

HORROR BEGINS AT HOME: FAMILY TRAUMA IN
PARANORMAL REALITY TV

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation argues that paranormal reality television is a form of what some have referred to as “trauma television,” a site of struggle between meanings of family and the violence often found in the hegemonic nuclear family ideal. Programs such as *A Haunting* and *Paranormal State* articulate family violence and trauma through a paranormal presence in the heteronormative family home, working to make strange and unfamiliar the domestic and familial milieus in which their episodes take place. Although ghosts, demons, and other entities stand in for violence and trauma taking place in the family, the subgenre’s narratives continue to suggest an oppressive situation and leave the hegemonic family ideal open to critique. Paranormal reality television draws on narrative conventions associated with the paranormal family horror film of the 1970s and early 1980s, particularly *The Amityville Horror*, *The Shining*, and *Poltergeist*, which also articulated family trauma following increased attention to family violence during those decades. Presenting forms of difference (race, sexuality, class, etc.) as threatening, recuperative, or absent in relation to the heteronormative family and privileging the “ghost hunter,” paranormal reality marks a powerful convergence of genres and modes, marking it as a site for articulating violence and trauma in the family.

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To the ghosts—for being there.

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CHAPTER I

AT HOME WITH THE DEAD: AN INTRODUCTION

It runs in the family.

--Tagline for *Paranormal Activity 3*
(dirs. Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman, US, 2011)

In an early episode of the Discovery Channel series *A Haunting* (2005-07), Arnold and Ginger Hinshaw purchase Summerwind, a dilapidated mansion in Wisconsin. Shortly after moving in, Arnold exhibits strange behavior and becomes prone to explosive rages, especially towards Ginger's children, whom he blames for missing items and open windows. According to Ginger's daughter April, Arnold killed the children's pet raccoon as a punishment for their imagined transgressions. In the weeks and months that follow, Arnold descends further into madness, obsessively playing dirge-like melodies on the family's pipe organ, and suffering a complete breakdown. Arnold's loved ones blame his startling decline on the infernal influence of the house and Ginger is finally forced to leave her husband. Describing her stepfather's transformation after moving into the house, April claims: "He just seemed to be more evil."¹

This sequence of events, found in the Discovery Channel's *A Haunting*, is common in what has become known as "paranormal reality television," a subgenre of reality television concerned with the paranormal and its investigation. Depicted through

¹ "The Haunting of Summerwind," *A Haunting*, season 1, episode 2, directed by Stuart Taylor, aired November 4, 2005 (Eugene, OR: Timeless Media Group, 2008), DVD.

reality television's narratives of authenticity and immediacy, paranormal reality also shares reality television's dual emphasis on the ordinary or mundane and the extraordinary or unusual,² investigating public institutions (bars, prisons, churches, etc.) as well as private family homes, displaying an overwhelming focus on haunted houses and articulations of family trauma alongside the paranormal.

Horror Begins at Home: Family Trauma in Paranormal Reality TV argues that paranormal reality television is a form of what some have referred to as “trauma television,” a site of struggle between meanings of family and the violence often found in the hegemonic family ideal. Programs such as *A Haunting* and *Paranormal State* (2007-) articulate family violence and trauma through a paranormal presence in the heteronormative family home, working to make strange and unfamiliar the domestic and familial milieus in which their episodes take place. Although ghosts, demons, and other entities stand in for violence and trauma taking place in the family, the subgenre's narratives continue to suggest an oppressive situation, leaving the hegemonic family ideal open to critique. Paranormal reality television draws on narrative conventions associated with the “paranormal family horror film,” particularly *The Amityville Horror* (dir. Stuart Rosenberg, US, 1979), *The Shining* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, US, 1980), and *Poltergeist* (dir. Tobe Hooper, US, 1982), which also articulated family trauma following increased attention to family violence during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Positioning forms of difference (based in race, sexuality, class, etc.) as both threatening and potentially recuperative in relation to the heteronormative family, and privileging the “ghost hunter,”

² Bernadette Casey, Neil Casey, et al., *Television Studies: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 196.

paranormal reality television represents a powerful convergence of genres and modes, marking it as a site for articulating violence and trauma in the family through what Stuart Hall has termed “postmodern articulation.”

Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall, in an interview with Lawrence Grossberg, describes the process of articulation as “the connection that can make a unity of two different, distinct elements,”³ while also stating that “a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse.”⁴ Hall’s theory of articulation guides my analysis of paranormal reality television as I suggest how this subgenre, despite its paranormal subject matter, articulates family trauma on a regular basis, creating connections that allow the paranormal to stand in for family trauma. Hall argues that “it is not the individual elements of a discourse that have political or ideological connotations, it is the ways those elements are organized together in a new discursive formation.”⁵ This dissertation examines paranormal reality television as an example of Hall’s “new discursive formation,” emerging from earlier traditions in both literature and film dealing with the paranormal and its effect upon families living in haunted houses. My analysis is informed by a concern with how the narrative elements of paranormal reality are organized to make possible its articulations of violence and trauma originating in the heteronormative family.

³ Stuart Hall, interview by Lawrence Grossberg, “On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 141.

⁴ Ibid., 141-42

⁵ Ibid., 143

Fear, Family, and Paranormal Reality

Beginning in 2004, paranormal reality television emerged as a discrete subgenre in cable programming, representing a hybrid of popular reality programs such as *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (2003-12), *Wife Swap* (2004-10), and *Supernanny* (2005-11) and “found footage” paranormal horror films such as *Paranormal Activity* (dir. Oren Peli, US, 2007). Programs comprising this subgenre document and dramatize alleged hauntings (these may involve ghosts or apparitions, poltergeists, or possession by demons or other malevolent spirits). Frequently containing accounts of family trauma, episodes also emphasize family-based trauma, overwhelmingly attributed to possession by the paranormal and explained as yet another symptom of the haunting.

Family trauma pervades paranormal reality in such programs as the Discovery Channel’s *A Haunting* and *Ghost Lab* (2009-11), Syfy’s *Ghost Hunters* (2004-) and its spin-offs *Ghost Hunters International* (2008-) and *Ghost Hunters Academy* (2009-), A&E’s *Paranormal State* and its spin-off, *Psychic Kids: Children of the Supernatural* (2008-), Biography’s *Celebrity Ghost Stories* (2009-), the Travel Channel’s *Ghost Adventures* (2008-), and Animal Planet’s *The Haunted* (2009-). Although largely panned by critics, the majority of these programs have garnered successful ratings: *Ghost Hunters*, between 2004 and 2008, doubled its audience from 1.3 million viewers to 2.6 million,⁶ a formidable number for cable, while *Paranormal State* drew an average 1.7 million viewers in the two months following its December 2007 premiere.⁷ In addition,

⁶ James Hannah, “Ghost-Hunting Groups Enjoy Surge in Popularity,” *Associated Press State & Local Wire*, May 10, 2008.

⁷ Thomas R. Umstead, “Chasing Television’s Ghosts,” *Multichannel News*, February 18, 2008.

such programs attract a younger demographic and cost considerably less to produce than scripted programs.⁸

Paranormal reality television has manifested as a form of niche programming whose pleasure, at least on the surface, derives from the simultaneous destabilization and restoration of the American family under paranormal attack. However, at the same time, paranormal reality articulates family trauma more than any other current television genre,⁹ building upon the medium's long-established and complex relationship to the family. Paranormal reality television draws upon generic conventions associated with horror, melodrama, reality television, and the gothic to engage with the violence and trauma implicit in the hegemonic nuclear family ideal.

Despite what some have advanced as the mainstreaming of the paranormal in the past decade, the paranormal remains critically marginalized in reality television as campy schlock. This dissertation concerns itself with how the subgenre positions the paranormal as a substitute or stand-in for overt trauma in the family. These articulations establish connections in popular culture texts, contingent on genre and historical contexts and drawing on filmic traditions developed in the paranormal family horror film that first emerged during the 1970s.

Horror Begins at Home: Family Trauma and Paranormal Reality TV contributes to television studies by establishing how conventions of the horror film have migrated to the hybrid form of paranormal reality and the medium of television as the most recent

⁸ Anne Becker, "Networks' Scary Strategy," *Broadcasting and Cable*, December 10, 2007.

⁹ One possible exception is the crime procedural, from which paranormal reality differs considerably, most foundationally in its presentation as "reality."

incarnation of the haunted house of folklore, literature, and film. When first undertaking this project, I was struck by the similarities in structure and style between personal narratives of family violence and the paranormal: the subject, isolated and vulnerable, undergoes a terrifying experience deeply influencing his or her life. The subject then becomes doubtful of his or her own sanity and reluctant to share the experience with others or seek professional help, for fear of dismissal, ridicule -- or worse-- escalation of the situation. While experiences of family violence and being haunted remain distinct in nature, underlying both are isolation and fear. Further, both are highly dependent on reception and belief by the community outside the family and home.

In the spring of 2009, I happened upon episodes of the Discovery Channel's *A Haunting*. Given my lack of regular access to cable television throughout college and graduate school (along with my pronounced lack of enthusiasm for reality television), I had been until that moment almost entirely unaware of *A Haunting* and other programs of its kind. Sitting through a half-dozen episodes that afternoon and evening, I became aware of how relatively little we see of the paranormal, whose absence works to articulate trauma originating in the family. After looking at several other paranormal-themed reality series, I realized that they comprised a subgenre organized around articulations of family trauma; this realization formed the basis of my departmental orals examination at the end of 2009. Despite taking slightly different approaches to the material, each of these programs have helped to define paranormal reality as a television subgenre and offer a unique opportunity for studying family and trauma. My critical approach to paranormal reality television builds upon foundational work on family and horror by Robin Wood and Tony Williams and was partially inspired by Jodi Dean's

scholarship on the reception of UFO abduction reports made by women,¹⁰ paralleling the reception of accounts of sexual assault and other forms of trauma.

