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THE TROUBLE WITH GHOSTS

> The best evidence for the natural history of ghosts remains in the ordinary, the unconsidered, and the everyday.
>
> —Roger Clarke, *Ghosts: A Natural History*

Our task in this book is to explore accounts of human encounters with ghosts, broadly defined. I recount many of the stories of ghostly encounters that were shared with us over the course of two years of data collection. Along the way, we will travel to places said to be haunted and, at times, delve deeply into historical records that pertain to eerie tales. This study has one main objective: to understand the persistence of uncanny experiences and beliefs in an age of reason, science, education, and technology and how those beliefs and experiences reflect and serve important social and cultural functions.

"I am sometimes asked what those who think they have seen ghosts have really seen," wrote Louis Jones (1959: 2) in his study of ghost stories in New York. "I cannot answer that with any great assurance." Neither can I. Certainly, the reported ghostly encounters that fill the pages of this book range from relatively mundane occurrences to highly dramatic and spectacular happenings. And, surely, all of us are quite capable of fashioning any number of rational twenty-first-century explanations for these kinds of strange accounts and hence brush off these so-called ghosts as hallucinations, fanciful interpretations of simple coincidence, products of peculiar psychological states

of mind, or simply overactive imaginations. Skeptical cynicism is easy and not always, or even sometimes, without merit. Yet a snickering dismissal of ghostly encounters overlooks the obvious persistence of these experiences; how ghosts are, at the very least, kept alive by the telling and retelling of stories;[1] and how these ghosts are understood and function in everyday life. Our effort to understand requires that we suspend disbelief and frequently engage people as they struggle with their own doubts, and start with questions instead of answers. I invite our readers to do the same.

In the fall of 2013, I was speaking with an elderly man who expressed interest in our research. As with most of these kinds of conversations before and after, the man, who was tall and thin, had a white beard, and wore thick glasses, eagerly offered his own mysterious experience. He recounted in detail a time that he saw thirty-eight eagles soaring over Mankato, Minnesota, our mutual hometown, and his interpretation of that admittedly extraordinary sighting. I have heard many stories like his, and for good reason. At 10:00 A.M. on December 26, 1862, Brigadier-General H. H. Sibley carried out President Abraham Lincoln's orders to hang thirty-eight Dakota natives in Mankato. My hometown remains the site of the largest government-sanctioned mass execution in U.S. history, which is especially salient every fall during the Wacipi powwow that is held in honor of the thirty-eight executed natives. Their spirits are frequently seen in our hometown in a variety of forms even when the powwow is not under way. I listened to the old man's story with interest but did not reach for my pen, paper, digital recorder, or informed consent form.

On the surface there appear to be close affinities between, say, a person who sees an apparition hovering over his bed, a Native American who communicates with a dead ancestor, two college students who have a rudimentary conversation with a spirit on a Ouija board, and an evangelical Christian who has been taken by the spirit of the Holy Ghost. Or, as Tom Rice (2003: 96) similarly explains, "It is a small step to move from believing in the devil and angels to believing in ghosts." There are also important differences that make this

1. Diane Goldstein and her co-authors appropriately add that ghost "stories contain spirits; they capture them for us and keep them before our eyes, scaring us but containing that fright in narrative form" (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007: 4).

"small step" a much larger leap than it may seem. In fact, despite surface similarities, the devout Christian who attends church frequently, believes in faith healing and spiritual gifts brought forth from a baptism with the Holy Spirit (including vocal gifts, or "speaking in tongues"; prophecy; and miracles) is among the *least* likely to believe in ghosts (see Bader, Mencken, and Baker 2010; Baker and Draper 2010) for reasons best articulated by David Hufford (1995: 18):

> The rationality and empirical grounding of belief are separate from its "truth"; many false beliefs are rationally held on empirical grounds (e.g., the belief that the sun went around the earth, as held in antiquity), and many true beliefs are held without rational or empirical grounds.

In addition, the various institutions that mediate between experiences and beliefs play a crucial role. Religion and spiritualism bestow "core beliefs" (Hufford 1995: 29) that, to the faithful, can conventionalize encounters with "spirits," just as the core beliefs of the fervent empirical scientist may be inclined to dismiss them. Consider Christian demonology as one example.

