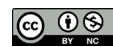




# Why Do People Believe in Ghosts, Aliens, and Bigfoot? An Anthropological Analysis of Popular “Irrational” Beliefs in the Euro-American West

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Antiscientific beliefs have been becoming increasingly popular throughout 21st century Western societies. Thus, as they have grown some of these beliefs have come to wield considerable power, often affecting political processes. I investigate this phenomenon through the study of “creature beliefs”: the extremely popular belief in the existence of creatures like ghosts, aliens, and Bigfoot. To research these beliefs, I reviewed academic literature and engaged with North American and British believer communities, culminating in ten multi-hour interviews. Further research was gathered by attending popular events like a mediumship evening in Herefordshire, and Coventry’s Sage Paracon 2023: a paranormal convention during which both Bigfoot and extraterrestrials were regularly discussed. Despite this apparent popularity, such beliefs are commonly ridiculed and criticised as irrational or foolish by the Western social majority. This dissertation explains the motivations of supposedly irrational beliefs vis-à-vis criticism. I conclude that these motivations are increasingly circulated lore, gradually “promoting” antiscientific beliefs as more plausible under specific conditions, and pressures and fears exacerbated by modernisation. This research has important implications for two reasons. Very little anthropology has addressed creature beliefs in a Western context, and thus this study is the first of its kind to provide detailed synchronistic explanations for what draws people to these irrationals. This academic tardiness has proven particularly unhelpful in engaging with similarly widespread antiscience like violent conspiracy theories. To challenge such beliefs they must be understood from the inside-out, breaking them down into motivating pressures, of which this dissertation provides an example.

On a dreary October evening, I arrived at Coventry’s Coombe Abbey Hotel for Sage Paracon 2023, my first-ever paranormal convention. I was impressed by the venue. The Gothic architecture of the medieval abbey suited the theme perfectly; however, no signs pointed to the event’s location, which I later discovered was hidden away in a function room behind the building. I entered the room to find the event well-attended. “PARACON” was in its sixth consecutive year and has become the most popular event of its kind in Britain, hosting the majority of its speakers from America. I seized the opportunity to mingle with some of the attendees before the first lecture began, but most seemed wary of newcomers and opted for short, one-word conversation rather than the paranormal discussions I had hoped for. Disappointed and feeling somewhat awkward, I took my seat at the back of the lecture hall. Introduced as a “legend”, the lecturing paranormal investigator, a middle-aged man dressed in a long black cardigan, took the stage:

Hello weirdos! The first time I heard the word weirdo I was being called the word weirdo. I was being punched in the stomach. I didn’t know what weirdo meant but in my brain at the time I thought ‘Well, if a weirdo is a person who is not punching someone else, then I am proud to be a weirdo’. It comes from

the English word wyrd, and it means ‘those people who manifest their own destiny’. So, when someone calls you a weirdo, they’re actually giving you the greatest compliment they can give you; it means that you’re an individual who thinks for themselves and does what they want to do. When you’re next at work, and someone whispers it under their breath at you, ‘weirdo’, you can be like, ‘You’re right! You drone!’

Now, I’m going to ask you a couple of questions. In everyday, polite, normal society you might be a little scared to raise your hand... but since you’re in a room filled with weirdos as weird as you are, you can put your hand above your head. How many people here believe in ghosts? Thank you. How many people here believe in UFOs? Thank you. How many people believe in Bigfoot? Thank you.  
(Interview #1)

Throughout 2023, I researched ghost, alien, and Bigfoot belief in Western culture by reviewing academic literature, interviewing experts, and attending popular events across the United Kingdom. The umbrella term Western refers to the shared heritage of ideas and beliefs across the countries of North America, Europe, Australasia, and to a lesser extent, Latin America and the Eastern Orthodox world. Ever since

the Scientific Revolution (1543–1687) and Enlightenment (1687–1815) occurred in Europe, most of these Western societies have emphasised the supremacy of rationality and scientific truth-finding. Today this scenario is more ingrained than ever; what is rational and scientific is thought to be correct and intelligent, while irrationality is criticised. These creature beliefs are commonly deemed irrational and superstitious: they lack scientific evidence and authorities regularly publish research disproving them. Despite this, such beliefs wield surprising power and influence. For example, in 1991 the New York Supreme Court ruled that selling a house without disclosing that it is haunted to new owners is illegal, thus encoding creatures as fact in Western law (Stambovsky v. Ackley, 1991). Today, this influence has only grown, as more Westerners believe in the existence of ghosts, aliens, and Bigfoot than ever before. Thousands of people search for the creatures, attend conventions, and consume related media. Indeed interest in creatures is so popular that the International Cryptozoology<sup>1</sup> Museum “generates \$140 million annually in the US alone” (Madden 2018, para. 1). The internet has greatly increased support for such beliefs by making information about them readily accessible. Though these online communities can be accessed internationally, they are dominated by North Americans. This region has become the cultural hub for the belief in ghosts, aliens, and especially Bigfoot.

This scenario, popular irrationality in societies which emphasise the importance of scientific and rational thinking, begs interesting questions. Firstly, why do people believe in ghosts, aliens, and Bigfoot despite ridicule from the rest of society? Rather than being diminished by such ridicule, why do communities of believers continue to grow? What do interactions with these beliefs suggest about the wider disbelieving society? Furthermore, I was drawn to studying this triad of creatures in particular, because of the many similarities in the ways they are imagined. Each of these creatures is thought to dwell in the inhuman edges of our mundane realm, yet draw their nature from an antithetical otherworld such as the realm of death, space, or the wilderness. Because of such similarities and fuzzy boundaries between these otherworlds, this triad often share the same pool of believers and discussions comparing or overlapping ghosts, aliens, and cryptids like sasquatch into the same creature are common. This overlap was reflected by the lecture above and the majority of my interviewees:

You don't have Bigfoot witnesses, and UFO witnesses, and paranormal witnesses, I think what people have been learning over the years is that you have 'experiencers'. If you start digging into these people who have encounters, they often have encounters of multiple different modalities.  
(Interview #2)

After the encounter it made me question in my head, 'well, everything must be real: ghosts must be real, UFOs must be real, everything with religion, there's got to be something to it because what I saw wasn't supposed to be real, but I saw it'.  
(Interview #3)

More scientific as opposed to 'oh, Bigfoot's over here and its orbs and its portals', [which] is really popular.  
(Interview #4)

I don't have enough to say I ran into Bigfoot; I ran into something. Until I film it, shit, it could've been a ghost!  
(Interview #5)

This merging suggests an interesting conclusion. The creature itself might be somewhat irrelevant and exist as a symbol or outlet which satisfies one's need to vent their distrust and disagreement with their society or authority. In other words, I wanted to investigate whether these sorts of beliefs could be forms of resistance. However, despite the ubiquitousness of these beliefs and the 21st century turn of the ethnographic lens back towards the West, I found very little anthropological work has been done on this topic. Some recent articles and very few books have

investigated ghost belief in Western countries, but this work has come from theology, folklore studies, and statistics rather than anthropology, which has remained more interested in the spirits of non-Western cultures. Furthermore, anthropological investigations of Western alien and Bigfoot communities proved almost non-existent.

One reason for this lack of academic interest could be problems of definition. For example, the terms supernatural and paranormal are deeply connected to this topic yet problematically “imprecise, and the boundaries of the purported phenomena which they denote are fuzzy” (Sidky, 2019, p. 39). What makes something natural, supernatural, or paranormal? Why is an encounter with a winged, androgynous, entity interpreted as a religious or spiritual experience, whereas a similarly androgynous but wingless creature, is an extraterrestrial in a spacecraft? This question cannot be answered simply with definitions that separate supernatural, paranormal, and extraterrestrial, because as we have seen, these boundaries are simultaneously upheld and often merged by believers themselves. Through their enigma, creatures are conceptualised in infinitely varied ways, thus leaving the anthropologist unsure how to approach their object. This is why Needham (1972) has discredited the use of belief as an explanatory concept in ethnography, as “when other peoples are said to ‘believe’ anything, it must be entirely unclear what kind of idea or state of mind is being ascribed to them... use of this word has [not] in any instance provided a precise of verifiable description” (p. 188).

Conversely, I think these definitional challenges can be useful. They highlight that not even believers know the boundaries between what is extraterrestrial, supernatural, and paranormal, ergo what constitutes a creature is an uncertain amalgamation of changing ideas. Therefore, emphasising the significance of patterns when they emerge from all this variation, since such patterns must serve some charismatic purpose to find purchase among most believers. With this in mind, I adopt Oppy's (2018) term “the non-natural” (p. 32). This term unites all creatures by their shared context of unknowable otherworldliness and deviation from the natural laws of science, reflecting Vallée's (1982) similar conclusion that UFO phenomena, elves, dwarfs, fairies, and other fantastical beings are all different imaginings of the same other. With this shared context in mind, and because so little academic work has focused on Western creatures, I have drawn from anthropological studies of non-Western creatures and compared them against my own research and theories, determining whether they are illuminating about creature beliefs in the West.

The structure of this dissertation is divided into three sections. The first discusses the historical context of ghost, alien, and Bigfoot belief in the West. It also describes their contemporary believer communities and the ways they conceptualise creatures; crucially relevant to the second section, my theories of what motivates these beliefs. The rare pre-existing anthropological explanations that have attempted to answer this question have arrived at the same vague conclusion: that creature beliefs are “maintained by the ongoing uncertainty about their existence” (Clanton, 2017, p. 63) or “the inherent liminality of spirits as constructs accounts for their persistence” (Baker & Bader, 2014, p. 569). These explanations do not capture the full scope of such beliefs, and therefore I posit three often synergistic explanations: 1) “the Unheimlich/World Lore explanation”, 2) “Creatures ward away fear and uncertainty”, and 3) “Creatures as a response to social change”. The final section of this article is my conclusion, discussing my findings and highlighting their implications regarding wider society and studies of other irrational beliefs like conspiracy theories.