Definitions of the word “haunt” suggest a relationship between institutionalized violence and the paranormal. Along with one of the more common meanings, as a descriptor of “unseen or immaterial visitants,” the *Oxford English Dictionary* yields the following: “To practice habitually, familiarly, or frequently,” and “to pursue, to molest.” This emphasis on both assault and the systematic speaks to the chronic aggression characterizing family violence. A related term, “oppression,” is defined as “prolonged cruel or unjust treatment or exercise of authority, control or power; tyranny; exploitation,” and can also be applied to the experiences of families haunted by the paranormal.

A comparison between the characteristics of family violence and family hauntings further illuminates the relationship between these seemingly disparate forms. Rhea V. Almeida, in her article, “Domestic Violence in Heterosexual Relationships,” enumerates the tactics associated with domestic violence, consisting of physical, emotional, and economic abuse; threats and intimidation; isolation and entrapment; sexual abuse and exploitation; and the control and abuse of children.¹¹ These all have their counterpart in accounts of the paranormal: the haunted often describe systematic attacks by the entities in their home, along with emotional abuse as the result of the continual fear in which the family is forced to live.

¹⁰ Jodi Dean, “Coming Out as an Alien: Feminists, UFOs, and the ‘Oprah’ Effect,” in *Bad Girls/Good Girls: Women, Sex, and Power in the Nineties*, eds. Nan Bauer Maglin and Donna Perry (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 90-105.

¹¹ Rhea V. Almeida, “Domestic Violence in Heterosexual Relationships,” in *Families as They Really Are*, ed. Barbara J. Risman (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 436.

As with domestic violence, paranormal oppression can also be described as a series of characteristics, symptoms commonly associated with a haunting in the home: unexplained noises, objects being moved on their own or levitating, doors opening and closing on their own, electrical problems, pets exhibiting strange behavior, and the feeling of not being alone.¹² These more general characteristics are joined by those more specifically evoking family violence and trauma: the appearance of bruises and scratches along with menacing and recurring apparitions, the unexplained and consecutive illnesses and deaths of family members and pets, as well as “finding unexplained bloodstains on clothes, on objects, or the floor,” while many sources also refer to “mysterious strife” between family members.¹³ Accounts of paranormal activity have featured physical and sexual attacks against both male and female family members, while children are often the initial focus of the haunting and particular targets of the harmful spirits invading their home. Both threats and intimidation are present in the entities’ ongoing attacks on the family, who eventually find themselves, much like victims of family violence, isolated from the outside community and from any potential sources of assistance.

Too Close for Comfort: Trauma and TV

During the 1950s and 1960s, the television sitcom and its representations of family concealed the physical and sexual abuse, alcohol and drug dependency, and economic instability that threatened to darken the idyllic suburban landscape in which

¹² “What are the Symptoms of a Haunted House?” Spiritual Science Research Foundation, accessed April 27, 2010, http://www.spiritualresearchfoundation.org/articles/id/spiritualresearch/difficulties/Ghosts_Demons/hauntedhouse.

¹³ Ibid.

television primarily sought to locate the American family through situation comedies such as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-66), *Father Knows Best* (1954-60), and *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-63). Although a term such as “domestic violence” would not enter into common usage until the 1970s, violence in the family did occur prior to that time but was considered unfit for public discussion (including, with some exceptions, television) as it failed to confirm idealized notions of the family as a site of warmth and security.¹⁴ Domestic violence reform had originated in the late nineteenth century,¹⁵ while second wave feminism, beginning in the late 1960s and continuing into the following decade, sought to make public an issue that had been previously consigned to the private sphere.¹⁶ Along with increasing public awareness and discussion, second wave feminists worked to hold perpetrators of family violence legally responsible for their crimes against their partners, spouses, and children.¹⁷ Funding was located for domestic violence programs, including women’s shelters and crisis lines.¹⁸

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence has defined domestic violence as “the willful intimidation, assault, battery, sexual assault, or other abusive behavior

¹⁴ Elizabeth M. Schneider, *Battered Women & Feminist Lawmaking* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15

¹⁶ Esther Madriz, *Nothing Bad Happens to Good Girls: Fear of Crime in Women’s Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 72.

¹⁷ Deborah M. Weissman, “The Personal Is Political—and Economic: Rethinking Domestic Violence,” *Brigham Young University Law Review* (2007): 387.

¹⁸ David Peterson del Mar, *What Trouble I Have Seen: A History of Violence against Wives* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 146.

perpetrated by an intimate partner against another.”¹⁹ Clinical psychologists Rhea V. Almeida and Tracy Durkin have expanded this definition to “the patterned and repeated use of coercive and controlling behavior to limit, direct, and shape a partner’s thoughts, feelings, and actions,”²⁰ thus addressing the psychological aspects of domestic violence alongside the physical. The formulation of terminology and definitions allowed family violence, in all its forms, to become mainstreamed over the course of the 1970s, raising awareness and leading to important changes in the legal system. More recently, these efforts have continued to demonstrate success: according to statistics provided by the U.S. Bureau of Justice, rates of family violence have dropped by more than half since 1993,²¹ the result of work done by social workers, staff at women’s crisis centers, police forces and prosecutors, and the passage of the Violence Against Women Act in 1994, followed by amendments in 1998 and 2006.²² Nevertheless, Elizabeth M. Schneider, in *Battered Women and Feminist Lawmaking*, states:

From one-fifth to one-third of all women will be physically assaulted by a partner or ex-partner during their lifetime [. . .] Thus on an average day in the United States, nearly 11,000 women are severely assaulted by their male partners. Many of these incidents involve sexual assault [. . .] In families where wife-beating takes place, moreover, child abuse is often present as well.²³

Schneider also writes that “physical violence is only the most visible form of abuse.

Psychological abuse, particularly forced social and economic isolation of women, is also

¹⁹ Rhea V. Almeida, “Domestic Violence in Heterosexual Relationships,” in *Families as They Really Are*, ed. Barbara J. Risman (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 436.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Schneider, *Battered Women*, 4

common.”²⁴ Despite significant social and legislative gains made by second and third wave feminist activists and domestic violence advocates, abuse among family members remains an active source of trauma for women, men, and children.

Domestic violence remains a widespread problem in the United States. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, each year nearly 1.3 million women experience physical assault at the hands of an intimate partner;²⁵ indeed, it has also been reported that when it comes to victimization, women statistically remain most vulnerable to men they already know rather than strangers.²⁶ Reports also state that one out of four women will, in her lifetime, experience domestic violence,²⁷ yet other sources indicate that an overwhelming number of domestic violence incidents remain unreported to authorities,²⁸ attesting to the continued stigma surrounding violence in the family and its reportage in the public sphere. At the same time, work by scholars in trauma studies has identified other forms of trauma emerging from and responding to family, many of which are on display in paranormal reality television.

At the same time that family violence was entering public discussion in the 1970s, activists from feminism’s second wave were also connecting sexual assault and family violence to trauma studies.²⁹ While warfare, captivity, and natural disasters were accepted

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Centers for Injury Prevention, *Costs of Intimate Partner Violence Against Women in the United States* (Atlanta, 2003).

²⁶ U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Criminal Victimization, 2005*, September 2006.

²⁷ Patricia Tjaden and Nancy Thoennes, National Institute of Justice and the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, *Extent, Nature and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey*, (2000)

²⁸ U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Criminal Victimization, 2003*.

as legitimate sources of trauma and its associated disorders, these activists advocated for the inclusion of family violence as an acknowledged source of trauma, as part of what I refer to in this dissertation as “family trauma.” For the purposes of this project and borrowing from the American Psychiatric Association’s definition of trauma itself, I define family trauma as the emotional response resulting from, but not limited to, psychological, physical, and sexual abuse occurring among family members. This conceptualization of family trauma demonstrates the relationship between all forms of family violence and traumatic disorders, while also taking into account the traumatic influence of psychological abuse.

Trauma scholar and psychologist Robert Scaer, in *The Trauma Spectrum: Hidden Wounds and Human Resiliency*, points out that when it comes to considerations of what constitutes abuse in the family, “Psychological abuse in the dysfunctional family [is] not considered. And yet few people who have experienced fear in the context of such experiences would deny that they were traumatic.”³⁰ Scaer also notes the importance of re-evaluating what constitutes trauma, as he refers to the “increasing complexity [. . .] of what we define as traumatic stress.”³¹ Far from “turning everything into trauma,” re-evaluating what is included in considerations of trauma allows for the re-examination of the world in which families live and the conditions that they encounter, influencing their relationships not only to the world around them but to each other, as well. Work done by

²⁹ Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 31.

³⁰ Robert Scaer, *The Trauma Spectrum: Hidden Wounds and Human Resiliency* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 287.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 129

second wave feminism took family violence out of the home and into public discourse, while also removing the immediate stigma of pathology from its victims through family violence's place in trauma studies. The stakes remain elevated around what is considered a legitimate source of trauma, for as Judith Lewis Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery*, states: "When the survivor is already devalued (a woman, a child), she may find that the most traumatic events of her life take place outside the realm of socially validated reality. Her experience becomes unspeakable."³² Structured as melodrama and containing aspects of horror and the gothic, paranormal reality television also articulates the formerly "unspeakable" trauma implicit in the heteronormative family ideal through the mode of reality television and its emphasis on surveillance of the domestic and familial settings in which these programs take place.

