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## "I Don't Believe One-half of It Myself": The Role of Folk Groups in Supernatural Legend Interpretation

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Honors Thesis

“I DON’T BELIEVE ONE-HALF OF IT MYSELF”: THE INFLUENCE OF FOLK  
GROUPS ON SUPERNATURAL LEGEND INTERPRETATION

by  
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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements  
for University Honors

English Department  
Brigham Young University  
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## ABSTRACT

### “I DON’T BELIEVE ONE-HALF OF IT MYSELF”: THE ROLE OF FOLK GROUPS IN SUPERNATURAL LEGEND INTERPRETATION

Melanie Kimball

English Department

Bachelor of Arts

A range of interpretations can characterize supernatural legends as religious or non-religious—or somewhere in between. Religious audiences quickly categorize supernatural religious legends as such, but they hesitate when interpreting supernatural non-religious legends and supply multiple interpretations. Folk group paradigms influence these interpretations, and a variety of factors in turn influence which paradigms are used. The most important of these factors is a hierarchy of folk groups, which each individual has uniquely created and to which they refer when interpreting stories and experiences. When the most important of these folk groups fails to fully interpret a narrative, individuals will use folk groups lower in the hierarchy. Individuals can apply multiple folk groups simultaneously.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## Introduction

Jan Harold Brunvand said that “we are not aware of our own folklore any more than we are of the grammatical rules of our language.”<sup>1</sup> The same is true of the unconscious ways we interpret our own folklore and allow our folk groups to shape our worldview. We all belong to multiple folk groups, and each folk group comes with its own perspective, which might stand alone or blend with others. People can entertain multiple belief systems simultaneously.

The purpose of this paper is to determine—or at least approximate—how and why individuals choose which folk group’s paradigm they use to interpret supernatural legends. By “interpret,” I mean not only whether a story is found believable—though legends and belief do go hand in hand—but also how both the performer and the audience change details within stories to accommodate their worldview or the worldview of those to whom they tell the narrative, regardless of belief. The narratives I analyzed revealed that each individual has their own hierarchy of folk groups, a set series of paradigms that allows them to interpret the world without dramatically bending important belief systems. This means that even those from similar backgrounds will not interpret a story the same way. The following narrative illustrates how individuals with similar backgrounds can still interpret stories differently.

In May 2005, a man stopped by his childhood home in Raymond, Idaho, a town that stretches itself comfortably across the fields of its valley home, population—perhaps—100. The few farmhouses that straddle the main road have stood for over a century. This was an unremarkable enough visit to suit the man’s tastes. He had returned

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981) 1.

for sentimental and not sensational reasons. However, his journey home—detailed in a letter written to his brother—was not devoid of sensationalism. He describes stopping at a coffee shop in Montpelier, Idaho on his way back to Utah. While there, he converses with an older woman who informs him that her daughter lives in Raymond—that, in fact, her daughter is the very woman who lives in his old house.

“You know that house is haunted,” she says. “I don’t like to talk about it because people think I’m nuts.”

The woman will not stop talking about it, telling him that the ghost’s name is Caroline and that she occasionally comes out of the old pantry or walks through the kitchen. The man patiently listens to the details before moving on. He shows little concern for the ghost in the house—though it should have garnered his attention, as his mother’s name was Caroline.<sup>2</sup>

The brother who received the letter paid more interest in the story, as did the man’s niece, Camille, who shared the story and her reception of it with me. She explained that her uncle “was a psychiatrist, a medical doctor, and he was very pragmatic, and he wasn’t a religious person.” When Camille discussed the story with her sister, her sister believed the house had “captured part of [Caroline’s] energy, and it manifests itself from time to time.” Camille herself viewed the haunting through a religious lens and discounted that it was her grandmother’s spirit appearing in the house because her understanding of the afterlife did not account for such a random visitation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Camille. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Camille. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.

The narrative presents multiple interpretations of the supposed haunting. For some, “Caroline” was a ghost, while for others, she was a fabricated story or a mere echo of someone’s energy left in the house long after they had departed it. Others could only understand the supposed haunting through a religious lens. Camille, her sister, and her uncle came from a similar background, yet all three interpreted the story in different ways. The background of the woman living in the old house and her mother are unknown, but the two of them together offered a fourth interpretation. Each individual posited their own interpretation of the story, suggesting that each individual had a folk group paradigm that was more important to them than others. Should one of them tell the story of the Raymond ghost, as Camille did for me, their personal interpretation would influence the performance—and the audience’s own folk groups would in turn influence the way they received the story.

While legends sit in a vague area of interpretation and belief, supernatural legends in particular are susceptible to changing meanings.<sup>4</sup> Terms native to one group, such as “spiritual prompting” or “possession,” can be interpreted entirely differently by another—a “gut feeling,” a “coincidence,” or a “mental illness.” These attitudes or interpretations are constantly on display during a performance and influence the narrative, both how the performer tells the story and how the audience interprets it. Linda Dégh states that “attitude toward belief is the essence of the [legend] genre” and that “legend contextualises and interprets belief.”<sup>5</sup> She also observes that “tellers state,

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<sup>4</sup> Bill Ellis, *Aliens, Ghosts, and Cults* (Jackson: Mississippi UP, 2001).  
Linda Dégh, “What is a Belief Legend?” *Folklore* 107 (1996): online, *EBSCOHost*.  
[doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.1996.9715912](https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.1996.9715912).  
Gillian Bennett, *Alas, Poor Ghost!* (Logan: Utah State UP, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> 1996, 33–4.

explain, interpret or at least imply their personal attitude toward ... the legend they tell. ...[Variants] may likewise be developed differently, depending on diverse interpretations of similar extranormal experiences of individual tellers.”<sup>6</sup> One’s interpretation of a legend is inherent in the legend itself and in turn influences the telling and reception of the legend. But even a single individual can have differing interpretations of a story—“belief is fluctuating, hesitant and selective, not consistent or absolute.”<sup>7</sup>

The accessibility of multiple belief systems to an individual allows one to adjust their perspectives of a story and remain open to its verity without feeling as though the story is challenging their core beliefs. A range of interpretations to pick and choose from provides one with a “sense of agency within their own worldview” and the ability to comprehend a complex world.<sup>8</sup> Legend-tellings “[draw] upon the deep cultural matrix within [individuals]” to elicit a multitude of interpretations.<sup>9</sup>

Folklorists have examined how performers adjust a narrative according to an audience’s expected reactions;<sup>10</sup> so too have they observed the ways performers tell

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<sup>6</sup> 1996, 33.

<sup>7</sup> Dégh, 1996, 39.

<sup>8</sup> Vivian Asimos, “Everything is True Here, Even if it Isn’t: the performance of belief online.” *Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions* 22 (2020): 52, online, *JBASR*. doi.org/10.18792/jbasr.v22i0.46.

<sup>9</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, “Folklore and Literature as Performance.” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 9.2 (1972): 78, online, *JSTOR*. www.jstor.org/stable/3814159.

<sup>10</sup> Ellis, 2001.

Komatsu Kazuhiko, *An Introduction to Yokai Culture: Monsters, Ghosts, and Outsiders in Japanese History* (Japan: Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture, 2017).

stories to have special meaning for a group defined by gender, age, occupation, religion, or nationality without appearing offensive to those outside the group.<sup>11</sup>

We know that folk groups have bearing in the ways narratives are performed and received, but there's still uncertainty regarding how individuals select which folk groups' lens they use to interpret a narrative—how they navigate Iwasaka and Toelken's "constellation of related beliefs and cultural traditions,"<sup>12</sup> not to mention Hufford's experience-centered hypothesis, in which individuals might interpret an event as supernatural even if they have no folk group to provide a framework for understanding it.<sup>13</sup> This thesis examines multiple narratives and the conversations surrounding them to better understand folk groups' role in interpretation.

## **Methods**

The stories I collected for this thesis came from conversations I had with friends and family members and from material located in the William A. Wilson Folklore Archives at Brigham Young University. All contributors are Americans living in the Mountain West, and all are members of or familiar with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Conversations were recorded by phone and later transcribed; I have edited out words and details I deemed unnecessary to understand the story. I use pseudonyms to refer to all individuals whom I personally consulted for this project.

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<sup>11</sup> Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser, "The Feminist Voice: Strategies of Coding in Folklore and Literature." *Journal of American Folklore* 100.398 (1987); online, *JSTOR*. [www.jstor.org/stable/540901](http://www.jstor.org/stable/540901). Ellis, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Michiko Iwasaka and Barre Toelken, *Ghost and the Japanese: Cultural Experience in Japanese Death Legends* (Logan: Utah State UP, 1994) 44.