## WESTERN CREATURES

Ghosts and spirits represent the disembodied soul of a deceased person that lives on after biological death. A concept of spirits similar to the Western one is recorded earliest in the literature of ancient Mesopotamia. The Epic of Gilgamesh (2100 BCE) is an example of such; in the twelfth tablet Enkidu returns from the underworld and describes his horrible, spiritual observations to Gilgamesh (George, 2002). Known

<sup>1</sup>Cryptozoology is a pseudo-scientific term referring to a creature whose existence is disputed by science

as gidim (𐤒𐤍), these spirits were created at the time of a person's death (Al-Rashid, 2022). They maintained one's personality and memories but existed in the underworld, where they lived an existence similar to the mundane realm. Relatives of the deceased were expected to make offerings of food to spirits, otherwise they would curse them with illness. The chthonic<sup>2</sup> spells of the Egyptian Book of the Dead (in use 1550–50 BCE) highlight that their spirit belief reflected similar underworld themes (Faulkner, 1972). The ghost, a non-chthonic dwelling spirit that remains in the mundane realm, is recorded in Greco-Roman literature. Pliny the Younger provides one of the earliest recorded "ghost stories", describing the haunted house of Athenodorus (Eliot, 1910). According to Pliny's recounting of the tale, late at night, a shackled ghost disturbed Athenodorus and led him to a location outside. Excavation here unearthed a similarly shackled skeleton, which was properly reburied and thus the haunting ended.

Though the historical development of modern concepts is an amalgamation, rather than a linear process with geographic direction, such as in an *ex Oriente lux* type of way, these traditions have influenced the current Western idea of ghosts. The most significant of these influences has been the adoption of such concepts in 19th-century Romanticism. Romanticism was an artistic movement present in painting, literature, and music, which emphasised "a new and restless spirit... a longing for the unbound and the indefinable" (Berlin, 1990, p. 92). It challenged the boundaries between the human, the natural, and the supernatural; ghosts and spirits were a common trope and found popularity among Western audiences. McCorristine (2010) has shown how the cultural impact of ghosts in 19th century German Romanticism (authors like Hoffmann, Schiller, the Brothers Grimm) would influence the development of the investigative ghost hunting that is common today. German philosophical thought connected ghost experiences to dreams and visions (Kant, 1766; Schopenhauer, 1851), and therefore presented these experiences as worthy of investigation (Crowe, 1848). By the late nineteenth century, the British attitude towards ghosts had been changed by these philosophical arguments and organisations like The Ghost Club (1860s), designed to investigate ghastrly phenomenon. One member, Charles Dickens, equated ghost experiences to a dreamlike realm, a feature very commonly recalled by ghost experiencers today. In 1869 the London Dialectical Society formed a 33-member committee dedicated to determining whether ghosts exist. The committee's controversial 1871 report garnered much public interest, as half of the members claimed ghosts existed while the others disagreed.

Alternatively, the Western fascination with aliens began at the turn of the 20th century and was greatly accelerated by the Cold War-era Space Race. In 1877, Italian astronomer Giovanni Schiaparelli noticed a series of linear structures on the surface of Mars which he called "canali" (Launius, 2018, p. 248). In 1895, the American astronomer Lowell (1895) would interpret this as evidence that an advanced civilisation lived on Mars and had built irrigation canals across the planet. He presented this argument in three books: *Mars* (1895), *Mars and its Canals* (1906), and *Mars as the Abode of Life* (1908). This work added to public interest and soon newspapers began to describe mystery airship sightings as Martian spacecraft. The novelist H.G. Wells was also influential in popularising Martians and published essays like "Intelligence on Mars" (Wells, 1896). His theories of a more intelligent space-faring species would become the idea behind his extremely popular novel *The War of the Worlds* (1898).

From the 1950s to the 1970s, the Space Race between America and the Soviet Union dramatically increased interest in intergalactic travel. The Western public became fascinated with aliens; television programmes like *Star Trek* (1966) were hugely popular and more sightings of UFOs (unidentified flying objects) were reported than ever. These reports drew government interest too. During 1952–1969, Project Bluebook was the United States Air Force's attempt to study the increase in UFO sightings. The project studied 12,000 sightings and judged 6% of them as truly unexplainable (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1969). Governments continue to maintain secrecy regarding their investigations of UFOs (Pope, 2016). Though this is likely to avoid potential international

embarrassment, this silence continues to be taken as confirmation of conspiracies. The most well-known example of this might be the existence of "Area 51", an isolated area of Nevada popularly thought to be a secret military base containing alien technology.

The creature Bigfoot is likely to have emerged as a vestige of the European Wildman or "Woodwose" (Forth, 2007, p. 262) which is forgotten in Europe but often referenced by North American enthusiasts. A popular mythical and literary figure during the 14th to 17th centuries, the Wildman is described as a naked apelike man completely covered with fur (Novak, 1972). He is the antithesis of civilisation; lurking in hidden uncivilised places like forests and being violently opposed to humanity, fighting knights with his club and kidnapping maidens. As a half-man half-beast, the Wildman represented the Medieval fear of the untamed wilderness surrounding settlements, and the possibility of this animalistic savagery crossing boundaries (Novak, 1972). The creature embodies the "potentialities lurking in the heart of every individual, whether primitive or civilized, as his possible incapacity to come to terms with his socially provided world" (Novak, 1972, p. 35). These descriptions and themes clearly reflect Bigfoot lore. The first purported encounter with this creature occurred in 1924, inside a gorge extending from the southeast shoulder of Mount St. Helens, Washington State. Here prospectors fought apelike creatures, which threw boulders at them from high on the gorge wall (Longview Daily News, 1924). It was in 1958 that these creatures came to be known by a new name: Bigfoot. A bulldozer operator working for a logging company in Humboldt County, Northern California, discovered a set of 16-inch hominoid footprints in the mud of Six Rivers National Forest. Upon telling his coworkers, they relayed other sightings of similar footprints, and soon the whole crew referred to the imagined culprit as "Bigfoot" (Bailey, 2003, para. 50). State and national newspapers sensationalised both of these incidents and interest in the creature grew rapidly. Books like Sanderson's (1961) *Abominable Snowmen: Legend Come to Life* (1961) were published to capitalise on this interest and promoted it further. Inspired by this book, in 1967 two filmmakers travelled to Bluff Creek, Northern California in the hope of filming a Bigfoot documentary. Frame 352 of their film (the "Patterson-Gimlin Film") has been immortalised as the most controversial image of the creature (Perez, 1994).

Native American folklore has a significant influence on the Bigfoot phenomena. "Almost every indigenous group in the United States has a 'hairy man'" (Interview #4) and these traditions have become synonymous with Bigfoot (Washington National Guard, 2017). This synonymy is not only one-way as Native Americans claim that their traditional 'hairy man' is the same creature, and thus the histories of many tribes are "deeply entwined with Bigfoot" (Moskowitz-Strain, 2012, p. 6). These historical stories often present the creatures as child-eating monsters:

[Found in] California, Nevada, and Oklahoma... [the] most common Bigfoot story throughout the United States is of a Bigfoot... [which] takes children away and eats them. This cannibalism leads to a battle... and in some places, like Nevada, there are actually landscapes that are associated with where that battle occurred. In Nevada they chased the Bigfoot into a cave and they gave them one more chance if [they'd] promise [they] won't eat children, [to which] they replied "no!" ... In this case [humans] set the cave on fire and killed them all. (Interview #6)

Oppositely, clans who believe the Bigfoot were not wiped out, like the Blackfeet of Montana, describe their existence today as peaceful "guardians of the forest who look out for people" (Interview #4), or as "another tribe just like them" (Interview #4) who are sometimes traded with. (Interviewee #4's claims are corroborated by the findings of the *Pikuni Bigfoot Storytelling Project*, 2025). Pictographic evidence confirms that a wildman figure now equated to Bigfoot has had a central role in the cosmologies of tribes like California's Tule River Indians for at least 700 years (Clewlow, 1978), and this longevity was regularly cited as proof of existence by interviewees:

Before they should have known about apes they are part of their creation story, so this might make you think 'okay, they are a myth', but the other animals in

<sup>2</sup>Relating to or inhabiting the underworld

that story like coyote are all real. Why are we so quick to say Bigfoot is not real and everything else is?  
(Interview #4)

If obviously Bigfoot's real then the first people here would know more about him than we do.  
(Interview #6)

Before this stuff really went crazy before the shows [it] wasn't so sensation-alised... look at the historical native accounts around the globe, that stuff's there and it's there pre-internet.  
(Interview #7)

**Believer Communities**

Creature believers organise into "huge online communities" (Interview #6) found across social media platforms. These groups are dominated by Western, mostly North American men, although women are represented too. The largest of these communities, which can have millions of members (Reddit, 2025), are open to newcomers while smaller subcommunities for adherents of particular theories are password protected and invite only. In these communities members make friends, avidly discuss sightings and theories, comment on expert's opinions, support their own with research, and seek explanation for experiences. Some of these online groups may focus on a singular creature but the majority of them promote discussions and a worldview that includes multiple. For example, discussions in Bigfoot communities often compare the creature to a ghost or an alien, the communities of which mirror this scenario (r/Cryptozoology, 2024). This is because members usually believe in each of these creatures and are thus involved in multiple communities. All of my interviewees emphasised the internet's role in these communities growing "dramatically bigger" by making such beliefs "much more mainstream" (Interview #4). Furthermore, many described how the accessibility of information online has turned beliefs into an addiction:

These people who are in my chats, they have to do Bigfoot at least 20 hours a week, because I know I do it... they never turn off their computer and they're always on Bigfoot channels.  
(Interview #5)

It's not healthy for you to think this way, you can't do things healthy because you're polluted. It's like somebody who is a drug addict, this is their drug.  
(Interview #6)

I can't take it anymore. My wife thinks I'm crazy, it's almost to the point: divorce or Bigfoot... I need to save the marriage because she's really pissed off about Bigfoot, it's consuming like that for everyone.  
(Interview #5)

I drew many of my interviewees from these online spaces. They all highlighted that as communities have gotten larger they have come to be characterised by ridicule. Many describe the ridicule they have faced as a pivotal part of their journey; they find connection with others because "our whole families think we're crazy", and the desire to "prove people wrong who have laughed [at them]" (Interview #5) are commonly described as motivations for enthusiasm (Hill, 2014). Despite the obviousness of their enthusiasm to those around them, to curtail potential outside ridicule every interviewee still assured me they remained sceptical:

Half of my brain thinks this is ridiculous, the other part thinks there is something in this. I describe myself as a hopeful sceptic... they could exist but I'm not a 100% believer.  
(Interview #4)

I'm a sceptic, I'm not saying they exist or not. But, I have some bizarre stuff that I can't explain.  
(Interview #5)

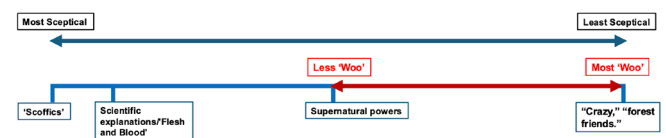
I'm there half the time trying to disprove.  
(Interview #7)

The second and even more characteristic type is the inter-community ridicule that occurs between different groups of believers. Tribalism is common, and discussions often become arguments between adherents of different theories. These tribes are bigger than single creatures and can be found arguing across a variety of non-natural creature communities, using smaller invite-only ones as headquarters. Interviewees characterised these groups by their scepticism (Figure 1). The Scoffics "are very sceptical... they spend an awful lot of time complaining about believers... they don't believe in [creatures] but they like to complain about people who do, because why, I don't know" (Interview #6).