Living in a Box: Reality TV

Reality television has been defined as "a wide range of texts which take as their subject matter real lives, real-life situations and events, and the first-person accounts of ordinary people (non-media professionals)."³³ In this genre, "the personal, emotional, and often intimate revelations of the first-person accounts are the driving force behind the narrative structure of these programmes, supported with actual footage (or dramatic reconstructions) of the events concerned."³⁴ Originally airing on PBS in early 1973, *An American Family* is considered to be the first program making use of the basic codes and

³² Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 8.

³³ Casey, et al., *Television Studies*, 196.

³⁴ Ibid.

conventions of what has become known as reality television,³⁵ chronicling the upper-middle class Loud family of Southern California, in which wife Pat asked husband Bill for a divorce and son Lance came out as gay, all in front of the cameras. The debut of *The Real World* (1992-), following the interaction between a group of twenty-something strangers living together, with the cast and the city changing each season, further established a narrative structure underscored by conflict, as well as an emphasis on technology and surveillance.³⁶ Reality television has produced a number of subgenres, including the “docusoap” (*The Real World*, and any of *The Real Housewives* programs), the makeover program (*Extreme Makeover*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*), the “gamedoc” (*Survivor*, *America’s Next Top Model*), the talent contest (*American Idol*, *Dancing with the Stars*), the dating program (*The Bachelor*), court programs (*Judge Judy*), and reality sitcoms (*The Simple Life*).³⁷

Critics have dismissed paranormal reality television as “pandering” and “voyeuristic spectacle,” taking “genuine human suffering and distress as their subject matter and (turning) them into spectacle for mass audiences.”³⁸ With reality television being sold as “the real,” critics have expressed concerns regarding the “impact that editing, reconstruction, producer mediation, and prefab settings have on the audience’s access to the ‘real’.”³⁹ As Laurie Ouellette and Susan Murray suggest, reality television,

³⁵ Laurie Ouellette and Susan Murray, introduction to *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, eds. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4-5

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5

³⁸ Casey, et al., *Television Studies*, 197

³⁹ Ouellette and Murray, introduction to *Reality TV*, 7

having developed over the past decade, is “an unstable text that encourages viewers to test out their own notions of the real, the ordinary, and the intimate against the representation before them.”⁴⁰ While my project addresses paranormal reality television as belonging to the reality mode, my primary focus is on how the subgenre articulates family trauma through narrative elements drawn from horror, melodrama, and the gothic. Nevertheless, an interplay between the real, the ordinary, and the intimate informs paranormal reality television and helps to frame its articulations of family trauma, influenced by but distinct from paranormal family horror films such as *Poltergeist* and *The Amityville Horror*.⁴¹

Granted an Audience with the Dead: A Rationale

This dissertation presents paranormal reality television as a space for working through family trauma in the twenty-first century, drawing upon generic codes and conventions (as well as modes of representation) associated with horror, melodrama, reality television, and the gothic. A close analysis of these programs and their narratives builds a compelling relationship between paranormal reality and family trauma. I have chosen to focus on the following programs that I have determined to be representative of paranormal reality as a subgenre: SyFy’s *Ghost Hunters* and Discovery’s *A Haunting* along with A&E’s *Paranormal State* and *Psychic Kids: Children of the Supernatural*. All four focus on haunted family homes, but individual programs work to emphasize and de-emphasize aspects of the narrative related to family trauma, establishing connections

⁴⁰ Ibid., 8

⁴¹ Larger considerations of the reality mode and its influence on paranormal reality’s articulations will be explored as I expand this project into book form.

between family violence and paranormal horror. At the same time, these programs vary in their invocation of difference, alternately featured as a source of horror for the heteronormative (and therefore, very straight, very white, and very middle-class) family and as exotic potential saviors in the form of “ghost hunter” types, new age practitioners, psychics, mediums, priests, and others brought into the family home to combat the paranormal in a subgenre marked by inconclusive endings and a medium that calls for a new house, a new family, and a new ghost in each new episode.

In my next two chapters, I establish a chronology and genealogy for paranormal reality television while also tracking its articulations of family trauma. Public discourse surrounding both family trauma and the paranormal increased significantly during the 1960s and 70s, through the efforts of second wave feminism as well as the box office success of such paranormal-themed horror films as *Rosemary’s Baby* (dir. Roman Polanski, US, 1968) and *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, US, 1973). Chapter II, “‘For God’s Sake, Get Out!’: Paranormal Family Horror in the 1970s and 1980s,” examines this historically-situated film subgenre and its influence on paranormal reality television, along with how both forms demonstrate a consistent concern with familial breakdown by analyzing three films representative of the subgenre: *The Amityville Horror*, *The Shining*, and *Poltergeist*. These films, particularly at the narrative level, establish how paranormal family horror, as a subgenre, has helped to construct the narrative template used by paranormal reality television, including not only its emphasis on family trauma’s phantom-like presence in the haunted home, but also how it invokes forms of difference (racial, sexual, gender, etc.) as a marker of both horror and the potential for the heteronormative family’s recovery. Although *The Amityville Horror* and

others of its kind were produced and first received in different mediums than paranormal reality, by the mid-1980s, they were airing with regularity on broadcast and cable television as well as on video cassette, making the leap between mediums and proving highly influential on paranormal reality television and its association of the paranormal with family trauma.

For Chapter III, “Ghost Story Confessionals: Articulating Family Trauma in Paranormal Reality TV,” I provide an overview of paranormal reality’s development as a subgenre and phenomenon along with its articulations, of family trauma, shared with the paranormal family horror film, before describing representative episodes from four paranormal reality programs (*A Haunting*, *Ghost Hunters*, *Paranormal State*, and *Psychic Kids*). At the same time, I distinguish paranormal reality television from its filmic predecessors in that it represents a particular convergence of genres and modes (horror, melodrama, reality, the gothic) all occurring within the medium of television, one with its own close and often uncanny relationship to family. Throughout this chapter, I examine the paranormal reality subgenre in terms of this convergence while also considering cultural and historical factors at play in its emergence during the early 2000s.

Chapter IV, “How to Haunt a House: Paranormal Reality Narratives,” analyzes how individual narrative characteristics of paranormal reality television articulate trauma in the family, particularly through the recurring figure of the “possessed patriarch,” with husbands and fathers becoming emotionally and physically abusive as the result of possession by paranormal entities. This chapter also considers, within these narratives, how difference is simultaneously absent and present in these shows, with the families depicted being overwhelmingly marked as white, middle-class, and heterosexual. Anyone

not obviously affiliated with that ideal is understood as a source of horror (appearing most often in the “angry Native American spirits” explanations for these hauntings), allowing for the displacement of trauma in the family onto not only the paranormal but intersecting forms of Otherness based in race, gender, class, and sexuality, suggesting a “dread of difference” in paranormal reality, also present in the paranormal family horror film (as described in Chapter II) and the horror genre itself

My fifth chapter, “Reversing the Dread of Difference: The Real Ghostbusters of Paranormal Reality TV,” looks at how the subgenre attempts to reverse its dread of difference. When it comes to the “ghost hunter,” paranormal reality often works to posit those marked as outside this ideal as potential resources for the transformation and recovery for the families on display in its programs. Invited into the haunted home, queerly-positioned ghost hunters listen to family members’ stories, provide them with validation of their experience, and make available strategies for managing the paranormal and associated trauma. A sixth chapter, “Dead Time: A Conclusion,” offers some closing remarks. The following chapter introduces the paranormal family horror film of the late 1970s and early 1980s as a subgenre responding to cultural shifts regarding family trauma during the 1960s and 70s. Films such as *The Amityville Horror*, *The Shining*, and *Poltergeist* articulated anxieties surrounding family and difference following a decade of social and political upheaval, helping to create the characteristic narrative of paranormal reality television, a narrative reminding us that, all too often, horror begins at home.

CHAPTER II

“FOR GOD’S SAKE, GET OUT!”: PARANORMAL FAMILY HORROR IN THE 1970S AND 1980S

I just wish all those people hadn’t died here.
--Kathy Lutz (Margot Kidder) on her family’s new
home in *The Amityville Horror* (1979)

Arriving in theaters in the last week of December 1973, director William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* told the story of Regan McNeil (played by Linda Blair), a 14-year old girl possessed by a demonic force. While the story itself, based on a bestselling novel by William Peter Blatty, is straightforward enough in its focus on Regan’s horrific condition and the efforts of Catholic priests to save her through the rite of exorcism, it was the film’s emphasis on the emotional impact of this paranormal intrusion on both Regan and her mother, Chris (portrayed by Ellen Burstyn), that would set it apart from previous films dealing with the paranormal. One of the highest-grossing horror films of all time,¹ *The Exorcist* would spawn its own sequel (*The Exorcist II: The Heretic*, in 1977) as well as a host of imitators (including the 1974 “blaxploitation” effort *Abby*) throughout the decade. Its financial success (earning \$193 million domestically²) made “demonic possession” a household term. It also revived interest in another horror subgenre, that dealing with haunted houses and encounters with ghosts, demons, and

¹ Lisa LaMotta, “Business of Fear: Highest-Grossing Scary Movies of All Time,” *Forbes*, October 24, 2007, http://www.forbes.com/2007/10/24/sony-jaws-lionsgate-ent-fin-cx_1025scarymovies.html.