<sup>13</sup> David Hufford, *The Terror that Comes in the Night* (Pennsylvania: Philadelphia UP, 1982).

I reference two major legend genres, supernatural religious legends and supernatural non-religious legends, as categorized by the Wilson Archives. Examples of supernatural religious legends include dreams, visions, premonitions, and appearances of supernatural beings such as angels. Supernatural non-religious legends include stories of ghosts, aliens, witches, and supernatural creatures such as Sasquatch or shapeshifters. In addition to these two genres, contributors volunteered memorates, or personal experience narratives with a supernatural aspect. As legends stand in a gray area of plausibility, and supernatural legends in particular require explanation and contextualization, they serve well as examples for examining the role of folk groups in interpretation.

I intended to collect solely supernatural non-religious legends, though the nature of folk groups and legends means that genres shift according to interpretation. The boundary between supernatural religious and supernatural non-religious legends is permeable and vague, depending on the folk group(s) applied in analysis. There are gray areas in identification that depend solely on how one interprets a legend. An individual can interpret a story about a haunting as a ghost or a demon, and the individual's differing paradigms affects their understanding of such phenomena. A non-religious legend can therefore become religious.

Parallel to the discovery that interpretation affects genre categorization was the observation that a religious audience had no trouble interpreting a supernatural religious legend through a religious paradigm, even if the story originated in a religion different from the listeners'. Supernatural non-religious narratives, in contrast, did not produce such an initial knee-jerk reaction; tellers and listeners adopted a more rational approach. Whether hearing the legend or experiencing the event first-hand, people logically

considered multiple perspectives before settling on one that made the most sense, even if that conclusion still perceived the event as supernatural. Alongside this, the worldviews themselves were at times indistinct and mingled with others; people naturally combine differing schools of thoughts and beliefs.

My final observation culminates in what I like to call the “multivariate theory of interpretation.” Individuals *do* have their own hierarchy of folk groups, but they don’t apply those folk groups uniformly. Instead, multiple factors influence how an individual selects a paradigm and interprets legends. This makes it difficult to predict a set pattern of interpretation, even for a single individual. I’ve determined that the hierarchy of folk groups is the most important factor, though much smaller factors such as the intention behind a narrative’s telling can influence how people interpret legends.

I’ll provide a summary of the above observations: legend genres have vague boundaries according to the performer’s and audience’s interpretations; the paradigms of the folk groups to which each individual belongs influences their interpretations, with each individual having a certain hierarchy of paradigms; in addition to this hierarchy, various factors affect legend interpretations.

I’ve centered my thesis around ten narratives and the conversations surrounding them. I organized the narratives on a scale from religious to non-religious according to performer and audience interpretations, with topics ranging from spiritual experiences to hauntings to skinwalkers. As the nature of the narratives grow increasingly more non-religious, the audience offers a broader range of explanations for events, and more folk groups are applied to the interpretation.

## Supernatural Religious Legends

The performer and the audience, all members of the same family, only ever examined the following three narratives through a religious lens, though the family examined the credibility of both the performer and the narratives themselves through similar stories told within the family. Both family lore and folk beliefs thus played a role in the interpretations of the stories. The teller of the first story, Camille, a middle-aged Caucasian woman, recounts the tale of a woman she met many years ago who had a spiritual experience.

### *Narrative 1*

Camille: This was a story that was told to me by a woman in the last area on my mission in southern Spain. She was a member and had been a member for several years, and she was probably in her 60s [...] when I knew her. And she had said that many, many years ago, before there were really any missionaries in Spain and she knew nothing about the Church in the area where she was living, she was walking down the street, and a person came up to her. [They] just kind of stopped by her and reached out and handed her this folder. And she took it—and I don't think the person said anything to her—but she took it, and the person just walked away and was just gone. And it was a Joseph Smith pamphlet. And she read that and had a testimony right away that he was a prophet. And she had to go into Barcelona to find someone to teach her about the gospel. It took her a while to find missionaries—and I think she actually ended up writing to the Church address on the back of the pamphlet. [She] says, "I have no idea who that was, why they would give that to me." So, I think that was definitely...

Lyn: The rough equivalent of a Three Nephite encounter.

Camille: Yeah. And she always wondered if it *was* somebody like that, you know, an angel or someone because she *did* have an interest in finding out something new about... she was kind of searching for some answers.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Camille. Personal conversation. 31 October 2021.  
Lyn. Personal conversation. 31 October 2021.

This story is replete with emic terms, though the gist of the beliefs and interpretations involved should be somewhat obvious, even to someone from outside the Latter-day Saint folk group. Camille served a religious proselytizing mission in southern Spain, and in the process met a woman—also a member of Camille’s church—who had a remarkable conversion experience. An individual had handed her a pamphlet years before detailing the beliefs of the Latter-day Saint church, particularly concerning its founder, Joseph Smith, whom Latter-day Saints regard as a prophet, or spokesperson chosen by God. The woman viewed the mysterious individual—who abruptly disappeared after the delivery of the pamphlet—as an angel. Camille’s husband Lyn interprets the individual as one of the Three Nephites, a trio of Native Americans who, according to Latter-day Saint folk belief, were granted immortality by Christ so they might wander the earth helping souls find God, and who are reported to appear and disappear suddenly.

Because all members of the audience present were also members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Camille admitted that she felt no need to adjust the story to accommodate alternate views, and no one in the audience presented a non-religious interpretation of the narrative. All believed it to be true, and, as Lyn’s remark makes obvious, all reached their own conclusion that the woman’s conversion could only have religiously supernatural connotations, shaped by their place in a religious folk group.

Although the story was swimming with insider terms and understanding, I found that many members—I hesitate to generalize for all Latter-day Saints—view stories such as the above and stories occurring in a similar vein—namely, lower context ones

involving impressions or “promptings”—as simple enough to excuse the necessity for adaptation or excessive explanation to non-members. After sharing a personal experience narrative involving an impression to avoid walking through a dark alley, also from her proselytizing mission in Spain, Camille said she wouldn’t adjust the story should she tell it to a non-member. Camille herself believes that she received a personal revelation and the Holy Spirit warned her of danger, but “it’s a fairly simplistic story. There wasn’t a whole lot of detail ... [she thinks she] would explain it the exact same way as being a personal revelation.”<sup>15</sup>

We learn from the above narrative and commentary that the presence of contrary folk groups within the audience doesn’t automatically necessitate a change in the telling of the narrative. Members of one group might believe that the story is so obvious that it has only one interpretation, or that the interpretation is low context enough to be understood by outsiders. The audience’s folk groups don’t always influence the telling of a story, though the performer’s folk groups weigh heavily on how they share the story.

The next example, which Camille also shared, concerns the appearance of a dead relative. Again, the Latter-day Saint folk group influences this story, particularly the folk belief that ancestors and deceased relatives are deeply concerned with their living family and occasionally find ways to communicate to them. The audience members, consisting of Camille’s family, find themselves drawing from lore within the family to supplement their religious interpretation of the events within the story.

### *Narrative 2*

Camille: This was told to me by my cousin [Steven], and I think I’ve probably told you this one before. [...] Steven was only a year older than I am. [...]

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<sup>15</sup> Camille. Personal conversation. 31 October 2021.

Steven's father, [Gordon], made some mistakes in his life. Some of them were really big mistakes. He made some mistakes back in... I believe it was the 70s—and ended up getting himself convicted of a felony and ended up being excommunicated from the Church. [...] And this was a horrible shock, not only to his family—you know, his spouse and his three sons—but it was a horrible embarrassment to all of his siblings, and 'cause he had a fairly large extended family. And it was quite shocking and embarrassing. But anyway, so, everybody was pretty worried about this. And I don't know if Steven was more worried about what was going to happen than anybody else. [...] One night, Steven was laying in bed in his room, and he woke up, [...] and our [Grandpa] was standing at the foot of his bed. Now, Grandpa had been dead for many years at this point. Grandpa was standing at the foot of his bed, and Steven said he looked perfectly normal, like he remembered Grandpa looking. And Steven said he wasn't afraid or anything, you know. Grandpa was just standing there, looking like Grandpa, at the foot of his bed, and Grandpa told Steven that everything was going to be okay and that he shouldn't worry, but he needed to tell his father that his father needed to shape up, and he needed to do certain things, and he told Steven what to tell his dad and gave him this message. And he said, well, that he [Grandpa] couldn't reach his [Steven's] father. He couldn't talk to him himself, and that's why he was coming to Steven, because evidently Uncle Gordon was not in a frame of mind to receive a heavenly visit from his dad. [...] And, as Steven told it to me, this was not a dream. It wasn't like he dreamt Grandpa came to him. He actually woke up, and Grandpa was there in his bedroom and talked to him for a while. And I don't remember him ever saying how Grandpa left, or if Steven just fell back asleep and he left. I don't remember how the visitation ended.<sup>16</sup>

Again, there are insider terms and folk beliefs reflected in this story of Grandpa appearing to Steven that the family felt would not need explanation for an outsider. This narrative contains fewer folk group-specific terms that an outsider would be unfamiliar with, perhaps because the concept of a dead relative visiting a descendant to offer advice or comfort is not unusual in other folk groups.

