

Eastern Illinois University

The Keep

Undergraduate Honors Theses

Honors College

2018

A Haunted Genre: A Study of Ghost Hunting Reality Television

Abigail L. Carlin

Follow this and additional works at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/honors_theses



Part of the [Television Commons](#)

A Haunted Genre: A Study of Ghost Hunting Reality Television

(TITLE)

BY

Abigail L. Carlin

UNDERGRADUATE THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF

UNDERGRADUATE DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, ALONG WITH
THE HONORS COLLEGE,
EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2018

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS UNDERGRADUATE THESIS BE ACCEPTED
AS FULFILLING THE THESIS REQUIREMENT FOR
UNDERGRADUATE DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

12/12/2018
DATE

THESIS ADVISOR

12/12/2018
DATE

HONORS COORDINATOR

12/12/2018
DATE

DEPARTMENT

Introduction to Thesis

In a recent interview on *CONAN*, the Chicago comedian Kyle Kinane shared his opinion regarding the relationship between white privilege and the existence of ghosts. Kinane joked that he thinks “the only people who believe in poltergeists are people who don’t have any real-world problems,” and following that statement, he states that believing in ghosts and engaging in paranormal culture is stereotypically “white” (0:39-1:20). The parallel drawn between daily life and the topic of race is referred to as privilege, and Kinane insinuates that white privilege leaves an individual with a significant amount of free time and resources to engage in seemingly illogical beliefs, such as ghosts; however, ghost hunting reality television lends itself to more than boredom, as it is a new and exciting genre specific to the 21st century.

In this thesis, ghost hunting reality television is explored and recognized as a cultural artifact. Born from the combination of secular methodology, religion, and technology, an unlikely and obscure genre explodes from obscurity to popular culture to such a degree that tier one celebrities, such as Post Malone, guest star on longstanding ghost hunting reality show *Ghost Adventures* (2008-present). Originating from a legacy of Victorian England seances, the desire to venture into the unknown is satisfied by an industry of individuals eager and dedicated to document the existence of ghosts. However, while documentation remains the primary objective of the genre at large, there is much to be explored outside of ghosts, ghouls, demons, and other monsters that go bump in the night.

Chapter one, “Ghost Hunting Reality Television: Entertainment as Catharsis,” seeks to establish the genre, as well as combat common misconceptions. The first misconception that must be addressed is the issue of race and genre, as articulated by Kinane. It is true that the

industry is lead primarily by Caucasian, Christian men, yet there are very real efforts to increase diversity within paranormal culture. *Ghost Brothers* (2016-2017) is the breakout portrait of African American men engaging in ghost hunting, and their work pioneering the industry could be equated to that of Jordan Peele and his horror film, *Get Out* (2017). Chapter one seeks to answer the question, “why do people watch ghost hunting shows?” as well as critically examine the properties of the genre. One of the leading and most distinguishable characteristics of ghost hunting reality television is the nearly ritualistic sense of escapism or catharsis, which is due (at least in part) to the legacy of Victorian seances. Seeking contact from the dead used to be an intimate affair, and while the ritual has become sensationalized, ghost hunting reality television’s ability to relay a cathartic experience remains intact. The marriage of secularism and faith to technology and the questionable existence of ghosts yields an unstable, unpredictable, yet reassuring product that reflects the same sense of ambiguity experienced in everyday life, making the quest for truth amongst the unknown nearly accessible, and just out of reach.

Chapter two, Masculinity and Ghost Hunting, is a more narrow study of masculine gender performance in *Ghost Adventures* (2008-present). As the leading figure in paranormal culture and the celebrity link to popular culture at large, Zak Bagans transforms from a struggling DJ in Las Vegas to the most coveted ghost hunter and haunted museum curator in the United States. As a fixture in paranormal culture, his behavior and development as a cultural icon seems significant considering the expectations of modern men. Zak Bagan’s masculine performance is dissected and analyzed to determine whether he is a figure to behold or dismiss, inspired Ian Black’s *New York Times* piece, “The Boys Are Not Alright.”

In chapter 2, the gendered history of the paranormal as a practice is studied alongside modern ghost hunting, which makes for a tested relationship between what is perceived to be feminine, what is perceived to be masculine, and what is made masculine simply by a hypermasculine gender performance. Through the history of seances, efforts to document the existence of ghosts, and modern reality television, somehow Bagans has mastered the complexities of a genre that is simultaneously grounded in empiricism and Christianity, further clouded by the presence of pagan figures and practices. Bagans is undoubtedly a powerhouse of the industry, but his successes as a paranormal investigator are haunted by his experiences of being bullied as a child. His development as a masculine figure, as well as a gradual unpacking of his past trauma, is outlined in over 10 years (or 15 seasons) of *Ghost Adventures*. While remaining at the height of a culture greatly indebted to his work, Bagans serves as a culturally relevant figure whose growth as a sensitive, three dimensional figure is significant given the timely nature of masculine performance in popular culture.

This thesis, in its entirety, was written in hopes of bringing more attention to the genre of ghost hunting reality television. Shows such as *Ghost Adventures* and *Ghost Brothers* not only reflect a certain cultural phenomenon of seeking cathartic experiences to remedy the anxieties of modern life, but the genre has great potential to affect cultural change. Zak Bagans of *Ghost Adventures* serves as a single example of a constructive development of a 21st century man who evolves from brutish displays of hypermasculinity to a more complex, depolarized display of strength and sensitivity. Most significantly, however, is the fact that ghost hunting reality television is begotten by centuries of widowers, mothers, and heartbroken figures seeking to document proof of life after death for the sake of their lost ones, which reflects an underlying

desire to connect with the unknown. Distinctly human and unique to the 21st century, ghost hunting reality television has great potential to become a cultural artifact mirroring diverse and meaningful aspects of the human experience, fully deserving of exploration and further analysis.