The presence of demons in Christian theology is far from mysterious, as there are numerous references to demons throughout the Holy Bible.[2] Their origin is readily accounted for: "The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to earth, and his angels were thrown down with him" (Rev. 12.9). Henceforth, these pure spirits—evil fallen angels—would breed with, multiply, and maliciously afflict the living, including "Mary Magdalene, from whom [Jesus] had cast out seven demons" (Mark 16.9). The Gospel of Matthew is especially thick with references to those "who were possessed with demons," of which Jesus "cast out the spirits with a word" (Matthew 8.16; see also Matthew 7.22, 8.28–32, 9.34, 10.8, 12.24–28). Mark repeats some of the same tales, adding new details. One in particular stands out: the messiah commanded, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!" And Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" The

2. In fact, at least according to Scripture, it is abundantly clear that Jesus spoke more about hell than he did about heaven.

demon replied, "My name is Legion; for we are many" (Mark 5.8–9; see also Mark 1.34, 1.39, 3.15).[3] Since a Roman legion—the basic unit of the ancient Roman army—consisted of various cohorts of ranked and specialized divisions of soldiers (a total of 4,200–5,120, depending on the era of the Roman empire), the word "legion" implies not only hostility but also an enormously large population of evil spirits in a social organization of hell that, not surprisingly, is just as hierarchically ranked as the Catholic church itself.

Scriptures are rife with demons malevolently influencing the living: possessing people; tormenting them; causing insanity, blindness, muteness, and many other afflictions. Demons bring about both great strength and illness in addition to suicidal behavior, self-isolation, self-degradation, and violence. These biblical demons are terrifying, yet it is surely comforting to the faithful to repeatedly read that they are driven away and shown to be mere charlatans before the mighty power of God—although not to be trifled with nonetheless (see Acts 19.13–16). Since the Bible refers to demons with specific names and specific functions, the most frequent of which is Beelzebub (literally, the Lord of the Flies), subsequent Christian demonology conceives of these spirits as rank-ordered specialists of evil. Sitri, to cite one of many possible examples, is a prince of hell who rules over sixty legions of demons; he is a master of seduction whose evil specialty is to enflame people with lust and a desire to show themselves naked.

We have gone far enough into demonology to make the point: for the faithful, these kinds of complex and sophisticated belief systems can be understood only as a cosmology that conventionalizes the eerie while providing ready-made interpretive schemes for human activity in which ghostly spirits—demons, in this case—are always lurking about and therefore, perhaps, are not that uncanny in the end. After all, the demonic influence of Sitri, to return to our example, can be felt in everyday life inasmuch as it is observed in the

3. For Luke's accounts of demons, see Luke 4.33–35, 7.33, 8.27–33, 9.42, 11.14. It seems that John didn't have much to say on the topic, except for a smattering of accounts of how Jesus was sometimes thought to be a demon (see John 8.49, 10.21). Even strictly within the New Testament, this is in no way a complete list of the references made to demons, the majority of which contain the same explicit or implicit message: "if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Luke 11.20).

highly destructive, self-degrading recklessness of celebrities ranging from Tiger Woods, who apparently now has been excised of Sitri, to Anthony Weiner, the infamous political peter-tweeter.

The ghostly encounters that fill the pages of this book, unlike the awe-inspired story of visitations from native ancestors, baptisms with the Holy Spirit, and the casting out of demons with the Word of God, are experienced and understood *outside* powerful social structures and conventionalizing cultural beliefs. Certainly, some people in this study made use of their religious and spiritual beliefs to help interpret what they experienced or how they responded (e.g., by praying, burning sage, or calling a priest). However, for clarity it was necessary for this research to focus on ghostly experiences that lurk outside the nomos of religion and spirituality, which are equally worthy of study but fall into an entirely different set of social and cultural dynamics. In fact, it is the ghost who is neither conventionalized by religion and spiritualism nor explained away by science and reason that is the most potentially troublesome, partly because "such beliefs and experiences are dually rejected—not accepted by science *and* not typically associated with mainstream religion in the United States" (Bader, Mencken, and Baker 2010: 24).

THE TROUBLES THAT LURK

Ghosts are troublesome and in many ways beyond the obvious. Indeed, the obvious trouble with ghosts—their capacity to frighten and terrorize—is among the most misleading. Surely, the ghosts of popular culture are frequently horrifying, such as Freddy Kruger in Wes Craven's *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise (1984–1991), who, out of vengeance against the parents who burned him alive, stalks and murders teenagers in their dreams. Likewise, Steven Spielberg's *Poltergeist* series (1982–1988) chronicles a family under attack from a league of ghosts controlled by a nineteenth-century religious zealot who is literally hell bent on abducting their daughter Carole Anne. Even comedies such as *Ghostbusters* (1984, 1989) portray ghosts as a terrifying menace who, in this case, would have destroyed New York City and beyond were it not for the awkward but well-equipped heroics of Bill Murray and Dan Aykroyd. Admittedly, these are popular films from my era of coming of age. Older readers will recall their own—perhaps *The*

House on Haunted Hill (1959), *13 Ghosts* (1960), *The Haunting* (1963), *The Exorcist* (1973), or *The Amityville Horror* (1979). Younger readers might recall *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), or *Scary Movie* (2000–2013). And surely, all of us can reflect on the ways that dastardly people evoked fears of ghosts (and other monsters) for selfish plots that were cleverly thwarted by Scooby-Doo (1969–present) and his motley gang of "meddlesome kids." In popular culture there is no shortage of terrifying and menacing ghosts.