Unlike Camille's first narrative about the woman receiving the church pamphlet, which the audience seemed to view singly through a religious lens, Camille's family interpreted this second narrative through several contexts. There were obvious religious elements; however, one listener added, "It was basically *A Christmas Carol*," bringing in

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<sup>16</sup> Camille. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.

a Western popular culture perspective, and another introduced a kernel narrative from a different side of the family, remarking, “I think it sounds like the story of Heber C. appearing to David Patten Kimball. Except I feel like David Patten Kimball was in the same position as Uncle Gordon, and Heber C. still popped up there.”<sup>17</sup>

The family used their lore as a lens to understand Camille’s narrative, though the family was unsure if the Kimball story supported the validity of Steven’s experience, as “Heber C.” managed to appear to a wayward son who wasn’t in the right mindset, while Grandpa had to appear to Steven in place of Gordon. This is perhaps a good example of folk group paradigms influencing an interpretation without concern for believability: the family could comprehend the story better in light of a similar story, but the discrepancies between the two didn’t cause them to doubt either one, and they backed up these discrepancies with a combination of their familial and religious folk beliefs:

Lyn: It’s plausible to me.

Buddy: Yeah, I think it’s totally possible that it happened.

Lyn: I think many of the so-called “angels” that come back to visit us [...] are our ancestors.

Camille: Our family members who are [...] concerned with what’s going to happen to the family or to us. Yeah, I think that’s true.<sup>18</sup>

As the next narrative reveals, family and religion lore can also contradict one another and throw doubt over the verity of a story. Lyn, a middle-aged Caucasian man,

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<sup>17</sup> Lorraine. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Camille. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.  
Lyn. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.  
Buddy. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.

shared this story at the same time as Narrative 2. The narrative shares a commonality with Narrative 2, in that an individual has an experience that may or may not be a dream and that Latter-day Saint folk beliefs may or may not explain. While Camille's connection to Steven and related family lore lent credibility to Narrative 2, the audience doubts Lyn's story of a member of his family because it doesn't match up with their religious beliefs. They've chosen to view the story solely from a religious perspective.

### *Narrative 3*

Lyn: [My mom] used to tell a story where... I think it was her dad... was having some kind of dream or whatever. And, like I said, I'm kind of fuzzy on the details, because it's been a while since I heard it. But the long and the short of this story is that he ended up getting in an argument with Satan, and Satan punched him on the arm, physically hit him on the arm.

Camille: Was it Satan himself, or just an evil spirit? And who was this?

Lyn: This, I think, was my mom's dad. Okay? And, I mean, there's nobody else physically in the room, other than maybe his wife who's asleep in the bed or whatever, but he had a bruise on that arm for, I think, *weeks*.

Camille: I find that interesting, since Satan doesn't have a body.

Lyn: I find it interesting too. But that's the story. [...] My mom swore it's true. She swore it happened.

Camille: I have a hard time believing that story. Because—not that I don't believe [your mom] thought it was true or that it happened or that [your grandpa] told it, but I don't understand it because from what I understand of the gospel, I don't know how a spirit without a body could cause that to happen. And I've heard a lot of things about spirits doing things. But I just don't know, so I'm a little incredulous regarding that story for that reason.

Buddy: It was kind of a very brief version of the story. We don't have all the details. I think it's plausible; it's possible it could have happened. Obviously, there's not a lot of information just off the story. I think it *is* possible for a force like that to cause harm, whether it's the devil himself or something else that caused the harm.

Lorraine: I mean, *I* think it could have been the devil. The devil accosted Joseph Smith when he went to pray.

Buddy: Yeah! I think it could have been him. Was it him or not in the story? I don't know. But yeah, I think it's possible.

Lyn: Quite candidly, I've always taken that story with a little bit of a grain of salt too, but I'm just telling you that that story exists, at least in my mother's family.

Camille: Well, I'm not saying it's not *true*, I'm just saying from my understanding of things, I'm just a little incredulous of how that's possible. Or if the details are complete.<sup>19</sup>

Later on, Lyn amended that the arm might not have been bruised for several weeks but merely sore. The majority of the family claimed that this addition didn't change their perspective on the ambiguous nature of the story; Camille said:

I think in our heads you could feel that your arm hurt, but actually having a physical bruise [...] I'm just not sure about [that] because, like I said, I don't see how a spirit could do that. But we have stories where spirits [...] manipulated things physically, either hit them or somebody has felt them, like my mother could feel somebody come by her into the room [see Narrative 5]. But, so, yeah, I don't know how that works because I don't know what a spirit body is like.<sup>20</sup>

The audience holds both Narratives 1 and 2 to be true and interprets them through a religious lens. Lore within the family was introduced as a second factor to add credence to Narrative 2. On the other hand, the audience vaguely interprets Narrative 3. The credibility of the family members (both Lyn and his mother—his grandfather seems not to be trustworthy enough) is the strongest factor in favor of the family believing the

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<sup>19</sup> Lyn. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.  
Camille. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.  
Buddy. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.  
Lorraine. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Camille. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.

story to be true. The family adopted two perspectives simultaneously: that of their family's folk group and that of their religion, though the religious perspective holds dominance over the family's. The religious perspective at first discounts Lyn's grandfather's experience (Camille claims that Satan could not have physically injured the grandfather, as Satan doesn't have a body) but then posits veracity (Lorraine points out that there are other stories within the religion wherein Satan *does* physically injure or at least affect a human being).

Because the religious perspective, which the family accesses first, offers two differing interpretations of Lyn's narrative, the family accesses the second folk group—the family—to support one side. There is no similar story to back up the narrative, but the family has only a positive view of Lyn's mother, and her integrity is what settles the ambiguity in the minds of most of the family members. Lyn's later-added detail, however, returns the family to the religious perspective (which seems to be the first interpretation they all reach for), and they again are forced to debate whether a being without a body can physically harm a living person. Camille then returns to the second perspective—the family folk group—by referencing a story from her side of the family, which suggests that humans can at least feel or physically detect disembodied beings.

Narratives 1 and 2 support the multivariate theory of interpretation, in that the folk groups of the audience influenced the performer of the legend, the performer of the legend told the story as they interpreted it through their own perspective, and the surrounding social context wherein the family told the stories (the family's home) affected how they interpreted the legend overall. Multiple factors were present; they simply all led to the same folk group coming out on top and affecting the interpretation.

Narrative 3 does a much better job of exploring the intricacies of how multiple variables affect interpretation. The jumping back and forth between two different folk groups—which the family seized upon simultaneously—shows that the way a teller presents a story and the listeners' folk groups have a profound effect on how the audience interprets a story.

Because the family leaped to their religious beliefs first, we can assume that, at least for them, the religious paradigm was higher up in the hierarchy and likely the first paradigm accessed for each member of the family when experiencing or hearing of a supernatural experience. Their family paradigm comes next, trumping even a regional culture, and was accessed only because the religious paradigm failed to provide a solid explanation of events. Accessing multiple paradigms, then, likely occurs when knee-jerk perspectives remain ambiguous. Furthermore, we can consider the switching between religious and familial folk groups as conflation, with the two groups influencing one another and becoming difficult to separate. There is a form of syncretism involved here as the paradigms merge.

