

## Acknowledgements

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## **Introduction**

At the evening the 19<sup>th</sup> of February 2011, I found myself in an apartment in Woodland, Northern California. It was my very first day in the field, and the first day I ever referred to myself as a social anthropologist. I had just met with Donald, a newfound friend and the leader of a ghost hunter group called “The Flying Monkeys”; one out of the many groups I would be introduced to that spring. Donald had given me ride to Woodland, where he and his group had scheduled a meeting this evening. This meeting was to be followed up by a “ghost hunt” at the Woodland Opera House later that night. When I and Donald had arrived at the apartment, the rest of the group had gathered around the kitchen table. There were 5-6 group members present in the apartment, who sat eagerly waiting for the coffee to finish brewing. Donald and I joined the table with them. There was a good tension, and conversations sprawled about the history of the opera house, the ghost hunters anticipations for the night, and previous “ghost hunts” carried through by the group. Fascinated, I was sitting there overhearing their discussion. This moment that I had depicted in my head during many months of fieldwork preparations, was finally here.

Several years before I had stumbled across a TV series named “Ghost Hunters” on the internet. The documentary-styled TV-drama followed two plumbers, whose favorite nightly activity was to seek out and spend their nights at reportedly haunted locations. “Plumbers at day, ghost hunters at night”, was the shows slogan. What characterized “Ghost Hunters”, and distinguished it from most other supernatural television shows, was that it had a scientific backbone to it. By utilizing “scientific methods” and an extensive use of technological gadgets, the ghost hunters purported to establish contact with, and document the presence of, any ghosts haunting the locations they visited. The two plumbers, and the rest of their ghost hunting crew, would travel around America and “hunt” for ghosts at various sites; from famous historical locations to private residences. Any successful “ghost hunt” would result in a ghost being “captured” to film or record – serving as “scientific evidence” the respective place was indeed haunted. Nevertheless, a ghost hunt would be equally successful if the ghost hunters managed to find rational explanations for any of the paranormal claims presented to them. The ghost hunters overall ambitions were to distinguish the real ghosts from those that were product of someone’s lively imagination.

What had interested me the most about the show was how “Ghost Hunters” united the two seemingly incompatible worlds of science and the supernatural; and how the stuff of fantasy, horror flicks and

ghost stories were so harmoniously incorporated into a scientific scheme. The phenomenon of ghosts was treated not strictly as something mystical and imaginable, but also as something physical, measurable and verifiable. “Ghost Hunters” confined ghosts not exclusively to mythology and fantasy, but also something of the material world; something physically “real”. This fascinated me.

It is fair to say that the “Ghost Hunters” television show was what would eventually bring me to California that spring; and to the apartment in Woodland that evening in February. When I had finally decided to take my masters in social anthropology, there had been no doubt in my mind that I wanted to study the phenomena of ghost hunting. At the time I had become aware that ghost hunting was more than just TV entertainment in the US. On the contrary, ghost hunting had become a major fad all over North America. After a few months of exchanging e-mails with various ghost hunter groups, I had come in contact with Donald. Alike me, he was one of many who had become fascinated by “Ghost Hunters” several years earlier; and he had been wanting to try it out for himself. After having attended at 30-40 ghost hunts throughout his ghost hunting career, he had gathered his team this evening to partake at yet another one. To me, this was to be the first.

A few hours before we were to set off, The *Flying Monkeys* were engaging in conversation over a cup of coffee. I was eagerly writing down in my field book anything of significance. It was during this meeting, at my very first day in the field, that the words would come to me. During a conversation regarding personal motivations Fairen, one of the attendees sitting right across me at the table, voiced her concerns with ghosts and ghost hunting. She uttered the phrase: “I am not sure what is real or what my mind wants to be real”. These words were those that I one year later would decide to put on the front cover of my master’s thesis; as I they so brilliantly encapsulated its overall theme.

This thesis will concern the epistemological aspects of ghost hunting. It tells the story about how the ghost hunter community went forward to uncover the “real” truth about ghosts – with a skeptical mindset, through rational inquiry and use of technological apparatus. I addresses the ghost hunters struggles to distinguish “the real” – what is objectively and universally true; from “what the mind wants to be real” – subjective deceptions posed by sensory illusions, wishful thinking, and a vivid imagination. More distinctly, it concerns how ghost hunters purported to tell the real ghosts from imaginary ghosts, the authentic ghost experiences from deceptive ghost experiences, and the true evidence of ghosts from misrepresented evidence of ghosts. The paper will go as follows:

Initiating Chapter 1 we will ask ourselves the basic question: “what is ghost hunting?” I will briefly introduce the essentials of ghost hunting, before I move on to elaborating on how the popularity of ghost hunting can be seen in light of disenchantment and re-enchantment. In Chapter 2 I will run you through how I went about conducting my field work; my methodological approach, my role in the field, as well as some methodical implications. Then in Chapter 3 I will introduce the ghost hunter community: the four groups I studied, the community’s inner workings and dynamics, and perhaps most importantly, the ghost hunters themselves. We will get to know the practitioners central to this thesis; how they got drawn into the practice, as well as why they committed themselves to “hunting ghosts”. In Chapter 4 it is time to hunt for some ghosts. By taking as basis one particular ghost hunt I will focus on the ghost hunters understandings of ghosts, the various “ghost gadgets” utilized during ghost hunts, and how these gadgets were to compromise with the ghost’s obscured nature. Chapter 5 will follow closely in the tracks of its previous chapter. The “ghost hunt” will here continue, although we will here be employing a different focus. The main theme will encompass the experiential aspects of ghost hunting; merely how ghosts “came to life” through use of the ghost hunter’s imagination on one hand, and their objective rationalization of mysterious events on the other. In Chapter 6 we will address the ghost hunter’s epistemology of personal experiences. That is, my informants’ epistemic conceptions of sensory experience, the process of categorizing experiences in terms authenticity, and their perspectives on other individuals’ epistemological orientations. In the last main Chapter, Chapter 7, we will devote our attention what the ghost hunters considered to be evidence. Namely photographs, audio recordings and video footage that would to the ghost hunters serve as proof that some location was haunted, and that ghosts did in fact exist. Finally we will sum up all the threads in a conclusion. We will briefly conclude with addressing the ghost hunters’ epistemic ambiguities when trying to distinguish the “real” from “what the mind wants to be real”



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## **Chapter 1: introducing “Ghost Hunting”**

### **Introduction**

in this Chapter I will introduce the reader to “ghost hunting”. I will initially address ghost hunting as a social phenomenon, by shedding some light on the popularity and commonality of ghost hunting in contemporary USA. Further I will go onto elaborating on what characterizes the ghost hunting practice, as well as what characterizes the institutions that conduct ghost hunting. Throughout the final part of the Chapter will link contemporary ghost hunting to the theories of disenchantment and re-enchantment. First of all let us ask ourselves the basic question. What is ghost hunting?

### **What is ghost hunting?**

Ghost hunting is a practice by which actors situate themselves at presumably haunted locations - mostly overnight - in order to interact with, as well as to document the presence of ghosts. Ghost hunting has been made iconic through various television shows, and seems recently to have become a highly widespread and popular practice in the US. The practice of ghost hunting is perhaps most known for the scientific ideals employed by those in the field, as well as their techno-sophisticated approach to paranormal matters. Ghost hunter practices are essentially orchestrated by so-called ghost hunter groups - or paranormal research groups – that are lay-organizations mostly open to the general public. Aside from being a forum for like-minded ghost-enthusiasts, these communities also share some common goals and characteristics, that we will familiarize ourselves with here.

### **Ghost hunting in contemporary USA**

In recent years the US has witnessed what may appear a commercialization of “ghost hunting”. This is perhaps most evident in popular media, wherein television shows – such as *Ghost Hunters*, *Ghost Hunters International*, *Paranormal State* and *Ghost Adventures* - have received massive popularity amongst American viewers; some of the series with millions tuning in to watch every week (Burger 2010). These shows all take on the genre of reality TV, and portray various “ghost hunter groups” in their efforts to investigate haunted locations throughout the US – as well as worldwide. Their means are to provide *evidence* of a ghostly reality, in a self-declared: scientific and rationalistic manner. This *Evidence* takes form as photographs, audio and video footage, presumed to portray genuine ghostly activity. The viewers of these shows are in a sense invited along - taking a stand in determining the significance and authenticity of their findings (Hill 2011). After the ghost hunter television shows began to emerge in the beginning of the millennium, “ghost hunting” seems to have become a

recognizable term within the American populace. However, ghost hunting is by no means confined to just television.

In fact an entire industry has been based around ghost hunting. For instance there is a seemingly endless array of books on the subject - covering everything from the histories of famous actors in the field, to introduction guides on how to become a professional ghost hunter. A quick browse on the Internet provides seemingly infinite results of sites offering various ghost hunting related products and services. Among these are many amateur web-pages presenting pictorial evidence of ghosts, intriguing tales from the field, advice on how to get in touch with the “the other side”, and so on. Furthermore, there is also a wide selection of commercial websites advertising products like: ghost tours, TV series merchandise, classes on how to hunt for ghosts, conferences where you may get to meet “real ghost hunters”, and so on. The perhaps most distinct aspect with ghost hunting on the Internet, is the widespread sale of, what one may call, “ghost tech”; technological equipment utilized in the field of ghost hunting, serving to aid the ghost hunter in interacting with ghostly entities. Sites like *theghosthunterstore.com* and *ghosthuntershop.com* offers a broad assortment of so-called ghost hunting equipment. They cover what one may call traditional equipment; like cameras, voice recorders, lasers, and various environmental meters. Technological apparatus that were considered elementary to the field, yet that were obviously invented for other purposes than interacting with ghosts. In addition the Internet sites advertise technology developed exclusively for the purpose of ghost hunting. Such gadgets are manufactured for the purpose of detecting ghostly entities, serving as mediums of communication, and/or obtaining evidence of ghosts.

It is hardly any wonder why ghost hunting has become such a commercial success. Lately it appears more and more Americans have become eager to try out hunting ghosts for themselves. One tendency supporting this theory, is the rising popularity of so-called “ghost tourism” (Holloway 2009). Ghost tourism often takes the form of guided tours - through which groups of tourists are given the opportunity to explore certain “haunted places”. It provides, as Thompson puts it, “a window onto the fate of ghost belief in the scientifically rationalized and technologically sophisticated west.” (2010:79). Through such activities, tourists get to experience the enchanting feel of a haunted location, and learn about the myths and (often dark) history associated with it. The appeal appears to lie in the flirt with supernatural ideas, and momentarily acceptance of the possibility that a ghost may in fact reveal itself during the tour. Hence there are many varieties to ghost tourism, some activities connect directly with the contemporary ghost hunter practice, as seen on TV (Hill 2011). These events sometimes allow the

tourists to familiarize themselves with the ghost hunter techniques and gadgets; and may involve spending the night “in the company of ghosts”.

What we will be concerned with here however, are more durable institutions of ghost hunting. That is, groups or organizations, with a rather steady member base of “ghost hunters”, who actively and continuously engage themselves in the practice. There seems to be no shortage of ghost hunter groups (or paranormal research groups) in the US. At the website *ParanormalSocieties.com* – one of several online directories displaying such groups – there are listed a couple of thousands of ghost hunter groups; scattered all throughout the states. At the time of writing there are about 80 groups listed located in California alone; despite several of the groups became familiar with in the field, are not listed in the directory. The sheer number of such communities seem to have increased radically over just recent years.

### **The ghost hunter community and practice**

What exactly characterizes a ghost hunter group? The excerpts below are taken from the respective websites of the four groups I studied; and illustrate how ghost hunter groups generally presented themselves to the public. The illustrations make clear some distinctive traits that to a great extent define a ghost hunter group.

*California Haunts, located in Sacramento, California, the California Gold Country, the Bay Area, Nevada and Texas is dedicated to the investigation of alleged paranormal activity. The team is dedicated to “proof and truth” and goes through exhaustive measures to investigate each alleged haunting. By utilizing infrared monitoring cameras, motion detectors, electro-magnetic frequency meters, tri-field meters, thermometers, Internet resources and good, old-fashioned research, the team makes every effort to understand why the activity is occurring.*

*Flying Monkey Paranormal Investigation is an organization based in Dixon, California that is dedicated to exploring unexplained phenomena, hauntings, ghosts, and the supernatural. The flying monkey is known as a «Spirit-Chaser». Traditionally they are made to protect sleeping children from evil spirits, assuring their safe return to this reality when waking up.*

*Flying Monkey Paranormal Investigation integrates a scientific and spiritual approach to investigating the paranormal. Our investigative method utilizes empirical evidence, and at the same time employs a spiritual perspective. Members of the team have been investigating the paranormal since 2008.*

*The team has investigated a number of historical infamous haunts as well as many private residences.*

*[P.R.O.V.E] was created to allow community members to investigate the paranormal, gather evidence and learn to analyze and debunk information.*

*Collectively, we have taken part in many investigations – with our core team and with other paranormal groups. Continuing to branch out and join other teams is encouraged.*

*Requirements to join this [group]*

- \* You are of sound mind. (Well, almost... ;oD )*
- \* You must have your own transportation.*
- \* Expect to pay a fee to get access to certain investigation sites, i.e. Preston Castle.*
- \* You are able to follow directions and accept positive criticism.*
- \* Keep an open mind that not everything odd will be paranormal.*
- \* Have fun while in the group. If you are not having fun, you should not be here.*
- \* No alcohol prior to or during an investigation. Drug use will not be tolerated.*
- \* There will be a monthly fee of \$1 to assist with the costs associated with this group – collected during the Meetup meeting/investigation.*

*[the group organizer wants] everyone to have fun while helping others and to assist in finding evidence to help P.R.O.V.E. what many believe is life after death.*

***The Solano Ghost Hunting Group** is based in the Solano County area of California and welcomes people who are interested in the investigation of paranormal phenomenon, in both a scientific and logical manner.*

*We would like to visit various interesting sites in Northern California, conduct investigations, and just have fun!*

*We are looking for people who are interested in paranormal investigations. Experienced or non-experienced people are welcome and also people with equipment and investigations skills. So if you are looking for some fun, cool experiences, and to meet new friends that have the same interests as you do, check out our [Internet profile]*

Although these four groups are organized independently of each other, they share several features; that they can be classified by as commonplace ghost hunter groups.

Firstly, ghost hunting – as well as other events taking place in the ghost hunter community – were predominantly attended as a leisure activity. The ghost hunter community appeared open-ended and accessible to seemingly anyone interested in pursuing the practice of ghost hunting. The groups I studied consisted mostly of deliberate ghost enthusiasts whom had made ghost hunting an ongoing commitment; some even a way of life. These were individuals who partook in ghost hunting on a permanent basis, by means of socializing, having fun and seeking answers for life’s biggest questions. On a weekly or monthly basis members of the ghost hunter communities would come together and engage in “ghost hunts” and various related events.

Secondly ghost hunter groups were essentially non-profit charitable organizations which aim was to consult unfortunates experiencing paranormal phenomena; especially “hauntings”<sup>1</sup>. Essentially, a ghost hunter group served as consultant assisting individuals who claimed to have paranormal events happening in their home. Although far less extreme, the circumstances regarding a “real life haunting” did not fall too far apart from its fictitious counterpart seen on the big screen. The typical situation in such cases seemed to regard a family who was living together in their home, when more or less suddenly mysterious events began to occur. These events accumulate over time leaving the residents somehow having to deal with the phenomena, out of annoyance, curiosity, anxiety, fear; or in the worst case scenario: concern with their own safety. A ghost hunter group would be contacted by the unfortunate client, and then conduct an *investigation* (Ghost Hunt<sup>2</sup>) at the respective location; within which they sought to get in touch with potential ghosts, validate or debunk paranormal claims, try to explain the circumstances of a potential haunting, and advise the clients on how to progress with their lives. Some of the groups also performed house cleansings<sup>3</sup>, although that seemed to fall outside the traditional core aspects of ghost hunting. Also it should be noted that aside from consulting troubled home owners, the groups would frequently also hunt for ghosts at remote and public “haunted locations”, by means of exercise, sociality and fun.

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<sup>1</sup>) Not any location that was inherited by ghosts was by my informants regarded as “haunted”. The term “haunting” was

<sup>2</sup>) The term “ghost hunting” was quite an informal term used mostly in interaction between individuals and groups in the paranormal field - as well as within popular culture. The same goes for related expressions like “to be a ghost hunter” and “to hunt for ghosts”. When on the other hand, these groups addressed actors outside the paranormal community, circumstances were often more formal. A ghost hunter group was then typically referred to as a “paranormal research group”, a ghost hunter a “paranormal investigator” and a “ghost hunt”, an “investigation”, and so forth. These formal terms contributed to empathize on the communities’ serious, professional and scientific approaches to their practice. Throughout this thesis I will switch between using the formal and informal expressions.

<sup>3</sup>) A house cleansing entailed that some person would come in and perform a cleansing ritual at a haunted location; to draw out any ghostly entities present at the respective premise. House cleansings were mostly performed by individuals who had some form of clairviont ability, or that were deeply involved in some spiritual practice; like for instance shamanism.



*One of many ways for a ghost hunter group to advertise its services*

Thirdly, ghost hunter groups were institutions of paranormal research. On behalf of the groups – and the ghost hunter community in general - actors engaged in researching paranormal phenomena, such as spirits, ghosts, poltergeists and demons. They were categorized as institutions of paranormal research, and approached these paranormal subjects through a uniformity of scientific ideals and premises. Moreover the ghost hunter groups utilized a wide array of technological aids upon conducting this research; which may perhaps be the most iconic aspect of the ghost hunting trade. Ultimately, the ends to paranormal research were to obtain tangible *evidence* - predominantly photo, video and audio recordings - proving the existence of ghosts; as well as provide further knowledge of such phenomena. This *evidence* was collected throughout a groups respective investigations (ghost hunts), and would ideally form the fundament to “ghost theory”.

As we in this thesis will be concerned with the epistemology of ghost hunting, it is the paranormal research aspect to ghost hunting that will be of significance. Or more precisely, what concerns the ghost hunters quest for truth. Therefore I find it necessary to introduce some of the discourses that seem to flavor today’s ghost hunting practices, as well as the philosophical legacy these discourses build on. In the next section I will introduce rationalist discourse, and discuss the impact the discourse has had on

modern western society.

### **Disenchantment and the emerge of rationalist discourse**

The fact that the practice of ghost hunting has received such a stunning appeal in today's modernized America seems to counter the so-called *disenchantment thesis*. The idea of disenchantment was pioneered by, among others, Max Weber who contended that the processes of rationalization, secularization, and bureaucratization would eventually contribute to the demise of supernatural beliefs and practices in modern western society (Saler 2006); either such beliefs would dissipate entirely or they would become far less dominant (Partridge 2004). A broadly covering definition of these tendencies is brought forth by Saler who states the theory of disenchantment: "maintains that wonders and marvels have been demystified by science, spirituality has been supplanted by secularism, spontaneity has been replaced by bureaucratization, and the imagination has been subordinated to instrumental reason" (2006:692). The ideas of disenchantment began to surface as a repercussion to the philosophical discourses emerging with the scientific revolution. In that context, Rene Descartes was a person of significance, as he was the first to propose a clear division between *subjective imagination* and *objective reality* (Northcote 2007); or more precisely, a divide in terms of how reality is *experienced*, contra how reality actually *is* (in a mechanical sense). The previously held idea that the cosmos was revolving around the individual, was now challenged by the understanding that we all share *one* objective reality. This new way of conceiving the universe would have huge impact on science, but later also to general western ways of thinking.

Descartes and Francis Bacon would, as opposed to previous thinkers, be the first to pursue to "question nature directly" and they emphasized the importance of precise methods of measurement (Morris 1981). Through such means the nature would speak for itself, rather than letting the human subject speak for it. And so the scientist would aim to address nature in an objective manner, drawing out the facts of nature by utilizing technology and "trained judgment" (Daston and Gallison 2007). This historical development can be said to have confined the subject within a designated position, perspective and function. Thereof deploying the scientist to *behold* the world instead of reading it; and *verify* it rather than commenting on it (Foucault 1970). Overall the subject – and reality as *experienced* - would come to occupy a more designated role. Human imagination would render far less significant within epistemology; thus considered misleading in the modern scientist's ambitions to uncover the truth about the universe (Daston and Gallison 2007; Northcote 2007) Bacon, for one, expressed that for the humanity to be able to explore the physical world, we had to rid the human mind of its superstitions. As



he put it: “The universe to the eye of the human understanding is framed like a labyrinth, presenting as it does on every side so many ambiguities of way, such deceitful resemblances of objects and signs, natures so irregular in their lines, and so knotted and entangled” (cited in Zagorin 2001:387). This “labyrinth” – what we today may refer to as the objective reality - could be fully explored and conquered, only if we were to be released from our superstitions (Ibid). Simultaneously, the virtues of the human senses would come to lose much epistemic value as well. This philosophical development can in fact be traced back to Descartes famous quote: “I think therefore I am”. His well-known words derived from a significant thought-experiment, which went as follows: “I shall now close my eyes, I shall stop my ears, I shall call away all my senses”. (cited in Synnott 1991:70). After Descartes had carried this experiment through, there remained to him *one* indisputable truth: “I exist”. A conclusion reached exclusively by intellectual judgment, and independently of his empirical senses. And so, to him, the rest of the world’s mysteries should be uncovered in the same manner; strictly through rational thinking. Based on this line of thought, the human senses were soon to be conceived as deceptive and misleading; and eventually they would become embedded into a modern scientific notion of the sensory. The senses were no longer considered cultural, but strictly physical; useful mainly to gather data about the physical environments (Classen 1993).

As it turned out, both subjective imagination and sensual experience would - over the course of the scientific revolution - lose much of its epistemic credibility; and out of these newly established philosophical developments sprung an emerging *rationalism*. A set of views which by definition: “propose that all knowledge and reliable guidance for life are to be rooted strictly in our rational powers” (Carlson 2010:232). Only by virtues of rationalization could humans unravel the truths about reality. These new ways of conceiving the universe would not be limited to scientific institutions, libraries and laboratories alone. As the west modernized the new dichotomy between subjective mind and the objective reality would eventually become embodied in the western mindset. Or more precisely, it would come to shape the epistemology of modern man. The rationalist discourse would set its mark on general western epistemology; and greatly dictate how we would rightfully arrive upon the truth. As Foucault put it: “Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements” (Foucault 1980:131). To Foucault (1970) natural philosophy unarguably had a profound influence on the political and religious systems of its time; as it carried with it - what he has referred to as a new “will to knowledge (and truth)”. He conceptualized this “will to knowledge” as a discursive “system of exclusion”, serving to exclude *true knowledge* from *false*

*knowledge*. It impacted western societies through institutions like literature, economy, sociology and medicine to name a few; which appeared to become governed by this fixed notion of true knowledge (Ibid). The development caused supernatural ideas to be marginalized in scientific circles, whose rationalist minds associated such concepts with merely *irrational passions* (Northcote 2007). These irrational passions could be said to fall outside the category of what was considered *true knowledge*.

The internalization of the new idea of *true knowledge* would eventually build up under the processes of rationalism and secularization, which was what Max Weber referred to as he proposed his ideas of disenchantment. He held that the population of the modern west would leave their supernatural beliefs (perceived imaginary and thereby irrational) behind due to these disenchanting tendencies. As Bennett explains: “A rationalizing culture encourages a particular style of thinking – the kind used in mathematics and scientific experimentation” (2001:58). In other words, the disenchantment thesis portrayed the western self as “predisposed toward rationalism and skepticism” (Ibid). Or as Berger and Luckmann put it: “modernity leads inescapably to secularization – secularization in the sense of a loss of influence of religious institutions on society as the well as credibility of religious interpretations in people’s consciousness” (Berger and Luckmann 1995:36) This theory may apply to paranormal interpretations as well. However, one may question just how deep-seated secularization and rationalist discourse had become within the western population; let alone what role it would play in the years to come (Northcote 2007).

Webers prediction about the future would entail that today, almost a hundred years after he proposed his views on disenchantment, there would be little room for the belief in ghosts in the western society. Or at least that such superstitions would be reserved marginalized groups in primitive and nonmetropolitan areas (Holloway 2009). We may ask ourselves; have these predictions of disenchantment become true? To answer this question I will introduce the contemporary paranormal discourse, and the theorists who contended that supernatural ideas were not about to diminish.

### **Re-enchantment and the contemporary paranormal discourse**

In recent decades, it has turned out the various theories of disenchantment would be met by skepticism. Weber’s (and others) predictions have come under critique, as many scholars stood up against the thesis of disenchantment; arguing that the western world is experiencing quite the contrary, namely processes of re-enchantment. This re-enchantment thesis proposed that mystic beliefs, such as the beliefs in ghosts, are not about to go away; but that they will somehow adapt to the secularized world, and even

increase in influence. As Patridge argues: “It seems clear that religion/spirituality is able to sustain itself outside of traditional institutions and indeed thrive with the postmodern” (Patridge 2004:58). It may look as if the re-enchantment theorists are onto something. Over the recent decades it appears the belief in paranormal subjects has been on the rise. In fact some polls have suggested that in 2011, as many as 1/3 of the American population admitted believing in ghosts; a considerable increase from only 1/4 in 1990 (Hill 2011). Likewise affiliated supernatural beliefs like those in healing, spiritualism and horoscopes have followed in its tracks (Goode 2000). Statistics have shown that as many as 68 percent of the North American population hold beliefs in *at least one* supernatural concept (Bader, Baker and Menchen 2010); indicating that believers in the paranormal constitute the majority, rather so than the minority of the populace.

It would however be overly simplistic interpreting these statistics as a token that most Northern Americans have lately chosen the path of “irrational passions” over the path of rationalism (a dichotomy essential to the disenchantment thesis). Both rational and supernatural discourses seem to be simultaneously at work here. Let us, for instance, take a look on how the paranormal have been represented in media in the last few decades. Although recent television series such as *ghost hunters* have explicitly endorsed the ideals of science, the rationalist discourse appears to have been ever-present in the paranormal media representations over the years. Hess (1993) has identified what he defines a *skeptical baseline*; evident in a variety of Hollywood movies, from the seventies onwards. This is based on the understanding the protagonists in blockbusters such as *the Exorcist*, *Poltergeist* and *Ghost Busters*, initially holds skeptical views towards mysterious phenomena. That is, until the paranormal reality eventually insists itself on them. Hess argues, that in these films, “a series of transitions take place as the skeptical, materialistic explanations gradually shift toward paranormal and otherworldly discourse” (Hess 1993:124). The skeptical baseline constitutes a point of reference from which the lead characters depart – in tandem with the movie audience - before having to face the alternate possibilities of a supernatural existence. The movies portray the “otherworldly (or paranormal) discourse” as a discourse that has to be made accessible. It becomes accessible only when the skeptical reasoning held by the audience is delegitimized in order to make room for perceiving the otherworldly as reasonable. Rather than forcefully throwing the spectator into a reality of ghosts and possessions, these movies direct to the modern westerns rationalist ethos; by which supernatural explanations are not taken for granted.

A “skeptical baseline” seems not only to be evident in movies and popular culture, but also in real life.

For instance Luhrmann (1989) noticed that within the witchcraft scene in London, participants initially held a skeptical position as they got involved with the practice and; and they frequently held onto their skepticism even when they kept involving themselves in witchcraft practices. Other scholars have focused on the accounts of individuals who claim to have had experiences of paranormal nature. Studies show that such individuals often take elaborate steps in order to preserve their integrity, as Goldstein argues: “Supernatural experience narratives (...) tend to share a common highly detailed, cautious, and sometimes even defensive structure” (Goldstein, Grider and Thomas 2007:78). Goldstein asserts that paranormal narratives were presented as if the person in question was “on the witness stand”; offering often thorough descriptions of the experience, the circumstances from which it arose, possibilities for alternate more natural explanations, and elaboration of the individual’s reluctance to accept the experience as genuinely paranormal (Ibid). Accordingly Lamont (2007) argues that those who had embraced their paranormal experience commonly warranted their respective beliefs by employing, as he puts it: “an avowal of prior skepticism”. This refers to a rhetorical technique, by which individuals confessed to once having arrived from a skeptic standpoint, before one (or several) incident(s) convinced them the phenomena was indeed real.

Generally, it appears those who have had paranormal experiences frequently make efforts not to come across as irrational, wishful, narrow minded, gullible, or in worst case scenario: crazy. These appear to be labels representatives of the modern western populace would refrain from having associated with them (Goldstein, Grider and Thomas 2007); to a point, Raahauge (2010) argues, admitting to ghostly experiences and beliefs may represent a modern taboo. This insinuates that the ideas of disenchantment are still lying dormant in modern western culture, in spite of the recent increase in paranormal beliefs. Overall the contemporary paranormal discourse seems clearly shaped by skepticism, yet ghosts - and affiliated phenomena - still manage to hold on their appeal and plausibility.

It may appear that ghost hunting is an icon for its time. Its respective beliefs and practices fits elegantly into the secularized and rationalistic ethos of modern day America. On one hand they direct to the supernatural - which Max Weber, for one - thought would see demise in the advent of modern society. On the other hand, they approach their supernatural concepts through notions of science, rationalism and objectivity; which Weber thought would contribute to cause this demise in the first place. So where does this situate the popular practice of ghost hunting? Is it the result of disenchantment? Or is it the result of re-enchantment? It may appear ghost hunting was influenced by both disenchantment and re-enchantment. In fact, some argue that today it will prove challenging to try and draw a line between the

two (Holloway 2007). Others even contend they are somewhat fused together. For instance Saler asserts that: “enchantment [may be] compatible with, and even dependent upon, those tenets of modernity usually seen as disenchanting the world, such as rationality self-reflexivity” (2006:702). This appears it could be the case with ghost hunting. Throughout this thesis we will see how the practice seemingly compromised elements of enchantment with elements of disenchantment.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this chapter I have introduced the phenomena of ghost hunting. I have given brief overview of what ghost hunting is all about, and shed some light on the popularity and commonality of ghost hunting in contemporary USA. Moreover I have introduced the theories of disenchantment and re-enchantment, which will serve as the underlying theme throughout this thesis. In this chapter these theories has been useful in illustrating how ghost hunting seem to be representative of the paranormal discourse of Modern North America; a discourse which appears to draw influence from both disenchantment and re-enchantment. These threads we will pick up occasionally as we proceed throughout the following chapters.

## **Chapter 2: The fieldwork**

### **Introduction**

This thesis is based on a fieldwork conducted in and about Sacramento, California; extending from January 22nd to July 2nd, 2011. Throughout this field work I studied four ghost hunter groups. Over the course of these five months I took part in their various practices and social events, This thesis is based on the empiric data collected from more than 30 such events counting paranormal investigations (Ghost Hunts), classes, meetings and other social get-togethers. Additionally the paper is based on the interviews undergone with 14 of my informants, carried out towards the end of my field work.

In this chapter I will elaborate on how I carried through the fieldwork.. I will then take the reader through several aspects of the research process; the methodology, matters of positioning and the interviewing process. Lastly, I will bring up some previous research that has been done on the northern American paranormal scene, as well as ghost hunting and similar practices.