Everyday ghosts are a different story altogether. From the earliest empirical studies of ghost lore (Jones 1944) to the more recent (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007), one conclusion is apparent: most often, ghosts of everyday life seldom do anything more than subtly make their presence known. Or, stated differently, given all of their otherworldly powers to defy the known laws of nature, the majority of everyday ghosts are dramaturgically impaired. Ghosts are most often indifferent to the living. When ghosts bother to pay us any attention at all, that attention is more frequently friendly and even helpful than malevolent. Indeed, as we illustrate later, the harm associated with ghosts is sometimes ironically the other way around: accounts of ghosts can bring harm to the dead, and occasionally it is the dead that ought to fear the living. Thus, Jones (1944: 246) concludes from his remarkable study of 460 items of ghost lore:

> It is assumed that a ghost will terrify. . . . The first observation must be that over half of the revenants are neither friendly nor unfriendly toward the living, but supremely indifferent to them. . . . These indifferent dead come for some minor purpose of their own and pay the living little or no heed. . . . They are neither sad nor glad, but preoccupied. . . . Almost never does a ghost hurt a person unknown to him, almost never does he act without cause. . . . Many ghosts come back in the best and kindliest frame of mind. They are helpful, consoling, rewarding, informative or penitent as we have already seen. Even, occasionally, they are in a lighthearted laughing mood, but these are rare. It should be reemphasized that the figures do not substantiate belief that ghosts need universally be feared. Those who have harmed the dead may well take care, but any-

> one with a clear conscience is as safe with a ghost as with one of his neighbors.

Fifteen years later, in his extended analysis *Things That Go Bump in the Night*, Jones (1959: 17–18) more wittily makes the point again:

> In all fairness ghosts have gotten an undeservedly bad name. . . . [A] long-standing tradition has led people to think that meeting the dead is a harrowing experience and fraught with great dangers. This is nonsense and statistically unsound. What this country needs is a Society for the Prevention of the Defamation of the Returning Dead.

If, in contrast to the ghosts of Hollywood fiction, everyday ghosts are most often indifferent or benign, then on what grounds can they be deemed troublesome? Allow me to suggest a few.

The trouble with ghosts is they do not die. Of course, a ghost cannot die because presumably it is already dead or residing in some plane of deathless existence. Ghosts can be driven away, as with an exorcism or by use of a charm, but they are otherwise above death or beyond death. This is not, however, what I mean.

Scholars and academics of all kinds have confidently predicted that belief in ghosts, as well as all manner of the supernatural,[4] will fade into extinction with the scientific—if not evolutionary—

4. Throughout this book, I use the word "supernatural" sparingly and do not use the word "paranormal" except as part of the term "paranormal investigator." "Nature," of course, is an abstraction. Nonetheless, "nature" refers to a set of governing laws that can be observed, tested, and otherwise empirically verified. Thus, the "supernatural" is necessarily that which defies the known laws of "nature." We can accept this definition. More frustrating is the mismatched grab bag of what is deemed "supernatural": ghosts *and* aliens, Big Foot *and* extrasensory perception, demonic possession *and* déjà vu. Surely, there is an important difference between, say, the person who believes he was abducted by an alien and the person who believes she was comforted by the ghost of a dead mother in a time of grief. I am uncomfortable with the word "paranormal." At best, "normal" is a statistical abstraction. At worst, "normal" is among the most brutal(izing) concepts in the history of ideas. In contrast to "nature," there is no "normal" (except as an approximation); thus, in one sense of the word, all things are in some way paranormal.

advancement of society and culture.[5] The anthropologist Anthony Wallace, for example, confidently wrote that "belief in supernatural beings and in supernatural forces that affect nature without obeying nature's laws will erode and become only an interesting historical memory" (Wallace 1966: 264). "The process," Wallace adds, "is inevitable. . . . [A]s a cultural trait, belief in supernatural powers is doomed to die out, all over the world, as a result of the increasing adequacy and diffusion of scientific knowledge" (Wallace 1966: 265). The theologian Rudolf Bultmann expressed the same sentiment when he wrote, "Now that the forces and laws of nature have been discovered, we can no longer believe in *spirits, whether good or evil*. . . . [I]t is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time believe in the New Testament world of daemons and spirits" (Bultmann 1953: 4–5).