Narrative 3 is the beginning of legend genres blurring. From here on, the stories begin to involve ghosts and demons and other supernatural figures that some interpret religiously and others scoff at or understand in a regional folk group context. Just as the family members struggle to believe that Lyn's grandfather was punched and bruised by Satan—or at least struggle to fit it in to their religious perspective—so too do the contributors and audience members in the following stories struggle to categorize the events. New theories and interpretations, particularly ones outside of a religious context,

emerge. Several stories still retain a predominantly religious interpretation, influenced mainly by their social context and the people involved in the stories.

### **Hauntings and Subordinate Folk Groups**

I've classified Narrative 4 as a supernatural religious legend due to the characters involved in the story (two Latter-day Saint male missionaries, also known as "elders"). The distinction between religious and non-religious supernatural legends blurs, however; the people hearing and telling the story largely influence the categories. The performer of Narrative 4, Buddy, a Caucasian male in his early twenties, told the story through a religious lens, classifying the male missionaries' experience as a haunting or demonic attack, explained only by Latter-day Saint folk beliefs. The audience—myself in particular—offered up contrary interpretations, and while the dominant lens appeared to be religious, popular paradigms also emerged.

#### *Narrative 4*

Buddy: This actually happened to an elder that I know pretty well. He was training [a new missionary], and him and his new companion show up, and they get in the apartment, and... I can't remember exactly how it built up, but basically, they started getting this really weird feeling whenever they were in the apartment. And there was this black triangle that they found one day in the apartment, like, this weird black triangle. They didn't know what it was or what it was made out of or anything.

Mel: Like, on the wall? Or was it just—

Buddy: No, like an object. Just a triangle. Like glass, obsidian, some type of weird material. They didn't know what it was. And all these weird things started happening—like, their phones got taken over. They couldn't control their phones, and it would just automatically open up the Gospel Library [app] and go to "Baptisms for the Dead." No, like, straight up; they had to take a video of it doing it. Their phones would just open up randomly and go to "Baptisms for the Dead," like, constantly, and they just started getting super weird feelings. They

both started to have super bad nightmares and all this stuff. So, finally, one of the elders—the trainer, the main guy—he’s like, “Okay, we gotta do something about this. It has to do with this triangle thing we found. It’s gotta be possessed—”

Lorraine: Why didn’t they throw it away?!

Buddy: They tried! So, they throw it away, and it shows up the next day in their apartment again. And they’re like, “Oh, fetch. Holy crap. Like, some bad juju is going on here.” So, they call the mission president. And [...] they’re both *super* scared. And so, they had the triangle... I can’t remember. They threw it on the table or something and ran out to the balcony to get away from it ‘cause they couldn’t go outside for some reason. I can’t remember why. But they run outside onto the balcony. The door accidentally shuts behind them, so they’re locked out on their balcony. They call the mission president. And the trainer is super scared, and the guy he’s training is, like, literally crapping his pants. He’s [...] *that* scared. He can’t contain himself. And so, he’s calling the mission president, like, “President, what do we do?” Basically [the mission president’s] like, “Well, you got the power of God in you. Just put your arm to the square, you know; go cast it out” and kind of gave him some certain words to say, how to phrase it properly and things like that. And so, he’s like, “Okay.” He’s shaking, he’s so scared. And they manage to force the door of the balcony open, they go inside, and he gets down, and he goes to cast out the evil spirit that’s possessed the apartment or whatever. And as he does it, he gets *hit*. Like, something hits him, and he falls to the ground. And he’s like, “Holy crap, what is happening?” And so, he can’t stand up, but he just gets up on his knees and he’s trying to cast it out. And he’s barely uttering the words, and as soon as he finishes it, he gets all the wind knocked out of him, and he just collapses on the floor, and his trainee, he’s just standing there watching this happen. But then, as soon as he did that, they said they could feel a difference, but they grabbed their bags and they just hauled butt out of there and didn’t go back to the apartment for, like, a week. They went to stay with the zone leaders for a week, just because they were so scared. And finally, they go back with the zone leaders. They couldn’t find the triangle thing anywhere, even though they knew they had left it in the apartment. But then, after that, it felt fine. They didn’t have any other problems.

Mel: Okay. When you first started, I was like, “Okay. Weird black triangle thing.” But then when you started talking about their phones, my first thought was they’d just gotten their phones wet. Because with touchscreens, you know, it absorbs a bit of the water and just wigs out for a bit. But then, you said it kept going to “Baptisms for the Dead,” so I was like, “Oh, okay, it’s a dead person who needs their ordinances done.” But then you made it demonic. So, I’m not really sure how the baptisms for the dead fits in with all of the demonic stuff.

Buddy: Well, I don’t really know, either. But that’s just what happened. Like, I think I actually *had* the video of their phone somewhere. Yeah, I thought it was pretty weird, too.

Camille: I just wonder what the black triangle thing had to do with it. Because an evil spirit could just be there anyway. Why did that have to play a part? Was this just to mess with them?

Lyn: It was a leftover part from a Ouija board.

Mel: Yeah, was it a planchette or something?

Buddy: No, no; they said that it was just plain and black. And, like, they didn't know what it was made of. Like, they could feel it and stuff, but they couldn't tell what it was made of.

Mel: Okay, new theory: not demons—*aliens*. That's why the electronics are malfunctioning. And it was just an invisible dude that was attacking him. And that was his little spaceship, or part of his little spaceship, or something. They just had an alien in their apartment.

Lyn: It was a part of the [...] monolith. The monolith from *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Camille: Yeah, that's what I was gonna say earlier when he was talking about that. So, I was—you know, I could see where it could be aliens.

Mel: Just a theory, guys, but...

Buddy: All I know is it happened.

Camille: No, I'm sure it was something evil. I think aliens are too nice.

Mel: I also feel, I really do, like aliens would just look like us.

Camille: Yes. 'Cause they're just Heavenly Father's children on another planet. I don't think they go messing with us, to be honest.

Buddy: I don't think they would mess with some missionaries, either—two hooligans, you know, just out there? That's who they pick on?<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Buddy. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.  
Lorraine. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.  
Lyn. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.  
Camille. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.

Like the previous narratives, Narrative 4 contains several emic terms, though Buddy said he would likely only adjust the leadership titles of the missionaries (“mission president” and “zone leaders”) should he find himself telling the story to a non-member audience. Higher context terms such as the “Baptisms for the Dead” page to which the phone app continually navigated might need to be explained or left out of the story entirely. The Latter-day Saint folk beliefs regarding demons would also need clarification for a non-member audience. “Demons” and “evil spirits” are synonymous in Latter-day lore—both refer to the disembodied followers of Satan. The basic plot of the missionaries feeling an eerie presence, concluding it to be an evil spirit, and casting it out of the apartment by praying and raising their arm to the square (raising their right arm so the upper arm is parallel to the ground, with the elbow at a right-angle, the palm open, and fingers pointing upward), would stay consistent. The presence of alternative folk group perspectives, therefore, wouldn’t change the premise of the story but may add clarifying details.

Buddy himself, having heard the story from “an elder [he knows] pretty well,” takes the story at face value, adding validating formulas such as “I actually *had* the video of their phone somewhere.” The audience either accepts this as credible or is less concerned with the validity of the story as they are with how it fits in to their paradigm. As in the previous narratives, the audience first attempts to interpret the story according to their religious beliefs. When I offer my interpretation, I first understand the spirit in the apartment as someone seeking for help but am then unable to fit that interpretation in with the demonic occurrences, such as the appearance of the black triangle and the unseen presence hitting the missionary. I then posit a new theory concerning aliens,

following popular culture, which the family enthusiastically takes up, influenced by regional perspectives about aliens and current events like the appearance of monoliths in various areas, including Utah. Whether they treat this theory seriously or not, the family once again returns to their religious perspectives to explain the aliens, stating that aliens would likely look like humans because “they’re just Heavenly Father’s children on another planet.” Despite the nature of Buddy’s legend opening up the potential for alternative perspectives, the audience returns to their religious beliefs, indicating that their religious paradigm is the most important.

This narrative (#4) and the next (#5) both deal with invisible beings who enter an apartment and are felt—physically and metaphysically—rather than seen. Prayer eventually drives out both unseen entities; however, unlike Narrative 4, where the heroes were missionaries and had a direct connection with a religious interpretation, the hero of Narrative 5 is Camille’s mother. The connection to religion is more tenuous, and family lore backs it up.

