

Transformation

Whitley Strieber's Paranormal Gnosis

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ABSTRACT: American horror novelist Whitley Strieber's account of an apparent "alien abduction" in *Communion: A True Story* (1987) was instrumental in bringing the abductee narrative into popular culture. Despite his ongoing engagement with mainstream ufology, in this article I argue that Strieber's experiences are more representative of a broader paranormal category, here defined discursively. I first examine this claim through an assessment of Strieber's career, particularly how his experience transformed his understanding of the nature of reality and brought him to challenge epistemic norms more broadly. Then, through ethnographic fieldwork, I consider whether this pattern repeated itself among subscribers at Strieber's 2012 Dreamland Festival in Nashville. I find that, in many cases, the paranormal experience acted as a catalyst for a larger questioning of epistemic norms—in short, a paranormal gnosis.

KEYWORDS: Whitley Strieber, paranormal, alien abduction, gnosis

[A]ngels do not convey messages; they change those they address. What they transfer is not an information content, but a new container. They don't bring maps offering some hold to beings starved of knowledge—they transform their interlocutors. What they convey are not telegrams but persons.¹

In May 2012, I traveled to Nashville to participate in the Dreamland Festival hosted by novelist and radio host Whitley Strieber, who probably is best known for *Communion: A True Story*. The popular 1987 account of an alleged alien abduction was instrumental in bringing

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the narrative into popular culture. The annual festival was not a gathering of UFO abductees but rather was based on Strieber's weekly Internet radio show, *Dreamland*, and included presentations from leading "alternative media" figures. Strieber's experiences, whatever their changing relationship to mainstream ufology, are best understood within the category of the paranormal, easily relatable to encounters with fairies, ghosts or angels. His experiences initiated a broadening transformation in his understanding of the nature of reality: a paranormal *gnosis*. For Strieber and many Dreamland attendees, the knowledge gained from paranormal experiences transformed not just them but the world.

Along with being a participant-observer in the three-day event, I was able to carry out quantitative research through questionnaires. Of 120 participants (including myself), 58 returned questionnaires in various states of completion, giving me a meaningful survey of nearly 50 percent of the group.² The questionnaire had three parts, of which only the first two are relevant here.³ The first was designed to gather socio-demographic information—age, nationality, gender, occupation, political and religious affiliations—with the latter questions left open so as not to guide respondents in any particular direction. The second section was a short series of open questions designed to establish respondents' specific relationship to Strieber's work, such as "Have you ever had a visitor experience?", "Have you ever had another paranormal experience?" and "Do you believe there is an environmental threat to the planet, and if so, how serious?" The survey was accompanied by many unguided interviews and in several cases followed with more guided questioning via email.

I begin this article with a discursive definition of the paranormal to highlight the term's relationship to shifts in epistemic norms. I then present a historiographical examination of Strieber's career, focusing on his abduction experiences and their effect on his worldview, specifically the adoption of other paranormal tropes, conspiracy theories and alternative histories. Then, based on ethnographic research, I explore whether this pattern repeats itself among Dreamland Festival participants. I conclude by considering how paranormal experience, rather than belief, can convince individuals of a broader range of counter-epistemic positions. I do not intend to evaluate the truth claims of alien abductions or other paranormal experiences, other than to consider their relationship to epistemic norms.

TOWARDS A DISCURSIVE DEFINITION OF 'PARANORMAL'

The term *paranormal* arose at the turn of the twentieth century to describe phenomena associated with Spiritualism, and it was understood

to indicate expressions of natural laws yet unknown to science.⁴ This general understanding continues to the present. Popular definitions typically include psychic phenomena such as telepathy and clairvoyance, and alleged anomalous physical phenomena such as ghosts, crop circles, UFOs and reincarnation.⁵ Somewhat less common are cryptozoological animals such as the Yeti or Loch Ness monster, alternative medical therapies, and religious, mystical or magical practices, with Western Christian experience less likely to be included.⁶ This attempt to establish common identifying factors in the category, however, runs into problems. A major difficulty is that the term is used in several different disciplines, each with a different agenda and therefore seeking a different outcome. For example, while religious studies scholars specialize in bracketing truth claims, this practice would not be encouraged to the same degree in psychology, which has a curative agenda. Here, paranormal experiences typically are constructed as psychopathological, and the decision over their pathological diagnosis generally rests on the degree of consensuality in wider society, with psychiatric categories of diagnoses increasingly accepted as being specific to culture and even gender.⁷ Similarly, there must be a degree of cultural consensus for an experience to be considered paranormal; otherwise, it is likely to be considered a “mere” hallucination or delusion.⁸ The line dividing the paranormal from mental illness is one of epistemic norms, or how prevalent a specific belief is within a certain culture.