Chapter 1

Ghost Hunting Reality Television: Entertainment as Catharsis

Introduction

In the 21st century, ghost hunting reality television lends itself to more than entertainment for a homogenous audience, as paranormal culture is becoming increasingly diverse, encouraging a larger following. Explored in this chapter are the efforts to increase diversity within the world of ghost hunting reality television, as well as the program's ability to satisfy a sense of catharsis. The cathartic properties of ghost hunting allows for a unique viewing experience, which negates the presence of a meta-narrative, a form of media made to draw universal conclusions about reality. Because consumers are able to satisfy individual feelings of existential dread by indulging in ghost hunting reality television, viewers can be transported into a space where good triumphs over evil, agents of religion are unquestionably real, and/or life does not end with death, making ghost hunting reality television a unique and exciting product of the 21st century.

Ghost Hunting Reality Television Inclusion Efforts

The object of race was brought to the forefront of the industry following the release of *Ghost Brothers* in 2016, which is a show documenting a trio of African American friends investigating various haunts across the American landscape. While the mission of the show is very typical of a show within the genre, the cast is entirely nonwhite. Huffington Post writer Lee Spiegel published, "Can African-American Ghost Hunters Do What All Others Have Failed At?" to better understand the effects of a nonwhite paranormal team compared to the typical

Caucasian paranormal investigative team with the cast, a trio of three life-long friends by the names of Dalen Spratt, Juwan Mass and Marcus Harvey.

Prior to the release of *Ghost Brothers* in 2016, there have not been any paranormal investigators of color within the genre of ghost hunting reality television. However, within his work, Lee refers to *Ghost Brothers* as specifically the first “African-American paranormal investigation team”(Spiegel), emphasizing their race. The composition of the investigative team is unique, as well, as their professional careers lie outside of paranormal investigation. The cast of longstanding ghost hunting reality television shows *Ghost Adventures* and *Paranormal State*, for example, are comprised of individuals with formal training in technology and/or religious studies. *Ghost Brothers* follows the investigations of a trio that were inspired to investigate by their fascination with ghost hunting culture. Wanting to challenge the preconceived notion that ghost hunting culture wears an exclusively Caucasian face, Dalen Spratt shares:

For years, I used to watch all the ghost hunting shows, all the horror movies — just everything,” says Spratt. “I just loved being frightened, but I always noticed that there wasn’t a representation of us on any of these shows. There were no black people doing any of these ghost investigations. (Spiegel)

Dalen Spratt is not the only member of the team that feels responsible for altering the face of ghost hunting reality television. Explaining the relationship between his ethnic background and experience with ghost hunting, Marcus Harvey believes that *Ghost Brothers* is making a larger political statement:

I was raised in church, so I grew up with a spiritual background, and as I got deeper into church, when I got older, I started really being a little more drawn to the heights of

spirituality... As we've been doing these investigations, not only has it opened me up for the spiritual aspect, but even just having your mind outside the box. People are perplexed when they hear 'black dudes, ghost hunting.' But to even know that we did it — we could do any *other* thing we want to do. (Spiegel)

Harvey, similar to Zak Bagans in *Ghost Adventures*, has been positively affected by his experiences investigating the paranormal, saying that he is “more drawn to the heights of spirituality” (Spiegel). Bagans writes in his autobiography, *I am Haunted: Living Life Through the Dead*, that he and his team use an immersive approach to their investigations. The team uses “[their] bodies as detectors” in investigations and participate in “local spiritual and religious rituals.” By going all in, Zak Bagans and his team “go beyond what cold science can prove or detect... going as far as [they] can to lift the veil and open up a portal to make contact” (Bagans 17). Harvey and Bagans share a passion for connecting with paranormal forces, yet have vastly different backgrounds and experiences in their lives off-camera, simply referring to their privilege as a white man and a man of color in the United States.

Concerning *Ghost Brothers*, the parallel contribution and engagement within the culture made by Harvey and Bagans should not be overlooked, as *Ghost Brothers* serves as a reminder of the continuous breaking of preconceived perceptions of race in popular culture. The underlying implications of the shock following the release of this show is not the idea that African American people do not engage in paranormal investigation, but rather, the fact that there are aspects of culture deemed inherently white, leading to a false perception of a uniform industry and fanbase in paranormal culture. However, *Ghost Brothers* proves that the culture does lend itself to a diverse audience, and the industry has everything to gain by increasing the

efforts to include more diverse figures than the majority, which would be figures that closely resemble Zak Bagans: Caucasian, heterosexual, and male.

Despite the groundbreaking work done by *Ghost Brothers*, the show was discontinued in 2017. Prior to its cancelation, the show was first premiered on the Destination America channel, which is the same network that produces and broadcasts *Ghost Adventures*. After the success of the first season of *Ghost Brothers*, the show's second season was broadcasted on TLC. While the reasoning for the switch is unknown, TLC receives significantly more viewers than Destination America. Statista, a website of statistic studies drawing from over 22,500 sources, conducted a long term panel study regarding the viewership of TLC. The results of the study concluded that, at least in period between September 24 and October 24, 2018, "21.85% of responders ages 18-29 watched TLC (The Learning Channel) in the past month" (Statista). Further, TLC is available in "more than 89 million homes in the US and 325 million houses globally" (TV News Desk), compared to Destination America, which has only 2.5 million viewers at peak viewership (according to a press release from Destination America in 2016). The decision to move *Ghost Brothers* to a more visible platform increases the awareness of the efforts to diversify the portrait of American entertainment, specifically ghost hunting reality television.

