IN TRO D UCT I ON

The Supernatural in Society,
Culture, and History

Dennis Waskul
Marc Eaton

In 1966, anthropologist Anthony Wallace confidently predicted 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” (264). Over half a century later, it appears Wallace could not be
further from the truth. In all fairness, though, Wallace simply articulated a
long-standing academic position regarding the supernatural, a subject that
many scholars regard as, in the words of historian Keith Thomas, “rightly
disdained by intelligent persons” (1971: ix). Since the Enlightenment era,
philosophers and other scholars have assumed that irrational supernatural
beliefs will give way to the rational endeavors of scientific experimentation
and empirical observation. Despite such confident predictions, supernatural
beliefs and reported experiences persist and even flourish in the current era.
Perhaps these scholars have failed to recognize that it is “far harder to kill a
phantom than a reality” (J. Thomas 2007: 81).

In the twenty-first century, as in centuries past, stories of ghosts, vampires,
and monsters of all kinds both thrill and terrify us, inviting us to imagine that
our familiar surroundings may be more enchanted than we thought. Despite—
or perhaps because of—advanced scientific understanding of the natural world,
people continue to report beliefs in and firsthand experiences with supernatural
phenomena. The supernatural remains a part of everyday life, and the time has
come to acknowledge that such beliefs and experiences are not doomed to ex-
tinction. We are past due for a concerted effort to understand supernatural be-
liefs and experiences—and that is precisely the main objective of this volume.
A recent Chapman University survey (2015) indicated that approximately half of all American adults hold at least one supernatural belief, by which we mean a belief in abilities or beings whose manifestation transcends accepted scientific understandings of the natural world and conventional religious doctrine. Of these believers, 41.4 percent believe places can be haunted by the spirits of deceased humans, 26.5 percent believe the living can communicate with the dead, 18.1 percent believe aliens have visited earth in modern times, 13.9 percent believe fortune-tellers and psychics can foretell the future, and 11.4 percent believe Bigfoot is a real creature. Other surveys report even higher percentages, between 68 percent (Bader, Mencken, and Baker 2010) and 73 percent (Moore 2005), of Americans believe in at least one supernatural phenomenon. Regardless of the precise percentage, the conclusion is obvious: it is normative for contemporary Americans to report beliefs in the supernatural. In fact, more contemporary Americans believe in the supernatural than scientific evidence that global warming is caused by human activity (Leiserowitz et al. 2012) or that humans evolved through natural processes (Pew Research Center 2015). Furthermore, most of these supernatural beliefs have increased over the last quarter century. According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2009), belief in contact with the dead and witnessing the presence of a ghost doubled between 1996 and 2009. Newport and Strausberg (2001) found less dramatic but nonetheless consistent increases since 1990 in reported beliefs in hauntings, alien visitation, clairvoyance, and channeling.

Americans are not alone. A recent U.K. poll, for example, found that 52 percent of Britons believe people have experienced ghosts and that 38 percent believe people have witnessed alien spacecraft visiting Earth (YouGov 2013). Likewise, Lyons (2005) reports that the populations of the United States, Canada, and Great Britain generally hold similar levels of belief in astrology, extraterrestrial visitation to Earth, and the ability to communicate mentally with someone who has died. Christopher Bader, Joseph Baker, and Andrea Molle (2012) indicate that rates of belief in astrology, communication with the dead, and telepathy among the Italian population are higher than those reported by David Moore (2005) in a Gallup poll of adult Americans. On the other hand, American teens and college students are less likely than U.S. adults to believe in extrasensory perception, telepathy, alien visitation, communication with the dead, astrology, and several other supernatural abilities (Farha and Steward 2006). Another poll (Pollack 2016) showed a less consistent generational decline in supernatural beliefs: American teens are less likely to believe in UFOs (29 vs. 35 percent) but more likely to believe in ghosts (44 vs. 41 percent) relative to their adult counterparts. Despite minor cultural and generational differences, survey data consistently show...
that large proportions of people living in scientifically and technologically advanced nations continue to believe in phenomena that cannot be explained by established science.