² “*The Exorcist* (1973) – Box Office Mojo,” Box Office Mojo, accessed January 23, 2012, <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=exorcist.htm>.

other paranormal beings, but with a pronounced emphasis on their effect on the family. Families terrorized by the paranormal would prove as bankable at the box office as encounters with the devil and his brethren by the end of the 1970s. This chapter traces the development of the paranormal family horror film from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, establishing film's contributions to paranormal reality television through a close analysis of three films characteristic of paranormal family horror: *The Amityville Horror* (dir. Stuart Rosenberg, US, 1979), *The Shining* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, US, 1980), and *Poltergeist* (dir. Tobe Hooper, US, 1982). While some have argued that all horror films are essentially family horror films,³ these particular films most significantly helped to create the conventions of narrative that paranormal reality television would later draw upon in articulating family trauma..

A brief word about issues of chronology and genealogy: while I have chosen three representative films from the historical period in question in order to suggest how this subgenre has influenced paranormal reality television, paranormal family horror has proven a diverse and durable subgenre. I have chosen to focus on films produced in the approximate decade following the mainstreaming of public discourse surrounding domestic violence and other forms of family trauma.⁴ The popularity of *The Exorcist*, *The*

³ Tony Williams, *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film* (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), 18.

⁴ In most cases, made-for-TV horrors were responding to paranormal family horror films and the cultural work they were already performing in regard to the family in the same manner as contemporary paranormal reality programs. However, with the exception of Gregory A. Waller's excellent work on the subject, made-for-TV horror movies have been a neglected area of scholarship and an expanded version of my project would benefit from considering how television has articulated family trauma in the specific form of the made-for-TV movie. To get a sense of how horror films made-for-television operate with regards to family

Omen (dir. Richard Donner, US, 1976), and *The Amityville Horror* prompted a veritable slew of made-for-TV horror films in the same historical period that yielded the theatrical films under discussion, the majority of which consciously mimicked their cinematic counterparts, including their narrative emphasis on family trauma articulated through the paranormal. Despite this shared concern and being native to the medium of television, however, I've chosen to exclude these telefilms in favor of focusing on their more influential cinematic brethren. At the same time, I have chosen to examine films involving the family home haunted by malevolent entities (the Overlook Hotel of *The Shining* is an exception of sorts, although it still arguably constitutes a family home), explaining the exclusion of a film such as *The Brood* (dir. David Cronenberg, Canada, 1979) or even *The Entity* (dir. Sidney J. Furie, US, 1983), both of which take considerably different approaches to their subjects.⁵

While paranormal family horror of the late 1970s and early 1980s visibly articulates family trauma, building connections between paranormal horror and the family, the mid-1980s would witness a turn from the horrific to the comedic in films such as *Ghostbusters* (dir. Ivan Reitman, US, 1984), *Beetlejuice* (dir. Tim Burton, US, 1988), and others, with paranormal family horror becoming the subject of parody, a cycle at work in numerous other horror subgenres (the classical “monster movie,” the “slasher” movie, etc.). Haunted houses continued to appear in made-for-television movies through

trauma, I highly recommend *Don't Go to Sleep!*, starring Valerie Harper and Dennis Weaver and which originally aired on ABC in December 1982.

⁵ Although these movies were released theatrically, they had become, by the mid-1980s, staples of both broadcast and cable television, often edited for content and accompanied by commercials. The advent of home video also furthered the presence of films such as *Poltergeist* and *The Shining* on television screens in living rooms across the country (including that of my own family). Therefore, it is worth noting that despite their theatrical origins, paranormal family horror films of the late 1970s and early 1980s were very much part of what Helen Wheatley terms the “domestic milieu” in which later television subgenres such as paranormal reality television were consumed.

the early 1990s, but in that decade, horror moved away from the paranormal and instead towards the “psychological” horror film in the manner of *The Silence of the Lambs* (dir. Jonathan Demme, US, 1991) and *Seven* (dir. David Fincher, US, 1995). Paranormal family horror emerged once again in the late 1990s with *The Sixth Sense* (dir. M. Night Shyamalan, US, 1999) and has persisted ever since through such contemporary paranormal family horror films as *Paranormal Activity* (dir. Oren Peli, US, 2007) and *Insidious* (dir. James Wan, US, 2011), continuing their articulation of trauma taking place in the family, a process established in the paranormal family horror film of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The Paranormal Family Horror Film

In *Paranormal Media: Audiences, Spirits and Magic in Popular Culture*, Annette Hill writes: “The historical context to ghosts indicates beliefs and practices were closely connected with social and political changes, and cultural and moral instability.”⁶ Historical context is key in order to understand the paranormal family horror film as, in part, a response to the women’s movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Paranormal family horror films of the late 1970s and early 1980s were informed by anxieties related to second wave feminism and the challenge it presented to the long-running patriarchal authority afforded husbands and fathers, seen as fundamental to the moral, spiritual, and economic strength of the family. Helen Wheatley, in *Gothic Television*, notes that “it is widely believed that today’s social maladies arose from the permissive atmosphere of the

⁶ Annette Hill, *Paranormal Media: Audiences, Spirits and Magic in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 23.

1960s and 1970s, and especially from the social movements that emerged during these times: the hippie movement, the antiwar movement, and the women's movement."⁷ More than any other group, women working for equality were seen as waging war on the American family, an assault articulated in the paranormal family horror film of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Following the end of World War II, government subsidies were made available to those seeking to start a family, buy a home, and pursue higher education, all in pursuit of the ever-shifting "American Dream."⁸ Banks were urged, by the government, to accept lower down payments and offer extended terms for payment to young men, with one dollar often being considered sufficient for a down payment on a home by a military veteran.⁹ Along with government intervention, the propagation of the family in the late 1940s and 1950s was bolstered further by the vast expansion of the economy in the U.S. and, for white male workers, a level of job security unknown prior to that time or since.¹⁰ Of this period of prosperity and opportunity, Stephanie Coontz, in her article "The Evolution of American Families," states: "Between 1947 and 1973, real wages rose, on average, by 81 percent, and the gap between the rich and poor declined significantly."¹¹

⁷ Helen Wheatley, *Gothic Television* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2007), 36.

⁸ Stephanie Coontz, "The Evolution of American Families," in *Families as They Really Are*, ed. Barbara J. Risman (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 43.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

These economic circumstances were accompanied by doubled marriage rates,¹² increased birth rates, and decreases in divorces (countering the reversals wrought by the Great Depression).¹³ During this time, the number of children being raised by a father as breadwinner and a mother as homemaker and graduating from high school hit a historical high.¹⁴

By the 1970s, however, the economic climate that had fostered the rapid expansion of the nuclear family had vanished, creating a set of circumstances that seemingly left the nuclear family in constant jeopardy. Coontz observes: “By 1973, real wages were falling, especially for young families. Housing inflation made it less possible for a single breadwinner to afford a home.”¹⁵ The 1970s and the decade that followed would continue to prove tumultuous for the nuclear family, with the divorce rate hitting approximately 50 percent in 1979-80, and showing little meaningful variation since.¹⁶ Of course, someone had to be blamed for these shifts and the diminished prospects for the American family, and women seeking equitable treatment in both the private and public spheres made easy targets. Helen Wheatley points out that “‘liberated’ women are presented as responsible for many of these social ills. In other words, if women would

¹² Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (Houndmills, Basingstroke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 6.

¹³ Coontz, “The Evolution of American Families,” 44.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹⁶ Virginia E. Rutter, “The Case for Divorce,” in *Families as They Really Are*, ed. Barbara J. Risman (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 159.

only go back to their homes, things would be different.”¹⁷ Even decades later, as Wheatley argues, “the belief that women’s primary responsibility is the care and protection of their children still prevails in most of American society.”¹⁸ Paranormal family horror of the late 1970s and early 1980s, while frequently positioning mothers in the role of heroine, also articulated a crisis of masculinity. Fathers such as Jack Torrance of *The Shining* or George Lutz of *The Amityville Horror*, frustrated or otherwise unsuccessful in performing their proscribed roles, found themselves susceptible to possession by paranormal forces, demonstrating the fragility of male power and patriarchal authority. Meanwhile, women were required to take control of and safeguard their families in response to what appeared to be the external threat of the paranormal but was in fact an articulation of societal anxiety surrounding the women’s movement and its effects upon the family through challenging patriarchal authority and established gender roles.

Registering social change, the paranormal family horror film of the late 1970s and early 1980s also exhibited what has been referred to as a “dread of difference,”¹⁹ based not only on gender but also in terms of race and sexuality, among others. The same decade that witnessed gains made by second wave feminism also saw highly visible challenges to the status quo by the civil rights movement as well as queer liberation activists. Both race and queerness had historically been featured as sources of horror,

¹⁷ Helen Wheatley, *Gothic Television* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2007), 36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁹ Barry Keith Grant, ed. *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).

overt and otherwise, in the horror film, which continued to feature both forms of difference as lurking threats to the heteronormative family and the “way things ought to be.” These threats, cloaked in paranormal terms, were made visible not in the castles and crypts of the classical horror film but in the suburbs and the sanctuary they were thought to provide for white middle-class families—the result of the discriminatory lending practices effectively segregating suburban neighborhoods following World War II that resulted in startlingly homogenous communities in regard to race and social class. For the middle-class families in these films, their ghosts are not inherited as in traditional gothic horror, but thrust upon them in conjunction with their new opportunities for home ownership.