The societal implications of the premiere, renewal, and cancelation of *Ghost Brothers* reveals a universal opportunity to connect and experience a reality unlike that which exists in popular culture. Adding *Ghost Brothers* to the canon of paranormal entertainment showcases the efforts to normalize paranormal investigation. When considering his team's contribution to paranormal culture, Harvey shares:

We bring soul, compassion, honesty and a new lens to look at the paranormal. And I think that's something that's going to be welcomed. People didn't know that you could be funny, but that's how you get a reaction out of people who are alive. We're investigating things we have to dig deep into, and we have to care about it to do our jobs the right way. (Spiegel)

With the promise of "soul, compassion, honesty and a new lens to look at the paranormal" (Spiegel), Harvey alludes to a larger desire to connect to something larger than the individual, such as the belief in God or an afterlife. With a slight critique aimed at the paranormal television programs that have come before, Harvey believes that his team brings something unique to the table, yet the phenomenon of interest, of seeking catharsis within media, is not unique to *Ghost Brothers* or *Ghost Adventures*, as the desire to experience such is the driving force behind the rising popularity of ghost hunting reality television.

Reality Television as a "Spectacle"

The use of the word spectacle refers to a profound sight, usually relying on the presence of drama or shock value, but the word "spectacle" holds a heavy significance in Victorian Spiritualism. The use of the word still refers to something that is profound and heightened drama, but is closely tied to an experience with the paranormal, such as a seances in Victorian England. The ritual results in an experience so profound that the participant may experience difficulty articulating the incident, making the experience a spectacle. This phenomenon enriches the foundations of paranormal culture, as it is the connection or experience that cannot be explained, that is captured in ghost hunting reality television. In the case of Victorian

Spiritualism, the participants were predominantly women seeking their husbands or sons who had passed during the Great War. Suspending disbelief, in this case, allows the participant to engage in catharsis, as the ritual allows grieving women a chance to achieve closure and connect with those they have lost. As paranormal investigations derive from a legacy of Victorian seances, the opportunity to experience a sense of catharsis makes ghost hunting reality television unique and relevant to the 21st century.

In their article, “Make Me Believe!: Ghost-hunting Technology and the Postmodern Fantastic” Sarah Juliet Lauro and Catherine Paul, argue that the cathartic nature of ghost hunting television is rooted in Freudian practices as opposed to Victorian Spiritualism; however, it is the presence of empirical practices that contributes to the immersive properties of the television programs. In fact, it is the structure of the show itself that creates the illusion of immersion, as “contemporary representations of the paranormal are framed both as fiction and reality... positioning itself as documentary television” (Lauro et al 221). The integration of modern technology into paranormal practices has allowed an increase of secular viewers, as the use of cameras, Electric and Magnetic Field (EMF) detectors, and Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP) recordings have allowed ghost hunters and viewers the opportunity to recreate and preserve various aspects of a fleeting paranormal experience. The evidence is collected and examined objectively to rule out abnormalities, dust particles, bugs, interference, and manage technological errors to best analyze pure, unaltered data. Lauro and Paul have coined modern ghost hunting as a “secular fantastic” as opposed to the “fantastic,” as the fantastic is a phrase similar to spectacle referring to that which is ill defined and unfamiliar, such as encountering a ghost. The secular

approach minimizes the need for a religious bias, allowing the unknown to exist comfortably in a space between the religious and nonreligious, allowing the inclusion of a nonreligious audience.

Ghost Hunting Television as a Means of Challenging Meta-Narratives

The distinction between the inclusion of secular and religious viewers does not affect the cathartic effects of watching ghost hunting reality television, as the experience remains a spectacle. It is the fantastic, itself, that serves as the constant and religious beliefs are the variables in calculating the significance of the experience for the individual. The ill-defined relationship between technology and religion in ghost hunting television allows audiences to pick and choose the experiences documented in the various ghost hunting programs in order to decide what is significant and what is not. In this way, some can relish the confirmation that there is life after death without relying on the belief in God, and for others, the inclusion of religious figures (such as demons) to reaffirm their religious beliefs in an increasingly secular world.

In “Making Their Presence Known: TV’s Ghost-Hunter Phenomenon in a ‘Post-‘ World,” Jessica O’Hara, argues the popularity of paranormal culture skyrockets after the events of 9/11, an earth-shattering and incredibly traumatic event shared by millions of Americans. It is argued that 9/11 serves as both a catalyst and a uniting factor for the fans of shows such as *Ghost Adventures* or *Ghost Brothers*, contributing to the rise of ghost hunting television in the United States. O’Hara articulates the relationship created between the events of 9/11 and ghost hunting television, which reflects the existential dread of the public when perception meets knowledge. As the object of ghost hunting is to unite perception (claims of haunted houses or properties)

with knowledge (empirical methods of ghost hunting), the methodology of ghost hunting perfectly captures the tension between the two.

