrying the "meddling kids," these villains further created a generational divide between the evil-doers and those willing and able to debunk their quasi-supernatural hijinks. This age division is evident in paranormal reality television, where the age of the investigators, and which version of *Scooby-Doo* they likely watched, impacts their identity as skeptics or believers. Older reality personalities, for whom the villain was an old white man in a mask, are more likely to strive to debunk hauntings. When *Scooby-Doo* evildoers became supernatural beings, the generation who watched the show more often became believers.

Often, the meddling kids are more earnestly searching for Truth than those around them. William Birnes and Joel Martin write in *The Haunting of America: From the Salem Witch Trials to Harry Houdini* that children were more frequently believed than adults because, “Children were considered less likely to engage in ‘trickery or deception than an adult,’ the spiritualist newspaper *Banner of Light* noted in what was typical nineteenth-century thinking” (Birnes 257). Younger investigators tend to keep the serious approach of a believer, and tend to believe young witnesses more readily. Karen Williams, in “The Liveness of Ghosts: Haunting and Reality TV” notes that the style of paranormal reality shows is centered around youth culture to begin with, that: “As was the case with *Blair Witch*, these shows [*Paranormal State* in particular] suggested a youth culture practice called ‘legend trips,’ in which teens, typically boys, go to places with grisly pasts to ‘defy superstition’ and test their own capacity for fear, ‘all in an effort to invoke -- and then successfully escape -- the wrath of the ghost’” (K. Williams 152).

Modern versions of Scooby-Doo (1987-present) dropped the overused trope of the old white man in a mask in favor of real encounters with monsters and the supernatural, which created a generation more open to the possibility. This shift happened toward the end of the youth of Generation X, and can be seen in current paranormal reality TV as ghost hunters who present as skeptics were born in or before the early 70s, when they would have been more likely to have watched the original series, while those who portray themselves as believers were born in the late 70s or later, making them more of the target audience for the remakes and reboots. *Paranormal State's* Ryan Buell even credits the show with inspiring him to chase ghosts: "To Gramma and Grampa Buell: All those years of watching *Scooby-Doo!* Undoubtedly had an effect" (Buell dedication).

Changing Scooby-Doo villains divided paranormal reality TV hosts between the younger generation, willing to believe in monsters, and those a bit older, who are still looking for the man behind the mask. These differences manifest in the style of their investigations, the types of equipment used, and how they present themselves to viewers.

This divide also matches the Social Justice Training Institute's line between privileged and marginalized identities, as society still believes that age equals wisdom. Older paranormal investigators are presented and perform as skeptics while the younger generation act as believers.

The paranormal is often considered something that people "grow out of." Children may be afraid of the monster under their bed, but through age and education, adults know better. This is true historically, as Davies writes, "While it would seem that the composition of such crowds consisted of a cross section of working class and artisan society, the most significant component and often the catalysts for ghost hunts were boys and young men" (Davies 92). *Ghost Adventures* is the perfect example of this. While the leader of the group, Zak Bagans, is now in his 40s, his dress and demeanor are youthful and appeal to young white men who want to put on some trendy clothes and go yell cuss words at ghosts.

Many of these paranormal investigators, like Bagans, never grew out of their childhood fascination with the paranormal, which is not new. Owen Davies documents that, "*The Compleat Servant-Maid*, which was reprinted many times during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, advised regarding the instruction of children:

> Neither terrify them into a Complyance to do any thing, by talking of Ghosts, Spirits, Hobgoblins, and such like ridiculous things, (which is a wicked Method too often put in Practice to the great Detriment of Children) for, comparatively speaking, as they are soft as Wax. The first Impression will be deep, and as they encrease in Years, they will retain it the stronger, and it will be almost impossible ever to root it out of their Minds" (Davies 138).

Stereotypically, children are believers, scared of the monster in the closet and the Boogeyman under the bed, and allowed these beliefs, will carry them into adulthood.

For Britain's Society for Psychical Research, this youthful belief system was actually a benefit: "Some historians have suggested that one reason [for their success] was the ages of the founding officers and members. Most were in their twenties and thirties at the time [...] their youth endowed them with 'zest, imagination, and drive,' wrote historian Fraser Nicol" (Birnes 303).

The Tennessee Wraith Chasers, stars of *Ghost Asylum* and *Haunted Live* were all born in the late 70s, which helps explain some of the decisions presented in their multitude of shows, including driving pickup trucks and blowing up ghosts with explosives. *Paranormal State* was an A&E show from 2007-2011 that followed the paranormal club on the campus of Penn State. The team was made of true believers, led by Ryan Buell, whose struggle with drug addiction has since clouded much of the show's success. As with *Ghost Adventures,* the cast is presented as young adults who fervently believe in what they are doing and that they are having a positive impact on society by warding off ghosts and demons attacking the innocent. *Ghost Adventures*,

and its many spin-offs, though, is really the pinnacle of young white men chasing, and cussing at, ghosts.

- *Ghost Adventures* (Travel Channel 2008-present)
- *Ghost Adventures: Aftershocks* (Travel Channel 2014-2016)
- *Ghost Adventures: Artifacts* (sometimes aired as *Deadly Possessions* Travel Channel 2016)
- *Ghost Adventures: Screaming Room!* (Travel Channel 2020-present)
- *Ghost Adventures: Quarantine* (premieres June 11, 2020)
- Spin off: *Paranormal Lockdown* (Destination American 2016-2019)

The poster boys for the "younger generation" of paranormal reality TV stars (and I only partially call them the younger generation because they are my age) are Bagans and his original castmates on *Ghost Adventures*: Nick Groff and Aaron Goodwin. I have to admit I love these guys. They are young, based out of Las Vegas, wear almost exclusively black Ed Hardy clothes, and provoke the ghosts -- usually by cursing at them -- to get them to come out. While the cast is exclusively white men, I argue that their youth is one of the contributing factors to them being presented as true believers, which is featured prominently in the intro -- especially as Zak Bagans details how he has never been able to move past his childhood paranormal experience. As he writes in his first New York Times bestselling autobiography, *Dark World: Into the Shadows with the Lead Investigator of The Ghost Adventures Crew*, after that time, and through his investigations: "I have now transformed into a sensitive; a person who is able to detect when spirits are present. It's a skill that's evolved over hundreds of paranormal investigations and has taught me that the human body is the best means of paranormal detection. I've become a fine-tuned instrument of spiritual sensitivity" (Bagans *Dark* 10). Bagans' exemplification of toxic masculinity is in stark contrast to shows with older casts that feature traits such as Gates' comical cynicism and the serious skepticism of *Ghost Hunters.*

While Bagans' description of his talents is heavy-handed and overbearingly smug, it is more informative than his second New York Times bestselling autobiography, *I Am Haunted: Living Life Through the Dead*, which includes a chapter about the time he was hitting on a flight attendant and his plans were foiled when someone didn't flush their rather large defecation in the airplane bathroom and she thought it was him. Bagans' constant self-promotion is part of his style, and although he doesn't necessarily claim to have all the answers, his affinity to control the situation can be problematic — especially while investigating something that may not be able to be controlled.

Bagans tends to be a conundrum in this way. He is a true believer whose stated goal is to help others deal with the paranormal in healthy ways, going so far as to say, "I want to leave this world knowing that I inspired people and brought to light things that people don't understand about life" (Bagans *I Am Haunted* 59). But then he writes, "I like to think of myself as a creative person [...] my mind never stops [...] the creativity never turns off" (Bagans *I Am Haunted* 168). Discussing his creativity hurts his ethos as a serious investigator, but he is, after all, on TV, and reality TV at that.

Bagans' education helps with the entertainment side of the show, as he holds a degree from the Motion Picture Institute. The first *Ghost Adventures* investigation was actually a documentary project toward his degree. Bagans writes of the appeal of their show that, "We weren't paranormal investigators. We were simply three curious guys armed with cameras and in our youthful exuberance, thought that was actually a good thing" (Bagans *Dark* 26). Like Ryan Buell of *Paranormal State*, the *Ghost Adventures* team are true believers. They believe they are helping families and business owners get rid of the paranormal disturbances that are plaguing their lives. Part of their appeal is their earnestness that they are truly doing good for the world. Their belief systems run so deeply that one of the original *Ghost Adventures* cast members, Nick Groff, quit the show after being harassed by a demon, and Bagans also complains of spirits attacking his girlfriends, past and present.

While they never focused on private homes, as *Ghost Hunters* did, like TAPS, as their TV popularity grew, so did the prominence of the locations investigated. Notable cases include Bobby Mackey's Music World (twice), Waverly Hills Sanitorium, Villisca Axe Murder House, and Eastern State Penitentiary ("The Best *Ghost Adventures* Episodes"). Their technology is state of the art and their travel -- usually in black SUVs, is of the highest quality.

Bagans' youthful worldview is also seen through his selective use of his own paranormal beliefs. While he spends a great deal of time discussing how the spirit world can help solve criminal cold cases, this belief only applies when the spirits are saying what he wants to hear. In *I Am Haunted*, he writes about stopping an interview with the resident psychic at the Lizzie Borden House, Liz Nowicki, because she was claiming Lizzie's mother's spirit had told her Lizzie was being raped by her father. Bagans, who generally believes everything the spirits tell him, then claimed, "I don't believe evidence from a spirit is strong enough to take public. I'm not saying it didn't happen, but I think Liz should have kept that information to herself" (Bagans *I Am Haunted* 65). Although Zak Bagans has made a career of sharing spirit "voices" and messages with the world, when a female medium accuses a white man of criminal activity, suddenly the spirits aren't to be trusted.

Zak Bagans also believes his techniques are far superior to those on other shows, saying:

> Paranormal investigators who don't participate in rituals or rely heavily on equipment-based investigation aren't doing all they can to find evidence, but that's okay, because not everyone should. I think it takes certain people who are more deeply connected to the spiritual world to successfully experiment and use rituals in order to knock on unfamiliar doors and establish a direct connection to the spirit world. We are equipment-based, but we have a balance. We're like the mixed martial arts fighters of PI [Paranormal Investigation]. (Bagans *I Am Haunted* 16)

He explains that they are not ghost hunters, a not so subtle jab at the cast of the show *Ghost Hunters*, by saying:

> We don't call it ghost hunting even in jest. Ghost hunting is looking for something and using equipment to find it, and that defines those types of investigators. They're not using their own bodies and their own energy to their advantage. Although I disagree with them, I also understand why they decline to do it. They think the body is fallible and can give false responses, and therefore a disinterested, unemotional machine is a better tool to capture paranormal evidence. This is where our groups disagree. To me, the body is a perfectly reliable detector of paranormal energy if you know how to use it right to tune to the spiritual world. (Bagans *I Am Haunted* 17)

Bagans lives in a house surrounded by paranormal objects, and even owns and curates Zak Bagans' The Haunted Museum in Las Vegas, which claims to be the "Home of the World's Most Haunted Object [the] Dybbuk Box." The museum is a curious place, and not a museum at all, but a guided tour through Bagans' private collection, with occasional jump scares from actors dressed as creepy clowns. Visitors to the museum must sign a waiver that they understand that:

> This building is known to contain ghosts/spirits and cursed objects. By entering you agree that management will not be liable for any actions by these unseen forces. Touching of artifacts is extremely forbidden and will result in an immediate end to your tour. Thieves will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law and succumbed to angry spirits' curse. All tour guests must sign and understand the Haunted Museum's indemnification agreement.

Bagans beliefs show in all aspects of his show, his museum, and the dungeon he built himself in the basement of his house. The museum is currently building an expansion, and in August 2019 Bagans bought a Manson murder house (Leno and Rosemary LaBianca), although he has not announced plans for the property. In 2014 he bought the "Demon House" in Gary, Indiana,

filmed a documentary released in 2018 -- which he says is also cursed -- about his experiences there, and had the house demolished in 2016, before the film aired, and without having it blessed first, to the chagrin of the priest who had worked with the previous owners (Kwiatkowski). Bagans, more than many paranormal reality stars, truly immerses himself in the supernatural. He thinks he is doing the right thing, as many paranormal investigators of his generation do, but more than others, Bagans has devoted every aspect of his life to finding Truth.

Similar to Ryan Buell of *Paranormal State*, the *Ghost Adventures* team are true believers, but these beliefs show themselves in different ways and different needs. Bagans writes of his investigations, “It’s like I’m trying to overdose on ghosts. I’m an addict” (Bagans *I Am Haunted* 19), whereas Buell’s rise to reality show fame drove him to a very different sort of addiction. *Paranormal State* was a show that ran for six seasons starting in 2007 following the investigations of the Paranormal Research Society at Penn State. As with *Ghost Adventures,* the cast is presented as young adults who fervently believe in what they are doing and that they are having a positive impact on society by warding off ghosts and demons attacking the innocent, often performing religious rituals to cleanse buildings and people of their paranormal ills. But television stardom had a different breed of demons for leader Ryan Buell. Buell writes on his blog, “Between 2010 and 2017, I was a shivering denizen under King Vicodin, then King Heroin. I also bent the knee to King Meth and Queen GHB. My ‘rise’ to ‘fame’ is quite documented. So is the ‘fall.’ And I stumbled quite spectacularly” (Buell “1 Year”). Buell blames his struggles with addiction on fame, depression, and the people he chose to surround himself with, and after several years of failed and cancelled appearances still using the *Paranormal State* claim to fame, he is now clean, sober, and shopping a new paranormal reality show.

Bagans and Buell both take note of their addictive personalities, Bagans even saying putting ghosts above drugs in this context, “This is why investigating the paranormal is addicting and the most thrilling adventure life can offer” (Bagans *Dark* 86), but they are similar in their

approaches, possibly because of their closeness in age: Bagans was born in 1977 (as were Ben Hansen and Josh Gates) and Buell, the youngest investigator considered here, 1982. The other original *Ghost Adventures* team members, Nick Groff and Aaron Goodwin, were born in 1980 and 1976, respectively. This younger generation of paranormal investigators truly believes they are helping families and business owners get rid of the paranormal disturbances that are plaguing their lives. Part of their appeal is their earnestness that they are honestly doing good for the world. Their belief systems run so deeply that one of the original *Ghost Adventures* cast members, Nick Groff, left the show after determining that a demon followed him home from Bobby Mackey's and ruined his marriage. However, Nick continues to chase ghosts through other reality shows such as *Ghost Stalkers, Paranormal Lockdown,* and *Ghosts of Shepherdstown.*

On the other side of the Scooby-Doo divide are the leaders of the original cast of *Ghost Hunters*, Jason Hawes and Grant Wilson. Born in 1971 and 1974, respectively, they aren't that much older than Zak Bagans and Aaron Goodwin, but there is just enough difference that they follow a more scientific style — always looking for Old Man Jenkins behind the mask of the paranormal activity they study.

While Wilson and Hawes have a healthy skepticism reminiscent of the old Russian proverb "trust, but verify," they are still paranormal believers. From the start, Wilson and Hawes, like their younger counterparts, want to help people who are suffering. Like Fox Mulder, Ryan Buell's inspiration, they want to believe. But the TAPS team is more methodically scientific than their younger TV counterparts. While Bagans and Buell wrote books full of stories of ghosts and demons and poltergeists, Wilson and Hawes' books are tempered with those stories as well as the man who heard voices because his neighbor's CB radio was interfering with his hearing aid, or the family who heard screaming because a hawk had nested in their attic.