Both *The Amityville Horror* and *Poltergeist* can also be classified as what Bernice M. Murphy terms the “Suburban Gothic,” a mode to which contemporary paranormal reality television can also be seen as belonging. Murphy describes the Suburban Gothic as:

a subgenre concerned, first and foremost, with playing upon the lingering suspicion that even the most ordinary-looking neighbourhood, or house, or family, has something to hide, and that no matter how calm and settled a place looks, it is only ever a moment away from dramatic (and generally sinister) incident.²⁰

Establishing the Suburban Gothic as a descendant of gothic literature, Murphy states that “the most notable conventions of the European gothic form were clearly ill-suited to the moral, intellectual, and emotional climate of the New World [. . .] the American gothic

²⁰ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 2.

would have to look to its own landscape to provide substitute settings.”²¹ Murphy goes on to assert that the Suburban Gothic “often dramatizes anxieties arising from the mass suburbanization of the United States and usually features suburban settings, preoccupations and protagonists. Minorities tend not to feature much, save as exploited outsiders, bit players, or dangerous interlopers.”²² Commenting on the decidedly circumscribed role of minorities in this mode, to which *The Amityville Horror* and *Poltergeist* unquestionably belong,²³ Murphy argues the centrality of difference as a source of intruding horror in both the Suburban Gothic and the paranormal family horror film.

As the result of being perceived as “storming the gates” and disputing the privilege and power granted by society to white patriarchy, those exhibiting racial and sexual difference were therefore seen as seeking to destroy the institution of family and were, to varying degrees, articulated within paranormal family horror as sites of monstrous horror. In the period under discussion, queerness seems to have been dealt with in a much more oblique fashion than race, which tended to turn up in the ongoing presence of the family home being built above a desecrated Native American burial ground, a narrative characteristic continuing to make its presence known in paranormal reality decades later. Yet even as difference in the form of race and sexuality, along with

²¹ Ibid., 105.

²² Ibid., 2.

²³ Murphy, in *The Suburban Gothic*, provides excellent analyses of *The Amityville Horror* and *Poltergeist*, to which I am indebted in working through my own questions surrounding paranormal horror and the family.

gender, has been positioned as a source of paranormal horror, they are also presented, by varying degrees, as potential sources of salvation for the families in these films. This tension between the normative family and difference as a form of intervention and horror underlies both the paranormal family horror film and contemporary paranormal reality television.

Beginning in the late 1970s, the paranormal family horror film drew upon conventions employed by the ghost story of literature and earlier films dealing with the paranormal, while at the same time distinguishing itself through its articulations of family trauma, often in the form of domestic violence but also through representations of alcoholism, sexual assault, and financial insecurity. Addressing the power of both horror and sci-fi films in this period to represent these concerns in symbolic form, Vivian Sobchack writes:

Figures from the past and future get into the house, make their homes in the closet, become part of the family, and open the kitchen and family room up to the horrific and wondrous world outside the private and safe domain. A man's home in bourgeois patriarchal culture is no longer his castle. In the age of television the drawbridge is always down; the world intrudes. It is no longer possible to avoid the invasive presence of Others—whether poltergeists, extraterrestrials, one's own alien kids, or starving Ethiopian children.²⁴

Yet this anxiety about intruders and the family home reveals instead another source of anxiety, internal rather than external and based in the home and family itself, arising from the increased public discourse surrounding trauma in the family during the late 1960s and the decade that followed. Airing on broadcast and cable television in the decades that followed, and preceding a second wave of such films beginning in the late 1990s, these

²⁴ Vivian Sobchack, "Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange," in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 145-46.

films provided a narrative template for paranormal reality television, reacting to contemporary anxieties surrounding the family. I will suggest how this film subgenre has influenced paranormal reality television's articulations of family trauma by analyzing three representative paranormal family horror films, released between 1979 and 1982.

The Amityville Horror (1979)

During the winter of 1975-76, the Lutz family allegedly spent twenty-eight days in their Dutch Colonial “dream home” in the Long Island suburb of Amityville before fleeing and abandoning the house and all of their possessions. The Lutzes had purchased the home only a year after it was the site of a horrifying mass murder, in which 23 year-old Ronald “Butch” DeFeo Jr. shot and killed his parents and four siblings, later claiming that disembodied voices in the house had urged him to slay his family (DeFeo was later convicted of the murders and sentenced to six consecutive life terms). The Lutz family's ordeal became a worldwide media sensation, spawning a book, *The Amityville Horror: A True Story* (which would sell 235,000 hardcover and 6 million paperback copies by 1979), a film with numerous sequels, as well as a flurry of lawsuits, many of which pertained to both the film and the book from which it was derived being sold as reality, “based on true events.”²⁵ *The Amityville Horror's* relationship to reality would prove as crucial as its articulation of family trauma in helping craft the narratives employed by paranormal reality television three decades later.

In the film, newlyweds George and Kathy Lutz (played by James Brolin and Margot Kidder) are awed by the house's charm, size, and unbelievably low purchase

²⁵ Michael Kernan, “The Calamityville Horror,” *Washington Post*, September 16, 1979.

price of \$80,000. George and Kathy agree that buying the house will be a financial stretch for them, even with the relatively low sale price, but George believes they can make it happen through cutting corners. Kathy sighs: “I just wish all those people hadn’t died here.” Here is the strong suggestion, between the attractiveness of the house and its relative affordability, that this property is “too good to be true,” with the family’s desire for the house and all it represents ultimately trumping any suspicion. Meanwhile, despite the film’s sustained formal attempts to present the house itself in a sinister light, it is not the gothic mansion or manor house of the “old dark house” film of the 1920s and 1930s²⁶ or the more traditional haunted house and “aristocratic milieu”²⁷ of earlier paranormal horror films such as *The Uninvited* (dir. Lewis Allen, US, 1944) or *The Haunting* (dir. Robert Wise, UK, 1963).

Symptoms constituting a haunting begin to accumulate: windows open and close on their own, the family dog begins to behave strangely, and George seems increasingly affected by the house, complaining of being cold and worrying about the heating bill: “This house is supposed to be well-insulated. They’ll nickel and dime you to death.” His appearance suffers, as George’s hair and beard grow increasingly shaggy and he wears the same clothing each day. In particular, he becomes obsessed with chopping wood to keep the house warm, against the encroaching cold of which only he complains. At the same time, there are suggestions that tension exists in this recently formed family. Of existing family trauma in the horror film, Curtis observes:

²⁶ Barry Curtis, *Dark Places: The Haunted House in Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

The individuals or families who experience these spirits from the past are often in tenuous emotional or financial situations [. . .] there is also a level of ambivalence, a suspicion of projection and paranoia. There is always a question of how much the intruder into the new milieu brings the haunting with them.²⁸

These questions of projection and paranoia are raised as George becomes gruff, expressing his annoyance at his new stepchildren calling him “George” rather than “Dad.” Incidents like these suggest that the Lutz family are already possessed by their own demons.

To add to existing family trauma, films like these invariably include a weakened or failed patriarch. Through Stuart Hall’s notion of “postmodern articulation,” which describes how seemingly disparate elements can be linked together in particular historical conjunctures, the paranormal is connected to the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s as well as the civil rights and queer movements of the same period, all challenging the power and authority of the white patriarch and threatening his very extinction. Indeed, in *The Amityville Horror*, the house continues to be especially hard on George, whose red-rimmed eyes are accompanied by an inability to perform sexually with Kathy; he also experiences problems with his construction business. Not long after, the financial pressure on George, already considerable after taking on the mortgage for the new house, mounts when he is forced to write a check to cover the catering expenses for Kathy’s brother’s wedding after an envelope of cash goes missing in the house. These varied forms of failure or impotence at both home and work mark fathers in the paranormal family horror film as particularly susceptible to possession by malevolent paranormal

²⁸ Ibid., 170.

entities, manifesting in the form of domestic violence and often threatening to escalate to murdering their wives and children.

As the events in the house increase in severity, Kathy suffers a nightmare in which George kills her and the children with an ax, while at the same time George awakes elsewhere in the house, shouting: "I'm coming apart! Oh Mother of God, I'm coming apart!" This instills in Kathy an understandable desire to leave the house, which only draws more anger from George who, before striking his wife, shouts: "You're the one that wanted a house! This is it! So just shut up!" Of the possessed patriarch, film theorist Vivian Sobchack observes: "*The Amityville Horror* is figured not only as the haunted middle-class family home, but also as the haunted middle-class family Dad – who, weak, economically beleaguered, and under pressure from his corrupt and demanding dream house in a period of economic recession, terrorizes his children."²⁹ Indeed, as the film builds to its conclusion (during the obligatory thunderstorm), George sharpens his ax and goes after his stepchildren. The film, in attempting to explain George's homicidal behavior towards his family, supplies any number of visible signs of paranormal activity (malevolent flies, bleeding walls and toilets filled with black goo, a large demonic pig with glowing eyes) and motivating factors, from devil worship to a Native American burial ground. In projecting family trauma onto the paranormal, *The Amityville Horror* is anything but subtle.

With George presented from the beginning as particularly susceptible to the house's evil influence, the burden is placed squarely on wife and mother Kathy to protect

²⁹ Sobchack, "Bringing It All Back Home," 152.

and attempt to restore the family. Possessed by the house, George becomes an abusive parent and a tangible threat to his family who actively stands in the way of their desire to leave: essentially, George becomes the film's true villain. Tony Williams notes the rise of the monstrous patriarchal father in the horror films of the late 1970s and early 1980s,³⁰ but also states: "the films supply no deeper reason for the revolt, only demonic possession."³¹ Kathy acts as a civilizing influence in restoring George to himself and allowing the family to escape the house.

One thing is certain: the mothers of the paranormal family horror film receive no significant assistance from any outside masculine authority, particularly that of mainstream religion. The family's Catholic priest, Father Delaney (portrayed by Rod Steiger) arrives to bless the house near the beginning of the film. However, Father Delaney is no figure of salvation: as Bernice M. Murphy points out, "Despite his [. . .] credentials, the good Father proves spectacularly useless."³² Although George and Kathy are presented as being religious and while Father Delaney does sincerely desire to help them, his presence does little good, partially because of the house's evil influence (he enters the house only once before its evil enfeebles him with a host of crippling maladies) but also courtesy of the ignorance of church authorities. These authorities forbid Delaney from involving the church in any meaningful way and adopt a dismissive attitude towards the case, expressing a cynicism towards authority considered by many to have prevailed

³⁰ Williams, *Hearths of Darkness*, 211.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

³² Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 113.

in the years following the Watergate scandal. *The Amityville Horror* makes it clear that the Lutz family are on their own, isolated further in the same manner as families experiencing domestic violence and other forms of trauma.