The next most sceptical category of group are referred to as the Critical Thinkers or Scientists. Some members of these groups are actual scientists. They attempt to posit scientific (usually pseudoscientific) or "flesh-and-blood" (Interview #4) explanations for the existence of creatures, such as Bigfoot being an undocumented descendant of prehistoric apes like Gigantopithecus blaki.

The Woo categorises the least sceptical enthusiasts who support far-fetched supernatural theories. These theories ascribe creatures spectacular powers (such as teleportation, which explains why none of them have been documented yet) or encapsulate them as "one" (Interview #2); all emissaries of a divine or extraterrestrial power. The Woo group has the most presence and support online. Interviewee #5 expressed disdain about this, describing them as "crazy nut-bags", "absolute bonkers", "forest friends", "100% psycho [with] legions of followers", and "90% of the[ir] channels are literally cuckoo-nuts" (Interview #5).

**Figure 1**  
*Tribalism in Non-Natural Creature Communities*



Note. Tribes and Communities Can Be Placed Along This Scale.

This tribal competitiveness has resulted in "lots of jockeying for position" which many communities "haven't found too welcoming" or have become "jaded about" (Interview #4). Due to the unlikelihood of the creatures' existence there are no concrete rules about them, therefore enthusiasts form an infinite range of opinions which they fight to support.

**Otherworlds**

Despite these different interpretations, there are clear patterns in the way all believers imagine the existence of ghosts, aliens, and Bigfoot. Understanding the way creatures are conceptualised is key to explaining why they are increasingly believed in. Of crucial relevance is the concept of the otherworld and its opposition to our world. The otherworld has been defined as a "time and space distinct from, but also very closely connected to, everyday reality" (Greenwood, 2000, p. 23). This "everyday reality" refers to our mundane world, the civilised existence that defines humanity and is experienced by many of us. In the same way that death cannot be conceptualised without life, the otherworld serves as a contrast to mundanity. For instance, numerous cultures' afterlife may reflect the world of the living, but they are fundamentally opposites; one is the realm of life while the other is of death, populated by spirits and sharing no scientific laws of material reality. Bader and Baker (2014) have posited an explanation for why we imagine otherworlds like the afterlife. They claim: it results from the natural tendency of the human brain to perceive the 'soul' (or some synonymous construct) and body as distinct and to posit anthropomorphic supernatural agents. The generalised cognitive bifurcation of anima as distinct from material reality intuitively allows spirits to exist or persist without bodily presence (p. 570).

In other words, human cognition is relational and we are naturally inclined to make separations between the material realm, which is the

human existence, and its opposites. Hafstein (2000) describes this well: "the Otherworld is... a counterpart, circumscribing and defining the boundaries of the 'inside'... through its manifestation of an 'outside', the domain of the other" (p.89). We imagine opposites: we are alive, we are not dead. We are civilised, we are not wild. We are human, we are not from space.

Creatures draw their nature from these otherworlds and thus they occupy a liminal identity; humanoid and existing in our mundane reality yet emphasising opposing otherworldliness and fear. This liminality is the type described by Turner (1969) as existing at the threshold between two states. Often playing an important role in the movement from one state to another during rite de passage rituals, "liminal personae" or "threshold people" (Turner, 1969, p. 95) are this liminality embodied into an identity.

They "are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between... the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such; their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols... often likened to death... [or] to the wilderness... they may be disguised as monsters".

These monsters are "attributed with magico-religious properties... so often regarded as dangerous, inauspicious, or polluting" (Turner, 1969, p. 108)

Creatures are these "liminal personae" in the common ways believers have anthropomorphised their existence. Western ghosts are usually imagined in the same way: eerie, pale, and dead-looking with powers like invisibility or the ability to curse the living. The ghostly person reflects cultural images, like spirits of Catholic saints in France "which can be understood as a variation of a ghost" (Mendelsohn, 2022, para. 8), or specific cultural fears like a murdered hitchhiker (Beardsley and Hankey, 1943) or jilted bride (Preston-Ellis, 2024). Ghostly nature is further given away by an inability to properly communicate with language or tattered historical clothing. Thus, ghosts are clearly liminal entities that occupy the threshold between the mundane human realm and the antithetical otherworld, the other in this case being death. Its humanoid appearance, cultural imagery, and previous human existence emphasise mundanity, while its abilities, lack of correct clothing and communication, defining features of humanity, maintain its otherness. This liminal position between mundane and otherworldly is also reflected by different types of ghosts. Invisible poltergeists lack human form, yet believers still claim they are motivated by human emotions like anger (Dullin, 2024).

Other non-natural creatures, like Bigfoot and aliens, reflect the same type of liminal identity. Sasquatch is universally thought of as a large, hairy, half-ape, half-man. Its humanoid appearance and the way believers describe its behaviour (as being closely related to *Homo sapiens* (Sykes et al, 2014) or able to trade) emphasises humanity, while its fur, apelike face, savagery, and existence in environments hostile to humans reflect animality and opposition to civilisation.

This creature also embodies the threshold between human and other; unlike the ghost, this other is not death, it is wilderness; a hostile existence humanity has left behind. Though ethnography has described spiritually powerful wildmen in Southeast Asia (Steedly, 1993; Bubandt, 2019), Africa (Sharp, 1993; Sarno, 2012), and North America (Moskowitz-Strain, 2008), the most common power attributed to Sasquatch-like creatures are enhanced animalistic attributes, drawn from its wild otherworld. Derrida (2009) argues that this animality of beasts makes them particularly liminal and otherworldly figures, as they "do not even respect the law of the animal community" (p. 19).

Finally, aliens are similarly liminal personae. Believers have divided the appearance of aliens into various types. These include the Reptilian type (scaly humanoids), the Nordic type (tall and beautiful humanoids), or the most recognisable Grey type (grey humanoids with large craniums; Lepselter, 2023). Those who claim to see aliens also often report seeing ships, the aliens' spacefaring vehicle. These ships exhibit great degrees of technological symbiosis, performing absurd activities like making crop circles, abducting lifeforms, or playing tricks on humans. The appearance of aliens is another variation on the human form, yet their vast technological succession emphasises inhumanity and unknowable

otherness. Clark and Coleman (1975) have highlighted this, describing how UFO abductees all report their experiences taking place in an "otherworld which may have seemed 'real' enough, but which could not possibly exist" (p. 236). Thus, aliens have been anthropomorphised in ways undoubtedly mundane yet simultaneously unknowable.

By contrasting our mundane world, the otherworld is hostile to us. Thus, it is feared. By embodying this otherworldliness, creatures become the icons of our fears. Ghosts highlight our inferiority and inability to beat death. Bigfoot highlights our weakness in the wilderness and acknowledges the irony of "the Anthropocene – the epoch in which humans have arguably become a transforming force of nature" (Bubandt, 2019, p. 226) yet are more vulnerable to it and extinction crises than ever. We know little about space and its potential denizens, "what we think, imagine or dream about cultures beyond the earth not only reflects our own hidden fears and wishes, but alters them" (Maruyama & Harkins, 1975, p. vii). Besides from this fear, liminality is the attribute most emphasised about creatures. Encounters with them almost always occur in locations with a similarly liminal identity. My first explanation for why people have such encounters, argues that Western culture has preprogrammed individuals to expect creatures at specific liminal locations.

### UNHEIMLICH/WORLD LORE EXPLANATION

The unheimlich/World Lore explanation emphasises the role of Actor Network Theory (Latour, 1987), location agency, and World Lore, (a term referring to knowledge and stories popular in Western culture) in why people believe in non-natural creatures. Actor Network Theory describes how constant interactions between human and nonhuman agents construct networks of shifting relationships, each actor interacting in the network influencing others (Latour, 1987). A group of local objects and humans who interact with them construct a network that formulates a location, and it is through these networks that whole locations can be agentic (Murdoch, 1998). For example, a room in a house with a bed, a nightstand, a wardrobe, and the observer's pre-existing experiences about what objects constitute a bedroom, inform them that this location is somebody's bedroom, and they behave accordingly. The observer's prior experiences and the specificities of these objects, such as whether the bed is pink or blue, changes the spirit or sensation of this location and thus alters human behaviour further. This argument proposes that humans have preconceived knowledge from World Lore about specific locations with a liminal spirit reflecting the otherworldliness of non-natural creatures. Thus, human interactors expect to find our liminal creatures in these liminal locations, they interpret them as most likely responsible for any unexplainable experiences occurring there. Therefore, such locations act as portals to the otherworld.

As Rieti (1990, p. 8) highlights, "the incursions of the human world and the [other]world into one another are the dramatic nucleus of [believer's] narratives" (p. 8), and liminal creatures are always seen in correspondingly liminal locations. The specific liminal spirit required to turn locations into creature-summoning portals is the unheimlich sensation. The unheimlich refers to the feeling of angst experienced in locations "one does not know one's way about in" (Freud, 1919, p. 341). Atran (2002) has similarly emphasised how creatures are over-detected in "ambiguous" (p. 78) or "uncertain" (p. 78) environments. Thus, inhuman locations like deep forests, mountaintops, or those in darkness, evoke such a sensation and are commonly associated with specific creatures. My interviewees commonly cited the woods, for example:

Now that I've been out in the woods, I 100% believe that we could have something that has been there for hundreds and hundreds of years... when you get in the woods it's a different place, it's dangerous.  
(Interview #5)

Furthermore, the unheimlich is also evoked when the "familiar and agreeable" (Freud, 1919, p. 341) become "concealed and kept out of sight" (p. 341) or "secret and hidden" (p. 341). Therefore, creatures can be encountered in the familiar too. Miller (2001, para. 8) is correct in claiming that the idea that "one's home is a direct expression of one's

taste is false", as unfamiliarity arises here through problematic social relations with the location. Specific features such as temporal changes (nighttime or closing time) expose the unfamiliar lives of the familiar, as Miller highlights, their "longevity... and the relative transience of their [deceased] occupants" (para. 1). This recognition of locations' social lives results in "feelings of alienation" (para. 15) as the material that encompasses us does not represent us. In the ghost story "we mythologise this problem by positing the agency as belonging to the house itself and its possessions, where these objectify those people who have previously lived within it" (para. 12). Unfamiliarity is similarly important in conjuring alien encounters. The unfamiliar ingredient that is interacted with and creates an unheimlich location is the appearance of a UFO. The flying anomalous light or craft cannot be identified and evokes fear.