Although he writes about having paranormal experiences, the supernatural didn't call to Zak Bagans the way it has some other investigators. When he was directionless, "Suddenly,

[after he couldn't find direction in life] my mother enrolled me in the Motion Picture Institute of Michigan. Mom understood me. She could see that I needed something more. I fell in love with the art of documentary filmmaking and graduated with honors in an elite class" (Bagans *Dark* 22). Grant and Wilson came to paranormal reality TV through using their plumbing skills to debunk haunting. Ben Hansen came to the genre after his FBI career. But Bagans comes to it as a filmmaker.

In fact, *Ghost Adventures* started as a film: "After a year of putting the material together, we submitted the finished project, titled *Ghost Adventures*, to the New York International Film and Video Festival and won their prize for best documentary film. It was also nominated for best feature film at the Eerie Horror Film Festival in 2006. Finally, NBC Universal picked it up to air seven times in a year on the Syfy Channel where it made their top ten list" (Bagans *Dark* 28). Not only did this documentary launch their TV careers, the featured investigation of the Goldfield Hotel is what made Bagans believe in ghosts when a brick was thrown across the room by an unseen hand: "I grew from curious Zak to professional Zak in the blink of an eye and where I realized this shit is real" (Bagans *Dark* 166). Generally, professionals would be skeptical, but Bagans entered the reality TV realm with a new found belief that observable reality is not all there is.

Zak Bagans, and to a large extent Josh Gates, also function as Jungian trickster figures, as they are "a faithful reflection of an absolutely undifferentiated human consciousness, corresponding to a psyche that has hardly left the animal level" (Jung 260). Bagan's credibility, which was never necessarily the strongest, is wounded when his second autobiography includes a chapter about pooping and how it hurt his ability to pick up chicks. Bagans would likely say the animal level of his maturity reveals his close connection to the spiritual realm, rather than base human behavior. While Jung continues his discussion by looking at how the trickster figure functions in mental disability, he comments that "Considering the crude primitivity of the trickster cycle, it would not be surprising if one saw in this myth simply the reflection of an

earlier, rudimentary stage of consciousness, with is what the trickster obviously seems to be" (Jung 261). This, too, is what reality TV seems to be, infotainment aimed at the baser side of human taste and preference. Paranormal reality TV hearkens back to the ever-present need to understand death and what comes after.

Bagans, and Gates, show their divided trickster nature; as Jung explains, "The trickster is a primitive 'cosmic' being of *divine-animal* nature, on the one hand superior to man because of his superhuman qualities, and on the other hand inferior to him because of his unreason and unconsciousness" (Jung 264), as they both present as smarter than the viewer and willing to be unabashedly cruder than the viewer would be willing to be if put in a similar position.

Bagans keeps tight control over this image, threatening to sue ranker.com's Graveyard Shift for an article saying Bagans fakes his investigations, and had a blog taken down that discussed his proclivity for bragging about sexual escapades with women in their young twenties while he enters his mid-40s. Ranker.com responded that "Ranker.com and Graveyard Shift have permanently taken down and deleted an article we recently published about Zak Bagans of Ghost Adventures and The Haunted Museum fame. We've also deleted the Facebook posts we created to promote the article. The article included inaccuracies about Bagans, and the Facebook posts were misleading; both the article and the social posts did not meet our current editorial and social media standards. We regret misinforming our readers, and any distress the article caused Zak Bagans personally" (ranker.com Facebook). He also had an epic Twitter battle with the *Ghost Hunters* team when they investigated Bobby Mackey's Music World, one of *Ghost Adventures'* favorite and most famous place to look for haunts. Bagans and his team claimed to find a portal to hell and that a demon followed Nick Groff home, but the TAPS team, working with a different Music World owner, found nothing, leading to an internet feud.

Bagans, however, believes these experiences have helped him grow, and that, "Over the course of filming *Ghost Adventures*, I haven't matured just as a paranormal investigator and

a TV personality, but as a person as well" (Bagans *I Am Haunted* 13). Being a TV personality has become part of his identity and self-awareness. But he still doesn't see any wrongdoing on his behalf: "I've been criticized over the years for sensationalizing our investigations and overreacting to the evidence we collect. I don't deny that I get excited, but that's what happens when you're passionate about what you do" (Bagans *Dark* 29).

Although his fame comes from yelling at ghosts, he believes that he is not only a good person in the real world, but also in the spiritual realm: "The spirits reach out to me because they know I have a good heart and a good soul. They know I was sent there for more than a TV show. It's my destiny and my fate. In the beginning, I was more focused on taunting the spirits and enticing them into a fight, but now I feel like I do more. I help people, but I also help spirits" (Bagans *I Am Haunted* 51).

And while he believes he is good, he also has clear views on who is bad -- especially in the field of paranormal reality TV: "People cast on other TV shows who have no abilities but think they're experts on the paranormal disgust me. They appear on a show and suddenly they're on the paranormal lecture circuit, making mileage out of being on TV. In truth, they have no abilities and no business claiming they do. They're just regular people who can't catch any paranormal evidence, and then they tell people that their houses aren't haunted. I don't believe in that" (Bagans *I Am Haunted* 58).

Yet Bagans acknowledges that his show isn't about scientific investigation: "People watch *Ghost Adventures* because they want to be scared or entertained" (Bagans *I Am Haunted* 142). Not only that, but his team doesn't really have a plan when they go into an investigation: "The Ghost Adventures Crew doesn't live by a code book for paranormal investigating. Some other paranormal groups think that you have to live by a set of rules, and everybody has to investigate this way or that way. People preach that there's one right way to investigate. That's like some backwater group telling a priest how to pray. It just doesn't make sense, and they look stupid when they try to force their investigation methods on others" (Bagans *I Am Haunted* 244).

Although he claims there is no correct way to investigate, he still believes that he is following a scientific process and reporting results. He admits, though, that when researching the paranormal, this is no easy task: “Since it’s nearly impossible to prove anything in this field, everything is a belief or a theory. But at least paranormal investigators like myself collect evidence, postulate theories, and try to test them through observation, trial, and error. Psychic mediums...not so much” (Bagans *I Am Haunted* 253). Although Bagans sometimes works with spiritual believers of different cultures, he is most comfortable with a research style of his own devising and occasional consultations with the Catholic Church. Bagans frequently works with Bishop Bryan Ouellette, a “semi-retired bi-ritual autocephalous eastern Orthodox/western Catholic bishop and exorcist for the Old Roman Catholic Sacred Order of St. Michael the Archangel (Order of Exorcists) also currently offering private instruction in Gedo Zen, meditation, mysticism, prayer, and Christian esotericism” (“Our Staff”). According to the Staff page of The Order of Exorcists-Atlanta, Georgia Division (where he serves as Lead Exorcist), Ouellette left the Roman Catholic Church because of its many constraints and continues to explore other Catholic traditions. He has kept up with his education, though: “During this time, he also completed post-graduate work in Education, Philosophy and Metaphysical Science, through which he received his ministerial doctorate and attained to the title of Metaphysician for the International Metaphysical Ministry” (“Our Staff”).

Bagans, and those he surrounds himself with, not only has an overinflated sense of self, but also his scientific abilities. Bagans reflects, “I don’t claim to be a quantum physicist, but I think some of the leading theories of quantum mechanics can help explain the paranormal in terms of natural physical occurrences” (Bagans *Dark* 8). This contradicts his statement that his TV show is about entertainment and jump scares. He uses scientific theory to inflate his credibility and that of his chosen profession, writing that, “Is paranormal investigation really a science? Yes. Yes it is. I don’t consider myself a scientist, but I would not be doing my job if I did not educate myself and stay on top of the latest theories surrounding our field of research.

And what we do is just that -- scientific research. I feel that it's important for anyone who wants to be a paranormal investigator to know what the prevailing theories in our field are, so together we can strive to prove or disprove them" (Bagans *Dark* 213).

He does make a few good points in his defense of paranormal research, the first being that part of the problem is the lack of community. With ratings on the line, every investigation becomes a competition with other teams, meaning that, "The field of paranormal research is at the point that [Thomas] Kuhn described as an immature science, meaning it lacks consensus. There are differing schools of thought that lack a common database to develop a disciplinary matrix. Every investigation team out there has a unique thought process with differing procedures, theories, and biases, which makes it hard for the field to progress as a whole" (Bagans *Dark* 251). Bagans also has a rare moment of self-awareness while making the distinction between phenomenology and the scientific method: "Physicist and Nobel laureate Werner Heisnberg said, 'What we observe is not nature itself but nature exposed to our mode of questioning" (Bagans *Dark* 217).

Despite his defense of science, though, like the Tennessee Wraith Chasers, Bagans believes some investigation skills are just innate, writing, "You can be lured or tricked by demonic entities, so your intuition is very important" (Bagans *Dark* 45) and that his particular gifts come from outside himself: "I felt like I was rewarded by a higher power for working so hard to communicate with the dead and ease their suffering" (Bagans *Dark* 47). There's not always a science to his research, as in one investigation when, "I got that heavy feeling in my gut and my Spidey senses tingled, suggesting there was a spirit in the room" (Bagans *Dark* 79).

While TWC believe their gifts come from God, Bagans doesn't attribute his abilities to any religious background, writing that "Before I started on this journey, I wasn't terribly religious. I was baptized as Catholic, but church only meant one thing to me -- cookies after the service" (Bagans *Dark* 204). Although he sometimes consults Bishop Ouellette, especially for exorcism advice, he doesn't claim a religious practice of his own.

Similar to Ben Hansen's eagerness to believe on *Ghosts of Morgan City*, Bagans says he tries to debunk, but is quick to move to the supernatural answer instead. He says that, "Every time I hear something out of place, I investigate it and try to debunk it. At least 50 percent of the time I find nothing that could have caused the sound" (Bagans *Dark* 64).

Investigating the paranormal isn't easy. His purpose for writing his first book was to help his audience understand what it means to be Zak Bagans, to understand his unique life:

> Finally, I want you to experience an investigation through my eyes. I want you to feel what it's like to be scared, pushed, cold, sluggish, whispered to, creeped out, and touched by an ethereal being or a demonic spirit. It's not like trying to pinpoint the cause of a knock in your bathroom in the middle of the night. The feeling is oppressive, heavy, sometimes evil, magnetic, and even addictive. I want you to know what your body goes through when the flight instinct tells you to run and the intense emotional struggle you can go through when you try to ignore it. When you're already amped up, physically and psychologically, simple noises seem much greater than they are. You don't just hear them -- you feel the shockwave from them as well and have to train yourself to deal with them appropriately. It's a lifestyle that takes years to adjust to and I want to pass on those emotions and experiences. (Bagans *Dark* 9)

Instead of the mission of most other paranormal researchers, Bagans' focus is more on helping the ghosts. He explains, "As cheesy as it sounds, I want to believe the paranormal world was portrayed accurately in the movie *Ghost*. I want to believe spirits of the dead roam the Earth with unfinished business looking for someone who can hear them, and once they find that person, they latch on" (Bagans *Dark* 72). Bagans believes he is the one for the spirits to connect with, but works best with spirits who look like him.

Bagans is casually misogynistic, writing of one female spirit, "[...] on other days she reaches out to touch men as they walk by. In one room, it's believed she climbs into bed with them at night to caress them. I would joke here that Jerusha is my kind of spirit and I was

looking forward to meeting her, but her plight only raised sympathy in me" (Bagans *Dark* 75). He later says if she looks like one of the seductive vampires in *Bram Stoker's Dracula* he "wouldn't be typing this right now -- catch my drift?" (Bagans *Dark* 77).

He writes an entire account of inappropriate behavior he uses trying to entice a female spirit to appear, that:

> In the basement of the Wade House there is an effigy of Jennie -- a mannequin of plastic and papier-maché made by the National Park Service to reenact the last moments of Jennie Wade before she was buried. Her 'body' has been wrapped in cloth and placed on an old wooden bed for dramatic effect. I decided that the best way to entice a spirit to make contact with me was to try a little agitation.
>
> 'Do you not like it when I do this?' I asked straddling the mannequin. Looking back, I was probably being disrespectful and I would be apologizing right now if I had not gotten the response I was looking for. Out of nowhere I was suddenly and forcefully grabbed on the ass. You did not read that last sentence incorrectly. A hand, as plain as I had ever felt, grabbed my butt cheeks and enjoyed a hard squeeze. Normally I would be flattered by this, but I was in a dark basement with two other guys and a doll, so it startled me. (Bagans *Dark* 99)

There's a lot going on here. Bagans doesn't feel like he needs to apologize because his methods were effective. He got the job done by any means necessary, even simulating sex on a mannequin on national TV. He then exhibits homophobia that he's concerned that someone grabbed him when there are only other men in the room. Later in the story he says he believes it was the ghost's father's spirit trying to get him to focus, which doesn't make logical, scientific, or spiritual sense.

Bagan's bad behavior is his lack of self-awareness. He constantly brags about how spiritually empathetic he is. He believes this is the key to his success: "If they [the spirits] sense that you don't care, then they won't either. I think someone who's cold toward these spirits is

actually a skeptic because they don't really believe that they're making contact in the first place or they don't care about the subject. They are there to simply capture a piece of evidence and run off with it" (Bagans *Dark* 117). Bagans differentiates between contact and evidence, seemingly believing that contact is communing spiritually with the spirits while evidence is more cold, hard science, ignoring the dichotomy that he says he's conducting investigations and should be relying on science rather than feelings.

But Zak Bagans' feelings are what made him famous. His ghost-taunting built his career and sets *Ghost Adventures* apart from other paranormal reality TV shows. It's not his whole team; it's just Bagans yelling at ghosts. He defends his style by saying, "I'm not a mouthy guy by nature, but when I get in the midst of evil or hurtful entities, I become the arrogant guy at a party who looks the linebacker in the eye and challenges him and the entire defensive line to a duel. I taunt and provoke, but you have to understand that I do that for a reason" (Bagans *Dark* 122-3).

Bagans defends his tactics to his detractors: "For the skeptics who ask why I don't do more debunking I have this to say -- what do you want me to do?" (Bagans *Dark* 173).

The original *Ghost Adventures* team, like the original *Ghost Hunters* team, has split up over time, with Nick Groff leaving the show to headline his own shows. The official reason may be that a demon followed Groff home from Bobby Mackey's Music World leading to his divorce, but now that he stars and produces in his own paranormal reality shows, the question becomes whether or not Bagans treats his teammates poorly. Bagans writes of the famous scene when he screamed at Nick on camera, featured prominently in the opening of the show: "'Stop running!' I yelled at Nick as he tried to get past me. I wasn't trying to exert my control over Nick, but I think this kind of behavior [Nick leaving the room] is not what paranormal investigators should ever exhibit. It not only discredits us in front of the world, but also in front of the spirits we're trying to contact. If they see us running away, then why would they want to talk to us? Why would they respect us?" (Bagans *Dark* 193-4). Bagans is more concerned about how spirits view him, and his ratings, than how he treats those he works with.

Zak Bagans has been involved with at least seven paranormal reality shows (mostly various rehashes of previous *Ghost Adventures* episodes; for example, *Aftershocks* is the team providing more information or follow-ups from earlier investigations, *Extra Pulses* shows real-time audience comments and Tweets on screen ("You're the ghost hunter in Extra Pulses featuring frightfully fun facts and Tweets!") and *Screaming Room!* features the team sitting in a home theater watching earlier episodes and elaborating on their experiences. In spite of this, he includes a quote in his first autobiography from Dave Scrader, host of *Darkness Radio* and coauthor of *The Other Side: A Teen's Guide to Ghost Hunting and the Paranormal*, that "Some people criticize the current glut of paranormal TV shows and say that they're hurting the field as a whole. I disagree, but I also think there needs to be some change in the future. TV shows are good because they bring their subjects out into the open and make people talk about the paranormal openly instead of in a hush" (Schrader qtd. in Bagans *Dark* 264).