Kathy engages in archival research at the local library to seek answers to the frightening and bizarre events taking place in her new home, with microfiche newspaper records yielding coverage of the previous year's murders and revealing that the killer was the family's son, to whom George bears a frightening resemblance. This kind of amateur detective work yields a motivation for the haunting in the form of the backstory but it also provides an answer to the question underlying paranormal family horror: "Why is this happening to my family and what can I do to stop it?" As a result of Kathy's archival research, a family friend (and a self-professed "sensitive") finds an explanation for these events in the history of the property: the owner of a previous house built there had been expelled from Salem for practicing witchcraft and is rumored to have practiced devil worship in his new home. She also reveals that the Shinnecock Native American tribe had used the region as a place to abandon their sick, their dying, and their insane to die from exposure. In addition to all of this, the house also sits on a Native American burial ground and a secret room is found in the basement, suggested to mark the gateway to Hell.

The invocation of racial difference is key in considerations of the haunting and the danger it poses to the Lutz family. Of all the films under analysis in this chapter, *The Amityville Horror* is the most overt in advancing racial difference as a marker of horror in relation to the heteronormative family. Richard Dyer has noted that "horror as a genre

does seem, despite some interesting exceptions, to be a white genre in the West.”³³ As a predominantly “white” genre, the horror film has shown a strong tendency to locate its horror in the racialized Other (as described by Robin Wood in his foundational work on the family in 1970s horror cinema), with the Other in paranormal family horror depicted as intruding into the (white) family’s private sanctuary of home and hearth. *The Amityville Horror* and, to a lesser degree, *The Shining*, thus articulates what Bernice M. Murphy refers to as “the gnawing awareness that America as a nation has been built on stolen ground.”³⁴ This recurs as an important characteristic of paranormal reality television, where a number of the depicted hauntings are suggested to have a “Native American angle” despite only the flimsiest evidence or in the absence of other motivating factors to support such an attribution. Such representations are informed by a racist logic, with the violation of the Native American burial ground failing to suggest the monstrosity of historical conquest and instead invoking the racial Other as embodying an irrational rage concerning events occurring long before our existence, for which we can therefore not be held accountable.

Describing this positioning of Native Americans in horror in *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present*, Robin R. Means Coleman states:

Native Americans bore quite the brunt of symbolic attacks. They were simultaneously portrayed as being (too) spiritual, (too) volatile, and (too) primitive [. . .] Native American culture was so excessive that it could not be adequately contained or completely destroyed, forever rising up to haunt White

³³ Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 210.

³⁴ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 104.

domains and bodies. White suburbanites were horrified whenever they discovered that their housing developments were built upon, and thereby disrupted, ‘sacred land’ in the form of ‘ancient Indian burial grounds.’³⁵

Trauma in the family is blamed on traces of racial difference and abusive patriarchs are therefore absolved of any culpability in terrorizing their families, with such behavior chalked up to possession by the agents of historical trauma in the form of Native Americans. Richard Dyer argues “that the whiteness of white men resides in the tragic quality of their giving way to darkness and the heroism of their channeling or resisting it.”³⁶ *The Amityville Horror*, and other horror films relying on the desecrated burial ground,³⁷ articulate racial difference not as the specter of national injustices from history but as active and racialized threats to family and patriarchy that must be resisted, with the white patriarch’s restoration posited as one of the most crucial points of the narrative and his family’s survival.

In the film’s conclusion, with Kathy’s help, George comes to his senses and swears he would never harm her or the children: they realize the house’s influence and flee their home as it collapses around them. The end titles inform us that the Lutzes abandoned the house and all their belongings and moved to another state. This abandonment of the family home, and the implied financial havoc it will wreak on the

³⁵ Robin R. Means Coleman, *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 149.

³⁶ Dyer, *White*, 28.

³⁷ *Pet Sematary* (dir. Mary Lambert, US, 1989), adapted from Stephen King’s 1983 novel, also demonstrates a concerted investment in the Native American burial ground as a site of horror for the family, and although it is not about a haunting per se, the film does engage extensively with family trauma (particularly in terms of loss and mourning) and the annihilation of the Creed family as the result of their interactions with the Micmac burial ground located in the woods behind their rural Maine home.

Lutzes (at least until they secure their book and film deal, we assume) is significant: they survive but find themselves both traumatized and without a home as the result of their brush with the paranormal. The house remains haunted, a threat to whichever family next takes possession of it, and has surely left its indelible mark on the Lutz family. The abrupt ending, and its failure to contain the horror of the house, articulates the open-ended nature of family trauma and the process of recovery as well as the problematic nature of prosecuting domestic violence in a patriarchal society.

The ending of *The Amityville Horror* places it within the tradition of 1970s horror as set forth by Robin Wood, who states:

One other crucial difference between the classical horror film and the characteristic works of the 70s needs to be noted. The typical ending of the former has the monster destroyed, the young lovers (sometimes the established family) united and safe: the typical ending of the latter insists that the monster cannot be destroyed, that the repressed can never be annihilated.³⁸

The Amityville Horror's conclusion lacks the narrative closure offered by earlier horror films, and this would remain true in both *The Shining* and *Poltergeist* as well as paranormal reality television. There would seem to be something about the paranormal that intrinsically denies narrative closure, and perhaps this accounts for the effectiveness of both the paranormal family horror film and paranormal reality television in articulating family trauma.

Equally important to the narrative characteristics already mentioned, in terms of its contribution to paranormal reality television, was *The Amityville Horror*'s reliance upon reality as a marketing tool. Unlike other paranormal family horror films, its

³⁸ Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan . . . and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 78.

immediate backstory (the mass murder of the previous owners by their oldest son) is based on an actual occurrence in which six members of a family, four of them children, died. The book on which the film was based, *The Amityville Horror: A True Story*, was sold as non-fiction. Promotional materials for *The Amityville Horror* stressed its connection to real-life events, alleged and otherwise: theatrical posters and television advertisements warned: “You will believe in *The Amityville Horror*” and reminded audiences that the film was based on “the bestseller that made millions believe in the unbelievable.” Without calling the film a “true story,” its marketing remained predicated upon those claims.

The film’s marketing was aided in this endeavor through talk show appearances by the real-life Lutzes, who claimed that both the book and movie had exaggerated their experiences and were seeking a forum in which to tell their own version of the story. Yet even as they were disputing the book and film’s version of events, George and Kathleen Lutz were helping to publicize the film, some of which they claimed was indeed factual. In appearances on programs such as *Good Morning, America* and *The Merv Griffin Show* during July of 1979, shortly before the film’s release, they recounted their experiences while sitting alongside the film’s stars. When asked by *Good Morning, America*’s David Hartman why they were speaking publicly of their ordeal, Kathleen Lutz, evoking family violence and its articulation in the film, responded: “Things of this nature happen quite frequently and when they happen to families, usually they close the door and they don’t talk about it. And unless these things are talked about, they’ll never be understood.” Yet even here, the two focus on the more outlandish details of the story such as the swarming

flies and keyholes oozing black goo. Neither the Lutzes nor their respective interviewers address or even refer to the more disturbing elements of the film and the novel such as George's abusive treatment of his family. The attention is drawn away from family trauma and directed instead to the spectacle afforded by the paranormal. Fact or fiction, *The Amityville Horror*'s marketing campaign paid off, with the film grossing \$8 million in its opening weekend alone,³⁹ suggesting the power of reality in paranormal family horror, which would play an even more central role in paranormal reality television thirty years later.

The Shining (1980)

Adapted from Stephen King's best-selling 1977 novel, *The Shining* was released in the early summer of 1980. The story involves Jack Torrance (played by Jack Nicholson), a recovering alcoholic spending the winter with his wife Wendy (portrayed by Shelley Duvall) and young son Danny (Danny Lloyd) at the Overlook Hotel, where Torrance is employed as the winter caretaker. Isolated by snowfall, Jack's own demons appear to be joined by phantoms residing in the hotel who demonstrate a pronounced interest in convincing Jack into killing his family. With Jack's behavior growing increasingly erratic, his family's only hope is Danny's telepathic ability, the "shining" of the title. His ability to shine allows him to see the frightening apparitions throughout the hotel, and this talent also provides him with some warning about the coming ordeal which permits both Danny and Wendy to escape while an ax-wielding Jack freezes to death after becoming lost in the Overlook's hedge maze.

³⁹ "*The Amityville Horror* (1979) – Box Office / Business," IMDB, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0078767/business>.

Of all the films comprising the paranormal family horror subgenre, *The Shining* is perhaps the most direct in articulating family trauma. It is informed by anxieties related to gender, race, and social class, particularly in how the film engages with the failed patriarchal figure and his susceptibility to possession by the paranormal. In contrast to *The Amityville Horror*, *The Shining* presents its ghosts in considerably more ambiguous terms. Director Stanley Kubrick de-emphasizes the paranormal in favor of a closer examination of a family's deterioration by revisiting a number of the narrative characteristics of paranormal family horror established by *The Amityville Horror* and later utilized by paranormal reality television.

