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Narratives

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CARNAL KNOWLEDGE: THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF SEXUAL TRAUMA IN WITCHES' SABBATHS, SATANIC RITUAL ABUSE, AND ALIEN ABDUCTION NARRATIVES

Joseph Laycock

ABSTRACT

There are strong similarities between the confessions taken from accused witches in early modern Europe, the testimony of Satanic ritual abuse taken by modern therapists, and accounts of alien abduction given under hypnosis. In each of these narratives, a subject describes horrible sexual transgressions performed on them at the hand of a mysterious other: the thorny penis of the Devil, the bizarre anal insertions of Satanists, and the mysterious probing of aliens. The motive behind these sexual acts is never revealed and the existence of the perpetrators is usually in doubt. This article suggests that sexual trauma serves an epistemological function. For such apparent victims, a belief in demons, Satanists, or aliens provides a meaningful worldview, and narratives of sexual transgressions maintain and even compound these beliefs. "Carnal knowledge"—knowledge through sexual encounters—is privileged above visual or auditory encounters, and is therefore more useful for constructing meaningful cosmologies in which human beings may interact with the divine. Carnal knowledge was a privileged form of epistemology in pre-Christian cultures. Since the days of the early Christian Church and the equation of sexuality with sin, carnal knowledge has survived in the form of masochistic and traumatic sexual encounters.

THE PROBLEM

There are strange similarities between the confessions taken from accused witches in early modern Europe, testimony of Satanic ritual abuse (SRA) taken by therapists on behalf of children and adults, and accounts of alien abduction given under hypnosis. In each of these narratives, a subject describes horrible sexual transgressions performed on them at the hand of a mysterious other: the thorny penis of the Devil, the bizarre anal insertions of Satanists, and the mysterious probing of aliens. The motive behind these acts is never revealed

and the existence of the perpetrators is usually in doubt. While these narratives exhibit variation and do not always contain penetration, the sexual elements are so common and the similarities so stark, that several scholars have attempted to account for them. David Frankfurter in his book on SRA notes parallels to UFO abductions and interprets the similarity as “a fantasy in search of an appropriate ‘reality.’”¹ Michael Shermer addresses all three narratives in *Why People Believe Weird Things*. He attributes the recurring themes of penetration simply to the fact that humans are highly sexual beings, whose mating habits are unconstrained by biological rhythms or the cycle of the seasons.² This article submits that the sexual content of these narratives is not only a reflection of human sexuality but is actually an epistemological necessity to render them credible. Sexual encounters, as a way of knowing, are regarded as somehow more reliable than mere sightings. Descriptions of sexual encounters with mysterious others is necessary to the true function of these narratives—that of constructing a cosmology inhabited by unseen and supernatural forces.

Walter Stephens, in his book *Demon Lovers*, suggests that early modern theologians were motivated to take confessions of diabolical copulation because of their own doubts about the reality of the supernatural.³ In the early modern period, it was understood that simply seeing or hearing the Devil could be a hallucination. “Carnal knowledge,” however, was viewed as an irrefutable form of evidence. Only by creating an archive of confessions describing copulation with demons in physical space could the reality of demons (and therefore angels) be proved. For these theologians, the persecution of witches was a means to an end. This article extends Stephens’s theory, arguing that carnal knowledge has been an important tool of meaning making since ancient times and continues to be so today. The fact that modern uses of carnal knowledge in the West carry connotations of torture and supernatural evil appears to be attributable to the transformation of pagan cosmologies at the hands of early Christian apologists.

Stephens’s insight into early modern witch theory can easily be extended to explain the cosmological issues at stake in modern debates over SRA and alien abduction: in each of these cases we find a group concerned with proving the existence of a disputed order of beings. The narratives of carnal knowledge are created through a dialectic in which an expert and an experiencer work together. The constructed testimony of the experiencer—if it is suitably intimate and traumatic—carries serious epistemological force. In the case of SRA, carnal knowledge has won out over material evidence and a rationalist worldview even in modern courtrooms. Stephens’s critics have suggested that this

theory of “repressed skepticism” in early modern Europe is part of a narrative of secularization in which scientific rationalism is a historical inevitability.⁴ By extending the theory to abduction and SRA narratives, however, we see that appeals to carnal knowledge are not a vestigial form of supernaturalism, but an ongoing tool of meaning making.

Witch theory, alien abduction, and SRA are presented here as manifestations of a single phenomenon that extends across cultures, which I describe as “carnal knowledge.”⁵ This is not to argue, however, that carnal knowledge is the only factor that shapes these narrative traditions. Other explanations of the similarities between the narratives have included the medical explanation of “sleep paralysis”⁶ and the structural-functionalist interpretation of social scapegoating.⁷ These theories serve to explain other facets of these phenomena, but they do not account for the sexual elements. Narratives of embodied sexual encounters carry a profound epistemological authority: to “know” another through a sexual relationship is to possess a knowledge that is both intimate and beyond challenge. The McMartin preschool trial, which went on for seven years despite the absence of any material evidence, is a stark example of this authority. This connection between sexuality and knowledge cannot be explained rationally, because it is not a rationalist epistemology. Nonetheless it can be found throughout Western thought and is suggested in the very languages of biblical literature.⁸ Carnal knowledge is typically not applied toward practical problems, but toward epistemological and ontological ones, especially inscribing the relationship between human beings and the divine. This process of creating meaningful cosmologies around narratives of sexual encounters can be seen from classical myths of sexual congress between mortals and gods to witch theory to alien conspiracy theories.

The reason *why* carnal knowledge carries this authority is unknown but likely has its origin in human biology and psychology. Marcel Mauss and Emile Durkheim argue in *Primitive Classification* that the way a society organizes knowledge is a direct reflection of its social organization, meaning that relationships between things are modeled on relationships between people. The kinship system is the basis for social organization and by extension the social construction of knowledge. The authors explain that “logical relations are thus, in a sense, domestic relations.”⁹ As kinship is ultimately a function of biology, it stands to reason that intercourse and epistemology remain linked: if sexual encounters can be imagined or are otherwise subject to doubt, then connections of kinship are also subject to doubt. This undermines the basis for all

other classifications and the world falls into chaos. An expanded theory of the link between sexuality and epistemology would ideally combine the sociology of knowledge with the findings of evolutionary psychology, but this is beyond the purview of this article.

Generally, the narratives associated with carnal knowledge require a dialectic between an experiencer and an interlocutor. In each case, we find such a pair: witch and inquisitor, abductee and hypnotist, child and therapist. John Mack, a Harvard psychiatrist who conducted hypnotic therapy with abductees, concedes that the information retrieved during his sessions is “co-creative” in the sense that he has an active role in eliciting the narrative from the abductee.¹⁰ This co-creative construction of narrative is a potent formula, and analogues can be found in numerous ancient forms of mediumship and prophecy.

It is also interesting that the entities described through these dialectics always seem to resemble the interlocutor: Bridget Brown points out that aliens often serve as a stand in for doctors and therapists.¹¹ In fact, therapists and aliens appear to “collapse into each other”: one has the power to make the abductee forget, the other to make her remember.¹² Similarly, in accounts of witches’ Sabbaths, the rituals of the witches—being baptized in the name of Satan, parodies of the Eucharist, and so forth—appear as a sort of shadow to those of the Church. Finally, the day-care providers accused of SRA are often a mirror of their accusers: the alleged Satanists are charged with having their own techniques and devices to ensure children’s silence, just as the therapists have techniques for coaxing children to talk. Again, relationships between people form the basis for other relationships, in this case between the experiencer and imagined beings.

Mauss and Durkheim argue that the purpose of “primitive classifications” is not practical but speculative, to “make intelligible the relations that exist between things.”¹³ In each case examined here, carnal knowledge was used to serve a function that Peter Berger calls “world maintenance.”¹⁴ The imagined forces that are the product of these narratives serve to repair a vacuum of meaning: witch theorists used carnal knowledge to counter modernist doubts about the existence of the supernatural; abduction narratives establish a meaningful cosmology for abductees; and SRA created a “moral panic” that galvanized the modern world into a Manichean battle between good and evil. Thus, although these narratives have produced horror, demons, and very real human suffering, their ultimate function is to produce a state of psychic security.