#### *Narrative 5*

Camille: This story happened to my mother and [Karen] and [Howard]. This probably would have been about 1950 or 1951. [My dad] was going to school at the University of Utah on the GI Bill, and they were living in a place called Stadium Village. And [that] was a bunch of old bunkers, like World War Two bunkers. Or... I guess they could have been Quonset huts, but they always called them bunkers, that they put up by the stadium at the University of Utah, by their old stadium up there. That’s why it was called Stadium Village. And it was all these return GIs and their families that lived in them. [...] My dad was... I can’t remember if he was at school or working late, but it was evening time, but not dark or anything yet, you know? So, it’s just kind of late afternoon, and my mother was starting to get some dinner ready. And she could hear the kids—Howard, who was like a baby, [...] and Karen, who would have been four years older than him, so she would have been four or five. They were playing the back bedroom. And they were just kind of back there, and they were just kind of fussy and kind of, you know, being kids. And [my mom] went back into the back

bedroom to get the kids to come back out in the front room so she could watch them while she was fixing dinner because they were both real tiny. And they had a window in their bedroom that was open. And she went over [...] to the window and reached up to close it, and as she closed it, she felt something come in through the window. She couldn't see anything, but she felt it touch her and go past her. And she closed the window. And she said as soon as that happened, Howard just started to cry and was crying and crying, and Karen started to cry. And Mom took the kids, went back out to the front room, and she started to fix dinner, and she said she had a *horrible* feeling that there was just something evil there, something really bad. And the kids were just crying, and she couldn't get them to settle down, and she said, "I knew that there was somebody in the apartment with us," even though she couldn't see them. And she said other than the feeling, there wasn't anything happening. It was just the kids were really upset, but there was just a horrible, horrible feeling. And she didn't know what to do; they didn't have a phone at the time or any way for her to get ahold of Dad, and she said, "I wasn't sure if I should leave and go someplace else, or go find somebody." But she said that she got the kids together, and they all knelt down in the living room and had a prayer. And she said she asked Heavenly Father to tell whoever was there to leave, to get out of the apartment. And she said that she could actually feel a presence in the room, and when she finished praying, it left. So, she has never been sure, but she said she knew that there was an evil spirit in their home and that by praying they were able to make it leave.<sup>22</sup>

Narrative 5 conforms to Latter-day Saint perspectives on the casting out of evil spirits: Camille's mother prays and feels the evil presence depart. The family analyzed the story from a religious perspective because of this conformity and validated their reasoning by establishing the mother's character.

Buddy: I think it's true. Grandma seemed like a very trustworthy lady. She wouldn't lie.

Lyn: I think it's plausible. And I think in the Church, we've heard... I'm not gonna say lots, but *many*, similar type stories where people have felt a bad presence or whatever, an evil presence or whatever, and have prayed and it's gone. So, I say it's plausible.

Camille: My mother was a fairly practical person, you know? So, she was not inclined to, you know, to exaggeration or to make things up, so I agree with Buddy. Yeah, she is trustworthy. She is a reliable source. You know, she

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<sup>22</sup> Camille. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.

wouldn't exaggerate something like that or make that up. She wouldn't even think of that to make it up.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the similarities between Narrative 4 and 5—including the context in which the performer shared them—the two received differing interpretations according to the folk group that they felt best explained the narrative.

I've observed that supernatural non-religious legends tend to be where set interpretations break apart, where a single perspective is insufficient to account for the events in the narrative and so where one supplies multiple folk groups' paradigms for examination. People still offer religious interpretations, but these tend to be reached after a period of reasoning and are held in conjunction with input from other folk groups. Supernatural religious legends, in this sense, are defined as such because the listener applies a religious lens almost automatically. Supernatural non-religious legends, on the other hand, are approached tentatively. When differing groups' interpretations of the supernatural, such as ghosts or demons, conflict, the surest way to discern the blurred boundaries between religious and non-religious legends is by examining the first paradigms that individuals access and how quickly they access them. Supernatural religious legends have an immediate religious response; supernatural non-religious legends are viewed from a distance, from a logical point of view, before a folk group is decided upon.

However, the blending of secular with spiritual folk groups—as occurred in Narrative 4—suggests that the boundaries between paradigms are just as permeable as the

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<sup>23</sup> Buddy. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.  
Lyn. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.  
Camille. Personal conversation. 15 January 2022.

boundaries between legend genres. People can access multiple paradigms simultaneously without considering them contradictory. A religious lens is not as distinct from a regional lens as we might think. When we account for the sundry variables that affect which folk group individuals choose for interpretation, we also must account for syncretism, for people combining multiple schools of thought and perspectives in order to fully analyze a narrative. This combination blurs the distinctions between paradigms. This blurring occurred minutely in the earlier narratives, wherein the audience used family lore and a character's or performer's credibility to examine a narrative in conjunction with their religious paradigm. It occurs more prominently in the rest of the narratives, which I classify as supernatural non-religious legends, as the performer and the audience use multiple folk group lenses to supply explanations.

Though Gillian Bennett divides the responses to the supernatural into two categories—"traditions of belief" and "traditions of disbelief"<sup>24</sup>—I hesitate to accept this dichotomy. An individual can be subject to a supernatural experience, think about it rationally, and still arrive at a supernatural conclusion. Approaching a narrative cautiously, examining it, and choosing to view it through the lens of a religious folk group is still a rational approach—perhaps not the scientific, "disbelieving" approach, but a rational approach nonetheless.

This is where the multivariate theory of interpretation is most useful. If we categorize supernatural non-religious legends by how an audience receives them—examining them first logically and then applying a folk group lens, which potentially blends with other lenses—then any number of interpretations, mixtures of believing and

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<sup>24</sup> Bennett, 1999, 31.

unbelieving, can emerge. The multivariate theory acknowledges that multiple factors contribute to interpretations and that assuming only two interpretations are possible—“believing” and “disbelieving”—is a fallacy.

The breaking apart of a single interpretation that the supernatural religious legends offered means that supernatural non-religious legends provide room for multiple folk group paradigms to emerge. The following narratives I examine are a combination of student collections submitted to the William A. Wilson Folklore Archives and narratives I collected myself. Though the performer and audience still apply a religious lens in cases, variables such as age, regional background, and personal experience also emerge during evaluation, creating a conglomeration of interpretations of seemingly similar events. Ghosts might be evil spirits, remnants of people who died terrible deaths, or echoes of energy lingering in a building. Skinwalkers are shapeshifters, demons, and people who have sold their soul to the devil. Depending on the social context and the hierarchy of folk groups of the contributors and audience members, supernatural non-religious legends can come in many shapes and sizes.

Narrative 6 was collected for the Wilson Archives and entails a story about a haunted building on Brigham Young University campus. The story is more of a legend summary: the contributor left out specific details of the supposed haunting while explaining why the haunting occurs.

#### *Narrative 6*

When the Spanish influenza hit in 1918, the students on BYU campus who were sick were taken to the Maeser Building for quarantine and treatment. Some of the students passed away. The building president at the time also became ill but

recovered after praying. He later became the University's president. His office was where Dr. Magleby's office is now.<sup>25</sup>

Stories about hauntings in the Maeser Building still circulate but are rarely complete and often trace themselves back to this tale of the influenza. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints privately owns the University, and the majority of the student body and faculty are members of the Church. Despite the religious influence expected to shape the interpretation of the narrative and the haunting of the building itself, beliefs that the building is haunted are more often based on regional and popular culture concepts of ghosts. The story has a religious aspect to lend it credibility and encourage a religious interpretation: the building president recovered from the illness after praying. The narrative reflects the contributor's religious attitude. Those who hear the story, however, tend to trust that the building is haunted for a completely non-religious reason: the Maeser Building was built on top of a Native American cemetery and is the oldest building on campus.<sup>26</sup> Students familiar with these details—whether or not they heard about the students who died from influenza—readily agreed that the building must be haunted.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Collected by Melanie Kimball. "The Uninvited: The Ghosts of Brigham Young University," 2019, FA 01. William A. Wilson Folklore Archives, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

<sup>26</sup> Kimball, 2019. Several students questioned about the ghost in the Maeser Building couldn't provide details of the haunting but were certain the building was haunted because they'd heard it was built on top of a cemetery. One student cited an anthropology professor as their source, while another said they'd seen older maps detailing the location of the cemetery and the current location of the building. Another student said that the cemetery had been for settlers, not Native Americans. Regardless of the cemetery's origin, all students aware of a ghost at the Maeser agreed that it was likely haunted because of its position over a burial ground.

<sup>27</sup> Kimball, 2019.