Within studies of religion, the idea has been pervasive that paranormal experiences are essentially mystical—that is, constructed as misplaced or misunderstood religious experiences. In his 1902 *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James noted there were similarities between the psychotic and the religious, describing “delusional insanity” as “a kind of diabolical mysticism, a sort of religious mysticism turned upside down.”⁹ Perhaps predictably, distinctions between phenomena or beliefs defined as religious, mystical, paranormal or psychopathological have been hotly contested, and surveys of the paranormal that include religious or mystical phenomena tend to be either apologetic¹⁰ or skeptical.¹¹

Parapsychology, on the other hand, aims to investigate paranormal phenomena objectively. Here the term paranormal is used in distinction to the supernatural to indicate that while “something beyond the normal explanations is required . . . nothing supernatural is implied.”¹² This position, however, seems to assume that at least some paranormal experiences have a physical reality outside of the observer, suggesting that while a particular phenomenon may move from the paranormal to the normal, the category as a whole necessarily must remain outside the normal,¹³ defined by its relationship to accepted scientific knowledge. UFOs thus present a problematic inclusion. It is not beyond the realm of science to posit that advanced extraterrestrial civilizations exist or

possibly have visited our planet. But UFO accounts, particularly in abduction circles, contain much found in the paranormal phenomena listed above—clairvoyance, astral projection (the ability of one's consciousness to travel independently of the body), time travel, visitations from the dead, and other experiences. Strieber's narrative exemplifies this. In fact, the common factor in all these attempted definitions is that they concern epistemic capital.

The Greek prefix *para* means alongside or beyond, so the paranormal is etymologically *that which is beyond the normal*. But what is considered normal—the cultural norm of the group in question—is not a contingent category of absolute facts but rather assumptions which are contested, negotiated and subject to change over time:

Power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.¹⁴

This approach reminds us that the term *paranormal* is understandable only in relationship to dominant epistemology. Indeed, there are examples where something believed (or at least entertained) by a sizeable percentage of the population is rejected by epistemic authorities as paranormal.¹⁵ Therefore a paranormal belief is one that is outside the purview of the epistemic authorities; in the case of the Anglophone West, the authoritative epistemic paradigm is scientific materialism. A Foucaultian genealogy of the term *paranormal* likely would show that it emerged during the ascendancy of scientific materialism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁶ This of course also assumes that the term would be less useful in a culture, for instance sub-Saharan Africa, with a less strict delineation between "science," "religion" and "magic."

Using a discursive definition of "paranormal" also helps clarify the category's fuzzy edges. While scientific materialism is the primary epistemic authority in the contemporary English-speaking world, it is not the only one. Religious traditions in particular still exercise considerable epistemic authority over large sections of the population, albeit to varying degrees. This may be the reason that common-sense definitions of the paranormal are likely to include magical phenomena or elements common in Eastern religions but not Christian metaphysical elements such as angels, the resurrection, stigmata and so on. In short, it is not the supernatural or metaphysical aspects of these beliefs which make them "paranormal" but their alterity in relation to epistemic norms.

Particularly relevant to religious studies is that these epistemic authorities include the academy, and scholars must be careful not to

draw too firm a distinction between “paranormal” and “religious phenomena” lest we make normative distinctions based on our own beliefs and act as caretakers rather than critics, to use Russell McCutcheon’s terms.¹⁷ This is particularly important for definitions in which phenomena relating to Eastern religions or new religious movements are counted as paranormal, but those related to Christianity are excluded.

I previously have applied this discursive model to defining “conspiracy theory,” arguing that because the term could neither be defined substantively (typically in terms of paranoia or irrationality) nor posited simply as a criminal conspiracy, its application is a matter of epistemic power.¹⁸ In the wake of events on 11 September 2001, President George W. Bush said “let us not tolerate absurd conspiracy theories.”¹⁹ This statement underlines my argument that although the official version of events posited an al-Qaida conspiracy in the legal sense, it represented an epistemic norm, not a conspiracy theory. The statement implied that a good citizen should never question the government (despite the fact that twice in the preceding 50 years impeachment proceedings had begun against a United States president for lying to the public). Rather than being an essential aspect of democracy and scientific method, questioning accepted truths was presented as *a priori* absurd.

Beliefs in conspiracy theories and paranormal phenomena are perfectly functional in psychological terms and typical in statistical terms, with around three-fourths of Americans professing belief in at least one of the aforementioned phenomena²⁰ and half believing a conspiracy was responsible for the 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy.²¹ Several recent studies suggest that paranormal beliefs may be situational—related to specific context rather than a consciously and consistently held ontological position—and therefore possibly more widespread than polls suggest.²²

The terms paranormal and conspiracy theory, then, can be understood as aiming to marginalize viewpoints that differ from epistemic norms—viewpoints here referred to *counter-epistemic* beliefs which, though widely held, are typified by their opposition to certain cultural epistemic norms. My reasons for bringing in conspiracy theories may not be immediately obvious here, but I return to the issue of epistemic (and counter-epistemic) capital in my conclusion.

PARANORMAL BELIEF AND EXPERIENCE

What unites these definitions is their focus on paranormal *belief* rather than *experience*. This is an important distinction. Indeed, the religious studies field has tended to focus primarily upon beliefs, perhaps best articulated by Clifford Geertz’ well-known statement that “the basic axiom underlying . . . ‘the religious perspective’ is everywhere the same: he who would know must first believe.”²³ This perspective has been

widely criticized as representing a bias inherited from Protestantism, but it continues nonetheless. Analyses of religious experience in a religious studies context have by-and-large addressed some posited *sui generis* other-than-normal reality—for example, the *sacred*,²⁴ the *transcendent*,²⁵ or the *numinous*.²⁶ For Rudolph Otto, an encounter with the numinous was a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—a mystery simultaneously terrifying and fascinating. As we will see, this is a fitting description of Strieber’s experiences. Paranormal studies typically have taken the same approach, however, as though presuming that paranormal beliefs necessarily precede experience.²⁷ Yet Strieber’s case reverses Geertz’ maxim: he believes because he first knew, via his abduction experience of 1985, which I describe below.