### **Getting started**

As I begun planning ahead for my research, I found that the practice of ghost hunting was performed all throughout the US. This gave me the opportunity to decide freely in terms of what state I preferred to perform my field work in. California came to mind quite early as an appropriate field; not only due to its warm climate, but also of practical reasons as the paranormal groups there seemed quite common and widespread. After several futile attempts of getting in touch with groups in Los Angeles and Southern California I began turning my attention to the northern part of the state. I had gotten a response from a group based in Dixon, which I had mistakenly thought was based in Los Angeles. Donald, the leader of this group was willing to help me out with my project. After some thorough consideration I settled on Northern California, since it was at that time the only certain opportunity I had; and I began arranging with plane tickets and looking for somewhere to live during my stay. The city of Sacramento came across as a fruitful choice; given it was the biggest city in the area. And it seemed to have decent public transportation, which I would be dependent of as I did not have a driver's license at the time.

I found a room for rent in the suburbs, and I arrived in Sacramento towards the end of January. I gave it a few weeks after my arrival before I began contacting potential informants. To begin with I had a list of a few names and numbers that I had received by Donald through e-mail. I would give these a call

and those who I got in contact with seemed willing to help me. Unfortunately I had to give up on one of the groups listed as it was based a one hour drive from where I was located, and it proved challenging getting a ride back and forth. I did however get in touch with one group besides Donald's, and shortly thereafter I also got in contact with two additional groups through their respective Internet sites. After having arranged with four different groups, and waiting for responses from a couple of others, all I could do was to wait for something to happen. I eventually got invited with Donald's group on a ghost hunt in the middle of February, and around that time I also got to meet up with all my three other groups.

From that point on I would involve myself with the groups whenever possible. I would be in touch with the group organizers on a regular basis to be updated about upcoming events. Granted that ghost hunting and affiliated events were mostly practiced at nighttime and in weekends, there would often go days – sometimes weeks – between each time I got to conduct field work. Although I to begin with, thought I would have to expand my network, I soon rested assure that my field work would get sufficient empirical data. I would frequently contact my key informants to see if they had any upcoming plans.

### **Methodological approach**

I employed a symbolist approach when carrying through my field work. In practice this meant I would take notice of what appeared to be of significance to my informants, and the ghost hunter community in general; then “analyze it for meaning” (Ortner 1973). One of the pioneers of symbolist anthropology was Clifford Geertz. He asserted that anthropology should be an interpretable science “in search of meaning” (1973:5); and that my role as an anthropologist should be to interpret the “guiding symbols” within the society I studied. These guiding symbols, or “cultural artifacts”, could be ideas, physical objects, modes of thinking, of types of experience that appeared to be meaningful to the people in question. Moreover, they should come across as fairly apparent to me as a scientist. That is, the cultural artifacts importance could be made explicit by my informants , be central to my informant's activities and/or appear to be relevant in many different contexts (Ortner 1973). As I were on the lookout for “cultural artifacts” a picture began to emerge, and after some time I was able to grasp some elements that was significance to the ghost hunter. These were among other things: the significance of the ghost hunter equipment, the significance of personal experiences, and the significance of physical evidence. As my field work evolved I came to identify several elements that I found both interesting and significant. As my informants seemed to have specific criteria for what counted as evidence of ghostly

manifestations, it was natural to focus on epistemological aspects. What would it take to perceive something as truly paranormal? What lied in their notion of evidence? Just what gave such evidence its preferred epistemic virtues? As the ghost hunters notions of personal experience and tangible evidence seemed to contrast, it was interesting to see why they considered it this way.

During my field work and whilst working on my thesis, I would begin to dwell into my informants epistemic perspectives. This would lead me to devote much attention to experience; both lived experience, as well as my informant's notions of experience as a way of "knowing". In fact the experiential aspect of ghost hunting would become a highly important object of inquiry. Experience was what would bring my informants together; providing a common ground through which they would relate to each other. At the different events I participated, stories of personal experiences was often brought up and discussed. Also most ghost hunters had had experiences which was significant to them, and to which they identified themselves and their practice.

Experience has arguably not received much attention as it deserve in anthropology. For instance, when it comes to studies of ritual, Geoffrey and Samuel (2010) argues, the emphasis on text and performance has resulted in experience being mostly overlooked. The reason for this presumed unwillingness to approach experience as an object of study, could be that the sensing body of others proves difficult both to observe and talk about by the anthropologist ( Lutz and White 1986; Samuel 2010). However, experience has not been completely overlooked. Many scholars have argued that as social scientists we simply are incapable of grasping the pure, "inner qualities" of how people live and experience their lives (Csordas 1994); implying that the anthropologist's attention is immediately drawn towards the mediums of narrative; not the experience in itself. So these mediums of communicating experience – like body and oral language - essentially becomes the object of study. This view is expressed by Geertz who puts it like this: "Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else's inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness" (1986:373). It entails that by resorting to study its very expressions, any experience that such an expression stands to represent, cannot be perceived in all its glory. It will have to be perceived indirectly - kept at an arm's length - disallowing the anthropologist to get immediate hold of it. Also, this may entail the particularity of any experience is lost in translation (Kapferer 1986).

The perhaps most comprehensive contribution to experience as a object of study can be found in Bruner and Turners (1986): "anthropology of experience". In that volume a great number of



anthropologists address several aspects of experience; from how actors experience their culture, as well as how they express their experiences. This volume has provided me some helpful theoretical tools, that will be used throughout this thesis.

### **Positioning**

As most of the paranormal groups I studied were continuously accepting new members, my entry into the groups provided few difficulties. That is, when I got in contact with the groups in the first place.

When I first met up with some group, I was not all that different from anyone else who had just signed up with the respective group, and met up for the first time. I had however made my intentions clear in advance, and when some group organizers did not introduce me to the group, I tried to make it as explicit as possible that I was present to do research. My informant's response to this was mainly positive, and most of them seemed eager to contribute to my project.

Any perceived distance between my subjects and me, I would regard as a consequence of me being "a stranger in a strange land", more so than by me, the anthropologist relating to his object of study. To begin with I felt quite like an outsider, although I don't think my informants intentionally contributed to this. It was more, I think, an awkward feeling on my side, that I was distorting their lives. Later, as I got to know my informants better, this feeling would go away, and they would invite me along to more personal and exclusive events, interested to share experiences with me. Then there were some aspects of the practice that simply was not that accessible. When it came to ghost hunts and various meet-ups I was mostly on the line with any other member of the group. Still there were the more exclusive events which I would miss out on; when the group organizers pre-interviewed the clients, or presented to them what they had found during a ghost hunt. Or they could be more personal events; like when a group's case manager went to the library to do historical research on a location, or when individual ghost hunters would come home and go through their audio recorders and photographs to see if they had captured a ghost.

I usually switched between being an active and passive participant, although for the most part I considered myself the latter. The more I got to know my fellow ghost hunters, the more I would engage myself in the various practices. Yet overall, I would most often draw back and try and observe as much as possible.

## **The interviews**

A few months into my field work I felt I had some general ideas to where I was headed with my thesis. I was ready to go more in depth with the subjects that interested me the most, and figured I would be able to gather information most effectively by the conducting interviews. After some day's effort of putting my thoughts to paper, I worked out an interview guide outlining some key concepts. The about 40 questions covered general information about involvement, practice and conceptions of the paranormal. However, the greatest share of questions directed mainly towards experience, evidence and epistemology, which I figured would constitute the very core of my thesis. Afterwards I decided with whom I preferred to do the interviews and winded up with a list of candidates; most of who I further scheduled appointments with over the coming month. I had decided to interview a select few from each of my three most active groups; with priority on those who had partaken in most events during my involvement. This gave me the ability to ask them out regarding previous statements and events that I was curious about. When picking my interviewees I reckoned it would be best going more in depth with those in the groups that I was most familiar with, rather than trying to cover a broader spectrum of informants. Some of those who I wished to talk to I was unable to interview due, to lack of time and opportunity.

Most of my informants seemed curious about my project and were more than eager to talk to me about their interest in the paranormal. I hosted most of the interviews at my place, with the exception of a few that I interviewed either in their own home, or somewhere in public. Primarily I interviewed my informants one by one, except in a few instances when the subjects were couples or in family; and it was more practical interviewing them together. I would use my voice recorder to tape the interviews so I could hear back at it any time. Towards my departure I had interviewed 14 informants and figured I could interview some more over the Internet if I found it necessary. Fortunately I felt that I did not have to this.

## **Adapting to a world of the ghosts**

As I conducted fieldwork in society not too different from my own, the typical "culture shock" often associated with coming to the field was not very overwhelming on my part. Of course there was a challenge in having to talk English on an everyday basis. There were also those trivial things that were slightly different in California than back home in Norway; like for instance how to greet people, how to act in public, and how to use public transportation etc. What would in my case fit the description of a culture shock however, was not adjusting to the American culture in general, but rather to getting

involved in the realities of the ghost hunters.

I had considered myself pretty open minded when it came to paranormal subjects. I believe there was a tiny part deep inside of me that anticipated – or at least hoped – that I would witness something spectacular during my fieldwork. My strong skepticism would however overshadow these anticipations, and as I got involved with the ghost hunting practice. I never experienced anything that did make me reconsider my views. Still, the notion that ghosts may exist subtly build up in my mind. It cumulated into an uncomfortable feeling that simply wouldn't go away. Through my engagement I would meet new people on a weekly basis; most of who had extraordinary stories to tell. In themselves these stories did not affect me much; hence I found I would constantly try and categorize my informant's experiences. Were they real or imaginary? I expected these various testimonies would be possible to explain away, but I found it mostly challenging as my informants seemed to rationalize in similar ways as I did. Most would come across as highly credible. I struggled to comprehend how individuals thinking in similar ways to me, could wind up with such seemingly irrational explanations.

Living for so long within a cosmology of ghosts did eventually get the better of me. I began to have occasional nightmares, which I had not really experienced since childhood. I would sometimes lie in the dark at night and imagine that something could stand at my bedpost. After all, that was a possibility according to my informants. Several times I sought comfort in discussing these issues with my host parents; especially Jim, my “host father”. Looking back now it seems quite humorous, but I cannot remember thinking so back then. After a couple of weeks in the field that feeling of discomfort dispersed. I slowly adapted to my informants views on ghosts and the paranormal.

### **Previous studies on ghosts and the paranormal**

Needless to say, I am not the first to focus my research towards the modern American paranormal scene. Paranormal ideas and beliefs have gained quite the attention among social scientists over the last two decades; perhaps most notably during recent years. As to name some works of significance: An extensive study has been carried through by sociologist Erich Goode (2000) who has studied multitude paranormal beliefs, and the workings of the respective paranormal communities. Another contribution has come from sociologist Jeremy Northcote (2007) who focuses on the discursive basis shared by actors in the paranormal debate. As for anthropologists David Hess (1993) has shown how various actors in the paranormal community - respectively new agers, parapsychologists and skeptics - bracket

each other by producing boundaries between true and false knowledge. The subjects of ghosts and hauntings have received some attention over the recent years also; as a social phenomenon (Gordon 2008), in popular culture (Peeren and Blanco 2010; Hill 2011), and in folklore (Goldstein, Grider and Thomas 2007). When it comes to Ghost hunting in particular, such practices have also been inquired, although to a lesser extent. Some scholars have focused on ghost hunting as it has been represented in the media, like for instance in television shows (Burger 2010; Williams 2010; Hill 2011) and the Internet community (Potts 2004). As far as I am concerned there has never been conducted any durable field research within the contemporary ghost hunter community. The closest seems to be the studies devoted to a similar practice; namely “ghost tourism” (carried through, among others, by: Holloway 2009, Thompson 2010, D`harlingue 2010). Alike this thesis, these studies build around the modern westerners relation to, and experience of ghosts and “haunted space”. Nonetheless they focus on a continuous stream of tourists, more so than permanent members of some “ghost community”. In that respect, this paper is somewhat unique.

One last contribution to subject that I find is worth mentioning is Tanya Luhrmanns (1989): “Persuasion of the witch’s craft: ritual magic in contemporary England”. This work is similar to mine, in how it bases itself on a lengthier fieldwork within one permanent community; as well as thematically. By asking the question: “what makes magic reasonable?”, Luhrmann approached the subject of epistemology in the rationalized world: merely how modern westerners could accept supernatural ideas as genuine. This is an epistemological theme we will touch greatly upon throughout this thesis.



### **Chapter 3: The ghost hunter community**

In this chapter I will introduce the ghost hunter community. We will initially become acquainted with the four groups I studied, and especially the actors this thesis will revolve around. Furthermore I will move on to characteristics of the ghost hunting community, before I once again turn the attention to the actors; with emphasize on how they got involved in the practice, and what motivated them to take part in ghost hunting. The underlying theme to this chapter is the diversity of practitioners; namely how they had different personal pursuits, employed different perspectives on ontological and epistemological matters, yet they seemed to come together as a group.

#### **California Haunts**

*California Haunts* was a ghost hunter group based in Sacramento. The group had a core member base consisting mainly of women from their mid-thirties and upwards. It was relatively active group hosting 2-4 events per month, and about a dozen participants would attend these on regular basis. The group's founder and lead organizer was Charlotte; a writer and freelancer, who had established *California haunts* in 2005. Personally however, she had been involved in the field for a few years longer. Charlotte was in her forties, a Christian and an outgoing woman. She defined herself a psychic, and her clairvoyant abilities had, throughout her life, granted her countless paranormal experiences. She always had some ghostly stories to tell, based either on things she had experienced personally, or the accounts from her ghost hunting acquaintances. She seemed to have a great deal of associates in the field that contributed to keeping the group active. Aside from being part of organizing investigations (ghost hunts), Charlotte also hosted the *California Haunts* podcast radio show. At Wednesday nights she would go on air and discuss various paranormal subjects, often accompanied by a guest. Occasionally this guest would be Caren, the group's official psychic – who would sometimes do psychic readings on people calling in for the show.

Also involved in organizing the *California Haunts* was Rose. Rose had just turned sixty. She was an exceptionally cheerful lady who had joined *California Haunts* just a couple of years prior to my visit; and had just recently acquired a role in organizing the group. Theologically Rose thought of herself a “reborn catholic”. That is, she had through the later years adopted a more nuanced perspective on ghosts and the paranormal realms. Rather than conceiving them as agents of evil - as was they were traditionally understood within Catholicism – she had begun to view them as essentially human entities. These entities were just as “you and I”, and frequently needed help to move on; an assignment Rose expressed she believed was given to her by God. Rose had had several ghostly experiences; occurring

within her ghost hunting practice, as well as throughout her regular life. She was into ghost hunting for the sake of helping others, as well as carrying through paranormal research.

Another active participant within *California Haunts* was Tracy. Tracy was light-hearted 36 year-old who worked as a crime scene investigator. She was raised a Christian and still subscribed to her faith in God. Her lifelong fascination with the paranormal had inspired her to join ghost hunter community about four years prior. Although “non-professionally” - as she defined it - she had involved herself in the practice for a quite a while longer. She had throughout her life had her share of paranormal experiences that she simply could not explain away. Yet she expressed that she kept an open mind, Tracy defined herself a skeptic, and she was always concerned with viewing paranormal matters from different perspectives. Her enthusiasm for the paranormal was however not confined to just ghosts and spiritual beings. Aside from frequently engaging in *California Haunts* various activities, she occasionally went bigfoot-hunting with John, who also had a significant role within *California Haunts*.

John was in his early thirties. Like Tracy he was fascinated with “the full spectrum of the paranormal”, more so than just ghosts alone; and he had been devoted for the greater part of his life. He began hunting ghosts in 2001, and had since then been part of a couple of groups. He was fond of discussing paranormal topics, and invested quite some time reading about such subjects. Throughout his roughly ten years as a ghost hunter John had only had a few experiences that he struggled to find natural explanations for. He always deployed a nuanced perspective on paranormal claims presented to him, and was known for being one of the more questioning members of the group.

Another active member of *California Haunts* was Susan. Unlike those mentioned above she was not directly involved in organizing the group; although she expressed great loyalty to *California Haunts*, and she constantly had projects going on behalf of the team. Additionally she always had her own projects in the works, and seemed to invest much time and money keeping up with the state of the art ghost hunter technology. Susan was in her mid-fifties, and out of all the ghost hunters I got to know she was the one who had been into the field the longest. She began in the late seventies, with what she back then referred to as “psychic photography”; decades before the ghost hunter fad came into play. About 30 years later the paranormal and ghost hunting was still highly important to her. She had throughout her life had various experiences of paranormal nature, inspiring her to keep on with her paranormal research. Several of these took place as she for several years lived in a haunted house in New York. Susan expressed certainty in her ghostly beliefs; as he expressed to me during an interview: “To be

honest... I think I know what is on the other side.” So rather than finding out the truth about ghosts and the afterlife, what drove Susan to involve herself in the practice was to help out people who were so unfortunate to be living in haunted houses. That, and to one day get what she referred to as “the perfect photograph”. Susan has been involved with different groups while living in California. However, her involvement seemed to have been frequently discontinued due to internal disputes in the respective groups. She seemed always to be thinking ahead on what group might be in stall for her next.

The members mentioned here were only about half of those who frequented *California Haunts* events. Yet they (with the exception of Susan) constituted the core of the group, and seemed to be closely knit. They were in contact on a frequent basis, engaging in board meetings and also more exclusive events. Some of these events involved a semi-investigation at the notoriously haunted US Hornet, and a trip to Murphy to arrange with an upcoming paranormal conference. Susan, who was not part of the core group and did not partake at the more exclusive events, was however very invested in her own projects. She would on multiple occasions take me to meet potential clients, as well as once carrying through an unofficial ghost hunt.

What set *California Haunts* apart from the other groups I studied was the emphasis on psychic abilities. The majority of the active participants identified themselves as psychics, sensitives or with having some sort of clairvoyant ability. *California Haunts* emphasis on clairvoyance also had some influence on the groups ghost hunting techniques. Although the group utilized the standard ghost hunting methods (as we shall see in Chapter 4 and 5) the investigators clairvoyant abilities were often used in addition to these methods. For instance *California Haunts* were frequently in touch with their so-called “remote psychic”; an out of state professional psychic who always did “readings” on the locations investigated by the team. Also Charlotte and Caren, whose clairvoyant abilities were thought to be the most solid, would constantly use their abilities during investigations (Ghost Hunts). Moreover, the group would meet about once a month at a meeting locale in Elk Grove and attend so-called “psychic development classes”. Here Charlotte - and sometimes Caren - would assign the attendees different exercises, guiding them in improving on their clairvoyant abilities. At the first of the classes I attended, Charlotte instructed us to split up into teams to try and read ones designated partner’s minds. She also told a story from her childhood and invited the assemblage to try and foretell components of the story. At another class Caren gave us an introduction in spirit writing. We were all given a pen and paper and tried to attain a meditative state, so the spirits could speak through us. The psychic development classes



were never very formal, and appeared to be the only regular events by which the team could get together outside of investigations. That was perhaps except for the *California Haunts* book club which was established towards the end of my field work. The members of the book club were to meet about every month to discuss particular books on the paranormal.

### **The Flying Monkeys**

*The Flying Monkeys* was a group based and located in Dixon about 20 miles southwest of Sacramento; and was a rather small group with below ten active participants. The member base was stable with little replacement. Also it appeared to be a rather busy ghost hunter group conducting one to two investigations on a monthly basis. *The Flying Monkeys* was led by Donald (or Don as he was mostly called) who had founded the group in 2008. The cheerful and charismatic 54 year old had been actively involved with the practice of ghost hunting over the recent years, and recalled having partaken in about 30-40 “ghost hunts”; both with his own group, as well as with other groups prior to *the Flying Monkeys* establishment. Throughout his adult life Donald had had his share of spiritual experiences; to a level he held no doubt in the existence of supernatural beings. Aside from being a teacher and musician, Donald had for a long time been devoting himself to “the red path”; what is mostly known as Native American spiritualism. His involvement in the red path was an ongoing commitment and he expressed that it had greatly shaped him as person. Moreover it appeared to have shaped *The Flying Monkeys’* group philosophy as well - granted Donald’s initial ambitions with the group had been to marry the scientific and the spiritual. This spiritual aspect connected greatly with the group’s identity, and was perhaps what mad *The Flying Monkeys* stand out amongst the multitude of other groups in the field. Donald was at the time of my field work, in the process of withdrawing from some of his head responsibilities in the group. Nonetheless, he was still partaking in most – if not all – group activities

Also involved with organizing *The Flying Monkeys* was Lisa; the teams newly assigned case manager. Lisa was originally a Christian but had lately begun broadening her religious perspectives with the incorporation of other beliefs; such as belief in reincarnation. Personally Lisa had never before been involved in ghost hunting, until she signed up for *The Flying Monkeys* about one year prior to my arrival. And although she had been fascinated with paranormal subjects since high school, she had just recently begun devoting herself to these interests. As a case manager, she put much effort networking, so that *The Flying Monkeys* would get access to a wide range of haunted locations. An assignment I was told she managed pretty well, as the group was getting more cases than it had ever before. Lisa asserted she had never experienced anything paranormal, and that she was looking forward to perhaps

having experiences of her own one day. Something she prepared for by trying to open up her sensitive abilities. Lisa was one of the most active members of the group, and attended the great majority of its events.

On the team were also fiancés Fairen and Chris – two homely ghost hunters, both in their thirties. They had joined *The Flying Monkeys* just a couple of years before I got in touch with the group. Although both shared a fascination for ghosts and the afterlife, they deployed different perspectives on these subjects. Whereas Chris expressed certainty that the phenomenon was in fact real, Fairen was more on the fence when it came to the existence of ghosts. She asserted that she had never experienced anything that could not potentially be explained away as non-paranormal. Chris on the other hand, had found his experiences in the field to be more convincing. The couple attended most of the events during my field work, and would participate as long as it did not conflict with their work schedule.

Another couple part of *The Flying Monkeys* was Alyssa and Ray. They were at the time also members of the group *Solano Ghost*, and had become involved in ghost hunting over the recent years. Alyssa was the more outspoken of the two. She defined herself a great “debunker” and frequently stressed her skeptic attitude towards paranormal claims and evidence. This to a point where she was reluctant to refer to any of her numerous mysterious experiences as “paranormal”. She preferred to relate to them as “unexplained”, granted she had no way to explain them, and would therefore not categorize them as unquestionably paranormal. All she knew was that she had experienced some odd things. Alyssa practiced Buddhism and was drawn to Donald’s group primarily because of its inherent spiritual philosophy. Her boyfriend Ray, on the other hand, was brought up a Christian. Throughout his life he had had several experiences of ghostly nature, and additionally he had found that he had the ability to foresee natural disasters. Like Alyssa he had no doubt there was something out there, and he was interested in obtaining proof of its existence. The couple attended only some of the events during my field work, and midway Alyssa left *The Flying Monkeys* due to internal disputes. Ray however, stayed with the group.

*The Flying Monkeys* did at the time of my field work not have anything like a monthly meeting. There used to be an assemblage of members in advance of ghost hunts wherein group directions and policies were discussed. These meetings would take place either at a team member’s home, or at some public place. Here the upcoming investigation would be planned out in detail, naturally complimented by informal chitchat about personal life, earlier investigations and experiences, ghost hunting equipment

and evidence. The tone at these meetings was never too formal.

Aside from investigations and pre-investigation meetings *The Flying Monkeys* would also host alternative social events. These were to a great degree inspired by Native American spiritual practices. The red path philosophy appealed to most active members of the group, and Donald who had much experience within this field, felt more than inclined to share his knowledge. Throughout spring 2011 several team members would begin engaging themselves more in Native American spiritualism, and at the very first pre-investigation meeting I attended with the group in February, this became an overriding topic. At this meeting, set to Alyssa and Rays place, Donald expressed he was interested in knowing in which direction the various members wanted for the group to be heading. After a brief discussion between the participants there was reached a consensus that *The Flying Monkeys* should keep gravitating towards the spiritualistic. The group then decided there should soon be arranged an event – humorously entitled “monkey business” – wherein Donald should introduce the members to the red path. This event took place at Donald’s house about one week later, and most of the members mentioned above were present. It was initiated with Donald giving an introduction to the pillars of the respective Native American beliefs. The group then discussed what each member wanted to get out of the spiritualism, before they engaged in a shamanistic ritual. This ritual. Finally Donald presented some books to the group, and assigned his fellow team members something to read before the next meeting.

Throughout the spring some of the members of *The Flying Monkeys* got more involved in the red path. Donald had begun performing shamanistic house cleanings. Although he had initially performed these as a personal endeavor, and not on the behalf on the team, his Flying Monkey associates had begun taking keen interest in these events. From mid-spring onwards Donald would invite some of them to take part at the house cleansings. They were all assigned different tasks in driving the spirits out of the house.

### **P.R.O.V.E**

*P.R.O.V.E.* was a group based in Sacramento - founded in winter 2009/2010. It had a rather small active member base, but experienced massive growth in terms of new members throughout my fieldwork. The initials in *P.R.O.V.E.* stood for “Paranormal Research Organization Valuing Evidence”, and captured the scientific ethos held by the organization. Terry, the founder of the group, was a sociable woman who did not take herself too seriously; and she quickly became known for her irony and sarcastic remarks.

Terry currently worked as a paralegal. Raised in the air force, she asserted she was never subject to any religious faith; and she considered herself an agnostic. After experiencing ghostly activity in her own home, she was drawn to involve herself in ghost hunting early 2009. Then when her first paranormal group split up, Terry decided to establish her own group, and then carry over some her former group's team members. *P.R.O.V.E* was then established and Terry had been in charge of it ever since. Terry, claimed to be a "sensitive", explaining that she had "always seen and felt things". She never doubted her experiences, and was certain that ghosts did in fact exist. Her mission by leading the group was to obtain scientific evidence so the world would one day comprehend the truth about ghosts. Therefore she took her role as a paranormal investigator with great responsibility.

Joseph, *P.R.O.V.E*'s co-organizer and official group psychic, was more of the reserved type. He was a middle aged, Italian immigrant and had a background studying psychology. He had been engaged in ghost hunting with Terry for only a year or two; although he stressed he had been involved in researching paranormal subjects for the greater part of his life. Joseph defined himself a scientist and emphasized he believed in the scientific method. He had begun studying paranormal phenomena already in his early teens, and currently worked on several projects related to that; many of which were not remotely associated with ghost hunting. These various projects appeared to make up an important part of Joseph's life, and he also had an authorship in the works. Joseph appeared exceptionally reflected when it came to paranormal matters, and he held multiple theories on the metaphysics of the paranormal. His main motivation lay in trying to explain and hopefully prove the existence of various supernatural phenomena.

Also active in the team was Wanda, Terry's mother. She lived just next door to Terry and would partake at most events hosted by the group. Like Terry, she had never been subscribing to any religious faith. Despite having conducted ghost hunts with the group for several months, she admitted she had never had any paranormal experiences. During my interview with her she brought up some occurrences she had witnessed that she thought of as odd, but that she was not sure she had imagined them or not. Wanda had recently taken the role of providing protection for the group, keeping the members out of harm when seeking out haunted locations. For the most part this involved making potions, that she would occasionally deal out during various events. She was however hesitant to whether the potions actually had an effect, and she was hoping to one day get some form of validation.

Including those mentioned above the group had a core of 4-6 active participants. These would partake

at the great majority of events during my field work. However, throughout the spring many new members were recruited to the group, and at about every event I would recognize at least one or two new faces. At some of the ghost hunts towards the summer, as many as 15 attendees were taking part. *P.R.O.V.E.s* meetings would take place at Terry's place. There were no regular meetings, but Terry would invite members to assemblies when she saw fit. Other than these meetings there were occasionally hosted other social events.

Unlike *California Haunts* and *The Flying Monkeys*, this group did not have any explicit cosmological orientation. It seemed the group had more of an experimental approach to the practice. Wanda would for instance experiment with her potions, while Terry would occasionally experiment with some pagan beliefs during investigation. Overall the groups emphasis was on the scientific aspect, although the approaches used in the field was not too different from the other groups I studied.

### **Solano Ghost**

The *Solano Ghost* was a group based I Vacaville, around a forty-minute drive southwards from Sacramento. It was a rather new contribution to the ghost hunter community. 10-15 participants would attend the monthly meeting which was set to the homes of the different group organizers. *Solano Ghost* was run by Dan who asserted that the group should stick to scientific principles, and refrain from using psychics or alternative such approaches to ghost hunting. *Solano Ghost* would schedule a meeting around the midst of every month. These meetings would last for about an hour; and most of the time would be spent planning ahead for future ghost hunts, as well as introducing new members to the group. The latter was of great importance, as the group had an increasing number of new participants signing up throughout the spring. Besides the monthly meeting, *Solano Ghost* was a rather inactive group during my field work. This was mainly due to the group being unable to get any cases throughout this course of time. Only one official investigation was conducted during those five months, to which I was unfortunate not to attend.

As *Solano Ghosts* private website was only accessible to participators of the group, and the identities of its members were not displayed publically, I will in this thesis refrain from using any of their names (That is except for Dan, whose name was mentioned on the front page)

### **The ghost hunter community**

Except for a shared fascination for the unknown, the representatives of the ghost hunting community

displayed great diversity. In fact, at first glance it would appear that ghost hunting could appeal to about anyone. The practitioners came from different theological backgrounds; ranging from Catholicism and Protestantism to Native American practices, Buddhism and agnosticism. As for occupations I came across engineers, psychologists, military personnel, paralegals, police officers, nurses and teachers. In terms of age there was also broad diversity; with attendances of people in their early twenties as well as some in their sixties; although I would estimate the average ghost hunter to be in his or her forties. Moreover the majority of my informants had only been in the field for about of 2-4 years; although some for notably longer. Aside from their involvement in hunting ghosts my informants appeared to be what one may call ordinary Californians. However, the practitioners I got to know seemed also to share a few mutual characteristics. With only a few exceptions, they all represented white middle class. Very rarely did I come across participators who were non-Caucasian. And out of the few I came to meet, none were at the time permanent members of the community. Also, there were not many in the field who I would define as distinctly upper or lower class citizens; although of course, some appeared financially better off than others.

However, one distinctive characteristic perhaps most evident in the ghost hunting community was the male-female ratio. As in fact, the majority – an estimated 60-70 percent of active attendees - were female. This would of course vary from group to group. For instance *The Flying Monkeys* had a rather balanced member base, whereas in California Haunts, John appeared to be the only active male participant. Anyhow, at most events hosted by the various groups, the women tended to outnumber the men. The gender ratio in the field of ghost hunting was peculiar. Especially considering that in the popular ghost hunter television shows - from which the community drew much inspiration – the cast were predominantly men. Like for instance the series *Ghost Hunters* the crew consisted of 4-5 males, whereas the number of female investigators there was a maximum of 2-3. In the ghost hunter community I studied on the other hand, the gender ratio appeared to represent quite the contrary.

This appears not to be a coincidence. Through a study Bader, Baker and Mencken (2010) found that: overall, within the Northern American populace, women were more likely to believe in paranormal subjects than were men. This may partly explain why so many actors in the ghost hunter community were female. The findings also pointed to various paranormal subjects as having different appeal among the gender groups; suggesting that UFO belief was strongly connected with the male population, whereas ghost belief appeared most widespread among the female population. However, the perhaps most interesting data coming out of the study, was that women tended - more often than men - to seek

out paranormal experiences for themselves. For instance, females were more likely to consult horoscopes and psychics, than were males. In this respect, we may suggest that one reason for men being in the minority within the ghost hunter community was that they were less likely to take the initiative and join a ghost hunter group. It should be noted, however, that despite being fewer in numbers, male participants were frequently involved with organizing the groups. All of the groups I studied had male lead organizers; and all four groups had at least one male member being part of the board.