Due to the religious influence at the University and the predominant faith of the student body, the social context seems ideally set up for all supernatural interpretations on campus to lean religious. However, in the case of the Maeser Building's haunting, students never offered an explanation that matched their religion's perspective on the afterlife. The students accepted a larger regional understanding of ghosts: a tragedy was involved, people had died in the building, the building was built over a cemetery, and the building was considerably older than the rest of the buildings on campus. All these factors mesh with a non-Latter-day Saint understanding of ghosts. Rather than assume all students consulted on the building's haunting were agnostic or rebellious, we can apply the multivariate theory to find other variables affecting the interpretation. There is a larger regional folk group to consider. Since so many factors concerning the building's history and location match a Western cultural understanding of ghosts, it's understandable that the students would find this folk group's lens more applicable than their religion, which offered minimal explanation for these sorts of supernatural events. Additionally, there is the variable of the students' age to consider. Compared to faculty and staff, students were more likely to appropriate a regional interpretation of the supernatural than their religious folk beliefs.<sup>28</sup>

We find further evidence of this age disparity in Narrative 7, also collected as part of a project for the Wilson Archives. The contributor is a woman in her late thirties or early forties who previously worked as a custodian on the Brigham Young University campus, specifically in the Joseph F. Smith Building (JFSB), where a preschool is

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<sup>28</sup> Kimball, 2019.

located. At the time of collection, the woman worked at a training center for Latter-day Saint missionaries located just north of the campus.

The woman contributed several stories related to a haunting in the JFSB preschool. Her first experience involved an unseen individual banging pans together that hung in the preschool playground. As is typical of my observations for supernatural non-religious legends, the woman first attempted to rationally explain her experiences, attributing the swinging and banging pans to the wind or possible deer on the playground. When she saw no deer or evidence of a breeze, the woman accepted that something supernatural was happening. Narrative 7 is a continuation of the hauntings.

#### *Narrative 7*

One time, I was in the basement training a couple of new people. And I talk to them, get them all set up on the computers for them to do their training, and I decided to go upstairs to the first floor and... just check on my students to see how they were doing, if they needed anything, and then I would just finish the round and come back down to the ones that were training. And I went into the preschool through the south entrance, and I started calling out the girl's name that was working there that day. I didn't want to startle her, so I started calling her name out. And I wasn't getting a response. I wasn't sure exactly where in the preschool she was because there's classrooms to both sides of the hallway, so I was like, "Okay, you know, she's probably at the other end." So, I kept going, kept calling her name, and I wasn't getting a response, and I was starting to think, "Is she not in the preschool right now?" I wasn't sure what was going on because usually I would have already gotten an answer by then. And I cross the middle area, the reception area, and I started slowing down. I was thinking, "She's gonna jump out and scare me or something." So, I started slowing down but still calling her name in the same volume. And all of a sudden, [...] she steps out from the doorway of the preschool kitchen. She's as white as paper, and she barely turns her eyes to look at me and asks, "Were you calling my name?" And I was like, "Yes, I've been calling your name since I entered the preschool." She's like, "No, no, not right now. Like, ten minutes ago." And I was like, "Oh! No, I was downstairs ten minutes ago. I'm training people downstairs." And she's like, "I heard you call my name. And I came out into the hallway and looked towards the south, and I saw somebody walking across that reception area." She said, "But it didn't look like you, and I wasn't sure if it was a homeless person, or what in the world, because they were covered." [motions with hands as though a veil or sheet

is over her head] And she, you know, to this day, she remembers that experience. And I do too. Because the way I felt, it was like... she was the first one to ever scare me, and she wasn't even trying to scare me; she was just telling me what she was going through. And I just felt really, really uneasy. So, I'm not sure what she saw, but she saw someone walking across there. And that hallway that she saw them from—so, the preschool has two hallways, one from North to South, then one from East to West. And I came in from the south side walking North, and she had seen somebody go from the west side to the east side.<sup>29</sup>

Unlike Narrative 6 and the haunting of the Maeser Building, there is no background on the JFSB ghost. The supernatural appears unexpectedly in that context. There is no evidence that the JFSB sits on top of a graveyard or that someone died there, and the JFSB is a relatively new building on campus. A regional explanation for hauntings thus fails to account for what the contributor and her student experienced; however, there is not a ready religious interpretation, either, hence the contributor commenting, "I'm not sure what she saw." The student's credibility is what the contributor draws on to back up the story; she believes that the student "saw someone walking across there." The contributor initially approached the experience attempting to rationalize what had happened. Having established that a supernatural explanation is best, the contributor then accesses multiple folk group paradigms to explain what has happened, ultimately settling on her religious perspective:

Definitely, the JFSB had a lot of activity, and I always wondered why. Why the JFSB? It's one of the newer buildings. And even more than that, why the preschool playground? Or the preschool? [...] I've kind of just appeased myself thinking, "Well, we *do* have a family history center. Somebody may be trying to get help or something." Yeah, I really have no explanation for what happened there. I just know that it definitely happened.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Collected by Melanie Kimball, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Collected by Melanie Kimball, 2019.

The supernatural events that have taken place can be explained religiously but, unlike in previous narratives wherein a supernatural encounter was attributed to an evil spirit, this contributor assumes a more benevolent being is involved, someone from the afterlife who needs help from their family. Such an explanation works into the Latter-day Saint emphasis on family history work;<sup>31</sup> just as Grandpa appeared to Steven in Narrative 2 to help the family, the being in the JFSB might appear there in order to contact one of its relatives—at least, this is how the contributor rationalizes things. She again admits that she “really [has] no explanation for what happened there,” but reaffirms that she “just [knows] that it definitely happened.” Her closing sentence hints that even her religious perspective fails to fully satisfy her understanding of events, but she perhaps chose it because it provides the most complete explanation. And, in contrast to the young students who trust that the Maeser is haunted thanks to its history, the contributor of Narrative 7 applies her religious lens before her regional one.

Several factors might explain the contributor’s interpretation: she shared the story at a training center for missionaries and was already surrounded by a religious context; her hierarchy of folk groups places religion at the top, making it the first paradigm she naturally reaches for; and her age and maturity make her more likely to assume a religious explanation as opposed to a regional one, in contrast to the younger students on campus. It’s worth noting that she involves syncretism to a degree in her interpretation,

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<sup>31</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints emphasizes family history work not only because they view a knowledge of one’s ancestors as important but because members believe certain rituals, such as baptism, must be performed in order for an individual to reach the highest level of heaven. If one fails to perform these rituals in their life, their descendants can do so vicariously. The spirit in the JFSB could, therefore, have appeared in a place with a genealogical center because they wish to contact their descendants or have those descendants perform the necessary rituals on their behalf.

bringing in subordinate folk groups to support her religious view as she grapples with her experiences. She mixes paradigms to explain the hauntings.

Narratives 8 and 9 are variants of one story, adapted according to the performer's interpretations. I also accessed them from the Wilson Archives, and the location of the events also took place on BYU campus. In the first telling, the student—an undergraduate in her early twenties—validates the story by elaborating details on the location of the museum and the museum's response to her inquiries. She tells the story using a combination of folk groups.

#### *Narrative 8*

So, I reached out to the Museum of Peoples and Cultures and asked them about this. And they're like, "Oh, we don't have any ghost stories." I was like, "Well, I've heard all of this stuff about when you were in this old building in Allen Hall that you had something," and they're like—it was the sketchiest thing I've ever gotten. They said, like, "The circumstances surrounding that event are confidential." And then they just cut it off, you know, ended it there. But anyways, so just from what I gather by reading and talking to the Bean Museum people is that the Museum of People and Cultures used to be in this old girls' dormitory, like after it was the girls dormitory, it was the museum. And I found pictures. I think they've torn it down now, but the museum used to be in that building. And they had a new exhibit brought in—I never found out what the exhibit was, obviously some sort of indigenous artifacts. But they had some sort of object that, when they would come back the next day after closing, all of the other objects in the display cases would be knocked over except for this one. And they're like, "Well, that's weird, whatever." And they'd come back the next day, and the same thing would have happened. I never found out if there was other stuff going on, if people were hearing things or saw something. But whatever was going on with this object, it got so intense that they called a shaman in to exorcise the spirit. And that worked. After that, whatever was going on stopped. So, it worked. I never got more from the Museum of People and Cultures because it was confidential.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Collected by Melanie Kimball, 2019.