For Strieber and many Dreamland attendees, a paranormal experience changed their view of the world. Many chose to use the term *gnosis*, which historically has been used in a variety of ways: as a specific “heretical” Christian tradition of the second through fourth centuries,²⁸ Jungian “individuation,”²⁹ anti-cosmic dualism,³⁰ mysticism³¹ and even existentialism.³² In emic constructions, however, *gnosis* most frequently indicates a particular posited type of knowledge, reflecting the term’s etymology—*γνωσις* (*gnosis*), or experiential knowledge—as distinguished from *ἐπιστήμη* (*episteme*), or theoretical knowledge. *Gnosis* here constructed is revelatory in nature, distinct from the logic-knowing of rationalist philosophy: “The pneuma is thus immersed in soul and flesh is unconscious of itself, benumbed, asleep or intoxicated by the poison of the world; in brief, it is ‘ignorant’. Its awakening and liberation is effected through ‘knowledge.’”³³

Gnosis also is constructed as *knowledge of God*, as contrasted with *faith in God*.³⁴ Wouter Hanegraaff takes this further by defining *gnosis* as one of three “theoretically conceivable avenues to the attainment of truth.”³⁵ It comes through personal, inner revelation rather than faith or scientific rationalism. It is not the world that is transformed by *gnosis*, but the individual’s understanding of and place in the world. The individual receives *gnosis* “in a flash” and is never the same again.

In this article, I highlight two issues: first, in studies of the paranormal, experience has been neglected in favor of belief; and second, the importance of paranormal experience in mediating a wide range of counter-epistemic positions. First, however, I turn to Whitley Strieber, one of the most prominent proponents of the paranormal—and the counter-epistemic—in popular culture in the last 25 years.

WHITLEY STRIEBER

Born in 1945 in San Antonio, Texas, Whitley Strieber was the son of a successful lawyer who developed laryngeal cancer that left him mute

and the family impoverished.³⁶ The young Strieber, however, managed to study law at the University of Texas before heading to London to study filmmaking.³⁷ After a successful career in advertising, he took up writing in 1977.³⁸ His first novel, *The Wolfen* (1978), was successful enough to be turned into a film, as was his follow-up vampire novel *The Hunger* (1981). When his two subsequent horror novels sold less well, he turned to speculative fiction, collaborating with James Kunetka on *Warday* (1984), concerning nuclear warfare, and *Nature's End* (1986), concerning environmental collapse.

His next book, *Communion: A True Story*, was rejected by Warner Books, his publisher up until then, but went on to become a *New York Times* #1 best-seller, staying on the list for almost a year, making it perhaps the most successful non-fiction UFO book in publishing history.³⁹ By accident or design, *Communion* used techniques from horror fiction as well as motifs familiar from Strieber's earlier works, causing doubts about the tale's provenance.⁴⁰ If *Communion* was a novel disguised as fact for marketing purposes, however, the plan backfired dramatically, as it effectively ended his fiction career.

Communion recounts that, late at night on Boxing Day 1985 while staying at his cabin near Accord in upstate New York, Strieber woke to see a small figure rushing toward him. He remembered being taken out of the room by a group of identical squat, blue beings, first to a depression in the nearby forest and then a brightly lit room where he encountered short but willowy, large-eyed beings that would become the archetypical "grey" aliens. Probes were inserted into his brain and anus, and an incision made on his finger. He awoke with a sense of unease and a vivid memory of seeing an owl through the bedroom window.⁴¹

In the following weeks, he claimed to have become withdrawn and hypersensitive as he struggled to understand his experience. A UFO report in the area led him to read *Science and the UFOs* by Jenny Randles and Peter Warrington, which included a description of an abduction experience that included both the depression in the woods and the memory of seeing an animal.⁴² Suspecting he may himself have been abducted, he made contact with Budd Hopkins, popularizer of the *missing time* motif in which UFO witnesses discover that a period of time has passed without them remembering, often with owls or other animals as "screen memories." Hopkins suggested that hypnosis might be useful in recovering event details and organized a session for Strieber.

Under hypnosis, further details of his abduction seemed to emerge along with an earlier event at the cabin on the night of 4 November 1985, when Strieber, his wife, son and two friends were awakened by a mysterious bang and bright lights. All had commented upon it the following morning but had not discussed it further, as though their memories had been similarly screened. During a second hypnosis session, Strieber recalled a third event, seemingly occurring when he was

12. During a business trip with his father, he awoke in a room where a number of GIs, in full uniform, were lying on tables and being touched by a tall, thin, black-eyed being holding a copper rod. Thus did Strieber come to believe he had uncovered a history of multiple abductions stretching back into his childhood, and start to reconsider other episodes for which his memories seemed anomalous or missing. Notable is a period of European travel during which weeks were absent from his memory, and remaining memories were fractured and often strange.