Zak Bagans' youthful boldness has won him legions of fans, and to hear him tell it, thousands of grateful spirits and a few disgruntled demons. He exhibits white male privilege, but is marginalized because of his performance of youth, which makes it difficult to take him seriously. As Dr. Charles Hoge, pop culture scholar at Metropolitan State University writes, "I was watching good ol' Zac hollering and threatening ghosts the other night and it occurred to me that he was trying to extend his privileged space into the afterlife. It seemed that he was using his most dick-swaggering bravado to stake out a space for himself and his privilege in ghostland. It's not enough to have all the unearned advantages in the living world: he wants them preemptively on the other side, too" (Leask and Hoge). Yet until Bagans' personality and investigation style mature, he will remain marginalized out of the realm of serious investigators.

- *Paranormal State* (A&E 2007-2011)

The other prominent youth-driven paranormal reality show was *Paranormal State*, which aired on A&E from 2007-2011 and features Ryan Buell and Penn State's paranormal club, the

Paranormal Research Society. Buell founded the club, which was impressive on its own. Michelle Belanger, author of *The Ghost Hunter's Survival Guide* writes: "when I was in college, we had trouble trying to get the university to sanction a gaming group, let alone something devoted to the investigation of ghosts, demons, and the occult. Yet somehow Ryan Buell had managed to do it [get the university to sanction a paranormal club], at a major university in the mountains of central Pennsylvania" (Belanger qtd. In Buell xiii).The show set itself apart by focusing on helping people not with their property, but with themselves. As Karen Williams explains in "The Liveness of Ghosts: Haunting and Reality TV," "Rather than haunted places, this group [PRS] ('students, seekers, warriors,' as they call themselves) investigates haunted people" (K. Williams 153). Unlike Bagan's dismissal of psychics, PRS works closely with them, often Chip Coffey, to determine how the humans in the house are affecting, and being affected by, the spirits. Williams writes, "In Ryan's approach to his haunted clients, he presents the 'healing of haunting' as a process which renders the ghost discursive -- which makes the ghost speak in and to the present. Ryan's discursive approach also poses the healing of haunting as a kind of talking cure, containing the ghost within reality TV's therapeutic discourses of intervention and recovery" (K. Williams 158). Coffey is the oldest paranormal investigator in this study, born in 1954, and writes of his status as a late bloomer that, "I didn't discover my own gift for mediumship until I was well into my forties. Even though I'd been psychic my entire life, as a medium I was a late bloomer, and I truly believe that this particular ability manifested itself at the point in my life where I was ready to accept it" (Coffey 4).

Ryan Buell, who realized his abilities as a spiritual sensitive early in life, leads the club and the show, and has the final say on investigations and results: "*Paranormal State*, while it does retain some of the performative techniques of the experiential shows, has in fact returned to more traditional modes of documentary to articulate its version of the ghosts of reality TV: the expository voice-over defining the experiences, the interactive interview which attempts to lay bare 'the truth,' and an observational camera which documents from an objective position." But

Buell, as a white man, still has to interpret for us what he has shown us: “The head of PRS, Ryan Buell, is given a voice-over 'director's log’ in which he classifies and qualifies the phenomena he and the viewer encounter” (K. Williams 157). The cast and viewers come closer together, but still remain separate when it comes to evaluating what it all means, the white male show lead is the only one who can do that, a pattern established by Jason Hawes and Grant Wilson on *Ghost Hunters*.

Following the established trope, Buell began researching the paranormal after encountering something as a child he couldn’t explain. He first started reading about psychics Ed and Lorraine Warren, famous for investigating the Amityville Horror House, haunted dolls, and writing several books that have since been turned into films. There have been reports of scandal around their investigations and their personal lives. After Ed’s death in 2006, Lorraine Warren continued the couple's work, appearing on several episodes of *Paranormal State* before her death in 2019.

Before working with Lorraine Warren, their writings inspired Ryan Buell to research further. After reading about the Warrens: “I soon discovered the works of Dr. Hans Holzer, John Keel, and even Carl Sagan. Almost everyone had a differing viewpoint, but they had one thing in common: They were dedicated to pursuing answers about the unknown” (Buell xix). Most especially, “John Keel fascinated me. First and foremost a journalist, he began as a skeptic. His 1957 book, *Jadoo*, exposed mystic frauds in the Middle East and Asia” (Buell 245). Buell writes of being inspired by Keel, and writes of those he investigates that, “That doesn’t mean I always take everyone at his or her word. Even though I want to believe -- in ghosts, demons, beasts, and little green men -- I’m not just going to buy anything. I’ve got standards, you know!” (Buell xxi). He also writes, “I like the saying ‘Be open-minded, but don’t be so open-minded that your

brain falls out'" (Buell 30). Yet William Cooper, in *Behold a Pale Horse*[2], writes that John Keel was actually a CIA plant whose job was to spread misinformation about the paranormal (Cooper 228), so Buell may not have followed the best paranormal mentor.

Buell acknowledges that he has always been a believer, and that as he started investigating, "A childhood friend, Christina (Chris for short), was my first partner. She also happened to be a staunch skeptic. She kept my feet on the ground -- or tried to anyway" (Buell xix). He needed this grounding. He writes that as a high schooler: "In fact, I wanted to believe that there was *something* there so badly, at times I overlooked more obvious natural explanations. If something even *seemed* paranormal -- creaking floorboards, winds -- I was easily convinced it was" (Buell xx).

Ryan Buell, more than other paranormal reality stars, seems to understand the many lines he's asked to walk: skeptic/believer and investigator/entertainer. He muses about *Paranormal State* that, "Like any television series, in the interests of time and good entertainment, the show presents reality through a particular lens" (Buell xxi). Despite this understanding, science is still not Buell's main focus. He explains, "I respect some of the other paranormal reality shows, but they focus on that first part, the evidence. The client becomes a side story at best, whereas to me, they're equally, if not sometimes more important" (Buell 6). Buell is more nurturing than other paranormal reality stars, and focuses on the present rather than the causes of the ghosts of the past. This desire to help others while finding the Truth is another connection between Buell and his professed on-screen mentor: "I think *every* paranormal investigator relates to Fox Mulder, but, to be a little cocky, I believe I have a stronger connection than most. As a child, Mulder experienced a sudden shift that changed his

2 When I bought this book the rumor was that those who bought it immediately went on a government watch list. I mentioned this once at a conference and fellow UTA PhD cohort member, David Purkiss, said he had worked for the publisher and the rumor was completely unfounded.

life. That was similar to what I went through" (Buell 17). Once again, life imitates art, although the trope is getting tired.

Ryan Buell not only believes in his techniques, but has strict training for those who want to work with his Paranormal Research Society:

> Anyone could be a member [of PRS], if you paid your dues, but to be an investigator, you had to take a semester-long training class that met once a week, take five exams (one each for vocabulary, psychology, applied theory, investigation rules and regulations, and a general overview of the history of paranormal investigation), write a ten-page research paper, and then go on three extensive paranormal investigations. You also had to go through a background check and take a psychological exam. If you were a student, you also had to let us see your grade point average in order to watch over your academic performance. (Buell 38)

Buell credits this strict regimen with helping his show retain credibility in the field. He writes, “In fact, an employee of James Randi, the world’s best-known debunker, told me they tried to debunk our show but couldn’t. We present people’s experiences, the factual evidence and research we have, and offer theories. As the employee put it, ‘How can you debunk someone’s testimony? It’s just a he-said, she-said argument. So we just gave up on your show!’” (Buell 178). *Paranormal State* may not present reality, but with their focus on the witness rather than the ghost, their investigation also can’t be disproved. The show kept this reputation throughout its run on A&E, as Buell writes in his autobiography: “PRS now receives more cases than ever...They remain committed to their mission statement: To Trust, Honor, and Always Seek the Truth” (Buell 352).

Unfortunately, Buell’s descent into drug addiction greatly damaged his personal credibility, and through extension, that of the show. While investigating the paranormal he writes of a day he was told, “The demon said it would get my soul when I least expected it, that there were other cases I’d be called to, that they wanted me to go to, and that they’d be waiting”

(Buell 351). He has since connected that demon to his struggle with drugs. Buell is now in recovery and shopping a new TV show.

For Karen Williams, the PRS team has made larger discoveries than ghosts: "*PS*'s young investigators, however, also use the idea of haunting to formulate an intimate and spiritual model of their own citizenship, for being in and of the adult neoliberal world. They find domestic life and family relations haunted, whether this is based in 'real world' issues or the paranormal; and they have internalized the ghost, viewing social and interpersonal relations as fraught with unknown forces that must be faced and conquered" (K. Williams 160). Ryan Buell's youth, and that of his team, cause them to fall into the stereotype of believers, which they embody on their own, but their earnestness and true desire to help was the reason their show was successful with fans.

Many other paranormal reality shows have kept the format of young believers seeking the Truth their older counterparts are unable to see. There has always been the belief of "growing out" of the paranormal, but the success of these shows is based on the younger generation being more attuned to the supernatural. Many of these shows feature the alumni of more prominent shows.

For example, *Destination Fear* "follows paranormal explorer Dakota Laden, previously part of the crew on 'Ghost Adventures'" (Denton), as he, his sister, and their best friend. "travel the county in an RV in what producers say may be 'the most terrifying road trip ever attempted'" (Denton). The show has a unique premise: "To build suspense, locations remain a surprise to all but Dakota" (Denton). Yet the more things change, the more they stay the same: "'My sister Chelsea and I grew up in a house with paranormal activity, and it's gripped us, and my best friend, Tanner, ever since,' says Dakota. 'The three of us have always loved exploring haunted locations but began to realize how much our fears of the unknown affected us and held us back from getting answers. So we're hitting the road in a terrifying attempt to confront and overcome

these fears head on, night after night, as we sleep inside America's scariest abandoned buildings'" (Denton). Their only credential to be a paranormal investigator is a childhood experience that scared them. They use the show to investigate abandoned buildings, so unlike other shows there is no helping others, no altruism.

One of the locations investigated on *Destination Fear* is the Old Pittsburg Hospital. So many paranormal reality shows have investigated this building that the new owners have rebranded it The Haunted Old South Pittsburg Hospital Paranormal Research Center ("Welcome to OSPHPRC") and offer special event tours with paranormal reality TV stars.

Nick Groff, another *Ghost Adventures* alumnus, has had the most successful spin-off career, starring on *Paranormal Lockdown* (which he also produced for Destination America) and *Ghosts of Shepherdstown* (Destination America), the precursor to Ben Hansen's *Ghosts of Morgan City* (Travel Channel). Results come quickly; on *Ghosts of Shepherdstown* he declares the city "cured" of paranormal activity after nine days of without incident.

While Zak Bagans met the other original *Ghost Adventures* teammate, Aaron Goodwin in film school, he writes, "I met Nick Groff during a wedding and found him to be an instant kindred spirit" (Bagans *Dark* 26). This difference in friendship origin stories may explain why Bagans and Goodwin still work together, while Groff has branched out on his own.

Groff also executive produced *Ghost Stalkers* 2014 for one season on Destination America. The show follows Chad Lindberg, a younger actor known for *The Fast and the Furious* and *Supernatural* and John E.L. Tenney, an older paranormal researcher. Lindberg wears new-age clothing while Tenney wears khakis and button-down shirts, exploiting the visual dichotomy in their ages. In Season 1 episode 1 they search for a portal, using a wormhole detector to search for interdimensional entities (a concept popularized by John Keel) and time shifts. The two investigate separately, and follow the *Ghost Adventures/Ghost Hunters* stereotype where the younger investigator yells and cusses while the older narrates in professional monotone.

A refreshing take on youth paranormal investigators is found in 2009's *The Othersiders* which ran two seasons on Cartoon Network. The show features three sixteen year olds, a fourteen year old, and a thirteen year old. The team gathers to look at paranormal reports on the internet and then chooses which is most valid to investigate, similar to what *Fact or Faked: Paranormal Files* would begin doing the following year.

While IMDB only lists first names for the investigators, perhaps because of their status as minors at the time of the show, Wikipedia lists their full names and positions on the team. Jackie Zhao (16 at the time of filming) was a researcher, continuing the trend of females being used predominantly in this role. KC Costonis (16) was the case manager, deciding where the team would investigate. Riley Litman (16) led the team, perpetuating the stereotype that only white males can lead. In the Pilot episode, Litman elaborates on his investigation and leadership style that, "The type of investigator that I think I am is I'm not going to jump to very quick conclusions because we get scared. We gotta use our equipment to capture legit evidence to help us make a decision" ("The Othersiders"). Sam Hirsch (14) was the webmaster, posting results on a GoDaddy website that is now for sale. The youngest team member, Zack Burke (13) worked as the tech manager.

The predominantly white cast investigated the Queen Mary and Alcatraz, similar to their older white counterparts. Robert Lloyd writes about the show for the *L.A. Times* that,

> "The Othersiders" features a Scooby Gang of five teenagers who travel to reportedly haunted locations and apply infrared cameras and EMF detectors (that's "electromagnetic fluctuation," not the '90s British band that recorded "Unbelievable") to assess the presence of unquiet spirits. They are "skeptical" enough not to believe that every weird thing they see or hear is a message from the beyond -- but they do believe in messages from the beyond, and tend to accept what they can't explain as evidence for the paranormal. In the pilot episode they bravely venture into L.A.'s own abandoned Lincoln Heights jail. Ruh-roh! (Lloyd)

Again, the connection between younger investigators and the Scooby Gang, although because of their youth, this instance is the clearest connection. Unlike the stereotype either of the Scooby Gang or of other young researchers, this team presents as more scientifically adept than many of the older reality stars who followed them.

The group is very democratic, and listens to all team voices. They quickly debunk an orb as dust, and instead of a fancy office, their Headquarters looks like someone's parents' garage. Despite their skeptical attitude, they vote unanimously that the Lincoln Heights jail is haunted.

Although not as well-known as *Ghost Adventures* or *Paranormal State*, the younger generation of paranormal reality stars follow a similar style and still fall into the stereotype of believers despite the variety of show concepts they are featured on.

While the purist would want paranormal reality stars to be scientists invested in researching the Unknown, these are TV personalities. Most list themselves on their professional websites or IMDB accounts as actors, not investigators. Some stay in the genre, as Nick Groff has, starring in and producing multiple shows. Others move to more mainstream careers, such as many on the cast of *The Othersiders*. Some were never investigators to begin with; Lauren Chesnut writes in "Neocolonial Scenarios in the Syfy Channel's 'Destination Truth': Scientific Discovery, Tourism, and Ethnography" of *Destination Truth:* "Most of the cast members are younger, probably in their twenties or thirties, mostly male, and seem to have come to Team Truth through their work elsewhere in film and television production" (Chesnut 137). These performers are just passing through paranormal reality TV, and their youth allows them to move through various television genres with ease.