The incursions of nature upon the civilised provide another distortion of the familiar. Otherworlds and their creatures often reflect natural themes like death and wilderness. Here "they represent, in anthropomorphic form, the mysterious and numinous in wild nature, the part of the world that is beyond mankind's understanding – 'the raw' of Lévi-Strauss, as against 'the cooked' what man has mastered" (MacDougall, 1978, p. ix). To ward against "man's unreconciled distrust of nature... in the cities [mankind] devised a thousand ways of disembling natural needs" (Rieti, 1990, p. 7). When nature reclaims infrastructure through dilapidation it "liminalises" these locations as they become both human and inhuman. The decaying haunted house is an example of this. Death, the ultimate unavoidable natural, has a similarly anti-civilising effect when it occurs at locations; it shatters the veneer of humanity's escape from nature, bringing it inside. Thus, places like hospitals and graveyards are similarly thought to be haunted. Nature also plays a liminalising role in the location of Bigfoot experiences, but they are reversely characterised by humanity incurring upon it. Thompson (2004) and Hafstein (2000) similarly highlight that other creatures of wild otherworlds, like fairies, are mostly reported in natural places encroached upon by urbanisation, like ringforts within towns.

My interviewees spoke of multiple encounters with non-natural creatures, all of them occurred in unheimlich locations where familiar mundane and unfamiliar otherworlds met. These locations were described as "creepy", "satanic", a "haunted occult place", or "hell-town" (Interview #2). The majority of ghost encounters I heard took place in graveyards or hospitals. Two of my interviewees were nurses and described nightly interactions with ghostly doctors and wartime patients. Ghosts also appeared within homes at hazardous locations like stairs, only after the homeowners heard about a death taking place there. Bigfoot was encountered at the threshold of where humanity meets the wilderness. Such locations included a hunting blind, "wilderness and abandoned houses" (Interview #3), a railway embankment that passed through a swamp, a remote reservoir, and while a frozen water tower was being defrosted by a bonfire. Finally, aliens were encountered during unnerving nighttime journeys or dreamlike visions.

Dreams have often been described as liminal spaces existing between awake and asleep, alive and dead, recognisable and impossible (Heijnen, 2005; Mageo, 2022). Anthropologists have discussed these experiences (Sheriff, 2021), claiming that "man reflecting on dream experience, would have inferred from it the notion of a non-material entity — the soul — and would then have attributed this to other beings...finally to lend it an existence independent of all material support, in the form of spirits" (Sperber, 1975, p. 1). In other words, the dream's disconnection from materiality leads to its interpretation as a message from an otherworld. Dream experiences are commonly described as interactions with spirits (Broz, 2018). Interviewee #9 explained it with "your mind is so relaxed that [it is more receptive to] spirit world people trying to contact you, you can accept it more, you're more responsive to it" (Interview #9). Anthropologists like Dick (2006), Dixon (2007, p. 200), and Santo (2023) have also emphasised dreaming's characterising role in alien abduction narratives. During dreams abductees experience their familiar surroundings and objects distorted by omnipotent aliens in a "playful", "absurd", or "paradox[ical]" way beyond human comprehension (Santo, 2023, p. 263).

The unheimlich is not limited to physical expression, nor is it limited temporally. During the festivals of Zhongyuan (China), Obon (Japan), Día de los Muertos (Mexico), and Samhain (Europe) the boundaries between the mundane and afterlife are relaxed, and practitioners expect to interact with ghosts more than often.

Ubiquitous bodies of World Lore associate entering the unheimlich with encountering particular creatures. Knowledge about ghosts and the locations they haunt is so well-known that such places are "instantly recognisable" (Clanton, 2017, p. 98), "even those that ridicule the notion are conversant with the rules of haunting" (Potts, 2006, p. 78). The situation is the same for creatures like aliens and Bigfoot. Entering the unheimlich and encountering the unexplainable, such as strange animal calls or aerial lights, becomes evidence for pre-informed creature knowledge rather than other explanations are sought. Naish (2022) highlights that we "expect [creatures] in the appropriate locations" (para. 6) because "expectations of what [these] monsters are like, has been, and still is, based on images familiar in popular culture" (para. 10). The author analysed 1,688 aquatic monster accounts dating back to 1600 AD, finding that after the 1824 discovery of the plesiosaur family of Mesozoic reptiles, descriptions of creatures like the Loch Ness Monster matched them exactly. Bigfoot enthusiasts similarly reference prehistoric great apes and claim that if such creatures existed then, why not now (The Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization, 2024).

Dewan (2006) provides a perfect example of how World Lore increases the belief in creatures. His study found interpretations of anomalous light experiences as aliens to be "cross culturally uniform" (p. 186). Hearing "other peoples' cases" (p. 190) or seeing "something on TV" (p. 194) contributes to UFO tradition; the "global bodies of lore... serve as the primary context for both the initial perception and subsequent interpretation of these experiences" (p. 188). During an experience, this knowledge is revised immediately and memories are encoded through the lens of these expectations. Thus, when a North American family encountered anonymous lights one night during a drive, the first explanation for this unfamiliarity is the extraterrestrial (Dewan, 2006). Ex post facto absorption of UFO tradition from other sources only adds to the "cultural filter" (Dewan, p. 190) through which memories are recalled. The memory becomes more elaborate, the something encountered, remembered as a creature for certain. What began as an unnerving experience becomes reinforced belief. Santo (2023) similarly found that alien abductees' beliefs were reinforced the more they attempted to understand abduction experiences, constructing increasingly elaborate explanations. Initially these experiences were claimed to be like bad dreams; traumatic operations occurring in a liminal state between asleep and awake. However, the more lore these individuals learned the more complex their explanations became; aliens were no longer threatening but "technological angels" (Santo, 2023, p. 6) and "family" (Santo, 2023, p. 9). Interviews with non-natural creature experiencers highlight how pre-informed knowledge about particular locations made them expect creatures:

"I already knew that a lady had died on the stairs and knew that she'd been watching me".  
(Interview #8)

Original Seneca lore saying that there was a big hairy creature in my area of New York... Here I have a book written in the late 1700s saying that there is a legend of something being here in native lore.  
(Interview #7)

In Bigfoot communities there is a term for this pre-informed expectation and it is called having "Bigfoot on the brain":

People go to the conferences, then they get interested, and then they go out looking and then they see something, people call this 'Bigfoot on the brain', seeing Bigfoot and hearing Bigfoot all over the place. This happens a lot.  
(Interview #4)

The more lore enthusiasts are exposed to, the more likely they are to expect and start encountering creatures. Bigfoot enthusiasts learn the major categories of experiences and enough coincidental interactions with these become as significant as an encounter with the creature itself:

This day, everything that every big Bigfooter says that happens to you when you are encountering a Bigfoot, happened ... The river was flooded and all of a sudden I'm disoriented... I got back to the river and everything looked different and there was owls [hooting] at 2pm in the afternoon... I had Bigfoot on the brain and I said "oh, you know what they say about owls, Bigfoot can mimic an owl [then]... I got hit by ultrasound... I say "oh my gosh I'm being zapped"... I'm going in this direction [toward the swamp and] as soon as I do tree splash goes up... it falls right where I'm walking and most Bigfoot people say that's a warning don't go that way and so of course, I took off... As I go out there I see this about 80 yards away. It's what people would call a 'nest'. Three logs... almost looking like a seat. I got seven major categories right there, most people only have one or two.

(Interview #5)

Eaton (2018) similarly describes how coincidental events also construct encounters for ghost believers. For one member of an investigation, tripping and falling was enough to prompt the group's leader to believe paranormal influences pushed her, and thus they must have encountered a ghost. Furthermore, interviewees often emphasised how the ex post facto absorption of lore served to reinforce creature beliefs and colour the recall of memories:

"I found out really quickly that other people had seen the same thing in the same spot".

(Interview #4)

A month or two later I would see something that would make me reflect back on what happened and make it make sense. It always seems like the answers to the questions I have, eventually come but in really strange ways. (Interview #2) Some of the dreams I've had I tell other people and they say 'oh, that sounds more like an out of body experience' and I'm like 'oh, I didn't even realise that!'

(Interview #3)

He started asking me questions about my life prior to 1995 and that made me realise that I've had stuff going on ever since I was a kid and I've just never realised it because... I never knew there was anything different about it.

(Interview #3)

One interviewee even noted how this process of lore exchanging has this effect:

When you confidently talk about things that have happened to you, it opens up doors for other people who have had strange things that have happened to them.

(Interview #9)

These interpretations of events to suit knowledge, rather than the other way around, sometimes become influential across larger scales. Daly (2023) uses the term "narrative hijacking" (p. 80) to describe how believers have descended upon historical events and altered the interpretation of them en masse to suit their agenda. In 1967 the Silver Bridge collapse occurred in Point Pleasant, West Virginia. It was the deadliest bridge collapse in American history, but is now mostly remembered for its association with the popular cryptid Mothman (National Geographic, 2021). Over a hundred people sighted this creature just before the bridge collapsed (Keel, 1975). Today, most residents of Point Pleasant do not believe in Mothman, but many thousands of believers come to the town each year and popularise stories that it caused or foretold the disaster (Mothman Festival, 2025). Much to the chagrin of the townsfolk, rather than memorialising their dead, the disaster has been deeply incorporated into cryptid lore, and throughout America it is thought of more as a mystery than mourned (Daly, 2023). In recent years, where there was a

plaque memorialising the bridge collapse it has since been replaced by a twelve-foot-tall metal sculpture of the Mothman (Daly, 2023; Figure 2).

Figure 2

Mothman Statue of Central Point Pleasant



Note. Mothman Statue Opposite the Mothman Museum

Throughout the West, lore associating locations and creatures of liminal identity is spread and reinforced. This has led to the expectation of creature encounters at these portals to the otherworld. We expect specific houses to be haunted, dangerous creatures to live in deep forests far from civilisation, and for advanced technology to be responsible for anomalous aerial objects.