He contacted a professional psychiatrist, Donald Klein, to see if he was experiencing psychosis or temporal-lobe epilepsy; the former was ruled out, the latter deemed possible though unlikely.⁴³ He also underwent two CAT scans and a lie-detector test, which suggested his sanity and honesty.⁴⁴ He concluded that something genuine had happened to him. This was, of course, a logical fallacy; not lying does not prove a factual experience but merely the belief that it occurred. Strieber had had a lifelong interest in UFOs, and he had these tests only after he had “recovered” his abduction memories through hypnosis by one of the foremost promoters of the alien abduction narrative. Hopkins was an artist by profession, rather than a psychologist, so would seem a curious first contact for a man concerned about his sanity. Moreover, Strieber’s action suggests he visited Klein in an attempt to validate his hypnosis-induced, recovered memories rather than to discover the root cause of his anxiety symptoms.

Communion’s narrative ends with Strieber meeting a group of people with similar abduction experiences. The latter third of the book, however, is a meditation on five possibilities: extraterrestrials, time-travelers, fairies, the dead, or the human collective unconsciousness; as a result, he refers to the beings as visitors rather than aliens.⁴⁵ This latter section is replete with allusions to religious and mythological symbolism, demonstrating Strieber’s obvious knowledge of these subjects.⁴⁶ Indeed, with its language of transformation, marriage and “higher consciousness,”⁴⁷ it is clearly modeled after a mystical text.

Strieber was not alone in claiming to have experienced anomalous phenomena in the cabin. His wife Anne, their son Andrew and several of their friends made the same claim. On one occasion, the Striebers were in their bedroom, two of their friends in an upstairs bedroom, a filmmaker in the living room and his crew bunked in the basement; and all were alleged by Strieber to have reported some degree of anomalous experience.⁴⁸ Of course, this took place after Strieber had become famous for being abducted. On the other hand, following publication of *Communion* he was contacted by thousands of people with stories of their own abduction experiences. Anne Strieber became custodian of these accounts, editing and publishing a selection of them in 1997 as *The Communion Letters*.⁴⁹ While there are striking similarities in these accounts, they are dramatic and often puzzlingly idiosyncratic. Known

in UFO circles as “high strangeness,” this tendency is often taken as proof of veracity: if you were going to lie, would you not make up something believable? Of course, one could equally argue that these idiosyncrasies recall the logic of dreams, and that these details are the very parts that are smoothed out in the process of hypnotic regression in order to fit the alleged memories into the abduction narrative.

The visitation narrative continued with *Transformation*, published eighteen months after *Communion*. Subsequent experiences had begun to change his thinking about what the visitors might be and were trying to achieve. First, during another abduction, a being resembling the one depicted on the cover of *Communion*, but pure white, told him he needed to stop eating sweets or he would die. It then allowed him to touch the hem of its garment, which produced a sensation which Strieber described as “like an edge of heaven.” The “being in white sitting on the edge of my bed and talking to me about death might have been a representative of the most powerful of all the forces that have shaped us. An Angel in my bedroom.”⁵⁰ This suggested to Strieber that, despite appearances, the visitors’ ultimate aims were benevolent. Further communication came in a series of nine knocks—three groups of three—emanating from a point on his roof he believed to be inaccessible without triggering the automatic lights, which allegedly terrified his cats. This convinced him of the visitors’ physical reality. He began to venture out alone at night in an attempt to provoke visitor experiences and perhaps challenge the balance of power between him and the visitors. His depression and anxiety abated, and surprisingly he found himself able to perform astral projection, sending his consciousness out with his physical body. Indeed, as the visitor narrative progresses, the ufology aspects become progressively less central than other paranormal phenomena.

Around this time, Strieber abandoned hypnosis, claiming concern that untrained researchers were “imposing their own beliefs on their victims” and that their use of hypnosis and other “aggressive therapies” would lead to “suffering, breakdown and possibly even suicide.”⁵¹ Strieber and Hopkins, however, had fallen out over Strieber’s increasingly complex and spiritually tinged interpretation. For Hopkins, the extraterrestrials (he used “intruders” rather than Strieber’s “visitors”) had a malevolent intention.⁵² For Strieber, however, the abduction trauma came from the abductee, not the visitors.⁵³ He constructs the visitors as the root of all paranormal and mystical experiences:

Whatever the visitors are, I suspect they have been responsible for much paranormal phenomena, ranging from the appearance of gods, angels, fairies, ghosts and miraculous beings to the landing of UFOs in the backyards of America. It may be that what happened to Mohammed in his cave and to Christ in Egypt, to Buddha in his youth and to all our great

prophets and seers, was an exalted version of the same humble experience that causes a flying saucer to traverse the sky or a visitor to appear in a bedroom.⁵⁴

Transformation also contained the first hints of Strieber's increasingly conspiracist direction. He developed an interest in the so-called Roswell incident—in which a UFO allegedly crashed in New Mexico in 1947, its purported government cover-up, and the MJ-12 documents “revealed” in 1987 by *Roswell Incident* authors Stanton Friedman and William Moore, who supposedly recorded a 1952 briefing informing President-elect Dwight Eisenhower that extraterrestrial cadavers had been recovered at the crash site.⁵⁵ These came to the fore in Strieber's ostensible return to fiction in 1989. *Majestic* was presented as a fictionalized version of the crash and events immediately following it, leading to the government cover-up.⁵⁶ Strieber later claimed, however, that *Majestic* was not really a work of fiction but had been constructed from his own visitor experiences, the testimony of his uncle, Colonel Edward Strieber, and his uncle's commanding officer, General Arthur Exon, who had worked together at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio where the crash debris allegedly was taken.⁵⁷ Unable to persuade them to speak for the record, he published what they had told him in a fictional narrative. This potentially was a risky strategy, because to knowingly publish fact-disguised-as-fiction only two years after being accused of publishing fiction-disguised-as-fact could give his critics more cause to doubt his veracity.