These beliefs may be both fed and reflected by the plethora of supernatural books, television shows, and movies that crowd our shelves and screens. Sales for the Harry Potter books top 400 million copies (Scholastic, n.d.), while the Twilight saga has sold over 155 million copies (McClurg 2015). In addition, the film adaptations of these book series have grossed a respective $7.7 billion (Nash Information Services, n.d.a) and $3.3 billion (Nash Information Services, n.d.b) in global sales. Aside from these fantasy fiction novels, our televisions are full of dramatized and reality-style supernatural story lines. Dramatic shows like the aptly named Supernatural draw nearly two million viewers each week (Porter 2016), and reality-style paranormal investigation shows like Ghost Hunters and Ghost Adventures each average approximately one million weekly viewers (Hibberd 2014; D. Holloway 2014). The supernatural is also hot at the box office, where “found footage” horror films such as the Paranormal Activity series capitalize on our fear that those bumps in the night may be a demonic presence (Box Office Mojo, n.d.). More recently, zombies have taken over the silver screen (Rutherford 2013). In fact, Mikel Koven found that “more zombie movies were produced in the dozen years after 9/11 than the sixty-two years before” (2015: 93). This post-9/11 zombie fascination has spilled over to television, where AMC’s The Walking Dead consistently ranks as one of the highest-rated television shows in recent history (Kissell 2016). These patterns of media consumption reveal a voracious contemporary appetite for supernatural stories of all sorts.

These supernatural manifestations in popular culture are worthy of scholarly attention because of their symbolic significance alone: they represent our worst fears in an age of terrorism, global warming, and other large-scale changes that threaten to destabilize or destroy life as we know it. However, in an era when interactive media and reality television blur the line between fantasy and real life, these media representations have also fueled the growth of organizations and identities that are rooted in fictional—or at least dramatized—portrayals of supernatural phenomena. Some simply seek to live out fantasies, like the nearly two hundred teams in the United States that play quidditch, a fictional game depicted in the Harry Potter books and movies (US Quidditch, n.d.). Others fashion themselves as researchers seeking empirical evidence for ghosts, lake monsters, UFOs, and other such phenomena (Krulos 2015). In fact, 20 to 25 percent of Americans have actually investigated ghosts, haunted houses, astrology, UFOs, or any one of the cryptids within the field of cryptozoology (Bader, Mencken, and Baker 2010). A third group, known as Otherkin, do not engage with the supernatural in a
playful or scientifically intended manner but actually believe themselves to be supernatural, in that their identities as “real” vampires, elves, and other such beings place them outside the bounds of humanity and scientifically recognized biological categories (Laycock 2009, 2012). Although such groups may seem odd at first glance, research shows that participants are usually motivated by common human interests like spiritual enlightenment, the hope of scientific discovery, or the desire to feel special in some way (Bader, Mencken, and Baker 2010; Denzler 2001; Northcote 2007). In other words, people who personally engage with the supernatural are no kookier than the rest of us.

This nonjudgmental stance relative to supernatural beliefs and participation contrasts with earlier sociological work, which theorized that disadvantaged and marginal social groups—such as racial/ethnic minorities, women, and the less educated—would report higher levels of supernatural beliefs because they had less to lose in terms of social standing by adhering to such beliefs (Bainbridge 1978; Wuthnow 1976). It also runs counter to the majority of psychological research, which argues that supernatural beliefs result from cognitive defects or psychoses. For example, Emilio Lobato and colleagues report positive correlations between “epistemically unwarranted” beliefs and “ontological confusion,” which they characterize as an inability to distinguish between psychological, physical, and biological domains of reality (2014: 618, 620). Likewise, Ken Drinkwater, Neil Dagnall, and Andrew Parker (2012) found that supernatural believers exhibited lower than normal levels of critical thinking, while Matthew Sharps, Justin Matthews, and Janet Asten (2006) concluded that tendencies toward dissociation (feeling disconnected from the everyday world) predisposed study participants to make perceptual errors that increased their beliefs in ghosts, aliens, and cryptozoological creatures. Other psychological studies (French and Stone 2014; Irwin 2009) show consistent relationships between fantasy proneness, schizotypal behaviors, and supernatural beliefs.