I was in my garage taking pictures of some pews in order to advertise them on eBay...on the pictures I saw all these floating white orbs surrounding the pews and I thought 'oh my god, it's the souls of all the people who have sat on these pews'. But then I realised, no, it's actually just a dusty old pew and the orbs are dust particles reflecting the light.

(Interview #10)

Creature interpretations of events can be refuted with enough contrary knowledge, but when other explanations are lacking they are often upheld. Furthermore, knowledge of the same lore learnt ex post facto becomes reinforcing. En masse, believers manifest even more evidence through the process of narrative hijacking, applying their agendas to historical events. This evidence can be particularly persuasive; encountering the impossible "disrupts the notion of a neatly linear temporality" (Clanton, 2017, p. 67) by suggesting there is something more to life. In reference to the community-binding feasting rituals of ancient societies, Hamilikas (2008) has highlighted that the ability to "disrupt the temporality of normal life has a powerful mnemonic role" (Madgwick, 2019, 03:23), as such irregular experiences last long in the memory. Creature experiences have a similar effect. Nobody I spoke to forgot encounters or found them any less persuasive. Finally, in regard to why creature beliefs rapidly grow, this explanation therefore posits a technologically deterministic argument. Though creature knowledge has been established for decades, as Western life further intertwines with technology like the internet, potential enthusiasts will become only more bombarded with lore and expectations.

### Creatures Ward Away Fear and Uncertainty

The previous subsection detailed how creature beliefs emerge from unfamiliar experiences. The following two functional explanations discuss the social consequences of upholding these beliefs. These social consequences motivate creature beliefs in a different way to an outright encounter, as individuals who find them attractive are drawn to upholding such beliefs. For example, creature beliefs are often employed as a way of warding against fear and uncertainty.

Firstly, the places associated with the otherworld in which creatures haunt are usually dangerous. The content of creature stories can serve as a warning not to venture into dangerous places like the forest. Native Americans tell their children stories of the battle with the child-snatching Bigfoots, warning them about venturing away from camp (Moskowitz-Strain, 2008). Bigfoot occupies the bogeyman role: "you better stay in line if you get too far away from me then Bigfoot will come and take

you" (Interview #6). Other creatures find similar expressions. In the northernmost Canadian territory of Nunavut, the Inuit warn of the Qallupilluit, a "strange looking seal" (Tulugarjuk, 2017, 02:37) with "green skin, long hair, and long claw-like fingernails" (04:08). It is also an "expert snatcher of children" (00:39) which is "especially active when the ice breaks in the spring, and, of course, when children go to the beach by themselves" (00:21). This type of warding story about creatures is very common cross-culturally, and while the belief and fear they evoke may be temporary they highlight that creature traditions are often instructional.

Creatures of the otherworld are socially disconnected and perpetually the other, incorrectly interacting with them has the potential to other the human. Broz (2018) effectively illustrates this. He describes the social rejection that befell a foreign man in the Altai community of Kosh-Agach (south-central Russia) when he interacted with spirits. In this community ghost incursions are frequent and locals ignore them to avoid the impurity they bring. This unwitting taboo interaction marked the man as other to the villagers; he had done something one should not do and lost his social position, gaining the same impure identity as the ghosts he interacted with. We similarly observe this in the West when creature enthusiasts expose their interest, they are met with ridicule and avoided. In 2004, Leonid Drachevskii, Russia's president's envoy to the Siberian Federal District, visited the region and heard about these ghosts. In response he said, "we are all educated people and I just feel awkward to hear of awakened spirits as though we live in the period of Middle Ages" (Mikhailov, 2004, para. 2). By judging "education as mutually exclusive with superstition" (Broz, 2018, para. 23), Drachevskii emphasises that ghosts "do not belong to his time" (Broz, 2018, para. 23), othering these Altaians to the inferior "Middle Ages" (Broz, 2018, para. 22). Thus, creatures are impure, the inhumanity and social othering they emphasise is contagious to those who interact with them. Rather than only reflecting Turner's (1969) "liminal personae" (p. 95) but existing outside of the rite de passage ritual, they in fact function in much of the same state-changing way; upon interacting with humans who enter their liminal threshold, they shepherd them from one state of being to another, in this case from social acceptance to otherness.

Therefore, incorrect interactions with creatures can destroy social position, but correct interactions with them can alternatively solidify social identity. Saethre's (2007) study of UFO beliefs across Walpiri Aboriginal communities in Australia highlights this. Many Walpiri uphold the belief that "aliens search for and procure water from the desert [and] while UFOs were capable of abducting humans, Aboriginal residents emphasised that these victims were exclusively non-Aboriginal" (Saethre, 2007, p. 902). As well as UFOs' "association with the presence of water, so were Warnayarra, giant multi-coloured snakes" (Saethre, 2007, p. 906) that laired near water and "recognised individuals 'belonging' in the area... [while] injuring those people who were identified as strangers" (Saethre, 2007, p. 907). Similarly, "aliens were able to recognise Aboriginal people as belonging in the area" and hence "they never harm [them]" (Saethre, 2007, p. 908). Therefore, the aliens mediate the relationship between Aboriginals and Westerners; the concern with finding water "is one way Aboriginal people demonstrate the link between [themselves] and their environment" (Saethre, 2007, p. 910), as this ability secures their belonging in a wilderness which threatens Westerners. Aliens represent this threat. Westerners cannot be harmed by aliens when they travel with Aboriginals, and though these UFOs might not be real, threatening aliens, this performance upholds the boundary between social affiliate and other. This has similarities with the way the Native American tribes of Georgia and Tennessee relate to Bigfoot:

During the time the government was moving tribes along the trail of tears, the bigfoots wanted to go with their tribes, and the tribe told them 'no, because they'll kill you if they find you'... [so they] came to the agreement, 'why don't you follow us but stay far enough away that these people cannot see you and kill you.'

(Interview #6)

Today, when these tribes see forested campfires glinting in the

distance, they claim this is the Bigfoot still keeping out of the Whiteman's way, but still visible to them (Interview #6; Interview #4). Interactions with ghosts can also result in social fortune. Among the Bayaka culture of the Central African Republic, if one gets lost alone in the forest, thus entering the unheimlich, they "will eventually come across an Aidyo [which] is a ghost" (Sarno, 2012, 00:15). Looking the ghost in the eyes will result in death but talking to it "with enough courage" (Sarno, 2012, 00:38), civilising it with language, will make you its "owner" (Sarno, 2012, 00:55). The ghost then leaves the forest for the settlement, where it performs a dance and brings its owner social prestige.

Alternatively, ghosts also play an important role in maintaining social position. In "many Native American societies, the lack of proper respect towards animals... results in vengeful animal ghosts. The role of the shaman... is to attempt to placate the angry spirits of dead animals who have been disrespected" (Thompson, 2019, p. 44). Tomlinson's (2016) study of Fijian ghosts provides another example. In Fiji, those who break social morals "are very much afraid of the spirits... [who] appear frequently... especially when they are asleep" (p. 19). Tomlinson (2016) relays the story of a man who discovered a human finger bone while digging the foundations for a house. Rather than reburying the bone he tossed it away. That night "he was unable to sleep [and a] large old-style Fijian with buiniga (a traditional hairstyle) indicating that he wanted his missing finger back" (Tomlinson, 2016, p. 20) appeared at his window. Similarly, Presterudstuen (2014) describes an encounter with the ghost of a girl: "it was good that his friend had not been kind to the girl [and told her to leave] because... [ghosts] emerge as indicators or markers of someone having overstepped racial boundaries as well as violated Fijian cultural norms" (p. 127). Refusing the ghost confirmed that this friend had not violated these customs. Therefore, interactions with ghosts encourage confirmation to social morals "by haunting individuals and communities with past ethical failures" (Thompson, 2019, p. 45).

Incorrect interactions with creatures sacrifices one's social position, when confronted with this threat one must demonstrate their invulnerability to them to avoid this. This can be seen in the way the residents of Kosh-Agach ignore spirits, in the way Walpiri relate their social belonging to alien immunity, and in the way the Bayaka or Fijians position spirits as their inferiors by dominating or shooing them. Creatures create an opportunity for one to demonstrate the other's lack of dominance over them. The same scenario is reflected in the West. Through the avoidance and ridicule of such beliefs, individuals demonstrate their allegiance to the rational social majority. Those that interact with creatures or believe in their existence are othered. These claims are supported by male enthusiasts' attempts to ward off social othering by incorporating their interest into the value system of wider society:

All an expedition is that you're camping, but a lot of guys have what I call 'Bigfoot toys': they'll dress up in their camouflage and their cameras and their really expensive walkie talkies. They get a lot of joy from saying 'okay, you go here and you go here' and planning all of it.

(Interview #4)

I'm a little different to your average researcher... I consider myself a gunslinger with a camera...there's nobody trying to do what I'm doing at the level I'm doing it.

(Interview #5)

I do a lot of survival and law enforcement.

(Interview #7)

Everyone wants to discover something. I want to figure it out on my own... if there's anyone to do it it's going to be me.

(Interview #5)

Every sasquatch encounter is not some forest creature playing peek-a-boo behind a tree, there's another side to the phenomenon and there's psychological ramifications.

(Interview #2)

By describing the masculinity and individualism of such dangerous activities, interviewees attempted to justify them and fit themselves into Western social norms. This position grants more social sanction and believers seem less irrational. Regardless of this social appeasement, believers are usually still othered. However, as observed with other countercultures, societies with different worldviews can be formed through the creation of online spaces. Here, experiences with creatures no longer invite othering but they offer ways of building social status:

When other people have had an experience it makes you feel good that other people share that experience because it makes you feel 'okay, I'm not totally crazy'.

(Interview #4)

There is this weird Bigfoot fame.

(Interview #4)

A lot of the big conferences are fun, I call them adult summer camp. Like, you are getting together with friends you see once a year and everybody's drinking and everybody's having fun.

(Interview #4)

My wife and I did everything together and then once I got into Bigfoot I got a new group of friends and left her.

(Interview #5)

These communities not only provide sanctuary; they are deeply alluring. Kierkegaard emphasised the reward of "identity derive[d] from believing something which is deeply offensive to reasoning... the believer feels alive and singularly inspired in ways which believing something currently plausible could not achieve" (Kierkegaard, 1843, as cited in Overing & Rapport, 2000, p. 369). Commitment to the absurd necessitates utmost conviction, but this conviction evolves into a communal bond and purpose to preserve one's identity vis-à-vis critics.