A film adaptation of *Communion* (from Strieber's own screenplay) also was released in 1989, but it was neither a critical nor commercial success. *Transformation* sold markedly less well than its predecessor, and Strieber's reputation and finances bottomed out over the next decade. He could no longer afford both the cabin and the New York City apartment; in 1991, he sold both and moved to a larger cabin in the same area.⁵⁸ Strieber returned to fiction, but his novels of this period were not successful, despite reprising themes from the *Communion* series. In 1994, no longer able to afford even the cabin, he and the family moved to his recently deceased mother's apartment in New York City.⁵⁹

From then on, his public profile was an extension of the visitor narrative. In *Breakthrough: The Next Step* (1995), the third volume of the *Communion* series, Strieber claimed that the seven years since his previous book had been a deliberate withdrawal from public life in order to better understand the visitors and their motivations. He claimed he was no longer being taken against his will but willingly participated in, and even initiated, these experiences. *Breakthrough* included an astonishing sequence in which Strieber described a visitor physically cohabitating with him and his wife for several months. He and the being would meditate together every evening, although Strieber apparently was unable to collect any photographic or other evidence.

Perhaps more interesting is *The Secret School*,⁶⁰ published the following year, elaborating on Strieber's recovered childhood experiences with the visitors, first mentioned in *Transformation*.⁶¹ Subtitled *Preparation for Contact*, and structured to parallel the three-by-three knocks of *Transformation*, it recounted his nocturnal experiences during the summer of his ninth year, in what he described as a kind of school. The book contained nine "lessons," each composed of a recovered memory followed by Strieber's commentary. After a dream in which the visitors introduced themselves to Strieber as "the Sisters of Mercy" and showed him a fantastical vision of a sphinx on Mars, he met an old woman, Mrs. Carter, who ran an astronomy class. Sneaking out after dark, Strieber became part of the class, which suddenly was relocated to an open space in the Olmos Basin Park. Later, he found himself simultaneously in Texas and ancient Rome, observing an antediluvian civilization awaiting the impact of a comet while building "stoneworks that will survive the cataclysm" to record events for surviving generations, and finally an apocalyptic vision of Earth's future. This fantastic narrative was interspersed with apparently mundane incidents, including an electrical storm and a passage where a fevered Whitley literally danced with Death, personified as a young boy.⁶² Again, Strieber was happy to continue his connection with mainstream ufology, despite moving away from the language of UFO abduction in other respects. In these later books, the visitors were portrayed as another race—whether terrestrial or otherwise is uncertain—hidden but existing alongside humanity. They no longer were constructed as extraterrestrial but as a misunderstood force in the natural world, echoing emic definitions of the paranormal.

Around this time, Strieber was interviewed on Coast to Coast AM, an influential radio show covering paranormal and conspiracist topics.⁶³ He and host Art Bell seem to have struck up a friendship, and in 1999 they collaborated on *The Coming Global Superstorm*, a work of "speculative non-fiction." The book, which returned to Strieber's environmental concerns, argued that small, incremental increases in carbon dioxide could produce rapid and dramatic climatic changes. The work later became the basis of the big-budget disaster movie, *The Day After Tomorrow*,⁶⁴ for which Strieber wrote the novelization. In 1999, Strieber took over Coast to Coast AM's sister show, Dreamland, from Bell. It covered similar topics but with greater emphasis on extraterrestrials and spirituality, and lacking the call-in format. The show is still broadcast weekly in an Internet-only format, through Strieber's website, unknowncountry.com. With his reduced influence as a novelist, Strieber's position as an "alternative" radio host introduced him to a new, younger, more rural and potentially larger audience. What's more, paranormal themes continue to be a frequent feature of both Coast to Coast AM and Dreamland, along with conspiratorial, revisionist histories and ancient alien narratives, although they aren't so obviously a part of his published work.