In contrast, folkloric researchers have highlighted the cultural value of such beliefs and practices. Bullard (1989) and Dewan (2006) show, for example, how people who believe they have encountered UFOs and aliens rely on established folkloric narrative structures to make sense of this potentially traumatizing experience. Similarly, Diane Goldstein, Sylvia Grider, and Jeanie B. Thomas (2007), and a more recent volume edited by Jeannie Thomas (2015), explore how contemporary ghost lore serves moral functions by warning the living of the evils of things like violence, slavery, and persecution. Through a practice Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi (1983) refer to as “ostention,” individuals sometimes reenact ghostly or other macabre legends in hopes of experiencing contact with the supernatural. While ostention can arguably be connected to murderous acts (Ellis 1989; Radford 2014), it more
The supernatural often takes the form of “legend tripping,” as in the pilgrimage many residents of San Antonio, Texas, make to the site of an accident involving a train and a bus full of schoolchildren. As Carl Lindahl (2005) recounts, legend trippers park on the train tracks and wait for the ghosts of the children to push them to safety. Much like participants on ghost tours (Gentry 2007; J. Holloway 2010; also see Chapter 5), these pilgrims experience the excitement of possibly encountering the spirits of the deceased even as they are exposed to tragic tales that remind them to appreciate and live a moral life.

Sociologists have also begun to acknowledge the social and cultural value of the supernatural. As self-reported religious beliefs and church attendance decline in the United States and Europe (Bruce 2002; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2009), supernatural beliefs can serve as a functional alternative (Emmons and Sobal 1981; Hergovich, Schott, and Arendasy 2005) or supplement (McKinnon 2003) to mainstream religious beliefs. A recent series of studies indicates that supernatural beliefs are highest among people who do not regularly attend church but nonetheless do not identify as atheists (Bader, Baker, and Molle 2012; Baker and Draper 2010; Glendinning 2006; Mencken, Bader, and Kim 2009; Mencken, Bader, and Stark 2008). It seems that the supernatural’s marginality to religion provides believers with the freedom to develop their own metaphysical worldviews without the baggage of doctrinal authority, proscriptive rituals, or paying of literal and figurative dues. This flexibility allows believers to mix and match aspects of supernatural and conventional religious belief systems, as when paranormal investigators draw on their religious or spiritual beliefs for protection and interpretation of events during a ghost hunt (Eaton 2015; Fitch 2013). Moving the focus from belief to experiences of supernatural phenomena, Dennis Waskul’s (2016) study of ghosts and hauntings illustrates the social-psychological processes by which strange happenings are made into ghosts. Most often, the people who conclude that they have experienced a haunting are “rational believers” (Goldstein 2007: 66) and also have settled on this interpretation reluctantly after eliminating other sensible explanations through systematic, deductive processes. Collectively, a small but growing body of literatures in the social sciences and humanities are starting to illuminate the many valuable social and cultural functions performed by supernatural beliefs and practices.

It may be fair to claim that the supernatural is experiencing a renaissance. Not only are media representations nearly ubiquitous, but increases in reported beliefs and personal experiences suggest that the supernatural has also colonized everyday life. At the very least, the popularity of the supernatural in our era rivals the enormous popularity of séances and the Spiritualist movement in the United States and Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth
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century (Leonard 2005; Weisberg 2005). Although scholarly research has lagged behind this cultural trend, an emerging body of literature by academics and journalists treats the supernatural as worthy of serious study. However, these investigations of supernatural phenomena are often separated by disciplinary boundaries within academia as well as divisions between what are considered scholarly and popular treatments of the supernatural. We believe that these barriers hinder understanding of the supernatural as a social and cultural product that has real significance for believers in such phenomena. Our aim in this book is to compile research from experts trained in the social sciences and humanities into one reasonably comprehensive volume that illustrates, as our title suggests, the social, cultural, and historical significance of the supernatural.

SUPERNATURAL DEFINITIONS AND PARAMETERS

Though the word “supernatural” is common in casual conversation, it is rarely if ever defined in its everyday usage. “Supernatural” is a word frequently used to refer to religious phenomena in addition to being a catch-all category for fantastic nonreligious phenomena: ghosts, vampires, Sasquatch, aliens, UFOs, fairies, witchcraft, and so on. Moreover, “supernatural” is frequently used interchangeably with “paranormal,” whose meaning includes extrasensory perception, clairvoyance, telekinesis, and other alleged psychic abilities. We believe that both tendencies are a mistake, and we call for distinctions that are more precise.