To illustrate the altered perceptions of knowledge and truth necessary to immerse oneself into paranormal culture, O'Hara highlights Descartes' "foremost philosophical enterprise:"

To demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wish to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last... Whatever I have up until now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses. But from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us just once. (73)

Ghost hunters put themselves in a similar position as Descartes. Descartes attempted to prove the existence of God and solve the mysteries of life, death, heaven, and earth. O'Hara states that "[ghost hunters], too, are pursuing proof of the supernatural and need a way to isolate and examine their evidence" (74). Both parties attempt to isolate the religious from what is true, yet, in an ironic manner, many can use objective evidence to support that which is subjective, such as the existence of ghosts in general, or even the existence of ghosts as evidence for the existence of Christ. O'Hara attributes the shared methodology as a reformed population of "Renaissance men and women, seeking to reintegrate the metaphysical domains for inquiry, which contemporary science has relegated to religion or quackery, with scientific methodology" (74). Questions regarding the subjective nature of individual experience are considered by each ghost hunting show, as "a haunting is inexorably a human perceptual experience" (O'Hara 74), resulting in a change in the paranormal vernacular. Increasingly, ghost hunting shows substitute phrases such as "evil" with "negative energy." The switch is inspired by a Neoplatonic notion that "conceives

of evil as a privation of good” (77), which grants investigators a sense of flexibility and credibility as they continue to investigate hauntings of spirits perceived to be evil and reflecting on the nature of evil, itself.

Returning to the notion of ghost hunting television as an opportunity to experience catharsis, it is the belief of popular culture scholars, such as Jessica O’Hara, that 9/11 serves as a driving factor inspiring a seemingly universal need for the American people to connect with something larger than themselves. Concerning postmodern ghost stories, and the way these ghost stories are shared, the structure and experience of consuming ghost hunting television offer a sense of consistency and authenticity. O’Hara writes, “most of the shows conclude with no conclusion at all, thereby beginning and ending with uncertainty... in [this sense], ghost-hunter shows take a distinctively postmodern approach to discourse and narrative in their preference for micro-narratives over grand narratives” (80). The consistent presence of uncertainty amongst a search for truth serves as a comforting reminder that the unknown is a constant and subjectivity is inescapable. That conclusion, while appearing disheartening and inappropriate when considering the primary objective of ghost hunting is to document the existence of the paranormal, challenges grand narratives, otherwise known as “meta-narratives” (O’Hara 80).

In this case, meta-narratives refers to “sweeping stories that order our understanding of history and knowledge itself. Meta-narratives offer a narrative for all narratives, so to speak, by developing a totalizing explanation for *all* stories, thus providing some kind of universal truth” (80). Challenging meta-narratives, such as Catholicism or Lakota creation stories, is a popular postmodern practice. By rejecting meta-narratives, the individual is free to perceive their own experience as they see fit, as opposed to relating their experiences to a specific lens and altering

their initial perception of a given event. The marriage between Descartes's philosophical experiment to postmodern philosophy results in a freedom of perception regarding experience made obvious within ghost hunting television. As postmodern subjects, the viewership of ghost hunting reality television is able to embrace the micro-narratives of specific hauntings and resolutions (or lack thereof) without the pressure of verifying the experience against religious beliefs. Interestingly, the two offer an equally promising result for their nonsecular audience, as subjects can use objective experience to support their own individual religious beliefs without feeling that secular evidence is working against religion. The distinction made for religious viewers is the freedom to relay and unite their beliefs to experience, instead of religion being considered compulsory.

Conclusion

In the wake of national tragedy, "We Will Never Forget" became a popular phrase repeated in response to the horrors of the attack. Returning to Jessica O'Hara's, "Making Their Presence Known: TV's Ghost-Hunter Phenomenon in a 'Post-' World," O'Hara believes that 9/11 is an "event that created seismic shifts in American thinking... [collecting] interest in the nature of evil, haunted spaces (such as the destroyed World Trade Center towers), enduring trauma and mourning, and the debt the living owe the dead in seeking justice and reparation" (81). In one day, the country faced a shared sense of unrelenting fear unlike anything the United States has faced before. In politics, the pursuit of justice was immediate, as the United States went to war, but that action did little to settle the internal dilemmas stirring within the American population. Like the women in Victorian England conducting and participating in seances in

order to connect with their lost ones, the United States has turned to reality television as a means of engaging in a series of one hour long mini-narratives that document the investigation of a haunting. Each episode begins and ends the same, as a team answers the call of a troubled family and community, investigates the property, meticulously documenting and interviewing those who had experienced the haunting, and coming to the conclusion that, while they may have some documented evidence, there is not much else to be done to answer the biggest, and impossible, questions.

It should be noted that 9/11 is not the beginning and the end of paranormal investigation, but 9/11 serves as a cultural moment that may explain the rise in ghost hunting television programs in the United States. As the postmodern properties of modern ghost hunting emphasize the micro-narrative over the meta-narrative, experiencing paranormal phenomena, or any kind of trauma at all, raises questions that are unable to be answered. However, the cathartic experience of watching a ghost hunting show nearly parallel to a mini-narrative explored by the ghost hunting shows must be comforting. In the 21st century, ghost hunting reality television allows viewers to exercise their own frustration and fears with that which cannot be controlled or known against someone else's frustration and fears that are documented by a paranormal investigative team, allowing a superficial wave of relief to temporarily distract anyone, regardless of gender, race, or creed, from the difficult realities of everyday life.

Chapter 2

Masculinity and Ghost Hunting

“The past 50 years have redefined what it means to be female in America. Girls today are told that they can do anything, be anyone. They’ve absorbed the message: They’re outperforming boys in school at every level. But it isn’t just about performance. To be a girl today is to be the beneficiary of decades of conversation about the complexities of womanhood, its many forms and expressions.

Boys, though, have been left behind. No commensurate movement has emerged to help them navigate toward a full expression of their gender. It’s no longer enough to “be a man” — we no longer even know what that means.