Strieber's most recent non-fiction work, *Solving the Communion Enigma* (2012), is a restatement and reassessment of the series. His ambiguity about the physicalist thesis of the UFO narrative remains, though elsewhere his position has hardened—for example, he describes his original 1985 encounter unambiguously as “rape.”⁶⁵ The book also offers a catalogue of paranormal phenomena and conspiracist motifs—including crop circles, the so-called “face on Mars,” alien implants and government cover-ups—in a grand narrative where the visitors are central. He now claims that the abduction experience is not rare and even perhaps universal; what is rare is remembering it, and the connection between the visitors and the dead introduced in *The Communion Letters* is made more central. Strieber seems to have decided that the living are students in a school where the visitors are the teachers and the dead are the graduates. “Certainly, I had been in a school. . . . But now the amazing purpose of this school was clear: it was to draw back the veil that stands between us and the world around us, and in so doing draw back the veil between the living and the dead. . . .”⁶⁶

THE HERMENEUTICAL SHIFT FROM PHYSICALIST TO PARANORMAL UFOS

Strieber was far from alone in moving away from a strictly physical and extraterrestrial conceptualization of UFOs and the abduction narrative. An increasingly paranormal interpretation was driven by two factors—the space race had revealed the severe realities of space travel, and general relativity had denied the possibility of faster-than-light travel and thus interstellar travel based on any known scientific principles. This led many skeptics to absolutely reject the possibility of UFOs. For those convinced of their existence, however—and I argue that this conviction frequently comes through experience—there were three alternative explanations: if UFOs did not come from nearby planets or stars, they could come from other parallel realities; they could be time-travelers from our own future; or (popular within the conspiracy milieu), they might not be paranormal at all but some sort of secret military intelligence operation.

This debate moved some ufologists away from a *physicalist* interpretation of UFOs toward a more paranormal interpretation. Toward the end of his life, Carl Jung attempted to mythologize the phenomenon. He presented flying saucers as a modern hierophany,⁶⁷ a modern representation of mythological archetypes pre-existing in the collective unconscious and projected onto physical reality. Jacques Valleé's interpretation, on the other hand, was de-mythological. He instigated a hermeneutic shift which saw UFOs reinterpreted as interdimensional rather than interstellar craft. A science-fiction writer, astronomer and computer pioneer, Valleé made his name in 1969 with *Passport to Magonia*:

From Folklore to Flying Saucers, arguing for numerous similarities between encounters with UFOs and supernatural beings in previous eras.⁶⁸ UFOs gave Vallee a materialist explanation for spiritualist and mythological phenomena in history. Rather than creating new gods to suit the technological age, as Jung had suggested, Vallee argued that we had simply interpreted the same physical phenomena to suit our epistemology at any given time.⁶⁹ UFOs and the beings of myth were one and the same, not because UFOs were mythological but because they were physical. He maintained that narratives of aerial beings communicating and, sometimes, abducting humans was far older than 1947, but because space travel only recently had become a possibility, earlier accounts could not have been interpreted as extraterrestrial craft.⁷⁰

Strieber acknowledged his debt to Vallee's ideas⁷¹ and provided a foreword to his *Dimensions: A Casebook of Alien Contact* (1988). The visitors are beings belonging to our world but somehow *other*, Strieber now suggested; not normal, but paranormal. He understood the visitors to be the origin of stories concerning spiritual beings—including angels, fairies and succubae—described in different cultures and traditions at different times. Because we experience the world scientifically and technologically, that is how we presently experience them, or perhaps that is how they choose to present themselves to us. In his foreword to *Dimensions*, Strieber states that Vallee

places this modern UFO experience firmly in its historical context as the latest manifestation of a phenomenon that goes back at least as far as recorded history. Thus, at a stroke, he redefines it as a part of the fundamental mythology of human experience and enables us, for the first time, to begin to raise questions about it of sufficient depth and resonance to be meaningful. . . . He reveals an appalling truth: the phenomenon has been with us throughout history—and never, in all that time, have we been able to deal sensibly with it.⁷²

For Strieber, the idea that “most major religions have emerged out of visionary experiences that are, in fact, understandable in the context of the UFO encounter”⁷³ provides a way they can be seen as having a common source; i.e., the paranormal. Thus, his demythologization of religious experience through the lens of the UFO narrative is at core detraditionalization rather than materialization; not a rejection of science *per se*, but of traditional sources of epistemic norms *in toto*.

DREAMLAND FESTIVAL AND THE PARANORMAL

The fifth annual Dreamland Festival took place in Nashville, Tennessee, on the weekend of 18–20 May 2012. The venue was the Scarritt-Bennett Center, a beautiful collection of Gothic-revival buildings

set on ten green acres at the edges Vanderbilt University. It was described as “a non-profit education, retreat and conference center” with “a strong commitment to the eradication of racism, empowerment of women and spiritual formation.”⁷⁴ I arrived just as the conference was about to commence, and though Strieber was surrounded by attendees I felt it was important to at least introduce myself before he began. To my surprise, he announced my presence and asked me to come down to the front. He told the audience I was “a good man,” and that like Jeffrey Kripal I was doing important work.⁷⁵ His lack of suspicion reinforced my impression, gleaned from his books, of his fundamental openness and honesty, and his few words of support gave me a degree of official sanction and insider status, prompting other attendees to be open with me.

That year also marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Communion* and, as suggested by the grey alien logo on the official mug, UFOs were never far from the Dreamland agenda. It would be incorrect, however, to describe Dreamland as merely a contactee get-together; fewer than half the attendees reported a close encounter, and speakers covered a broad spectrum of positions within the cultic milieu.⁷⁶ Former United Kingdom Ministry of Defense UFO specialist Nick Pope’s presentation was firmly in the area of traditional, “nuts-and-bolts” ufology. Whitley Strieber, Linda Moulton Howe (director of *Strange Harvest*, the 1988 documentary that popularized the connection between UFOs and cattle mutilations⁷⁷) and Jim Marrs (author of *Crossfire*, a seminal conspiracy text on the John F. Kennedy assassination⁷⁸) gave presentations weaving UFOs and other paranormal phenomena into larger alternative histories. Marla Frees, a psychic medium, and Chip Wilkins, who presented an alternative health technology, were more typical of “New Age” practitioners and never mentioned ETs or UFOs at all.