The Torrance family appears unstable before they even reach the hotel. Cramped within their Volkswagen Beetle, none of the three seem terribly excited about the months of isolation ahead of them. When Wendy asks if the Donner Party met their gruesome fate in this region, Jack contemptuously informs her that it occurred much further west, in the Sierra mountain range. He is also surly towards a hungry Danny, responding that he "should have ate his breakfast." Wendy immediately undermines his authority, promising to get Danny something to eat once they reach the hotel. Thus, in this short scene occurring before the family ever takes up their seasonal residence at the Overlook, we are made aware of an oppressive, abusive family dynamic at work.

While the Overlook, as an exclusive mountain resort, lies far beyond the family's economic means, it is not presented as the typical "too good to be true" haunted house; therefore, it is difficult to place within the Suburban Gothic mode into which *The Amityville Horror* and *Poltergeist* fit relatively neatly. The Overlook Hotel is, instead, a

public space that has been rendered deceptively private in its off-season; while the Torrances have the entire hotel to themselves, they are still required to live in modest employee accommodations, in stark contrast to the well-appointed guest suites, and there are no gracious hotel employees to see to their needs. As imagined by Kubrick, the Overlook Hotel eschews many of the gothic conventions associated with the haunted house, even their more suburban counterparts in *The Amityville Horror* and *Poltergeist* as well as those found later in paranormal reality television. For Stanley Kubrick, the domestically-oriented horrors of *The Shining* were not to be concealed in the dark corridors of the conventional haunted house, but to occur in the full view offered by fluorescent lighting.

Symptoms of a haunting accumulate, much as they did in *The Amityville Horror*: Danny encounters the ghost of twin girls who were the slain daughters of a previous caretaker who murdered his family with an ax. Later, Danny is attacked by the apparition of an elderly woman lying in wait in the bathtub of one of the guest rooms. An investigating Jack sees the same woman and yet refuses to discuss it with Wendy afterwards. Indeed, these experiences occur to individual members of the family and go unremarked upon to the others. Jack's resentment of his family prevents him from responding to the haunting in any meaningful manner, Wendy is largely unaware of a paranormal presence until the film's final scenes, while Danny seems to know better than to try to talk about what he has seen. Like Amy Lutz in *The Amityville Horror*, whose talk of an imaginary playmate goes unnoticed until it is too late, and *Poltergeist*'s Carol Anne Freeling's early conversations with the "TV people" who are slowly coming to

occupy her family's home, Danny represents the vulnerability of children in these dysfunctional families, along with their tendency to be the first point of contact for the encroaching paranormal.

Another characteristic of paranormal family horror, established in *The Amityville Horror* and continued to feature in *The Shining*, is the presence of a weakened or failed patriarch, portrayed as particularly susceptible to being possessed by the paranormal forces invading the family's home (or in this case, the hotel). Jack is also an unsuccessful academic and writer. He sees the winter caretaker job at the Overlook as a last chance of sorts. Of this act of paternal reclamation in horror, Tony Williams writes: "Psychotically submitting to patriarchal rules, the father may become a monster who sexually and violently dominates his family, compensating for his lack of ideologically defined capitalistic success outside the home."⁴⁰ This idea of "compensation" is key, for it is only in isolation resulting from heavy snowfall that Jack can regain any sense of mastery over his wife and son and -- by extension -- his own manhood. Jack Torrance is, in many ways, the quintessential possessed patriarch, weakened in the public sphere and engaging in a demonic reclamation of authority and privilege at home, articulating cultural anxieties of the time claiming a crisis point for masculinity. The undermining presence of his wife and the intervening force of racial minority Dick Hallorann, and the Overlook Hotel itself represent a threat to his power as head of the family. Further, these threats act as avatars for challenges against white patriarchy in the 1970s by movements working for

⁴⁰ Williams, *Hearths of Darkness*, 16.

the liberation of women, people of color, and queers, along with the increased fragility of the so-called American Dream in the wake of recession, inflation, and decreased wages.

Jack's patriarchal authority is also undermined by the very economic forces that have driven him to the Overlook Hotel and the sanctuary that he believes he has found there. If *The Amityville Horror* features a family aspiring to climb the social ladder by way of home ownership, then *The Shining* presents a family that has lost its grasp on that same ladder and is descending rapidly. During their tour of the hotel, Jack and Wendy are informed by the hotel manager that all alcohol has been removed from the hotel for insurance reasons, which, as Randy Rasmussen points out, is "another subtle reminder that the Torrances are employees, not guests."⁴¹ Like the Lutzes of *The Amityville Horror*, the Torrances are woefully out of place in the Overlook, portrayed as intruders in a way of life beyond their means. While the Overlook Hotel's present is a continual reminder of his economic lack and failure, it is only through his vulnerability to possession and subsequent descent into the hotel's past that Jack is able to maintain the illusion that he has finally achieved the socioeconomic power required to belong to a world of privilege and plenty.

Echoing Margot Kidder's Kathy Lutz in *The Amityville Horror* and prefiguring a host of similar figures in paranormal reality television, Wendy Torrance, as played by Shelley Duvall, is positioned as the heroine mother of *The Shining* (in a significantly different manner than Kathy or Diane Freeling in *Poltergeist*). Of his decision to cast Duvall as Wendy, Kubrick stated: "Shelley seemed to be exactly the kind of woman that

⁴¹ Randy Rasmussen, *Stanley Kubrick: Seven Films Analyzed* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 245.

would marry Jack and then be stuck with him.”⁴² Kubrick used Wendy as one of the film’s primary signifiers of family trauma (second only to possessed patriarch Jack) to draw attention to trauma within the Torrance family rather than within the Overlook Hotel and its ghostly denizens. In contrast to Steve and Diane Freeling in *Poltergeist*, who are openly affectionate and blithely share a joint after the children have gone to bed, Jack and Wendy Torrance are depicted as having a sustained lack of sexual desire in their marriage (recalling George Lutz’s own sexual dysfunction, subtly attributed to the house, in *The Amityville Horror*). Indeed, the only time in *The Shining* that Jack evinces any kind of interest in sex is when he encounters the apparition of a nude young woman in one of the guest bathrooms; moments after he embraces her, however, she transforms into a rotted, cackling old hag. Jack’s sexual frustration suggests that the paranormal threatens to strike the family patriarch where he’s symbolically most vulnerable and embodied in the form of his wife.

Describing the mother in family horror, Tony Williams asserts: “The mother may unthinkably reproduce ideologic dictates by forcing children into conformist patterns, abusing them, and even turning a blind eye to her husband’s psychotic activities.”⁴³ Wendy is a loving and concerned mother to Danny from the film’s beginning, but her emotional dependence on Jack often interferes with her care for her son. This can be seen in her “confession scene” with the female pediatrician early in the film, in which Wendy, anxiously smoking a cigarette, cheerfully minimizes Jack’s dislocation of Danny’s

⁴² Michel Ciment, *Kubrick: The Definitive Edition* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2001), 189.

⁴³ Williams, *Hearths of Darkness*, 16.

shoulder and even (subtly) intimates--as her cigarette ash grows maddeningly longer--that Danny was somehow responsible, having misbehaved by scattering his father's papers. Wendy is only moved to actively oppose her husband's patriarchal privilege and rage (by incapacitating him with a baseball bat and then locking him in the hotel pantry) and break her husband's oppressive hold over her when it becomes a matter of life and death for both herself and her child.

Jack's attempt to maintain his patriarchal authority is also threatened not only by racial difference through the attempted intervention of the hotel's African-American cook, Dick Hallorann (played by Scatman Crothers). Dick shares Danny's precognitive and telepathic link and is made aware of Danny's plight. Returning to the Overlook in the middle of the winter, Dick seeks to rescue the child and his mother from Jack's murderous intentions. His sharing of Danny's empathic gift articulates long-standing stereotypes of the mystical affinities of racial minorities (particularly egregious in films dealing with the folk religion of voodoo or those invoking all Native Americans as possessing shamanistic abilities, which will recur in paranormal reality television). It also squarely positions Hallorann as what Robin R. Means Coleman refers to as "the 'magical Negro' stereotype," one "in which a Black character is imbued with supernatural powers, which are used, notably, not for his or her own personal, familial, or community protection or advancement, rather the powers are used wholly in service to white people."⁴⁴ Indeed, for his trouble, this potential savior is ambushed and killed by Jack (as opposed to King's novel, where Hallorann survives) only moments after he enters the

⁴⁴ Means Coleman, *Horror Noire*, 151.

hotel, with his rented Snowcat providing Wendy and Danny with the means to escape the hotel. Unlike *The Amityville Horror*, there is no (albeit ineffectual) religious presence in *The Shining*: the Torrances are on their own with only Dick Hallorann and the difference he embodies existing as a potential source of salvation in his “magical” status.

While Dick represents an obstacle to be disposed of by the villainous Jack, he also represents a potential surrogate father to Danny who provides Danny with the attention and understanding that Jack does not, even in their brief face-to-face meeting before the hotel closes for the season. In the interests of maintaining his own control, Jack destroys Dick and any viable alternative male figure with which Danny might be able to relate.

King’s novel provides extensive history for the Overlook and its ghosts but Kubrick’s film avoids this, never providing a backstory of any consequence and certainly never venturing into the archive to the degree that *The Amityville Horror* did. The closest that *The Shining* comes to providing a motivation for the haunting of the Overlook Hotel is found in a casual reference made early on in the film regarding the desecration of a Native American burial ground (repeating a similar revelation in *The Amityville Horror*). Race is frequently represented in the paranormal family horror film through the figure of the Native American, not as a corporeal presence but as a historical presence, representing vengeance committed through paranormal agency and providing motivation for the terrifying and extraordinary events we see unfolding before us. Hotel manager Ullman (Barry Sullivan) blithely announces that the Overlook was indeed built over a burial site amid attacks by Native Americans seeking to defend their sacred ground. Featuring race in this way serves the purpose of not only externalizing the horror and

locating it far outside the family, but also in providing a convenient scapegoat in the form of the racial “Other,” dating back to early settlers and their equation of Native Americans with the Devil.