WITCHCRAFT AND DEMONOLOGY

The Phenomenon

Estimates of witch trials have been exaggerated both by the witch-hunters themselves and by historians. Brian Levack considers a realistic estimate to be 110,000 witch trials resulting in 60,000 executions.¹⁵ Although many cultures believe in the existence of individuals more or less analogous to the European witch, the historical episode known as “the great witch hunt” arose suddenly and was largely unprecedented. Prior to the fifteenth century, the Western Christian world thought in terms of heretics, *maleficium* (black magic), and demons; however, there was not a single composite category “witch.”¹⁶ Contrary to popular understanding, many in the ranks of the Church denied the existence of witchcraft. Such nonbelievers are specifically described in the texts of witch theorists, including the most famous of these works, the *Malleus Maleficarum* or *Hammer of Witches*, published in 1487 by Heinrich Kramer.¹⁷

Along with the new category of “witch,” a new group of theologians arose, referred to as “witch theorists.” Witch theory was primarily the realm of the literate and ruling elites. While peasants believed in the reality of witchcraft, the demonological theories of the witch theorists were probably incomprehensible to them. Levack speculates that peasants were likely not as frightened of witchcraft as were the theologians.¹⁸ Witch theory was predicated on a new understanding of the Devil. Early modern theologians, including Kramer, had a sort of dual understanding of the Devil’s power: the Devil was at the same time a source of transcendent evil and yet relatively powerless in the affairs of daily life. Therefore, they concluded that the Devil could actually do very little without the aid of a witch.¹⁹

The evil done by witches was known as *maleficium*. In Kramer’s work, *maleficium* does not refer simply to black magic; it is occult harm that can be wrought only through the cooperation of a witch and a demon through a contractual relationship. Additionally, many witch theorists believed that the Devil commemorated these pacts by leaving a distinctive mark on the witch.²⁰ This mark was the only empirically observable evidence to support a witch’s confession. Structurally, it is identical to the various implants and scars discovered by abductees.

As Stephens observes, witchcraft was regarded as inherently sexual. Kramer believed that witchcraft and sexual immorality were necessary complements to each other.²¹ The *Malleus Maleficarum* states that sexual congress with demons

is a categorical requirement for being a witch: “Mark well, too, that among other things [witches] have to do four deeds for the increase of the perfidy, that is, to deny the Catholic faith in whole or in part through verbal sacrilege, to devote themselves body and soul [to the Devil], to offer up to the Evil One himself infants not yet baptized, and to persist in diabolic filthiness through carnal acts with incubus and succubus demons.”²² Note that actually casting maleficium is not a requirement, but intercourse with demons is. Further, Kramer speculates that through witches, the world is now becoming full of demon/human hybrids.²³ This, too, has an analogue with modern alien mythology and conspiracy theories about creating transgenic hybrids.

Who exactly are these demons that fornicate with witches? Hans Peter Broedel suggests that the incubi and succubi of Christian tradition were almost certainly demonized forms of nature spirits, poltergeists, and house spirits.²⁴ Greek pagans referred to such intermediary beings as *daimons*. Classical myth is replete with stories of sexual congress between mortal and divine beings. The transition from *daimon* to demon can be seen in *City of God*, where Augustine states that angels and demons are not capable of “sexual union.” By this, Augustine appears to have meant procreation: he still describes incubi ravishing mortal women, but presumably these unions could not produce offspring.

Thomas Aquinas continued to pick at this problem in *Summa Theologiae*. Christian demonology still had to account for a story in Genesis wherein angels impregnate mortal women, begetting a race of giants called the Nephilim.²⁵ His solution added two important tenets to the early modern understanding of demons. First, he argued that demons were incorporeal but could form temporary bodies by inspissating air.²⁶ Incidentally, a similar theory was arrived at by an abductee who commented that in order to perform an abduction, aliens must first transform into a physical body, “which is very painful for them.”²⁷

Second, Aquinas suggested that incubi and succubi are actually a single order of beings that can switch genders at will: incapable of creating their own semen, they extract it from men in the form of a succubus and then create a male body in order to deposit sperm into a woman as an incubus.²⁸ The supernatural speed of demons allowed them to perform this feat before the semen lost its potency. Levack adds that this tenet of demonology explains confessions from witches in which the phallus and semen of the Devil are described as cold. He rejects the work of earlier historians who interpreted this detail as a reference to actual events in which witches were penetrated by stone phalluses—perhaps left over from a pagan fertility rite.²⁹ This new take on demons circumvented the obstacle created by Augustine—human beings could once more claim carnal knowledge

of divine beings. But this move came with a price: unlike the ancient Greeks, early modern theologians believed that only a diabolical entity would deign to physically interact with a mortal.

Constructing the Narrative

Broedel notes that the only firsthand accounts of demons come from witches themselves, who confessed under torture. Their descriptions of their demon lovers were colored by popular ideas of magic and the supernatural.³⁰ Accounts of demons, created through this dialectical process, were essentially a composite of theological speculation and folk tradition. Broedel concludes that witchcraft was about understanding the diabolical, and not the other way around.³¹

Walter Stephens builds on this observation with special attention to the sexual component of the narratives. He notes that in witchcraft trials, questions about witches' Sabbaths where copulation with demons occurred were not asked until after torture had been introduced. Further, questions pertaining to interaction with demons were usually scripted, part of a long list of stock questions to ask accused witches. Finally, he notes that these demonological questions were incomprehensible to most people. Peasants and lay people feared the witch because of her ability to cause harm through occult means, not her relationship to demons.³²

Stephens's thesis is that early modern theologians were motivated to induce confessions about diabolical copulation because of their own doubts about the reality of the supernatural. These doubts are addressed in numerous witchcraft treatises from the period. One example appears in the work of Nicholas Jacquier, a French Dominican inquisitor, who wrote *Flagellum haereticorum fascinatorum* (*Scourge of Heretical Enchanters*) in 1458. Jacquier describes how witches would be bedridden for days after their sexual union with demons and concludes, "Thus the gatherings of these perverse witches are not an illusion formed by the imagination but a practice that is real, corporeal, and personal." Another French Dominican, Jean Vineti, addresses these concerns in *Tractatus contra demonum invocatores*, or *Treatise Against Those Who Invoke Devils*, written sometime between 1450 and 1470. He dismisses "the presumptuous and heretical-sounding opinion of those who say that demons do not exist, except in the imaginations of the common people, so that a man imputes to a demon the terrors that he has impressed on himself by the exercise of his own imagination, and that on account of a vehement imagination, some figures can appear to the senses exactly as a man has thought of them, and then it is believed that he

is seeing demons." Stephens offers evidence that even the *Malleus Maleficarum* was written "to prove that demons are not imaginary and that their copulation with witches proves that they are real."³³

In describing the erotic epistemology of witchcraft trials, Stephens analyses two confessions describing copulation with demons. Walpurga Hausmännin, a midwife who was burned at the stake in southern Germany in 1587, was made to confess to propositioning a coworker for a tryst. Only after sex did the coworker reveal himself as a demon: one of his feet was a cloven hoof and one of his hands was described as a sort of wooden claw. Despite this, Walpurga yielded to her demon lover's advances the next night, when he again appeared as the coworker. Johannes Junius, a chief magistrate executed in 1628, was made to give a similar confession: he was approached by a woman in an orchard and, after sleeping with her, she turned into a goat and "bleated" that she/it would break his neck unless he renounced God. Stephens points out that the interrogators could have forced the accused to say *anything*—including that they knew from the start that their lovers were demons. He writes, "Instead they accused them—or, rather, credited them—with *acquiring* the knowledge that they were interacting with demons."³⁴ Thus they were really confessing to a revelation that was the result of carnal knowledge.

A similar revelatory narrative appears in the writings of Dominican theologian Jordanes de Bergamo. Jordanes tells of a hermit who was seduced by a beautiful girl. After this tryst, the girl announced, "Behold what you have done, for I am not a girl or a woman but a demon." The hermit, now drained of all of his semen, died a month later.³⁵ (Presumably his semen was used to impregnate witches at a nearby Sabbath.) This sexual revelation has also appeared in abduction narratives, although with less frequency. Susan Clancy worked with an abductee who described having sex with a woman who suddenly "switched" into her alien form, at which point he "tossed her off" his lap and ran out the door.³⁶ While this story unnerved Clancy, it would probably have been pleasing to early modern demonologists.