Too many boys are trapped in the same suffocating, outdated model of masculinity, where manhood is measured in strength, where there is no way to be vulnerable without being emasculated, where manliness is about having power over others. They are trapped, and they don’t even have the language to talk about how they feel about being trapped, because the language that exists to discuss the full range of human emotion is still viewed as sensitive and feminine.

Men feel isolated, confused and conflicted about their natures. Many feel that the very qualities that used to define them — their strength, aggression and competitiveness — are no longer wanted or needed; many others never felt strong or aggressive or competitive to begin with. We don’t know how to be, and we’re terrified.

But to even admit our terror is to be reduced, because we don’t have a model of masculinity that allows for fear or grief or tenderness or the day-to-day sadness that sometimes overtakes us all”

- From “The Boys Are Not All Right” by Michael Ian Black

Introduction

In 2017, Parkland High School faced a terrible tragedy. A young man killed 17 people in his school, injuring another 17, and scarred the nation. Shortly after, Michael Ian Black wrote an opinion piece in the *New York Times* titled , “What is Wrong with Our Boys?” At the crossroads of realizing something is wrong with the model of American masculinity and struggling to find a solution, there seems to be a lack of definitive positive models for boys to replicate. Even further, dominant culture favors the strong male figure, but increasingly dynamic feminist figures are beginning to reshape societal expectations for feminine gender performance and behavior. The same does not exist for men. Behavioral expectations of American men and boys are being

brought to light by movements such as #Metoo, #timesup, and the S.L.U.T. (Satirically Lessening Unfair Theories) Walk, and through these demonstrations, victims (who are predominantly female) of sexual assault and violence are empowered. In the wake of female empowerment, there lies a vacuum in which boys do not have a space to express their gender in a way that defies the current polarity of gender performance.

Ghost Hunting and Masculinity

Unique to the 21st century, the rise of ghost-hunting reality television serves as a cultural model for the complexities of Christian, American masculinity. Through a study of *Ghost Adventures* (2004-present), a team of individuals with a longstanding reality television show and two documentaries, along with multiple miniseries and features in other television shows, follow the adventures involving a team of American, Christian men who travel the United States, with the occasional European investigation, saving those plagued by the paranormal. Traditionally a female affair, the culture of ghost hunting reflects a hypermasculine gender performance, but *Ghost Adventures* proves to be peculiar due to the show's shift from a reality television spectacle to a quest documenting Zak Bagan's sense of duty to protect and save others while still maintaining the ghost hunting genre's main objective: proving the existence of ghosts. In her article, "Negotiations of masculinity in American Ghost Hunting Reality Television," K.J. Renner distinguishes Ghost Hunting, as opposed to traditional spiritual endeavors, by a bombardment of traditional masculine behaviors.

What is striking about these programmes is that even though spiritualism and mediumship has traditionally been strongly associated with women, men not only dominate ghost hunting

reality television but have transformed it into a hypermasculine arena through a variety of behaviors: proclaiming and proving physical toughness; treating fear as ‘girlish; physically sacrificing themselves, soldier-like, for the greater good; declaring a desire to seek out truth and justice regardless of danger; subduing emotion and intuition with evidence; heftily pronouncing their heterosexuality; expressing a need for ‘extreme’ experiences away from the staid norms of everyday life. (Renner 203)

In the current culture of masculinity, *Ghost Adventures* has developed a modernized brand of heroism, distinguished and becoming increasingly distant from toxic behaviors present in male dominated narratives, such as observations demonstrated by Renner in her study of the ghost hunting genre. While Renner makes these observations of the ghost hunting genre as a whole, critiquing and defining constructive masculine properties present in *Ghost Adventures* will reveal the transformation that takes place within Zak Bagan’s own gender performance, which adopts more feminine and sensitive properties as the television series continues, yet does not compromise his gender identity as a man. Bagan’s development as a figure in reality television serves as a cultural model that breaks the mold of American heroism as it is portrayed in modern media.

The audience, perhaps unaware of the heavy influence of Catholicism (calling on saints, performing exorcisms, consulting clergy), paganism (indulging regional, pagan deities in North America and Europe and performing rituals), and the influence of brute male heroism already present in the genre of ghost hunting, sees Zak Bagans as the tortured hero of each narrative, or adventure, in the television show. Bagans works with his team of fellow paranormal investigators to release the spirits trapped in their earthly plane, as well as working to defeat the evil (the

embodiment of which changes with each new narrative constructed in the series) that lay across the entirety of the American landscape. Between Heaven and Hell, Zak Bagans and his crew dedicate their lives to documenting their most holistic experience with the paranormal, including but not limited to exercising courage, fear, physical violence, humor, and emotional turmoil. Throughout the series, Zak Bagans and the *Ghost Adventures* team suffer from a number of maladies, including damage to their lungs and the emotional consequences of clairvoyance and possession. The audience is meant to perceive these maladies as “badges of honor,” as only the members of *Ghost Adventures* would dare to risk the sanctity of their soles and earthly bodies in order to help those affected by the paranormal. It is this behavior that contributes to the “heroic” complex embodied by Bagans. His mental torment, physical altercations, and emotional outbursts serve as proof of his dedication to his craft, further elevating his status as a hero, and further, as a man.