Not only are the performers on these shows young, but for the most part, so is their audience. Daniel Holloway writes in "Travel Channel Tells Ghost Stories to Young, Female Audience" that in August 2014 "Ratings Intelligence also found that *Ghost Adventures* was Travel Channel's most-watched series year to date [...] though the series skews female,

averaging a 0.65 among women 18-49 and a 0.57 among men 18-49, it outperforms other Travel Channel series by a wider margin among men than it does among women. Discounting spinoff *Ghost Adventures: Aftershocks*, the closest in-house competition among men 18-49 is *Toy Hunter* at 0.34, which *Ghost Adventures* outpaces by .23. Among women 18-49 the closest competitor is *Dead Files* at .55, a difference of .1" (Holloway). *Toy Hunter*, as the name implies, follows Jordan Hembrough as he seeks out rare collectible playthings, and only ran for three seasons from 2012-2014, but *Dead Files* is another paranormal reality show, which is entering its twelfth season in 2020.

Zak Bagans' style and swagger work for him, and his audience reflects his youth. Holloway notes, "*Ghost Adventures* also skews significantly younger than other networks' paranormal series with a median age for season nine of 39.1. Though higher rated, *Long Island Medium* and *Ghost Hunters* skew much older at 51.4 and 47.3, respectively" (Holloway). There is a paranormal reality show for every age, gender, and belief system.

Many people leave ghost stories behind as an aspect of their youth. Even Grant Wilson of *Ghost Hunters* admits of children that, "Over the years, they'll be told sternly to stop making up stories, or playing with their imaginary friends. They'll be encouraged to develop a 'healthy' skepticism about anything other people can't see or hear. But when they're little, they're still receptive to a range of supernatural entities and events" (Wilson qtd. in Hawes 194). Some, though, not only keep searching for supernatural Truth, but let the lessons they learn in that realm inform how they approach the "real world." As Karen Williams theorizes of the difference between earlier reality shows that featured contestants being scared, such as NBC's *Fear Factor* and shows where youth empower themselves over their fears and investigate them: "As the paranormal youth show has developed alongside reality TV more generally, however, this focus on spectacles of teen fear has shifted to a far more narrative use of the supernatural to depict a kind of paranormal citizenship for young adults, as found in *Paranormal State*" (K. Williams 152).

The *Scooby-Doo* divide between the human monstrous and paranormal monstrous has had a subconscious effect on all those who watched the show in either incarnation (or those that followed — I have to admit I'm a Matthew Lillard fan). Paranormal reality television reflects the generational division inherent in this *Scooby-Doo* narrative change. Investigators and audience members of a certain age were taught to distrust the old white man in a position of power, to look for the motive of greed for money or property behind the seeming haunting. As the Scooby-verse became less cynical and more open to the possibility of ghosts for ghosts' sake, a new generation of believers was nurtured. The meddling kids, as a marginalized population, are no longer looking to just fight the power, but to explain something that can't explain. Instead of finding the answers, they are more interested in the spiritual (both literal and figurative) journey the questions bring.

The Haunted Museum Tour
WAIVER, RELEASE AND INDEMNITY AGREEMENT

In consideration of being permitted to participate The Haunted Museum tour, I hereby acknowledge and agree as follows:

I understand that my participation and involvement in The Haunted Museum tour at 600 E. Charleston Boulevard in Las Vegas, Nevada may include **spirit detection activity, interaction with spiritual and/or unexplainable phenomena, and/or other unexplainable, unusual or paranormal activities or interactions**, which necessarily **include certain risks** which may or may not be foreseeable.

_____ *Initials*

I acknowledge that the risks associated with The Haunted Museum tour could cause me, others around me, or third parties over whom I have no control, **bodily injury, damage to property, emotional distress, death, or other harm**.

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I understanding the risks associated with The Haunted Museum tour, and even with those risks, **I freely and willingly desire to participate** in The Haunted Museum tour.

_____ *Initials*

I hereby waive, release and discharge any and all claims for damage for harm, personal injury, death or property damage which I may have, or which may hereafter accrue to me, as a result of participation in the Haunted Museum tour. This release is intended to discharge in advance **Hell Fire Media, LLC, Zak Bagans, Zak Bagans' The Haunted Museum and their respective owners, officers, directors, agents and employees** from any and all liability arising out of or connected in any way with my participation in the Haunted Museum tour, even though that liability may arise out of negligence or carelessness on the part of those parties. It is understood that activities such as the ones I will be participating in involve an element of risk and danger of accidents or unknown and/or unexplainable paranormal activity and knowing those risks, I hereby assume those risks.

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I agree to indemnify and to hold harmless, Hell Fire Media, LLC, Zak Bagans, Zak Bagans' The Haunted Museum and their respective owners, officers, directors, agents and employees from any loss, liability, damage, cost or expense which they may incur as the result of my death or any injury or property damage that I may sustain while participating in any activity associated with the Haunted Museum tour.

_____ *Initials*

This waiver, release, indemnity and assumption of risk is to be **binding on my heirs and assigns**.

_____ *Initials*

I understand that by participating I consent to **photo images** taken by staff during this activity to be used in any or all publications and websites.

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I AM AWARE THAT THIS AGREEMENT IS LEGALLY BINDING AND THAT I AM RELEASING LEGAL RIGHTS BY SIGNING IT. I HAVE READ THE ABOVE TERMS AND CONDITIONS IN FULL AND HEREBY ACKNOWLEDGE THEM.

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The Haunted Museum Tour
WAIVER, RELEASE AND INDEMNITY AGREEMENT

CONSENT OF PARTICIPANTS 18 YEARS OF AGE OR OLDER: I hereby attest and acknowledge that I am over 18 years old, that I have read and understand this Waiver, Release and Indemnity Agreement, and that I am willingly agreeing to the same. I understand that I may choose not to sign this Waiver, Release and Indemnity Agreement and that if I so choose, I will not be allowed to participate in The Haunted Museum Tour.

Date _____ Print Name _____

Signature _____

CONSENT OF PARTICIPANTS UNDER 18 YEARS OF AGE: I hereby attest and represent that I am the parent or legal guardian of the participant listed below, that I have read and understand this Waiver, Release and Indemnity Agreement, and that I am willingly agreeing to the same. I hereby provide my consent for the participant listed below to participate in The Haunted Museum tour and I hereby execute the Waiver, Release and Indemnity on his/her behalf as his/her parent or legal guardian. I hereby agree to indemnify and hold the persons and entities mentioned above free and harmless from any loss, liability, damage, cost or expense that they may incur as result of the death or any injury or property damage that said participant may sustain while participating in The Haunted Museum tour. I understand that I may choose not to sign this Waiver, Release and Indemnity Agreement and that if I so choose, the participant listed below will not be allowed to participate in The Haunted Museum Tour.

Print Name of Participant _____

Date _____ Print Name of Parent or Guardian _____

Signature _____

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Chapter Five: I [Want to] Believe Her: The Role of Women in Reality Paranormal TV

Paranormal reality TV struggles to find a clear identity between science and the spiritual, but where it does agree is that the scientific side includes privileged straight white men while women, homosexuals, and minorities are spiritual creatures to be marginalized. This chapter will explore the Canadian all-female paranormal reality show *The Girly Ghosthunters* and the role of women as side characters in male driven shows of the genre. Even male show personalities who present as feminine are marginalized. In some cases, the misogyny is inherent in the programming of these shows, while in others the marginalization of female characters (or men portrayed as feminine) is more subtle.

Female audience has always, and will continue to, influence how ghosts are presented. In the fifteenth century, both witnesses to hauntings and the ghosts themselves were male. But as Owen Davies writes in *The Haunted: A Cultural History of Ghosts*, "The gender imbalance is less obvious in post-Reformation English sources. Although authors and publishers were still predominantly male, in the age of print there was a significant female readership, which may have affected the way in which ghosts were presented" (Davies 14). As women were allowed to read, they became present in the texts, even if that presence was ghostly.

One of the most shocking historical examples of the patriarchy asserting control over female spirituality is the story of the Fox sisters, Maggie and Kate, who helped create and popularize Spiritualism in the Nineteenth Century. The sisters heard and interpreted spiritual rappings and, at the height of their popularity, toured the world wowing audiences with their abilities to communicate with the Other Side. They were investigated several times, using questionable techniques. Horace Greeley reported in the editorial "The Mysterious Rappings" in the *Tribune* that:

> The rooms which they occupied at the hotel, have been repeatedly searched and scrutinized; they have been taken without an hour's notice into houses they had never before entered; they have been all unconsciously placed on a glass surface under the

> carpet, in order to interrupt electrical vibrations; they have been disrobed by a committee of ladies, appointed without notice and insisting that neither of them should leave the room until the investigation had been made; yet we believe no one, to this moment, pretends that he has detected either of them in producing or causing the rappings, nor do we think any of their condemners has invented a plausible theory to account for the production of these sounds, nor the singular intelligence which (certainly at times) has seemed to be manifested through them. (Birnes 161)

The Fox sisters, made to undress at a moment's notice in front of strangers (females in this instance), were 10 and 13 at the time.

They were again examined by three medical professors in 1851 (Maggie would have been 14) and "Their conclusion was that the spirit raps were audible only when Margaret's legs were freed or at least not held tightly" (Birnes 165), meaning that at some point in the examinations, the men were tightly holding a teenage girl's legs closed. One of the sisters did later confess that she was able to produce the rappings by popping her joints at will, but the other clung to the story that the noises were true spirit communications.

In an interesting linguistic note, one of the first spirit messages the girls received was that a former tenant in the Fox house, John Bell, had murdered someone in the house. John Bell is the same name as the Tennessee landowner plagued by the Bell Witch, which is said to have frightened Andrew Jackson and made national news just a few decades before the Fox Sisters encountered their John Bell. The Bell Witch was a female spirit who challenged the patriarchy (legendarily scaring Jackson off the property, eventually killing John Bell), is related in some legends to the Native Americans chased off the land (another assumed connection between Other and spirituality), and was the inspiration for *The Blair Witch Project*.

Although the paranormal has not always provided a safe space for girls and women, it has provided the opportunity for female gender expression. Colin Dickey writes in *Ghostland: an American History in Haunted Places* that Spiritualism was a safe place, "In an age when male-

dominated religious and medical institutions were working overtime to contain, train, diagnose, and treat all women who didn't fit an established mold." He also quotes Volume 3 of *The History of Woman Suffrage* Elizabeth when Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage write that the Spiritualists "'have always assumed that woman may be a medium of communication from heaven to earth, [and] that the spirits of the universe may breathe through their lips'" (Dickey 74), putting the practice in a positive religious light.

William Birnes and Joel Martin point out a similar idea in *The Haunting of America: From the Salem Witch Trials to Harry Houdini*, that "Spiritualism embraced the women's movement, as well as other later reform efforts for temperance, prisons, and labor. Spiritualists represented 'rebellion against death and rebellion against authority,' wrote Ann Braude" (Birnes 248). The intercession of the spirits gave women an opportunity to say things they wouldn't normally be able to say: "Was there any other place but at a séance where a female could express her opinions, especially to men -- some of them important figures in business, law, literature, science, politics, and myriad other occupations that were otherwise closed to women? What's more, men actually listened to what they were told, a rarity in a society where the woman's voice was largely ignored" (Birnes 253). Medium Nettie Colburn was able to use her channeling of male spirits to influence her clients in their decision-making: "There were witnesses to the séances Nettie conducted who later recalled that when she went into a trance, a 'masculine spirit force' communicated through her. The men present listened carefully to what the 'masculine spirit' had to say" (Birnes 261). Famously, she was a frequent guest of Mary Todd Lincoln in the White House and legend has it she channeled Daniel Webster to convince Lincoln to sign the Emancipation Proclamation.

Yet not everyone agreed that Spiritualism empowered women; the stereotypes against women were too strong: "Skeptics and critics found nothing commendable about the so-called 'feminine' personality required to be a medium. The 'stereotype of nineteenth century womanhood' considered that she was 'more spiritual, sensitive, and passive than the male,'

wrote author Mary Farrell Bednarowski. 'In fact, the typical female medium fits this description perfectly'" (Birnes 252). Because of this perceived passivity, women were never the major players in supernatural investigations. As pop culture and Disability Studies scholar Rebecca Stone Gordon writes, sexist and gendered language and attitudes functioned to diminish the reputation of Spiritualism and Mediumship, while the field of parapsychology was simultaneously utilizing the labor of women in the laboratory as both test subjects and precariously employed researchers" (Gordon). When The Society for Psychical Research was founded there one woman on the nineteen-member council, who resigned because she was the only woman, and the next woman wasn't named for another twenty years, something Birnes and Martin find "ironic and imprudent given that women so dominated the spiritualist movement" (Birnes 303). Female mediums occupied a specified non-leadership place in society, with clear guidelines and expectations about what it meant to fulfill this role:

> Many agreed that a woman's enhanced sensitivity and spirituality, as well as her intuitive nature, passivity, and tendency toward 'nervousness' were all qualities that a good medium required. She was also believed to be more virtuous than men, and more willing to sacrifice herself for others, even if it meant suffering, bearing pain, or foregoing her own happiness. In fact, these were the same qualities that women were thought to employ as wife and mother. Stereotypical masculine traits such as strength, willpower, and logical thinking were supposedly not seen in mediums, according to the Victorian view. A man with an aggressive, intense, or forceful personality or intellect -- all considered male characteristics -- would not make a good medium. (Birnes 252)

Perhaps Zak Bagans' aggression isn't as appealing to the spirits as he thinks. Although he claims to get results, the stereotype remains that feminine equals spiritual, in women and men, and that this nurturing spirit is what attracts the spirits.

Despite this, male investigators are what attract the mortal women. The original run of *Ghost Hunters* boasted a strong female viewership, although for the first several seasons the

only women on the cast were those who answered the TAPS phone line and provided the men with the background on their cases. The women were shown on the other end of a walkie-talkie or telephone -- safely back at the office, while men assumed the privileged place, literally in the driver's seat or at the investigation site. And only the men addressed the camera/audience, as Alissa Burger points out in her article "Ghost Hunters: Simulated Participation in Televisual Hauntings": "direct addresses in regular season episodes of *Ghost Hunters* are usually framed through the presentation of information: TAPS team members give definitions of technological equipment or paranormal theory, often against an official black and yellow TAPS logo background [...] the direct address technique is most often used to establish expertise or present information to the viewer" (Burger 172). Nevertheless, while the female cast members were marginalized, the female audience didn't seem to mind. In 2008 SciFi boasted that, "Ghost Hunters also continues to prove immensely popular among female viewers, with this season scoring the highest viewership for any SCI FI original series ever among Women 18-49 and Women 25-54. In addition, this season has produced the top four telecasts among Women 25-54 and the top two telecasts among Women 18-49 in the Channel's history. With the inclusion of Ghost Hunters International, the hit first-year spin-off series, the Ghost Hunters franchise in 2008 to-date has produced the top eight series telecasts among Women 18-49 and Women 25-54 in SCI FI's history" ("Ghost Hunters Triumphs").

Female audiences also flock to Josh Gates's slew of shows -- one female blogger calls him "hunky" -- and excuse his frequent casual misogyny. In his autobiography, Josh Gates pontificates on how he can take the job of Uncle on the Malaysian paranormal reality show *The Seekers*; Gates calls Uncle a "genius" (Gates 42). He wants to be the older man who runs around in the dark with four beautiful young women.

Beautiful women are the key. Audiences don't want to watch women in their fiction or their reality who are not physically attractive. As Barbara Creed writes in *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis,* "Gérard Lenne in his article, 'Monster and Victim:

Women in the Horror Film', is fairly typical of those who find the very idea of a female monster offensive to their rather quaint, but deeply sexist, notions of chivalry. Gerard Lenne argues that there 'are very few monstrous and disfigured women in the fantastic, and so much the better'. He appears to believe that women should be represented only in terms of their 'natural' role in life. 'Is it not reasonable that woman, who, in life, is both mother and lover, should be represented by characters that convey the feeling of a sheltering peace?'" (Creed 3). Women, as the stereotypical fairer and perceived weaker sex, need to be protected so they can fill their societal roles.