It is therefore not surprising that scholars have regarded belief in ghosts as idiotic or depraved—or, at the very least, in the words of the historian Keith Thomas (1971: ix), that ghosts have been "rightly disdained by intelligent persons." Newbell Puckett (1931: 9) stated it much more offensively when he deemed that folk beliefs of this kind "are found mainly with the uncultured and backward classes of society, white or coloured; and it is to such retarded classes rather than to either racial group as a whole that reference is made"—thus adding race and class antagonisms to this history of scholarly elitism. There is little doubt that "most academic theories have assumed that folk belief—especially beliefs about spirits—is false or at least unfounded, 'non-rational' and non-empirical'" (Hufford 1995: 11), or that "our whole civilization is so neurotically suspicious of anything remotely suggestive of the supernatural" (Wren-Lewis 1974: 41).

This brings us to a related trouble: *because a ghost seemingly defies rationality, the person who believes risks his or her credibility*

5. Scholars have also called the persistence of beliefs in the supernatural a dismal index of contemporary and backward ignorance. For example, Victor Stenger wrote in *Physics and Psychics* that he was "astonished that so many people in a modern nation like the United States still take the paranormal seriously" and that he "shudder[ed] at what this fact implies about the general state of scientific education in America" (Stenger 1990: 298).

and stigmatization. As Richard Kalish and David Reynolds (1973: 219–220) wrote:

> Knowing the skepticism that is attached to mystical experiences, many persons are reluctant to admit to such occurrences until they have ascertained that their listener is sympathetic. They know all too well the assumptions that persons experiencing the return of the dead are mentally ill, drug-addicted, or alcoholic, and they avoid exposing themselves to this attack. Even the possibility of risking laughter or teasing will undoubtedly be avoided.

Likewise, most contemporary scholarship on ghosts and beliefs in the supernatural hinges on assumptions of deprivation and marginality—that, in short, "unusual belief or experience must be more common in individuals who are socially marginal, deviant, or psychologically disturbed" (Emmons and Sobal 1981: 50). From this perspective, marginal groups of people—the poor, women, the elderly, the uneducated, racial and cultural minorities—are theorized as more likely to believe in the supernatural as a means to cope with the strains of their disadvantaged status in society (Fox 1992; Glock and Stark 1965). Related variants of this theory suggest that "paranormal beliefs arise in response to the alienation produced by crises of the human condition" (MacDonald 1994: 35), as well as by rapid social change (Greeley 1975; Lett 1992). In this view, the supernatural bestows a sense of meaning and control in the face of chaos and uncertainty. Scholars of this ilk tend to take either a religious or a secular approach to their conceptualizations of the alleged relationship between marginality and supernatural beliefs. Those on the religious side argue that salvation from existential crises is the comforting appeal of traditional religion, and accordingly, with a decline in religiosity people may be more persuaded by the supernatural as a substitute (Orenstein 2002). Indeed,

> religious narratives and experiences can offer similar experiences, but ghost legends come with fewer strings attached—one does not have to accept religious principles, participate

> in an organized group, donate tithes, or even believe in order to feel the pleasant rush of possibility offered by a good ghost story. Supernatural legends invite their listeners into metaphysical mystery in a simple, come-as-you-are and do-it-yourself fashion. (Thomas 2007a: 46)

Those on the secular side argue that society itself has become an inescapably alienating "juggernaut," and supernatural beliefs are one pathway to an empowering, transcendental re-enchantment of everyday life—a view best expressed by Barbara Walker (1995: 5):

> In mainstream American society (and perhaps in other societies, too), which prides itself on scientific advancement, technological know-how, educational superiority, and computerization of almost everything, the supernatural functions as a transcendental element. It goes beyond the mechanical, the empirical, the quantifiable, the provable, and beyond the immediate and practical. It resonates with the idea that even though we have advanced technologically, there still are elements and concerns that rest outside our arena of control or conscious understandings. . . . [I]t suggests an attempt to believe in and connect with a "larger" universe in a world that has become increasingly sophisticated and objective on the one hand and abysmally narrowed and single-focused on the other. . . . In such a world, where the individual may sense a certain loss of control, belief in the supernatural (itself quite possibly outside of our control) ironically returns more direct power to humans: We may feel powerless before the juggernaut of technology, but technology is powerless and perhaps irrelevant when juxtaposed with the supernatural—and beyond it all, humans still have access to their supernatural realms.

In this way, available scholarly literatures most frequently suggest, explicitly or implicitly, that there is something wrong with people or their social worlds—"whether conceptualized as marginality, deprivation, alienation, or deviance" (Emmons and Sobal 1981: 55)—that makes them compensate with absurd, albeit sometimes enchanting,

superstitious beliefs (also see Friedlander 1995; Gilovich 1991; Kurtz 1991; Shermer 1997).