Nevertheless, themes of cover-ups and conspiracies ran through the conference. Pope later told me that he was well-used to the presence of conspiracy beliefs among the UFO community:

The idea that the government knows more about UFOs than it lets on is a central trope of ufology...but I'd be hard-pressed to say whether belief in UFO-related cover-ups and conspiracies has gone up, down, or remained broadly the same...I've noticed...that people who believe in one conspiracy tend to believe in others; so there's a fair degree of crossover between the UFO community and 9/11 "truthers," for example.⁷⁹

Jim Marrs agreed, saying there always had been conspiracy theories in the UFO community. What surprised him was all the “New Age, love beads stuff.”⁸⁰ Yet UFOs were a prominent feature of early New Age communities,⁸¹ which leads me to suspect that Marrs may be an example of someone who is drawn to the spiritual aspects secondarily, having

principally come into contact with conspiracy beliefs. Others, like Marla Frees, seem to have been drawn primarily by the spiritual aspects.

This broad range was echoed by the attendees. From the questionnaires, the largest group seemed to be men who had jobs in the military or engineering, occupations that would seem to demand sober, linear minds. Perhaps this is the reason that they accepted their experiences so whole-heartedly; they could not be dismissed as hallucination or flashback as they could had the experiencers had a history of hallucinogenic use, for example. An aeronautics engineer told me how as a young man just arrived at a Texas air base he was told by his commanding officer not to have anything to do with UFOs and never to express interest in the subject, if he cared about his military career. Several years later, while driving home in the early morning hours, he spotted an aircraft hovering low over a house near some electricity lines. His immediate conclusion was that he was seeing a helicopter, and he was alarmed that a pilot would fly so close to power lines; later, however, he recalled how silent it had been and wondered why it had been shining lights at the ground. He decided to—and did—report seeing a UFO, but after a month he still had not been contacted for a witness report. He went to his commanding officer and was told that the report had never been forwarded and would not be, for his own good.

Other stories I was told were less UFO-related and more paranormal. A geologist told me of his nocturnal visits from malevolent “shadow people” which had begun in childhood and continued through his successful career. Another told me of an experience in the Callanish Neolithic stone circle on the Isle of Lewis in the Scottish Hebrides. For others, conspiracies were the central concern. One man, who had been in the United States Army for twenty-four years before taking up computer programming, told me his big concern was with government secrecy. He talked about “the removal of individual rights” and asked me if it was true that in the United Kingdom there were security cameras everywhere. I told him it was true. He then told me he was concerned about the poor quality of food in the United States, about genetically modified produce and hormone supplements in cattle. I told him I thought it was interesting that whereas in the United Kingdom we allow security cameras but not genetically modified food, it was the other way around in the America. After a bit of thought, he suggested that the “elite” might not allow genetic modification and hormones in Europe because it was their “homeland” and they feared “contamination.”

The data I collected through questionnaires provide other interesting information. When asked by Strieber, approximately half the attendees were prepared to state they had had a visitor experience. This was roughly mirrored by a response of 25 out of 58 (43 percent) in the questionnaire. However, 44 of the 58 (76 percent) reported an “other mystical or paranormal experience,” suggesting that the principal commonality was

paranormal experience. Those reporting abduction were outnumbered by those reporting conspiratorial or alternative health concerns.

More unexpected—given that statistics frequently inform us that, unlike secular Europe, religion is alive and well in the United States (where some 77 percent of respondents identify as Christian⁸²)—only about one in four Dreamland attendees identified as Christian, while fully half wrote “none” and five identified as “spiritual.” Remarkably, no one identified as atheist. This anti-tradition trajectory continued in the question about political affiliation. Given the commonly held impression (supported to some degree by web statistics) of subscribers to conspiracy beliefs as being politically right wing, it was surprising to find that only two persons identified as “Republican,” with another four as “conservative” or “Libertarian.” On the left, nine persons identified as “Democrat,” five as “liberal” and two as “moderate.” But the majority, 27 (46.5 percent), put “none.” The underlying commonality among Dreamland attendees was counter-epistemic views—extraterrestrial, paranormal, spiritual and conspiratorial.

Paranormal Gnosis

Something that wasn't on the questionnaire but became a recurrent theme of the conference was the idea that a paranormal encounter—whether in a strictly physicalist UFO form or Strieber's later, more supernatural interpretation—could lead one to question other accepted epistemologies. As one attendee later told me:

when a person realizes, through an interaction with the paranormal, that the “normal” is in some sense a lie, the next step is to ask what other things you believe are lies. This is how the conspiracy thing becomes relevant. If the US Government IS actually lying about UFOs . . . then what else are they lying about? It doesn't take much digging to find they have been lying about pretty much everything from the Sinking of the Maine which led to the Spanish American War to a string of CIA involvements [sic.] . . . right up to the present wars in the Middle East which were based on lies. . . .⁸³

The word he used—and which several others used over the weekend—was *gnosis*. The term is used in the sense of “transformational, salvational knowledge.” They experienced something—alien abduction, paranormal phenomena, spiritual experience—that transformed their understanding of the world. Undeniably, a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.⁸⁴ This is not a “naïve belief” or “blind faith” but a conviction based on solid experiential ground. As Susan Clancy writes, “the reason they ultimately endorse abduction is actually quite scientific; it is the best fit for

their data—their personal experiences.”⁸⁵ Yet it also contradicts dominant epistemic norms, as do paranormal beliefs and conspiracy theories.