The premise of this narrative is simple enough. An apparently haunted object is brought into the museum. A shaman comes in to “exorcise the spirit”—implying a religious perspective, though the terms “shaman” and “exorcise” can suggest the narrator accesses two different religions—which successfully ends the haunting. More detailed information is “confidential” and censored by the museum, which perhaps further suggests a religious interpretation, at least by the museum. In Narrative 9, the same story is retold by a graduate student, a young woman in her mid-twenties.

### *Narrative 9*

Before the new Museum of Peoples and Cultures was built, the museum was originally housed in old Allen Hall, which is located south of BYU campus. The museum evidently once had an exhibit that included a haunted item. This item would knock over the other objects in the display. The events surrounding this object eventually got so bad that the museum called in a bishop to bless the place, after which the events stopped. Allen Hall was a women’s dorm at one point, and it was believed to be haunted then; it has since been torn down by BYU.<sup>33</sup>

This student shares a less detailed narrative compared to Narrative 8 but implies her interpretation of the story by changing an important detail. The “shaman” in Narrative 8 has become a “bishop,” conforming the story to a Latter-day Saint perspective. The student offers a religious viewpoint to explain the haunting; this paradigm is obviously at the forefront both when hearing the story for the first time and in this retelling, as the greatest change made to the narrative was the adjustment from a shaman to a bishop blessing the museum. Notice also the change in wording: an exorcism has become a blessing. One contributor to this project noted that Latter-day Saints “don’t perform exorcisms, but we perform blessings. Instead of us trying to

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<sup>33</sup> Collected by Melanie Kimball, 2019.

combat the demons, it's us blessing and relieving ... the individual of that."<sup>34</sup> The word "exorcism" is still used within the Church, but "blessing" is more commonly applied when talking about casting out an evil spirit from an individual or place.

Due to the previous four narratives originating from a religious university, it's reasonable for a religious lens to be the first applied in both performance and reception of the legends, accompanied by a subordinate regional lens according to age or the failure of the religious lens to fully account for a supernatural event. We can properly classify Narrative 6 as a supernatural non-religious legend; the other three, on the other hand, are vaguer, as the contributor supplied a religious interpretation that did not entirely explain what was happening.

### **Skinwalkers and the Conflation of the Religious with the Non-Religious**

The next story, also from the Wilson Archives, drifts even further into the realm of non-religious as opposed to religious supernatural legends. In Narrative 10, the contributor is agnostic and experiences the events firsthand; the narrative is her memorate. Her story deals with skinwalkers, a Navajo supernatural legend about individuals who shapeshift into animals at will and possess superhuman abilities. Skinwalkers have a religious connotation within the Navajo community, though those familiar with the legends thanks to regional proximity to Navajos have differing interpretations, sometimes viewing them similar to werewolves or other non-religious creatures. Even when they acknowledge the religious origin of skinwalkers within

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<sup>34</sup> Nicholas. Personal conversation. 30 December 2021.

Navajo culture, a non-Navajo regional culture may have stripped away the religious aspects.

The collector of Narrative 10 added commentary to define terms unfamiliar to outsiders, and further explained that his initial interview with the contributor was lost due to a faulty audio recording. The narrative is a second recording, notably told differently than the first time; the collector clarifies the differences in an afterthought that I have included, though some comments in the narrative itself I have removed. “Skinwalker” is used here as an etic term, as the contributor for Narrative 10 provides no name for what she sees, understanding it only as a shapeshifter. Her story is viewed through a regional rather than religious lens. Later commentary from individuals discussing skinwalker stories defines the beings as evil spirits or people who have sold their soul to the devil, providing the legends with a religious spin, similar to Navajo belief. Considering the skinwalkers’ tendency to shift between human and animal, between the natural and the supernatural, their ambiguous placement between the two supernatural legend genres is fitting.

#### *Narrative 10*

This happened in March. I was with Mack [a friend] and his truck, it was dark, and we went to McDonald’s [she mentioned that it was down in Provo but clarified that it might not have been. It was just more south than from where she lived]. And then we were driving down this dirt road that was parallel with I-15 [freeway]. And it was originally a road and when you drive far enough it turns into a dirt road and we were just driving, and it was dark, and we really couldn’t see anything and all we could see were where his headlights were and they weren’t working very well, I mean we had the brights on but it could only do so much. Anyway, and there was this deer in the road and so he slams on his brakes and I look up and I see this deer but it didn’t quite look like a deer it was off just a little bit it looked, I dunno menacing? I guess. And then it just walked off the road and stood up and was a man and he just stood there and stared at us. We could see his eyes. It was creepy.

[In the initial recording, she said that it was a man at first and then he walked away and became a deer, but then later in the conversation she clarified that it was the other way around. She also said that they could not see his face, but he was turned in their direction. The friend asked where it went, and she said that it was over on the side of the road staring at them before the friend saw it, swore, and drove away.]<sup>35</sup>

The contributor did not dub the deer-man as a skinwalker, but she *did* offer the story in response to the collector's request for skinwalker narratives, indicating that she was familiar with the tradition. As an agnostic, the contributor didn't view the story through a conventional religious lens. Instead, her best explanation drew from the regional folk belief in skinwalkers as shapeshifters.

A second story from the Archives utilizes a regional-over-religious approach when discussing skinwalkers. The contributor shares her friends' experience driving up American Fork Canyon "with the intention of seeing something spooky."<sup>36</sup> The group *does* find something spooky: partway up the canyon, they come across a group of strange figures standing over a body in the road. The group in the car immediately identify the figures as skinwalkers and speed away, pursued by the skinwalkers. The contributor's testimony that her friends first identified the mysterious figures as skinwalkers—not "demons," "evil spirits," or even humans—suggests that, in this instance, the regional lens was accessed before the religious. The group saw something strange, explained it supernaturally, and then labelled the experience with a regional lens. The group

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<sup>35</sup> Collected by Joseph Avila from Rebekah Balmanno. "Skin-walker Sighting," 2020, FA 03. William A. Wilson Folklore Archives, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

<sup>36</sup> Collected by Audrey Varvel from Meghan Higgins. "American Fork Drive," 2016, FA 03. William A. Wilson Folklore Archives, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

experiencing the narrative first-hand may have had alternating interpretations that included a religious lens among other folk groups, but their regional lens dominated when they told the story to others.

During Margaret K. Brady's investigation into Navajo children's skinwalker narratives, she discovered that multiple factors influenced the way the children told and interpreted stories. The children confused skinwalkers with wolfmen or added Catholic explanations.<sup>37</sup> The children's offered definitions indicate that they use multiple folk groups to interpret skinwalkers: children more commonly confuse wolfmen and skinwalkers, providing an age factor; the Navajo's religion and culture teach them how skinwalkers function and come to be; the added religious context from the Catholics states that skinwalkers are people who have interacted with the devil. These interpretations are engaged simultaneously and work together to add further layers of understanding to the legends. In the case of the Navajo, their regional and religious lenses combine and are supported by alternate folk groups to interpret skinwalker legends.

In Narrative 10 and the subsequent story taking place up American Fork Canyon, the performer interpreted their experiences through more of a regional lens. The Navajo understand skinwalkers as religious figures.

I collected from one group that debated the exact nature of skinwalkers and supernatural legends in general. This conversation fit closely with my observation that supernatural non-religious legends can be defined by an initial hesitation of analysis and the first step of a logical examination. The group determined that, "for the sake of

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<sup>37</sup> Margaret K. Brady, *Some Kind of Power: Navajo Children's Skinwalker Narratives* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1984) 67.

discussion, [they should] assume that all skinwalkers are people that have sold their souls to Satan, for whatever reason.”<sup>38</sup> This definition was followed by a discussion about how skinwalkers functioned.

Diedra: Clarify for me, but skinwalkers can—in theory—transform into any form that they choose, right? Like, what are the rules?

Nicholas: I thought it was one form.

Alexandra: Yeah, I thought it was, like, you have one form, you just need to go back and forth.