A secondary way creatures police social morals is by "represent[ing] the past as an 'other' undesired mode of being" (Clanton, 2017, p.76). The past is not remembered as "an absolute quantity but a relative set of values" (Hewison, 1987, p. 135). Creatures "invoke respect for the past and for societal boundaries" (Clanton, 2017, p. 69) by embodying the worst of these historical values and highlighting that they should not be repeated in the present. This effect manifests by conjuring feelings of guilt concerning past injustices. As Parra argues, alien abduction narratives function as a simulacrum of anxieties regarding science, technology, and especially post-colonial guilt (Parra, 2022, as cited in Santo, 2023, p. 255). This conclusion is echoed by Halperin's (2020) study, who found themes of the slave trade in alien experience narratives; Barney Hill, a particularly famous example, reported that throughout his abduction experience aliens were checking his teeth as if in a slave market. Gelder (1994, p. xi) emphasises that indigenous peoples are often the focus of Australian ghost experiences and stories, reflecting feelings of post-colonial guilt about a violent white settlement. Similarly, Bergland (2000) claims the "spectralization" (p. 5) of Native Americans in North American ghost stories is acknowledgement of the government's continued oppression and attempts to remove them from American history. The Soviet government greatly oppressed the Kalmyk peoples of southern Russia, causing almost 17,000 deaths during the 1920s (Pohl, 2000). Today, vengeful Kalmyks are a common feature of the region's ghost stories; they haunt those who moved into their homes after deportations and thus remind inhabitants of this injustice (Terbish, 2019).

Bubandt (2019) describes the colonial and historical anxieties elucidated by wildmen creatures like Sasquatch. On the Indonesian Island of Halmahera "the hairy and barely human giants that are said to roam the jungle are seventeenth-century Portuguese colonisers" (Bubandt, 2019, p. 223). Thus, "the first white colonisers are also the ultimate figure of animality" (Bubandt, 2019, p. 224). This is because these creatures, known as yawas, reflect the colonial brutality enacted on the indigenous population (Bubandt, 2019). They are "really ignorant" (Bubandt, 2019, p. 229), yet they "see themselves as enemies of [the island's] humans"

(Bubandt, 2019, p. 229) and are much fiercer combatants than them, "easily outpacing even the fastest hunter" (Bubandt, 2019, p. 228). This tradition highlights the otherness of Western brutality, however, it has changed in response to Indonesian Westernisation. On Halmahera today there is "electricity and TVs and satellite dishes", and the notion that "there are no yawas left" (Bubandt, 2019, p. 230) because the boundaries between Western and Indonesian are now much lessened. Rather, yawas have shifted from an exterior concern to an interior concern with the human potential for animalistic savagery, "a projection of the repressed anxieties of modern self-consciousness" (Bubandt, 2019, p. 236). Though they might roam the jungles no longer, as an idea these creatures still embody the sins of the past and enforce social morals by being an opposite.

Therefore, it can be beneficial to make "contracts" (Lévi-Strauss, 1955, p. 232) with creatures. These ongoing relationships forged by belief ensure one remains on the right side of social boundaries. Such relationships are often characterised by the appeasement of creatures, a demonstration that one does not want to be afflicted by its misfortune. From Spiro's (1953) study of evil ghost appeasement on the small pacific atoll of Ifaluk, to the massive Hungry Ghost Festivals of East Asia, anthropologists have documented these appeasement relationships across a spectrum of scales (Engelke, 2018; Lo, 2022). Known as Zhongyuanjie in China, millions participate in this Hungry Ghost festival, which begins on the 15th night of the 7th lunar month. Zhongyuanjie is thought to be adapted from the Buddhist story of 'Mulian who saves his mother from Hell' which is found in the Yulanpen Sutra of Mahayana scripture. Mulian's mother had been reincarnated in one of the lowest levels of Hell populated by preta, hungry ghosts who suffer through extreme starvation (Teiser, 1988). In order to save his mother, the Buddha instructs Mulian to make offerings of food to the Sangha on the 15th day of the 7th lunar month, after which Mulian descends to Hell. Thus, Zhongyuanjie is a time when the boundaries between realms are lessened and spirits return to the mundane world. It is a dangerous time and practitioners avoid liminal spaces or travelling at night. Reflecting Mulian's filial piety, many Chinese households make large offerings of food to appease the ghosts of their ancestors. This appeasement prevents ghosts from bringing misfortune to the living through impurity and disease (Teiser, 1988).

However, rather than these ghosts haunting humans, Puett (2014) is correct that they "have been domesticated into relationships defined to benefit the living" (p. 226). We do not appease ghosts, we appease ourselves; our anxieties about misfortunes are warded and the acknowledgement of the deceased demonstrates filial piety, conformation to group social morals, and invokes respect for the past. If this gift appeasement is categorised as an exchange, it is negative reciprocity in the Sahlinian sense, as the donor hopes to gain a lot from their gift. However, abnormally this exchange is predicated on the immaterial and by giving and destroying their offering it is essentially an exchange with oneself. Highlighting that through the concept of creatures needing appeasement one gains the Hau, the spiritual influence to reciprocate exchanges, and the satisfaction of it, which in this case brings the feeling of warded misfortune, solely through one's own deception. By acknowledging creatures and the fear they represent as something that can be appeased, this personal exchange provides the continual opportunity to ward away feelings of anxiety. For example, many of China's younger population are atheist, but they still return home to Zhongyuanjie and make offerings to the dead (Kipnis, 2021). In a country where the city-working younger generations have become more unsure about how to demonstrate traditional yet important values like filial piety, this festival supersedes its religious emergence and remains an important way of demonstrating social commitment and warding away the misfortune of othering (Kipnis, 2021).

Thompson (2022) highlights that the same appeasement of creatures happens for Western believers. He claims that we tell ghost stories because "there's a possibility that the ghost can be appeased, that you can acknowledge the wrongs, and give them a proper burial... [it is] a really powerful ethical message to consider: we can't change the past, but can certainly try to do the right thing now" (Thompson, as cited in Mendelsohn, 2022, para. 15.). Ghosts display "the shadow of ethics"

(Thompson, 2019, p. 44) and by acknowledging them we appease the broken ethics of a jilted bride or brutal murder, appeasing our fears that such things are acceptable. This "is not superstition, but rather a sober reflection of the importance of acting ethically now, to avoid being on the wrong side of history later" (Thompson, 2019, p. 53). The stories of believers reflected this. In places like Carlisle Castle's dungeons, ghostly "Spanish prisoners of war" (Interview #8) were seen licking stone walls for condensation, thus the horrors of their treatment were acknowledged. Ghost beliefs can provide more than acknowledgement, creating ways individuals can directly appease past sins, as this Paracon story illustrates:

She would cry and bang her head on a tree, the next sister would get this red rash from her ankle up to the side of her face, and the mother would collapse on the floor and feel like she was being crushed... there had been a house there in 1810, the owner lived there with two of his daughters. I found a news article about the father's death, he had he shot himself over being depressed about losing his two daughters... one daughter had been chopping wood and [accidentally] struck a support and the roof collapsed on her and crushed her... the other daughter had been walking through the kitchen and her dress caught on fire and burned her up the left side of the body... he shot himself in the head under the same tree... [I went] to see where they're buried... and a tree had crushed the three graves... We raised the tree and moved it off the graves, we rebuilt the gravestones, we brought the family and the ancestors out to the cemetery and we had a funeral for the three of them and everything in the house stopped. They just wanted to be remembered.  
(Interview #1)

These beliefs take the fear and uncertainty out of the other, they show it as something controllable, something that we can know about.

I was minding somebody who was in a coma, she woke up, her eyes went to the door, she followed something right to the foot of her bed, and then she died. Somebody came for her to take her to the other side. It was eerie. I thought it was lovely really.  
(Interview #9)

[Spirits] let you know that 'I'm still here' and 'I'll look after you,' me personally I've got a lot of comfort in that. During the Falklands War I didn't worry too much because I knew [my husband's] grandad would look after [him].  
(Interview #8)

When you smash a bug in your house, now it's going to be there forever.  
(Interview #1)

Spirit beliefs imply that there essentially is no death and therefore no need to worry. This was most visible when I attended a popular mediumship event in Herefordshire. The medium went around the room gleaned information about attendee's dead relatives. For one couple whose baby had died she assured them that "she knows you loved her and she knows you wanted her... she loves daddy... everyone out there is looking after her". About parents she said, "in her eyes you didn't do no wrong" and "she is grateful for the time she had, she's not sad". Such performances provide attendees a way of mending trauma, "tak[ing] the absence created by loss and metabolis[ing] it into... a space where relationships can continue developing" (Kontou, 2023, para. 26), "making life more bearable" (Kontou, 2023, para. 26). When the medium could not gather enough information about deceased relatives, the spirits offered different self-assuring advice:

"Someone in the spirit world says she likes your tattoos".

"You didn't want to see that he wasn't his true self... [a] narcissist... it's his loss, they say".

For me, they had some particularly relevant, but foreboding, advice:

Medium: "Why [are the spirits] looking at computers a lot?"

Author: "Because I'm writing my dissertation".

Medium: "They want to keep it going because they're watching you alright. They're saying... keep it so they want to read it".

Author: "That's definitely relevant".

Medium: "Well I know that's relevant that's what they've told me! What they're saying is make sure you keep their imagination and hold them to it, so they want to read it. Because, believe you me, they've read loads of it, and, its pretty 'whatever'.

When asked why ghosts linger in the mundane realm, Interviewee #9 told me, "[maybe] they died in such a traumatic way that they have not had chance to say goodbye to people". In actuality, believers make them linger because they want something from them. Ghosts ward away fears concerning death and past morals. Aliens do the same for anxieties concerning technology, space, and the future. Making aliens tangible, understandable, and contactable, creates avenues to negate these anxieties. Many large pseudo-religious Western groups like Scientology, the One World Family, Nation of Islam, and Falun Gong, describe aliens as saviours and promote ways of contacting them through chanting (Santo, 2023, p. 261) or tantric sex (Perdue, 2006, 15:13). These aliens replace religious figures, for example, they are the "universal mind of cosmic consciousness earth people call god" (Perdue, 2006, 02:00), and the "Christian prophets" (Perdue, 2006, 02:37) were "tuned in" (Perdue, 2006, 02:54) and heard "directly from the God Mind" (Perdue, 2006, 03:05). These extraterrestrial connections "empower" (Perdue, 2006, 26:10) believers by giving them comfort.

Alternatively, Interviewee #6 highlighted that their Bigfoot beliefs brought self-assurance about being in the wilderness:

"Sometimes he's just a friendly giant".