Still, the ghost hunter community seemed to be flavored by diversity, more so than homogeneity. This, I believe may be linked to the ghost hunter community being so accessible. The groups I studied were in no way exclusive clubs, but rather all-embracing and open to those who pleased. As most of the groups were actively recruiting new members, the ghost hunting community was made available to basically anyone. In fact three out of my four groups displayed both time and date for their upcoming meetings online - so that anyone interested could drop by and check it out. With some exceptions, joining a ghost hunter group was as easy as looking one up online, signing up at the groups' meetup-page, contacting one of the groups administrators, or simply just meeting up at any of the events advertised. This dynamic provided a constant flux of new participants. This was particularly apparent within the groups *P.R.O.V.E* and *Solano Ghost*; both of which seemed to have a great increase in new members throughout spring and summer 2011.

Not only were most groups highly accessible, but so was also the ghost hunter practice. Due to ghost hunting television being so commonplace, the new recruits were already somewhat familiar with ghost hunting, the ghost hunter mindset, techniques, and equipment utilized in the field. Taking into consideration what they still would have to pick up when participating, the learning curve did not seem to be all that steep; at least not to become a functioning ghost hunter. There were still aspects of the practice - like for instance mastering the equipment and organizing investigations - that would require a greater degree of specialization. However these more advanced tasks were commonly conducted by the more experienced ghost hunters, who would instruct newcomers on what to do. Basically, one could take part in carrying through a ghost hunt without much competence what so ever.

### **Events and attendances**

Just how often members would assemble varied from group to group. Nonetheless each group I studied seemed to have a get-together at least once a month. These would take place mostly at weekends, so

they should not conflict with most members work and family life. *Solano Ghost* had a meeting scheduled at Saturdays around the fifteenth of each month. *California Haunts* would have their psychical development classes set to Sundays - about as frequently. *The Flying Monkeys* and *P.R.O.V.E.* did not have any regular meeting or such, but the organizers would schedule events whenever convenient. As for ghost hunts, they would be arranged almost as often as possible. However, this did not mean they came across very frequently, as the groups were dependent on locations to perform ghost hunts within. So the frequency to which each group would hunt for ghosts was based on a groups – or its respective case managers – ability to get cases. As we have already seen, some of the groups I studied were more active than others. *The flying Monkeys* and *California Haunts* did for instance perform more ghost hunts throughout my field work than did the other two. Yet to my understanding this was a particularly slow period for the business, offering the groups less opportunities to perform ghost hunts than they regularly did.

As attendance at the groups various activities was voluntary, and most of a group's members had little to no commitments, the frequency to which members attended the events varied accordingly. Some - like most of those presented in the group descriptions - would attend the great majority of events hosted by their respective group. Those who frequented such events were typically involved in organizing the group, and felt they had some responsibilities with contributing to the team. Naturally many of these individuals would often build strong friendly bonds, and often be in touch both by group organization as well as private affairs. Yet some of the more active participants did not necessarily attend every type of event that was arranged. For instance Rose and John did usually not attend *California Haunts* psychic development classes. Then there was a category of members who would attend only now and then. Some who had previously been active members, but had withdrawn from their group. These individuals I would meet once or twice during my five month long field work; and a few I never got to meet at all.

Although most members of the ghost hunter community would sign up on their own accord, there were also those who would attend together in couples. This was not uncommon, as within all the groups I studied, one or two couples formed part of the member base. As was the case with Fairen and Chris, as well as Alyssa and Ray, ghost hunting and affiliated activities constituted something they could do together as a couple. Also some practitioners had loyalties to two or several different groups. The most common reason for this, was that they felt their primary group was not active enough, and they had joined another group to be able to “hunt ghosts” more often. For instance this was the case with



*P.R.O.V.E.* members Caprice and Matt. Caprice expressed her current group was not as active as they expected, and the couple planned on joining several more groups to be able to hunt ghosts as often as every weekend. Others again had quite the opposite problem, and struggled to make the ends meet - going about with their daily routines and additionally trying to fulfill their roles as ghost hunters.

As was made clear when introducing the groups, many practitioners had been involved with more than one group throughout their practice. Although, several of my informants had only participated in one particular group, it seemed to be a trend to change groups after being in the field for some years. At least until an individual would settle on one her or she preferred. This could have natural explanations; either the individual moved out of town, and would have to find a paranormal group elsewhere. Another possibility was that their previous group split up, leaving its former team members on the lookout for a substitute group to keep up with their practice. There were also those who switched groups due to internal disputes. I met a few who had been in disagreement with the group board, or who disagreed on how things should be done, and so they left their current group. Some had also been kicked out of groups due to incapability of blending in, or of having inappropriate behavior. To my knowledge this was rare, but it was known to happen.

### **Inspirational factors**

What was it that had inspired my informants to sign up for a ghost hunter group? There seemed to be a few variables here. First and foremost, although most practitioners had committed themselves to ghost hunting only though recent years; many stated that their fascination for ghosts and other paranormal phenomena had blossomed long prior to their involvement in the field. To some, paranormal mysteries had been a significant part of their life. Like with Tracy, for instance, who told me she had been into the paranormal since she was about four:

“Ever since I was a child I’ve been interested in the paranormal. My grandparents, my parents, were always interested in the paranormal. Even when growing up my dad would take me out for bigfoot- expeditions. My grandma would always tell me the ghost stories, and the Celtic myths stories. My grandpa would always take me to places like cemeteries. [...] we used to play in the cemetery as a kid, so we heard all the ghost stories and legends, so we were always really interested in it. Always seeking it out; the entire family. We’re talking first cousins, second cousins... So there was always a large group of us very much interested in it, so I just went from there.”

Alike Tracy, a few of my informants had personally engaged in what they referred to as research into

the paranormal, before they had involved themselves in the ghost hunter community. Many expressed they had been intrigued with such subjects for a long time, and that they had actively been reading literature and watching documentaries associated with the paranormal. Joseph for instance, stated that he “Started asking questions at a very early age”, and he began reading into parapsychology around the age of twelve. Others asserted that they had partaken in unofficial ghost hunting activities - either through tourist attractions or just with friends – before signing up with a group. Overall, the once newly appointed ghost hunters were rarely introduced to the paranormal when becoming part of a ghost hunter group, but most seemed to have had a keen interest in ghosts and the paranormal for a long time in advance.

Many of my informants claimed to have had a more direct introduction to the paranormal world. Many of the ghost hunters I came across were not merely introduced to ghosts through books and television shows, but through personal experiences. The greater part of the ghost hunters I interviewed admitted to having had one or several experiences they thought to be of paranormal nature. The experiences seemed to vary greatly from person to person. Some brought up mysterious experiences from their childhood, some told me about the experiences of living in haunted houses, some stated they had some sort of clairvoyant ability that had granted them continuous mystic experiences, some had once or on multiple occasions seen or felt supernatural entities; and a very few even claimed to have had been physically assaulted by a supernatural entity. Yet there were also those who expressed they had yet to experience anything unquestionably paranormal. Only some of those I interviewed – roughly one fourth of my interviewees – explained they had never experienced anything paranormal

One question remains, however: what made my informants take the step from reading literature, watching television shows and/or having personal experiences, to sign up for a ghost hunting group? As we have seen, when ghost hunting went mainstream in the beginning of the millennium, there was a notable increase in ghost hunter groups. Many of the actors I met who contributed to the growth of the ghost hunter community - by establishing or/and involving themselves in these groups – were drawn in due to the ghost hunter fad. Donald was one out of many to point out that he first became inspired by watching the ghost hunter shows. He put it like this: “I initially got involved cause my son was watching a *ghost hunters* episode and invited me to watch it with him. I thought, “let’s check it out”, and started watching it and was kind of intrigued by it. So that’s kind of what peeked my interest to begin with.” Many others also brought up the media as inspirational factors. Chris put it this way: “I always had this like weird interest in the paranormal, like in the back of my head, you know, I would

read stories then, and watch the TV-shows off course. I never really knew how to get into it, you know like, how do you know, how do you do this kind of stuff?” Another account came from Patrick, member of *P.R.O.V.E.*, who started out with the intention of validating whether what he saw on TV was true or just a “gimmick”: “I got into paranormal research because I wanted to know if it was real. If it was fake or... if people were just making money out of it, or if there was actually really another side, or as other people say, a parallel universe”.

As this entails, many made clear that the ghost hunting fad had inspired them to take part in the mystery, by signing up as ghost hunters. Then there were also some whose initiatives were not triggered directly by watching ghost hunter television shows, but rather after having first-hand experience with the ghost hunting practice. For instance, Fairen and Chris’s ghost hunting adventure begun after attending a ghost tour event in Virginia City. During their interview Fairen explained in detail how Chris and her signed up for a commercial ghost hunter event that would leave them lusting for more: “...we went to an old hospital, and there were probably 20 of us there. And they all had different [ghost hunting equipment] [...] And one person would ask a question, and all the machines would answer the same way - all at once. And it was just a different feeling in there, at that house. So that’s how we got involved.” Being impressed with ghost hunting, and the apparent contact with the “other side”, the couple decided to involve themselves in *The Flying Monkeys* a while later.

Another person said that a first-hand experience with ghost hunter practice, was what inspired her to involve herself in the practice, was Terry. Some years before I met her she had herself consulted a ghost hunter group, tired of sharing her home with some troublesome ghosts. Upon witnessing this group perform an Investigation and cleansing of her property, she became so intrigued that she wanted to engage in the practice as well. She stated: “When I saw the people come in here (...) I was so impressed by their work. Because when they left the house totally felt different. And it felt comfortable. I felt it was my house. And not just some place I am staying. (...) Just seeing them, and what they did, I wanted to know: I wanna do that! How can I do that?”

One last category of ghost hunters worth bringing up are those who got involved in their respective ghost hunter group through family and friends. Wanda for instance, got involved with *P.R.O.V.E.* through her daughter Terry. She again introduced her sister to take part in the group. Likewise Susan was introduced to the practice by her father back in the late seventies. From time to time members would bring a friend, who was curious about ghost hunting, to a ghost hunt or event. If the friend or

relative was intrigued by the practice they were likely to keep themselves involved in it.

As we have seen, there were different reasons why my informants decided to begin with ghost hunting. Nonetheless, whether it was paranormal literature, ghost hunter television shows, family or friends that inspired them to take part in the practice, it seemed most active ghost hunters had an underlying fascination for ghosts and the unknown. Now that we have seen how people became involved with ghost hunting, let us focus on what kept them there. What motivated them to do what they did?

### **Motivational factors**

There were several reasons for participating in the field. Yet some motivational factors stood out more than others. In this part we will explore some of my informants accounts when asked why they were into ghost hunting. What seemed to connect them with the ghosts, the mystery and the practice? Here we will get some insight into the what seemed to be the most common motivations for partaking in a ghost hunter group; namely helping people who claimed to be haunted, personal experience and enlightenment, and conducting paranormal research.

### **Consulting the haunted**

One day in mid-February Susan had decided she wanted to take me along and introduce me to several of her projects. We were returning to her house after visiting some friends of hers, and she had just received the phone number to a potential client; one whom she appeared very eager call. This client, an older woman, had according to Susan experienced several paranormal occurrences in her home; one of them which had possibly even landed her in a wheelchair. It turned out, however, that her main issue revolved around the imminent sale of her property; which proved challenging, allegedly due to the negative energies dwelling within the property. No one dared to buy the house. Therefore, it was possible that this old lady would give *California Haunts* the opportunity to investigate her house, and hopefully help her out of the situation. “That's why I'm into this!” Susan uttered as she had just finished telling the story. She expressed clear compassion for this woman, who Susan considered “grounded” in her own home - unable to move out of the haunted house. She brought up that she had spent nine years living in a haunted house in New York; and that she had first-hand knowledge on how it could be to live under a constant supernatural treat. Susan stressed that her main motivation for hunting ghosts was to help unfortunates dealing with paranormal phenomena. She stated: “First it is to maybe help someone. Because, when I lived through it, in the nineties, there was no... I mean, it was hard.”

As previously stated, one of the main pillars of the ghost hunting was the charity aspect. Namely the means to consult clients claiming to have paranormal experiences in their home; and hopefully help them out of their haunting situation. Or as John put it: “help them better understand it so they can, be less afraid by the unknown.” Although just a few of my informants had first-hand experiences with actually living in haunted houses; the very aspect of helping people in need, appeared a common motivation. Throughout their practice ghost hunters would get personally introduced to clients. This also meant that they would be introduced to their stories of haunted homes, what it was like to have mysterious experiences at a regular basis, and what pressure this could put on the family situation. Before initiating a ghost hunt a ghost hunter would often get to meet the clients, which in many cases were families with young children. And under the given circumstances ghost hunters would feel sympathy with the clients; and a personal urge to help them out of the situation. To many this was the core reason for engaging in the practice of ghost hunting. Donald, for instance, expressed his main motivation as follows:

“I think, primarily why I got into it was to help people that are experiencing paranormal things - which they’re really bothered with, that’s going on (...) More than just researching it and trying to find, you know, evidence of paranormal activity, I’m really more in it to help people that are experiencing it. To see what I can do to help them.”

Like Susan and Donald, there were those who really emphasized how important the charity aspect was to them. Those who brought up other motivations as their main reason for participating, did also bring up the charity part as a motivation. However, ghost hunting was not always about helping people. The groups also occasionally went ghost hunting at remote locations just for research and having fun. About half of the ghost hunts I attended during my field work took place not at private residences, but at public locations.

### **Personal experience and enlightenment**

Ghost hunting was to a great extent about having fun. Although a very few of my informants emphasized this during the interviews, there was little doubt that having fun was a major motivation. The fun aspect directed towards spending time with friends taking part in a well cherished activity. Nonetheless, the perhaps most elementary aspect was putting oneself in an allegedly haunted building, unknowing of what could possibly happen. As we have seen the majority of my informants had had

paranormal experiences, which to a degree motivated them to take part in the practice. They, and those who never had experienced anything paranormal, would participate in the hope of having new personal experiences.

Ghost hunting was in a sense a hunt, not just for ghosts, but also for truth. By going to ghost hunts a ghost hunter would personally take part in his or her personal pursuit of truth. By ghost hunting the actors would situate themselves into the midst of the paranormal world, and through personal experience they would seek to unravel the truth about ghosts, and what these beings were capable of. To some the question remained: do ghosts exist at all? By engaging in hunting ghosts they hoped to make up their minds about the matter. Like Fairen uttered during an interview: “For me, I guess, it’s the unknown. I have no clue, like if there is actually spirits out there, if they’re not out there. I guess for me its finding out. Is there?” Generally the “inexperienced” ghost hunters appeared to be more on the fence when it came to belief in ghosts and affiliated phenomena. That is not to say none of them believed in ghosts, only that they had not had any experiences that could validate their beliefs. When asked about personal experiences, these would often bring up some peculiar events they had witnessed; hence which were not convincing enough in their own rights. For instance they could discuss some vague childhood memories or something that happened when they were half asleep - and therefore could have been potentially dreamt up. Those who had never witnessed anything paranormal frequently expressed a strong desire to experience something that could rid them of their doubts; and further solidify their beliefs. This for instance, was the case with Lisa. She contrasted herself against those who had had several reaffirming paranormal experiences, by stating the following: “I’m not psychic, I’m not sensitive, or so I don’t think. So it’s not that I have had experiences as a child that a lot of people coming into this thinking, because they’ve had experiences and what not.”

Whether or not a ghost hunter firmly believed in the phenomena’s existence, he or she was nonetheless in line with all her associates when it came to pursuing life’s biggest mysteries. In this respect the phenomena of ghosts were only part of all the mysteries that lay concealed. Yet by inquiring into this phenomenon ghost hunters could be seen as attempting to peek through the mystery keyhole; hoping to answer the even greater questions about the universe. And a ghostly experience could be just the key to uncover the mystery. For instance John gave that he performed ghost hunting “personally just for personal experiences.” He jokingly went on to say: “You know, spend my own personal knowledge - and growth and refill. We are all gonna eventually cross over, to whatever is the great beyond. I might as well get some information beforehand, right?” Or like Wanda stated: “I kinda wonder, you know... I

think that everybody does: Is there an afterlife? You know. Is this stuff real or is it just in people's minds?" Then she further elaborated what she hoped to get out of the practice: "my husband got sick and then he died, and I was thinking maybe he could come back, that his spirit will come back, and I started getting more into it then, thinking.... I don't know."

Overall, ghost hunting was an activity through which individual participants could address the mysteries of life: Where do you go when you die? What would make some people stay on earth beyond death? Is there an afterlife? Is there a heaven and a hell? Is it possible to communicate with dead relatives? There seemed to be no shortage of affiliated questions; to which future paranormal experiences (and research) hopefully would provide answers. By situating themselves in supposed haunted places, ghost hunters personally engaged in a quest for truth.

### **Conducting paranormal research**

"I'm in it for the research. I'm in it for the answers" - Rose once replied, as a bystander had approached her, curious to why she engaged herself in ghost hunting. It was a short and resolute answer, outlining paranormal research as the sole reason for her commitment to the field. Although I knew the research aspect alone was not at all the only reason for Rose's participation, it was to her - as to many others in the field - a significant motivational factor. I think that with great confidence, I can say that I never ran across any ghost hunter who was not "in it for the answers". However, like Rose, there were some who were interested in learning the truth about ghosts, not only for their own benefit, but also to reveal the truth about ghosts to the world. And unlike the pursuit of personal experience and enlightenment - which associated mostly with individual endeavors - the ambitions of researching the paranormal contributed to something greater. Through the research the aim was not primarily to enlighten the individual ghost hunter about ghosts and the like; but to provide proof of the phenomenon's existence, by which *anyone* could be enlightened. The research-approach was to address ghostly phenomena through scientific protocol - by utilizing scientific equipment and instrumental reason. Moreover it was to obtain scientific evidence of its existence - photographs, audio and video that was indisputably paranormal. In the ghost hunting field the emphasis on scientificity always shone through; reflected in the methodology of ghost hunting, the ghost hunters rhetoric, and the groups respective websites, where scientific evidence and equipment was often proudly displayed. That being said, to the various ghost hunters, how common and essential was the ambition to research the paranormal?

The ambition to prove to the world that ghosts exist appeared not to be shared by everyone. Evidently there were various opinions as to the means and significance of the research. On the one side of the scale there were those who took with great pride and responsibility their roles as paranormal researchers. These - although with other motivations as well – expressed that providing paranormal evidence was a clear agenda. As Tracy once put it: “It doesn’t make a difference what I think. It’s what we capture. And that’s what we are looking for. That’s the evidence that we are capturing. That’s what makes the difference. Not what I think or what I feel”. By her expression of “the difference” she distinguished her thoughts and feelings from tangible evidence; the latter which was what really mattered. Evidence which she argued could potentially convince the skeptics. Another informant who had such ambitions, and who was perhaps the one who made them most explicit, was Terry. Confident that ghosts really existed, she put forward a hypothetical scenario which would bring forth the truth about ghosts.

“Ideally what I would like to do is find scientific proof, irrefutable proof. I wanna get pictures that cannot be debunked. I wanna get recordings that cannot be debunked. I wanna help establish, if there is a foundation, if there is people on the other side, what we can do to help them. My dream is to have one paranormal incident, [that is] so controversial and result[s] in some sort of crime, and it goes to the court; to the superior court in California.”

The counterpart to those who were heavily dedicated to research, were those who had no faith in that the community could ever bring forward indisputable evidence of ghosts, or who did not see any personal gain in working towards that particular goal. These individuals seemed to weigh charity and/or personal experience and enlightenment up against the means of “proving to the world” that ghosts existed. Donald for instance, were one of a few that expressed his doubts in the scientificity of ghost hunting; both the scientific gadgets used in the field, as well as the evidence coming out of it. Although he admitted he initially had more stock in the scientific aspect of ghost hunting, he had lately found himself “getting less scientific”. As he put it: “I think that very rarely do you find anything quote: “scientific”, that I would use, I mean If I was a scientist; that I would use as evidence and supporting paranormal activity”. Another informant who did not care too much about proving to the world that ghosts were real was Alyssa. At one occasion, while I was getting a ride back home from a *Solano ghost* meeting, there surfaced a minor discussion on the topic. Alyssa and Ray, who had brought me along, seemed to be in disagreement when it came to the purposes of researching ghostly phenomena. I had asked Ray why he engaged himself in paranormal research, and he empathized his ambition to find



proof - in order to “to show people who don’t believe that [ghosts] exist”. He was immediately questioned by Alyssa whom sat beside him, asking how anyone would really benefit from that: “if you are doing it to show other people that there’s something else out there... what would that do for them or you if you were able to do that?” Unlike Ray, Alyssa saw little motivation in proving to the world that ghosts were real. I would only meet a few ghost hunters who would argue against the research aspect of ghost hunting like that. Yet of course, I find it safe to assume that a great part of those in the ghost hunter community were into ghost hunting without any ambitions to prove to the world that the phenomena was real. Nevertheless, the presumably scientific methods of ghost hunting would to many serve as a legitimate approach to personal enlightenment.

Overall, paranormal research was a significant aspect of ghost hunting, whether or not all the individual ghost hunters were heavily invested in it. The groups were run and presented as paranormal research groups, and their official aim (aside from charity) was to provide evidence of ghosts. However, as we have just seen, among the ghost hunters there were, different opinions about the significance of paranormal research. Some saw it as a great motivation for hunting ghosts, others did not invest much into it, whilst a select few opposed to some degree the idea of proving to the world that ghosts were real. All in all, it would seem that those who were involved in organizing the groups were more explicit about their dedication to paranormal research, than were the “ordinary ghost hunters”. Yet, it is here important to mark the variety of perspectives that could be found within the community.

### **Concluding remarks**

Throughout this chapter I have introduced the ghost hunter community, the groups I studied, and perhaps most importantly, the actors who will have a central role throughout this thesis. My aim has been to paint a comprehensive portrait of the ghost hunter communities, yet at the same time display the diversity of actors participating in the field; this in terms of social background, dedication, personal beliefs and motivations. At one of Flying Monkeys social get-togethers, Alyssa once expressed the words: "Even though we are here together, we are here separately". This quote, I think sums up quite elegantly how participants of the ghost hunter community had different values and motives, yet at the same time found themselves in the same boat. Irrespective of their personal beliefs and motivations, they would nonetheless come together and partake in the same activities. When it came to the research, the charity and the overall group business the participants were, in Alyssa’s sense, “together”; hence at the same time individual participants had their own personal pursuits. As we have seen there was great variety in terms of what participants wanted to get out of the practice. Some were eager proponents of

the paranormal research, whilst others were participating almost exclusively for their own personal enlightenment. Then there were many who did not care too much about the research aspect of the practice, but rather participated to help people in need, socializing with fellow ghost enthusiasts, and to simply have fun. They were there “separately”.

In conclusion the ghost hunter community – or one respective ghost hunter group – should not be seen as one homogeneous group of people; all of whom shared some distinct ontological and epistemological bias. The religious diversity in these groups should make perfectly clear, that the community had great room for individual conceptions; of ghosts, the afterlife, and even on these phenomenon’s existence. The variety of beliefs and motivations held by those within the community, pointed to ghost hunting being an accessible and flexible institution. Ghost hunting was something that the Catholic, the Buddhist and the Agnostic could all easily involve themselves in, despite of existential differences. We may say that within the ghost hunter community there existed a form of “epistemological individualism”; meaning each individual ghost hunter had his or her own “path to truth”. The ghost hunter employed her or his own perceptions and beliefs; although the participants were in a sense dependent on being somewhat in agreement with fellow ghost hunters. This agreement was to a great degree maintained by a highly enforced relativism. Like Partridge argues, epistemological individualism leads to truth claims being relativized. He states: “relativism prevents the emergence of social conflict by allowing people to view the world from whatever perspective they desire and adopt any worldview they want” (2004:34). To some effect this entails - as Berger and Luckmann put it - “No interpretation, no range of possible actions can any longer accepted as the only true and unquestionable right one.” (1995:40). To illustrate: fiancées Fairen and Chris could essentially “disagree” regarding the existence of ghosts, by holding a relativistic perspective thereby acknowledging to the possibility that the spouse was potentially right. As to give an impression of just how flexible most ghost hunters could be with their individual assumptions; when asked whether they were open to the possibility that ghosts did not at all exist, the great majority of my informants concurred. Moreover they would in most cases bring up one or several alternate non-paranormal explanations for mysterious experiences they had had, evidence they had seen, or suspected ghostly phenomena in general. There was a general understanding that “no one knows all there is to know about ghosts”; and ghost hunters would seem to compensate for their “lack of knowledge”, through emphasizing that their understanding about the ghostly realms were built on personal *assumptions* rather than universal *facts*. The latency of epistemological individualism and relativism is something the reader should keep in mind when he or she progresses through this thesis.



## **Chapter 4: Ghosts and ghost gadgets**

### **Introduction**

Throughout this chapter and the next, I will address the concept of the “ghost hunt”; or “investigation” as the activity was mostly referred to as. Whereas the next chapter will concern the experiential aspects of ghost hunting, this chapter will revolve around ghosts and ghost gadgets. That is, I will focus on the equipment utilized during investigations: the significance the equipment had within the practice, the functionality of the various equipment, and the equipment’s conceived supernatural qualities. I will initiate the chapter by giving a brief review on my informants conceptions of ghosts. Thereafter I will introduce the case that this chapter and the next will base itself upon; namely an investigation at an old abandoned sugar mill - conducted by the group *California Haunts*. I will bring the reader through the early hours of the investigation, as I put emphasis on the role of the various ghost gadgets used underway.

### **What is a ghost?**

Before I move on to elaborating on the actual ghost hunting it would be useful for the reader to know, exactly what ghost hunters reckoned they were “hunting” for. In their eyes, what was a ghost? Who was the ghost? And how did it interact with the material world? Moreover, how did ghosts appear to the ghost hunter as a plausible phenomenon?

The ghost hunter community’s categorization of the phenomena drew influence - almost exclusively, it seemed - from the traditional ghost known from western folklore. Ghosts were spiritual beings who at some point in time had been alive and possessed a physical body. Yet for some reason, more or less deliberately, they still remained on earth after death. Like one of my informants explained: “something is keeping them grounded to earth. They can’t quite move on from their mortal life.” The ghost hunter’s conceptions of ghosts based itself on the understanding that the soul survives the body, and may for various reasons end up situated in-between spaces - “Between this world and the next”. The consequence to this was that they were destined to, for an indeterminate amount of time, “haunt” the earth. Or more precisely, they would “haunt” some particular place, to which they had a connection whilst they were still alive. As ghosts were conceived as having once been human, the ghost hunters also ascribed human characteristics to them. Whether children, women, men, elderly, ill-tempered or light hearted, they all were believed to stick with their personality even after they had passed away. Moreover, they were believed to employ the full specter of human emotions, from happy and

enthusiastic to sad and angry. As Tracy once put it “just as there are pissed of people in life, there is gonna be pissed off people in death”. Consequently ghosts would act on accord with their emotions; playfully, nonchalantly, malevolently or out of frustration.

The reason a location was haunted by ghosts was often suggested as the consequence of some wrongdoing – as result of untimely deaths, tragic destinies and ambitions of revenge. The haunting was simply the manifestations of such events, made explicit through people’s paranormal experiences - and their telling of them. In that sense hauntings can be interpreted as manifestations of tragedies that has “refused” to be forgotten. As Gordon (2008) puts it, a haunting manifests itself “when what’s been in your blindspot comes to view”. He goes on to say: “What’s distinctive about a haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquity” (Gordon 2008:xvi). In ghost hunter cosmology, the ghosts’ behavior and state of mind was often inevitably linked with their destinies. That is, some ghosts were sad due to some tragedy that had befallen them (and likely taken their life); some were confused and frustrated as they struggled to realize what was going on; some were angry as “the living” occupied what they still considered to be their own space, and some felt so deeply connected to “the living” that they refused to move on. This list could go on almost indefinitely. Bottom line, the ghost hunters perceived ghosts mostly as human beings without a physical body, and whom found themselves between life and the afterlife; incapable or unwilling to move on.

Ghost hunters also linked ghostly activity with darkness; another characteristic seemingly adopted from western folklore. Normally an investigation would be initiated with the team going “lights out”. All light sources would be shut off, leaving the location as dark as possible. The idea of performing investigations in pitch black – or as dark as it could possibly get – seemed a key aspect to the ghost hunting trade; hence it did not appear to connect very much with strictly methodological aspects of the practice. Although I overheard a few theories suggesting ghostly activity manifested more frequently at night, few of my informants were confident that ghosts were any more active at nighttime than at daytime. Or that investigating during late hours would provide more fruitful results. Moreover, even though the great majority of investigations were scheduled to evenings and nights, they would occasionally be scheduled during midday. This often due to the client’s request - for instance if a family had issues with having their house at night, swarming with paranormal investigators. Nonetheless, ghost hunting was something that was carried through mostly at the darkest hours, and my groups preferred to conduct them at nights whenever possible. The darkness seemed to contribute greatly in

producing the atmosphere associated with ghost hunting. And even as darkness was by far no necessity, my informants enjoyed hunting ghosts in pitch black. In fact, one of *The Flying Monkeys* bumper stickers read “ghost hunters like it in the dark”, underlining the practitioners’ passions for hunting ghosts at night.

There was also another significant characteristic encompassing the ghost hunter’s notion of the ghost. This aspect however, seemed not directly associated with traditional western folklore, but more so it seemed, with ghostly phenomenon’s history of having been “an object of scientific inquiry”. This side to the ghost directed to the ghost not as a *mythological* but a *physical* phenomenon - as well as the physical laws ghosts had to abide in order to interact with the material world. Ghost hunting seemed to build greatly on scientific ideas. The perhaps most apparent token of this lied in the ghost hunters conception that ghosts operated through manipulating energy. As ghostly entities did not have a physical body, they were thought as to have great limitations in interacting with the physical world. This granted they lacked of physical abilities, knowledge and skills to be able to interact. The essential idea was that ghosts had to consummate and manipulate energy in order to manifest themselves. This energy had to be absorbed from the surroundings; like from temperate air, electrical power sources or even human beings. A more complex manifestation – like when a ghost would move a heavy object, or show itself in its true visual form – needed a lot of accumulated energy in order to be achieved. Correspondingly any minor manifestation – like knocking on walls and moving light objects – demanded much less accumulated energy. Moreover ghosts would not always be familiar with how to gather and manipulate energy; and so they were often conceived as incapable of interacting with the material world. These conditions put restrictions on the ghosts, and even if ghosts were willing to interact with the ghost hunters during an investigation, their ghostly disabilities could often restrict them in doing so.

The understanding of ghost as something physical seemed to maintain the credibility of ghost belief. Berger (1967) argued, in order for religious and spiritual world views to self-prevail amidst the rise of scientific and rationalistic hegemony they had to be re-adjusted to their respective societies. This seems to have been the case with ghost beliefs. In fact, one explanation to how ghost beliefs have stood up against the dominating rationalist discourse, could be that – despite it was marginalized by most intellectuals – the supernatural somehow found its way into the “laboratories” of orthodox science. From the 19th century onwards, several scientists would purport to apply scientific principles to supernatural phenomena. Signs of this tendency can be traced back to the “spiritualist movement” in

the mid to late eighteenth hundreds - and the establishment of the “Society for Psychological Research” in 1882. Both institutions, in which consisted mostly of intellectuals, sought to overcome the clear cut distinction between supernatural ideas and scientific fact (Northcote 2007). The perhaps one of the most famous attempts to encompass supernatural concepts as objects of scientific study came with the advent of parapsychology in 1930s. The paradigm, established by Joseph B. Rhine, would have its ups and downs within the scientific community for the years to come; conducting, according to many at the time, intriguing research (Inglis 1984). One may say the paradigm – and its forerunners - opened up for interpreting the supernatural in a new light. In thread with Berger’s theorizing we may say the act of incorporating ghosts into a scientific scheme may have helped to sustain the beliefs in ghosts. In other words, the ghosts modern scientific wrapping seemed to have given these beliefs *plausibility*.