According to common cultural assumptions, there is a fundamental difference between two college students conversing with a spirit via a Ouija board and an evangelical Christian who has been taken by the spirit of the Holy Ghost. Likewise, having a conversation with the ghost of a former resident of your home is considered odd, but communicating with a deity via prayer is perfectly normal. But what is the difference? The main difference is that institutionalized religious beliefs have what David Hufford (1995: 18) calls “cultural authority.” These beliefs are transmitted through social institutions that, through historical power struggles and intergenerational transmission of values, are vested with the authority to declare certain worldviews more valid than others. By virtue of being embedded in these legitimated and legitimating institutions, evangelical Christians possess the power to conventionalize their beliefs as valid religious phenomena while discrediting nondoctrinal beliefs and rituals as invalid supernatural phenomena. Hence, it is not the essential qualities of a phenomenon that make it religious or supernatural but rather the dynamics of cultural authority that determine which of these seemingly equivalent phenomena achieves legitimacy. Thus,
while nonhuman entities such as demons certainly fit the objective criteria of supernatural creatures, they are nonetheless religious beings according to our definition to the extent that their existence is asserted and legitimated within the context of conventional Christian teachings. Conversely, despite the subcultural growth of Wicca and goddess religions (Griffin 1995; Jensen and Thompson 2008), witchcraft itself has not been integrated into dominant religious discourse. Therefore, witches remain supernatural beings even though some people embrace some forms of witchcraft as a new religion.

By disentangling the supernatural from religion, we are better able to understand the supernatural as a modern concept, even though we see similar representations of the supernatural throughout history and across cultures. As Émile Durkheim 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” (1915: 39). Or at the very least, the supernatural refers to everything that we cannot make understandable using socially legitimated means of knowledge production—especially, in our era, the application of science, technology, and reason. Hence, as Durkheim insightfully argues, the supernatural is necessarily a modern idea simply because 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 is bound together by necessary relations, called laws” (41; emphasis in original). Durkheim further 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. (1915: 41–43; emphasis added)

Thus, it is correct to claim that throughout recorded history people have allegedly encountered things we might now interpret as supernatural phenomena. However, it is incorrect to label these events in historical accounts as
supernatural if the experiences were interpreted and acted on in the context of a religious worldview that framed the events as evidence of religious teachings (as, for example, a sign from God). Likewise, it is historically inaccurate to refer to these encounters as supernatural if they occurred before the development of a modern paradigm in which the universe is understood as operating according to immutable laws of nature. For these reasons, we must apply the supernatural label carefully when comparing cross-cultural or transhistorical accounts of such phenomena.

We reserve the term “paranormal” for alleged psychic abilities that defy accepted scientific understanding of human mental capabilities. There are several important differences between supernatural and paranormal phenomena. One difference concerns testability. A person who claims to be clairvoyant—that is, able to gain information about remote places, people, or events using no known sensory medium or physical interaction—can be subjected to laboratory tests designed to determine if such abilities are present. Such methods are scientific in that they rely on falsifiable hypotheses that are tested using controlled conditions that may be replicated by other researchers. In contrast, alleged supernatural phenomena such as ghost encounters or alien abductions are fundamentally untestable. These phenomena do not occur in a replicable fashion, the conditions in which they occur cannot be controlled, and the evidence presented is generally anecdotal. While some investigators of the supernatural, such as paranormal investigators and Big-foot hunters, collect an enormous amount of empirical evidence, even the clearest audio or video recording cannot prove the source of what we are hearing or seeing. Although believers assert that evidence of even one exceptional case—one “white crow,” according to William James (1896: 884)—is enough to disprove established science, the presence of one or two cases that appear to deviate from expectations is insufficient to overturn centuries of accumulated knowledge about the natural world. Absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence, but this inability to establish scientific meth-

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1. This distinction parallels that made by parapsychologists between psi phenomena that they attempt to test in laboratory settings, such as telekinesis or remote viewing, and other phenomena generally labeled paranormal, such as ghosts and cryptids. While such a distinction is important for parapsychological research, we use “supernatural” and “paranormal” here because these terms are more widely known to a general audience. In addition, we distinguish “supernatural” from “paranormal” to emphasize that supernatural phenomena are presumed to go against natural laws, whereas paranormal phenomena are assumed to violate social standards of what is considered normal. We make one exception for ghost hunters, who prefer to be called “paranormal investigators.” While this terminology does not adhere to our definition for people who seek to accumulate evidence for the existence (or nonexistence) of ghosts—what we call “supernatural” phenomena—we respect the descriptor they choose for themselves.
ods of investigation distinguishes supernatural phenomena from paranormal abilities.