The Function of the Narrative

Witch theorists used carnal knowledge as a form of world maintenance. In Stephens's reading of witch narratives, the "damage" that must be repaired was the modern doubt about the reality of demons. If the existence of demons could not be proved, then the existence of angels, and indeed a provident deity, also fell into doubt. By the early modern period, scriptural evidence and theological

proofs were apparently no longer sufficient to shore up faith in the supernatural. Even sightings of demons were not sufficient for the reasons outlined by Vineti—such sightings could be the hallucinations of superstitious peasants. Only accounts of physical interaction provided suitable evidence for the existence of demons. Despite the fact that these theologians saw sex as sinful, erotic knowledge somehow remained the highest form of epistemology. Only by creating an archive of confessions describing copulation with demons in physical space could the reality of demons (and therefore angels) be proved. The inquisitors were actually demonologists for whom the persecution of witches was a means to this end.

The succubus continued to fascinate long after the great witch hunt and the Inquisition had subsided. In the early modern period, only theologians actively sought direct knowledge of the diabolical. Now everyone is free to confront the diabolical in his or her own attempt to draw nearer to the transcendent. Michael Cuneo's *American Exorcism* includes an account by the self-appointed Catholic demonologists Ed and Lorraine Warren, who were summoned to help a couple in West Pittston, Pennsylvania. The couple complained of repeatedly being "raped" by a succubus and an incubus. They contacted the Warrens after the diocese of Scranton refused to perform an exorcism.³⁷ The role of the Warrens in interpreting their clients' experiences and cocreating diabolical encounters is yet another expression of dialectic associated with carnal knowledge.³⁸ Fortunately, it is no longer necessary to persecute or torture women in order to achieve this dialectic. As with alien abduction, interlocutors need not resort to coercion in the construction of modern exorcism narratives.

ALIEN ABDUCTION

The Phenomenon

Many theorists—academics as well as UFOlogists—have noted the connections between accounts of alien abduction and older stories of visitations by demons.³⁹ The author and abductee Whitley Strieber draws parallels between his experience and accounts of succubi in early modern witchcraft texts, including the *Malleus Maleficarum*.⁴⁰ Similarly, Clancy quotes a Muslim abductee from Palestine thus: "The Koran talks about how people can be occupied by aliens. They can live in them. In my country, people are being occupied by these creatures. In your country, I saw a documentary on demonic possession.

They are not demons—they are aliens. There is a consistent pattern.”⁴¹ These theorists are correct in that there is an underlying phenomenon behind these descriptions. While UFOlogists see this connection as evidence of otherworldly beings, however, psychologists and sociologists see an insight into human nature.

Modern UFOlogy began in 1947 and is a product of the Cold War. In June of that year, a pilot named Kenneth Arnold experienced a sighting while flying near the Cascade Mountains in Washington State. He described nine glittering objects flying in V formation. He said they moved the way “a saucer would if you skipped it across the water.” Arnold was misquoted as seeing “flying saucers.”⁴² This started a rash of sightings of literal flying saucers. Many early UFOlogists did not assume these were alien spaceships. Rather, they were alarmed that these sightings might be aircraft representing a foreign power.

The same month that Arnold saw the first modern UFOs, a rancher near Roswell, New Mexico, found a pile of debris. According to an article appearing in the *Roswell Daily Record* on July 9, the debris contained such banal material as tinfoil, paper, and tape. While the actual source of this debris was never confirmed, it was clearly human-made and of terrestrial origin. The legend of the Roswell crash emerged decades later through the tabloids. In February 1978 an article in the *National Enquirer* first reported that the debris had been a spacecraft. In 1981 the supermarket tabloid *The Globe* added that alien corpses had been retrieved.⁴³ In 1995 Fox aired its “Roswell autopsy footage.” This material was sold to the network by a man in Britain, who claims he found it while searching for footage of Elvis during his military service in the late 1950s.⁴⁴

The first report of an “alien abduction” occurred in 1961. Clancy notes, however, that the United States had been primed for this experience by a decade of alien invasion movies. Notably, the 1953 film *Invaders from Mars* featured aliens that kidnap people from a small American town, anesthetize them using special lights, and implant them with mind-control devices. This film also contains the abduction trope of a woman’s navel being pierced with a long needle.⁴⁵

Betty and Barney Hill were an interracial couple who recalled being abducted by aliens during the civil rights era. Betty was a white social worker and her husband, Barney, was a black postal employee. In 1961 they experienced a phenomenon known as “missing time” while driving to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, from a vacation in Quebec. Over the following days, numerous anomalies began to accumulate, suggesting that something more had happened: Barney felt a strange compulsion to examine his genitals, the dress Betty had been wearing was inexplicably torn and had traces of a strange, pink residue, and so forth. Finally, in 1964, they underwent hypnosis to retrieve their lost memories.

Out of these sessions came a narrative in which they had been taken aboard a spaceship and medically probed by aliens with large heads and slanted eyes. Georg Ronnevig has described the Hill abduction as “the mythic first” for all future abduction narratives.⁴⁶

Clancy offers strong evidence that the memories “recovered” by the Hills were actually a pastiche of science-fiction movies. Betty was a fan of this material and had already read several books on the flying saucer phenomenon before her abduction. Her memory of a long needle being inserted into her navel could have been borrowed from *Invaders from Mars*. The description of the aliens, complete with large heads and slanted eyes, may have been inspired by an episode of ABC’s *Outer Limits* called “The Bellerose Shield,” which aired twelve days before the Hills’ hypnosis session.⁴⁷

Only twenty-six other cases of abduction came to light between 1967 and 1972. This changed in 1975 when NBC broadcast a made-for-TV movie about the Hills. By 1980 there were about two hundred known cases of alien abduction. This new archive of testimony caused a change in UFOlogy. While investigators had focused primarily on UFO sightings since the 1950s, they now directed their attention predominately to studying abductees.⁴⁸ This shift is significant because it represents a new epistemological framework for the existence of aliens. Like the early modern witch theorists, UFOlogists had given up trying to find empirical evidence of aliens and had turned instead to the dialectic of carnal knowledge.

Narratives of alien abduction have always emphasized sexual trauma.⁴⁹ Betty Hill interpreted the needle in her abdomen as a “pregnancy test,” and Barney described how the aliens collected a sperm sample by placing a device over his groin.⁵⁰ Barney also reported a fingerlike device pressing against “the base of his spine.” Bridget Brown believes that this detail became the basis for the trope of the “anal probe,” which has become “a standard and ubiquitous feature of alien abduction.”⁵¹

In the late 1990s and 2000s, abduction mythology evolved further to include theories of “transgenic beings” or human/alien hybrids.⁵² The UFOlogist Budd Hopkins is largely credited with disseminating the theory that abductions are part of a genetic experiment. Hopkins and his colleague David M. Jacobs view the abductees’ unwilling participation in these experiments as a form of rape. Jacobs comments, “No matter how they handle the experience, all abductees have one thing in common: they are victims. Just as surely as women who are raped are victims of sexual abuse or soldiers can be victims of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, abductees are victims.”⁵³ This is essentially a re-creation of

the transgressive sexuality found in early modern demonology. Christopher Partridge has argued that the malevolent aliens of abductee narratives are heavily indebted to Christian demonology. In fact, he finds that UFO enthusiasts are particularly fascinated by the story of the Nephilim, which they have reinterpreted as ancient human/alien hybrids.⁵⁴ Conspiracy theories involving such beings replicate the concern in the *Malleus Maleficarum* that the spawn of incubi are populating the world. Even the tableau of the nocturnal witches' Sabbaths seems to have been re-created with the aliens' technological phallus replacing the Devil's icy penis. Patricia Barbeito explains that abduction narratives are now "replete with images of women, and to a lesser extent men, lying naked, penetrated by a variety of metallic objects and attached to machines."⁵⁵

Without these lurid details, it is possible that interest in UFOs might not have survived the Cold War. In 1997 a CNN poll indicated that 65 percent of respondents thought that UFOs had actually visited Earth.⁵⁶ While this was probably due to the feedback loop described by Shermer,⁵⁷ carnal knowledge may have also been a factor. Certainly terrified and weeping abductees made better fodder for television shows than blurry photographs.