All in all, the ghost seemed to have a mythological and a scientific side to it. One that was clearly influenced by western and American folklore; and another that seemed to build on a historical “scientification” of supernatural phenomena. That being said, what has been presented in this section can only be interpreted as a mere simplification of the ghost hunters’ conceptions of ghosts.

We will dedicate the rest of this chapter to the various gadgets utilized during investigations. The main emphasis will lie on how the technological apparatus was conceived to be compromising with the ghost hunters metaphysics of ghosts.

### **Preparing for investigation at an abandoned sugar mill**

It was an evening in early May and the sun had begun to set. In the dusk around a dozen people had gathered to take part in the nights upcoming ghost hunt. This evening I had the opportunity to join *California Haunts* as they were to conduct investigation of an old abandoned sugar mill. We had just arrived – Charlotte, Rose and I - after some 45 minutes of driving northwards from Sacramento. Before departing the three of us had met at Charlotte’s house, where we had gathered and loaded the ghost hunter equipment into the back of Roses car. All assorted this constituted an array of plastic containers, camera bags, a couple of cardboard boxes, multiple reels of cable and some tripods. There were so much equipment in fact, that Charlotte had to put it all onto a trolley to be able to single-handedly bring it out on the street. It took us a few minutes reorganize it from the trolley and onto the back of Roses car. When we had finished loading, the entire trunk was almost filled up entirely by a towering stack of boxes. It was then time to set out for the night. Around the time we arrived at the sugar mill several of our fellow ghost hunters were turning up in their vehicles. 10-12 members of *California Haunts* initially gathered outside at the facilities parking lot. There were some familiar and fairly active

investigators, like Tracy and John. And there was a few that I had never met before. A few of my companions wore their t-shirts with the *California Haunts* logo printed on the chest. Most appeared cheerful and clearly excited for what the coming night would bring about, and multiple conversations developed, mostly regarding ghostly subjects, previous experiences and anticipations for the hunt.



*California Haunts assembling outside the sugar mill*

The sugar mill rested before us. It was a rather massive brick structure connected with a number of smaller buildings. To its left was a winery - a more recent build on the property - and to the right were the sugar mills old locker rooms. At the back were also some smaller structures, but to which we had no access this evening. As most of my team members had arrived, the *California Haunts* team began bringing out the ghost hunting equipment from the back of Roses car; further moved it in into the ground floor of the mill. The acoustics of the place made our voices and footsteps echo as we went in through the main entrance. The sugar mill had clearly been abandoned for some time, and inside remained mainly pillars, staircases, brick walls and open concrete floors. Some rubble was scattered around, as well as a great deal of wooden barrels. It was dusty. The building had four stories in total. Throughout the upper floors there were huge circular holes in the ground. They were left open as most of the industrial installments had been removed. It was gloomy as the only light source brightening up the Sugar mills dusty insides was the dimming sun. Eventually the equipment was gathered at a spot in the far end of the main compound. All the different ghost hunting gadgets were then brought out into the open as the bags and containers were dispatched; video cameras, photo cameras, voice recorders,



flash lights, walky-talkies, various environmental detectors and other ghost hunting gadgets.

This equipment would play a significant role throughout the night; but first the main priority was linking up the camera system. All the groups I studied utilized a night vision camera system during their investigations, which enabled the group to record at several different locations throughout the event. With the exception of one investigation I attended – which took place at a remote outdoor location – such camera circuit systems were always deployed. And usually as a ghost hunter team accessed the site of investigation, the first hour or more would be spent getting the camera system up and running. At the sugar mill there were to be deployed four stationary cameras in total; all which were to be put up at different places of the main building. These were meant to document any paranormal occurrences happening throughout the night. They would be monitored constantly from a so-called “control center” based on the ground floor. The control center was a provisory setup; basically constituting a table with a VCR and monitor attached to it. In this case a few deckchairs, so that one or more investigators could stay seated while monitoring the building. The monitor would display the video from all the stationary cameras simultaneously. These were to be connected with the command center by sets of cables; several feet of which, were soon stretched out along the ground and upwards throughout the structure.



*California Haunts rigging up the camera system.*

As the preparations were at the starting phase I went with John who took charge in hooking up these

cameras. As we went up the stairway to the second floor, the murmuring of our busy associates could be heard echoing within the compound. Some of them were occupied at the control center, where they unboxed the VCR and monitor, connected it to electricity, and reeled out some of the power cables. Others were assigned to bring up the cables (and other accessories) to the higher floors so they could later be connected with the cameras. This also involved taping the cables to the floor so they would not slip or become obstacles later on. Meanwhile John, Tracy and a few others discussed at which positions it would be most practical to face the cameras in order to cover an as extensive area as possible. After a brief discussion it was decided that two of them were to be based on the second floor, one of them all the way up at the top floor, and the last one was to be based on the ground floor. When the camera positions were agreed upon, those involved in the discussion took responsibility for the different cameras and; brought them to the designated areas to attach them to tripods. Walky-talkies were continuously used to keep communication with those downstairs at the control center. For instance, when someone at the upper floor needed to extend a cable they called down for someone to help them out. And when the cameras had finally been connected, the walky-talkies were used to make sure the camera was displayed properly at the monitor downstairs.

Over the course of setting up the camera system the place became exceedingly darker, as the sun was about to set. Not very long before midnight, most team members had gathered at the control center. They engaged in multiple conversations, while those in charge of the cameras finished the very last of preparations. When the camera system had been successfully deployed the investigation was ready to begin. In practice this meant the investigators were ready to hunt for some ghosts.

### **The ghost hunting gadgets and their functions**

When it came to investigations the equipment utilized within the field was paramount. A lot of time and energy went into getting the camera system up and running, and further throughout the investigations different technological apparatus played a significant role. John Potts (2004) argues that the attention to technological apparatus within modern ghost hunting extends from a long tradition in western society, of what he refers to as “media mysticism”. This tradition can be traced back some 200 years. Potts brings up certain technological new comings invented in past decades - particularly in the early 1800 hundreds – that have been conceived as having supernatural qualities. Among these “mystical” technologies Potts mentions mesmerism with its supposed healing potentials, electromagnetism with its magic-like qualities; and radio technology through which it was believed one could communicate with the dead. Potts argues that contemporary ghost hunting carries on the traditions of media mysticism, by

ascribing supernatural qualities to technological devices. This may point to technological apparatus as having become subject to a form of enchantment; a possibility that will here be explored. I will in the following sections elaborate on how the ghost hunters conceptualized the various equipment used in the field; as well as how the equipment's functions connected with the ghost hunters conceptions about ghosts.

Before we, in the next chapter, move on to studying how the equipment was practically used, we will take a moment to elaborate on the equipment, and its perceived merits and functions. The three most prominent functions were: the equipment allowed for ghost hunters to (1) to detect the whereabouts and activities of ghostly entities, (2) obtain physical evidence of ghostly activity, and (3) establish communication with ghostly entities. As I continue bringing the reader through the early hours of the investigation, I will now go through every function in detail.

### **Detecting the whereabouts and activity of ghosts**

Normally, as an investigation was initiated, the respective group would be divided into teams, usually with 3-5 investigators in each. In this case Rose had come through earlier with some of the other group organizers, and they had made up their minds to which areas would be investigated, and later also who should be part of each team. I was put on team with Charlotte, Rose and two other investigators. To begin with we were to head off towards the locker rooms, while another team was to investigate the main building. Later throughout the night the teams should switch locations.

Before we departed from the main building, the various ghost hunting equipment - that had just recently been dispatched - was distributed amongst the different teams. Aside from voice recorders and photo cameras - which were mostly individually owned - most investigators were given a gadget that he or she should be wielding for the coming hours. I for one had been given a Mel-meter. A device that would pick up any sudden electromagnetic fluctuations, thus indicating that a paranormal entity could be present. It had a small display by which I could monitor these frequencies, and signal to those around me if I got unusual readings. Rose had a K2-meter, a device serving a similar function. It displayed five lights, ranging in color from green to red; and these would light up corresponding with measured intensity of the magnetic field. This was one of gadgets most used in the field. Its lights were especially handy as its spikes were clearly visible in the dark.



*The K2-meter*

Other such gadgets circulated also; like digital thermometers – which could detect temperature drops from a distance -and the so-called “spirit box”. The spirit box was a digital device meant for ghosts to communicate through. It had the ability to scan through multiple audio channels simultaneously, and could potentially connect with the ghosts on the various channels. What set the spirit box apart from other devices such the K2 meter was that it could “talk”. Rather than just signaling on a ghost’s presence, it had incorporated an extensive vocabulary of words, with the help of which, the ghost were believed able to communicate. When the spirit box was activated its mechanical voice would speak out a set of random words every few minutes. Although most of the words were incoherent and did not make any sense, some of them could believably have been channeled through the spirit box, on command of a ghost. That was, if the words was somehow mysteriously related to the place circumstances and context through which they were uttered. For instance, it did at one *California Haunts* investigation utter the word “trace” just as John had asked if any ghosts could say the name of one of the investigators present. This came across as peculiar by the group, as “trace” was remarkably close to “Tracy”; whom was one out of five people in the room. Granted the spirit box likely did not have her name in its vocabulary, “trace” was probably as close as any ghost could get to “Tracy”. And so, this incident was either a huge convenience, or the word had been communicated through the “spirit box” by a ghost. Overall “the spirit box” (and similar devices) was a bit of a controversial gadget, that not many put much stock into; hence some expressed the spirit box (and similar gadgets) “had its moments”. Another ghost hunting that is worth mentioning was the “Ghost Radar”. The ghost radar

was one out of many cell phone applications available to the ghost hunter. Like the spirit box this particular software could believably also “talk” on behalf of the ghosts; but what the most unique about it was that it could also detect the position of any ghostly entities in the room. These were, for a brief second, shown as dots on the radar display, so the ghost hunter would know exactly where the ghosts were located. However, alike the spirit box, the ghost radar was viewed by my informants as more of an experimental toy, than a reliable ghost gadget.



The Mel meter, K2 meter, digital thermometer, the spirit box, the ghost radar and alternate environmental devices were used in order to try and detect whereabouts and activities of ghostly entities. Practically, the ghost hunter equipment was utilized to extend on the senses, allowing for a broader and more extensive insight into the physical environment. The sound recording devices would serve as extensions to the human ear, the cameras and night vision devices would serve as extensions to vision, and the various environmental detectors (measuring electromagnetic field, temperature etc.) would serve to extend on the sense of touch. All of these allowed for the ability to register paranormal presences outside the range of empirical experience. Basically, the ghost hunter equipment can be said to have constituted an extension of human consciousness altogether; as it enabled ghost hunters to “see”, “hear” and “feel” what they otherwise could not. The equipment served to make ghostly phenomena somewhat tangible, despite its unpredictable, obscured and invisible nature. Therefore, whenever a K2-meter would spike, the spirit box would abruptly come up with a set of words, or some anomalous shape would turn up on a photograph - the equipment had made it so the invisible forces lingering within the sugar mill was temporarily uncovered. The ghost hunter gadgets had brought the ghosts to the surface, so to speak. Or as Connor puts it: “In spirit photography, otherness is made

visible and familiar, and the unmasterable event of manifestation becomes the fixed and manipulable record.”(Connor 1999:208)

In a historical context, the technologies of photography were cherished by scientists as they were capable of providing an extension of the visual scene. It gave access to what had before been invisible to the human eye. Via these revolutionary apparatus humans had for the first time the ability to obtain physical images of, for instance light polarization, which had never before been seen by the human eye (Daston and Galison 2007). Likewise, ghosts would eventually also been conceived as something that could be present in the physical environments, yet which could become manifest through photography (Potts 2004). The capability of the camera (or any recording medium) as being able to represent nature beyond what is possible by human experience, made the technology essential to the practice of ghost hunting. In fact most ghostly manifestations seemed to be recorded without the ghost hunters being aware of it. They often seemed to come across as a surprise when the photographs and recordings from an investigation were examined. Arguably this supported the belief that the ghost hunter equipment indeed offered an extension to the human consciousness, and that much paranormal activity occurred beyond the range of human experience.

Overall, the ghostly realms were conceived by the ghost hunters as mostly inaccessible. The ghosts could practically occupy the same physical space as the ghost hunters, yet the ghosts' presence could simply go unnoticed. The conception that ghosts were so inaccessible to the ghost hunter may serve as a plausibility structure in itself. It could justify the notion that some location was haunted, although the ghost hunters did not experience it as haunted. I overheard on several occasions ghost hunters expressing things like: haunted locations are by no means a “dog and pony show”, and that ghosts “rarely act on cue”. An informant even once compared haunted locations with “slot machines” entailing that it would require certain amount of luck to get in communication with a ghost; better yet being able to document its presence. Following this thread of thought: When a ghost hunter group investigated a location and didn't get any indications that there were any ghosts present; that didn't mean that the ghosts simply were not there - only that they were inaccessible to the ghost hunters at that particular moment. Based on these conceptions, ghosts were not (necessarily) absent or non-existent; they were only out of empirical range. The ghost could persist at some other frequency or light specter. If they appeared to be absent, they were not necessarily absent; only inaccessible at that point of time.

## **Obtaining physical evidence of ghostly phenomenon**

What appeared to be the prime means for ghost hunters to utilize recording equipment was to obtain physical evidence of ghostly phenomenon. In the ghost hunter communities, what went into the category of *evidence* were primarily video recordings, photographs and audio recordings portraying what was believed to be ghostly phenomena. For instance a photograph portraying a mysterious shape could be categorized as evidence; provided the investigators could not come up with a natural explanation why it had turned up on the photograph. Likewise a mysterious voice obtained on recording would be categorized as evidence; provided no natural explanation could be found why it had turned up on audio. In hope of obtaining evidence during investigations, ghost hunters utilized many different recording devices.

Most investigators had brought their photo cameras to the sugar mill. Hundreds of photographs were often taken throughout investigations, and hopefully something anomalous would turn up in some of them. Because ghost hunting was performed mostly at night, the cameras were cherished as they could potentially uncover what lied hidden in the dark. Some groups even used different types of cameras in order to cover the invisible realms as effectively as possible. These could be thermal cameras (displaying heat signatures in color) or so-called full spectrum cameras (covering the full color spectrum, including ultraviolet light). The perhaps most sophisticated piece of visual recording device utilized that night, was the night vision camera wielded by Charlotte. As we were to dwell into the dark locker rooms this could be utilized to get an overview of what was happening outside our visual range. And potentially it could also record any peculiar occurrences happening throughout - both visually and audibly.

Another utility that was absolutely essential to ghost hunting was the digital voice recorder. The most dedicated ghost hunters appeared to have at least a few of these. They did come in some different varieties and some types were specifically manufactured for ghost hunting; like the “voice activated” recorders that activated on voice detection. However, most investigators used the regular kind of voice recorders - originally retailed for other purposes than communicating with the dead. It was believed that ghosts often communicated on other frequencies than did humans, and that a tape recorder was able to pick up ghostly vocals on these frequencies. Whenever ghost hunters would conclude that they

had obtained a ghostly voice on recording they would refer to it as an EVP<sup>4</sup>. The ghostly voices manifested in EVPs could range in audibility from distinct to highly indistinct. EVPs were fairly were a fairly common form of evidence collected in the field. Therefore the voice recorders, and these apparatus ability to catch ghosts on recording, was highly essential to ghost hunting.

### **Establishing communication with ghosts**

Ghost hunter equipment also served a purpose in establishing communication with ghosts and other paranormal entities. More than enabling the ghost hunter to record and detect any ghosts' whereabouts and activities, the equipment also played a significant role when it came to interaction between ghost and hunter. The various gadgets simply constituted mediums of communication, assisting the ghosts in interacting with the ghost hunters. As we have seen, ghosts were conceived as having great restrictions in interacting with the material world, as they were dependent on manipulating energy to do so. This could prove so challenging for the ghosts that they, when unable to gather enough energy to manifest, were fully unable to make themselves known. The ghosts' physical shortcomings were to be accounted for by the use of equipment. All the different gadgets – like the spirit box, the ghost radar, the K2 meter and the voice recorder – were utilized to lessen the ghost's restrictions when trying to interact with the physical world. The idea behind the equipment entailed that the ghosts were to use the devices to interact without major energy consumption; as opposed to not being able to manifest at all, or winding up exhausted after one failed attempt. For instance a ghost would be instructed to speak into the voice recorder, which allegedly demanded much less energy than for the ghosts to say something out loud. Or it could interact with the K2 meter to get it to light up, as opposed to performing a major energy consuming act - in order to get the ghost hunters attention. The ghost hunter gadgets were essential to ghost hunting, as they provided the ghosts an enforced ability to communicate.

As we have touched upon earlier, the understanding that technological apparatus could be used as a medium to communicate with the dead goes far back in time. Dixon argues, that in terms of supernatural ideas in the modern west, the modern communication technologies helped to “create a new metaphysics for imagining proximity, distance and intimacy” (Dixon 2007:720). The supernatural forces were conceived as persisting at some obscured realm; and that realm was now made available through the new technologies. The realms of the dead would appear closer and more accessible than they had ever been; and the technology constituted some basis of communication between “living” and

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<sup>4</sup>EVP stands for «Electronic Voice Phenomenon»



“dead”. Ghost hunting seemed to build heavily on these conceptions; and in a sense the ghost hunter equipment served to mediate an uncanny presence. Although the ghosts were empirically inaccessible to the ghost hunters, they could nonetheless be there with them.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this chapter we have become familiarized with the ghost hunter’s conceptions of ghosts, as well as the equipment that they utilized in order to interact with ghosts. The ghost hunter equipment constituted to practitioners a “sixth sense”, allowing ghost hunters to “see”, “hear” and “feel” what was fully inaccessible to them. Furthermore, it gave them the opportunity to document what was otherwise invisible and intangible, with help of the various recording devices (video camera, photo camera and audio recorders). Finally, the use of these gadgets also played a communicative role; and using these, practitioners purported to bridge the gap between ghost and ghost hunter, making interaction easier on the ghosts’ part.

Overall, the perhaps most interesting aspect about the various ghost gadgets, was not the respective gadgets functionality and conceived merits, but rather how the technological equipment aided the ghost hunter in “thinking around” ghosts. Namely, the way the ghost gadgets so clearly played into the metaphysics of ghost hunting, and contributed to giving ghostly phenomenon a recognizable and acknowledgeable form. For instance, the idea that the ghost could communicate through a tape recorder made the ghostly realms accessible. The understanding that a blimp on the ghost radar could represent a ghostly presence gave the ghost its immediacy. The conception that the ghost could use the spirit box to speak its preferred words gave the ghost a will, ambition and interactivity. In the next chapter we will discover how this worked in practice.

However, before we move on, there appears to be another theme worth mentioning. It may seem as the ghosts and ghost hunting had in a sense become influenced by disenchantment. Max Weber and other disenchantment theorists contended that supernatural beliefs would demise as a result of the modern world becoming gradually more rationalized, secularized and bureaucratized (Saler 2006). As the modern man would come to adopt a rationalistic world view, supernatural beliefs and practices - which was by some referred to as “irrational passions” - would eventually become exposed as insubstantial and untrue. The basis for the disenchantment theorist’s predictions lied in a conception that supernatural phenomena were not objectively real, but merely the product of human imagination. Ergo, ghosts and other supernatural phenomena resided in the subjective sphere; it existed only in the minds

of those who believed in, and engaged themselves in, such “irrational passions”. The “irrationalism” then, lied in these believers or practitioners’ assumed inability to distinguish the real from what was not real; what was objectively true on one hand, from what was only superstition on the other (ibid). In this respect, one could say that ghost hunting represented an “irrational passion” that had become rationalized.

Jenkins argues: “In a disenchanted world everything becomes understandable and tameable, even if not, for the moment, understood and tamed” (Jenkins 2000:12). It has been made clear throughout this chapter that ghost hunters did not conceive the ghost as something overall mystical and unmanageable; but rather as something that could be understood, and and to some extent controlled. Ghostly phenomenon was being (partly) understood by the ghost hunter, in the respect that it has become incorporated into a scientific and rationalist scheme. Basically, the idea behind the ghost hunter equipment was based on the conception that ghosts worked out of scientifically recognized principles. The K2 meter was utilized out of the understanding that ghosts could manipulate the electromagnetic field. The voice recorders could pick up signals on frequencies that the human ear could not. Various cameras were utilized as they were believed to detect ghosts that were essentially out of sight. It was evident the ghost hunter metaphysics simply built on a modern, objective and scientific understanding of the world; whereby theories about radio frequencies, electromagnetic fields and energy consumption all played into the equation. In this respect the ghost was understood by the ghost hunter; at least it was in the process of becoming so. Simultaneously the ghost had been demystified -or disenchanted, in that it lost some of its mysterious qualities.

Moreover, the ghost was in a sense controllable to the ghost hunters; as their ghost gadgets made the ghostly realms accessible, explicit, and not least and verifiable. The ghost hunters understanding that ghosts could interact with the various scientific apparatus entailed that ghostly phenomenon was indeed something of physical nature. Ghosts could be detected, measured and recorded; ergo they were not the product of the “subjective mind”, but rather as a physical phenomenon operating within the objective world. This seemed to enforce the ideas that ghosts were physically real, and not just a product of the mind. We may see a tendency that the equipment – or *scientific equipment* as it was mostly called – contributed to maintain the idea that ghosts was in fact objectively real. In Berger’s (1967) terms, we may say that ghostly phenomena was made *plausible*; as it was re-categorized from something imagined (taking place only in the human mind) to something tangible (something considered part of the physical world).

Although ghost hunting seemed to be greatly flavored by disenchantment, there were apparently also some elements of enchantment. The ghost gadgets were in a sense enchanted in that they were conceived as having supernatural qualities. Ghost hunting seemed to build greatly around this form of enchantment, and this theme will be brought up in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Perceiving the ghosts**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, the investigation at the old abandoned sugar mill continues. Here however, we will be more concerned with the experiential aspect of ghost hunting. I will initiate the chapter by introducing the “EVP-session”; the most common and perhaps most significant of activities performed during of investigations. Further, I will illustrate how the hunters in the mill responded to mysterious – potentially “ghostly” – occurrences; and how their experience can be explained in light of “enchantment”. Throughout the last part of this chapter we will see how the ghost hunters attempted to explain the mysterious occurrences befalling around them, and how they, through the means of debunking, sought to distinguish subjective experience and perception from objective reality.

### **The EVP-session: Addressing the ghosts**

Back at the sugar mill all the various equipment and ghost gadgets should soon come in handy. As the different teams had collected the respective equipment it was time to initiate the investigation. Or more precisely, it was time to move out and try and get in contact with the ghosts. Some of the last words that were expressed before the teams separated and set out of the main building, came from Charlotte, who enthusiastically encouraged us: “Let’s do this! Find some ghosties!” Charlotte, Rose, two other investigators and I left the sugar mill, and began mobilizing towards our destination. After a minute or two of walking away from the main structure, we were about to arrive the locker rooms. The tension was now as ecstatic as it had been when *California Haunts* had assembled on the parking lot several hours earlier. As my team walked the distance between the two buildings the air was filled with enthusiasm and laughter. Everyone was clearly excited to get on with the ghost hunting. Eventually we entered the locker rooms, and Charlotte, Rose and the rest of us installed ourselves in one of its cubicles. Sitting at some wooden benches inside we were ready to begin investigating.

The standard protocol whereas an investigation had been initiated, and the different teams had arrived at their designated locations, was for each team to conduct a so-called EVP-session. To the ghost hunters these EVP-sessions served as the mean to initiate contact with the ghosts, and hopefully wind up with obtaining EVPs - ghostly voices on recording. EVP sessions were the most common activity conducted at investigations. The ghost hunter group operating at some location would carry through several sessions simultaneously. The sessions were conducted multiple times throughout, and usually took up a great part of the night. The sessions would normally be carried through for some 20-40

minutes; until the team decided to move on to another spot, or was relieved by another team. Typically, towards the end of the night, the majority of investigators would gather at the locations most interesting spot, and carry through a longer session together.

As opposed to the video camera system - that was set to run all night long and would merely capture ghostly activity by coincidence - the EVP session constituted a more direct interaction with the ghosts. Through the EVP-sessions the ghost hunters purported to get the ghosts to react to their presence, and respond to their instructions on cue. In practice an EVP session constituted an intended dialogue between ghost and hunter, wherein the ghost hunters would ask questions, and hopefully the ghosts would respond back. Beginning these sessions the ghosts would be instructed to interact by “speaking into the voice recorder”, hopefully leaving the group with an EVP. However, despite the fact that the term “EVP-session” itself implies the teams simply performed the activity in order to catch ghostly voices on audio, there was more to the EVP sessions than the term insinuates. More so than just asking for a ghost to leave their voice on the recorder, the ghost hunters would also inspire them to interact in other fashions. Like for instance the ghosts were asked to manipulate the different ghost gadgets and equipment, make noises in the environment, manifest themselves visually, move objects, and touch team members present in the room. EVP sessions were not merely about the EVPs that could later be uncovered on tape, but what was happening around the investigators there and then. Throughout the sessions it was attempted to bring out ghostly responses one way or the other. The preferred type of response to a question was often specified by the investigators. Like for instance they would instruct the ghosts to “speak into the light” (on the voice recorder) or light up a device (a flashlight or environmental detector) to answer a question by “yes” or “no”. For instance, if a K2 meter would light up for a second after she had asked a question; that could qualify as a potential response. Likewise, interference in any of the other apparatus, or occurring noises, or a ghost hunters sensory experience could be interpreted as a sign that a ghost was trying to communicate. Occasionally the ghost hunters would take photographs, and if any anomaly turned up in some photograph, this could also be interpreted as ghostly intervention.

“Recorders on! Lights out” Charlotte and Rose cheerfully commanded us. The voice recorders were activated and our flashlights were switched off. EVP sessions were normally initiated like this, with one or more voice recorders being activated and put down on the floor. Often during these sessions various other gadgets would be placed in the middle of the room so everyone present could keep an eye with them. That way they would all know when a gadget picked up anything. The person in charge – in

this case Rose - would then state the place and time for the session, so the team would know these details when later listening to the tapes. Further, the team members would in most cases introduce themselves by name; followed by the investigator in charge stating the reason the team had come to investigate. This was so the ghosts should not be intimidated by the ghost hunter's presence, but rather feel welcome to communicate with the team. During investigations at private residences ghost hunter groups would primarily state they were there on behalf of the residences; mostly by explaining they were there to help their clients out of their "spooky" situation. However, in many cases they would also state they were there also to help the ghosts get their message through or to "move on to the other side". Ghost hunters sometimes also expressed they were to investigate for their own gains; like Wanda did during a *P.R.O.V.E.* investigation: "We wanna learn the age old question: is there life after death? And we want to find out what's going on, on your side."

In the locker rooms Charlotte initiated the EVP session by calling out the following: "If there is anybody in here with me, can you walk over and touch this machine I am holding in my hand?" EVP sessions would most frequently be introduced like this, with the investigators directing the ghost's attention towards the technological apparatus. The equipment was made the center of attention both for the ghosts and the ghost hunters. The ghost hunters would constantly keep an eye on it, and the ghosts were to initiate contact through it. The various ghost gadgets was the true medium of communication. Ghost hunters would also occasionally instruct the ghosts how the equipment functioned; illustrated by the following excerpt from a *P.R.O.V.E.* investigation.

"We have digital voice recorders. Although we are not sure how old you are... or if you know what a digital recorder is. But it records any little sound. We can't hear your voice - if you're trying to speak to us - with our own ears; but if you speak loud and clear, our digital recorders will pick up your voice, and we can hear them when we take the recorders home, and use earphones."

An interesting aspect with how the investigators focused communication on the technological gadgets was how they in the process indirectly undermined subjective experience. It is true that at during most EVP-sessions the investigators would at some point inspire the ghost to physically interact with the ghost hunters. However, this was in the majority of cases proposed after a while into the session, often due to a ghost's reluctance or inability to interact. The procedures during the sessions established the gadgets as the main means of communication, because they were reliable in the pursuit of truth. Sensory experience on the other hand, was not. I will elaborate more on this in Chapter 6 and 7.

When the teams had introduced themselves to the ghosts by name, stated their intent for carrying through the investigation, and made clear the premises for communication; they would begin with the questioning. EVP sessions would often begin with the asking a few somewhat generic questions. These would often involve several of the following: Is there anybody here with us? Is there somebody here who would like to talk with us? Is there somebody here that died recently? Can you tell us your name? Are you a male? Are you a female? At the session in the locker rooms the following questions were asked by Charlotte: “Is somebody in here with us? Can you please make a noise if you are here? Did you work here at the mill? Is there a reason why you stay here? Tell me your name!” There was - as always - added a few seconds of pause between each question, giving the ghosts an opportunity to respond.

Investigators would often form questions based on the particular place investigated; associations, myths and the paranormal events that had allegedly taken place there. It was believed that if the team had knowledge of a particular event or deceased person, bringing up such certain subjects could appeal to the ghosts. If for instance they knew the name and story of one particular ghost, they would use this information to get him or her to interact with them. Rose had in this case done some research in advance, and she hoped to get in contact with one of the former workers at the mill. According to historical records, there had several decades ago been a dispute between some employees working there. The dispute had led to a physical confrontation between the two involved, and had ended with a deadly outcome. One of the employees had lost his life as a result of the physical confrontation. At the locker rooms the team hoped that bringing up this event and its circumstances would get the deceased to respond. “Did you get into fights when you worked here?” Rose asked out loud. “Were you married? You like to fight over the ladies?” - Charlotte followed up with. “I hear that someone around here was a big carouser and slept with a married woman,” Rose added. “Was that you? Did you have a fight with her husband?” Several such questions were asked throughout. Some of them even in Spanish, as the deceased were supposedly of Mexican origin. As one way to respond to one of these questions, Charlotte instructed the ghost – if he happened to be present – to slam the locker doors behind us. The team waited patiently for a response.

Overall, the EVP-session constituted a dialogue between ghost and ghost hunter. During these sessions the investigators sought to get the ghosts to respond by trying to “trigger” their attention, and illustrate how the ghosts could interact. As we have seen how the ghost hunters went forward communicating

towards the ghosts, let us now see what happened when the ghosts responded back. We will see how the ghosts manifested through sensory experience and the manipulating of equipment, as well as how the ghost hunters responded to such mysterious occurrences.