The persistence of these theories is perplexing, considering that they have little empirical support or merit. Rice found in his study, which involved 1,200 random-dialed telephone interviews with adults across the nation, "how poorly social background factors account for paranormal beliefs" and that "the deprivation theory is not especially useful in explaining who believes in classic paranormal phenomena. . . . People who are routinely marginalized, such as African Americans, the poor, and the less educated, are often no more likely than other people to believe" (Rice 2003: 101, 104). John Fox's study of General Social Survey data from 1984, 1988, and 1989 concludes that "reported paranormal experiences are largely independent of major sociodemographic variables and hence provide little support for cultural source explanations of reported paranormal experiences. . . . These findings suggest that deprivation theory has little empirical support" (Fox 1992: 429).

Indeed, and in contrast to the convictions that supernatural beliefs would vanish, Gallup polls for decades have shown that a *majority* of Americans—75 percent—believe in at least one of the supernatural phenomena surveyed (Gallup Organization 2005). In fact, Gallup polls clearly show that, over the past decade, there has been a significant *increase* in the number of people who believe in the supernatural, with demonic possession the only category showing a decline. Apparently, at the turn of the millennium, Satan was alone in his significantly decreased cultural capital.[6]

What differs is simply who believes in what. "The supernatural is democratic," as Jeannie Thomas (2007a: 46) writes. Ghosts are among the most common of the supernatural beliefs; in a random sample of 1,637 people, Christopher Bader and his associates found, "nearly half of Americans believe in ghosts" (Bader, Mencken, and Baker 2010: 44)—roughly the same number of people who believe that global warming is caused by human activity (see Leiserowitz

6. On the basis of a random sample of 1,648 Americans, Christopher Bader, F. Carson Mencken, and Joseph Baker (2010: 175) found that "the more education acquired, the less likely people are to believe in supernatural evil" and the "belief that Satan is the primary cause of evil in the world declines steadily and dramatically with income."

et al. 2012). Thirty-seven percent of Americans believe in haunted houses (Lyons 2005). Various studies indicate that women are more likely than men to believe in ghosts, hauntings, and witches (Bader, Mencken, and Baker 2010; Lyons 2005; Newport and Strausberg 2001), as well as in precognition and extrasensory perception (Fox 1992; Goode 2000; Tobacyk and Milford 1983), and that women are also more likely to report such experiences (Bourque 1969; Greeley 1975).[7] "More than a third of Americans believe that extraterrestrials exist, and another 12 percent are absolutely certain" (Bader, Mencken, and Baker 2010: 47). Men are more likely to believe in extraordinary life forms on the whole, such as Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, and extraterrestrials and the UFOs in which they fly (Goode 2000; Tobacyk and Milford 1983).[8] Men are also more likely to believe in astrology (Lyons 2005). Forty-three percent of Americans "exhibit belief in ancient, advanced civilizations such as Atlantis," and "another 30% are undecided on the matter" (Bader, Mencken, and Baker 2010: 51). Common measures of social class (education and family income, in particular) "are not associated with the empirically supported measure of extrasensory perception, clairvoyance, contact with the dead, and mysticism"; neither is marital status (Fox 1992: 428). As this research also finds, with increased levels of education Americans are more likely to believe in haunted houses (Gallup Organization 2005). Some literatures report that African Americans are more likely to believe in classic supernatural phenomena (such as ghosts), while whites are more likely to believe in UFOs (Wuthnow 1978), although there appears to be no correlation between education and beliefs in extraterrestrials (Goode 2000). In fact, when it comes to education, Rice (2003) found that better-educated people are more likely to believe in extrasensory perception, psychic healing, and déjà vu—although the wealthiest and best

7. Some scholars have suggested that this "may also be due to a sexist association of women with nonrationality" (Emmons and Sobal 1981: 55).

8. "If there is a trend here, it appears that men are somewhat more interested in 'concrete' paranormal subjects. In theory, at least, it *would* be possible to capture, kill, or find concrete physical evidence for the existence of Bigfoot, lake monsters, or extraterrestrials—and men seem to enjoy the hunt. Women have greater interest in more ephemeral topics" (Bader, Mencken, and Baker 2010: 108).

educated may be the least likely to report beliefs in classic supernatural (Mencken, Bader, and Kim 2009).

And what about the religious people? Empirical data on the relationship between traditional religion and supernatural beliefs are much more complex and divided. On one hand, a negative hypothesis asserts that people who subscribe to traditional religious beliefs are less likely to believe in the supernatural, because it is an endorsement of spiritual beliefs that are outside of church doctrine. On the other hand, a positive hypothesis suggests that both traditional religion and the supernatural "affirm the existence of realities beyond the mundane existence of everyday life" (Wuthnow 1978: 71); therefore, belief in either one is more likely to be supportive of the other (Goode 2000). Various studies show that both of these hypotheses are true *and* false (MacDonald 1995, Mencken, Bader, and Kim 2009; Orenstein 2002; Sparks 2001).