Constructing the Narrative

Many theorists have postulated a link between alien abduction and the rise of psychotherapy at the end of the twentieth century. Wendy Kaminer attributes both alien abduction and SRA to what she calls "the recovery movement." The recovery movement, according to Kaminer, emphasizes "healing" over reason and feelings over evidence.⁵⁸ The entire alien abduction phenomenon is premised on an idea associated with psychotherapy: repressed memories. This is a hypothesized defense mechanism in which the mind responds to pain by rendering traumatic memories inaccessible to conscious awareness. The same mechanism is also essential to "uncovering" narratives of SRA. While the idea of repressed memories has its roots in Freudian psychology, most psychological research shows that traumatic events have the opposite effect on memory: rather than forgetting, most people find they are unable to stop thinking about them.⁵⁹ Most psychologists have now dismissed repressed "memories" as nothing but constructed fantasies. In *The Myth of Repressed Memory*, Elizabeth Loftus explains that memory is not analogous to a file folder or a computer hard drive located within the human brain, as is commonly imagined. Instead, she explains that the reality of memory is more malleable and evasive.

Curiously, she writes, "I must admit that memories are more of a spiritual than a physical reality."⁶⁰

Because memories of abduction are believed to be repressed, the only way they can be recovered is through hypnosis.⁶¹ This means that the majority of abduction narratives are the product of a dialectic between an experiencer and a hypnotist. One of the leaders of this movement was the Harvard psychologist John Mack, who heavily endorsed hypnosis as a tool for uncovering memories of alien abduction. Mack reportedly commented that when you are with a hypnotized patient you are "in the presence of a truth teller, a witness to a compelling, often sacred reality."⁶² Several theorists have noted that psychotherapy has begun to take on a quasi-religious role since the 1960s and 1970s.⁶³ Indeed, just as aliens have largely replaced demons, psychotherapists have replaced inquisitors as the interlocutors of carnal knowledge. While abductees come willingly to the hypnotist, they nevertheless undergo a process in which emotional and physical self-control are relinquished to another.⁶⁴

Because of this, abduction narratives invoke a very personal, embodied epistemology for which scientific rationalism is often no match. One abductee is quoted thus: "I know you think it sounds weird. Everyone does. I do too. But what you don't understand is that I know the abduction was real, so it doesn't matter what you think. What I felt that night was . . . overwhelming . . . terrifying. . . . There was something in the room with me. All I can say is that it happened to me, it didn't happen to you. . . . I felt them. Aliens."⁶⁵ Understandably, abductees are often hostile when confronted with discursive, rationalist epistemologies. Clancy describes an experience after an interview, in which she overheard an abductee in another room talking on her cell phone, saying, "And then she brings up this sleep paralysis shit. 'Oh, what really happened is sleep paralysis.' Riiight! How the fuck does she know? Did she have it happen to her?"⁶⁶

The Function of the Narrative

Skeptics who have met abductees often describe their surprise at how rational and intelligent they seem.⁶⁷ What motivates these individuals to seek out hypnosis? Perhaps a more important question is what motivates professionals to hypnotize people and archive their abduction narratives? An explanation of abduction narratives can be approached either as a social problem or through methodological individualism. While psychopathological explanations were once dominant, these appear to be waning. More recent interpretations view the phenomenon either as the product of changing social conditions or as an

individual quest for meaning. Either way, abduction narratives can be read as a use of carnal knowledge to restore a sense of meaning.

One popular theory is that alien mythology is a response to the stresses of the modern world. As early as the 1950s, Carl Jung speculated that sightings of flying saucers are tied to changes in the collective unconscious caused by the stress of the Cold War.⁶⁸ The link between a government conspiracy and alien powers that has become part of modern abduction mythology also points to the modern breakdown of the social order. At a conference on alien abduction at MIT, the audience was asked if they trusted aliens more than the military. The response was an enthusiastic “yes.”⁶⁹ Now that the threat of nuclear war has subsided, environmental devastation is rapidly taking its place in abduction narratives.⁷⁰

Another condition of modernity that may be fueling alien mythology (as well as reliance on carnal knowledge) is what Anthony Giddens calls “radical doubt.”⁷¹ Not only is the government no longer trustworthy, but no expert or media outlet is considered above suspicion. Jodi Dean writes, “I will argue that the phenomenon [belief in alien abduction] is symptomatic of a historical period during which people have come to feel increasingly divested of the ability or authority to know what is real or true about themselves and the world in which they live.”⁷² This condition of radical doubt may, in fact, be the reason for the survival of carnal knowledge into the modern era.

From the perspective of methodological individualism, numerous causes have been suggested for why one might seek help recovering memories of abduction. One explanation is that abductees are simply masochists who receive sexual gratification from being dominated and violated by aliens.⁷³ Bridget Brown adds that abduction narratives allow some people—particularly men—to explore dominatrix fantasies.⁷⁴ This interpretation could certainly be applied to *Communion*, in which Strieber describes being sexually penetrated by a female alien.⁷⁵ This theory can also be used to explain modern demonology. The Warrens’ description of their client being attacked by a succubus is highly pornographic. Cuneo quotes them thus: “A voluptuous young woman was on top of Jack, riding him in the position of sexual domination. . . . He lay there and simply watched the demon perform.”⁷⁶ Being the experiencer of carnal knowledge comes with what Foucault calls “speakers’ privilege.”⁷⁷ Not only can experiencers talk freely about their sexual encounters with an unseen other, they can describe orgasm during violent, transgressive sexual acts without shame or censure. This aspect of being an abductee may certainly be appealing to some.

But it would be myopic to conclude that abduction narratives are motivated solely by sexual titillation. Virtually all abductees come to attribute tremendous meaning to their experience. This is the function of world maintenance. Brown notes that the aliens *need* the abductees.⁷⁸ As frightening as their experience is, it signifies that their genetic material is of cosmic importance. Ronnevig takes this a step further and adds that abductees become “heroes in a cosmic soteriological project.”⁷⁹

Finally, Clancy describes an audio recording of an abductee under hypnosis that takes a religious turn. The tape began with cries of anguish as the abductee “relived” being probed by aliens. Then the abductee suddenly exclaimed, “Are you my Lord Jesus? I would recognize my Lord Jesus. I love you. God is love and I love you. . . . Oh praise God, praise God! I know I am not worthy.”⁸⁰ Many abductees ultimately arrive at a similar experience of transcendence or spiritual insight.⁸¹ This process through which abductees make sense of their experiences, gradually moving from rape to enlightenment, bears a similarity to the ascending steps of erotic knowledge as described by Socrates in the *Symposium*.⁸² Because the process of “recovering” abduction memories does not rely on coercion, it may well be the truest expression of pre-Christian carnal knowledge in the modern world.

While there is no shortage of scholarly literature about the alien abduction phenomenon, I have found little analysis of the motivation of the hypnotists, without which these narratives could not exist. This is especially odd considering that in the case of witch trials and Satanic panic, most of the inquiry focuses on the interlocutors and not on the experiencers. Stephens argues that John Mack and Heinrich Kramer were essentially engaged in the same project of proving the existence of an unseen order of beings.⁸³ This interpretation means that the hypnotists as well as their patients are engaged in a project of world maintenance.

SATANIC RITUAL ABUSE

The Phenomenon

It can be argued that the phenomenon known as “Satanic panic” is directly descended from the witch hunts of early modern Europe. The fear that society has been infiltrated by agents of Satan can be traced in America back to the Puritans. But belief in SRA—that Satanists are torturing and sexually abusing children for religious purposes—did not arise until the late twentieth century.