### **Responding to mysterious occurrences**

It was after midnight, and the locker rooms which we had familiarized ourselves with just a couple of hours prior, were now almost covered in pitch black. As we sat down on some benches inside, the wooden lockers surrounding us were basically out of visual range. Despite how close my fellow ghost hunters were to me I could barely make them out in the dark. I could only acknowledge their presence through sound, like when they would move around or speak amongst each other. I was given a clear glimpse of my team members only momentarily, when someone would take a photograph, and the flash would - for just a fragment of a second - light up the room. The rest of the time we were all pretty much covered in darkness. The dark opened up for a manifold of possibilities; every shadowy corner and narrow corridor becoming enshrouded in mystery. The possibility that there was perhaps something lurking in the dark - just outside of our sensory reach - gave the space a mystical quality. Upon situating in the dark, the sense of sight became almost obsolete. To compensate for what was visually inaccessible, ghost hunters would have to actively use the imagination and find some way to reacquaint with the environments without the privileges of the eyes. What could otherwise be concluded in a microsecond, just by a momentary glimpse, would now take much more effort to perceive. Also the



auditory gained much more attention now, as faint sounds emerged from the surroundings would come to dominate the sensorium. Hearing would to a great degree replace vision, being that the auditory sense - as opposed to touch, smell and taste - could be used to perceive the whereabouts actively at broader range. With the inability to instantly recognize the surrounding environments, the sounds of a place would become more distinctive. Any otherwise ignored creak from an old building was to be associated with some sense of mystery, potentially linked with ghostly intervention.

From the very first moments after we had entered the locker rooms, my fellow ghost hunters had begun to speculate whether something spooky was going on. Initially Rose puzzled with her K2-meter for a few minutes, astonished that it was not working properly. “The first one is not lighting up. That’s weird” she stated. One of the lights in the display had not lit up as it would normally do when it was connected with batteries, and Rose had trouble understanding just what was causing it. “I just changed the battery!” she said out loud - an uttering responded to by another investigator, commenting: “battery drain”. It was a common belief within the ghost hunter community that ghosts would drain power from electronic devices in order to accumulate the needed energy to manifest. Right then that was what was being suggested. First, implicitly by Rose, as she shared her astonishment with us, and second, explicitly by the comment of her fellow ghost hunter. Could it be that someone or something was manipulating Rose’s equipment? If that was the case, it did not last for very long, as Rose was eventually able to get her K2 meter to work. Not long after however, a similar incident occurred with Charlotte’s video camera. She observed its battery indicator had dropped drastically: “I have my power, my battery, my everything dropping right now”. “Well... that’s a good thing”, Rose responded. She further asked me, and whoever else wielded an environmental detector, to do some readings around Charlotte and see if we could pick anything up. We stepped over to her and swept our meters all around her for a few seconds, however we were unable to get any spikes.

Such incidents would occur a few times throughout investigations, based either on the various equipment “acting up”, or the environmental detectors spiking for no apparent reason. Because these were such rare occurrences they would gain a lot of attention once they happened. Whenever a piece of equipment spiked the investigator wielding that particular gadget informed the rest of the team about it; just as Rose and Charlotte had done. As a spike was a sign of a ghost potentially interacting, efforts were shortly made to have that suspected entity continue with the communication. For instance when I informed my team my Mel-meter just spiked for a second, Charlotte asked the ghost to come over and interact with it again. If during an EVP session a team utilized a “spirit box”, the ghost radar or any

such device that “talked”, that device could also play into the questioning. Earlier that night for instance, the Spirit box abruptly began to say out a selection of words, and the team had flocked around it. Charlotte followed up any words coming from the spirit box with preceding questions. Part of it went like this:

Spirit box: “Fly”, “Away”, “Outside”

Charlotte: Fly away? You wanna fly away outside? Is there something outside that we need to see? Do you want us to go outside?

Spirit box: “George”, “Strong”

Charlotte: George Armstrong? “Are you George Armstrong? Did you know George Armstrong? Is George Armstrong a friend?”

Spirit box: “Property”, “Run”.

Charlotte: “Are you running this property? Do you want us to run? Is there something we should be afraid of?”

There was always the slight possibility that some entity could be interacting with the equipment. However, not anything would be interpreted as paranormal intervention. It was a continuous endeavor - during investigations - attempting to distinguish the *normal* (or natural) from the *paranormal*. Unless a potentially ghostly reaction were of tremendous nature, a singular occurrence was likely to be discarded as not paranormal. Say if roses K2 meter just lit up subsequent to one question, and not any of the others, no one would probably argue it was unquestionably the response of a ghost. It could potentially have been solar flare affecting the detector, or perhaps the K2 meter was malfunctioning and giving imprecise readings. Had it, on the other hand, reacted to several of the questions, and in the process given somewhat consistent information, the investigators would definitely embrace the *possibility* of ghostly interaction. And additionally, if several gadgets would react simultaneously - one or multiple investigators would have experiences, and it was later found that an EVP had been captured at that very same moment; under such circumstances investigators would likely gravitate towards a paranormal explanation. To my understanding however, such correspondences were very rare. At most occasions the ghost hunters would have to do with the more subtle and less decisive indications of a ghostly presence - like the former incidents with Roses K2 meter, my Mel-meter, Charlottes camera, and the spirit box’s incoherent phrase of words.

Despite the equipment’s highly ambiguous signals, such occurrences seemed to make the ghosts come to life. They were still as invisible and inaccessible as they had been all night, but through the social context they became in a sense present along with us. The gadgets can be said to have formed immediacy between ghost and ghost hunter. Any time a piece of equipment would spike, the incident

inevitably pointed towards some invisible occurrence in the room. Yet the ambiguity to what that was would have to be categorized somehow, and the spectral possibilities were those which would automatically come to mind.

It was not just the equipment alone that could help indicate that ghostly entities were present. Any sensory experiences could unveil the paranormal in the same manner as the equipment could. Investigators would occasionally have mysterious sensations, and they would later be discussed in plenum. For instance, whilst we were sitting in the locker rooms Rose told us of an experience she had had earlier that night: “You know, just a note. When I was coming through here earlier, with John, I felt like I was being choked. And I was coughing a lot. I thought it was just the dust, but I’m not doing it now, so... and I don’t have the mask on”. Rose did - when bringing up her experience - underline the possibility that a ghost might have been in this room with her earlier; and that it could still be there along with us. Occasionally at investigations practitioners would have such experiences that they would excitedly tell their companions about. Like for instance they shared they had just felt they were tugged in the hair or clothing, or that they had just heard a sound or seen a shadow.

It was interesting to see how ghost hunters through the context of investigation contributed to animate the invisible realms. How they together produced a sense of ghostly presence out of the darkness and ambiguity they were surrounded by. Pennartz argues “it is not space in itself that creates atmosphere, but some kind of social action that takes place in the space” (1999:103). In a similar vein Holloway asserts: “practices of legend-telling, legend-tripping, ostension, and play produce affective assemblages of supposition and wonder that momentarily transform space into something charged with the strange and anomalous” (2009:618). The space becomes something unique, hence different from the locus of everyday life.

From these respective points of view the procedure of the EVP session –or investigation itself - could serve to enforce a notion that the ghost hunters were indeed in the presence of ghosts. In that way, the participants contributed to creating a haunting atmosphere. By directly investigating the ghostly claims, sharing experiences and interpretations, asking questions and anticipating a response, the investigation did in a sense make the ghosts “come to life”. The occurrences and sensations in the place were actively attributed to potentially ghostly intervention. Seeing it like this, the locker rooms became more of a mysterious place than the building alone could be credited for. It was as if the investigators had “charged it” - to use Holloway’s (2009) expression - with a sense of mystery and wonder.

Holloway, who carried through a study on ghost tours in the UK, came to recognize how the tourists adopted a certain mentality while attending the tours. He argues the operators of the events engaged in various activities - like legend-telling and play - as strategies to try and influence the (often skeptical) tourists into momentarily accepting the possibility of ghosts. The tour guides would take the tourists throughout the respective tourist sites, and reference the historical events and ghost sightings that had taken place there. And in the process they “charged it”, by producing, what Holloway termed an *infrastructure of enchantment* - challenging and substituting the tourists’ leery everyday epistemology. Holloway borrows the term “enchantment” from Bennett, who explains the term “entails a state of wonder, and one of the distinctions of this state is the temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement” (Bennett 2001:5). Such a state, Bennett elaborates, is characterized by an enforced consciousness, causing the individual to get a sense of the physical environments beyond the ordinary. In this case, the sense of enchantment produced a heightened awareness of the potentially invisible forces lingering about at the “haunted” location. The supernatural tales shared at such ghost tours - as well as the beliefs that supported them - Thompson argues: «might inspire ridicule in tourists’ daily lives, but on the ghost tour they are accepted with an open mind” (2010:90). The otherwise impossible or highly implausible claims of invisible entities were reconsidered; as at that time and place they could potentially be true. The ghosts and possibility of ghosts, although invisible and physically inaccessible to the tourists, came in a way to be the focus of their attention. We may say the attendees of the tour were in a sense united by one mutual sense of enchantment, wherein they were “predisposed to experience”, as Thompson (2010) puts it. They became prone to expect the otherwise unexpected.

Holloway identified *enchantment* to be an essential component when it came to keeping the tourists intrigued with the tours. Although the contexts of the ghost hunts I attended were somewhat different to at the ghost tours Holloway and Thompson describe, the theory of “infrastructures of enchantment” can be applied also here. For despite the fact the attendees of the ghost hunts were not merely belief suspending tourists - but were often heavily invested in their ghostly beliefs (and assumptions) – they would nonetheless contribute to produce and share a sense of enchantment during investigations. Already before Charlotte, Rose and I had arrived for the sugar mill that night; the sense of enchantment had seemingly begun to brew. Rose was almost ecstatic when she came to pick me up, and as always before investigations there was this feeling that this was going to be an extraordinary night. Later as we arranged all the ghost hunter equipment into the back of Roses car, and set off into the night, there was little doubt just what we were heading into. There was this signature tension that I had only come to

associate with ghost hunting, and the hours leading up to it. Further as we arrived at the location, this tension would only exceed as the ghost hunters gathered and shared their stories and anticipations. The sugar mill that stood before us became more than just a massive brick building. There was something more to it than that. Something uncanny and ambiguous which was worth tapping into. The sense of enchantment was something a ghost hunter did not carry with her every day of the week, but something which came into play once she and her associates situated themselves within a presumed haunted location; perhaps even before they stepped in through the door. Even though there were no tour guides present whose tasks were to produce a sense of enchantment, the individual ghost hunters seemed to take on this part themselves.

It was when we had initiated the investigation and situated ourselves in the dark that the sense of enchantment became really evident - when we had just accessed the locker rooms, and Rose and Charlotte began to speculate about the equipment. The stories shared in the mill - Like Roses choking incident – can also be said to have built into this structure of enchantment. The locker rooms were in a sense given some property it did not possess until Rose shared her story with us. They were no longer just possibly occupied with ghosts, but these ghosts were potentially prone to interact – perhaps even in a violent fashion. To coin Holloway once again, Roses story contributed to create a “literal and discursive frame”; an indicator that the locker rooms could at any times “reveal the supernatural” (2009:624). Furthermore, the questions asked during EVP sessions, and the anticipation for response, contributed to produce and uphold a structure of enchantment: “Is somebody in here with us? Can you please make a noise if you are here?” Although such questions would remain unanswered for the ghosts’ part, they served to produce, amongst the team, a shared anticipation that “somebody” was there with us. And “somebody” that could potentially manifest itself at any time, and in any way imaginable. The ghost (or ghosts) became in a way animated into that particular space as the team addressed it. It was there somewhere, either covered in darkness or hidden behind the walls. Bell (1997) argues places can be interpreted as “personed”, thus independent of anyone being physically present within them. He elaborates: “We moderns, despite our mechanistic and rationalistic ethos, live in landscapes filled with ghosts. The scenes we pass through each day are inhabited, possessed, by spirits we cannot see but whose presence we nevertheless experience” (1997:813). It is important to note however, that Bell does not refer to “ghosts” in the same sense as my informants did. They are not essentially the disembodied souls of the dead lurking about in old buildings. His concept of ghosts directs towards how different “historical landscapes” – like the property of the old abandoned sugar mill - brings about sets of associations linking distinct “personas” to physical space. It may seem as the places somehow “contain”

such historical references, but in reality it is those present there who create them. As Bell puts it: “it is we that give ghosts to places” (Bell 1997: 831).

Independent of whether the sugar mill was indeed haunted by something the ghost hunters could not see, Bells metaphoric concept of ghosts may shed light on what gave the ghost its “substance”. What made the ghost - that “somebody” - stand out of the ambiguity? Throughout the EVP sessions entities were not only given a presence, but often also an identity. As Rose brought up the story about the deadly brawl that had taken place in the locker rooms - and pursued to get in contact with the victim - this particular ghost was no longer subject to anonymity. That “somebody” was attributed a name, a destiny and a potential reason to stay around beyond his death. He/it was given a motivation for haunting the place, as there was some unresolved business. This is further clarified when the next questions are being asked: “I hear that someone around here was a big carouser and slept with a married woman. Was that you? Did you have a fight with her husband?” The tragic story associated with this person’s death, built up under the enchanting feel of the locker rooms. It was in a way built into the space. Likewise did his perceived personality and state of mind. Together those present in the room could feel sympathy for this ghost; identifying with his despair, his reason for slamming locker doors, perhaps even choking Rose earlier that night. Whatever would occur throughout the time we were sitting in the locker rooms could somehow be associated with him. Alike the other ghostly personas I came to “encounter” throughout the investigations I attended (like a little boy still allegedly playing around in his former home beyond his death, or a fireman who was said to haunt the Woodland opera house) they were given a presence as they were addressed. Through the produced structures of enchantment they in a way filled the physical room. They were there together with us in the dark. Throughout the investigations mystical worlds encompassed the ghost hunters. Worlds that remained empirically inaccessible to them but which were nonetheless there. The material space become in a sense swarming with invisible life - produced and collectively imagined by those present. Schutz explained the phenomena it like this: “The social structure of fantasy worlds is complex. One can fantasize with oneself or with others; with a fellow man or many to whom one is related socially; and en masse” (Schutz and Luckmann 1973:32). As the ghost hunters shared to a degree some conception of ghosts and haunted places, they were able to mutually fantasize themselves into a reality of ghosts. The ghostly reality was a reality collectively experienced through a sense of enchantment.

Use of imagination was essential to ghost hunting, although the ghosts that manifested themselves through the ghost hunters imagination had little epistemic value. The ghost hunters did in a way

produce a ghostly presence out of the ghosts' absence. And unless the ghosts made a decisive appearance, this ghostly presence remained strangely hypothetical. No one would necessarily insist the ghosts were there in the room with us that night at that sugar mill. Not when the equipment was acting up. Not even as a response to Roses incident earlier.

The ghost hunter's idea of ghosts seemed to build on the ghostly realms being at any time invisible and majorly inaccessible. Ghosts were almost constantly "out of range" to the investigators, and their empirical absence had to be interpreted somehow. Although there was rarely an opportunity to be absolutely sure an occurrence had been staged by a ghost, my fellow companions played into the possibility that a ghost was in the room interacting with them. This demonstrated by Charlotte, who spoke out to the ghost(s): "I know you are in here, because you are messing with my camera!"

The paradox was that Charlotte did not "know" whether there was a ghost there or not. And she would likely not admit to "know" unless something truly spectacular would happen, or the team managed to put the ghosts to film or audio. Charlotte simply did not "know"; neither did anyone else in the room. There were so many "unknowns" that the ghost hunters were simply dependent on using their imagination. Charlotte's camera malfunctioning, and Rose coughing for some unknown reason, didn't explicitly point to the interference of a ghost. It was with help of the imagination that the ghost was associated with these occurrences.

In fact, the ambiguity of potentially ghostly interaction seemed to create a great room for using the imagination, based in there being essentially little room for validation. The equipment *could have* been affected by a ghostly entity. Likewise Roses feeling of being choked *could have* been imposed by an entity that either wanted her attention, or to do her harm. Nonetheless, these interpretations were only hypothetical, as they were impossible to validate. This ambiguity created a playful sphere through which attendees were "allowed" to read into things, and frankly be a little naive, without jeopardizing the investigation. It was all relative, and whether or not a particular ghost was in the room with the investigators, would only be speculated about unless it was somewhat confirmed. That was if the entities would seemingly respond back, and the investigators were to witness something that they had to try and explain.

### **Attempting to explain mysterious occurrences**

While my fellow ghost hunters were sitting in the dark their senses were sharpened in order for them to pick up what was happening in the environment. And at the same time their minds were constantly processing sensual impressions; scrutinizing any occurrences befalling around them. During the brief moments of silence (between questions), all the investigators would do was sit quietly, in order to be able to hear, feel or catch a glimpse of anything paranormal. Occasionally something would happen that the investigators instantly recognized was worth looking into. “What was that? Did you hear that?” - someone would say. Minor discussions would then arise regarding the reason for that particular occurrence. At one instant Rose reacted to what she thought was a whisper coming from the dark. As the investigators tried to acknowledge the origin of the sound, another investigator responded by asking: “was that a cat?” Out of the discussion that followed it was made clear that several had seen cats on the property that night, and the “whisper” was likely to have been caused by one of them. Rose then openly accepted the conclusion, the discussion ended and the EVP session went on. Throughout the questioning more such incidents would occur, and they were discussed in a similar manner. At one point an investigator reacted to feeling a cold draft. At another, two of them claimed to have heard voices from the dark. A third incident revolved around an investigator who thought she sensed a mysterious smell of cigars. These particular incidents were explained to some extent. The cold draft was explained as wind sieving through the broken windows. The alleged voices were regarded as most likely dogs barking somewhere at the distance. The smell of cigars was harder to explain away. However, because this incident – as opposed to the two other incidents – was just experienced by one investigator, there was little to go on determining whether the smell was real or just imagined.

Regularly during investigations, such incidents were concluded to be nothing out of the ordinary. Through some mutual understanding they could easily be disregarded pointing to a natural cause; like the creaks of old building, piping, animals, other team members etc. Also, an occurrence - like a noise - could sometimes be unidentifiable, hence not spectacular enough to gain any significant interest by anyone in the room. However, independent of its cause, the occurrence would nevertheless become subject to mystery; if only for a brief moment. The possibility that it could have been caused by a paranormal phenomenon was always inherent in the discussion. Any response - “what was that?” - highlighted the spectral possibilities, leaving such opportunities open, until the team would settle on a likely cause.

Was the knock on the wall some sort of answer to a question the ghost hunters had just asked? Was it a



sign of the ghost wanting to communicate? Or was it perhaps a sign the ghost wanted them to leave the property? The possibilities were virtually endless. Likewise, if nothing would happen whilst the ghost hunters were trying to get in touch with the ghosts, that would be equally as difficult to categorize. If an otherwise active ghost (according to clients or other groups) did not interact during an investigation; how could that be? There was always a great deal of possible ways to explain such inactivity. The ghost could be afraid to interact with the ghost hunters. It could be protective of its own territory and simply unwilling to interact out of disrespect for the “intruders”. It could be willing to interact, but unable to do so as it could not harness enough energy to manifest. It could be in an unconscious state and therefore not aware of the ghost hunter’s attempt to communicate. It could in fact be interacting with the ghost hunters yet its efforts would go unnoticed (perhaps later to be uncovered in photographs or audio footage). The particular ghost could simply not be present at the moment; or the place could potentially not be haunted at all.

Because most mysterious occurrences befalling throughout investigations could potentially have natural explanations (like that apparent whisper could be explained as cat noises, and Roses coughing experience could be related to dust) ghost hunters were often unable to firmly categorize the occurrence. Could it be given a paranormal or natural explanation? They were most often left with the possibility rather than certainty that an occurrence was indeed the act of a ghost. If a paranormal and natural explanation seemed equally valid, investigators would often leave both possibilities open, rather than to conclude it was paranormal. This was the case with Roses incident earlier that night. Instead of insisting that her coughing was the result of ghostly activity, she outlined both the natural and paranormal possibility: “I thought it was just the dust, but I’m not [coughing] now, so...”. Alike scientific readings by the equipment, experiences could be interpreted in multiple ways. To Rose and the rest of the team it was not concluded whether her sensation earlier was caused by a pair of ghost hands choking her, or simply just dust in her throat. Was it paranormal or normal? The incident simply remained unexplained. Most such experiences were highly ambiguous, and could rarely be interpreted as decisively of ghostly origin. They simply could not be classified as genuinely paranormal; only possibly paranormal (This will be elaborated on in greater detail in Chapter 6).

For the most part, investigators would disregard the paranormal explanation in favor for the natural explanation, as long as a natural explanation was viable. For instance, when the team recognized that there were stray cats on the property, they concluded that a cat likely made the “whisper” they had heard; although a ghost could practically have made it. So most often, when attempting to explain an

occurrence, investigators would either settle on a natural explanation, or leave both possibilities open. Very rarely would a ghost hunter group seem to conclude an incident was decisively - or even most likely - of paranormal origin. Often team members would disagree on the matter, and from time to time some would have different opinions whether an incident had been paranormal or not. Nonetheless this was mostly due to ambiguity. For instance when there were one or more potentially natural explanations for the particular incident, or there was only one individual who had witnessed the incident in question. That being said, mysterious incidents were mutually determined as paranormal only if there appeared to be no sufficient natural explanation for what had happened. Or like most ghost hunter would say: the particular incident could not be *debunked*.

### **Attempting to debunk mysterious occurrences**

Debunking was an essential aspect of paranormal investigation. By the means of debunking the practitioners sought to find natural causes for incidents that were potentially paranormal. Any location a group decided to investigate had a history of one or several allegedly paranormal events. Before an investigation was initiated the respective client would normally show the group around the property, and tell about occurrences that had taken place at the different spots. The investigators would later address these claims, and through taking all circumstances into consideration, try and come up with a natural reason for any particular occurrence. For instance at the locker rooms, Charlotte pointed out how the broken windows could potentially cause heavy drafts within the building, and this could explain why some claimed the lockers would open and shut by themselves. On most investigations investigators addressed the claims directly. They would invest some effort into figuring out for instance, whether a door could potentially latch by itself, an electromagnetic field could cause inhabitants to have hallucinations, or animals could be held responsible for making things go bump in the night. To my understanding, it was not rare for a group to arrive at such natural explanations. The respective ghost ghostly claims could simply be debunked by testing how little pressure it would take for that particular door to open, measuring the electromagnetic fields in the house, or checking the attic for rat droppings. If a team was successful in debunking a paranormal claim, the possibility that the particular location was haunted could potentially be ruled out altogether. In many instances however, the groups didn't manage to debunk the client's claims. If so, the investigation - and the potential evidence yielded from it - would shed light on whether the claims were legit or not. Any lack of indications a paranormal entity was present, would simply leave the mystery unresolved. Most interestingly however, were cases in which a team itself witnessed something during an investigation which they were unable to debunk. Under such circumstances there was a great possibility a team would determine the location to be

haunted. To my understanding, this happened in rather rare cases; when none of the investigators could seem to find a natural explanation to what had happened.

This happened only once throughout my entire fieldwork. The incident took place during an investigation conducted by *The Flying Monkeys* at a bar in Old Town Sacramento. Well into the investigation the group of 6-7 investigators had divided up, and I had been teamed with Donald and Chris. The incident occurred some 20 minutes into an EVP session, as my two companions had ceased asking questions for a little while. We were sitting quietly side by side in the dark, Donald having just previously expressed he had ran out of techniques to get the ghosts to interact. All of the sudden a distinct sound broke the silence - similar to the ring of a bell. This which left us baffled for a few seconds curiously looking around trying to acknowledge its origin. It appeared to have had erupted from the corner right in front of where Chris was sitting, and shortly after Donald turned towards him and asked: "Was that you?". Chris, seemingly as surprised as the rest of us, responded with a stunned "no!" Donald then cracked up, probably just realizing how peculiar the incident was, and we all rose up from our chairs to look into it. Our attention was immediately drawn towards a bar stool standing in the corner where the sound had seemingly come from. Donald went to get some flashlights while Chris started rocking the bar-stool back and forth, thumping it against the floor in order to try and replicate the sound. His attempts proved futile, and after a while we began turning our interest to other objects within the bar environment. We interacted with walls and pipes to see if anything could produce a sound similar to that of a bell. Meanwhile Donald and Chris discussed what it had sounded like, and how Chris likely could not have caused it, as Donald had initially thought. After a few minutes of investigating and with no success Donald finally suggested: "Let's sit back down and see if *you* can do it again" - thereby addressing the entity that would have caused the sound to occur. We had no luck this time. The EVP session was later discontinued as the rest of the team returned from another part of the locale. Soon the entire group engaged in trying to explain and to hopefully recreate the distinguished sound - which was played over repeatedly on the tape recorder. Quite a while into investigating, and with no successful attempts of getting to the bottom of it, Donald expressed his enthusiasm: "That's good! That's one thing we can talk about [to the client]. We cant explain it."

In this rare case the team could not arrive at any natural explanation for the occurrence. The hours' worth of trying to recreate the sound of a bell - and to figure out its origin - proved unsuccessful. It could simply not be debunked. On one hand, there seemed to be no natural reason why it had occurred in the first place. Unlike in most cases - as with most incidents during the sugar mill investigation - no

natural explanation could here be thought up. It could not be subjected to external elements like sounds of animals in the distant environment. What distinguished Roses coughing incident, for instance, with the bell incident, was that no rational explanation could be found for the latter. Whereas Rose had at least one possible natural explanation for her experience, *The Flying Monkeys* were left with only paranormal explanations. On the other hand, there was nothing that could seem to produce the sound of a bell. There were several people who heard the sound and who could agree on what it sounded like, as well as where it had erupted from. This ruled out the potential element of sensory deception - not least granted the sound had also been recorded on tape.

By debunking there was the incentive to be fully objective, and allow “nature to speak for itself”, rather than letting the “subject speak for it”. Or more precisely allow the haunted locations (and the assumed ghosts within them) to speak for themselves, rather than having the ghost hunters or clients speak for them. It was all about being objective. What were mostly subject to debunking were the ghostly claims presented by the clients who had called in a ghost hunter group believing their property was haunted. The team would always take the claims with a pinch of salt, well knowing the respective incidents could have been imagined, misunderstood, and/or exaggerated. Ghost hunters would whilst debunking dwell with the (sometimes terrified) homeowner’s mysterious experiences, implicitly purporting to demystify them. Like for instance when a group would conclude a door would swing open by the slightest draft - regardless of any ghostly intervention. Or the mysterious “footsteps” from upstairs could be discarded once traces of rats were discovered in the attic. Also, when Charlotte proposed the lockers in the locker rooms could likely slam due to the wind, she implicitly discredited the judgment of those who had asserted the incidents were orchestrated by some supernatural force. Likewise when the team concluded with the cat-explanation, they implicitly disregarded Roses initial perception that there had been heard some whisper in the dark. Objectivity was always on the pedestal, and subjective perceptions seemed to be an essential obstacle in the ghost hunters’ search of truth.

Daston and Galison assert: “Objectivity is the suppression of some aspect of the self, the countering of subjectivity” (2007:36). Through the means of debunking, and investigation in general, the ghost hunters sought to separate the subjective and objective sphere. They sought to separate what “was real” from the imaginary - what the “mind wants to be real”. This seems to build on Francis Bacon’s contribution to the scientific world view; how he compared “human understanding” with a “labyrinth” (Zagorin 2001). The ghost hunters seemed to be perfectly aware of how subjective perceptions could be obstacles on their path to truth, and they would very carefully navigate through the “labyrinth” to avoid

falling pray for deceptions. In order to avoid just that, they would constantly have to be as objective as possible. Moreover, ghost hunters and ghost hunting carried with them Descartes Philosophical legacy, based in the fact that it was purported to reach the truth about ghosts with help of rational powers. Imagination played a minor part in this search of truth. During investigations careful examination, use of reliable equipment, and emphasis on debunking, would take presidency over subjectivity, thus leave the ghost hunters with merely objective results. When it came to finding explanation for what happened throughout the night, imagination and sensory experience were in a way restricted in favor of careful examination and thorough rationalization.

This seems to stand in stark contrast to the ghost hunters collective experience of a ghostly presence - as discussed previously - whereby the ghost hunters imagination played a rather significant role. Via the structures of enchantment the ghost hunters animated a ghostly presence into the psychical space. The ghosts were experienced, by the ghost hunters, as lurking about in the sugar mill - just out of the ghost hunters empirical reach. However, any supposed ghostly activity was considered imaginary insofar there was no proof supporting that the respective occurrences were caused by an actual ghost. During investigations the “real” ghosts could only be uncovered through employing rational judgment. Only on behalf of thorough rationalization and debunking attempts could the actual ghosts reveal themselves. The ghosts that could not be verified by use of rational thought – i.e. the ghost that choked Rose, or made the spirit box come up with a set of seemingly random words – were ignored as possibly imaginary. The ghost that caused the bell sound at *The Flying Monkeys* investigation, on the other hand, could be verified on the basis of rational inquiry.

On one hand, the ghost hunters animated supernatural life into the haunted location, yet on the other hand, they sought to rid the location of its supernatural qualities. Whereas the ghost hunters spoke out to the ghosts, played around with the spectral possibilities, and shared their mysterious sensations; they served to enchantment the physical environments. However, whereas they attempted to debunk any incidence that occurred around them, they served to disenchant the physical environment. In the very moment the incident happened it was perceived with wonder, and the ghost hunter immediately recognized its supernatural potential: “what was that? Did you hear that?” The occurrence became in sense *enchanted*. However, when a natural explanation was later found for the occurrence, the occurrence completely lost its supernatural potential. The occurrence became in a sense *disenchanted*.

There is an interesting aspect about the transformation from enchantment to disenchantment. The ghost

hunter would seem to abruptly shift from interpreting the environment through imagination to addressing it via rational thought. At first the incident occurred. Its supernatural potential was immediately recognized - "what was that?" The incident's ambiguity made it subject to enchantment. Then the incident was soon disambiguated - "was that a cat?" All that the incident was imagined to be suddenly became irrelevant. Rational thought took presidency over imagination, and the incident became disenchanting. However, if the incident could not be debunked, then its enchantment was maintained. The bell sound at the bar in Old Sacramento maintained its enchanted qualities. What had caused the bell sound to occur could only be accessed via use of the imagination.

### **Concluding remarks**

Throughout this chapter I have introduced the reader to the act of ghost hunting. Whilst telling the tale of the investigation at the old abandoned sugar mill, I have shed light onto the different aspects of the practice. The underlying theme in this chapter has been the epistemology of ghost hunting; the ghost hunters' attempts of distinguishing the real ghosts from the imagined ghosts.

In a sense the ghosts came to life both through the ghost hunters' imagination on one hand, and their attempts to rationalize mysterious occurrences on the other. Investigators would always try to find a reason for a mysterious occurrence - whenever possible - so that the investigators should not confuse the normal with the paranormal, or the objective with the subjective. Although the investigation was an activity by which ghost hunters sought out the ghostly realms by use of scientific gadgets, objectivity and rational thought - subjectivity still played a very significant role. It was through the imagination the ghosts were accessed. To conceive the invisible, ambiguous and obscured realm of ghosts, the imagination was the most valuable tool; as most ghostly activity could never be measured, documented or debunked. During the greatest part of the nights, ghosts could only be accessed through the ghost hunters' imagination.

Around 3 AM at the night of May 6<sup>th</sup> 2011, the investigation at the sugar mill was closing to an end. The last couple of hours had been spent moving about the property and carrying through a number of EVP sessions. The tension became gradually less formal as the investigators became tired and began looking forward to return to their beds. As *California Haunts* decided it was time to finish up, the practitioners gathered at the command center and began rigging down the equipment. The mobile gadgets were put back into the boxes from whence they came, the cables were reeled in, and the stationary cameras were detached and carried back down on the main floor. After half an hour or so of boxing up the equipment,

piece by piece the ghost hunter gadgets were put into the back of Roses car. The team members said their farewells at the parking lot and eventually returned to their homes. Rose, Charlotte and I set off back to Sacramento, while the ghosts were left behind at the old abandoned sugar mill.