This thesis is not arguing or advocating for the existence or nonexistence of paranormal forces, but rather examining the evolution of Bagan’s gender performance and how his validation as a hero can serve as a positive cultural model for the public. A number of the *Ghost Adventures* investigations involve families and businesses calling for help, for they believe paranormal forces adversely affect their personal and working lives. Through investigations, which include research through archives and demonology/history, interviews with locals and religious leaders (both inside and outside Christianity), and “Lights out” (the actual act of ghost hunting), the team immerses themselves into a narrative that is created by the region in which the paranormal phenomena occurs, and this narrative is further informed by the formal investigation that takes place before, during, and after hunting for ghosts. Within the ghost hunting genre, evil exists

both in religious contexts (demons, Satan, entities that wish to do harm to others) and within American history. Episodes often explore hauntings in spaces that are associated with slavery, murder, the Gold Rush, rape, jails, asylums/hospitals, all with a tormented past even outside the questionable existence of the paranormal. Through their investigations and involvement with communities, Zak Bagans opens his heart and their soul in his work, making Bagans and his team appear as the ideal troupe of heroes. It is this performance of American masculinity, being eager to help others, exerting one's power and dominance to defeat the enemy, and presenting a solution with evidence to the affected party allows Bagans to express himself as tough male figure in a space that is meaningful for both him and his clientele. The latter action, providing evidence and a solution, acts as an "unveiling" of sorts, making the climax and resolution of the narrative created during investigations mirror other masculine-dominated genres, such as the murder mystery or an adventure in wartime. While the archetype of a male hero is not altogether challenged or dismissed, the resolution gained by Bagans and his team is a job well done instead of the promise of a woman's affections or monetary gain.

Ghost Hunting in Popular Culture

Thanks to the popularity of shows such as *Ghost Adventures*, *Ghost Hunters*, and *Most Haunted*, ghost hunting in popular culture appears predominantly masculine, yet derives from a feminine legacy of conducting seances. Ruth Heholt recognized a pattern of masculine authority and credibility in her own research, "Subversive Ghost Hunting: A-Technology, the Imagination and the Gothic Spaces of *Most Haunted*," a work studying the relationship between the British program, *Most Haunted*, and technology, and found that the show consulted only male mediums

during its 14 seasons (and another 8 seasons of *Most Haunted Live*). Heholt recognizes that “although in Victorian times there were some prominent male mediums, the vast majority were women” (45), which is supported by Alex Owen’s research of Victorian spiritualism, in which he considers mediumship a historically feminine affair. Owen writes, “spiritualists assumed that it was innate femininity, in particular female passability, which facilitated [a] renunciation of self and cultivation of mediumistic powers” (Owen 10). The Spiritualist movement created an avenue in which women were communicating freely with the unseen world through séances. Essentially, mediumship became a unique opportunity for avenue women to achieve a position of authority and independence, but the power has shifted from women to men within paranormal culture of the 21st century. In a larger sense, this could be considered a sense of appropriation, as men have adopted and transformed the paranormal from an intimate, spiritual place to that of skepticism, disbelief, and adventure. However, Bagan’s relationship with the spiritual realm does not wish to erase the culture of spiritualism, but rather embrace the unknown, or what is not exclusively rooted in empirical or scientific evidence, associated with communicating with spirits.

While empirical evidence and procedures, demonstrated by the background investigation and the documentation of spirits, remains a crucial aspect of their practice, *Ghost Adventures* has become more inclined to the spiritual properties of ghost hunting. In his autobiography, *I Am Haunted: Living Life Through the Dead* (2015), Bagans describes his new approach to ghost hunting that seems to bridge the gap between masculine empiricism and feminine spirituality. Bagans believes his team is unlike other paranormal investigative groups due to their willingness “to use [their] bodies as detectors” and to engage with “local spiritual and religious rituals,” which allows them to “harness the power of religious groups and practices and go beyond what

cold science can prove or detect in terms of the existence of another dimension. [*Ghost Adventures*] go as far as [they] can to lift the veil and open up a portal to make contact” (Bagans 17). Most interesting, and most divergent of the masculine properties of ghost hunting, is Bagans’s “emotional connection” to the spirit world, which he describes as “a key trying to unlock a spiritual door” (18). In past years, Bagans has recognized his own psychic abilities and identifies as a sensitive, or as one who can communicate or receive messages from the spirit realm:

You could say that I’m a human satellite. The spirits reach out to me because they know have a good heart and a good soul...I don’t just help them; I also guide them through the astral plane. We humans are constantly striving for happiness, so is it so hard to imagine that spirits who were once human would want the same thing? We all want to be free of pain, disease, violence, and suffering. Life is a fight against these adversities. (Bagans 51)

While still comfortably existing within a masculine space, Bagans utilizes his emotional and spiritual vulnerability to improve the lives of those affected by the paranormal, as well as connect with paranormal entities. The significance of the role assumed by Bagans is not in the practicality of existing as a sensitive, but in the transition he has made since the documentary in 2004. Bagans has found a way to continue existing as the knight in shining armor, and his emotions and consideration for the wellbeing of others has not robbed him of his masculinity, but rather, made him a more effective spiritual guide and ghost hunter.

Predisposed Gendered Roles in Paranormal Culture

Ghost Adventures demonstrates the breaking of a gender binary present in the paranormal

culture. Ghost hunting with a priority on empirical procedure is inherently masculine, while the feminine form is more concerned with the emotional connections made between the spirit world and the individual. The feminine aspect of the paranormal derives from Spiritualist tradition of communicating with the dead, which “involved a sensitive, passive, usually female medium or an innocent heroine trapped in a Gothic space” (Renner 203). The genre adjustment echoes that of other traditional male-dominated genres, such as the superhero movie or action-adventure detective story made more three dimensional with the inclusion of feminine properties, such as the willingness to admit to feeling exposed, afraid, defeated, and feeling preyed upon. Concerning Bagan’s depolarized approach to the paranormal and ghost hunting practice, he allows for an air of subjectivity and engagement with what cannot be seen or proven by empirical means.