Stories of SRA sprang to life in the 1980s and experienced a slow decline throughout the 1990s. The SRA debunkers Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedeker give the following description of this belief:

According to a claim that has been promoted for more than a decade by preachers, police, prosecutors, psychotherapists, child-protection workers, and anti-pornography activists, there exists in this country—and, indeed, around the world—a massive conspiracy of secret satanist cults that have infiltrated everywhere into society, from the CIA to police stations to judges’ chambers and churches. The Devil worshipers have even secreted themselves in day-care centers and preschools, the story goes, where they pose as teachers. This prospect has been particularly frightening, for it is said that satanists consider youngsters attractive prey for rape and torture and easy recruits for their faith.⁸⁴

A description presented by a believer is, if anything, more fantastic. Valerie Sinason, a child psychotherapist, writes:

After eight months in which the patient [a woman in Sweden with “a severe learning disability”] described events that we found unbearable to hear, a picture was painted for us of one aspect of contemporary Satanism. Men and women, dedicated to Aleister Crowley’s guiding principle “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law,” worship Satan as their god in private houses or in churchyards and forests. In so doing they literally turn upside down any moral concept that comes with Christianity. They practice every sexual perversion that exists with animals, children and both sexes. They drink blood and urine and eat faeces and insects. They are involved in pornographic films and drug-dealing as a means of raising money. They are highly organized, successful in their secrecy and have a belief that through this pain and abuse they are getting closer to their god.⁸⁵

Sinason’s claim that she is describing only “one aspect of contemporary Satanism” warrants some exegesis. Colin Ross explains that there are five levels of Satanism. These are (1) isolated criminal deviants, (2) teenage dabblers, (3) noncriminal public Satanic churches, (4) narcosataniists,⁸⁶ and (5) orthodox, multigenerational Satanic cults.⁸⁷ Advocates of SRA claim that skeptics deliberately portray only the most fantastic manifestation of Satanism—which they still argue exists—as representative of the entire phenomenon.

Unlike alien abduction, psychologists who endorsed the reality of SRA found it fairly easy to disseminate their ideas through scholarly presses throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The psychological literature about SRA frequently contains claims about religion that are patently absurd to experts in religious studies or anthropology. For instance, it is often alleged that modern Satanism is the descendant of ancient Gnostic sects and various pagan religions.⁸⁸ In *Cult and Ritual Abuse*, James Randall Noblitt and Pamela Sue Perskin suggest that black masses really occur and are probably a descendant of the pagan rites described in James Frazer's *Golden Bough*.⁸⁹ One of the only scholars in the field of religion to advocate the reality of SRA is Carl Raschke. In his book on Satanism, *Painted Black*, he excoriates other academics for ignoring the obvious evidence of a Satanic conspiracy: "In their information retrieval and assessment, the so-called experts, however, have frequently lagged severely behind the lay public. There has been a tendency among some in the field of the study of religion, particularly those who should know better, to dismiss the entire subject as a tabloid-inspired wave of frenzy simulating audience reaction to, say, the late-night television series 'Tales from the Dark Side.' An analogy has also been drawn with UFO sightings."⁹⁰ Indeed.

Even if the historical claims about Satanism could be accepted, the claims of SRA narratives are almost as fantastic as those of witch confessions and abductees. Testimony from allegedly abused children included being raped and sodomized with weapons, being forced to perform in pornographic films, participating in the ritual slaughter of animals and infants, being abducted in vans, boats, and airplanes, and being told that their parents would be killed if this abuse were ever discovered.⁹¹ In the case of adults who recover memories of SRA, the parents themselves are often Satanists. One adult "survivor" remembered watching a baby being barbecued alive at a family picnic in a public park. Another came to believe that she had consumed the body parts of two thousand people a year.⁹² Shermer describes a woman who recalled being served a meal of dead babies "buffet style."⁹³ According to one expert, the CIA, NSA, the Mafia, and a cabal of business leaders all operate a network of Satanic cults. Nazi scientists created this conspiracy after World War II with the goal of (what else?) world domination.⁹⁴

While the scope of Satanic conspiracies theories has no bounds, at the center is always sexual trauma. Frankfurter notes that the published stories of SRA "placed sexual monstrosity at the center of the tableau of evil." He buttresses this point with an account of an initiation ritual from an alleged SRA survivor. After being baptized in the blood of freshly dismembered dog, the Satanists

approached her with a candle: “The long white taper was lit and ceremoniously held over me, wax was dripped carefully onto each of my nipples. It was then inserted, still lit, into my vagina. In this way I was welcomed into the faith.”⁹⁵ Save for the explanation that this is “a ritual,” the purpose behind these penetrations is no less mysterious than those of the abduction narratives.

Like alien abduction narratives, SRA is allied with psychotherapy and founded on the premise that traumatic memories are repressed. The first book on SRA was *Michelle Remembers*, published in 1980 by the psychotherapist Lawrence Pazder about his patient Michelle Smith. The dialectic between Pazder and Smith—who later married—is yet another example in which a narrative is cocreated through an embodied relationship. Smith suffered from depression and Pazder had been treating her for several years. In 1976, after having a miscarriage, Michelle commented that she needed to tell him something but did not know what it was. Pazder concluded that Michelle was repressing something, and not long after she developed a rash. This rash served the same epistemological function as the Devil’s marks found on witches or the various scars and marks found on abductees. Pazder concluded, “Her body was trying to speak and thereby relieve the pressure.”⁹⁶ Over the next fourteen months, Pazder and Smith underwent hundreds of hours of hypnosis. During this time, Smith repeatedly regressed to the age of five and relived experiences that allegedly took place in 1954.

Smith alleged that her mother had been part of a Satanic cult that had tortured her extensively. The atrocities described in *Michelle Remembers* actually surpass those of the *Malleus Maleficarum*: Smith had been tortured and sexually abused; she had also been forced to assist in murders and infanticide; she had been confined within an enormous effigy of Satan;⁹⁷ her teeth had been removed and horns and a tail had been surgically grafted onto her body. She had also witnessed the assemblage and animation of a Frankensteinian monster, hell, and Satan himself—whose return to Earth was prevented when Smith resisted her family’s Satanic conjuring ritual. What is astounding is that for Pazder, the fact that Smith had a rash was deemed sufficient empirical evidence to prove all these claims. Pazder identified the rash as a “body memory” of having been touched by Satan.⁹⁸ *Michelle Remembers* was eagerly consumed by Americans in the late twentieth century and may represent the ultimate triumph of carnal knowledge over rational epistemology in the modern era.

Michelle Remembers inspired a full-blown moral panic over SRA that led to actual prosecution that ruined lives. The most famous legal case of the SRA panic was the McMartin preschool trial, which lasted from 1984 to 1990.⁹⁹ In 1983

Judy Johnson accused a McMMartin teacher, Raymond Buckey, of sodomizing her child. In response, the police sent a form letter to approximately two hundred parents, asking them to question their children about such topics as sodomy, pornography, and bondage. In closing, the letter stated, "Do not contact or discuss the investigation with Raymond Buckey, any member of the accused defendant's family, or employees connected with the McMMartin Pre-School."¹⁰⁰ This resulted in hundreds of children—both current and former McMMartin students—being interviewed by an abuse therapy clinic. It was from sessions with therapists that allegations of SRA first began to occur. Children reported seeing McMMartin employees fly, being taken in hot-air balloons, and being led to tunnels under the school.¹⁰¹ Eventually eight employees of the McMMartin preschool were charged with 321 counts of child abuse involving 48 children.¹⁰² Despite the total absence of any material evidence, the prosecution persisted for seven years, even after Johnson, the original accuser, was hospitalized for acute schizophrenia.¹⁰³

Although everyone accused in the McMMartin trial was eventually acquitted, media coverage only fueled the moral panic. The term "ritual abuse" was coined during the trial and similar cases sprang up all over the country. Formal advocacy groups with names like "Believe the Children" were also created during the McMMartin trial.¹⁰⁴ In 1994, 70 percent of people surveyed for the women's magazine *Redbook* reported belief in the existence of abusive Satanic cults (even more than believed in aliens); 32 percent rationalized the absence of proof by explaining that "the FBI and the police ignore evidence because they don't want to admit the cults exist."¹⁰⁵ (In fact, the FBI did launch an investigation into SRA, but found no physical evidence of its existence.)¹⁰⁶ Finally, 22 percent reported their belief that cult leaders use brainwashing to ensure that the victims would not tell.¹⁰⁷ Throughout the 1990s, numerous people, many of them teachers and day-care providers, were accused of SRA. Many were acquitted only after being bankrupted by legal fees. Others were fired, driven out of their communities, or forced to give over their children to child protective services. Some spent months in jail for crimes that were almost certainly never committed.¹⁰⁸

Constructing the Narrative

The dialectic through which SRA narratives were produced sometimes resembled the therapeutic setting of the abduction narrative. In other cases, it resembled the interrogation of witches. In still other instances—particularly

in the case of children—it appears to have been a mixture of suggestion and coercion. During the 1990s, through the recovery movement, many adults found recovered memories of both mundane abuse and SRA. In 1988 Ellen Bass and Laura Davis published *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*. It sold more than 750,000 copies and triggered a memory recovery industry. Shermer estimates that if the number of abuse survivors projected in this book is accurate, then the United States is home to at least 42.9 million sex offenders.¹⁰⁹ *The Courage to Heal* advised readers, “If you think you were abused and your life shows the symptoms, then you were.”¹¹⁰ This is essentially the same rhetoric used in alien abduction: if you think you might be an abductee, then you probably are. Whereas abduction narratives were typically shaped by science fiction, recovered SRA narratives drew details from sources like *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Geraldo*.¹¹¹