Women already run the risk of being frightening and dangerous. Creed explains, "The main reason for this is that most writers adopt Freud's argument that woman terrifies because she is castrated, that is, already constituted as a victim. Such a position only serves to reinforce patriarchal definitions of woman which represent and reinforce the essentialist view that woman, *by nature*, is a victim" (Creed 7).

And even scarier than woman herself, is a feminist. Carol Clover writes of the main character of *Carrie* in *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*: "Feminism, that is, has given her a language to her victimization and a new force to the anger that subsidizes her own act of horrific revenge" (Clover 4). But there is no anger in female paranormal TV stars. They are still subservient to their male co-stars and sympathetic to spirits. Anger is reserved for Zak Bagans--the women may be touched or poked or prodded, but they may not raise their voices.

Female paranormal reality stars are clearly coded feminine. While many claim Dana Scully from *The X-Files* as an inspiration, they haven't followed her fashion patterns toward pantsuits or her attitude of skepticism. With Clover's view that, "The fact that female monsters and female heroes, when they do appear, are masculine in dress and behavior (and often even name), and that male victims are shown in feminine postures at the moment of their extremity, would seem to suggest that gender inheres in the function itself" (Clover 12), which already

visually puts these female TV stars out of the realm of the lead character. Her discussion of male victims, though, is reminiscent of Zak Bagans yelling at Nick Groff for running away in a famous scene from *Ghost Adventures*. Of course the hyper-masculine Bagans would chastise Groff for appearing weak, and worst of all, feminine.

Clover's notable theory of the Final Girl mixes these identities: "The Final Girl is boyish, in a word. Just as the killer is not fully masculine, she is not fully feminine--not, in any case, feminine in the ways of her friends. Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance set her apart from the other girls and ally her, ironically, with the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer herself" (Clover 40). This can be seen with the later female cast members on *Ghost Hunters*, who are allowed to be more in the forefront of the investigations, but not in *Girly Ghosthunters*, which has no Final Girl. Shultzy, their unseen male driver, is always there at the end to take the girls home, or *The Dead Files*, where the female's psychic impressions must be validated by her male retired police officer partner at the end of each show.

While focused on fictional females, Clover's Final Girl separates herself from other women by her willingness to explore. She writes, "At the level of cinematic apparatus, her unfemininity is signaled clearly by her exercise of the 'active investigating gaze' normally reserved for males" (Clover 48). This makes her an anomaly in horror films (which is why she is allowed to live), and would in paranormal reality TV, if such a persona existed. Female investigators on these shows don't investigate. They "feel." They "sense." They are more likely to use divining rods and Ouija boards than EVP recorders and EMF detectors, and are often identified as psychic mediums.

Anne Williams writes about the historical dichotomy between Male and Female in *Art of Darkness: Poetics of Gothic.* She explains:

> Consider, for instance, the following paradigm attributed to the Pythagoreans by Aristotle, who quoted it in his *Metaphysics*. According to this scheme, reality consists of the following ten pairs of opposites:
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | male | female |
> | limited | unlimited |
> | odd | even |
> | one | many |
> | right | left |
> | square | oblong |
> | at rest | moving |
> | straight | curved |
> | light | darkness |
> | good | evil |
>
> These two columns, once commonly called “The line of good” and “the line of evil,” were familiar in intellectual discourse well into the Renaissance. The list beginning with ‘female’ and concluding with “evil” contains several elements now generally associated with a Gothic (or, indeed, a Romantic) aesthetic, whereas the first, “male,” “line of good” emphasizes those qualities privileged by “classicism” and to a lesser extent by the more modern concept of “Realism.” (Williams 18-19)

Paranormal reality television includes many of these male/female elements with the male generally represented by men investigating and the feminine elements represented by the woman connecting with the spiritual and relying on feelings rather than logic. The spirits themselves also follow this feminine coding -- appear in darkness, always moving just out of sight while the investigator remains motionless, often represented by spherical orbs, etc.

In most of these television shows and documentaries, the medium is either female or an effeminate male, continuing the view that feminine equals spiritual. This is also easily seen in

the Travel Channel's *The Dead Files*, where a female medium – who investigates at night – is paired with a day-walking male former Marine and NYPD homicide detective -- she investigates on feelings and images "received" from the other side, while he does research into the facts of the case. The appeal of the show is that their findings often match at the end of the show, presenting the idea that both forms of seeking are valid, an interesting twist on Clover's White Science vs. Black Magic.

While most male paranormal reality stars, especially those who claim a scientific focus eschew the use of psychic mediums like Amy Allan or Jasmine Orpilla, when shows do feature them, they are predominantly female or feminine. Shows such as *Long Island Medium* and *Mama Medium* feature female stars bringing messages from beyond to living loved ones. Women have always been considered the more spiritual, which contributed to the rise of the Spiritualist movement: "In short order Spiritualism became dominated by women: for one thing, they were generally acknowledged to be superior mediums, and many saw in Spiritualism as an antidote to the patriarchal misogyny of traditional religion" (Dickey 74).The HBO documentary *No One Dies in Lily Dale*, which centers on the upstate New York community of psychics and spiritualists focuses on predominantly female mediums, with one effeminate-presenting male psychic, Gregory Kehn, who, despite appearances, is actually a straight white male. Like Kehn, the mediums' clients, and sometimes detractors, are white heterosexuals. But the stereotype is lasting and historical: "Author R. Laurence Moore quoted a newspaper article from the 1850s that labeled male mediums as 'addled-headed feminine men.'" (Birnes 250). The stereotype prevails, despite Zak Bagans' swagger and Jason Hawes' stoicism, that spirits can only be contacted by someone in touch with their feminine side.

Chip Coffey, an older medium, has been featured on *Psychic Kids: Children of the Paranormal* on A&E from 2009-2010, where he met with children who presented with psychic gifts and counselled them on how to control and accept their abilities, which many considered exploitative. He has recently joined the full-time cast of *Kindred Spirits.* Coffey is a gay man who

has found success as a role model in both the gay and paranormal communities. On one of his Twitter threads a user with the handle Spirit Medium Clayton writes to Coffey that, “I think us gay mediums had things pretty rough. Not only were we going through all the feelings of being gay we also are talking to dead people at the same time. Hey MOM, I’m gay.... btw I also talk to dead people. Lol this took a while for mom to wrap her head around” (Coffey, “Coming out of the Closet”). Viewers feel comfortable reaching out to Coffey for advice on their sexuality as well as their spirit guides.

Coffey is a major outlier to the theory of the Scooby-Doo age divide. As a white man born in 1954, and the oldest TV personality considered here, he should be firmly in the Monsters are Human camp. Yet, as a sought-after psychic, it is his job to believe in the paranormal. In his book, *Growing Up Psychic: My Story of Not Just Surviving but Thriving — and How Others Like Me Can, Too*, he even references the show as an outlet of the paranormal and possible influence on children, saying, “And if your three-year-old tells you there’s a ghost under his bed, he might just have seen a scary movie or a television program about something psychic. Many parents tell me that they don’t allow their children to watch scary movies or TV shows, but they forget that even some cartoon series, such as *Casper the Friendly Ghost* or *Scooby-Doo*, feature scary ghosts!” (Coffey 53). While he does warn parents about the imaginations of children, he counsels children with psychic gifts and goes into these encounters as a believer, explaining “I always assume a child’s gift is real until proven otherwise” (Coffey 34). Interestingly, Chip Coffey does reference a TV show that started his path toward paranormal research, but instead of *Scooby-Doo*, it is *Dark Shadows* (the original original version) (Coffey xxix).

Ryan Buell, Coffey’s *Paranormal State* co-star, also writes about the difficulty in accepting his sexuality, but not because of parental or spiritual pressure: “It became more difficult when I discovered that I was bisexual, attracted to both sexes, something that the Church still considers a mortal sin” (Buell 191). Like Coffey, Buell uses his celebrity to help

counsel viewers who came to his show for paranormal answers, but also asked for personal advice: “I received an e-mail from a young man who told me that he was gay, and wondered if he was going to hell. ‘Since you deal with spirits, have you ever come across evidence that suggests that they do go to hell or they are in torment?’ This broke my heart. We humans can be so cruel to one another, but the teachings of Jesus Christ are that of love and compassion. I’ve decided to share my sexuality and struggle over faith in hopes that others will no longer feel as though they are alone or that they can’t be religious” (Buell 193). Both Coffey and Buell display a feminine combination of spirituality and a comforting nature, in contrast to the hyper-masculinity of other paranormal reality television personalities.

The subconscious influences in television have never been in question, and male/female straight/gay stereotypes are highly influential. Nancy Signorielli, in *Girls in the Media: A Content Analysis. A Study of Television Shows and Commercials, Movies, Music, Videos, and Teen Magazine Articles and Ads*, writes about the effect of mass media and the relegating of women to minor roles on young girls. She writes that, “Adolescent girls form ideas about their own lives by observing how girls and women in the media look and behave, their motivations and their goals, what they do with their time and with their lives” (Signorielli 4). The shows available for young women are the ones showing damaging messages. Signorielli explains that the “same media favored by teenage girls often contain stereotypical messages about appearance, relationships, and careers. Findings in the study confirm previous research which shows that appearance is shown as more important -- and more uniformly idealized -- for women than for men” (Signorielli 5).

Signorelli's main findings can be easily categorized:

Positive:

- “Women in the media are often shown as independent, depending first upon themselves to solve their own problems to achieve their goals” (Signorielli 6).

    - This point doesn't hold up in paranormal reality TV, where women depend on male teammates to lead the group, give direction, and reach the conclusions. Even *Dead Files*' Amy Allan requires her male partner to verify her findings.
- "Women are shown as honest and direct in their dealings with other characters" (Signorielli 6).
    - This is a frequent characteristic of paranormal reality TV. The possible outlier would be *Ghost in the Hood*. Jasmine Orpilla's cast mates don't necessarily distrust her, but they do openly mock her spiritual techniques.
- "Women are often portrayed as intelligent and frequently use their intelligence to achieve their goals" (Signorielli 7).
    - Since women are more frequently shown as the researchers, either as mediums or support staff, but not as investigators on these shows, either getting information from spirits or librarians and archivists, they aren't allowed to show their own innate intelligence.

Negative:

- "Women continue to be underrepresented in most media, which limits opportunities to portray women in a full range of roles" (Signorielli 7).
    - *Ghost Hunters* has had a few women on their cast through both iterations of the show, but has mostly used them in support roles. *Ghost Adventures*, which has had cast turnover, has never had a woman as part of the team. The two most popular and influential paranormal shows have kept women from fully participating in all aspects of the investigations. *The Girly Ghosthunters* is the only show to feature an all-female cast, but it only ran one season in 2005.

- “Media’s female portrayals send girls messages emphasizing a woman’s ideal appearance and the importance of this appearance to their lives” (Signorielli 7).
    - Similar to the rumor that A&E paid for one of their *Storage Wars* cast members to have plastic surgery to enhance the sex appeal of the show, *Dead Files* (Travel Channel)’s star Amy Allan’s appearance has changed drastically through the show’s many seasons to match conventional beauty standards.

(Elliot)

- “Both men and women are sometimes seen acting in stereotypical ways” (Signorielli 9).
    - Unlike their fictional inspiration *The X-Files*, paranormal reality TV is clearly split down gender lines with older white men as scientific and logical while the women rely on spirituality and supernatural beliefs.

Nancy Signorielli’s breakdown of the positives and negatives of images young girls see on TV proves that paranormal reality TV, reinforces damaging gender stereotypes and femininity as a marginalized identity.

When teaching and presenting about paranormal reality TV, I generally address the most prominent shows (*Destination Truth, Ghost Hunters, Ghost Adventures, Ghost Brothers*) first, and then ask the class/audience who is missing. Without fail, students or audience members point out that other than the support staff and minor characters, these shows are utterly devoid of women.

Female paranormal reality stars have not reached the fame, popularity, or prominence of the Fox sisters. Many male-dominated paranormal reality shows justify their inclusion of women

on their team, although they are relegated to backstage or small roles. Zak Bagans writes that, "Jay's wife, Ashley, is our still photographer, and she comes along on every shoot. During the first two days at any location, Ashley takes still photos of us while we're doing interviews, researching the location, getting B-roll footage, setting up, or whatever. All her photos get uploaded to TravelChannel.com, and she's definitely a part of the GAC inner circle" ((Bagans *I Am Haunted* 27). While she's part of the inner circle, she isn't important enough to be considered part of the crew on the Travel Channel website, which only includes Bagans, Aaron Goodwin, Billy Tooley, and her husband Jay Wasley. Ashley's role is to support the men, make them look good, and further their careers, at the expense of her own.

Another prominent female paranormal researcher who is featured on male-dominated reality shows is Jael de Pardo, who worked with Ben Hansen on *Fact or Faked: Paranormal Files,* was a frequent guest on Josh Gates' *Destination Truth*, and appeared on *Haunted Highway* with Jack Osbourne. While listed professionally as an actress, not a paranormal investigator, de Pardo did enjoy her time searching for the unknown: "My favorite part about shooting *Fact or Faked* was the office scenes. The dialogue was often a debate of scientific mysteries and I loved it!" (Hernandez). Although she's objectified by interviewer Al Carlos Hernandez as a video game character, the "real life Lara Croft," he emphasizes her role as an actress in that she "played a researcher on the hit series *Destination Truth*" (Hernandez). She "plays" a researcher, meaning she -- unlike her male counterparts -- isn't truly considered an actual investigator.

de Pardo exemplifies the Other as her role in these shows is to be markedly different from the white male lead. The producers of *Fact or Faked* focused on Ben Hansen's experience as a former FBI agent, but articles about de Pardo emphasize her difference and looks: "Raised in NYC, Jael arrived at the age of two from her native Colombia. At four years old she was already being repped by Ford Modeling Agency" (Hernandez). And unlike co-star Josh Gates, with his degrees in Archaeology and Drama, de Pardo attended Fashion Institute of Technology

in NYC and majored in “exhibit design and multi-media studies” “before deciding to move to Los Angeles to pursue acting.” She explains of her academic choices that, “I thought Multi-Media studies would give me a chance to experiment with different forms of art and find my niche” (Hernandez).

de Pardo’s acting career has always put her in the midst of what is young and hip: “In 2006 she signed a three-year contract with Al Gore’s newly launched, youth lifestyle television network, Current TV.” But unlike other paranormal reality stars, who obviously relish their celebrity, de Pardo, on being a performer claims, “It’s more about loving the work, not being in the public eye” (Hernandez).

She also has a better grasp than others are willing to admit of the scope of their shows. She analyzes her participation in two popular shows and concludes, “The biggest difference between the two shows is that I think *Fact or Faked* has a more scientific approach with our experiments and such in tackling these cases. On the other hand, *Destination Truth* has this travelogue aspect where we’re headed to really remote places around the world and having this adventure in the process and doing things such as rappelling down mountain cliffs and crossing waterfalls” (Eramo). de Pardo has participated in both sides of the infotainment divide.