A second difference is that paranormal powers are presumed to originate in the mental capabilities of otherwise ordinary human beings rather than from nonhuman sources or manipulation of one’s environment by means of magic. If someone believes he or she possesses the ability of psychokinesis—moving objects purely with the power of the mind—then, for our purposes, that is a paranormal phenomenon. However, if this person claims to move objects by use of a spell or some other form of magic then, for our purposes, that is a supernatural phenomenon. Equally, the power of telepathy—the alleged ability to send and receive messages simply through mental transference between two or more living humans—is paranormal, but the claimed ability to communicate with the dead or with otherworldly beings is supernatural. Like distinctions between religious and supernatural phenomena, the difference between paranormal and supernatural phenomena lies not in the ways these alleged abilities manifest themselves. Both psychokinesis and magic could move objects in similarly astounding ways, for example. Rather, the distinction between paranormal and supernatural phenomena rests on how those who claim such abilities account for the origin of these powers. In the former, such powers are presumed to be rare (but not superhuman) mental capabilities that need no additional outside influence to be effective. The latter, on the other hand, requires some external source of power or information to manifest what, on the surface, looks like the same phenomenon as that produced through paranormal means.

A final difference concerns the inclusivity of the two terms. Using our above definition, “paranormal” applies only to abilities, while “supernatural” encompasses abilities as well as entities. Because our goal in this volume is to highlight the social and cultural functions of beliefs and practices associated with both supernatural abilities (such as fortune-telling or communicating with the dead) and entities (such as ghosts or Bigfoot), use of the more inclusive term “supernatural” is more appropriate. This focus on personal experiences with or the historical effects of both supernatural abilities and entities distinguishes this work from others that frequently emphasize popular culture representations of the supernatural. The contributing authors in this volume place an array of supernatural phenomena in their appropriate historical, social, and cultural contexts. In doing so, they challenge the reader to not dismiss the supernatural as an unfortunate remnant of some imagined irrational past. Such a dismissive attitude simply obscures the important roles that supernatural beliefs and practices have played in Western history.
SUPERNATURAL OVERVIEW

The contributing authors of this book are diverse in many important and valued respects. They come from disciplinary perspectives within the social sciences and humanities and use different research methods to arrive at their conclusions. Some base their arguments on firsthand ethnographic experiences, while others rely more on secondary sources and historical records. The authors also vary in terms of their engagement with elements of what could broadly be called supernatural subcultures. Some authors in this volume relate to the supernatural as an object of disinterested inquiry that can be understood through archival research or similar unobtrusive methods of data collection. Those who used ethnographic methods necessarily participated in supernatural subcultures in an effort to see the world from the perspective of those they studied. Regardless of the research methods they used or their personal beliefs about the ontological status of the supernatural—that is, whether these abilities and entities are real in some objective sense—the authors have not set out to prove or disprove supernatural phenomena. Instead, the focus of this volume is on what these beliefs and alleged experiences do to and for people—in other words, their personal, social, and cultural functions in a given historical moment.

Supernatural beliefs and practices persist because they serve important social functions. They provide explanations for frightening or unexplained events, help people cope with trauma, imbue the mundane with mystery, establish social bonds between like-minded people, and even provide a platform for developing self-identities. Furthermore, as several chapters of this book illustrate, supernatural beliefs and experiences are deeply entangled within power relationships: they can be invoked as a means of exploiting disadvantaged populations or may be used as a source of self-empowerment in the face of personal troubles or social problems. As other chapters illustrate, the supernatural can also be a powerful source of meaning, community, and identity. Setting aside ontological arguments about the objective reality of the supernatural allows us to acknowledge that the things people believe—and most especially how they act on those beliefs—are undeniably real in the beliefs’ personal and social consequences.