As it turns out, there is a curvilinear relationship between religion and beliefs in the supernatural (Baker and Draper 2010), and the issue is best explained by the *structure* of those belief systems—not the content of the beliefs themselves (also see Bader, Mencken, and Baker 2010). "For those not strongly tied to a specific, exclusive religious tradition through frequent practice, there is a significant positive relationship between Christian beliefs and beliefs in the paranormal. Meanwhile, for those attending religious services frequently, the relationship is severely attenuated" (Baker and Draper 2010: 415; see also Orenstein 2002). Belief in ghosts (and the supernatural in general) is greatest at the mid-level of conventional religious belief and practice—that is, among people who have a nonexclusive spiritual outlook and are moderate in how they practice their religion, "in stark contrast to those whose style of belief is more absolute or certain, whether in favor of, or opposition to, conventional religiosity" (Baker and Draper 2010: 422; see also Mencken, Bader, and Kim 2009). In other words, the evangelical Christian and the radical empirical scientist share a bed when it comes to absolute and certain belief structures, and they are among the least likely to believe in things like ghosts. The rest of the moderately religious, or spiritually flexible, population—arguably, the majority—is more likely to believe.

So what are we to conclude? Clearly, belief in ghosts has proved just as impervious to extinction as ghosts themselves. Moreover, just as a

ghost can be driven out of a person or place, the people who believe in ghosts are marginalized, despite evidence that those beliefs are *normative* among a large proportion of the population. Those who believe in ghosts are especially likely to be marginalized by scholars, for whom these kinds of unpalatable folk beliefs are, at worst, symptomatic of pathology and, at best, an amusing but otherwise inconsequential myth. In fact, the use of the word "myth" in the social sciences says it all: it is usually used to imply nonfactual, ignorant, and even patently false beliefs that aggravate the problems of society and the hardships people experience (e.g., "rape myths"). This is unfortunate, considering that a myth is traditionally defined as a sacred story—"sacred" because the stories concern morality, ideals, expectations, and cautionary advice and are important means by which people link the past with the present as they body forth into the future. Perhaps if we were to think of ghostly encounters and the stories we tell of them as various forms of myth and mythmaking, in the truest sense, we would not be so dismissive or shocked to discover that ghosts refuse to die or otherwise vanish from our private and public spaces.

The trouble with ghosts is they are cross-cultural and transhistorical, yet they must also be understood as a uniquely modern phenomenon. On one hand, various accounts of communicating or otherwise interacting with the dead can be found everywhere and throughout history. It can be argued that belief in and experiences with ghosts may be a historical and cultural universal: from ancient Egypt to the Aztecs, from the writings of Homer to the jinni of old Arabian religion. On the other hand, the whole of the supernatural is a decidedly modern innovation.

As Émile Durkheim (1915: 39) points out, the "supernatural" refers to "all sorts of things which surpass the limits of our knowledge; the supernatural is the world of the mysterious, of the unknowable, of the un-understandable." Hence, unto the supernatural we haphazardly assign an enormous range of sometimes overlapping and frequently contested phenomena: ghosts, demons, angels, witches, fairies, monsters, the occult, extrasensory perception, clairvoyance, telepathy, UFOs, alien encounters—indeed, everything (and anything) that cannot be explained by the accepted knowledge of our time. Or, at the very least, the "supernatural" refers to everything that we cannot *make* understandable through socially accepted means of knowledge pro-

duction, especially, in our era, the application of science, reason, and technology. Hence, as Durkheim insightfully argues, the concept of the supernatural is necessarily a modern idea. There can be no "supernatural" without "the sentiment that a *natural order of things* exists, that is to say, that the phenomena of the universe [are] bound together by necessary relations, called laws" (Durkheim 1915: 41). He elaborates:

> When this principle has once been admitted, all that is contrary to these laws must necessarily appear to be outside of nature and, consequently, of reason; for what is natural in this sense of the word, is also rational, these necessary relations only expressing the manner in which things are logically related. But this idea of universal determinism is of recent origin. . . . [I]t is a conquest of the positive sciences. . . . In order to arrive at the idea of the supernatural, it is not enough, therefore, to be witness to unexpected events; *it is also necessary that these be conceived as impossible*, that is to say, irreconcilable with an order which, rightly or wrongly, appears to us to be implied in the nature of things. Now this idea of a necessary order has been constructed little by little by the positive sciences, and consequently the contrary notion could not have existed before them. (Durkheim 1915: 41–43, emphasis added)

Or, as David Hufford (1995: 24) similarly explains, "Telescopes and microscopes, computers and laboratories, years of training—all are necessary to make officially authoritative statements about the world. This reflects a shift in the construction of cultural authority that really crystalized at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth."