A female paranormal reality star who takes an entirely different approach is *Ghosts in the Hood’s* Jasmine Orpilla, who also goes by the stage name NINJAMAMALICKUM. One article about Orpilla describes *Ghosts in the Hood* as a comedy show rather than a reality show. Orpilla is the show’s medium, and other cast members often mock her while watching her on-screen persona, which seems very true to life for Orpilla. On the webpage for her performance art she has a “Photo of me and my spirit guides” in which she is sitting on a couch in a short skirt holding a champagne flute (her spirit guide?). She recites the familiar trope of childhood paranormal experiences on her website, which has an age restriction of 18 and older, that:

> I am and have been an undercover practicing clairvoyant empathic MEDIUM for many years now, ever since some eye-opening, unforgettable experiences beginning in my

> childhood that set me unwillingly on that path. I tried everything, believe me. Psychologists and different cognitive modalities of analytic therapy did not 'fix' it. Multiple religions and their different teachings didn't 'stop' it. Oh yeah, as much as I still love them even the scientific method and atheism didn't exactly work out for the best. (Orpilla "AAAH")

And, like many other psychics, she attributes her abilities to heredity: "Sooooo…having hit my existential rock bottom, from there, began some gentle digging into my family history: turns out these 'abilities' run along my mother's line (go figure) and continue past me even down to my younger cousins. That doesn't mean my Dad's totally off the hook by the way- he contributes by always wearing this ring that makes him go quiet whenever I try to ask about its insignias. (Sigh.) (Orpilla "AAAH").

Because conventional methods for explaining her spiritual vision didn't help, and her family was not forthcoming with information, Orpilla created her own set of beliefs, that:

> I insist I am at heart and in fact, always will be a steadfast, realistic, common-sense subscriber to logical and critical thinking who:
>
> #1. *Is embarrassed by any New-Age Woo-Woo anything.*
>
> #2. *Integrates daily ritual, as a practical part of my heritage, pride, sexuality and existence as a spiritual person of color.*
>
> #3. *Always puts out the disclaimer that predictions could be <<wrong>> and you should only take home messages that resonate with you, or else sprinkle in a grain of salt because at the end of the day, you must own that it is YOUR gut instinct that is correct*. (Orpilla "AAAH")

In a confusing timeline, the website says she has been "Offering Vocal Destruction© for Ninja Academy since 1909," describing Ninja Academy as an "all-Asian-American multidisciplinary post-prog-punk-bebop band," and offers the biographical information that, **"Ninjamamalickum**, née Jasmine Orpilla, is a Filipina-American vocal medium, ritual

performance artist and composer of experimental music-theatre installations. Though raised in Saudi Arabia and Japan, her roots remain in her family's barrio of Salindeg in Ilocos Sur, Philippines. Her A2-F7 full vocal range and 250+spoken BPM is symbolic of her immersion into various ungendered styles and vocal registers in order to pay respect to the multiple cultures in which she had immersed herself in order to learn traditional musical/performance practices from Japan, China, Philippines, Germany, France and Morocco" (Orpilla *Ninjamamalickum!!!*). Her *Ghosts in the Hood* co-stars use her talents while making fun of her difference, but Orpilla has used her difference to create a space in which she feels comfortable.

Travel Channel's *The Dead Files* just finished its twelfth season, and is clearly split down stereotypical gender lines. Amy Allan is the younger female believer/spiritual medium, while her partner, Steve DiSchiavi, an older white man and former Marine/NYPD homicide detective functions as the skeptic. In a break from other shows such as *Ghost Hunters* and *Ghosts in the Hood*, it is DiSchiavi who does the library research rather than field work. DiSchiavi is filmed predominantly in daylight, looking through archives, property records, and interviewing sources. Allan is filmed at night exploring the house. She is often the madwoman in the attic, acting out her impressions of the haunting and being physically assaulted by the spirits. The pair do not talk until the end of the investigation, while revealing their results to the homeowners. In this moment, they are able to make adjustments to their findings to match each other, fooling the audience into believing their evidence had matched all along. In the most compelling segment of the show, Allan frequently works with a sketch artist in advance of the Reveal, who interprets her report of what she observes, which is then shown to those living in the house to determine if everyone is seeing the same spooky creature. The show's press release explains that:

> In each episode, Allan and DiSchiavi travel to a different U.S. town, where they explore each case separately. As a no-nonsense detective, Steve DiShiavi investigates the facts behind every situation, meeting with witnesses and local experts to piece together the

> real story. Medium Amy Allan channels the dead to understand what spirit activity lies within the haunted building at hand. In order to preserve the integrity of their discoveries, each investigator's methods and findings are kept hidden from the other until the very end. Only then do they finally come together to reveal the results to the homeowners--ultimately formulating into one shocking and undeniable conclusion. ("Travel Channel Takes Viewers")

The show capitalizes on shock and awe with the reveal blending pathos and logos, but doesn't have direct resources to recommend to help with these undeniable conclusions. Allan and DiSchiavi are all suggestions without actual help. They may be able to tell the homeowner to call a voodoo priest and hoodoo practitioner to cleanse their house -- Allan frequently recommends hiring a Reiki Master -- but they don't actually offer contact information, whereas Zak Bagans has an exorcist on speed dial. It is still up to the homeowner to solve the problem, so they are in the same position they were in before asking for help, they just have a better knowledge of what they may be up against. This doesn't make the showrunners frauds, necessarily, but they don't help in any material way; they are literally all talk. Other shows, potentially for the shock value, often film their various cleansing ceremonies and report on the current status of the property, Allan and DiSchiavi just report whether or not their directions were followed.

Steve DiSchiavi brings the cold, hard facts, but Amy Allan's role as a psychic medium is to provide the emotion and voice of the spirits, reminding viewers that the feminine has been associated with the spiritual since before Aristotle. Owen Davies writes about mediums as a nurturing force in *The Haunted*: *A Cultural History of Ghosts* and that current paranormal reality TV "highlights the rise of the medium as exorcist. Rather than abjuring or praying that ghosts depart from houses, mediums act as ghost counsellors, seeking to relieve spirits of their mental burdens. Unlike the clergy, modern mediums have no need of the scriptures, only the gift of

compassion and sensitivity to the needs of the spirit world" (Davies 97). Allan's job is to comfort the ghosts, not the mortals.

The Dead Files had 757K viewers in 2018, and was the fourth highest rated show on Travel Channel ("Ratings"). The show lost out in the Travel Channel rankings to fellow paranormal reality shows *Ghost Adventures, Expedition Unknown, and Legendary Locations* (yet another Josh Gates spin-off).

While IMDB has an entry for a 2017 paranormal reality show with an all-female cast, aptly called *Ghost Stocking*, it has zero episodes listed. It also features the error-laden description that, "New TV Series-New Twist- all female Paranormal Investigation team, 5 on the team, all in shape and ready for anything, Models, runners, bodybuilder's and more, this all female team will try to enhance the activity in a Haunted Location as they will be all alone with no male's present, some comedy, but very scary. The team will also be conducting investigations into Bigfoot, Aliens and more" ("Ghost Stocking"). The show is also mentioned on the Devil Dog Film and Movie Productions site, with no information other than a cast list.

To date, this leaves Canada's *The Girly Ghosthunters*, which aired on the SPACE Channel in 2005 and premiered the same year as *Ghost Hunters*, as the only paranormal reality show with an all-female cast. *The Girly Ghosthunters* clearly did not have near the same longevity as *Ghost Hunters*, nor the same support from its network. It remains the only paranormal reality show with an all-female cast. While male-driven shows feature the latest in technology, the tools the Girly Ghosthunters use are more traditional folk methods; their most high-tech device is a digital camera. The show's budget was much smaller than large-scale American productions: "a full season of the show was created for roughly 1/6 of what a **single episode** of *Paranormal State* cost to produce" [emphasis original] and their choice of technology was both due to these budget constraints and reminiscent of female Spiritualists of the past: "The team made use of equipment that would become standard television fare, such

as thermal cameras, night vision, and electromagnetic frequency meters, but also put traditional divination tools to use. Dowsing rods, pendulums, and Ouija boards weren't uncommon pieces of equipment in the series" (Newkirk).All locations researched are in Ontario, and unlike their male counterparts on other shows, the Girly Ghosthunters don't even get their own vans/SUVs/pickups, they are driven around in a motorhome by a man who is never seen but is identified as "Shultzy," giving the show a vibe somewhere between *Charlie's Angels* and *Scooby Doo*.

If that weren't enough, the name is a clear problem. From the show's official production company, Buck Productions, comes this lack-of-confidence inspiring and exclamation- point-laden description: "Best friends Dana, Jen, Corrie and Nicole are – THE GIRLY GHOSTHUNTERS – a team of brave young girls on a mission to uncover the secrets of the supernatural world! Spooky ghost stories about historical hauntings become real as the gang explores the creepy cemeteries, haunted houses and other locations ghosts are said to live… These girls are cool, courageous and ready for terrifying adventures, are you? Fear has never been so much fun!" ("The Girly Ghosthunters"). The team was a family affair -- Dana and Corrie are sisters, Jen is their cousin, and Nicole is a close family friend.

Girly Ghosthunters founder, Dana Matthews, later co-founded the website Week in Weird in 2008 with her husband Greg Newkirk. In a clear move for self-promotion, she talks about the show in an interview with Newkirk for their own website and claims that "the all-girl angle wasn't a gimmick. 'I never thought about it, actually,' she says. 'When I started the group, it was called the Kitchener Waterloo Paranormal Research Society. It didn't even cross our minds that we were the first all-girl ghost hunting group until a year or so into our investigations. We were just friends who started chasing mysteries together' (Newkirk). This idea hearkens back to the Scooby gang, but while male paranormal researchers claim the Scooby gang or Fox Mulder for inspiration, Matthews says, "'We were just a bunch of typical girls who watched a lot of *Buffy* and wore out our VHS copy of *The Craft*,' Dana recalls. 'We were nerds who were too

old for summer camp and too young to do anything else, so we started doing what lots of teenage girls do – we started playing with spirit boards, pendulums, and reading books about magick, but it was ghosts that really interested us'" (Newkirk). Her nostalgic memories reinforce the stereotype that men want to investigate using technology while women want to communicate. It also strengthens the trope of young girls using traditional folk methods to contact spirits.

Despite differences in pop culture references, Matthews acknowledges reading the same authors Ryan Buell lists as motivators: "When their repeated Ouija sessions began to contact the same spirit over and over again, Dana began to take the paranormal seriously, discovering books by Hans Holzer and Ed and Lorraine Warren, pouring over research in her local library, and hunting down tales of ghostly activity in her hometown of Kitchener, Ontario" (Newkirk). Teenagers interested in the paranormal before reality TV found and were inspired by the same sources, which informed the shows they created, which inspire the teenagers who watch them now.

In one of the most honest EVPs (Electronic Voice Phenomenon) ever recorded, Matthews tells Newkirk that on their first investigation, one not featured on the show, they captured a spirit voice whispering, "I don't know what to say" (Newkirk).

Although Matthews says she didn't think about the fact they were an all-female team, she does acknowledge that their gender caused other paranormal researchers to treat them badly: "'People were so mean to us,' Dana recalls. 'There were a few psychics and paranormal researchers in the area who held events, and we were asked to do one, and got so excited. We made a big poster board, gathered up our best evidence – stuff we were really proud of. It was the only event we ever did because other investigators twice our age openly mocked us to our faces, said we were better suited for a girl band than ghost hunting, and called our evidence fake without even looking at it'" (Newkirk).

Not only were the team members ridiculed because they were female, they were also young. Matthews reflects: “Looking back, I realize now, more than ever, how terrible it is for adults to actively attempt to extinguish the fascination and excitement of kids the way these people did. We were only sixteen, eighteen, nineteen at the time, doing something we were passionate about, and we didn’t have an Amy Bruni [*Ghost Hunters, Paranormal Lockdown, Kindred Spirits*] or a Katrina Weidman [*Paranormal State, Paranormal Lockdown, Portals to Hell*] or an Amy Allen [*The Dead Files*] to look up to. We were figuring it out as we went, but people tried to discourage us at every turn.” More than just discouraging, other investigators were misogynistic and mean, which helps to explain why there hasn’t been an all-female paranormal reality show since *The Girly Ghosthunters* went off the air. “It takes a special kind of awful for a 30-year-old man to call a group of teenage girls ‘attention whores’ for no other reason than being young, female, and hunting ghosts. That actually happened. People are scarier than any supernatural monster” (Newkirk).

Although the show didn’t inspire future female-dominated paranormal reality shows, it did have a strong influence on shows with male casts. For example: “The series’ wider-reaching effects might not be so obvious, but at the time of its release, *The Girly Ghosthunters* was the first straight-up ghost hunting show produced in North America. No cash prizes, no dramatic docu-soap elements between team members, and no client review at the end of the episode. Their premise was simple: a small group of friends locking themselves into a haunted building at night looking for ghosts. If that sounds familiar, that’s because *Ghost Adventures* made the format popular in 2008.” The cast also tried to be autonomous in filming, as *Ghost Adventures* is, but ran up against producer reluctance and budget restraints: “‘We actually argued for having no camera people,’ Dana told me. ‘We met in the middle, and they said if we would accept one camera operator, we could shoot the rest with body cameras, but since the cameras had to be custom made, they were really expensive, and we could only afford two’” (Newkirk).

Newkirk further explains that the main non-gender element that set the show apart is "They're also the only paranormal series to never have a story producer (if you ever see "story producer" in the credits, it's a tell-tale sign that the show you're watching contains scripted elements)" (Newkirk). *Ghost Hunters, Ghost Adventures, Destination Truth, Ghost Asylum,* and *Ghosts of Morgan City* are just some of the paranormal reality shows that feature male casts and use story producers.

Dana Matthews continues to explore the supernatural. She says her research has discovered a breakthrough in the field, telling Newkirk that "'We don't have a set date to debut the experiments because we keep coming up with opportunities to make them even better,' she says. 'We want to make sure everything is perfect, that we've established repeatability, and that we have a good medium to share them. I have no doubt people will look at the paranormal differently when we're done.'"

In another similarity to Zak Bagans, she also owns a museum of paranormal objects, although her Traveling Museum of the Paranormal & Occult is "the world's only mobile museum dedicated to haunted objects that people can actually hold and investigate for themselves. The museum is a regular addition to events on *Paranormal Lockdown*'s Nick Groff Tour and Amy Bruni's Strange Escapes, and is constantly criss-crossing the country to bring supernatural artifacts to crowds in some of the world's most haunted places" (Newkirk), while Bagans' museum has a permanent location in Las Vegas.

Matthews' husband, Greg Newkirk writes this tribute to his wife's time on paranormal reality TV: "*The Girly Ghosthunters* had a lot of cards stacked against them. They were young, they had a silly name, and their show was made by a first-time Canadian television production company with a five person crew and miniscule budget. They were insulted by peers twice their age, underestimated because of their gender, and largely excluded from the paranormal community due to both of those things. In the end, though, none of that mattered, because they

still made history in spite of their challenges" (Newkirk). *The Girly Ghosthunters* was the first all-female paranormal reality show, and so far, is also the last.

Women and feminine men in paranormal reality TV are still marginalized and underutilized, as they are used in secretarial or nurturing roles. Feminine agency is removed in many of these programs. *Girly Ghosthunters* has Shultzy. If Shultzy exists to make the Girly Ghosthunters more like Charlie's Angels, then it perpetuates the myth that women need a man to give them direction. *Dead Files* has a white male former police officer who has to validate all the female psychic's findings for them to be considered findings at all. *Ghosts in the Hood* openly mocks the female psychic on their team, and both requests her skills and dismisses them at the same time. The *Ghost Hunters* reboot has two women out of a cast of six, but the other spin-off from the original, *Ghost Nation*, focuses on the three male cast members. They show a female investigator in their promos, but don't list her on any of the official cast pages.