Accounts of SRA also appeared in confessions acquired through the more traditional methods of aggressive police interrogations. Shermer describes the exploits of Detective Robert Perez of East Wenatchee, Washington, in 1995. On a quest to uncover sex offenders, Perez charged one woman with more than 3,200 acts of sexual abuse. An elderly gentleman was charged with having intercourse twelve times in a single day—a feat he said he could not have done even as a teenager. Much like the witch trials of early modern Europe, Perez took testimony from small children and focused his accusations primarily on the elderly and the poor. (All suspects who could afford a private attorney were released.) Perez apparently interrogated one girl for four hours, threatening to arrest her mother unless she admitted to witnessing sex orgies in which her mother had participated. Shermer quotes Perez as saying, “You have ten minutes to tell the truth,” promising to let her go when she signed a statement. The girl eventually signed, at which point her mother was arrested and jailed.¹¹²

The tactic of interrogating children was sometimes used during the great witch hunt as well.¹¹³ While hypnotized adults contributed to the archive of SRA narratives, the testimony of children was especially prized. Children made the perfect experiencers for a dialectic of carnal knowledge because of two unstated (and seemingly paradoxical) assumptions: first, groups that advocated SRA such as “Believe the Children” were founded on the assumption that children were incapable of lying—at least when it came to abuse.¹¹⁴ This was the same epistemological value that inquisitors assigned to witches under torture and that John Mack assigned to the hypnotized. Second, children were simultaneously seen as incapable of simply describing their experiences, and thus required an interlocutor to serve as an interpreter.¹¹⁵

Not all statements taken from children took the form of a police interrogation. Often, as with the McMartin trial, children were sent to specialists who used a variety of techniques to elicit the desired response. Many of these specialists used “play therapy,” such as allowing children to speak through puppets. In some cases, suggestive questions were combined with coercion. The following is a transcript of a five-year-old boy being interviewed by a police officer and a social worker:

Adult 1: Did she put a fork in your butt? Yes or no?

Child: I don't know, I forgot.

Adult 1: . . . Oh, come on, if you just answer that you can go.

Child: I hate you.

Adult 1: No you don't.

Child: Yes I do.

Adult 1: You love me and I can tell. Is that all she did to you, what did she do to your hiney?

Adult 2: What did she do to your hiney? Then you can go.

Child: I forgot.

Adult 2: Tell me what Kelly [the accused Satanist] did to your hiney and then you can go. If you tell me what she did to your hiney we'll let you go.

Child: No.

Adult 1: Please.

Child: Okay, okay, okay.

Adult 1: Tell me now . . . what did Kelly do to your hiney?

Child: I'll try to remember.

Adult 1: What did she put in your hiney?

Child: The fork.¹¹⁶

Cryptic statements like “the fork” do not constitute an SRA narrative. To achieve this, the testimony of children must be massaged and interpreted by foster parents, police, caretakers, social workers, and therapists.¹¹⁷ But the perceived need for an interpreter is so strong that ultimately no testimony is needed from the child: to an expert, a child's behavior can be evidence of SRA. Victims of SRA allegedly show “bizarre” behavior or seem to have an overabundance of fear.¹¹⁸

Needless to say, eliciting these narratives is highly damaging to the experiencer—far more so than in cases of alien abduction. Many children did come to believe they had been abused and then suffered nightmares about these constructed memories. Phenomenologically, their experience of torture

is real, but was created by social workers and prosecutors rather than Satanists. Many adults who recovered memories of SRA lost the capacity to function professionally, care for their children, or relate to their spouses. Marriages and families were destroyed.¹¹⁹

The Function of the Narrative

The connection between Satanic panic and the great witch hunt is obvious.¹²⁰ La Fontaine adopts a structural-functionalist interpretation of Satanic panic, arguing it is part of a broader phenomenon of persecution that exists across cultures.¹²¹ This may be the case, but there were important cultural factors that seem to have catalyzed and shaped the panic over SRA. Kaminer attributes Satanic panic to the convergence of three cultural forces: the recovery movement, feminism, and the Christian Right.¹²² A fourth should be added: the counter-cult movement that formed during the 1970s.¹²³

Psychotherapy and the recovery movement laid out the epistemological framework for SRA. Additionally, since the 1970s, a growing body of child-protection officials sought to justify their positions by uncovering evidence of childhood sexual abuse.¹²⁴ The social status of women was also in flux during the 1970s and many were accused, ruined, and imprisoned by the SRA scare. Kaminer has suggested that, in part, the hysteria represented cultural resistance to women's liberation and changing gender roles. The day-care providers that became the target of SRA accusations were enabling women to have careers.¹²⁵ Yet, paradoxically, the feminist movement was particularly susceptible to Satanic panic.¹²⁶ Feminists supported accusations of SRA in solidarity with their support of rape victims. In fact, La Fontaine describes a "training video" on detecting SRA that was produced through a feminist network and marketed through the Manchester Rape Crisis Center.¹²⁷ A strange alliance seems to have formed between feminists and the Christian Right. Both groups were opposed to pornography, and Satanic panic linked this issue to far darker and larger social problems. Similarly, the counter-cult movement recruited from the Christian Right and from the ranks of mental health professionals to crusade against SRA. For instance, Noblitt and Perskin claim that David Koresh had a scar shaped like an inverted cross, suggesting he was a survivor of SRA.¹²⁸

Part of the appeal of Satanic conspiracies is precisely that they can weave numerous complex social problems into a single, monolithic evil. As Michael Barkun explains, the view of the conspiracy theorist is paradoxically both frightening and reassuring. He writes, "It is frightening because it reveals the power

of evil, leading in some cases to an outright dualism in which light and darkness struggle for cosmic supremacy. At the same time, however, it is reassuring, for it promises a world that is meaningful rather than arbitrary."¹²⁹ If only a cabal of Satanists actually existed, then drugs, pornography, organized crime, government corruption, and much more would all constitute a single, potentially manageable problem. Further, this conspiracy is also responsible for profoundly personal problems such as depression or anxiety. SRA supports this dualist worldview and allows its believers to be firmly on the side of good. La Fontaine argues that while this cosmology may be rooted in Christianity, its appeal is now secular.¹³⁰

Alien abduction narratives allow the experiencer to become a hero in a cosmic soteriological project. But in SRA it is the interlocutor who gets to assume this role. Frankfurter notes that by reinterpreting anomalous experiences into a framework of evil, SRA experts, much like witch finders, make themselves indispensable in resolving that evil.¹³¹ While other moderns wring their hands, feeling helpless to solve the world's myriad problems, the therapists who crusade against SRA have the power to expose this entire system and literally heal the world. The vision of these therapists is in a sense messianic.

While there may be a common function of scapegoating, there is a crucial difference between the great witch hunt and Satanic panic on the one hand, and the tradition of witchcraft among the Azande on the other. For the Azande that Evans-Pritchard studied, no evidence is needed to prove that witches exist, because the question has never been raised. The existence of witches is simply part of their everyday reality. For moderns to enjoy the benefits of the Azande's worldview (a fulfilling cosmology, the feeling of being galvanized against an inimical other), a tremendous amount of work is needed to overcome their skepticism. Because rational inquiry will never find evidence of witches or demons, only carnal knowledge can buttress such a claim. The Azande do not accuse witches of bizarre sexual practices because they do not need to. Only moderns have a use for these horrible stories.

CONCLUSIONS

Although scientific rationalism is now regarded as the only legitimate approach to truth, in practice, rationalism exists alongside other worldviews. Clancy notes that abductees scored high on measures indicative of a personality construct called "schizotypy." Those who have a high degree of schizotypy are prone

toward eccentricity, odd beliefs, and “magical thinking.” Clancy notes that simply labeling these people is not particularly helpful, and that in the nineteenth century they would have been called “hysterics.”¹³² One interpretation is that those with a high degree of schizotypy are more promiscuous with their epistemological frameworks.