Although the ghosts had been left behind, they were not necessarily forgotten. The ghost hunters who had had mysterious experiences that night would look back at them with fascination - and perhaps doubt. Moreover, those who had recorded audio or taken photographs in the sugar mill would spend the coming days analyzing them to see if they had obtained any evidence of ghostly activity. These are the two aspects of ghost hunting that we will focus on in the two preceding chapters; namely personal experiences and media evidence.

## Chapter 6: “Personal experiences”

### Introduction

“If I am having a situation where I have evidence or a paranormal experience, whatever. I wanna know the truth. I don’t want my truth. I don’t want an illusion of truth. I want the real truth. As close as I can get to it anyway. For me that means, if I have a paranormal experience, before I can personally go: “aha! That’s paranormal”, before I can assign my name to that statement; I really need to make sure there is no other logical explanation - rational explanation - out there, that could possibly be [the reason] why. To the best of my ability, I mean; cause I will never really know. [...] I think you’d be really surprised if I ever really uttered literally: “this is paranormal!” That’s such a big statement. \*laughs\*

One of the greatest issues associated with ghost hunting was distinguishing authentic paranormal experiences from experiences happening through natural circumstances. Or more precisely: distinguishing the *real* perceptions of actual ghosts from the *imaginary* perceptions, produced out of misperceptions, sensory illusions and wishful thinking. Alyssa’s account above make them clear, the epistemic struggles a ghost hunter had to navigate through in his or her pursuit of truth. That is to say, the ambivalent path between rationalizing and categorizing personal experiences; and the imminent threat of being deceived into accepting some *personal* truth, or *illusion* of truth, as the *real* truth. In this chapter we will focus on the ghost hunters’ conceptions of “personal experience”, its epistemic merits and demerits, and what varieties of personal experiences were considered authentic paranormal experiences.

I will initiate the chapter by elaborating on how ghost hunters related to their personal judgment and organs of sense; followed up by how personal experiences were rationalized and thereafter categorized as deceptive, genuine or unexplained. Finally we will see how my informants related to other peoples personal experiences, and epistemic orientations and paranormal claims. Before we get started, I’ll take a moment to elaborate on the concept of the “personal experience”.

### Defining “personal experience”

Throughout their carriers as ghost hunters my informants had had different experiences they believed to have been of paranormal character. Some claimed they had had their hair pulled, or been touched or pushed by an invisible force. Some claimed they had heard voices from beyond, or mysterious noises in the dark of night. Some claimed they had seen a ghost with their own eyes, and some even claimed



they had been physically assaulted by a paranormal entity. When it came to mysterious experiences like these my informants almost exclusively used the term “personal experience”. Having a “personal experience” was however not necessarily synonymous with experiencing a ghost. The term “personal experience” did, as opposed to other terms used, like “ghostly experience” or “paranormal experience”, implicitly disregard any question of authenticity. Whereas a “ghostly experience” entailed an encounter with a genuine ghost, and a “paranormal experience” entailed an experience of paranormal nature, the term “personal experience” stood to represent a basis of neutrality and indecisiveness. The experience was not necessarily “ghostly” or “paranormal”. Generally, the personal experience was an unexplained experience – occurring on an investigation or within another context – that could potentially have been associated with paranormal activity. There were circumstances with the particular experience that could point to some form of paranormal intervention.

Like we saw with Alyssa’s initial quote, there was in the ghost hunter community some hesitance accepting any personal experience as paranormal. This hesitance seemed grounded in the idea that “the mind can play tricks on you”, thereof giving a false impression that something paranormal has occurred. This common attitude was made clear from time to time, through expressions like: “a personal experience is just that” or “feelings don’t count in court. Feelings don’t count in science”. These expressions underlined that personal experience had little value in terms of paranormal research. Personal experiences were primarily not to be presented to clients, put on the Internet or presented on paranormal conferences, as proof of ghosts and hauntings. They became more secondary as they were epistemologically inferior to tangible evidence, such as video footage, ghostly photographs and EVPs.

The two terms – experience and evidence - by definition does not mutually exclude each other. In fact, the term “evidence” derives from Latin word “videre”; which simply means: “to see”. This may be traced far back into European philosophical tradition, whereof major thinkers have linked belief with sight. This has also inspired famous sayings like “I have to see it to believe it” and “seeing is believing” (Bloch 2009), which directly connects evidence with experience. However, an experience-evidence dichotomy became evident in my informant categorizations of - and often contrasting of - experience and evidence. To a ghost hunter, seeing a ghost pass by did not qualify as evidence, but was distinctively referred to as a “personal experience”. My informants’ notion of “evidence” did not entail manifestation of ghosts as experienced through the medium of the human body; but in its place, ghosts documented by photographic, video-graphic and recording devices. Their primary use of the term excluded “personal experience” altogether. In that respect, personal experiences did not fit into the

evidence category, but in the field it was viewed rather as complementary to evidence. Whereas evidence was considered objective - conceivably object to mutual examination and discussion - the personal experience was considered highly subjective and speculative. It was reduced to the subjective sphere. In fact it seemed personal experiences had often to be backed up with evidence to support it ever occurring in the first place. Like an informant once said: "I believe I've had two paranormal experiences, but there is no evidence to prove that they've actually happened". The personal experiences simply weren't evident (or objective) enough to be categorized as evidence.

As previously seen, continuous efforts were made throughout investigations to keep as separate authentic ghostly activity from what was considered natural occurrences. Like for instance in the sugar mill locker rooms, the investigators were constantly trying to decide if an occurrence had its origin in ghostly activity, or if it could be a natural explanation like animal noises, wind or dust. However, unlike the cat/whisper heard in the sugar mill or the bell incident at the bar in Old Sacramento, a great deal of personal experiences was experienced only by one particular ghost hunter. Roses choking incident for instance was something only she had felt, which had furthermore left her nearly alone trying to sort it out. Was it a ghost or was it just the dust? Here companions simply did not have a say on the subject matter, as the experience was not accessible to them. Personal experiences were after all "personal"; and the person who had had the experience was mostly alone in making sense of it.

The link between "experiencing" and "believing" was not necessarily that obvious. As we shall now see, it was not always easy for the ghost hunter to connect the dots; to make sense of the personal experience. In the end it all came down to one question: to what degree were ghost hunters willing to believe what their senses told them? Or to put in a different way: Could they trust their own body as a medium when interacting with the paranormal world? In the next section we will study my informants' general attitudes towards personal experiences; or more precisely, how they related to their own personal judgment and sensory organs.

### **Epistemic demerits of personal experiences**

My informants generally carried dubious attitudes towards their organs of sense, as well as personal intuition and judgment. It was clear how most ghost hunters conceived subjectivity as misleading when it came to rationalizing personal experiences; and how this caused serious challenge when the experiences were to be categorized. One of the potential threats posed on the ghost hunter in his or her pursuit of truth was the deceptive force of wishful thinking. In her account below Fairen elaborated on

the shortcomings of being able to trust the body as a medium, in the aftermath of having had a personal experience. Her biggest concerns seemed to be separating reality from imagination.

“A lot goes through my head, because you so badly want to justify the hours of work that you put into [the practice]. So you start to think okay, is it your mind? Cause you can trick your mind into thinking: “Oh, I just got touched.” But the fact that you actually really got touched, or do you just really want to be touched, or hear a noise or... and you go back to “wait, maybe I *did* get touched or hear a noise?” You know, you just go back and forth a hundred times. “Am I crazy? Is this real?” That’s what goes through my head like, a doubt. “Is it real? Is it not real?” So you try to justify, well there is nothing around that would make that noise. For me, I’m really unsure, if I really wanted to be touched, or I actually really got touched. It’s hard for me to say: “I just wanted it, so it didn’t really happen”. Because you can trick yourself into believing what is not true. Am I doing that? Or am I really feeling what I am feeling?”

Fairen clearly expressed the internal struggles arising in the aftermath of a personal experience. The main issue seemed to regard the categorizations of the event as either paranormal or imaginary; as she stated: “Is it real? Is it not real?” It is evident that the possibility of there being alternate “natural” explanations – “[something] around that would make that noise” – was not the only factor that would keep her from labeling an experience paranormal. She also insinuated that her mental state during the ghost hunt could potentially lead her astray. Her challenges in determining to which category the particular event belongs stems from her conception of the mind; the fact that “you can trick your mind into believing”. So the path to accepting an experience as paranormal lead through both subjective (mind) and objective (material) obstacles. Whether the specific noise could have come from a natural source may be debunked by the ghost hunter, but what is related to mind power – “tricking yourself into believing what is not true” – seemed to prove more challenging to many of my informants.

A similar rationale I found with Tracy. She shared Fariens impressions that sensual perception may lead one astray in the pursuit for truth; but she also realized that her skepticism towards personal experiences as representing reality may actually have kept her from reaching it. She was here asked whether she ever doubted her personal experiences:

“Every time! Every time. You have the experience and then you doubt it. You know, did I really see that? Did I really hear that? Did I really *experience* that? And even more so now. When I was younger I doubted what it was; I didn’t doubt that I had the experience, I just kinda doubted: “What was that?” You know, was it my imagination? Was it a ghost? Was it an angel? I doubted it. Now it is more so. Did I really just feel that? Did somebody just really tug on my cargo pants? Hm... you know. Still to this day I doubt everything that I

experience. But sometimes you just have to let go of that doubt and go “okay, I can’t say this is what it is, I can’t prove this is what it is” [...] So yeah, I doubt every experience that I have; only because I am so skeptical. But maybe I should just embrace it. I don’t know.”

Tracy clearly established the ambiguity of having personal experiences. She stated that she doubted all of her personal experiences, but also that her epistemological position has changed throughout her life. As she said: “When I was younger I doubted what it was” – stating that before she was not so concerned with the authenticity of the experience, as much as with the ontology: “Was it my imagination? Was it a ghost? Was it an angel?” As of “today” her concerns were more pointed towards the circumstances associated with the specific personal experience: “Did I really just feel that?” As I got to know Tracy, she made me aware of her skeptical approach to paranormal claims and experiences, what her above statement also shows us. However, here she also reflected on her epistemological position, by asking herself “maybe I should just embrace it”. This little remark implies that is aware that her skepticism may be holding her back, and itself be an obstacle in her pursuit of truth. She went on with saying that she sometimes have to let go of getting to the bottom of it, leaving the experience in the category of unexplained rather than natural or paranormal: “okay, I can’t say this is what it is, I can’t prove this is what it is”. Alike Fairens account, she was often left with just the mystery. The experiences were not convincing enough for them to ascertain them as actual paranormal experiences.

Fairen and Tracy elaborated on the ambiguity and shortcomings regarding having personal experiences. They both put a lot of doubt into experiences they’ve had in the past, and were cautious about labeling any experience paranormal. This seemed to be a common trend among the ghost hunters that I met. It should be noted, however, that not everyone instinctively doubted their experiences. Although they were in the minority, some actually felt confident that what they experienced was indeed representative of reality. To These ghost hunters there was more or less an overlap between subjective experience and objective reality. To the majority of ghost hunters however, this overlap was far from absolute. Fairen for instance, conceived her experiences not necessarily to be on par with what had actually happened. This meant, generally the role of the subject was problematic. Nevertheless, most ghost hunters – even those who did rarely doubt their experiences -would instinctively try to debunk their experiences, and question their sensory experience and perception, until the point they would find – or fail to find – a natural explanation for the particular experience.

## **Categorizing personal experiences**

We will in this section elaborate on how my informants sought to “find meaning in”, or more precisely, categorize their personal experiences. We will submerge ourselves in my informants individual rationales, hence see how these are shaped by common ideas of subjectivity, objectivity and authenticity.

Personal experiences were something the ghost hunters would look back at, try to make sense of, and talk of for perhaps years to come. Inarguably such an experience could have great meaning to the respective ghost hunter. Schutz argues “lived experiences first becomes meaningful (...) when they are explicated post-hoc and become comprehensible to me as well-circumscribed experiences” (Schutz and Luckmann 1973:16). The very moment an individual categorizes an experience is a crucial one; as Victor Turner puts it: “What happens next is an anxious need to find meaning in what has disconcerted us, whether by pain or pleasure, and converted mere experience into *an* experience. All this when we try to put past and present together” (1986:36). Turner distinguished between two concepts of experience; namely “mere experience” and “an experience”. The former, mere experience, he referred to as “the passive endurance and acceptance of events”. It entails a pre-reflective continuum of experience, which has yet to be given a recognizable form. We could say it is our time passing by, without us giving any reference to it. The significant “moments” of our lives has yet to stand out of the continuum. The latter concept - “an experience” - constitutes the specific experiences; like for instance a “ghost hunt” – that happens to be extracted from this continuum; and appears as isolated and rooted in time and space. Contrary to mere experience which is “passively endured and accepted”, “an experience” is actively referred to and categorized as “one”. As to illustrate: A ghost hunter could say: the “investigation” took place in this residence, lasted from 8 pm to 3 am and this and this happened; or I had this peculiar sensation in the back of this room at 1 am and this is how it felt like. Thus intervened, the “ghost hunt” and the “personal experience” are conceptualized as two distinctive entities, taken out of the continuum of mere experience. Kapferer (1986) argues, when making sense of an experience, we draw from sets of “culturally constituted constructs, concepts and typifications”; which are shared within the community and enables us to look back at our experience from an “objective” point of view, and label it thereafter. As illustrated by Abrahams (1986:61), we use a multitude of different terms to distinguish different type of experience, like for instance “the American experience”, “the sixties experience”, “the growing-up experience” and so on. These consists a set of understandings of experience which allows us to associate our experience with its culturally shared meaning. In our case we have categories like personal experiences, paranormal (authentic) experiences, and “unknown”

(undecided) experiences. As we shall see, the ghost hunters' ways of conceptualizing personal experience was clearly founded in a concept of authenticity; and typifications were based upon whether a personal experience was genuinely paranormal or a product of imagination, misperception or wishful thinking. Was it real? Was it not real? Could there be a natural explanation? Could the experience be debunked?

### **The “unknown” experience**

The process of categorizing a personal experience was not always easy to the ghost hunter. This was evident as so many were hesitant to label an experience paranormal. I believe this was why many of them would distinguish not only between *real* paranormal experiences and *unreal* paranormal experiences, but also operated with the category of “unknown” (or “unexplained”) experiences. There were some variants of personal experiences that would almost exclusively be subject to distrust. These were mainly childhood experiences, experiences that had taken place when the individual was potentially asleep, and things seen in the dark, or in peripheral view. These kinds of experiences seemed rather common, given that most of my interviewees brought up one or two such incidents. These were almost exclusively categorized as “unknown” experiences. The “unknown” experiences had to the individual proved impossible to be rendered neither “real” nor “not real”, paranormal nor natural. It was simply impossible to decide between the two.

An “unknown” experience was not necessarily paranormal but had the potential to be; as John put it, they were: “[personal experiences] that I would [not] say is definitely paranormal, but they are things I have not been able to find an explanation for; so I keep it open to the possibility of that being a paranormal experience”. Overall my informants were cautious about labeling a personal experience paranormal, although many of the experiences associated with the unknown-category had some mysterious quality to them. To illustrate, John brought up an example of a personal experience he had had when he was younger. One night when he was lying in bed, he had been awaked by the feeling that someone was pulling his leg. When he looked up however, no one was there. Puzzled by the unusual experience he had grabbed a pen and paper and written down the exact time of when it had occurred; later to find out it had happened around the time his grandmother had passed away. Regardless of the highly mysterious circumstances, John remained open to possibility of the incident having been a coincidence. It remained unknown whether the experience was coincidental or if there was any collaboration between his experience and his grandmother's death. So he indecisively categorized the

experience as an unknown experience.

A personal experience could be mysterious and “impactful” in itself, yet not necessarily significant, as it was potentially «not real». It would rarely be categorized on the basis on the empirical experience itself, but on the circumstances. That was seemingly why childhood experiences and experiences taking place when one was in bed at night, were often put in the “unreal” or “unknown” category. Tracy did for instance tell me about how she as a child would play with her neighbor, only later to find out that he had been dead for weeks. Moreover, Wanda told me how she one night had been woken up by the distinct voice of her deceased husband. These were significant and “impactful” experiences. However, both were reluctant to categorize their experiences as authentic paranormal experiences, based on the circumstances; that potentially the experiences could be either “made up”, “wished up” or “dreamt up”. Ideally a personal experience had to be rationalized, and its authenticity could be supported only if there was slim to none possibility of a natural explanation. Rose, for instance, stated it had to be “truth without a doubt” to her; and normally she, as most other in the field, would believe an experience was authentic only if there appeared to be no logical explanation why an incident had occurred. This seemed to be the norm for how ghost hunters categorized their personal experiences. However, the intensity and uniqueness of an experience was to many of them of great significance. Below Fairen compares two personal experiences she had had in the field. Although she held doubts in both of them (categorizing them as “unknown”), one of them she seemed to have epistemic status over the other:

“One time we were on “the Hornet”<sup>5</sup>. We were sitting in the sickbay. And I felt like omeone touched me - like grabbed my arm. And then we were at the apartments at Carmichael, and me and Chris were sitting there [...] And I felt like something was holding me down. And it was for quite a while, for five or ten minutes. It wasn’t squeezing my arm very hard, it just felt like they were just tugging and didn’t want me to get up.”

Upon being asked how she later had come to conceive the two experiences she responded the following: “In the sickbay I believe that was my mind that wanted something to happen. In the apartment [in Carmichael] I believe that something was holding me down, that it was some kind of spirit or entity holding me, want me to stay or, I don’t know”. Fairen classified the two experiences in the field in terms of authenticity; one as a product of her mind, yet the other she *believed* was objectively real (although with some hesitation). There were no proof to back up either of them; something she later

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<sup>5</sup>) The Hornet is a US navy air carrier based in Oakland. Today it serves as a museum.

pointed out. However, her experience at the apartments in Carmichael she seemed to regard as more believable than the other, due to it being more long-lasting and intense. It was more likely to be real than the other one, as it was less likely to have been imagined.

### **The paranormal experience**

What would it take for a ghost hunter to categorize an experience as paranormal? As opposed to those experiences rendered “unknown”; what features would an experience have to be impervious to doubt? Naturally the answers to these questions would depend on the ghost hunter having the experience, and his or her way of rationalizing it. But in spite of individual epistemologies, the typical “paranormal experience” seemed to have some common features.

When asked the hypothetical question: “what would ultimate personal experience be to you?”, my interviewees came up with rather similar answers. Many gave that they would like to have a “meaningful conversation” with the ghost; as Tracy put it: “You know, to actually have one standing in front of me, me visibly seeing them, and them talking to me, and responding to my questions”. Most of them expressed they wanted to see a ghost appear in front of them, and remain visible to them for some period of time. Like fairen put it: “Just to see one standing right in front of me, and to know, that there’s no one around, nothing else that could make that person stand there”. Seeing a “full body apparition” (a ghost in a lucid, human form) was considered the Holy Grail of personal experiences. These were however rare occurrences, and even the actors who had been hunting ghosts for the longest, had only a minimum of such experiences to refer to. Having a full body apparition appear in front of someone for a longer period of time would to some degree rule out the possibilities of misperception; as made implicit in Fairens statement, there could be “nothing else that could make that person stand there”. My impression was that those who had seen a full body apparition frequently believed in what they had seen. They were categorized as “real” or “authentic” paranormal experiences. They were mostly impervious to doubt as they could not readily be explained away. Unlike the sensations of being tugged in a piece of clothing, feeling a cold draft or being awoken by something at night, seeing an apparition would have to constitute quite a complex deception. Still some non-visual experiences did occasionally pass the test as paranormal experiences. Some common characteristics seemed to be that they felt unique, occurred spontaneously and within an adequate context, as well as was explainable within the paranormal scheme. This will be illustrated by two examples below.

In the following account Rose elaborates on an experience she had while investigating the abandoned



sugar mill. As our team had finished off an EVP session, we regrouped and were ready to move over to another part of the locale. Rose was first out to enter the room next door, and just as she was crossing the threshold she was surprised to experience – as she perceived it - an “energy go through her”. A few weeks later, during my interview with her, I asked about this experience. She explained it like this:

“Oh my god, that was another wow experience. Because I felt like there was something back at that room, and so I got up and I walked over that way. And all of the sudden I felt like somebody just went “pfff!”, and my stomach just ... hit my stomach and my stomach went up and flipped over. That’s what it felt like. Big time flip! It was almost like... the combination of being punched in the stomach, and losing your wind kind of thing; and going down like, falling of a building. I mean that how it felt. And I’ve never felt that before. That was the creepiest feeling. And then I heard shuffling footsteps after that.”

Chris also told me about one of his more convincing personal experiences. He went with *The Flying Monkeys* to the Fair Oak cemetery when he had what he referred to as his “biggest experience” in the field. As the cemetery was closed at night, the team had to stay outside on the road separating its two parts. During an EVP-session Chris experienced something he had never experienced before. He explained it like this:

“We were just walking down the road you know, and... I was walking along the fence like real slow, and I was sticking my hand inside the fence with the K2 meter, to see if I could get anything. I don’t know why, but I decided I wanted to look over the top of the fence. There is no reason why I should be out to look over the fence. I mean, the fence, you can see right through it. But as soon as I lifted my head over the top of the fence, there is like, the whole front of my head, down to the top of my lips. I had this weird sinking feeling, I felt like the energy got into my forehead. And it kind of pushed me back. And I felt sick to my stomach and lightheaded and... as soon as it happened it went away.”

These two personal experiences share several characteristics. For one, both Rose and Chris immediately considered their respective experience as paranormal, without much further demand of validation. Their experiences seemed to be convincing in their own rights. Unlike the cat/whisper and dust/choking incidents in the sugar mill, these experiences seemed to cling to their mysterious quality. They hadn’t been debunked or attributed to a possibly natural explanation, like cats or dust. They were neither in the category of natural experiences (deceptive, imaginary etc.) nor unknown experiences. They had never been subject to doubt, as was for instance Fairens or John’s experiences mentioned previously. Rose’s and Chris’s experiences were presented as unique and rare instances, labeled by

Rose as a “wow experience” and by Chris as his “biggest experience in the field”. Both experiences came across as spontaneous and unpredictable; they had a shock value to them. Their accounts were enthusiastic and thorough - despite the incidents happening a while back. That indicates they must have made a great impression. So it may be of great interest to discuss what aspects of these experiences made them pass the criteria for genuine paranormal experiences. We might ask ourselves the following question: what aspects of these experiences that made them so convincing?

One of the most distinguished features with the personal experiences, that seemingly made them fit into the paranormal category, was the uniqueness of the experiences. Both experiences entailed a unique sensation; different Rose and Chris claimed, than anything they had ever felt before. And that alone seemed to give the experience credibility. However, this feature seemed also to provide some challenges. The uniqueness of the sensations Rose and Chris had felt, made it somewhat difficult for them to conceptualize exactly what they had experienced. Therefore, Rose and Chris put much effort into explaining their respective sensations, yet by having to refer to some similar sensations that they (and we) were familiar with. Kapferer (1986) argues that upon categorizing personal experiences its particularity is somewhat lost in translation; that it is emptied of its uniqueness. It will have to be categorized in terms of what one is already familiar with. And so the “groundbreaking” or unique experience will be given a familiar and universal form, based in the social categories one has learned to think by. This was evident as my informants tried to put their unique experiences into words. Rose described her sensation as “the creepiest feeling”: “the combination of being punched in the stomach, and losing your wind kind of thing; and going down like, falling of a building”. She had no specific term for such a unique experience, and it took some elaboration to explain it. Chris met the same challenges: “I had this weird sinking feeling, I felt like the energy got into my forehead. And it kind of pushed me back. And I felt sick to my stomach and lightheaded and... as soon as it happened it went away.” The sensations they described were mostly everyday feelings, which they and I as the interviewer could relate to.

Despite of the ambiguity of the experiences, there seemed to be a need to find meaning in them. As Geertz put it: “the odd, strange and uncanny simply must be accounted for“ (1966:16). However, because all natural explanations (external factors, misperception, imagination etc.) were evidently ruled out, Rose and Chris had to turn to paranormal explanations. Geertz argues people will instantly try and render phenomena explainable within their “accepted scheme of things”. In this case the experiences would have to be interpreted in light of the metaphysics of ghosts; That is to say, the respective nature

by which a ghost would be expected to act. In this respect, their experiences coincide with the conceptions ghost hunters held about ghostly phenomena. And so the respective paranormal experiences were explained on the basis of the ghost hunters shared ideas of ghosts; or as Kapferer (1986) put it, their “culturally constituted constructs, concepts and typifications”. Both experiences were clearly perceived within an understanding that “ghostly entities” manipulate energy to interact with the physical world. Rose explained her experience as “an energy going through her” whereas Chris expressed “[it] felt like the energy got into [his] forehead”, pushing him back. The particular “ghostly entities” are also understood as mobilizing – moving “through” and “into” the body - further pointing to the presumed entities having a spatial dimension to them. Rose, Chris and any ghost hunter who would have personal experiences knew how to explain them in regards of energy manipulation. They simply rationalized how the ghost had managed to manifest it by consuming energy in the room, and then used this energy to interact in the way it did. After discussing her sensation with her team member Charlotte, Rose was informed that what she had felt might have fallen into the category of what was referred to as a “psychic hit”. Having knowledge of this already established phenomena helped Rose come to terms with what she had felt. Moreover it seemed in a way to have “objectified” her subjective experience. It became a “thing of this world”, and not just some unspecified feeling.

The experiences seemed to have been explained within the “accepted scheme of things”, as Geertz put it. Still some major questions remained. These were not questions that did not direct to “how”, but rather with “why” and “who”. Why did the ghost act in such a manner? Why did it happen to interact with respectively Rose and Chris, and not anyone else at the respective investigations? And perhaps most interestingly, who was it that had manifested itself through the experience? These questions were mostly up to the individual ghost hunter to try to explain. However, as opposed to the experience itself, the “reason” for it taking place, had not been felt on the body. Neither Rose nor Chris could know “why” simply by having the experience. In that respect the only thing they knew was that the respective experience had taken place, and how it had felt like. To find out the rest they would have to piece it together with help of the stories of myths associated with the place. Both would try to understand the occurrences from the ghost’s perspective. They would speculate why the ghost had acted in the way it did. As for Rose, she interpreted her experience to be the outcome of some curious spirit who “went through her” in order to “explore” her energies. Chris would later believe his experience to be caused by a “grumpy old man” who was rumored to haunt the cemetery. Allegedly this ghostly entity were known to be protective of his territory; and the physical assault Chris felt he had become a victim of, could potentially be associated with the rough behavior of this “grumpy old man”.

Bottom line, Rose and Chris's experiences fell into the category of paranormal experiences. That is, they were of such extraordinary character that they could not be rendered natural experiences; nor were they so ambiguous they were categorized "unknown experiences". Overall, paranormal experiences were unique, unexpected and the individual ghost hunter could not find any natural explanation for its occurrence.

### **Relating to others experiences and epistemological orientations**

We have seen how ghost hunters were often hesitant to acknowledge their personal experiences as genuinely paranormal; this based on an understanding that their senses and minds could potentially lead them astray. They seemed aware that what they experienced was not necessarily representative for what had actually happened; hence they sought constantly to distinguish the objective truth from their subjective perception of it. We will now move on from seeing how ghost hunters conceived their own personal perceptions, to how they conceived others personal perceptions. The questions we will be touching upon here are: How did my informants relate to the epistemological biases of fellow ghost hunters in the field? And how did they relate to the paranormal claims of their clients?

### **Conceiving fellow ghost hunter's epistemological orientations**

Although individual epistemologies were of great importance in the field - and anyone was entitled to their own perspectives – there persisted some common ideas on how a ghost hunter should appropriately rationalize personal experiences. It is true that most ghost hunters I came in contact with were rather relativistic, and a very few claimed to "know" all the answers about ghosts and the afterlife. And so it would not really matter whether some fellow ghost hunter had a different perspective on such subjects, as essentially neither one knew the ultimate truth; and the assumptions of both parts could in theory turn out to be the "correct" one. Still, when team members, ghost hunter groups, or the ghost hunter community in general, worked together towards a common goal – researching ghostly phenomena and/or validating or debunking particular "hauntings" – they were dependent on being somewhat in agreement with each other. In this respect it was expected that a skilled ghost hunter should not be led astray by his or her sensual impressions, and rather be aware of the possible deceptions of personal experiences (as discussed earlier). It seemed that most of my informants held the view that their common researchers were more capable of dealing with personal experiences; as they shared the same ambitions of providing proof of paranormal phenomena (in contrast to the average American). Like Rose asserted: "I tend to believe them more because they're in the same

position I am. They're there to gather evidence. [...]. Because they are trying to further the advancement of the scientific end of it; To prove that there are spirits out there." According to Rose - and I believe ghost hunters in general - ghost hunters were more experienced and possessed trained judgment. Also more stock could be put into fellow ghost hunter's rationale because they came across as more experienced in interpreting personal experiences, than the average population. Still there were some exceptions to the norm. Since ghost hunters were often so aware of their own epistemological principles, they would often seem to contrast themselves with others who thought differently than them. Out of this derived some categories of "the negative other"; more precisely, the types of ghost hunters (or paranormal investigators in general) who lacked of good judgment, and whose subjective minds restricted them in arriving at the objective truth. John here shares his interpretation of the subject matter:

"There's the true believers and the debunkers. And that's like the two extreme ends of the paranormal spectrum. The true believers: they are the ones who believe - because of whatever lore, something they've read on the Internet, or whatever - a place is haunted; so therefore, whatever evidence or experience that they have, whether it is genuinely paranormal or just [the fact that] you're in an old building - their imagination is getting carried away on that. They make that fit into whatever story they read, or whatever they worked out in their mind about what is going on. That's not a good investigator. Then you have the other end of the spectrum which is debunkers; Which, It doesn't matter what you present *to* them. They're gonna [react to evidence] like: "oh its lense-flair, its somebody in the other room." I mean, you could catch a full body apparition, and they're like: "oh, it's just somebody you didn't know was walking through there". It doesn't matter to *them*. There is no evidence that *can* validate a haunting. Where you get the one where nothing would validate it, and you get the other in the spectrum where anything and everything [is paranormal]. What people need is a good middle ground between the two, where you have the skepticism about it, which is still open-minded to the possibility of it."