In this volume, supernatural beliefs, practices, and identities are treated as collective processes of sense making that must be understood within their sociocultural and sociohistorical contexts. Therefore, it is our position that the supernatural is real because belief in the supernatural has fundamentally shaped human history and continues to inform people’s interpretations, actions, and identities daily. The supernatural is an indelible part of our social world that deserves sincere scholarly attention. This volume is our contribu-
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In Chapter 1, William Ryan Force argues for a multidisciplinary “cryptoscience” that considers mythic tales, folk stories, beliefs, and experiences with the uncanny as valuable aspects of the human experience deserving of serious scholarly inquiry. Force describes a flexible framework for conceptualizing the supernatural as a “social fact,” a culturally embedded reality that structures perceptions of reality and helps people make sense of their everyday lives. Force further articulates several general principles of this cryptoscience that not only are highly useful for those who seek to better understand the supernatural but also are dynamics that we see reappearing frequently in subsequent chapters of the book.

Whereas William Ryan Force seeks to establish a means of conceptualizing the supernatural, in Chapter 2 Jeannie Banks Thomas lays out a methodology for approaching both research and general inquiry on the supernatural. Thomas emphasizes the importance of cultural competence in the kinds of questions and research that we conduct on the supernatural and provides a useful checklist for students and aspiring scholars. To illustrate her method, Thomas narrates engaging and evocative examples from the ethnographic fieldwork she conducted on Cape Breton Island.

The Introduction and first two chapters provide readers with three fundamentals: a general scholarly argument for the significance of the supernatural, a general way of thinking about the supernatural, and a general way for conducting inquiry on the supernatural. From Chapter 3 on, each chapter focuses on a specific supernatural phenomenon. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 concern different aspects of ghosts, which—as we established earlier in this chapter—are the supernatural entities people are most likely to report believing in and witnessing.

In Chapter 3, Dennis Waskul ethnographically illustrates the key elements that distinguish four genres of ghostly experiences: what he calls “everyday ghosts,” “professionalized ghosts,” “commercial ghosts,” and “institutional ghosts.” Drawing from his previous and ongoing research, Waskul further defines and illustrates four types of hauntings (intelligent, residual, anniversary, and historical) as well as six forms of ghosts that appear within those hauntings (apparitions, phantasms, wraiths, poltergeists, specters, and phantoms). Waskul seeks to provide a useful framework for sifting and sorting the enormous variety of experiences that people claim and associate with a ghostly presence.

In Chapter 4, Marc Eaton focuses on the tension between two methods of paranormal investigation: the scientific and sensitive approaches. On the
basis of several years of participant observation and interviews with paranormal investigators (ghost hunters), Eaton’s chapter contextualizes these two approaches within a U.S. culture that is characterized by both individualized spirituality and an abiding faith in science. Eaton first describes the differences between scientific and sensitive investigators in terms of their ontological assumptions, epistemologies, and reasons for investigating. Next, Eaton reveals how sensitive methods are subordinated to scientific approaches within the paranormal investigation subculture and details the strategies sensitive use to increase the perceived validity of their claims. Eaton unpacks the power dynamics that determine what qualifies as a legitimate way to investigate the existence of ghosts.

Legend tripping and dark tourism are the central topics of Rachael Ironside’s Chapter 5. Legend tripping, an activity that appears in several places in this book, refers to visiting a location that is associated with the supernatural. For example, visiting a graveyard with a reputation for being haunted is a form of legend tripping, and as Ironside illustrates, people legend trip for several reasons. Some forms of legend tripping benefit businesses and communities; these forms make up what is known as dark tourism. For example, dark tourism is critical to the local economy of Salem, Massachusetts, which has commodified its legendary witch trials. Ironside grounds her discussion of dark tourism in what is surely its most common form—ghost tourism, which includes relatively low-cost adventures like a guided ghost walk or ghost hunt as well as more expensive thrills such as staying in a haunted hotel. On the basis of her ethnographic research on ghost tourism, Ironside illustrates the key elements necessary for a successful experience with dark tourism.