Wouter Hanegraaff, building on the theories of Lévy-Bruhl and Tylor, has argued that alongside scientific rationalism exists another way of seeing the world, which he calls “participation.” He describes it as “an affective rather than rational stratum in human thought and action, which is more fundamental even than animism, is analogical rather than logical and is not reducible to primary reasoning. It may be referred to as ‘spontaneous animism,’ as distinct from Tylor’s official intellectualist theory of animism as rational inferences made by ‘man, the primitive philosopher.’ Predictably, Tylor could find no place for it in his intellectualist theory of animism, and this theory undermines the whole of his theoretical framework.”¹³³ What I have called carnal knowledge may be thought of as a subset of such a mode of thinking. I argue that witch theorists, alien abductees, and SRA crusaders, while all capable of rationalist thought, made forays into the epistemology of carnal knowledge.

Hanegraaff rejects the assumption of Tylor and Lévy-Bruhl that “civilized man” has outgrown the epistemological worldview of the primitive—that a form of natural selection guides the progression of human understanding inexorably toward scientific rationalism. Hanegraaff’s critique of Tylor is correct. In fact, modern life has arguably arrived at existential problems that rationalism is poorly equipped to solve. Modernity, characterized by a plurality of worldviews and an emphasis on individual autonomy, has led to a state of chronic uncertainty in which very little can be taken for granted. Anthony Giddens refers to this condition as “radical doubt,” while Peter Berger uses the term “the heretical imperative.” For many people, rationalism alone is not sufficient for maintaining a sense of psychic security. For this reason, Giddens argues that radical doubt has led to a resurgence of religion as people seek a remedy for the modern condition.¹³⁴ Similarly, Berger notes that the experience of the supernatural—particularly encounters with the “inhabitants” of the supernatural realm—“opens up the vista of a cohesive and comprehensive world.”¹³⁵ In sum, moderns may actually yearn for direct encounters with the supernatural *more* than ancient peoples.

If we cannot personally experience the presence of an angel, demon, or alien, we can still benefit from such encounters vicariously, provided the experienter’s story is sufficiently credible. Carnal knowledge, coupled with the various

forms of the interlocutor's craft (torture, hypnosis, play therapy, etc.), produces narratives that are compelling despite being fantastic. The persistence of stories describing human sexual congress with supernatural others indicates that carnal knowledge remains an important epistemological tool for rendering the cosmos meaningful and establishing humanity's relationship with the sacred.

NOTES

1. David Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Ritual Abuse in History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 142.

2. Michael Shermer, *Why People Believe Weird things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, and Other Confusions of our Time* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1997), 97.

3. Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

4. Claire Fanger, "Review: *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief*," *Comparative Literature* 55, no. 4 (2003): 356.

5. "Carnal knowledge" is used here as a stipulative definition to describe a way of knowing based on narratives of embodied, erotic encounters. It is also an enumerative definition that includes, but is not limited to, testimony of erotic encounters taken from alleged witches, abductees, and SRA survivors.

6. In 1982 the folklorist David J. Hufford theorized that sleep paralysis is the underlying cause behind various "supernatural assault traditions" such as night hags, vampires, and incubi. See David J. Hufford, *The Terror That Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

7. J. S. La Fontaine has linked rumors of Satanic ritual abuse to E. E. Evans-Pritchard's study of witchcraft among the Azande. La Fontaine arrives at a similar structural-functionalist analysis and argues that the hunt for Satanists is part of a broader phenomenon of scape-goating that exists across cultures. See J. S. La Fontaine, *Speak of the Devil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 181.

8. The Hebrew word *yada* may be translated as "know," but it also refers to the sex act. In fact, in Genesis 19, the same verb is used to describe both the way that God "knew" Abraham and the way that the people of Sodom wanted to "know" Lot's houseguests. In the Septuagint and the New Testament, the Greek word *ginosko* carries exactly the same ambiguity as *yada*. See Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, vol. 2, *Chapters 18–50* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 18.

9. Marcel Mauss and Emile Durkheim, *Primitive Classification*, trans. Rodney Needham (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 84.

10. John Mack, *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens* (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 391. Despite this concession, Mack denies claims that he simply tells his subjects what to say or that he believes entirely in the content of their narratives.

11. Bridget Brown, *They Know Us Better Than We Know Ourselves: The History and Politics of Alien Abduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 14.

12. *Ibid.*, 31.

13. Mauss and Durkheim, *Primitive Classification*, 81.
14. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor, 1969), 29.
15. Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Pearson Education, 2006), 25.
16. Hans Peter Broedel, *The "Malleus Maleficarum" and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 3.
17. *Ibid.*, 28.
18. Levack, *Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 31.
19. Broedel, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 4.
20. *Ibid.*, 30.
21. *Ibid.*, 2.
22. *Ibid.*, 24. This model of witchcraft was perpetuated into the twentieth century by modern-day demonologists. Ed Warren, a lay Catholic exorcist, described how witches become "brides of Satan" through diabolical contracts and fornication with demons. See Gerald Brittle, *The Demonologist: The Extraordinary Career of Ed and Lorraine Warren* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1980), 172.
23. Broedel, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 26.
24. *Ibid.*, 52.
25. Jennifer Knust argues that this story became the basis for a fear of miscegenation with divine beings that continued to develop in Jewish and Christian thought in the first and second centuries C.E. This association between sexual congress with angels and transgression is likely the reason that carnal knowledge has taken such demonic and masochistic expressions in the West. See Jennifer Wright Knust, *Unprotected Texts: The Bible's Surprising Contradictions About Sex and Desire* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 158–61.
26. Levack, *Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 35.
27. Susan A. Clancy, *Abducted: How People Came to Believe They Were Kidnapped by Aliens* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 121.
28. Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 64.
29. Levack, *Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 35.
30. Broedel, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 52.
31. *Ibid.*, 58.
32. Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 15.
33. *Ibid.*, 22, 25, 35.
34. *Ibid.*, 2, 5, 16.
35. Broedel, *Malleus Maleficarum*, 56.
36. Clancy, *Abducted*, 107.
37. Michael W. Cuneo, *American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty* (New York: Broadway, 2001), 32–33.
38. The modern demonologist and former Jesuit Malachi Martin also partakes in vicarious carnal knowledge. His book *Hostage to the Devil*, which was endorsed by the prominent theologian Harvey Cox, contains accounts of possession cases of which he allegedly had personal knowledge. The majority of these cases involved graphic sexual transgression. See Malachi Martin, *Hostage to the Devil* (New York: Bantam, 1977).
39. Clancy, *Abducted*, 49.

40. Whitley Strieber, *Communion: A True Story* (New York: Avon, 1987), 248.
41. Clancy, *Abducted*, 113.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*, 93.
44. Shermer, *Why People Believe Weird Things*, 91. An alternative account of the crash at Roswell appears in the final pages of the recent book *Area 51* by the journalist Annie Jacobsen. Jacobsen attests that a disk actually did crash at Roswell, but that it was a Soviet hoax. The disk was most likely an unmanned drone and the “pilots” were children who had been surgically altered—perhaps by the Nazi scientist Josef Mengele—to resemble aliens. The hoax was an attempt to panic Americans, and was inspired by the *War of the Worlds* broadcast of 1938. Critics point out that the only evidence for Jacobsen’s theory is an unnamed source who allegedly worked with the crash remains at Area 51. Jacobsen claims she cannot name her source, but that she interviewed him for eighteen months and deemed his credentials and story reliable. See Annie Jacobsen, *Area 51: An Uncensored History of America’s Top Secret Military Base* (New York: Little, Brown, 2011), 367–72.
45. Clancy, *Abducted*, 89.
46. Georg M. Ronnevig, “Toward an Explanation of the ‘Abduction Epidemic’: The Ritualization of Alien Abduction Mythology in Therapeutic Settings,” in *Alien Worlds: Social and Religious Dimensions of Extraterrestrial Contact*, ed. Diana G. Tumminia (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 101.
47. Clancy, *Abducted*, 95.
48. Ronnevig, “Toward an Explanation of the ‘Abduction Epidemic,’” 101.
49. At the time of this writing, the song “E.T.” by Katy Perry reached the number one spot on the American music charts. The song describes the artist’s erotic fantasy about being abducted. The song’s reception suggests a general understanding that abduction is inherently sexual. See “Katy Perry Joins Elite Chart Club as E.T. Hits Number One in the U.S.,” March 30, 2011, accessed July 29, 2011, <http://www.contactmusic.com/>.
50. Patricia Felisa Barbeito, “He’s Making Me Feel Things in My Body That I Don’t Feel: The Body as Battleground in Accounts of Alien Abduction,” *Journal of American Culture* 28, no. 2 (2003): 201.
51. Brown, *They Know Us Better Than We Know Ourselves*, 83.
52. *Ibid.*, 103.
53. Christopher David Bader, Frederick Carson Mencken, and Joe Baker, *Paranormal America: Ghost Encounters, UFO Sightings, Bigfoot Hunts, and Other Curiosities in Religion and Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 67.
54. Christopher Partridge, “Alien Demonology: The Christian Roots of the Malevolent Extraterrestrial in UFO Religions and Abduction Spiritualities,” *Religion* 34, no. 3 (2004): 163–89.
55. Barbeito, “He’s Making Me Feel Things,” 207.
56. Clancy, *Abducted*, 42.
57. Douglas Cowan offers evidence that *The X-Files* actually had a measurable effect on belief in the supernatural. Gallup polls indicated an increase in psychic phenomena over the course of the series. See Douglas Cowan, *Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 55.
58. Wendy Kaminer, *Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials: The Rise of Irrationalism and Perils of Piety* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 3–5.