Strieber asks, “Who watches us? It is a question that was once answered by the richness of mythology and faith. We have abandoned the mythology and lost the faith. The question must be addressed afresh.”⁸⁶ He is describing the counter-epistemological position I have described here, in which both scientific-materialist and traditional religious positions are considered inadequate frameworks to explain paranormal experiences. Due to scientific materialism, “we have abandoned the mythology,” and because of secularization (however we construe it), “we have abandoned the faith;” subjective experience has convinced this group of the reality of the paranormal. In doing so, it has led them to distrust other epistemic authorities and frequently to become involved with conspiracy theories and other counter-epistemic milieu. Thus a paranormal experience leads to a transformation in how the individual interacts with epistemic structures; a paranormal gnosis.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have examined the experiences of Whitley Strieber in relation to the category of the paranormal, proposing a discursive definition of paranormal predicated on its relationship to dominant epistemologies, and questioning the dominance of belief over experience in other definitions. Although Strieber’s experiences are typically considered to be an abduction narrative, his work contains a great deal of phenomena belonging to a broader paranormal category and to conspiracy theories, another category that can be defined by its relationship to dominant epistemologies. My fieldwork suggests that this conflation of counter-epistemic positions is even more pronounced among the 2012 Dreamland Festival speakers and attendees, for whom a paranormal experience leads to a broader questioning of epistemic norms, and frequently the adoption of other counter-epistemic positions. Thus their understanding of the world is transformed by exclusive knowledge imparted through their encounter with the paranormal, which I have described here, based on terminology used by the attendees, as gnosis.

The continuation of paranormal beliefs and the growth of conspiracy theories in modern society do not therefore represent a critique of reason, as some would have it.⁸⁷ They represent a critique of hegemonic authority—political, scientific and religious. As cultural sociologist Stef Aupers has argued in relation to conspiracy theories, such a critique is “part and parcel of the project of modernity and that progressive modernization in fact motivates the appeal and popularity of paranoid narratives,”⁸⁸ but such a critique might as well refer to the paranormal.

For Strieber, his first visitor experience of 26 December 1985 revealed to him that his own life was in part a lie. In recovering his own occulted history, he had the curtain drawn back on the occulted history of the world. The visitors—“a dark and highly active phenomenon that seems to inhabit cracks in the unconscious, cracks in space time, and cracks in history”⁸⁹—allow him to connect his other pieces of counter-epistemic knowledge, and experience his own paranormal gnosis.

ENDNOTES

¹ Bruno Latour, *Rejoicing: Or the Torments of Religious Speech* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 32.

² To my knowledge, none of the panelists completed questionnaires, although later, via email, I did ask several of them to respond to some of the issues raised.

³ The third allowed participants to indicate which other popular figures in the “spiritual” and conspiracy theory milieu they considered to be authorities, to allow cross-comparison with other groups at a later stage in the research.

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⁵ Frank Newport and Maura Strausberg, *Americans’ Belief in Psychic and Paranormal Phenomena is Up Over Last Decade* (8 June 2001), Gallup; at www.gallup.com/poll/4483/Americans-Belief-Psychic-Paranormal-Phenomena-Over-Last-Decade.aspx; accessed 24 March 2014; David W. Moore, *Three in Four Americans Believe in Paranormal* (16 June 2005), Gallup; at www.gallup.com/poll/16915/Three-Four-Americans-Believe-Paranormal.aspx; accessed 24 March 2014.

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⁷ Jennifer Radden, “Recent Criticisms of Clinical Nosology: A Review,” *Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology* 1 no. 3 (September 1994): 193–200.

⁸ Irwin, *Psychology of Paranormal Belief*, 9.

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¹⁰ For example, see Jeffery J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

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- ¹⁶ In Merriam-Webster and other dictionaries, the earliest usage cited is 1915–1920.
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- ¹⁸ David G. Robertson, “(Always) Living in the End Times: the Rolling Prophecy of Conspiracy Culture,” in *Prophecy in the New Millennium: When Prophecies Persist*, ed. Sarah Harvey and Suzanne Newcombe (London: Ashgate, 2013), 207–19.
- ¹⁹ George W. Bush, cited in Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 20.
- ²⁰ Newport and Strausberg, *Americans’ Belief in Psychic and Paranormal Phenomena; Moore, Three in Four Americans Believe in Paranormal*.
- ²¹ Jim Williams, *Conspiracy Theory Poll Results* (2 April 2013), Public Policy Polling; at www.publicpolicypolling.com/main/2013/04/conspiracy-theory-poll-results.html; accessed 24 March 2014.
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