John here elaborated on the spectrum of epistemological biases that could be found within the ghost hunter communities (as well as in the paranormal community at large). The gullible "true believers" who were so "carried away" that they believe any unexplained event to be caused by ghostly beings. And then the "the debunkers" who turned a blind eye towards any paranormal claim or experience, naively insisting on natural explanations. Both categories, believers and debunkers, he insinuated to as "negative others", whose mindsets were not apt for paranormal research, as their respective preconceptions will manipulate the outcome. The "haunted house" would be either sprawling with ghosts or completely lacking them, depending on the specific ghost hunter rationale. In both cases there would most likely not be any overlap between objective reality and the subjective perceptions of it. John established that there should be a "middle ground" between the two approaches to ghost hunting, thereby carrying a reasonable amount of skepticism and open-mindedness. He placed himself

somewhere in the middle of the scale, and so would most people in the field. I believe that none of my informants would insist on belonging to one of the two extremes, thus the majority would probably point out that they leaned more towards the debunker than the believer side of the scale. That being said, categorization as well as positioning was likely to be perceived differently by different ghost hunters. John did not approve of being called a debunker, as that to him meant he was prone to debunk “everything presented to him”. Others again would associate themselves with being debunkers. Alyssa, for instance, defined herself a debunker and stated she was one of the most skeptical in her group when it came to paranormal claims. Alike John she asserted that some – who John would refer to as “believers” – were so caught up with wanting a paranormal experience that they would find an experience “everywhere they go”. She referred to this as “ghost hysteria” and stated the following:

I think a lot of people really, really are seeking a spiritual experience. And, you know when you [have] people that really, really want something, they will manifest it a lot of times; And [find] some way to justify, to rationalize, to be whatever it is they are trying to be, or whatever they think it is going to do for them. And the majority of people are not going to be self-aware enough to realize what they are doing. I think it takes a certain level of being self-aware and self-questioning [...] The people that I have ran across in my life, they don't seem to really question themselves or their perceptions very much. What they say, that is what it is! What they are seeing, that's what it is! It cannot be wrong, they cannot be mistaken. “This is it!” And they'll just work towards that. I don't ever see a lot of people going: “but am I right”. And I think when you have that kind of perception, where you are like: “this is how I see it. This is what I think it is. That's it! I have nailed it!” You don't question it, there is nothing wrong. And you take that kind of mentality, and you put it into what they are trying to investigate, to see if something is true or not; the more likely there is something that is gonna be questionable or they are gonna tap into it and [say]: “see, this proves that I am right.”

Alyssa's concern was that there were some lack of self-awareness and self-questioning among actors in the field. That many made up their minds without question and were incapable of grasping it from different perspectives. Healthy skepticism was overshadowed by determinism. But perhaps most importantly, she asserted that not only may they misperceive their experiences, they may also subconsciously be manifesting these experiences for themselves. Their urge to experience a real ghost manipulated them into imagining things. This lack of self-awareness mixed with lack of self-questioning – seemed to her a central abstraction to the pursuit of truth; with them being deterrent: “this is how I see it. This is what I think it is. That's it! I have nailed it!” Northcote (2007) argues that within the paranormal scene, ontological orientations not only lead participants to act against “outsiders” regarded as deviant, but also against fellow members who may be seen to stray from the groups ideal.” In our case it seems it is the epistemic orientations which were as regarded deviant.

It should be noted however, that this did not appear to pose a “serious problem” in the communities I studied; and those who were by some perceived as deviant would likely never be confronted with it.

### **Relating to clients claims**

We have now seen how some of my informants related to their common associates epistemological orientations. The questions we will ask ourselves now is: how did they perceive their clients epistemic orientations? How did they relate to their clients paranormal claims?

Throughout my fieldwork there was this story I would come to hear several times. It was brought up on multiple occasions within *California Haunts*; mainly for comic relief, but also as an illustration on how clients could sometimes “read too much into things”. The story was about an older lady who had once called in *California Haunts* believing her house was seriously haunted. For one, she claimed on a frequent basis hearing mysterious footsteps in the attic. But the most disturbing claim regarded something that would happen every night as she was asleep. She told the team she would often wake up in the middle of the night with a feeling something was pressing heavily against her chest, making it difficult for her to breathe. *California Haunts*, in agreement with this old lady, decided to one evening come into her home and investigate her claims. They wanted to figure out whether her experiences were genuinely paranormal, or could there be natural explanations for what was befalling her? It would turn out to be the latter. A stroll through the attic revealed the room was filled with rat droppings; something which could easily explain the woman’s impression that someone (or something) was walking around up there. The rats climbing and jumping around the loft, could (according to my informants) easily be mistaken for footsteps. So the potential of ghosts in the attic was lightly ruled out. But what about the woman’s terrifying experiences in her sleep? To get to the bottom of this the *California Haunts* team had decided they would have to observe her while she was asleep. They put up a camera in her bedroom to see if they could witness the alleged phenomena of something pressing against her chest, and in the best case scenario, put it to film. During the first hours of investigation nothing appeared to happen; until suddenly, in the middle of the night, the team was amazed to see the woman’s cat walk into the room, jump up on to the bed, climb up to her chest, and start playing with her breathing apparatus. This to the point it became disabled. It seemed this was an open and shut case to the members of *California Haunts*. There remained no doubt that the alleged “haunting” was no more than the product of a vivid imagination. The woman’s trouble of breathing, and sensation of having something press against her chest, could now easily be explained away as nothing out of the ordinary. And the woman should no longer have to fear for her nightly visitor, well knowing that it was

not as terrifying and ill-intentioned as she had first suspected.

Throughout my fieldwork there was this story that I would come to hear several times. The reason why this story was brought up over and over was likely because it humorously contrasted the ghost hunters and client's ways of rationalizing unexplained events. This old lady was portrayed as an overly suspicious individual who experienced ghosts which in fact wasn't there. *California Haunts* on the other hand approached her claims in a refined manner and managed to debunk them one by one. What stood out are two distinguished perceptions on reality. One founded on misperceptions, sensory deceptions and a vivid imagination; and the other founded on objectivity and rational judgment. And that was what an investigation was all about. The ghost hunters were called in, as the experts, to make sense of something the clients could not make sense of themselves. The ghost hunters were there to help them categorize the unexplained occurrences that had taken place in their home (or wherever), and to distinguish the natural occurrences from the paranormal occurrences.

There appeared to be general consensus among my informants that representatives of the general public – “average Joe who watches the ghost shows” - was somewhat notorious for attributing paranormal explanations to natural occurrences. There seemed to be – by some ghost hunters – a general reluctance to accept client's claims as “true”. Chris for instance stated he believed roughly 95 percent of any paranormal claims could be given a natural explanation. When clients told what they had experienced, he was always open for the possibility that they had misinterpreted what they had experienced. He stated it like this:

“I call it the run of the mill. You know, doors being opened, bangs being heard, and whispers and, you know... Pretty much everybody has the same thing happen. And I kind of push that off to the side; you know, [and think of it as the] “run of the mill”. You know like, a bang, a voice [...] when [a client]wakes up in the middle of night and they see people standing by the edge of their bed, you know; I take it with a grain of salt.”

By Chris's account it is evident that he viewed clients as essentially lacking the sort of trained judgment that ghost hunter themselves were dependent to have. The client's personal experiences and claims he often took “with a grain of salt”, granted they were likely to be misperceived and/or exaggerated. He asserted a client would often experience things and categorize their experiences as paranormal, although they could potentially be the product of natural occurrences (i.e. “run of the mill”).



There were also other factors that came into play; namely social and psychological factors. Donald told me, that before scheduling an investigation on behalf of *The Flying Monkeys*, he would always ask himself the question: “Do these people need a ghost in their life?” To him, there was always the possibility that clients could “imagine” a ghost out of their lives, perhaps to take the attention away from some “real problems” that they had. *The Flying Monkeys* would therefore try and address any underlying social and psychological factors that could contribute to the clients believing they were being haunted. It would seem such an explanation was viable from time to time. During various get-togethers with the groups I would get to hear about individuals who were clearly “haunted” by their own personal problems. Some of these were “haunted” by drug and alcohol issues, yet some by general lunacy.

Then there were also some cases that were more intricate. I partook at a few investigations where it was suggested that the client simply could have imagined a ghost due to personal problems that they were suffering from. One which stood out took place in late March 2011. It involved two little boys who lived with their mother and her new boyfriend. Her former husband – the father of her children – had passed away a few years earlier. *California haunts* was called in as the little boys claimed to have seen a ghostly entity in the house; whom they believed was their father keeping an eye on them from beyond the grave. Regardless, there was much fear and ambivalence associated with the mysterious occurrences, so the family had called in professional help to figure out what was happening. But in this case, it seemed there were problems also associated with the living. Already at the beginning of the investigation it turned out that the widow’s new boyfriend was an obnoxious drunk, and he acted aggressively, and he would yell at those present in the house for hours. After having to discontinue the investigation, the team went to a coffee shop to discuss this whole ordeal. Despite one of the team psychics had identified some ghostly presences in the house; another explanation was also brought to the table. Tracy speculated that the youngest boy was potentially so terrified of his mother’s new boyfriend that he was pretending to see a ghost so he could seek comfort in his mother’s bed. She further insinuated his mother probably had embraced the idea of her former husband visiting them, as she still missed him so much. And so, there was not necessarily a ghost present in their home. It could simply be a product of the boy’s desperation, and his mother’s wishful thinking.

Through an investigation a ghost hunter group would apply to make the “haunted location” speak for itself rather than letting the subject speak for it. Therefore, one of the main ambitions a group had when

investigating a supposedly haunted location, was to try and debunk any paranormal claims associated with that place. Implicitly that meant that the validity of any experience taking place at that location was questioned. For instance, when *California Haunts* put up the camera at the old lady's bedroom, her claims became subject to inquest. Or when Tracy speculated about the poor little boy's situation, his and his mothers, sense of perception was questioned. However, none of these claims would be categorized as "real" or "not real" unless they were somehow debunked or verified. Overall the client's personal experiences tended to end up more on the sideline. The investigation was more about what the team could come up with evidence-wise. And so, many of my informants normally did not make up their minds, whether a client's experience was genuinely paranormal or not. They simply had no way of knowing. Hence their experiences were for the most part respected. Like Rose once asserted: "I don't want to deny peoples experiences. And if they've had the experience that's their experience, and I can't deny what they've experienced. Cause I wasn't there". In a similar vein John stated that their personal experiences were: "not necessarily worth nothing. But I can't prove or disprove what you experienced. Feelings are interesting but they don't make good evidence". So when relating to clients personal experiences, need for evidence was often demanded. These circumstances provided, the barrier of ambiguity between the client's claim and the actual states of affair seemed to be broken down completely. If the evidence was believable that is. If so there would no longer be any room for hesitation as the proposed phenomena has manifested itself into objective reality. The statement below was given by Rose, as she was asked what it would take for her to validate paranormal claim proposed by a client. She asserts that paranormal claims gain legitimacy only if she would get to experience the alleged phenomena for herself; either indirectly through mechanical evidence or directly through personal experience.

"If they have pictures of stuff, actual pictures, I can validate it through the pictures. If I get evidence, that corroborates with what they told me. Like EVPs, if I see something moving myself, or if I see a [ghostly entity], [...] that would corroborate with what they told me. So, if they tell me a story and nothing happens, and it's like, well, I can't validate it. I'm not saying you didn't have that experience. But I can't validate it. So it's like undetermined to me."

Rose's statement reveals that the testimony of a client holds very limited epistemic status in itself. She responds to my question by first pointing to any available evidence which could support the client's claims: "if they have pictures of stuff" or "if I get evidence that corroborates with what they told me". Evidence put forward by the client or by Rose herself would considerably strengthen the client's

testimony of what they claim to be experiencing. This would add to the table a common medium to support the claim. The other possibility of any clients testimony to gain significant epistemic authority would be if Rose had experiences similar to or related to the ones claimed by the client. She puts it like this: “if I have an experience [then] I can say: yeah, that’s what happened to you.” Any lack of evidence or personal experience on Roses side however maintains ontological indifference between her and the client: I’m not saying you didn’t have that experience. But I can’t validate it. So it’s like undetermined to me.” Ergo, the clients account lacked sufficient epistemic status. Albeit Roses reluctance to accept a client’s claim as legit, she did not dismiss the paranormal event taking place; only that she had any desired proof to determine its validity.

All in all, the experiences of others was hard to grasp. Whereas a ghost hunters personal experiences could be challenging to categorize, the experiences of anyone else – be it clients or fellow ghost hunters – was almost impossible to categorize. Because personal experiences were potentially deceptive, and the person that had the experience was potentially incapable of adequately categorizing that experience; the experience of the other had little epistemic value.

### **Concluding remarks**

I initiated this chapter with a quote from Alyssa whom clearly established the ambiguity of having personal experiences. As she stated: “I wanna know the truth. I don’t want *my* truth. I don’t want an *illusion* of truth. I want the *real* truth”. Her emphasis lied on how the personal experience was conceived deceptive and could potentially lead one astray in the pursuit of truth; an attitude shared by most (if not all) in the field. Throughout the chapter I have illustrated how personal experience and judgment was seen as often misrepresenting “the *real* truth” due to its epistemic demerits. The subjectivity had the potential of obscuring the line between the “real” and “deceptive”; genuine ghostly manifestations on one side, and imagination, dreams, childhood delusions, lunacy, and social issues on the other. Moreover I have illustrated how this ambiguity of the personal experience produces difficulties in categorizing personal experiences in terms of authenticity. More precisely how my informants would often settle their personal experiences in the “unknown” category, as they were hesitant to categorize them as either “real” or “not real”. When it came to others experiences validation and categorization was almost impossible.

Well aware that personal experiences could be deceptive and therefore not representative of reality; the

ghost hunters were dependent on mediums that could represent reality more accurately. In the next chapter we will focus our attention towards what ghost hunters regarded as such reliable mediums; namely physical evidence.



## Chapter 7: “Evidence”

### Introduction

Susan was one of the first practitioners of ghost hunting I came in contact with. She and I met during a psychic development class hosted by *California Haunts*. And when I told her I was writing a thesis on ghost hunting, she seemed enthusiastic and more than willing to contribute. Just a few days later, Susan invited me home to her place. She seemed eager to tell me all there was to know about her involvement in the paranormal field; her over 30 years accomplishments with taking photographs of ghostly entities, as well as the personal experiences she had had along the way. She led me to her study; a room which had shelves filled with ghost gadgets - everything from, what she referred to as “old school” equipment, used back in the old days - to more sophisticated ghost hunter equipment she had acquired during recent years. In the study she had prepared for me a series of photographs which she had captured throughout different epochs of her life; from the late seventies, when she started out, and up to quite recently. But this was not an ordinary photo montage one would perhaps expect from someone who is summarizing three decades of dedication to her favorite leisure activity. Only a very few of the pictures had people in them, and even in those pictures the people were not meant as the center of attention. What Susan wanted me to see however, was what stood out as anomalous, and simply did not seem to belong in the photographs. More precisely, the supposed ghostly entities manifesting themselves in empty rooms, dark corners and narrow hallways.

As Susan began presenting her photo collection to me she told the story associated with each and every photograph, as well as pointing out supposed ghostly manifestations appearing in them. First she showed me photographs captured by her father and her as they had initially started out with - as she used to call it back then - “psychic photography. These photos were clearly of some age, and most displayed vague, ambiguous shapes and figures. Susan pointed out the various anomalies, which had mysteriously been captured by her camera, during her nightly visits to old hotels and other remote locations. She had several different albums that she shared with me. At some point she presented to me a set of photos taken in one of her previous homes in New York, where her family had encountered some severe ghostly activity. Just upon moving into their new house, mysterious events had started to occur and apparitions had been seen on multiple occasions. Susan had identified two, eventually three paranormal entities, to be present in her home. Determined to document the circumstances she had begun taking pictures throughout her house, hoping who or what was haunting them would show up on camera. The evidence that came out of it, supporting her claims, were photographs displaying murky

shadows, faint, ambiguous shapes and odd color fluctuations. To Susan these images stood template for the various paranormal experiences she had had throughout her life. They served as *evidence* supporting the ghostly experiences, as well as the reality they happened within. However, despite all her accomplishments with putting ghosts to film, she admitted she had not reached her ultimate goal. After about 30 years as a ghost hunter Susan were still pursuing to capture – as she put it – the “perfect photograph”; a photograph that was simply impervious to critique.

To Susan there was no doubt that the paranormal experiences she had had were real. Nonetheless, she did - along with her fellow ghost hunters in the field – put much effort into obtaining *evidence* to support her experiences, and the fact that ghosts were real. This chapter will be devoted to such evidence. We will begin with familiarizing ourselves with what my informants categorized as evidence, in addition to what qualities that granted such evidence its epistemic authority: Further on I will elaborate on the process of categorizing evidence in terms of authenticity (“real” or “not real?”), as well as on how evidence could under some circumstances be considered “questionable”, and therefore be lacking epistemic authority. The question we should keep in mind from the beginning to end of this chapter is: exactly how *evident* is evidence?

### **Defining “evidence”**

An essential aspect of the consultation business was presenting evidence to clients, to support there was something paranormal going on at a location investigated. Another essential aspect of paranormal research was bringing forwards evidence as to prove that ghosts exist.

In this chapter we will be concerned with ghost hunters’ emic notion of “evidence”. That is, what ghost hunter normally referred to when they used the term. And most often, when ghost hunters talked of evidence, this would regard some form of ghostly manifestation captured to record, photography or video. The two primary forms of evidence circulating within the ghost hunter community were visual evidence - ghostly photographs and video footage; and auditory evidence – EVPs (ghostly voices caught on tape) and other forms of paranormal audio.

Daston argues that, by definition, a *fact* becomes evidence “when enlisted in service of a claim” (Daston 1994:243). In the paranormal community there circulated a manifold of claims, for which ghost hunters applied to obtain evidence. To provide proof that ghosts did *in fact* exist, the ghost hunter groups sought to obtain “evidence” of the phenomena’s existence. To be able to determine whether a client’s claims of being haunted were real or imaginary, a ghost hunter group would have to come up

with “evidence” supporting these claims. Likewise, any personal experiences the group would have during the investigation could not fully be accounted for unless “evidence” was provided to back them up. Any such evidence obtained during (and after) investigations would respectively serve to prove that ghosts exist, that some location was haunted, and/or that some ghostly experience was indeed genuine. When that piece of evidence was uncovered, it could potentially have the epistemic status to support manifold ghostly claims.

As we have previously seen, ghost hunters held a hardline distinction between personal experience and evidence; a distinction grounded in incommensurability between the two concept’s epistemic statuses. The notions of objectivity and subjectivity appeared to underlie my informant’s views as they distinctly categorized “evidence” as complementary to personal experience. The old phrase “seeing is believing” could perhaps hold true to the individual ghost hunter, yet in regard of paranormal research, the ghost hunters personal experience was considered mostly insignificant. It simply was not objective enough to qualify as evidence. That is to say, Susan’s paranormal experiences in themselves could serve as evidence to her, maintaining her beliefs in ghosts. However, her ambition to one day capture “the perfect photograph” did not direct primarily to her own personal convictions. Rather, the purpose of obtaining such a photograph was providing, *to others*, indisputable evidence that her ghostly beliefs and experiences were grounded in reality. The “evidence”, and not her experiences or narratives, were to serve as the means of persuasion. Unlike her photographs - she did not refer to her experiences as “evidence”; as they simply weren’t evident enough.

### **Epistemic merits of evidence**

What would occupy ghost hunters the (at least the most dedicated) after an investigation was over would be going through all the photographs and digital recordings captured at site; and unravel whether the group had managed to document any ghostly activity. Taking into consideration the presumably 10-20 hours of video recordings collected during most investigations, the often hundreds of photographs captured, and the audio from multiple voice recorders combined, the outcome evidence-wise was highly minimal. A great deal of the investigations I went to did not yield any evidence at all. However, in the aftermaths of the typical investigation, a few split seconds of recordings would be uncovered that potentially qualified as evidence. EVPs were by far the most common form of approved evidence collected in the field. Photo evidence was more of a rarity, and appeared to represent the exception rather than the norm. For a group to capture ghosts on video was even rarer; and video-evidence was considered rather sensational when it came about. In the coming days or weeks after an investigation



the ghost hunters would normally go through their personal photographs, the audio on their voice recorders, and make a memo if they discovered something peculiar. Investigators would then eventually share what they had found, and get their fellow ghost hunters opinions on these findings. Could it be the group had managed to obtain evidence of a paranormal manifestation?

As opposed to personal experience, evidence could be reviewed in plenum by the members of a group; and the act of distinguishing the “real” from the “not real” became in that respect rarely a personal endeavor. Whereas the personal experience was empirically inaccessible to anyone else than the person who had had the experience, evidence was accessible to fellow team members, fellow ghost hunter groups, or anyone who would happen to stumble across that piece of evidence. As Susan put down the photographs on the floor before me, they were readily presented for my mind to judge as as evidence. This required no unique skills or expertise, nor any knowledge beyond what was illustrated through her stories (Berryman 2005). All the ghosts Susan have experienced belonged in the past, and her fellow ghost hunters could get access to them only indirectly through her narrative. A photograph on the other hand, represented any ghostly manifestations directly, and could be accessed by anyone at any time. All it required was somebody’s attention. As pointed out by Berryman: “The evidence can even overcome the limits of space and time through [...] photographs” (Berryman 2005:24). As objects of evidence, like photographs and EVPs, were empirically accessible to “anyone”, they deflected some of the epistemic demerits that made personal experiences so questionable. A team of ghost hunters could simply put their heads together and try to explain how an anomaly could have turned up in evidence and reach a conclusion; not through personal speculation, but rather mutual reasoning

For instance, at one *Solano ghost* meeting the potential evidence from a previous investigation were displayed on a computer, and the different team members involved themselves in trying to conclude on its authenticity. Among other evidence, some EVPs obtained at a former investigation were presented to the team. Those who had uncovered these EVPs on their voice recorders thoroughly explained the particular circumstances around which the mysterious voices had appeared on audio. As they reflected on the EVPs they had caught, there sprang a discussion within the group, on whether there could be any natural explanation. Those who had uncovered the potential evidence were mildly confronted with possibly alternative explanations. Could the voices have travelled through distance, or perhaps correlate time-wise with the chatter of other ghost hunters on the property. Also, could there perhaps have been a homeless person on the property who was uncounted for? Could any of the investigators have made a sigh or a whisper and then later forgotten about it? All such possible explanations were

discussed in detail, and ruled out if they were very unlikely. The discussion would carry on like this until those present made up their minds, or simply ran out of ideas on how to explain the EVPs, or turned their attention to other topics.

Other than the accessibility of evidence, there was also another significant aspect of evidence that gave it epistemic presidency over personal experience; namely its objective merits. The potential threats of subjectivity, which was underlined in the previous chapter, were simply overcome through evidence. That is, many of the variables that made personal experiences subject to doubt – such as the possibilities of personal deceptions, wishful thinking, and a vivid imagination - were left out of the equation. When recorded or photographed the ghost transcended the subjective sphere and became the property of objective reality. As opposed to the ghost hunter, the photo camera, audio recorder and video camera were simply prone to speak the objective truth.

The ghost hunters' conceptions of their mechanical apparatus as objective - and therefore reliable in speaking the objective truth – were by no means unique to them. In fact, such conceptions about these technologies can be traced back some hundred years. Back in the 19th century, when photography was invented, it had a significant impact on the scientists' ambition to explore the physical world. An increasing desire for objectivity emerged within the scientific community; and the new technology was soon cherished as an instrument of scientific discovery. The technological newcomer would aid the scientist in his pursuit of mechanical objectivity. The ideal of mechanical objectivity had surfaced as a counterpart to “willful intervention” – the deceiving threats posed by subjectivity. What had mattered before was the authority and trustworthiness of the eye witness (Pinney 2009) but now photography was introduced as a neutral medium; representing reality in impressive detail, thus defying the potentially misleading will of the scientist. As Daston and Galison puts it: “The automatism of the photographic process promised images free of human interpretation – *objective* images, as they came to be called.” (2007:130). What initially gave the photography status as “objective” was its ability to represent nature as it appeared, without being led astray by human interpretation or judgment. Overall, what ghost hunters categorized as evidence took on a form that the populace of the modern west was prone to accept as trustworthy. The technologies of photography and record utilized in the field constituted, as Dixon puts it: “the correct format for the accumulation of knowledge.” (Dixon 2007:730). The objective format of “evidence” granted it significant epistemic status, not just within the ghost hunter community, but within modern western society in general. And that was perhaps what gave evidence its purported evidency; the ability to appear credible in its own right.

Susan's photographs represented a common objective reality - as documented by the camera - which in turn supported and gave credibility to her experiences. As for her photographs, they are products of her photo camera, and so whatever anomalies they displayed, manifested itself in an objective reality her mind had no control over. They persisted independently of her potentially "willful intervention"; and if someone were to argue her personal experiences were products of a vivid imagination, her photographs could not possibly be subject to the same suspicions. They simply represented objective reality "as it is".

Although Susan's photographs did not lie, they were nonetheless ambiguous. The murky shadows, faint, blurred shapes and odd color fluctuations displayed in her photographs were of such an ambiguous character, that I suppose few people would instinctively associate them with ghostly manifestations. Although the neutral medium of the photo camera was capable of "promising" that the anomalies *displayed* in the photographs were objectively real, it was nonetheless incapable of communicating what the anomalies *represented*. There would be no doubt that the photographs were unusual, but whether the manifestations in them represented a ghost or anything else, would often remain unknown. Since evidence was usually of such ambiguous character, ghost hunters were dependent on somehow making sense of them. They had to fill in the gap, so to speak, by unveiling all that the ghost hunter equipment (i.e camera), and the evidence it produced, simply was unable to tell them. This entailed that they would have to decide whether an anomaly in evidence could represent something paranormal or something natural. Let us now turn to how ghost hunters went forwards to categorize evidence.

### **Categorizing potential evidence**

As we have seen throughout this thesis, ghost hunter groups always sought to find natural explanations for any mysterious claims and experiences presented to them; and just like personal experiences, evidence had to be categorized in terms of authenticity. It should be made perfectly clear that not everything anomalous turning up on a photograph or audio recorder was considered a ghostly manifestation. Before any photograph, piece of video footage or snippet of audio could be labeled authentic evidence; it would have to pass the test as genuine. That is, evidence would be considered "real" if it could not be debunked; so only when no one in a group could come up with a non-paranormal explanation the evidence was deemed authentic. Therefore the number one priority for a group who had obtained potential evidence was to make sure it was not categorized "real", when it was in fact "not real". They would analyze the potential evidence thoroughly to decide to which category it

belonged.

Debunking evidence was all about finding ordinary explanations for something that was not all that ordinary. Whether an anomaly turning up in evidence would later become explained as product of natural phenomena, that potential evidence itself was unordinary. Anomalies would perhaps turn up in one out of hundreds of photos, or in a brief second out of manifold hours of recording. And it would remain ambiguous until the team would manage to explain what the anomaly represented. Douglas argues: “Any given system of classifications must give rise to anomalies, and any given culture must confront events that seem to defy its assumptions” (Douglas 1966:40). She further states, one common way of dealing with an anomaly is simply settling it within one specific category. In our case, rather than leaving the anomaly with an ambiguous status (i.e. “unknown”), ghost hunters would try to settle it into the categories of “real” or “not real”. The path to determining to which category the anomaly belonged, happened through the act of debunking. If an occurrence was debunked it lost its status as possibly paranormal; and if it could not be debunked, it passed the test as paranormal. At least it was considered likely paranormal. When, for instance, *California Haunts* managed to debunk the case of the old woman claiming she was assaulted at night, any paranormal explanation was completely discarded. The ghost was “not real”. On the contrary, when *The Flying Monkeys* were unsuccessful in debunking the sound of the bell, the possibility of a paranormal explanation was strengthened. The ghost was likely “real”.

One major advantage in distinguishing the “real” from the “not real” was having knowledge of what sort of natural phenomena could potentially be mistaken for ghostly phenomena. And therefore ghost hunters would pay attention to how dust, insects, pollen and even a dirty lense could appear in photographs as something otherworldly. In practice, if ghost hunters were aware of how visual anomalies (such as light fluctuations, shadows, orbs or bright objects) could quite naturally turn up in photographs, they could rule out such anomalies as paranormal without much hustle. The same went for auditory evidence. Ghost hunters would during EVP sessions be cautious to alert the team when they made a suspicious noise, so later when the recordings were analyzed, it would not be mistaken for ghostly activity. By outing “That was me”, or “that was my camera” after the fact, they could later be sure some noise was not misinterpreted. Also whisper was frequently disallowed during investigations, as in the aftermath it was hard to tell exactly who the voice belonged to. Such ambiguity the ghost hunters tried to avoid. I once attended a meeting by *California Haunts*, part of which was dedicated to experiment with different effects that could produce anomalies in photographs. It was for instance

illustrated how taking a picture when a camera was in motion could contribute to some strange and unwanted effects. Also it was shown how something as natural as a camera strap could turn up in a photo as an indistinguishable white form. Moreover it was illustrated how cigarette smoke could influence the photographs; and how objects with reflective surfaces could easily give the impression that they were giving off their own light.

The perhaps most debatable phenomena turning up in photographs and video was orbs. Orbs were merely circular artifacts moving about in the air; and were not an uncommon phenomenon to capture on film. However, many dedicated ghost hunters stressed an unwillingness to accept orbs as ghostly manifestations, provided these objects were highly probable to be bugs or fragments of dust passing right in front of the camera. A mosquito flying by just an inch away from the camera lense could, when the evidence was analyzed, give the illusion of being a significantly larger object appearing at greater distance. As ghost hunters were mostly aware of this, they hesitated to accept orbs as genuine paranormal manifestations, granted they could easily be mistaken for something else.

Overall it would seem to have more ramifications if a group miscategorized evidence, than if an individual ghost hunter miscategorized a personal experience. The processes of separating the “real” from the “not real” was even more crucial when it came to evidence, as the integrity of a group (and the ghost hunting trade in general) relied on it. It could potentially be “bad for business” if a group were to present faulty evidence to a client, and claim they had obtained evidence of a ghostly manifestation in their home, when in fact they hadn’t. This could result in a client becoming terrified for no reason; and furthermore, if someone would later manage to debunk that faulty evidence, the group would risk becoming subject to critique and ridicule. But the perhaps worst consequence -which was brought up from time to time by my informants - was that when a group would do a “bad job” with investigating claims and evidence, it could in worst case scenario put the entire ghost hunter community to shame. This would contribute to potential clients losing their respect of ghost hunter groups, and make the practice of ghost hunting a laughing stock. The taboo of presenting fallible evidence was embedded in the very ideals of ghost hunting. It went against the paranormal communities’ ambitions to prove the existence of ghosts utilizing legitimate means. Evidence held no value if it was fake.

As the act of debunking was of such importance to the ghost hunter trade, the respective groups often expressed their emphasis on debunking. *P.R.O.V.E.* for instance stated on its website that the group was

created to: “allow community members to investigate the paranormal, gather evidence *and learn to analyze and debunk information*”. At the very first meeting I attended with *P.R.O.V.E.* the organizers of the team brought us newcomers through the process of debunking evidence, and pointed out how it could at times be challenging. Terry showed us some photographs captured by the team at various investigations, that she and her companions had had a hard time debunking. In one of the photographs there appeared to be an ambiguous, yet fully rendered figure positioned in front of a window. The anomaly did not resemble anything in particular, but it was somewhat textured, and Terry had initially thought she identified the figure to have a face. She said she had at first reacted to the disfigured and “otherworldly-looking” entity expressing something like: “What is that thing? That thing is evil!” Unable to explain the anomaly, and well aware that they could potentially mistake paranormal phenomena for natural phenomena, the team later returned to the location where the photo were taken. They then examined the place to see if there could be any natural reason which could explain why the photograph had turned out as it did. After some thorough examination it turned out the evil looking entity could be explained away as nothing out of the ordinary. What had appeared in the photograph was one of the client’s dogs that was sleeping outside on the balcony during that respective investigation. As it had been lying outside none of the team members had been aware it was there, and since the figure did not distinctly resemble a dog, the possibility hadn’t occurred to any of them. And although the figure on the photo looked like an otherworldly entity positioned in front of the window, it turned out it was just the dog reflected in the glass. And so, what could have turned out to be some impressive pictorial evidence was debunked. Terry and her team would most likely have preferred that they had obtained a genuine photograph of an otherworldly entity, but debunking the photo did not make the whole ordeal meaningless. It seemed however, always to be a shared sense of satisfaction when a natural explanation could be found for an anomaly, although that ruled out any paranormal explanation. In accordance with Douglas (1966) theorizing the ambiguous status of the anomaly had dispersed, as the anomaly had been firmly put into the “debunked” or “not real” category.