The combination of existing and engaging in (what is perceived as) feminine and masculine spaces is revolutionary in the practice of ghost hunting. The broken binary demonstrated in Zak Bagan’s character, however, was developed over almost a decade of investigations. When interviewing a witness in Tombstone, Arizona during season 2, (“Bird Cage Theatre”), Zak Bagans says to a man, “You look like kind of a tough guy. To me, it looks like it takes a lot to make you a believer in the paranormal” (Travel Channel), implying that men who look like this witness - muscular, tough, and otherwise “manly,” - typically do not believe in ghosts, let alone express their experiences. Belief in the supernatural, and by extension, experiencing fear, is stereotypically female, whereas men are either the object to be feared or the one to save the damsel in distress. Renner explains this tendency with belief within ghost hunting by clarifying, “men are supposedly linked to the realm of the rational and scientific, their default

position being skepticism, to not believe in anything without proof” (207).

A similar conclusion was made by L. Schofield Clark’s in her research concerning supernatural skepticism in both male and female teenagers. In her book, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (2003), Clark recognized that while teenage girls were more inclined to believe in the paranormal, they did not need to support their claims. When considering the teenage boys, those who did believe in the supernatural defended their stance in terms of scientific discourse. Believing in the paranormal, then, becomes a masculine act only when the air of skepticism has been cleared. Referencing the same interview from “Bird Cage Theatre,” mentioned in the previous paragraph, the relationship between experience and evidence seems relatively dependent on, or perhaps associated with, one’s gender identity. It has been established that females do not face the same kind of pressure to provide context for their beliefs regarding the paranormal, where males, if they do believe, must defend their stance.

Evolution of Zak Bagans

Throughout 15 seasons (2008-present) and two documentaries (2004, 2014 but released in 2018), the *Ghost Adventures* crew dedicate their livelihoods to ghost hunting in order to navigate the spaces between what it is they believe to be good and what is they believe to be evil, not as agents of God, but heroes of their own accord. While “good and evil” are constructs dependent on the specific narrative from the investigation they are conducting, Zak Bagans feels called upon to help others because he has faced similar traumas as his clients. Paranormal investigations do not always entail a battle in the literal sense of the word, but during an investigation Bagans may battle symptoms of depression, anger, fear, and other aspects of the

human experience exaggerated by the perceived presence of the paranormal. For example, any narrative that includes instances bullying affect Bagans and trigger an empathetic response. In the first episode of the series in 2008, Zak Bagans recalls his own experiences with childhood bullying and torment from his peers and declares, “I want to provoke the hell out of [the spirits]. I just want to stand up to them... Who are these spirits to be bullies and possess you” (Travel Channel). In this case, the evil entities that wish to do harm to “you,” referring to the patrons of Bobby Mackey’s Music World (a notoriously haunted night club), but this example mirrors a typical exposition for the narrative in each episode across the decade of investigations. Throughout his investigations in public places such as Bobby Mackey’s Music World, hotels, ruins and historical sites, Zak Bagans and his team have worked with a number of prominent figures in the ghost hunting and paranormal fields, such as Michael and Marti Perry and Lorraine Warren (the psychic featured in the film “The Conjuring” and widow to famed demonologist Ed Warren) to develop technology and to develop spiritual connections to best fight invisible evil. For ghost hunters, as Christians, the risks are very high, as they jeopardize sanctity of their souls through their work, and yet anchor their investigations in empirical practices.

The members of the *Ghost Adventures* team engage in dominating displays of strength and presence, even to a militaristic degree, in order to sell their livelihood. It should be noted, however, that across the entirety of the show, a dramatic masculine performance is not synonymous with sadistic displays of violence, as Zak Bagans has assembled his team of investigators in order to fight back against the perils of the paranormal to protect the living and bring peace to troubled spirits. While the idea of “battle” and the nobility associated with sacrifice is preserved throughout the show, the performance of masculinity becomes increasingly

more complex as it adopts characteristics that are considered more feminine. Prior to season 9, the title sequence was as follows:

My name is Zak Bagans, lead investigator of the *Ghost Adventures* Crew. I never believed in ghosts until I came face-to-face with one. So I set out on a quest to capture what I once saw onto video. With no big camera crews following us around, I am joined only by my fellow investigators, Nick Groff and Aaron Goodwin. The three of us will travel to some of the most highly active paranormal locations where we will spend an entire night locked down from dusk until dawn. Raw. Extreme. These are our *Ghost Adventures*. (Ghost Adventures)

In this title sequence, Bagans admits that his belief in the paranormal is a product of his experience. Like L. Schofield Clark's *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (2003), Bagans feels compelled, using the phrase "quest" as if his task is righteous and honorable, to prove the existence of the paranormal through empirical means. In his early work, Bagans is not concerned with the spirituality of the paranormal, but rather proving that it simply exists. As the series continues, Bagans becomes more sensitive and aware of the complexities associated with ghost hunting.

And after season 9:

There are things in this world that we will never fully understand. We want answers. We have worked years to build our credibility, our reputation. Working alongside the most renowned professionals in the field. Catching groundbreaking proof of the paranormal. This is our evidence, our *Ghost Adventures*. (Ghost Adventures)

Echoing patterns of compulsive empiricism, the team of investigators stress the importance of

their work by acknowledging the stakes of being a paranormal investigator. “Raw. Extreme” and “There are things in this world that we will never fully understand. We want answers” highlight the groundbreaking nature of the work while stressing how important and terrifying the investigations are for the team, both as a physical quest and as an intellectual journey. *Ghost Adventures* positions itself as a “metaphorical and metaphysical sheriff coming to town to reassert justice... Bagans implies that he is not only performing a physical service for the living as their defender but an emotional, therapeutic one as well” (Renner 222). Cloaked in masculine sheep clothes, Zak Bagans and his team embody a new brand of heroism that simultaneously challenges evil while considering the more delicate aspects of spirituality and faith.