"He's a friend of the tribe and they have a good relationship... he's just a different kind of brother". "In some tribes if you see a Bigfoot... it's considered a complete blessing, 'this was a sign for me of something great'".

"[Among the Kwakiutl] the wild women of the woods dance brings good fortune for the year".

(Interview #6)

However, rather than warding fears about the past or future, I found Bigfoot beliefs mostly warded enthusiasts' present uncertainty about society.

In conclusion, the belief in creatures functions as a way of appeasing one's fears. This is achieved by acknowledging creatures and therefore emphasising the social morals they oppose, or by actively interacting with them to ensure such boundaries remain unbroken in the present. This conclusion reflects previous anthropological studies, which have also shown the seemingly irrational to be methods of warding uncertainty. Evans-Pritchard's (1937) seminal work on Azande witchcraft highlighted its function as complex social performances for warding uncertainty about illness and communal disputes, rather than justification for European evolutionists' models. In countries like Romania, witchcraft persists as a way to repel uncertainty (Coțofană, 2017). Creature beliefs are another seemingly irrational practice achieving this function, as fear and uncertainty grow in Western societies we should expect them to proportionally.

### Creatures As Responses To Social Changes

In the previous subsection, I described how creature beliefs ward off anxieties. Though these anxieties may relate to the past or the future, they are all ultimately interpretations of the present state of one's society and its morals. This explanation posits that the belief in creatures is underpinned by anxieties regarding maintaining social values in response to widespread changes in social identity. Anthropologists have recorded multiple examples of this in regard to fay creatures. In Newfoundland, Rieti (1990) has suggested that the function of fairy tradition is

to compare the past with the present, associating the fairies with days gone by and former generations. Like other creatures, the fairies are the ultimate strangers, their otherness reflecting "the human relationship with nature... in a harsh environment, under precarious economic and material conditions, one's niche is ever under siege; fairy narratives reflect the struggles and hard-won survival of culture... and the tenuous imposition of order on the wilderness" (Rieti, 1990, p. 6). Therefore, the nostalgia fairies evoke has translated into a contrasting worldview between the older generations who grew up rurally, and their immediate city-dwelling families. For most, the traditional anxiety that fairies represent is no longer a problem, and therefore the nostalgic belief in them that older generations maintain signifies social change and their resistance to it. Hafstein (2000) provides a similar example of Icelandic elves. These elves "represent nature in the heart of culture" (Hafstein, 2000, p. 89) and live in correspondingly liminal locations like rocks, hills, and ponds found amongst human infrastructure. The presence of the "other" at these places makes them "taboo, they must not be fished in, messed with, moved or mowed; they must not... be brought into culture" (Hafstein, 2000, p. 89). However, these places regularly come into contact with modernisation projects as Iceland urbanises, and therefore elves retaliate with misfortune "directed against development" (Hafstein, 2000, p. 92). Such misfortune has supposedly included hospitalising builders and making bulldozers explode. Development projects like road construction "blur the traditional metanarratives of community" (Hafstein, 2000, p. 94) by bringing the rural outside into the civilised inside, destroying boundaries with otherworlds and evicting elves from their homes. Seeing these evicted, migrating elves has been reported by observers in areas due to be developed. This, and the fact that "elves still have all the material culture of Iceland's pre-industrial peasant society" (Hafstein, 2000, p. 94), has characterised them as "protectors and enforcers [of] pastoral values and traditional rural culture" (Hafstein, 2000, p. 101), "waging battle against the destruction of traditional order" (Hafstein, 2000, p. 96).

Modernisation in Iceland has been rapid, decreasing the rural population from 88.1% to 9.3% in less than a hundred years (Jonsson & Magnusson, 1997, p. 90). These popular folk narratives are interpretations of social identity changes and they raise concerns about them. As Hastrup (1990) states, the "image of the Icelanders, as produced and reproduced in the strategies of identity creation is the image of the Icelander as a farmer" (p. 133). Thus, modernisation, urbanisation, and industrialisation have occurred so rapidly in Iceland that national identity still draws from pastoral values. Oppositely, "fishermen, labourers, and white-collar workers are outsiders in the reigning representations of nationality" (Hastrup, 1990, p. 132). This inversion has transformed these Icelanders participating in modernisation into the "other". They "menace the incarnations of Icelandic identity" (Hafstein, 2000, p. 98) while elves, rural and traditional in urbanised society, embody it. Therefore, the "vitality of elf-tradition in contemporary Iceland may be taken as a sign of orientation toward the past" (Hafstein, 2000, p. 96), an attempt to reunite oneself with their desired identity in a society that has othered them.

Other creatures similarly embody national identity. The national identity of the Solomon Islands has been fractured by long periods of colonial government and continuing ethnic violence. Therefore, creatures like Kakamora have come to "embody places and their pasts in new, hopeful projects of imagination that look for signs of indigenous strength" (Tomlinson, 2016, p. 17). Found on the island of Makira, these Kakamora are widely believed in spirits who are animated parts of the land, living in the ground and embodying "the primordial wholeness and essential power of Makira" (Scott, 2013, p. 59). It is thought an army of Kakamora will one day re-emerge from the ground and reestablish traditional ways. In the meantime, they lurk out of sight and punish those who break traditional social values. Indigenous identity in the Solomon Islands may have become illusive, yet, like Icelandic elves, Kakamora uphold what it means to be Makiran and embody this struggle. They display an ideal, believing in them encodes this ideal into reality and makes it powerful. Thompson (2004) has displayed the power of

creatures embodying ideals even among those who do not believe in their existence. He highlights how the popularity of creatures like leprechauns in Ireland is not because they are a touristic image or stereotype, rather they are an attempt to empower native identity. For a long time, these creatures were characterised as the pagan "other" and belief in them was damned by the Christian Church (Thompson, 2004). Christianity is still powerful in Ireland, but it has become "increasingly unfashionable to use the Catholic Church as a symbol of the Republic" (Thompson, 2004, p. 202) among younger generations "interested in promoting secularism, diversity, and cultural pluralism" (Thompson, 2004, p. 202). In contrast, the use of leprechauns as symbols is "staggering" (Thompson, 2004, p. 203). People might not believe in their existence but they believe in them as symbols "of the good old days" (Thompson, 2004, p. 205); they show identification with the desire to challenge social values that have been instilled for years in favour of "an idealised past" (Thompson, 2004, p. 205). The colonial English enforced Christianity and attempted to wipe out these creatures. Today they are upheld as "something that the English do not have" (Thompson, 2004, p. 206) and thus embody Irish identity.

Upholding beliefs in creatures like Bigfoot is similarly an attempt to achieve a desired social identity not satisfied by modernity. Believers described this identity as traditional and connected to nature, one opposing destructive urban modernity. Native American accounts precisely reflected this opposition, highlighting Bigfoot's inability to coexist with the modern world:

One of the things I have been told by multiple different tribes is that once science proves that Bigfoot is real, that's going to be the end of this current world, because he is the protector of the forest.

(Interview #6)

Once the Blackfeet started to shy away from the old ways and become more modernised the limoitapi [(Bigfoot)] retreated to the woods. They're still there but they look at them as guardians of the forest who look out for people.

(Interview #4)

Many tribes say we have stories [about Bigfoot] but he left a long time ago when Europeans got here, he headed for the hills and never came back because he was afraid of Europeans with guns.

(Interview #6)

In Indonesia, Forth (2011) has similarly written about the ebu gogo wildmen of Flores Island, whose "locals [also] describe them as either extinct or much rarer than in previous times" (p. 201). With much similarity to the Native American tradition, the Ua people of Flores "decided to exterminate the ebu gogo... by confining them inside their cave and igniting a great fire inside the entrance" (Forth, 2011, p. 208). The Wildman represents the primitive human past which cannot coexist with human modernity, characterised by its most defining tool: fire. Thus, absent or murdered wildmen are martyred; such stories highlight modernity's destruction of traditional ways, upholding these creatures offers a way to reconnect to them. Therefore, the reappearance of Bigfoot has marked the return of tradition:

In north [California], the Shasta tribe I believe, they're trying to revive their culture... and they're starting to drum and to dance when one of the elders goes over to a bush and has a conversation. He [returns and] goes "well, don't look straight at him but over there is Bigfoot. I said, "what are you doing here?" and he said "I haven't heard this music in a very long time and I just want to stand here and listen to it because I remember this. I remember when you used to dance. I remember when you used to do this drumming". Bigfoot remembered this ritual and he wanted to hear it again.

(Interview #6)

Believing in Bigfoot, the "guardian" of traditional ways, is an attempt to uphold them and resist modernity. Many Western believers emphasised similar anti-modernity values, such as establishing reconnection with nature and fears about global warming:

Bigfoot changed my life in a lot of ways... I have taken survival classes by myself... learned how to survive in the wilderness... all of these things have come from this quest to know more.

(Interview #2)

They found the Humboldt Marten again, which they thought was extinct, [and that is] the benefits of this in the bigger picture.

(Interview #7)

Dramatic change in the way nature deals with me... I've had two or three mosquito bites. Bees leave me alone... those fears are gone.

(Interview #3)

I became very dedicated to things like recycling and caring for the planet... [when] before I didn't care... This space on Earth, this is what we have... we've got to take care of our home.

(Interview #3)

Simon's (2017) "Sasquatch Pastoral" highlights how individuals are drawn to Bigfoot belief in this way. He claims that Bigfoot represents "humankind in pristine, uncorrupted, natural perfection. He represents the virginal innocence of our species' origins... [and] hark[s] back to the prelapsarian simplicity of life before civilisation corrupted us" (Simon, 2017, p. 118). The allure of Bigfoot is its pastoral idealisation of the past and disillusionment with modern social changes. Thus, "folklore gives form to energies set into motion by some shared or social anxiety" (Abrahams, 1971, p. 19), and upholding creature beliefs becomes a way of resisting modernity's influences.

Initially I tried to shut this [experience] out of my head because I still led a very selfish lifestyle... I was young, cocky, I wanted to go to war... my whole attitude to violence changed and I didn't want anything to do with it.

(Interview #2)

I don't want to be judgemental of other people but they don't realise what they're doing is very selfish... There's a whole movement now that says "you need me-time" and that you have to love yourself first... there's a lot of people who are depressed and unhappy.

(Interview #3)

A lot of people who become so enraptured by science and technology... the more science discovers the more people start thinking that we are the creators of our own destiny.