However, it would seem evidence was not always that easy to categorize in terms of authenticity. For the most part this went for evidence that the respective ghost hunter or group had not been involved with obtaining. Or to be more precise; photographs, EVPs and video footage that was obtained and labeled evidence by other participants in the field. We will now see what attitude my informants expressed towards such evidence.

## Questionable and fallible evidence

We saw in chapter 6 that when it came to personal experiences, ghost hunters often felt inclined to categorize experiences as “unknown” (neither “real” or “not real”). This could also be the case with evidence. “Questionable evidence” was perhaps the term most commonly used to describe evidence of such ambiguous epistemic status. Alike “unknown experiences” questionable evidence could potentially have natural *and* paranormal explanations; and many would hesitate to accept such evidence as genuine. We will now see why ghost hunters often found evidence presented to them to be questionable.

One of the most interesting discussions concerning evidence, I encountered prior to my very first “ghost hunt”. It was February 19<sup>th</sup>, and I had been invited to participate in the “Flying Monkeys” upcoming investigation in the Woodland Opera House. The team had gathered in an apartment nearby to discuss group policies and to prepare for the investigation scheduled later that night. Upon discussing the opera house; the subject came up regarding what other ghost hunter groups claimed to have had experienced there; and what evidence they had captured. Alyssa recalled a photograph taken there by another group, to which this group had claimed authenticity, and proudly presented on their website as one of their greatest pieces of evidence. As Alyssa went online to trace the photograph the rest of the “Flying Monkeys” gathered around the computer to get a glimpse of this evidence. The photograph<sup>6</sup> displayed a figure which this other group claimed to be a ghost; depicted in the midst of the stairs leading from the stage towards the back of the Auditorium. Although its upper body appeared blurred one could clearly make out what resembled the contours of a male figure in a running posture with his legs and feet rather distinct. The ghostly figure looked as if he was hurrying up the stairs, and it had a faint arc above it, appearing to be some sort of mysterious light reflection. Compared to pictorial evidence I had seen at that point – which primarily had displayed ambiguous motives like orbs, faint shadows and color fluctuations – this stood out for me as rather unique. To my understanding, rare pieces of evidence like this was what ghost hunters groups struggled to obtain.

To begin with Alyssa had expressed a skeptical attitude towards the photograph, an outlook which was soon adopted by the rest of the group. All in all this piece of evidence was met with disbelief and ridicule rather than acceptance and admiration. No one proposed it to be an authentic photo of a ghost like it was claimed by the group who captured it. It was pointed out that the ghost appeared to wear

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<sup>6</sup>) This photograph can be accessed at [www.californiahaunts.org](http://www.californiahaunts.org)

sneakers and Bermuda shorts; which came across as rather obscure and humorous. Someone also implied the photo could easily be a fraud, with the suggestion that the figure was probably just one of the team members running up the stairs. It appeared that the “evidence” was just too good to be true; and so the team questioned it.

There were several potential variables that could contribute to make evidence questionable. One of the most prominent possibilities was that those groups or individuals, who presented the evidence, could simply have done a “bad job” trying to debunk the evidence; and mistakenly categorized an anomaly as a ghostly manifestation. This would entail that the evidence was “fallible”; that it was presented as evidence when in fact it did not represent anything paranormal. In her account below, Tracy pointed to the plausibility of evidence being flawed due to potential mistakes and sloppiness from the evidence-suppliers side:

“For me, I can watch shows. I can see other people’s videos. But you know: who knows the elements involved with how they obtain that evidence? Was there somebody in the background that could be casting a shadow? Was there some sort of sound in the area that wasn’t audible to anyone in the team? Then again, you don’t know how that was captured so I want to capture it myself to know what elements were around me. What situation I was in when it was captured? You know, for me that’s for myself, proof; of what I found.”

Tracy established that knowing “the elements involved” as a piece of evidence was obtained – the circumstances surrounding its origin - was of crucial importance when she was to determine its legitimacy. To her the epistemic status of any proclaimed evidence - for instance Tracy mentioned: “other people’s videos” - isn’t solely limited to the physical evidence in itself, but extends also to include various underlying factors. As she brought up; could there be “somebody casting a shadow?” Or a perhaps “a sound in the area that wasn’t audible to anyone in the team?” These underlying factors were not necessarily revealed by a video itself, as they to some degree concerned what happened “behind the scenes” as the video was recorded; outside of the cameras range so to speak. To be ultimately sure some video was in fact representing a paranormal entity, Tracy would have to look beyond its visual (and auditory) representation, to determine whether any sound or shadow was caused by a paranormal entity; or if it could in fact have its origin in more natural causes. Hence if she could not arrive at any satisfying conclusion regarding a piece of evidence, it fell short of gaining significant epistemic status. She questioned it: “who knows the elements involved with how they obtain that evidence?” As she did not “know the elements” there was no way do determine with complete certainty



that the evidence is authentic.

Alike Tracy, ghost hunters were often reluctant to accept evidence as genuine, as there was always a possibility the group which presented the evidence had done a bad job trying to debunk it. The respective group was perhaps unaware of elements that could produce natural anomalies in photographs – such as dust, insects, reflective surfaces and camera straps. Or they could have been ignorant of some external factor during an investigation and - later when analyzing the audio and photographs - accidentally misconceived rat noises for ghostly footsteps; or human presences for a ghostly presences (like in the scenario Rose brought up previously). And as my informants often did not know the elements involved with obtaining other groups evidence, they were simply incapable of debunking it. And so rather than to label it authentic or false, they would think of it as questionable.

Another significant variable which could give evidence status as “questionable evidence” was the potential of fraud. John elaborated on the matter like this:

“I’ve seen some evidence that is interesting but I wasn’t there so I can’t rule out fraud. [...] There’s all the kinds of interesting ghost things on YouTube, but anyone with Photo-shop or an idea about film making and special effects can do half that stuff. And then there are other groups that I’ve seen where the evidence... they’re like: “this is a ghost” and I’m like: “no, its not”. I’ve seen interesting evidence. I’ve seen intriguing evidence, but because I’m not there to witness it, I cannot say 100 percent what it is; if its fraud.”

John asserted that there was always the possibility of evidence being subject to fraud. Unless he was personally present in the process of obtaining the evidence, he is unable to fully determine whether the evidence was indeed authentic or not. He underlines that he has seen “interesting”, even “intriguing” evidence, but it is clear that the ever-present possibility of any evidence being fraudulent, makes him hesitant in acknowledging the legitimacy of evidence in general; pointing to the fact that any external evidence will have limited epistemic authority. This was apparent also among my informants, who often held skeptical positions towards the incarnations presented to them; although they themselves engaged in obtaining such evidence. When taking into the consideration the potential of fraud, the ghost hunters felt they were incapable of determining whether some piece of evidence was genuine or not. The evidence could simply not be categorized as authentic evidence.

The last variable worth mentioning, which could make evidence questionable, was ambiguity. Just like the subject was conceived as able to read too much into experience, it could potentially also read too

much into evidence. And at times, my informants expressed they were simply unable to pick up what was so anomalous about some photograph or audio recording. As opposed to someone who enthusiastically showcased their evidence on the Internet or on paranormal conferences, my informants sometimes had a hard time trying to comprehend what the evidence was supposed to represent. On at least one occasion during my field work, some ghost hunter would tell me that a photograph had supposedly an anomaly in it; but she herself could not tell me where to look for it, because she simply could not remember where it was. The anomaly was simply so faint that it had to be pointed out for us to acknowledge it. Such ambiguities however were most prominent when it came to EVPs. EVPs were often incredibly faint and tough to apprehend, and required one to really focus the ears. On most occasions multiple hear-troughs' was demanded for the subject being able to make out the ghostly voice; let alone what it was uttering. And so the EVP could be essentially "worthless" unless one knew what to listen for. Therefore, on the Internet, EVPs were typically displayed along with a respective groups (or individual ghost hunters) interpretation of what a "ghostly voice" was saying. This so that anyone who was not familiar with the EVP could know exactly what to listen for. However, as Lisa is pointed out in the excerpt below, such "disembodied voices" were often so faint and indistinct; that they were hard to make; especially amidst all the mechanical interference and background noise typically present in an audio recording. She put it like this:

"Sometimes you're listening to a recorded EVP on Facebook or on a web site, you think "what? Where'd they hear that? No, I don't hear that." You can't understand what's being said. And sometimes it's just the quality of the recording or whatever. That even at the [paranormal convention that we went to], they were running their EVPs. You gonna admit it was like... I didn't hear that. \*Laughs\*. I don't know what you're hearing but that's not [what I hear]. And I wouldn't doubt that someone may listen to my evidence and say the same thing. It's all very interpretive."

The ambiguity of the EVP medium is evident here. Lisa asserted that even when knowing exactly what to listen for in an EVP, she at times had troubles perceiving just what those who presented the EVP claimed to make of it. Either she could not "understand what's being said" or she even would not hear anything at all. Primarily she pointed to reviewing audio evidence as being "very interpretive", implying various people will interpret EVPs differently, to a point they may even disagree on what is being said: "I don't know what you're hearing but that's not [what I hear]". Lisa also acknowledges that evidence put forward by her could have the same ramifications: "I wouldn't doubt that someone may listen to my evidence and say the same thing". This comment entailed that respective EVPs were

not necessarily “good” or “bad”; but that the EVP-medium itself had limited epistemic status because it was so “very interpretable”. Lisa’s ghost hunting companion Donald shared her views on EVPs, although he was even more skeptical towards the EVP format. As he stated: “All the EVPs you get, they could be *anything*”. He pointed out how so many things could be perceived as a ghostly voice, that it was almost impossible to tell. That any team member present during an EVP session could sound totally unfamiliar when whispering, or talking with her head down. He found it humorous how someone would insist that anything unfamiliar turning up on audio was a ghost. “Like a moan... why would a moan be a spirit?” he laughed.

It should be mentioned that members of a ghost hunter group could reach different conclusions about evidence. That was only natural as the evidence was often so ambiguous. It would rarely matter though, as ghost hunters were entitled to have their own interpretations. However, evidence would have to be categorized one way or the other. On most occasions it would be the organizers of the groups that would determine whether some evidence was to be presented to a client, or on the Internet. And although they would agree in most cases, I heard of cases where different group organizers were simply unable to reach a consensus. This could potentially have more serious consequences. To illustrate: Rose once brought up a disagreement she had had with the leader of one of her former groups. She pointed to this previous associate’s ambitions to become famous (become on TV and to publish books) as possibly having affected her judgment in one instant when analyzing evidence.

“We went on an investigation, and she [captured] a photo that she swore [depicted] a ghost. I knew it wasn’t a ghost. It was the guy that we were with. He was in a certain area, it was dark, she was with her IR-camera, taking pictures and he was across the room doing something. And she must either forgot he did that, or blanked that out somehow. But she saw that picture of this man standing across the room in the dark and she swore that was a ghost, and I said: “no, that’s when he walked over to check this area for us; and [that figure in the photo] is him”. And we disagreed on that. She posted it on the website as a ghost. I thought okay, that’s crazy. \*laughs\*”

From Rose’s frame of reference her former group leader had labeled and presented a photograph online as authentic evidence of ghostly phenomena; when in fact it was not. So to her the photograph got its status as evidence on entirely false premises. Their common associate’s whereabouts - when the photo was taken - had simply been overlooked by her group leader when she determined the photograph to be legit; as Rose puts it: “she must either forgot he did that, or blanked that out somehow”. Rose’s overall argument pointed to her former group leader – with her ambitions of becoming famous - was so eager

to obtain evidence that her agenda clouded her judgment. The very act of putting that evidence up online claiming it displayed a ghostly apparition, Rose laughed away and she referred to as “crazy”.

Generally, what fell into the category of “questionable evidence”, was alike “unknown experiences”, incommensurable with neither the “real” nor “not real” category. The respective ghost hunter, who regarded some evidence as questionable, was simply unable to determine the evidences validity. Whereas the ambiguity of personal experiences was frequently associated with potential deceptions posed by subjectivity – misperceptions, sensory illusions and wishful thinking; the ambiguity of evidence was associated with methodical carelessness, potential of fraud, and uncertainty of representation.

### **Authentic evidence**

Authentic evidence constituted evidence that simply could not be debunked; and so the anomaly that appeared in a particular piece of evidence was believed to be genuinely paranormal. The evidence represented an anomaly that could not be explained in natural terms. Thus far we have focused on evidence that, in the eyes of the beholder, simply was not *evident* enough. The *potential evidence*; like photographs and EVPs that stood out as anomalous, but had yet to undergo the processes of debunking and/or validation. The *fallible evidence*, which had been labeled evidence on false premises; as consequence to unprofessional-ism, sloppiness or underlying agendas. And the *questionable evidence*, that was questioned, as not enough was known about the evidence and the circumstances around which it was obtained; so it could not be subject to validation, debunking or legitimation. These types of evidence fell into the category of evidence that lacked sufficient epistemic status to be rendered authentic evidence.

What were displayed in authentic pictorial evidence could not possibly be bugs, dust, cigarette smoke, camera straps or the contours of a fellow ghost hunter. What made itself known through authentic auditory evidence could not be the voice of a ghost hunter, someone’s stomach growling, digital interference or a sound that had traveled through distance. When it came to evidence categorized as authentic all such variables were ruled out, leaving the ghost hunters with only one possible explanation: they had “captured” a ghost. Most ghost hunters that I came in contact with were in possession of what they considered to be authentic evidence. The 40-50 photographs Susan presented to me that day in February were no exception. These photographs she had sorted out of the manifold thousands of photographs captured throughout her ghost hunting career. They remained the ones of

significance to her after each and every one had undergone thorough analysis. They were the photographs which displayed anomalous artifacts she had been unable to explain; therefore giving the evidence sufficient epistemic status to be categorized authentic.

Authentic evidence was normally not just “stored away” at someone’s private computer or photo albums, but often displayed for “anyone” to see. The most impressive evidence was proudly presented at the respective group’s webpages; it was shown to the new members of the groups, and at times even presented at public events. In May I attended such a public event - the Manteca paranormal convention. This conference was dedicated mostly to ghost hunting, and ghost hunter groups from all throughout the state participated; to share their knowledge, their stories from the field, and perhaps most interestingly, their evidence. In the conference room different groups appeared at stage and introduced the assemblage to their latest ghost hunting adventures. There was shown video clips, audio footage and photographs that the respective groups deemed were of paranormal nature. Photos were thoroughly elaborated on; it was explained where and when any photograph was taken, what had happened right up to that point, and what it was speculated that the anomalies could represent. EVPs were presented in a similar manner. They were played over several times, and the groups that presented them underlined what words they thought the voices were uttering. Throughout the conference there was presented much authentic evidence. These pieces of evidence had gained its status as authentic, granted the respective groups were simply unable to find a natural explanation. But one question has to be asked: what value did the authenticity of evidence have to others?

What most ghost hunters had come to accept was that, as Engelke puts it: “the quality or condition of being evident exist more as a desire than an actual state of affairs” (Engelke 2009:4). Evidence was not necessarily *self-evident*. The photographs, videos and audio footage coming out of the ghost hunter communities, simply did not hold one universal truth. The epistemic status of any “authentic” evidence was on the other hand relative to who was there to interpret them. For instance, the photo of the ghost in the opera house was considered authentic to Charlotte of *California Haunts*; who would later submit it to the group’s website, to share online one of the most impressive pieces of evidence she had ever collected. To the members of *The Flying Monkeys* however, this piece of evidence was of little significance. Not only was it questionable to them, but they also suspected that the photograph could have been subject to fraud; entailing it did not have any epistemic status whatsoever. This illustrates that what was considered authentic evidence by some ghost hunters could likely be categorized as fallible, questionable or false by others. And so, in that respect there would likely never surface any

evidence that would become accepted as authentic by every ghost hunter, every ghost hunter group and, the ghost hunter community at large. As Joseph once stated: “I don’t ever think there’s gonna be a picture or recording that anyone is ever gonna say: “oh, there’s no way that’s not faked”. Ghost hunters were always aware of the possibility that there had been some form of human intervention. Either some evidence was a deliberate fake or that it was just fallible and had been labeled authentic on false premises. Because of this ghost hunters seemed instinctively to doubt any evidence presented to them. The evidence had little epistemic status. As Daston puts it: “In order for facts to qualify as credible evidence they must appear innocent of human intervention. Facts fabricated as evidence, that is, to make a particular point, are thereby disqualified as evidence.” (Daston1994:244)

It would appear, the less involved the individual ghost hunter was in obtaining some piece of evidence, the more questionable that evidence seemed to become. If the ghost hunter was present as the evidence was obtained, as well as took part in the debunking process, he or she would likely conclude that evidence was authentic. If the ghost hunter was not involved in obtaining the evidence, but merely present as the evidence was introduced within the group, he or she could sometimes hesitate to conclude whether the evidence was authentic. And if ghost hunters were not even part of the group that obtained the evidence, or knew those responsible, they would often deploy a skeptical attitude towards that evidence; just as was the case with the ghost photo from the Woodland opera house. Hill (2011) argues there is a “narrative of distrust” in western societies when it comes to media representations of paranormal phenomena. The general population is aware that any evidence presented to them may be misleading or simply tampered with. The typical evidence’s distant and enshrouded journey so to speak – from being obtained to being received by the audience - often renders it with lack of epistemic status. It would appear, that even within the ghost hunter community - in which actors shared the same ambitions to uncover and expose the truth about ghosts - there was a reluctance to accept evidence as authentic. Evidence in general, and whoever came up with that evidence, was simply not reliable enough.

Moreover, there appeared to be a link between personal experience and evidence; or to put it more precisely, an enforcement of the evidences credibility granted immediacy to the object. For instance, Tracy’s and Johns solutions to what Hill refers to as the “crisis of evidence” united the notions of evidence and experience. As Tracy stated: “I want to capture it myself to know what elements were around me”. To avoid the ambiguities like those she associates with “other people’s videos” she wanted to place herself within the confines of the experiment. Being part of this process enabled her to directly

address the circumstances through which any evidence was obtained. And so, by being present as evidence was collected the ghost hunter could to a greater degree discount for the hypothetical possibilities.

All in all, what was deemed authentic evidence was not conceived as authentic by everyone. In fact, it would seem it was mostly conceived as authentic by those ghost hunters who were involved in obtaining and analyzing the respective evidence. To anyone outside the closest circle the evidence was almost bound to be questioned. The evidence simply wasn't evident enough.

### **Concluding remarks**

I initiated this chapter with providing some insight into the carrier of a veteran ghost hunter. I presented the tale of Susan and her over 30 years with taking photographs of ghostly entities, and the significance of her showing her ghostly photographs to me. Accommodating her narrative about the ghostly experiences she had encountered throughout her life, these photographs were to serve as evidence that her experiences were in fact real. The photographs were categorized as evidence due to the mediums epistemic status: as Dixon put it; they constituted the “correct format for accumulation of knowledge”. They were considered evidence as they were “Objective images”, which free of any subjective intervention were conceived as capable of “letting nature speak for itself”. The anomalies appearing in Susan’s photographs were not the product of her mind, but simply represented reality “as it is”

However, although the ghost hunters mediums of evidence were objective, accessible, and overall characterized as the “correct format for accumulation of knowledge”, evidence also had its epistemic demerits. Evidence was rarely self-evident. Throughout this chapter we have seen how evidence, and its conceived advantages with reflecting reality, perhaps somewhat ironically, was challenged by the one tenet objective evidence was to oppose; namely subjectivity. Photographs and audio footage was often of such an ambiguous character, that there was more than one way to read into them. The cameras and recording devices had the ability to “let nature speak for itself”. However, an anomaly appearing in evidence did rarely speak for itself, and due to this ambiguity the subject (the ghost hunter) was often dependent on “speaking for it”.

What was not made explicit by the camera or tape recorder, had to be categorized somehow, and it the ghost hunters judgment, debunking skills and individual interpretations were needed to fill the ontological cracks. Although somewhat unwelcome, subjectivity played a significant role when it came

to analyzing evidence. On one side subjectivity would be what made evidence “come to life”; more precisely what made the anomalous shapes, figures and sounds would become conceptualized as paranormal entities visiting from beyond the grave. And on the other side subjectivity was considered a serious threat, potentially conceptualizing an anomaly a ghost, when in fact it was not.

As for one final remark: It appeared the emphasis on obtaining and presenting evidence connected with the intellectual, professional and “scientific” ideals embodied in the ghost hunter institution.

Complementary, the personal experience - as entailed in the term - connected with the individual on a more personal level. At the end of the day, it was not just the experience that was personal, but also its inherent meaning. Since personal experiences were mostly neglected in terms of paranormal research, they connected more with individual epistemologies, and pursuit of truth. Forget not how many of my informants got involved in ghost hunting because of personal experiences that they had had, and that they wanted to explain. Their experiences weren’t “just that” to them. Experiencing a ghost first hand would have more of an impact to a ghost hunter’s view on reality than would spotting a ghostly manifestation on a photograph. As Donald put it:

“How do you know that there is something, some spiritual being in this world? You don’t know except for maybe a feeling that you have, or a personal experience that you have. But it’s not because you saw a picture of something, or you recorded a voice that you can’t explain. That’s not what makes people believers.”





## **Chapter 8: Conclusion**

In this thesis I have provided broad insight into the epistemology of contemporary ghost hunting; and the epistemic struggles ghost hunters had to go through distinguishing the real from the not real - actual hauntings from imaginary hauntings, paranormal experiences from mundane experiences, and authentic ghostly evidence from misrepresentative evidence. I have introduced the essentials of contemporary ghost hunting – its recent rise in popularity, the respective ghost hunting communities, the prominence of “scientific equipment” within the practice, as well as the rationalistic backbone ghost hunting seemed to be built upon. Throughout the paper I have introduced the reader to the “how do you know” of ghost hunting in general: the significance of the equipment, the objective formats of evidence, the emphasis on debunking, and undermining of subjective experience. The thesis has been based on phenomenology inquiry into significant aspects of ghost hunting epistemology - investigation, ghost gadgets, EVP-sessions, debunking, personal experiences and evidence.

Initially I presented a rundown on the theories of disenchantment and re-enchantment; two views on modernity that have formed the underlying theme throughout the paper. It has been illustrated how the practice of ghost hunting seemingly built on tenets of disenchantment as well as tenets of (re)enchantment. The ghost hunter epistemology based itself greatly on philosophical legacy from the scientific revolution; whereby rational judgment, objectivity and instrumental reason was of great significance. This was perhaps most evident by (1) the ghost hunters efforts to rationalize mysterious occurrences and claims - the emphasis on debunking and incorporating ghostly phenomena into a rational, scientific scheme; (2) the ghost hunters efforts to distinguish subjective deceptions from objective facts – viewing subjective experience as generally unreliable; and (3) the ghost hunters efforts to prove and validate ghostly presences with help of neutral mediums of representation - such as recording apparatus, photography and various environmental detectors.

Simultaneously, ghost hunting also based itself greatly on (re)enchantment. Ghost hunting provided much room for imagination and playful speculation, and throughout investigations the haunted sites of Northern California became animated into locations of spectral possibilities. Structures of enchantment contributed to giving the otherwise invisible and imperceivable realms of ghosts a somewhat recognizable form. The dark and haunted locations became charged with a supernatural presence, produced by the ghost hunters acts, speculations and ambitions. Moreover, the role of the various ghost gadgets seemed to represent another form of enchantment. The different apparatus, which were meant for accurate and objective representations of reality, was themselves attributed supernatural qualities. It

became evident that the ghost hunter groups I studied carried on the traditions of “media-mysticism”, as Potts (2004) coined it.

Although the underlying theme in this thesis has concerned the tenets of disenchantment and (re)enchantment, the main focus has been the epistemology of ghost hunting. Therefore I decided to name the thesis after a quote that I mean capture the very essence of ghost hunter epistemology. Namely the words Fairen uttered at my very first day in the field: “I am not sure what is real or what my mind wants to be real”. Let us now take a moment to sum up this thesis by referencing these few words

The “real” and “what the mind wants to be real” represented - to Fairen and her fellow ghost hunters - two different realities. One reality – the “real” – represented what is objectively shared and universally true. The other reality- “what the mind wants to be real” – represented a subjective, potentially misleading representation of reality. To each of these two realities belonged a certain type of ghost. In one belonged the “real” ghosts, and in the other belonged the “imaginary” ghosts. The “real” ghosts were “hunted” by the ghost hunters so they could expose the truth, whilst the “imaginary” ghosts were avoided so they would not distort the truth.

The mind housed the “imaginary” ghosts; the ghosts that gave the impression they were real, when in fact they were not. These were the ghosts that belonged in the wishful thoughts of a terrified little boy, within the past experiences of a gullible ghost hunter, and in the paranoid mind of an old lady - who could not tell her cat from a supernatural imposter. “Imaginary” ghosts were either “made up”, “dreamt up” or “wished up”, and existed only in the minds of those who were incapable or unwilling to see through them. Imaginary ghosts resided only in the subjective sphere.

The objective reality housed the “real” ghosts. The ghosts that were measurable document-able, recordable and verifiable; and that persisted independently of anyone’s imagination. These ghosts haunted the material world, and not (just) the human mind. Unlike the imaginary ghost, the real ghosts were not accessible by use of the imagination. Only with help of rational judgment could the real ghosts be recognized. That is, the “real” ghosts achieved their status as “real” when no rational explanation could be found for their respective manifestations. The “real” ghost was the type of ghost that produced the sound of a bell at the bar in Old Sacramento; granted it “survived” *The Flying*

*monkeys* thorough debunking attempts. It was a “real” ghost that had caused Roses “wow-experience” in the sugar mill; on the basis it had manifested in such a unique and powerful manner that Rose found it only explainable within a paranormal scheme. Moreover, it was “real” ghosts that had manifested in Susan’s photographs. Her photo camera legitimized her experiences, and proved that the ghosts did not simply belong in her mind; they were indisputably “real”. In all cases the respective ghostly manifestations were conceived by the particular ghost hunters as not belonging in the subjective sphere. To the ghost hunter in question the respective ghosts could not possibly have been “made up”, “dreamt up” nor “wished up”. They were “real”; to them, at least.

Both “real” and “imagined” ghosts played their respective roles in the practice of ghost hunting. The “real” ghosts were of great significance as they kept the ghost hunter engaged in the practice. The ghosts that had passed the test as “real” (like in the cases above) would inspire the ghost hunters to engage in their practice; for the sake of their own and others enlightenment. Whether the ghost hunters had the ambitions to experience ghosts for themselves, or prove to others that ghosts were in fact real, the “real” ghosts was what motivated them. And for those, like Fairen, who doubted the existence of ghosts, the mere idea of the “real” ghosts was what kept the practice intriguing. Moreover, to paranormal research the “real” ghosts was what should convince the skeptics; the indisputable evidence – “the perfect photograph” – were what should prove that ghosts did not (exclusively) reside in the subjective sphere.

Also the “imaginary” ghost had its rightful place in the ghost hunter practice, granted it was kept within its categorical confines – ergo not confused with the “real” ghosts. The imaginary ghost was what would flavor the investigations, when the “real” ghosts would not manifest themselves. Until that point the imagined ghost would fill the darkness of a haunted site, it would become associated with any mysterious occurrence taking place there, and its presence would be continuously speculated about. The imaginary ghosts would “come to life” through structures of enchantment. They would be animated in to the physical space, through the ghost hunters’ ambitions to communicate with ghosts, through creation of a enchanted atmosphere, and through the sharing of experiences, anticipations and assumptions. Any imaginary ghost could be attributed a name, a mood, a destiny, a presence. However, until the ghost would turn up on a photograph or recording, respond coherently to the ghost hunter’s instructions, or manifest in a manner avoid of a natural explanation, the ghost would remain “imaginary” in the ghost hunters’ eyes. They belonged in the subjective sphere insofar, there was no valid indication or proof that they were “real”.

Unfortunately, distinguishing the real ghosts from the imaginary ghosts could prove challenging to the ghost hunters; at times even impossible. Fairens words (“I am not sure what is real or what my mind wants to be real”) underline how the lines between the objectively real and the subjectively deceptive may appear blurred; and that this posed a problem when it comes to settling the ghost within its rightful category. What seemed to come out of this ambiguity was the type of ghost that was classified as neither real nor imaginary; but the manifestations of which, were categorized as “unknown”, “unexplained” or “questionable”. This was the type of ghost that failed to convince Fairen to fully accept the phenomenon as genuine; the type of ghost that did interact with Charlotte’s camera in the locker rooms, yet which she would never know if was really the case; the ghosts that had manifested through many of Tracy’s personal experiences, but that had on her side only become subject to doubt and skepticism; the ghosts that revealed themselves through client’s personal testimonies, yet which could not be denied or verified by any respective ghost hunter group; the ghost that manifested in the photograph captured at the Woodland Opera House, but which only became questioned by the members of *The Flying Monkeys*. These “unknown” ghosts, and their respective manifestations, seemed to balance perfectly on the edge between the real and imagined - between the objective and the subjective sphere.

Although “unknown” ghostly manifestations would frequently become subject to doubt, hesitation and skepticism, these “unknowns” were perhaps what kept the practice alive. One may ask oneself, what would have made ghost hunting so appealing had it not been for these unknowns? Hypothetically, what would happen if there was developed a ghost gadget that allowed for a precise and direct communication between ghost and ghost hunter? And a device that gave the ghost hunter the opportunity to successfully record and depict ghosts on command. The haunted locations of Northern California would become tangible, predictable and transparent; as the whereabouts of the ghosts that linger there would always be known; their otherwise unpredictable and ambiguous actions would be predicted and understood; the questions regarding who haunts the place could be answered in an instant. The haunted places of the world would lose its enchantment, as the ghosts - the supernatural beings that inhabits these places - would become fully disenchanting. The ghost which is based around mystery, invisibility, unpredictability and thrill would lose all its enchanting qualities. The paranormal entity would become normalized. The supernatural being would become categorized as a natural being. The “unknowns” would turn into “knowns”. Most importantly, the ghost hunter would not really have anything left to “hunt” for; neither ghosts nor the truth about ghosts.

A world of “unknowns” holds no actual barriers nor limits; only potential. This potential can only be limited by imagination. In this respect, the unknowns of ghost hunting was perhaps what kept the practice alive. On one hand, these unknowns made ghost hunting an ongoing endeavor. It allowed for the ghost hunter groups to continuously seek out new locations to investigate; and the mysteries of death and the afterlife were kept alive. On the other hand the unknowns contributed to keep the practice intriguing. It was in a sense an appeal with having a personal experience, yet not knowing what to make of it. It was appealing to find an anomaly in a photograph or on a piece of audio, not knowing what it represented - only there was something there. There was an appeal with not knowing whether what the ghost hunter had heard, seen or felt was real, or just the product of his or her imagination. There was an appeal with not being aware of what could be lurking around one in the dark; not knowing what it could be, where it could be, what intentions it had, or what it was capable of. Although most ghost hunters got into ghost hunting for the sake of personal enlightenment, many kept involving themselves as a consequence of never becoming fully enlightened. The truth was often out of reach - and that was much of the appeal with ghost hunting. This is perhaps why ghost hunters preferred to hunt for ghosts, not during the light of day, but in pitch black. By situating themselves in darkness, they deliberately blinded themselves to the realities that surrounded them.

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