Thus, for example, Pliny the Younger (A.D. 61–115), a Roman letter writer, author, lawyer, and magistrate, wrote about what we would deem a classic haunted house in ancient Athens: in the night, one could hear the noise of clashing iron and rattling chains. The sound would come nearer and nearer until, suddenly, an apparition appeared: an old man, pale and emaciated, in chains. In Pliny's account, the terrors of this nocturnal apparition drove away living residents until the home finally was deemed damned and uninhabitable. When the philosopher Athenodorus came to Athens, he discovered the home, was

impressed with its size and low price, and was not at all afraid of the ghost. When the noise and apparition appeared to Athenodorus, he did what apparently none of the other residents had thought of: he acknowledged the ghost, who then beckoned to him with one finger. Athenodorus followed the slow-moving ghost into the courtyard and carefully marked the spot where it suddenly vanished. The next day, Athenodorus had the spot dug, and the skeletal remains of a long-dead person entangled in chains was found. Once the bones were given a proper burial, the house in Athens was haunted no more.

The tale of Athenodorus's home contains all of the recognizable elements of ghost stories that we currently tell, some two thousand years later. There are, in fact, quite a variety of Greco-Roman ghost stories (see Collison-Morley 2009). That should not be surprising, since the ancient Romans believed in various shades of the dead for whom there were festivals, official days, and rituals by which the living and the dead routinely encountered one another. Because "anomalies are relative to the existing picture of what constitutes the normal" (Truzzi 1971: 638), the ghost, as we know it today, could not be conceived by those people or by any collective group of people who do not regard the universe as governed by immutable and empirical laws, no matter how much the stories resemble one another.

The trouble with ghosts is the many and varied ways in which they make themselves known to the living. Because a ghost can make itself known to the living in so many ways, enormously varied experiences end up lumped together more by convention than by what they have in common. My first cue to this trouble with ghosts appeared early in our fieldwork when I discovered that the word "ghost" often proved problematic. For many people, "ghost" implies a visual confirmation of some kind of evanescent form that is "perfectly recognizable but is unquestionably a ghost because of its translucent and somewhat film-like form" (Jones 1959: 11). For that reason, many participants in this study were not sure that they had encountered a ghost and remained uncertain that such phenomena were even possible, simply because they did not *see* something that approximated the conventional *image* of a "ghost." Instead, many of our respondents were simply convinced that they had experienced something uncanny—something inexplicable, extraordinary, mysterious, or eerie. They trusted what they experienced, knew they could not explain it in any rational kind

of way, and were unsure about how to label it. Indeed, as Sigmund Freud (2003 [1919]: 125) observed, "The essential condition for the emergence of a sense of the uncanny is intellectual uncertainty," and experience often does not adhere to cultural constructions of a ghost.

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that a ghostly encounter can be experienced in "a wide variety of guises and forms" (Jones 1959: 5). Simply drawing from the accounts collected in this study—and the list is far from exhaustive—we can say the following:

- Ghosts sometimes appear in a visual spectral form (most often as some kind of recognizable human appearance; at other times, as a spectral shadow, mist, or orb); sometimes as a disembodied voice (occasionally speech but more commonly audible human expressions associated with emotional states such as a moan, laughter, cry, or scream); and most frequently in no visual or identifiably human acoustic form at all.
- Ghosts sometimes make an audible presence by what appears to be an invisible interaction with inanimate objects in the environment; "objects are heard but not seen" (Jones 1944: 244): they knock on doors, rattle windows, scratch on walls, make the distinctive sound of footsteps, and creak floors.
- Ghosts sometimes manipulate inanimate objects in the environment: they inexplicably rearrange items on a shelf, hide things from the living, turn lights and other electrical devices on and off, leave gifts, open drawers, tilt pictures on walls, turn on water faucets, break dishes, and open and close kitchen cupboards.
- Ghosts sometimes make a nonvisual somatic imprint on people: they make the living feel as if they are being touched or clothing is being tugged on; they bring about experiences of inexplicable cold spots, perceptions of being pushed, or choking sensations.

In short, unto the word "ghost" fall a huge variety of perceived encounters with "something," and the range of those somethings has little, if anything, in common except that the teller cannot rationally account for what he or she experienced. For our purposes, we also use the term "ghost" in this generic, catch-all form. However, in the

course of our research, we discovered discrete kinds of ghosts that require distinction, because they concern particular kinds of experiences that have much in common: apparitions, phantasms, wraiths, poltergeists, specters, and phantoms (which we define and discuss in detail in Chapter 3).

As all of these various troubles indicate, ghosts are thick with social and cultural relevance. As the pages that follow illustrate, ghostly encounters, and especially the stories people tell about them, reflect deep-seated cultural beliefs. Not unlike sociologists, ghosts sometimes compel the living to harness their understanding of society, culture, and, especially, history to make sense of what they have experienced. As we heard from many people, ghosts embody our hopes just as much as our fears—at individual, local, and broadly shared levels. As many reported accounts show, ghosts challenge people to understand and in that way expose important everyday practices of both meaning making and "sense making" (Vannini, Waskul, and Gottschalk 2011). Ghosts articulate moral frameworks as they appear to us as spectral embodiments of good and evil, right and wrong, desirable and undesirable, and they comment on matters of human responsibility. And because ghosts continue to haunt our everyday lives, we summon the dead sociologically by uniquely examining how people report experiencing ghostly encounters.