Mel: I don’t know. Because for some of them, I thought you had to have the animal skin and put that on—so, like selkies or werewolves or whatever—but for some of them, maybe it is just like they can transform into any animal. I don’t know.<sup>39</sup>

The idea that “all skinwalkers are people that have sold their souls to Satan” implies a religious interpretation of what is happening, closer to traditional Navajo belief, though the application of the term “skinwalker” to describe a phenomenon means a regional interpretation is in use as well. The belief that the skinwalkers must “have the animal skin and put that on,” connected to popular non-religious supernatural legends such as selkies and werewolves, also indicates more of a regional understanding. There is a contradiction and a conflation of paradigms. The group places skinwalkers in an ambiguous status, hovering between religious and non-religious interpretations. Again, the ambiguity breaks apart a set definition and allows room for the group to step back and analyze the stories rationally before assigning an interpretation. In terms of verity, the

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<sup>38</sup> Alexandra. Personal conversation. 30 December 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Diedra. Personal conversation. 30 December 2021.  
Nicholas. Personal conversation. 30 December 2021.  
Alexandra. Personal conversation. 30 December 2021.

group critically examines stories of skinwalkers according to the skinwalkers' goals. The group scrutinizes the skinwalkers' purpose—either why the skinwalkers would have sold their souls to the devil or why they would have appeared in that time and place. Diedra eventually admitted that:

those stories sound to me like allegories and not actual experiences of people. So, it sounds almost to me like it's kind of a lesson to be taught, or like you can get something out of that story versus... just because it's all so—not far-fetched, but it just kind of defies logic a little bit. So, it feels to me like there should be some symbolism there that maybe I'm missing.

Alexandra: I would try and find similar stories from the scriptures, or explanations more from what I'm familiar with. And I know that a really common theme throughout the Book of Mormon and the Bible and all that stuff is that God tries to make men like Him. And so, then the opposite of that would be the devil trying to make humans less than what they are, which would be animalistic.

Diedra: I definitely believe in the supernatural and that kind of beyond-logic kind of a situation, but I think that I have to really think story by story, because it's hard for me personally to not logic my way out of it. Because if it's something that's weird and can't be explained, I'm like, "Okay, let's try and figure it out." If that is the case that, let's say, a person sold their soul to the devil and became, you know, able to transform into an animal or, you know, give up part of their humanity, logistically, how does that take place and for what purpose, to what end? You know? And what was the reason for that? You know, so I look for meaning in those things. I guess what I said about it being an allegory... I think I misspoke a little bit. It's less of an allegory, like they're telling the story to teach us a lesson, but it's more of... like, from that specific encounter that he had [referring to a skinwalker story shared earlier], you can learn something from that. The reason why he's telling that story is like, "That's really weird that that happened to me." And it's almost like a warning to others that he's telling the story to.<sup>40</sup>

The conversation here touches on religious interpretations as well as a more empirical approach. Alexandra clearly attempts to get the stories to align with her

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<sup>40</sup> Diedra. Personal conversation. 30 December 2021.  
Alexandra. Personal conversation. 30 December 2021.

religious point of view and suggests a religious explanation for the skinwalkers' behavior and transformations. Diedra, on the other hand, admits that she finds the stories more allegorical or educational; she is unable to get past the "logistics" of transforming from a person into an animal and the reasoning behind doing so. She is still in the rationalizing stage of interpretation; she hasn't moved on to applying a religious perspective, as Alexandra has, but she also hasn't accepted a regional explanation.

The group spent quite a while talking about how they interpret stories rather than sharing stories themselves. Their discussion was particularly helpful in highlighting not only how and when a folk group's paradigm is applied for interpretation but how those folk groups themselves are viewed. For example, Alexandra commented, "When I approach something with religion, it's never mystical or like magic. Because I'm very much... I feel like everything's really practical in a lot of ways. Like, there's always a practical explanation that includes religion, you know?"<sup>41</sup>

Alexandra's comments, in conjunction with her earlier efforts to comprehend skinwalkers through a religious paradigm, emphasize that taking a "practical explanation" can include religion.

Two more comments made by the members of the group analyzing how the performance influenced their interpretation support my multivariate theory. For the first, Nicholas interprets an earlier skinwalker legend as false because of the method the performer employed to tell it; a second skinwalker legend is more believable because of its delivery.

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<sup>41</sup> Alexandra. Personal conversation. 30 December 2021.

Nicholas: I don't think that was a real story. I naturally believe that's not a real story because of the way it was told in more of a story fashion. Instead of like the story you told—it wasn't really in a story fashion, it was more of a documentary-style telling, like reciting an event that happened.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to social context and the folk groups the performer and audience utilized, Nicholas's comment makes it clear that the way in which the legend is delivered plays a role in the reception and interpretation of narratives. The one skinwalker legend was “told in more of a story fashion”—presumably, to use an etic term, as a folktale rather than a legend—while the other legend “was more of a documentary-style telling,” which provided it with more credibility as a genuine event. The distinction changed how Nicholas interpreted the stories.

The second comment the group made involves a clarification provided after a narrative was shared, which changed the way the group interpreted the story. The narrative itself involved a large, ape-like creature spotted in an orchard in Mexico, heard by Nicholas from a friend who heard it from a first-hand witness (the friend-of-a-friend formula was used as validation, adding more credibility that the story happened but not that the ape-like creature was supernatural).

Diedra: Yeah. To be honest, my mind does not immediately go to religion or spirituality when I hear a ghost story or any kind of story like that. My first thought is not like, “Oh, this is part of a spiritual moment.” I think that supernatural... I don't know, I just don't see it as a religious story first, unless it does have ties, like the skinwalkers. You know? It has spiritual ties and has kind of more of... more lore and legend tied to it versus—

Nicholas: I forgot to say: the guy was talking about a skinwalker.

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<sup>42</sup> Nicholas. Personal conversation. 30 December 2021.

Alexandra: Well, then, it's the same; I would have the same reaction as to the sheep thing.<sup>43</sup>

At first, Diedra and Alexandra interpret the story from a rational point of view, though a regional lens is considered. They propose that the creature is a Sasquatch, but this is denied; it's more likely to be a species of undiscovered primate. Diedra admits that she doesn't consider the story to have any religious implications, and therefore won't view the story through a religious lens. She has at this point decided that skinwalkers have a founded explanation from a religious perspective, providing those stories with "spiritual ties." Nicholas then amends "the guy was talking about a skinwalker" to his story.

This new piece of information changes the way the audience receives it. Whereas the ape was previously an unidentified primate, the redefining of it as a skinwalker adds both supernatural and religious connotations to the legend. Alexandra states she "would have the same reaction as to the sheep thing," referring to a previously shared narrative that was found to be both more supernatural and credible. Though Nicholas's opinion of the ape narrative—the ways he has applied his folk groups to the story's interpretation—is unknown, his brief statement that he originally heard it classified as a skinwalker narrative adds a new variable to how the group receives the story. Another variable to consider for my theory, then, includes not only applied folk groups during performance but the intention involved in the sharing of the story in the first place. Furthermore, the story's intention or interpretation going several generations of performers back can

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<sup>43</sup> Diedra. Personal conversation. 30 December 2021.  
Nicholas. Personal conversation. 30 December 2021.  
Alexandra. Personal conversation. 30 December 2021.

impact the way an audience receives a story later. Understanding how and why someone selects a folk group for interpreting a story must factor in variables such as the audience's knowledge of the performer's intent and the attitude of the performer toward the narrative during the performance.

## **Conclusion**

My study of folk groups and supernatural narratives is by no means universal, but what I collected suggests several interesting points concerning how individuals apply folk groups to interpret stories. First, within the Latter-day Saint community at least, the boundary between religious and non-religious supernatural legends is blurred; supernatural non-religious legends are often still provided with a religious interpretation. Second, observers can determine a legend's classification by the audience's response: supernatural religious legends tend to elicit a religious gut-reaction, while supernatural non-religious legends are first approached rationally before a folk group's paradigm is assigned, though there is a scale to how "non-religious" a story can be. Third, individuals each have their own hierarchy of folk groups; the most-referenced folk group is supported by supplemental folk groups to fill in the gaps that the primary folk group fails to explain. Additionally, the divisions between paradigms can be just as vague as the divisions between legend genres because individuals are capable of combining multiple points of view and schools of thought.

Fourth, the act of assigning a folk group's paradigm is heavily influenced by multiple factors. Demographic data such as age and ethnicity obviously play a role; religion is a prominent factor for Latter-day Saints; individual hierarchies have greater

prominence than peers' interpretation; the capability of a single folk group to supply an explanation for a supernatural event determines whether more paradigms will be accessed; social context and a performer's interpretation, attitude, and intent all influence which folk groups a listener accesses to understand a supernatural narrative. Although each individual has one worldview they rely on more than others, this worldview will not be accessed consistently by itself; a variety of factors affects interpretation.

Because of these multiple variables, it's possible to hazard a guess at how an audience will receive a narrative, but it's impossible to know until the very act of someone sitting down and telling a story.

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