(Interview #3)

I didn't grow up in a haunted house or with UFOs... I was just a punk rock kid who didn't like being told what I could or couldn't think about, and people told me not to waste my time thinking about ghosts and UFOs... so because I was a punk rock kid that is what I was going to think about.

(Interview #1)

Ong (1988) reflects this, highlighting how creature beliefs become forms of resistance when the traditional is replaced by modernity. In Malaysia, rural female factory workers have experienced disruptive mid-shift ghost possessions since the 1970s (Ong, 1988). They claim these ghosts live in the cisterns of factory toilets, and thus they refuse to flush them and throw used sanitary products around the room, frightening ghosts. These rural women come to factories because their own communities hold less opportunity, but when they arrive they are greatly exploited and their experience of modernity is oppressive. They blame this for their possession; citing "the stresses of urban living" (Ong, 1988, p. 32) and its "mounting pressure" (Ong, 1988, p. 32). Therefore, Ong (1988) claims that ghost possession becomes a way of resisting oppressive modernity; female workers draw power from their rural identity and resist employer's oppressions by emphasising their otherness. A "local medicine man can do more good than tranquilisers" (Chew, 1978, p.51), so they are sent back home. These events are not isolated. In India and Sri

Lanka, Fuller (1992) similarly claimed "women's possession episodes are culturally tolerated opportunities to complain about female inferiority and subordination" (p. 233).

Like these women, Westerners who become disillusioned with their experience of modernity and its values, uphold creature beliefs to maintain their otherness to it. This maintenance of otherness becomes resistance; creatures offer interpretations of the past, present, and future, which refute the values of modern society and relate to a different identity. Many features of the modern Western lifestyle, such as war or the destruction of nature, magnify the fears that creatures ward. Therefore, as this magnification continues, we should expect creature beliefs to increase accordingly.

## CONCLUSION

I offer three synchronistic explanations for why Westerners believe in creatures. They are bombarded with lore associating creatures with correspondingly liminal locations, making them expected there. Secondly, appeasing creatures wards away the fears and negative social values that they represent. For some believers, these negative social values come to represent modernity; upholding creature beliefs offers opportunity for maintaining personal resistance against them.

Overall, I argue that these beliefs are a reaction to a loss of security. This loss can be immediate, as upon encountering the unheimlich, or the loss of social identity which results from upholding creature beliefs. This loss of social identity is not always a reaction, but may pre-exist and drive creature beliefs; they offer an outlet for feelings of disillusionment with wider society. Essentially then, behind these beliefs are future threats and attempts to counteract them. The imagining and anthropomorphising of aliens answers uncertain, fearful questions like, "Are we alone?" and "Can we trust our governments?" providing methods of doing something about these fears. The belief in Bigfoot is organised around the present; determining whether it exists today becomes an attempt to connect to nature and tradition which may be destroyed by modern society. Finally, ghosts represent past values but they do this to "ask questions about what futures might result from avoiding past misdeeds" (Weinstock, 2013), or to threaten us with the opposite. Furthermore, Laqueur (2015) highlights that the lingering soul enables us to keep "part" (p. 64) of our loved ones with us, warding off the fear of a future without them.

It is with these points in mind, I posit that creatures are not just "liminal personae" in the Turnerian sense, but they exactly match his definition and rite de passage ritual that they play a role in. Some people want to be other to society because they find security in it, like fear warding or creating desired social connections. Thus, these creatures are not just liminal figures but involved in a rite de passage; their othering interactions perpetuate the desired change in state and purposefully seeking them enacts this ritual. Alternatively, not all believers desire the same extent of othering, but these beliefs still offer them a form of resistance to modernity through escapism.

Anthropologists have studied other irrational obsessions and drawn similar conclusions. In Rice's (2002) study of Koi-obsessed fish breeders, their "addiction" (20:50) was described as a response to the challenges of modern life: "They're just serene if you watch them, it comes across as therapy if you have had a bad day... it's idyllic, it's wonderful, gives you a great sense of wellbeing" (21:01). One can enter a fantastical world through obsession. However, I found that this escapism could only go so far. Believers felt disillusionment with society but were still invested in the same value systems, ergo their beliefs became avenues to manifest qualities like the masculinity or individualism that had become denied to them by wider society. Their beliefs are unscientific, yet believers commonly expressed continuing faith in science and tried to fit their beliefs into it:

I remember parts about science and how to do science.  
(Interview #5)

I try to be a scientist and think this through.  
(Interview #6)

I'm working on a UV hair study where we're using UV light and different camera filters to look at hair under a digital microscope.  
(Interview #7)

The technology we're using, cryptids and paranormal [studies] could really benefit.  
(Interview #7)

The Bigfoot Field Researchers Organisation are notoriously science based.  
(Interview #3)

Therefore, I draw the conclusion that these beliefs are attempts to resist a society one feels threatened by while simultaneously providing ways of "fitting in" to the values believers have been denied.

## DISCUSSION

This research is also informative about wider society and why it might ridicule beliefs like these. To elaborate on this, I borrow from the theories of Gender Studies. In Ortner's "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture" (1974), she claims that the subjugation of women by men is due to cultural associations between the former with nature and the latter with superior culture. Ortner (1974) highlights how women are associated with nature in three ways:

The female body and its functions are more involved with "species life" (p. 12) than men, who do not directly create life.

The female body and its functions put her in social roles that are considered more natural and at a lower order of culture, in opposition to the higher orders of the cultural process given to men.

Traditional female social roles, imposed because of her body and its functions, give her a different psychic structure that is seen as being more "like nature" (p. 22).

These claims reference De Beauvoir's (1961) conclusion that a woman's body can make her life difficult because of its adaptations to the needs of the egg and child. Therefore, she is more enslaved to her nature than a man, "her animality is more manifest" (De Beauvoir, 1961, p. 13). Furthermore, while the man is distant from the domestic unit the woman is responsible for it; her role is to transfer children from wild to cultured, and therefore she occupies a "middle status on the hierarchy [between] culture and nature" (Ortner, 1974, p. 25) as not quite fully culturalised herself. Connell's (1987) theory of Hegemonic Masculinity describes how this sociocultural interpretation of behaviour is organised into a hierarchy. At the top of this cultural hierarchy is the behaviour of "a 'real' man or boy and many males draw inspiration from [this] cultural library of resources" (Fitzclarence & Kenway, 1997, p. 120) to know how to behave. Thus, "hegemonic masculinities are located in a structure of gender/sexual power relations, and within these, boys define their identities against the Other. Gay masculinities feature in the Other category, as does any attachment to the feminine" (Jackson, 2002, p. 39) which is associated with nature. By modelling their behaviour against the feminine other, men demonstrate their allegiance to masculinity and culture. Having and labelling the other, then highlighting one's difference to it, cements one's own identity.

Nature, middle-status, and other, make clear comparisons to creature beliefs' association with the same themes. Wider society sees its ghost, alien, and Bigfoot believers as a liminal other, who has rejected culture to hunt creatures in nature. Choosing to uphold creature beliefs is unnerving in the same way a Western man may be reluctant to wear a dress or admit his queer sexuality, because one has to openly defy societies hegemonies of self-worth. Therefore, the ridicule and social rejection of believers can be explained as a form of hegemonic sociability; by finding them irrational or foolish one reinforces their place within the boundaries of society to themselves and others. Rather than simply ridicule, Kristeva's (1982) theory of abjection captures the personal subtleties of this rejection. She claims encountering something that "disturbs identity, system, and order... the in-between, the ambiguous" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4), such as a corpse's position between once alive and now deceased, subconsciously forces us to choose our identity. One might react disgusted by the corpse, rejecting it. Thus, "the object refers

to the human reaction (horror) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss in distinction between... self and other" (Felluga, 2014, para. 1). Abjection is a reaction to a threat, and importantly highlights that our identity-cementing rejections are a constant cognitive process of how we think about the other. Non-believers categorise beliefs like these into a library of contrasts; resources that oppositely define society's adherence. Most people might not have met creature-believers but they have encountered the concept, the othering way it is thought about, thus cementing their identity.

Finally, this research has further implications regarding the study of conspiracy theories, another group of irrational beliefs not "seen as worthy of ethnographic inquiry in anthropology as of yet" (Rakopoulos, 2022, p. 45). In 1945, Karl Popper coined the term conspiracy theory and argued they came from the death of god; the decline in the charisma of religious explanations for the world and the uptake of new sources of truth. The World Health Organisation has called our current age an "infodemic" (Kramer, 2021), as we live with so many sources of truth that the West has entered a "post-truth era" (Sidky, 2019, p. 1). In consequence, Western conspiracy theories like Qanon and Pizzagate have recently grown to have considerable power, heavily influencing events like the 2021 United States Capitol attack. Such irrational conspiracy theories are present "in the UK [too], people who allegedly believe that 5G cellular networks are the cause of COVID-19 set fire to multiple cell towers" (Slotkin, 2020, para. 1). Like creature beliefs, most conspiracy theories express "concern about a loss of autonomy and challenges to traditional notions of identity" (Butter & Knight, 2018, p. 41), the environmental conspiracies of southeast Italy (Parmigiani, 2021) and Turkey's homophobic conspiracies (Saglam, 2020) providing similar, right-wing examples of this. These conspiracies are attempts to resist the changing world and provide a community mission to do so.

This communal, social aspect has often been misunderstood by academic research underlying methodologies for tackling conspiracies. In 2018, the University of Hradec Králové produced research detailing experiments effective at coaxing Flat Earth Theorists away from their beliefs (Břízová et al., 2018). One experiment utilised the eventual inability of boats to see land due to the curvature of the earth. In 2020, National Geographic replicated these experiments using a long-range camera and a panel that floated across a lake. The Flat Earthers remained "absolutely" (National Geographic, 2020, 08:13) unconvinced, exclaiming "it's still flat" (National Geographic, 2020, 08:19). People with irrational beliefs like these are often described as having passively "fallen down the rabbit hole", implying that scientific logic can pull them out. Yet, my research shows that they actively "jump" down this hole because it provides a desired function. Doing this often necessitates social rejection from wider society and the investment in new online social networks where the irrational is rewarded. Therefore, these beliefs are not opinions that can be challenged with logic, they are ways of belonging, intertwined with social identity. Believer's rejection of persuasion is a performative way conspirators abjectify their other. Showing conspirators their errors only promotes this. As I have done for creature beliefs, anthropologists should analyse conspiracies to determine the social pressures and fears driving them. Only this knowledge and its implementation in social policies will stop conspiracies spreading.

## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

### Appendix

# Article references

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