Excellent bodies of literature are available on the ghost *stories* that people tell, particularly among folklorists (see, especially, Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007). Excellent literature on *belief* in ghosts is also available, particularly among sociologists of religion (see, especially, Bader, Mencken, and Baker 2010). And there are excellent sources that describe the *history* of ghosts (see, especially, Clarke 2012). But, with the partial exception of Freud (2003 [1919]) and the much more relevant work of the folklorist Diane Goldstein (2007), no literature examines how people experience what they believe are ghostly presences and the consequences thereof. *Ghostly Encounters* seeks to change that.

ANTICIPATIONS OF THE UNEXPECTED

The content of this chapter is mostly the product of deskwork—the usual distanced academic labor that Richard Mitchell (2002: 49)

aptly describes as "limited to an interview here or there, some weekend visits, and comforting review of mute books, articles, and news clippings." That changes with the chapters that follow, as we closely examine the ghostly encounters that people report and visit places with haunted histories. To ease this stark transition, I conclude with a brief overview of how the rest of this book is organized, focusing on the questions and key issues that each of the subsequent chapters addresses. Do not, however, expect any answers here—at least, not yet. After all, both the authors and the readers of a book about ghosts and hauntings ought to embrace the potential to be surprised by something unexpected. Anything less would be injustice to the topic. Along the way, do not be alarmed if you experience strange ambiances, for ghosts most certainly haunt the very pages of this volume.

Because the topic is innately interesting to most people, we enjoyed significant attention, as we conducted this study, from colleagues, the people we encountered daily throughout our research, and even our children, who at this point know far too much about ghosts than elementary-school students should. Not surprisingly, it is the stories that people told that elicited the most fascination, especially their dramatic content. To cite just a few, they include the ghost of a witch who haunts all those who step on her grave; the portal a woman showed us in her home that she believes is a gateway to the afterlife, around which she hears spirits and sees apparitions; and the shadowy specter with luminescent eyes that reportedly chased a young man and his friends out of a cemetery. The responses of friends, family members, and colleagues who heard these stories varied quite a bit; the most common response, however, was fascination, followed by skeptical rolling of the eyes, dismissive chuckles (or hisses of disbelief), and final punctuation consisting of statements or questions regarding the sanity (or sobriety) of the people to whom we talked. That response was not surprising, either, and most of the people we spoke to were all too aware of how their stories threaten their perceived sanity. In Chapter 2, "Ghostly Reason," we listen very carefully not so much to what people say but to how and why they say it. In so doing, we illustrate the complex relationships among rational thought, empirical observation, struggles with a will to (dis)believe, and what we can only superficially deem unreasonable conclusions.

In Chapter 3, "Ghostly Typology," we provide a highly descriptive classification that illustrates the rich diversity of ghostly encounters that were reported in this research. I distinguish among types of hauntings and forms of ghosts, identifying four types of hauntings (intelligent, residual, anniversary, and historical) and six major forms of ghostly encounters (apparitions, phantasms, wraiths, poltergeists, specters, and phantoms). Chapter 3 concludes with common characteristics of ghosts, regardless of form or type of haunting, and ends with rare accounts of truly terrifying experiences that are distinct from the normative ways people report experiencing ghostly encounters.

In Chapter 4, "Ghostly Legends," we take a detour and a road trip to explore such legends. It is a detour because, unlike in the previous chapters, those who recount ghostly legends often have not experienced anything eerie or uncanny at all. It is a road trip because, more so than in previous chapters, we developed Chapter 4's content through fieldwork—time on the proverbial road that branched out along many literal and figurative detours. Unlike the personal narratives that largely constitute the rest of this book, here we focus on stories that are told among various people over time—stories that are often richer and more dramatic. As is made evident, things do not have to be true to be consequential, and that which is "true" exists at many different levels of what is "real." In the end, even the skeptic will have to concede the reality of ghosts and their capacity to exert influence on the living and the dead.

The book concludes with Chapter 5, "Ghostly Speculations," in which I reflect on the two years we spent among ghosts and hauntings: the amusing and terrifying, comforting and tragic stories; the people met along the way; the time culling historical documents, carefully transcribing words and reflecting on photographs taken in cemeteries, attics, and basements. What general understandings can we distill from all of this? When people report a ghostly encounter, what, exactly, is it that they experience? What aspects of contemporary experiences with ghosts and hauntings merit further research? I conclude with ghostly speculations, for, in the end, all of these things haunt the margins of what can be reasonably concluded.