The stereotype of women having ties to the paranormal hasn't changed much since the centuries of witch trials and executions, when "Some 85 percent of the accused were women, often elderly, widowed, or unmarried. Anything and everything psychic, magical, or occult were thrown together into an indiscriminate jumble that incredibly persists to this day" (Birnes 53). Likewise, reality TV doesn't really differentiate -- female = spiritual, no matter what the woman's particular skill set.

But spirituality does not equal autonomy. Women weren't even considered in control as witches, as seen during the Salem Witch Trials, when "witches were nearly always women, and they were agents of the devil, agreeing to carry out his evil deeds" (Birnes 70). Paranormal reality TV continues this belief that a woman must always have a man -- even if it's Satan -- telling her what to do, even where the paranormal is concerned.

When women are given credit for something, the credit is negative. *Ghost Hunters'* Jason Hawes writes of an investigation where "Clearly, something of a supernatural nature had

invaded the place. As for what might be at the root of it, Kristyn confessed that she had used a Ouija board in a casual attempt to contact the spirit world" (Hawes *Seeking* 107). While the Girly Ghosthunters were inspired by their use of the Ouija board, the overarching stereotype is that of young girls using this form of spirit communication to invite something in that they can't control, usually a male demon. This also leads to the stereotype that poltergeist activity centers on teenage girls, that: "Sheet-wearing was a typically male form of ghost hoax mostly perpetrated by young men, while the simulation of obstreperous ghosts or poltergeist activity appealed more to young females. This gender distinction is in part explained by the social spaces in which young men and women were to be found. In rural villages and small towns in particular, it was socially unacceptable for young women to roam the streets and fields unaccompanied at night, and therefore it was more difficult for them to play the visual apparition without being detected. Young housebound women could more easily mimic domestic-centered poltergeist activity" (Davies 173-4). It is fascinating that there is a perceived gender divide even when it comes to faking the paranormal, although the Fox sisters fit into this paradigm; their spirit guide was never seen, just heard, and always in interior spaces.

And in a patriarchal society, the impact women make on men, especially boys and their budding masculinity, especially worries the ruling class. Owen Davies writes that, "A subtext to these concerns over the influence of female servants was that women could transmit their foibles and weaknesses to boys, potentially crippling their virility in later life. Reginald Scot thought that some men were prone to seeing ghosts due to a 'cowardlie nature and complexion, or from an effeminate and fond bringing up'. One mid-eighteenth century writer even personified 'foolish' ghost beliefs as female, and beseeched 'pull the old Woman out of our Hearts', and thereby extinguish the absurd beliefs imbibed in childhood" (Davies 138-139). Upper class women also worried about the effect of their nursemaid's telling ghost stories to their young boys, so actively worked against it; Owen Davies writes of a movement to "bypass the nurse completely and provide anti-ghost literature to be read *by* children. Women were at the forefront

of this literary enterprise" (139). Masculinity must be preserved at all costs, and belief in the supernatural does not belong in its inherent privilege.

Ghost tourism and paranormal reality TV use the same template -- sex and violence sells. Savannah ghost tour guide Elena Gormley says "the ghost stories she recited would turn the city's turbulent past into a pleasant night's outing. 'A few stories came across as fairly light,' she wrote, 'but most repackaged the rape, abuse, and lynching of vulnerable women into family friendly entertainment'" (Dickey 230). When Savannah tour guides were asked to pass a test of the city's history -- "several groups filed suit against the city, alleging that the test infringed on their right to free speech" (231). The Truth of the matter doesn't matter. The entertainment value, often at the expense of violence to women, is what keeps the audience enthralled.

What happens when ghosts of different genders disagree? In a 2014 episode of *Ghost Adventures: Aftershocks*, Zak Bagans reviews his 2011 investigation of the Lizzie Borden house and interviews the museum's resident psychic, Liz Nowicki. In the episode, which Bagans calls "the most controversial so far," Nowicki put forth the theory that Borden killed her father because he had been sexually assaulting her[3]. Bagans recalls: "Liz stated that the spirit of Lizzie's mother had given her this information. That may be true, but I don't believe evidence from a spirit is strong enough to take public. I'm not saying it didn't happen, but I think Liz should have kept that information to herself...The spirit of Andrew Borden can't defend itself from the accusations of the living, so I chose to. I can't defend every spirit, but I can speak out for one that I've had an encounter with" (Bagans *I Am Haunted* 65). This is a radical departure from Bagan's usual method, where he takes anything a spirit says at face value. But the spirit didn't say this to him. A female spirit said it to a female medium, and Bagans chose to end the

3 I had actually heard this same theory from a tour guide on a ghost tour in Denver, who said he heard it from communicating with Lizzie herself. He also said he and his son had been offered *Ghost Hunters* originally but passed it on to Hawes and Wilson, and that he had spoken with the spirit of JFK, who told him who had killed him. He said he had a book forthcoming, but that the government was suppressing it.

interview rather than hear something that contradicts a male spirit with whom he claims to have made contact.

Nowicki's credibility has been questioned by others, and apparently, she's no longer working at the Lizzie Borden house as of Halloween 2013 when she claims she was sexually assaulted by a ghost, whom she declined to positively identify but heavily implied was Andrew Borden's ghost. None of her claims about the Borden family dynamic can be definitively proven, but Bagans didn't even try. He, who writes about working with the Denver police department to use spirit evidence to solve crimes and states, "The [the spirits] want me to reopen cold cases and stories that don't have proper endings" (Bagans *I Am Haunted* 267), ended the interview when Liz Nowicki said something he didn't like. As open as Zak Bagans claims to be, he still privileges the spirit of a white man over the testimony of a white woman claiming to have contacted the spirit of a white woman.

This is similar to *Ghosts of Morgan City*'s premiere episode when a female ghost communicates with a female witness and a female psychic, but white male Ben Hansen is sent to interview the witness, and later, when his female psychic teammate is getting sick from spiritual energy, Hansen takes over interviewing the ghost as well!

While discussing Josh Gates' all-male expedition to open an Egyptian sarcophagus while there were plenty of qualified female archaeologists available, Andy Dehnart writes of Discovery Inc.'s problem as a whole, that "Of course, one show is one show, and not a big deal by itself. The real problem is the pattern across Discovery shows: science and adventure programs that star and feature men. And if you're truly interested in 'appealing to as broad an audience as possible,' maybe make the on-screen cast reflect that world?" (Dehnart).

Ironically, perhaps, considering his treatment of women on his own show, when he allows them to be on his show, Josh Gates quotes Amelia Earhart in his autobiography, that, "Women must try to do things as men have tried. When they fail, their failure must be but a challenge to others" (Gates 75). Since *The Girly Ghosthunters*, an all-female cast hasn't been

given the chance to try. Maybe these stereotypes of females as marginalized believers are why there aren't more female-led paranormal reality shows. This is what makes *The X-Files* notable -- they switched the gender roles and made the female the skeptic and the white male the believer -- although by the end of the series the female was also a believer. The anticipated change in gender roles fell back into its expected place. To be a believer is to lose all credibility, and always has been. As Davies writes, "It is understandable that recently emancipated middle-class women, with their increasing political and social influence, would feel sensitive about giving ammunition to a patronising male establishment by expressing a belief that, as we have seen, had long been used to highlight the credulity of womankind" (Davies 242).

Carol Clover's most famous theory, that of the Final Girl -- the survivor at the end of the horror film, does not apply as neatly here, as the women presented in paranormal reality shows are often not allowed to use their wits and cunning to defeat whatever goes bump in the night. They are too often left in the van or the library, needing protection from the white men around them. While the Final Girl is often triumphant in fictional films and TV shows, in reality paranormal shows the white cisgender straight men still reign supreme.

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Chapter Six: With Ghost Hunting for All

Greg Newkirk, in his interview with his Girly Ghosthunters wife Dana Matthews, writes, “These days, a ghost hunter without a television show is like a cryptozoologist without a silly hat” (Newkirk). There are so many paranormal reality television shows it’s hard to keep up. And even as there is more diversity in casting decisions, there is less diversity in beliefs--especially in comparison with stereotypes. White straight older men are still privileged, while minorities are marginalized, even if they get more screen time than they once did.

American paranormal reality television continues to be popular even though, on the surface, making reality shows about something that is, at best, an unreality doesn’t seem to make sense. Karen Williams points out in “The Liveness of Ghosts: Haunting and Reality TV” that:

> Reason would suggest that the ghosts of the supernatural are not a logical subject for reality TV. Reality TV’s subjects have largely centered around the ‘real’: documenting ‘real’ people caught in common and uncommon situations, and depicting ‘real life’ through moments both everyday and exceptional. In literature, any hint of the supernatural would immediately place a work outside the parameters of realism. But, in television, the supernatural was a part of reality TV from its earliest formulations, having been a recurring segment on the true-crime magazine show. (Williams, K. 149)

As Williams recognizes, mystery has always been part of entertainment, even, or maybe because, it doesn't make logical sense. Yet even though the formula works and ratings are high, all voices are still not heard.

Change is coming, but there is still reluctance. In “Flying Saucers Against Capitalism,” Peter Brookesmith recognizes that privilege is prevalent in his discipline, ufology, and makes a statement relevant to all reality TV that explores the unknown, that “Ufologists, for all their frustrations, do have something to be thankful for. The feminists haven’t come after them -- yet. In a way this is surprising, given that the vast majority of ufologists are old, white, male, and

hang out in the notoriously racist, misogynist, militaristic (&c &c) West and are therefore surely in need of severe correction, a radical dose of identity politics and perhaps a lashing of intersectionality" (Brookesmith 28). Stereotypes in paranormal research have never changed, neither on reality TV nor in reality. Networks are beginning to recognize their responsibility to the community; Discovery, Inc. aired a #BlackLivesMatter statement: "Discovery's mission is to understand and share the world around us. We will always stand for mutual respect, equality, and acceptance. Our hope is for justice and peace for all. #BlackLivesMatter," but hasn't taken positive steps to improve how it presents privileged and marginalized communities on the nineteen channels it owns.

Society in 2020 is changing rapidly, but the images we see on our screens remain expected and stereotypical – the more things change, the more they stay the same. Skepticism and belief is, and has always been, often divided by race and age. Owen Davies thoroughly explains how social class, age, and gender stereotypes in the 1700s not only influenced paranormal realities, but also how the paranormal was faked, an accusation often lodged at paranormal reality TV. Of the historical context, Davies writes:

> The history of hoax hauntings provides a healthy corrective to the view, repeated over the centuries, that the minds of the uneducated and the poor were weighed down with nocturnal fears and foreboding regarding the appearance of the dead. While criminals, lovers and property speculators obviously benefited from general apprehensions regarding ghosts, the crowds drawn to urban hauntings and the many hoaxes perpetrated by the working classes counter the patronising eighteenth-century portrayals of labourers too frightened to leave their houses at night or frequent churchyards after dark. (Davies)

In addition, gender roles follow historical norms, as Davies continues, "The numerous cases of adolescent servant girls mimicking noisy ghosts also rectify the long-held view that women and children were the most credulous sections of society. As with the activities of some working-

class female spiritualists, we find cultural assumptions and social relations being subverted, with servant girls playing on the gullibility of their masters and the young putting one over on their elders. By playing ghosts, hoaxers may have helped perpetuate ghost-belief by maintaining the currency of stereotypical manifestations, but at the same time they also challenged perceptions of who were the haunted in society" (Davies 185-6). Paranormal reality is doing the same thing; not necessarily faking the paranormal for ratings or fame (although that remains a distinct possibility), but at the very least giving agency to those who are stereotypical believers -- proving that they have the power to overcome their own perceived fears by helping others banish their physical and metaphorical demons.

In the twentieth century, mass media and the rise of reality television helped belief in the paranormal become more mainstream. Davies explains, "Since the 1940s people have become less embarrassed about *expressing* their belief in ghosts. In other words, ghost-belief has become more socially acceptable" (Davies 241). Once it became something that could be more openly talked about, it could be written about more realistically, and shown on screens big and small. This change led to the prominence of paranormal reality TV.

Paranormal reality television brings familiarity to hauntings. There is a clear organization to the shows and easily defined stereotypical characters. Karen Williams notes that, "The narrative structure of the show in fact follows that of the police procedural drama, in which the enigma of the crime is posed and then resolved through a segmented investigation. *PS* [*Paranormal State*] follows this narrative structure quite closely, as each episode contains a repeated sequence of titled investigative steps: 'Case Briefing,' 'House Tour,' 'Interview with Clients,' 'Psychic/Medium Arrives,' 'Historical Research,' 'Dead Time,' 'Evidence Evaluation,' and 'Final Meeting with Family" (K. Williams 157). Most shows follow this pattern, bringing comfort and a sense of control to audiences who know exactly what to expect as they explore the Unknown.

Even the locations are comforting in their predictability. As Kaleb Horton writes in his aptly titled article, “I Went Ghost Hunting and Didn't Find Shit” about taking a ghost tour with reality show personalities in Los Angeles, “You knew the ghost hunters were real because they were on TV, and you knew the houses were haunted because they were Victorian” (Horton). While their detractors focus on the clearly defined tropes, their audiences count on them to bring structure and control to something out of the scope or normalcy.

In his article, “That Creak in the Night Is Music to Their Ears, Neil Genzlinger remarks on the tropes of paranormal reality TV that, “Each of these shows has its own gimmick [...]but they all look the same. Self-appointed experts in the paranormal go in search of ghosts, using night-vision cameras and electronic gear of dubious value, and get all excited when the ancient structures they're wandering around in squeak and creak, as ancient structures tend to do” (Genzlinger). Like the tales told around the campfire, the viewers know what to expect, which limits and fear of the unknown.

Ghost stories are timeless, which is amplified by paranormal reality TV. Alissa Burger notes, “In *Ghost Hunters*, the intersection of haunting and modern televisual technologies works to construct the ghost as a figure of futurity, drawing upon Jacques Derrida’s notion of the ghost as ‘always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*.’ This discourse of the ghost as always returning pulls the paranormal out of the past by instead emphasizing the immediate and future nature of such hauntings and investigations” (Burger 163). Our fearless investigators may not have found the reality of the afterlife in this episode, but rest assured, they will continue to look as long as the ratings continue to rise.

Paranormal reality TV’s popularity, albeit in a niche genre, will allow it to continue to flourish in its success. In the COVID-19 absence of new investigations, teams are revisiting videos of older shows and interacting more online with fans. Travel Channel is using the opportunity for a four-part mini-series, *Ghost Adventures: Quarantine*, in which the main cast members quarantine themselves in Zak Bagan’s Haunted Museum for two weeks. The show

began airing on June 11, 2020, just as the museum reopens to the public after closing down for COVID-19 and for renovations and expansion. And the channel will no doubt have a plan for October, especially after their 2019 press release that: "'Halloween is Travel Channel's Super Bowl,' says General Manager Matthew Butler [...] And we have the biggest stars and experts in the field to take us to every haunted, cobweb-covered corner in America" (Denton). Ghosts have always naturally socially distanced, now the investigators have to as well.

Shows create paranormal belief through over-saturation of personalities and shows, which is not a new phenomenon, as "Ghost-belief was vibrant in the towns and cities where the population was most exposed to the magic lantern and Pepper's Ghost. If anything, it may have stimulated urbanites to go out into the streets and try to see the real thing for themselves" (Davies 215). And now, the internet-saying "pics or it didn't happen" leads to a new method of story-telling, where "in the era of cell-phone cameras and YouTube, a 'pandocumentary culture' has emerged in which 'the recorded event has become a dominant form of communication' (K. Williams 156). Whether the reality shows have camera crews or each team member has an individual camera, documentation is still essential to the shared experience.