The *Ghost Adventures* team has experienced a shift from their first documentary to their current work. In 2011 during the “Sacramento Tunnels” episode, Zak Bagans gave the following speech:

Uncovering and discovering history has always been the trademark of our ghost adventures. Here in Sacramento, California, we find ourselves charged with a very different purpose. Settled in 1849, floods, a cholera epidemic, and massive fires decimated this mining town. Our mission is to help the thousands upon thousands whose unreported deaths mean that their spirits still linger. We need to find them some form of closure. (Travel Channel)

While Bagans seeks to remedy hauntings, gather data regarding ghosts, and granting closure to restless spirits, the sensitivity in the latter item is a feature that has developed over time. Zak Bagans, specifically, has become more sensitive, both in the spiritual role and concerning his behavior, during his time as an investigator. At the beginning of his ghost adventures, Zak

Bagans and his team created a documentary in 2004 titled *Ghost Adventures*, but the narrative created by Bagans, which reflected a tragic story, and his performance as a hero, were completely opposed. When visiting the Silverqueen Hotel in Virginia City, Nevada, Bagans and his team decided to investigate room 111 where, allegedly, a prostitute had committed suicide in the bathtub a century and a half before. Hungry for evidence, Bagans elected to film himself taunting the spirit. Sitting on the floor in room 111, he began yelling, “Come and get me, ghost. I’m slitting my wrists just like you did. (laughter)” (*Ghost Adventures*). In the years that follow the release of the documentary from over a decade ago, the *Ghost Adventures* team has adopted a more approachable investigative technique that has embraced the transition from raw and extreme to reflecting on the uncertainties of the afterlife.

Conclusion

In a culture where masculinity and femininity appear so polarized in their performance, there exists figures such as Zak Bagans that serve as dynamic and diverse portraits of gender. Bagans serves as a reminder that young boys and men can become more humane and sensitive without compromising their gender identity or abandoning the concept of “manhood”. Ian Black from the NYT meditates on what it means to “be a man,” and *Ghost Adventures* is just a single reality television show that demonstrates that exercising one’s emotions, doubts, fears, and engaging with one’s past trauma in order to help others is a noble endeavor that is to be celebrated, not scorned. Bagans demonstrates a meaningful adjustment and reformed masculine performance through *Ghost Adventures*, and as the star of a reality television show, serves as a positive cultural model for masculinity. Since the inception of his paranormal career, Bagans has

learned to embrace characteristics that seem to contradict the archetype of a hero, yet remains confident in his identity. Echoing the concerns of those such as Ian Black, there are men who exist in popular culture that break the mold that seem to imprison young men, encouraging them to embrace the complexities of their gender identity rather than feeling trapped in a monolithic portrait of masculinity.

Works Cited

- 'Bobby Mackey's Music World', *Ghost Adventures*, Season 1, Episode 1, 16 October 2008, Chevy Chase: Travel Channel.
- 'Preston Castle', *Ghost Adventures*, Season 2, Episode 5, 3 July 2009, Chevy Chase: Travel Channel.
- 'Sacramento Tunnels', *Ghost Adventures*, Season 4, Episode 23, 15 April 2011, Chevy Chase: Travel Channel.
- "Only Privileged White Men Believe in Ghosts." Performance by Conan O'Brien, and Kyle Kinane, *YouTube*, YouTube, 2 Oct. 2018.
- Bagans, Zak, and Kelly Crigger. *I Am Haunted: Living Life through the Dead*. Victory Belt Publishing, 2015.
- Destination America. "Destination America Secures Most Watched 2Q in Network History ." *The Futon Critic*, Thefutoncritic.com, 7 July 2016.
- Ghost Adventures* (2008-) Chevy Chase: Travel Channel.
- Ghost Adventures* (documentary) (2004) Zak Bagans. 2004.
- Heholt, Ruth. "Subversive Ghost Hunting: A-Technology, the Imagination and the Gothic Spaces of Most Haunted." *Contemporary Legend: The Journal of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research*, vol. 9, Jan. 2006, pp. 37–47.
- Lauro, Sarah Juliet, and Catherine Paul. "'Make Me Believe!': Ghost-Hunting Technology and the Postmodern Fantastic." *Horror Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2013, pp. 221–239., doi:10.1386/host.4.2.221_1.

O'Hara, Jessica. "Making Their Presence Known: TV's Ghost-Hunter Phenomenon in a 'Post-' World." *Philosophy of Horror*, 2010, pp. 72–85.

Own, Alex, 1989, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Renner, K. J. (2013), "Negotiations of masculinity in American ghost-hunting reality television", *Horror Studies* 4:2, pp. 201-219, doi:10.1386/host.4.2.201_1

Schofield Clark, L. (2003), *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Speigel, Lee. "Can African-American Ghost Hunters Do What All Others Have Failed At?" *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 2 May 2016.

TV NewsDesk. "TLC Ends First Quarter of 2017 As Its Highest Rated Quarter In Two Years." *Broadway World - #1 for Broadway Shows, Theatre, Entertainment, Tickets & More!*, BroadwayWorld.com, 3 Apr. 2017.