59. Clancy, *Abducted*, 12.
60. Elizabeth Loftus, *The Myth of Repressed Memory: False Memories and Allegations of Sexual Abuse* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 4.
61. *Ibid.* In the 1990s, the American Psychiatric Association and the Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis issued a formal statement that hypnosis should *not* be used to enhance memory recall. See Ronnevig, "Toward an Explanation of the 'Abduction Epidemic,'" 123.
62. Clancy, *Abducted*, 60.
63. Brown, *They Know Us Better Than We Know Ourselves*, 30; Ronnevig, "Toward an Explanation of the 'Abduction Epidemic,'" 100.
64. Brown, *They Know Us Better Than We Know Ourselves*, 30.
65. Clancy, *Abducted*, 47.
66. *Ibid.*, 50.
67. Shermer, *Why People Believe Weird Things*, 95; Clancy, *Abducted*, 107.
68. Carl Gustav Jung, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies* (1959; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 13.
69. Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 119.
70. Brown, *They Know Us Better Than We Know Ourselves*, 17.
71. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1991), 181.
72. Dean, *Aliens in America*, 6.
73. Leonard S. Newman and Roy F. Baumeister, "Toward an Explanation of UFO Abduction Phenomenon: Hypnotic Elaboration, Extraterrestrial Sadomasochism, and Spurious Memories," *Psychological Inquiry* 7, no. 3 (1996): 99–126. Logically, this interpretation could be extended to adults who have recovered memories of SRA.
74. Brown, *They Know Us Better Than We Know Ourselves*, 56.
75. Strieber, *Communion*, 76.
76. Cuneo, *American Exorcism*, 32.
77. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 11.
78. Brown, *They Know Us Better Than We Know Ourselves*, 16.
79. Ronnevig, "Toward an Explanation of the 'Abduction Epidemic,'" 122.
80. Clancy, *Abducted*, 153.
81. Mack, *Abduction*, 398.
82. William S. Cobb, trans., *Plato's Erotic Dialogues: The "Symposium" and the "Phaedrus"* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1993), 48.
83. Stephens, *Demon Lovers*, 369.
84. Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedeker, *Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt* (New York: Basic, 1994), 1.
85. Valerie Sinason, *Treating Survivors of Satanist Abuse* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 3.
86. In their search for evidence linking Satanism to organized crime, advocates of SRA focused on Mexican drug cartels that used an eclectic milieu of Afro-Atlantic and occult symbols and practices.
87. Colin A. Ross, *Satanic Ritual Abuse: Principles of Treatment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 61.

88. David K. Sakheim and Martin H. Katchen, "Satanic Beliefs and Practices," in *Out of Darkness: Exploring Satanism and Ritual Abuse*, ed. David K. Sakheim and Susan E. Devine (New York: Lexington, 1992), 21–44.

89. James Randall Noblitt and Pamela Sue Perskin, *Cult and Ritual Abuse: Its History, Anthropology, and Recent Discovery in Contemporary America* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1995), 123.

90. Carl Raschke, *Painted Black: From Drug Killings to Heavy Metal: The Alarming True Story of How Satanism Is Terrorizing Our Communities* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 62.

91. Nathan and Snedeker, *Satan's Silence*, 2.

92. Kaminer, *Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials: The Rise of Irrationalism and Perils of Piety* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 206.

93. Shermer, *Why People Believe Weird Things*, 111.

94. Kaminer, *Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials*, 193.

95. Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate*, 138.

96. Brant Wenegrat, *Theater of Disorder: Patients, Doctors, and the Construction of Illness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 191.

97. This detail was almost certainly inspired by the 1973 film *The Wicker Man*.

98. Lawrence Pazder and Michele Smith, *Michelle Remembers* (New York: Pocket Books, 1981), 78–81.

99. Much like the abduction of Betty and Barney Hill, the McMartin case was timed to follow a relevant TV drama. In January 1984 sixty million viewers watched a made-for-TV drama called *Something About Amelia*, which featured a handsome, affluent father who sexually abuses his teenage daughter. See Nathan and Snedeker, *Satan's Silence*, 110.

100. "Letter to McMartin Preschool Parents from Police Chief Kuhlmeier, Jr.," September 8, 1983, accessed December 8, 2009, <http://www.law.umkc.edu/>.

101. Paul Eberle, *The Abuse of Innocence: The McMartin Preschool Trial* (New York: Prometheus, 1993), 172–73.

102. Robert Reinhold, "The Longest Trial—A Post-Mortem; Collapse of Child-Abuse Case: So Much Agony for So Little," *New York Times*, January 24, 1990.

103. Nathan and Snedeker, *Satan's Silence*, 127.

104. Jeffrey S. Victor, *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend* (Chicago: Open Court, 1993), 15.

105. Kaminer, *Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials*, 193.

106. Clancy, *Abducted*, 13.

107. Kaminer, *Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials*, 193.

108. Nathan and Snedeker, *Satan's Silence*, 3.

109. Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (New York: Perennial, 1988); Shermer, *Why People Believe Weird Things*, 110.

110. Bass and Davis, *Courage to Heal*, 22.

111. La Fontaine, *Speak of the Devil*, 136.

112. Shermer, *Why People Believe Weird Things*, 113.

113. La Fontaine, *Speak of the Devil*, 112.

114. Nathan and Snedeker, *Satan's Silence*, 12.

115. *Ibid.*, 147.

116. *Ibid.*, 141–42.
117. La Fontaine, *Speak of the Devil*, 111.
118. *Ibid.*, 96. To a lesser extent, irrational fear—particularly the desire to secure one’s room at night—has also been used as evidence of alien abduction. Whitley Strieber ultimately concluded that he purchased a shotgun because of his unconscious fear of alien intruders.
119. Kaminer, *Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials*, 205.
120. Astoundingly, Colin Ross cites the witch trials as evidence of *the reality* of SRA, pointing out that this was a historical example of ritualistic cruelty. He also consistently refers to “the Catholic inquisition” despite the fact that witch trials were often conducted without the intervention of the Church and occurred in both Catholic and Protestant countries. See Ross, *Satanic Ritual Abuse*, 34–35.
121. La Fontaine, *Speak of the Devil*, 181.
122. Kaminer, *Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials*, 200.
123. For more on the moral panic over “cults” during the 1970s, see Douglas E. Cowan, *Bearing False Witness? An Introduction to the Christian Countercult* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003).
124. Nathan and Snedeker, *Satan’s Silence*, 12; La Fontaine, *Speak of the Devil*, 169.
125. Kaminer, *Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials*, 198.
126. Nathan and Snedeker, *Satan’s Silence*, 4.
127. La Fontaine, *Speak of the Devil*, 169–70.
128. Noblitt and Perskin, *Cult and Ritual Abuse*, 165.
129. Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 4.
130. La Fontaine, *Speak of the Devil*, 185.
131. Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate*, 70.
132. Clancy, *Abducted*, 129–30.
133. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World,” *Religion* 33, no. 4 (2003): 374.
134. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 195.
135. Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1979), 42–43.