Turning to fortune-telling, in Chapter 6 Stephen Muzzatti and Emma Smith highlight how fortune-tellers function as life advisors for people searching for guidance in the face of economic uncertainty in late modern capitalism. Muzzatti and Smith also emphasize the persecution of fortune-tellers throughout Western history and illustrate the sharp contrast between popular culture caricatures of the fortune-teller and the actual practice of soothsaying. Muzzatti and Smith illustrate how modern and contemporary fortune-telling machines and smartphone apps both popularize and trivialize fortune-telling.

While some who seek answers about the future or the mysteries of life turn to fortune-tellers, others use tarot cards, which are the subject of Janet Baldwin’s Chapter 7. Baldwin details the somewhat mysterious history of the tarot, as well as major influences on this tool of divination as the cards became more or less codified by the early 1900s. Yet tarot can serve more functions than simply being a means for gleaning clues about the future or insights about one’s everyday life. As Baldwin illustrates from her ongoing
ethnographic research, the use of tarot can bind people together and serve ritualized social functions that are at least as magical as the alleged powers of tarot itself.

In Chapter 8, I’Nasah Crockett focuses specifically on voodoo, especially in the city of New Orleans. As Crockett illustrates, the actual practice of voodoo sharply contrasts with how it has been characterized in the limited available literature on the topic—much of which is tainted with blatant racism. Moreover, voodoo is both an eclectic religion and a tourist commodity in New Orleans. Thus, the history and nature of voodoo—especially in New Orleans—is heavily influenced by not only the black culture of the region but also shifting geographic realities, the civil rights movement, and the marketing of voodoo as a tourist commodity.

In Chapter 9, Joseph Laycock goes beyond beliefs to trace the evolution of the vampire from a demonic to a sympathetic figure, a misunderstood outsider who appeals to many teens and young adults searching for an identity in which to ground their self-perceptions. While many may identify with the vampire as a social construct signifying outsider status, some people’s commitment goes beyond mere affinity for the symbol. These people believe they are real vampires—that they were born with a condition that makes them fundamentally unlike other human beings. Laycock details the common misunderstandings about the real-vampire community, the similarities between members’ claims of identity and the history of the LGBTQ community, and ultimately the challenge these identity claims make to not only what it means to be a vampire but what it means to be human.

In Chapter 10, Tea Krulos provides overviews of the field of cryptozoology as well as the cryptids that cryptozoologists study and hunt. From Lazarus species and living fossils to well-known (e.g., Bigfoot and the Loch Ness monster) and lesser-known (e.g., Mothman) cryptids, Krulos illustrates the struggles cryptozoologists face in their quest for legitimacy. Faced with skeptics on one side and hoaxers on the other, cryptozoologists fight an uphill battle against both scientific orthodoxy and public opinion. Yet, inspired by a few success stories, cryptozoologists remain compelled by the thrill of potential discovery and the hope that one day they will be seen as pioneering scientists. Regardless of the outcome of their efforts, Krulos argues, their efforts have value as a form of enchantment in what often feels like a disenchanted world.

In Chapter 11, Scott Scribner proposes an eight-part Teller-Narrator model for understanding alien abduction narratives. He shows how these narratives form within—and are informed by—a complex matrix of competing accounts of abduction experiences. Scribner’s model embeds the alien abduction narrative within a temporal sequence in which past stories may act as interpretive
resources for a given abduction account, which may in turn influence future narratives of similar experiences. At the same time, multiple people—from eyewitnesses to professionals—attempt to shape the narrative to fit their needs. To illustrate this process, Scribner draws on perhaps the best known of such narratives, the story of Travis Walton’s abduction in November 1975.

We sought to bring together scholars from different disciplines and backgrounds to create one comprehensive text on the supernatural—an objective that we knew from the start could never be fully achieved. Missing from this book is any sustained attention to other topics that could just as easily have been included—worthy subjects such as witchcraft, mediumship, astrology, and nonreligious understandings of demonology. Perhaps the supernatural is simply too vast a subject for any one text to fully cover. As the content of this book clearly illustrates, the supernatural is extraordinarily rich with complex, important, and innately interesting social, cultural, and historical dynamics. Consequently, we hope this book contributes to a future in which scholars are less likely to ignore or trivialize these topics.

REFERENCES