Even with all the similarities, a distinction exists between stories that focus on the investigation and those that are more interested in telling the stories of the departed as well as those present at the haunting. Colin Dickey writes that "Information [...] is killing ghost stories" (Dickey 285), but Zak Bagans focuses more on the sensationalism of reality TV, that "This is my conflict, my drama, and my gossip. The paranormal is my *Desperate Housewives, Survivor,* and *Ultimate Fighter* rolled into one" (Bagans *Dark* 177). For Bagans, inserting his personality, preferences, and predilections only enhances the ghost story.

On the other hand, investigators like Ryan Buell have a clear purpose while striving to avoid notoriety, either for the locales or for the team themselves. Buell writes, "It's why we [PRS] don't go to ghost 'hot spots' where they only want publicity so they can continue to make money from paranormal tourism" (Buell 336). As a young team, Buell's team, the Paranormal Research

Society, like the Girly Ghosthunters, had to fight through assumptions and condensation. In what is probably not a coincidence, neither show is currently on the air, while Bagans has his original show and several spin-offs. When Ryan Buell was interviewed on Fox News for the show *Red Eye* he recalls: “When the interview started, I realized that wasn’t what they wanted me for, especially when the host asked if ‘a creepy uncle’ was responsible for my childhood haunting. It took me all the way back to when I first started thinking about doing a show, and I realized how the media thought of the paranormal as a novelty. I wanted to do something better. I thought we had, but would anyone listen?” (Buell 357). Most paranormal reality teams, at the heart of it, want to do something better. Zak Bagans may focus on, or in many cases bring, the drama, and Josh Gates may be looking for Indiana Jones’ fortune and glory, but most teams, at least on the surface, are genuinely trying to help home and business owners find out what is going bump in the night.

Assistance depends on proof, and proof often depends on the quality of the gadgets. Owen Davies recognizes that “Technology could be used to enforce the belief in ghosts as well as debunk it” (Davies 201), but tech also invites collaboration between inventors and investigators. Henry Hanks, in “Paranormal Activity Finds Mainstream Acceptance” interviews paranormal investigator Peaches Veatch who explains that, “‘We attend a lot of conferences and they'll bring out new equipment to try out,’ said Veatch. ‘In the industry we all talk to each other, so it’s all word of mouth. They’ll say, ‘This really works and you’ll really like it’”” (H. Hanks). Reality stars are still those headlining the conferences or charging exorbitant amounts for their tours, but they are inspiring a new generation of paranormal researchers to create and explore. Often the people on the ground are more supportive and collaborative than those who have found fame and fortune -- while not finding ghosts.

Paranormal reality TV hasn’t just provided opportunities for more television, but real world experiences for these community investigators. Dan Bernstein, of the group Paranormal Investigations (part of TAPS) was asked to investigate Georgia Aquarium’s Titanic Exhibit is

haunted: “Without the national exposure of shows like ‘Ghost Hunters,’ I’m not sure that would have been possible” (H. Hanks). These shows are frequently problematic, but can bring positive change at the community level.

Bernstein knows most people aren’t going to change their minds on the paranormal: “Those who do not believe in the paranormal are not going to be convinced otherwise until they have an experience for themselves. On the flip side, it is also difficult to convince a hard-core believer that there is a natural nonparanormal explanation for claims found during an investigation, as well as people that believe that every bump in the night is paranormal. Our advice is to just be open to the possibility that this is real, and if one day you have an experience, you will know it to be true” (H. Hanks). Paranormal reality TV provides this shared lived experience. If a viewer can’t have an experience, they can watch someone else have it in real-time. This creates an echo-chamber where believers can choose a show that “proves” hauntings, while a skeptic can choose shows that focus on debunking the paranormal. Colin Dickey would explain this as, “A haunted house is a memory palace made real; a physical space that retains memories that might otherwise be forgotten or that might remain only in fragments” (Dickey 7). Reality shows bring these haunted spaces and memories into their audience’s homes, and viewers can decide how to process the information and evidence.

The burden of proof is on the reality stars, but also depends on how much the audience is willing to suspend their disbelief. Karen Williams notes, “The visual claims of these shows are equally ambivalent, as their images cannot serve as a direct window on real events, but instead must represent evidence just missed by a panning camera or just offscreen at the other end of a terrific gaze” (K. Williams 154). The ghost is always able to be present, yet just out of reach.

The pseudo-investigative format of paranormal reality TV both enhances credibility and makes valid evidence impossible. If a ghost was captured on a reality show, the show’s mission would cease to exist. As Williams explains, “In order for their subject to remain within the parameters of the paranormal -- meaning without real-world explanation -- or even

hypothetically supernatural, they must use documentary to produce proof which paradoxically demonstrates that a phenomenon remains unexplained" (K. Williams 154). There is no reason for these shows to go away while the truth is still out there.

Williams also considers how the parameters of television itself impacts reality shows, and how "Like a haunting, television is a domestic form which transmits images and sounds from the 'ether' into the home, and like a spiritual medium, it collapses everything into the temporality of its present tense flow and maintains a constant direct address to the home's inhabitants" (Williams, K. 151). Paranormal reality TV is always aware of audience. The viewers are always with the investigators, whether the show is designed to show viewers' Tweets on the screen in real-time, performers break the fourth wall, or the show is produced to make the audience feel included.

The haunting needs both this audience participation and for the show hosts to speak for them. Williams explains, "The ghost itself, though, often remains unsubstantiated, its presence charted through acts of haunting registered only as a series of phenomenological experiences -- raps heard, cold spots felt, shadows glimpsed. Reality television has also relied on subjective representation, using first-person testimonials, video diaries, and hand-held cameras" (Williams, K. 150). The spirit is passive, but the investigators are active first-person, relaying the information of the paranormal's existence and their own agency and self-created ethos. Someone needs to speak for the spirits: "In fact, it is only *in* 'representing' that the 'reality' of these shows can come into being at all; like the ghost, the reality of the paranormal show requires a medium and 'creative interpretation' to be known" (K. Williams 155). The investigators not only have to interpret evidence for the living audience, but also for the ghosts. They must simultaneously be scientists and storytellers.

Zak Bagans, as always, takes this a step further, claiming that investigating the spirit world builds on and challenges all of science: "The existence of paranormal energy challenges the disciplinary matrix of physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, and psychology and presents

an unexplainable anomaly to these fields. We are the hole in their thinking they cannot explain, so they just turn a blind eye and ignore us" (Bagans *Dark* 250). He feels that paranormal investigations are marginalized because it asks questions the privileged scientific world can't answer.

This scientific conundrum doesn't bother most of the target audiences for paranormal reality TV. Most people who seek answers to the afterlife are already coming from an emotional angle. Steven Candor, who directed *No One Dies in Lily Dale* writes of his first trip there that : "There were one or two mediums that gave us messages that were specific and accurate and really made us think twice. But even more striking was the palpable grief that many of the visitors wore on their sleeves and the subsequent relief or at least diminution of that sadness through the psychic messages that were conveyed to them. The emotional journeys that the visitors experienced made me realize there was a film there" (Jackson-Buckley). While the customers in the film are able to find solace through the messages the mediums bring them from the Other Side, the audience, too, find catharsis through watching the process. Knowing there is an afterlife, and a communication system, gives the illusion of power over the unknown.

Ilie Ruby offers a similar observation in "Why We Love Ghost Stories," that "Perhaps this is what we love most about ghost stories. They offer us a sense of control over terror, something unattainable in real life" (Ruby). Even better than just hearing a story around the campfire, paranormal reality TV allows us to watch others, "experts," challenge and provoke the spirits to show themselves, to help the audience feel comfort in their existence, rather than fear. Reality TV combines the written, spoken, and visual narrative to contain the story to a 43 minute package. Like a traditional story, its time is finite. Ruby continues, "Ghost stories fill us with fear and dread. But when they're over, and we return to our comfortable lives. They help us to bond, become a haven, ride the lost rush of adrenaline and create memories on starry nights with those we love" (Ruby). In this case, paranormal reality TV allows us to bond with these groups who can be on our screens whenever we need them, always offering us the opportunity to be

part of something amazing. Lauren Chestnut comments, “Whether or not specific viewers take Team Truth’s investigations seriously, there is always a *chance* that they could witness a sighting of a mysterious creature or the discovery of compelling paranormal evidence while watching at home” (Chesnut 134). Modern society isn’t able to explore the unknown; that’s all been done. But the search for unknown spirits and animals, there is still something to be discovered. Chestnut continues, “[Folklorist Peter] Dendle sees cryptozoology as an antidote of a sort for ‘how weary many people are with a world over-explored, over-tamed and over-understood’” (Dendle 193 qtd. in Chesnut 135). There is a further reason for the need audiences feel to connect with the unknown: “Dendle also contends that belief in cryptid species helps relieve human guilt over environmental destruction, pointing to the fact that many allegedly extinct creatures are considered cryptid candidates” (Dendle 198 qtd. in Chesnut 135). Animals such as the Coelacanth, long considered lost until rediscovered in 1938, give hope that maybe humanity isn’t destroying the planet and its other inhabitants. Maybe the Loch Ness Monster is a plesiosaur, maybe Bigfoot is a human ancestor, and maybe ghosts are real. With paranormal reality TV, audiences have a chance to “be there” when these discoveries are made.

Paranormal reality TV has had an undeniable impact on its corner of American pop culture. The article “Travel Channel Earns Best Year in Network History” reports that: “Top performing series for the year included Ghost Adventures (1.2M P2+ [total viewers]), Expedition Unknown (972K), Legendary Locations (867K), Dead Files (757K), and Haunted Live (549K)” (“Ratings”). These still aren’t *America’s Got Talent* numbers (roughly 8.7 million viewers per episode, the ratings are still enough to keep the shows in constant rotation with the same personalities, literally and figuratively continuing to lead us through any building with the rumor of a haunting.

Even *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* did an episode, “Mickey Mouse Monster Musical,” in which Mickey and the gang go ghost hunting in a castle, in a musical strangely reminiscent of both paranormal reality TV and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Although these personalities bring the ratings, they are not on equal footing where the parent company is concerned; Discovery, Inc.'s on air marketing doesn't mention its channel Destination America (home to *Ghost Brothers, Kindred Spirits, and Paranormal Lockdown*), and features Josh Gates (whose shows have aired on Discovery and Travel Channel) prominently but nothing about *Ghost Adventures* and Zak Bagans (which airs on Travel Channel). Regardless, these shows recycle concepts and personalities, even if not everyone makes the ad campaign.

It's only fair to admit that I am writing from a position of privilege myself. Although I am a woman, I am white, straight, educated, and upper middle class. I have tried to be mindful of and acknowledge my own privilege, and not write from the position of White Savior. My background has caused me to reach different conclusions than others in some cases. For example, writing about *Ghost Brothers*, pop culture scholar Tiffany A. Bryant points out the positive, that:

> *Ghost Brothers* provides onscreen racial representation that has been missing from the paranormal television industry through the routine absence of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) participants, especially as knowledge-holding paranormal investigators. If present, BIPOC representation often occurs on an auxiliary level via quick interviews with applicable owners, staff, visitors, and/or witnesses of allegedly haunted spaces. But more often than not, on these white-dominated programs, "diverse" representation happens through the narrative objectification and manipulation of BIPOC's stories as reported spirit identities (historicized victims of systemic wrongdoings whose stories and translated by a white dominant discourse). (Bryant)

She further contrasts *Ghost Brothers*' approach to the spirits they are trying to contact with other shows that feature aggression and taunting. When the team investigates Magnolia Plantation in the series premiere, rather than being condescending to the memory of those who have died or trying to manipulate the dead or their memories, Bryant points out that *Ghost Brothers*

"transforms the typical representation of Blackness-as-the-oppressed-and-objectified-Other normally found through an authoritative white gaze by not only showcasing Black men as active voices of Black history, but also by resisting the traditional Othering of the supernatural through the humanized treatment of the deceased as people, let alone as extended family (such as affectionately talking about Black 'auntie' cultural tendencies while investigating the dwelling of Aunt Agnes, the onsite conjurer female spirit in the series' premiere)." While there are clear stereotypes in the performances of *Ghost Brothers* (meeting in a barber shop, investigating plantations in the first place), they are more authentic than paranormal reality shows with all white casts to audiences of color.

However, People of Color are not who Discovery, Inc. markets to. In their April 2020 ratings report, the only mention of African-American audiences is in relation to the OWN channel, co-owned by Discovery, Inc. and Oprah Winfrey's Harpo Productions. The Travel Channel, which airs *Ghost Brothers*, only lists ratings for total audience and women, even though it will air a second *Ghost Brothers* spin off, *Ghost Brothers: Haunted House Party*, beginning in July 2020. The title of that show has a racially-charged connotation, whereas the same channel's *Ghost Adventures: Quarantine*, which has the same basic premise, has a much more generic title.

The visual imaging of these groups' Travel Channel shows is also markedly different, with the Black *Ghost Brothers* team looking frightened while the white *Ghost Adventures* crew, wearing industrial masks, look definitely at the camera.

Media analyst Nancy Signorielli notes that stereotypes on television are important in the viewer's identity formation. She references UCLA Professor Patricia M. Greenfield who states: "Television can do more than reinforce stereotypes. It is so powerful a medium that, with careful planning, it can also be used to break down social stereotypes" (Signorielli 10). The question then becomes, is there any careful planning involved in reality TV? Or is the rush to produce too intense? *Ghost Adventures* is currently airing Season 23 -- 23 seasons in 12 years. While Zak Bagans feels the need to help spirits cross over, he doesn't recognize his responsibility to his viewers, and continues to front a show with no evidence of inclusion. He leads a team of white men and dismisses the work of marginalized investigators in his show of privilege.

Sara Boboltz and Kimberly Yam write in "Why On-Screen Representation Actually Matters" that the normality of under representation of marginalized groups is dangerous in that: "It can even serve as a proxy for experiences audience members haven't actually lived, shaping their views on people of color and women — and shaping the way those people view themselves" (Boboltz). They continue by citing research that found, "In a 1976 paper titled 'Living with Television,' researchers George Gerbner and Larry Gross coined the term with a chilling line: 'Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation'" (Boboltz). Privileged identities are able to make powerful change, even in the realm of reality television, and should move to become more inclusive and remove harmful stereotypes from their shows.

In "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack, Peggy McIntosh asks," "Having described it, what will I do to lessen or end it?" (McIntosh). Awareness of the stereotypical tropes is the first step, as well as educating audiences how privileged and marginalized identities are used to divide skeptics from believers. The audience may be comforted by the patterns of investigations and personalities, but they are unfair to performers and viewers alike.

At the end of the 2017 semester when I used these shows in my classroom, one of my students wrote in her course evaluation: "I think this lack of diversity/accurate representation in

the ghost/cryptid hunting industry is awful. Somewhere out there, a little brown girl is watching her favorite TV show and wishing she could be a ghost hunter. She doesn't have a role model that looks like her to look up to, so chances are she'll give up her dream of being a ghost hunter. I think the producers should worry about the societal impact of their shows rather than the money and ratings." The continued marginalization of minorities through the popular culture of paranormal reality TV is significant as it affects the views of Self and Other of those who consume this media. Representation matters, but authentic representation matters more.

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