The final sequences of *The Shining* offer even less closure than that of *The Amityville Horror*. The Lutzes fled their home and the haunting assumedly remains in force, *The Shining*'s conclusion leaves us unsure about everything that has come before in the narrative. Following Wendy and Danny's hasty departure in Hallorann's Snowcat, Jack is shown to have frozen to death while attempting to locate his wife and son outside the hotel. Yet in the final scene, we return to the Overlook's interior for a series of close-ups on a framed black-and-white photograph of the Fourth of July Ball held at the hotel in 1921. Among the revelers we see a young Jack Torrance, who would appear to have been absorbed into the hotel's past. Baffling questions of assimilation and reincarnation aside, an oppressive patriarch is dead, his family very likely traumatized for many years to come, and the hotel remains haunted... or does it? Given its ambiguous articulations of the paranormal and sustained emphasis on domestic violence and child abuse, *The Shining* doesn't permit even the limited reassurance of *The Amityville Horror*, which allows the Lutz family to survive intact with George's abusive and homicidal behavior attributed solely to the house's influence.

Poltergeist (1982)

1982 would see the release of director Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist*, a film whose articulations of both the paranormal and the family would differ considerably from those featured in *The Shining*. The story of yet another haunted family, it concerns the attempts

of Steve and Diane Freeling (Craig T. Nelson and Jo Beth Williams) to reclaim their five-year old daughter Carol Anne (Heather O'Rourke) after she is abducted by paranormal entities occupying their suburban tract home. *Poltergeist* was produced and written by Steven Spielberg, best known at that time for directing such box office successes as *Jaws* (1975), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). If the rumors are to be believed, he was the director of *Poltergeist* as well: Tobe Hooper, director of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), was hired only because Spielberg was directing *E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial* (1982) at the same time and was contractually unable to direct two films at once.⁴⁵ However, the film's promotion broadly hinted that *Poltergeist* was a Spielberg film,⁴⁶ with Spielberg billed in larger type than Hooper's.⁴⁷ This issue of authorship in *Poltergeist*, between Spielberg's association with escapism and Hooper's body of work with its decidedly bleak assessment of family, may go some way in explaining its markedly different approach to the paranormal and representations of family trauma. Less direct than *The Shining*, *Poltergeist* builds upon the narrative characteristics of paranormal family horror and contributes to the articulations of trauma underlying paranormal reality television and its articulations of family.

The Freeling family's tract house, like the suspiciously affordable Dutch Colonial in *The Amityville Horror*, is certainly "too good to be true": *Poltergeist* takes place in the suburban California housing development of Cuesta Verde, a sprawl of recently constructed upper middle-class family homes with more under construction. However,

⁴⁵ George C. Perry, *Steven Spielberg* (London: Orion, 1998), 53.

⁴⁶ Frank Sanello, *Spielberg: The Man, The Movies, The Mythology* (Dallas, TX: Taylor, 1996), 117.

⁴⁷ Perry, *Steven Spielberg*, 53.

like the other haunted properties discussed in this chapter and despite its alignment with the contemporary, the Freeling house still completes the gothic project of isolating the family from their neighbors and the rest of the community, eliminating any possible help the neighbors might be able (or willing) to offer.

As in the previous two films under discussion, hints of trouble soon appear: furniture moving around on its own accord, a mysterious stain appearing on the wall of the master bedroom, and odd behavior by the family dog. Diane suspects a paranormal presence in the house, and the activity appears fairly innocent, even amusing at first. Then little Carol Anne vanishes and despite a thorough search of the house, she is nowhere to be found; yet they can hear her voice, calling to them eerily from inside the television set. Apparitions begin to appear in the house, along with terrifying hallucinations and intense poltergeist activity in the children's room.

Despite their shared concern with family and the paranormal, *Poltergeist* fundamentally differs from *The Shining* in its absence of visible tension in the Freeling family. The film's first act is greatly invested in making the Freelings accessible to viewers and as likable as possible—as broadly appealing as any family in a television sitcom (and in stark contrast to the Torrances in *The Shining*, where Kubrick worked assiduously to mark them as unnatural and awkward before they ever take up residence at the Overlook). Tony Williams, addressing *Poltergeist* and its particular project in regards to family, states: “Inserting its significantly named Freelings into a dark, technological Disneyland, *Poltergeist* banally succeeds in its ideologic aim of reuniting the family and

blaming convenient scapegoats”;⁴⁸ in this case, the paranormal in the form of the spirits whose graves were desecrated in the building of the Cuesta Verde housing development. While Bernice M. Murphy notes that “the Freelings are the perfect Reaganite family,”⁴⁹ the activity following Carol Anne’s abduction quickly takes its toll: Steve is seen unshaven and haggard, having missed work; the remaining children have been taken out of school; teenage daughter Dana (Dominique Dunne) is a hysterical wreck; only Diane seems to be holding up emotionally. Their swift transformation, from the idealized suburban family to a family signifying trauma in the same manner as the Torrances and even the Lutzes of *The Amityville Horror*, works to articulate trauma in the family while also presenting the family as without blame.

Symbolic domestic violence is depicted through paranormal assaults on both Diane and the children who, as in the previous films under discussion prove to be the first point of contact with the paranormal. Referring to a scene near the film’s conclusion, in which a nightshirt-wearing Diane is attacked and held down against her bed by an unseen force, Andrew M. Gordon, in *Empire of Dreams: The Science Fiction and Fantasy Films of Steven Spielberg*, observes: “The movie hints that the poltergeist attacks are disguised sexual assaults, directed primarily against women.”⁵⁰ At the same time, the repeated terrorizing of Carol Anne and her brother Robbie (played by Oliver Robins) by entities manifesting in their bedroom (like the home, a supposed sanctuary that is violated) stands

⁴⁸ Williams, *Hearths of Darkness*, 225.

⁴⁹ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 127.

⁵⁰ Andrew M. Gordon, *Empire of Dreams: The Science Fiction and Fantasy Films of Steven Spielberg* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 104.

in for the child abuse that Danny Torrance suffered at the hands of his enraged alcoholic father in *The Shining*. Thus, family trauma in the form of sexual assault and domestic violence are present in *Poltergeist*, but projected completely onto the paranormal.

Noticeably absent from *Poltergeist* is the possessed patriarch, characteristic of the paranormal family horror film. Far from the menacing father figures of *The Amityville Horror* and *The Shining*, Steve Freeling shrinks from shouting at his children, much less physically disciplining them. Douglas Brode, in *The Films of Steven Spielberg*, states, “[Steve] is the enlightened contemporary suburbanite,”⁵¹ not the frustrated blue-collar George Lutz or failed academic Jack Torrance, and therefore, his is a soft and blameless patriarchy. However, when Carol Anne is abducted, Steve is powerless to save her: she is returned to her family through the efforts of women. Yet, as with other frustrated patriarchs in this subgenre, Steve is presented as a man operating under economic pressure in the wake of the social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, articulating male anxiety surrounding second wave feminism and the changes that both it and similar movements strove for in both the private and public spheres.

Meanwhile, Douglas Kellner suggests that *Poltergeist* can be read, like the other films discussed in this chapter, as expressing anxieties of the early 1980s related to social class, and writes: “the film deals with the threats to freedom and loss of sovereignty in contemporary middle-class life, and the all-too-real prospects of downward mobility in an

⁵¹ Douglas Brode, *The Films of Steven Spielberg* (New York: Citadel Press, 2000), 112.

American dream gone sour and become a nightmare.”⁵² Within these threats of downward mobility and the loss of homeownership, Kellner also points to “middle-class male fears of losing power.”⁵³ A fear of intrusion and usurpation runs through the film: intrusion in the form of the spirits who kidnap Carol Anne from inside the supposedly safe family home, and in the form of older women, whose presence in the private sanctuary of the home is necessitated by Carol Anne’s abduction, challenging Steve’s paternal power and suggesting alternatives that are not entirely welcome. This sense of difference and its necessary intervention in the heteronormative family home, would also become, years later, an important convention in paranormal reality television.

Steve is ultimately shown to be complicit in his family’s trauma: halfway through the film, he meets with his boss, land developer Teague (played by James Karen), who offers him a considerable promotion. Unfortunately, this boon is accompanied by the revelation that the land on which the entire Cuesta Verde development was built was once a cemetery, with the graves moved to make way for new homes. Teague provides a rationalization steeped in both race and class, as he says: “Oh, don't worry about it. After all, it's not ancient tribal burial ground. It's just people.” It is worth noting that, while the desecrated cemetery is once again trotted out as an explanation, it is not the Native American burial ground of *The Amityville Horror* or *The Shining*, but “just people.” This suggests that on this occasion, horror is being located not in racial difference, but in difference based in social class, for if it were the resting place of socially powerful

⁵² Douglas Kellner, “Poltergeists, Gender, and Class in the Age of Reagan and Bush,” in *The Hidden Foundation: Cinema and the Question of Class*, eds. David E. James and Rick Berg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 222.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 231.

individuals, the cemetery would most likely not have been moved in the first place. Addressing the suggestion of paranormal vengeance, Barry Curtis suggests that ghosts in these films act as “agents of morality and reminders of the repressed injustices and illegalities of the past.”⁵⁴ For the first time, we begin to perceive a motivation for the trauma being suffered by the Freeling family, with Steve indirectly to blame for the horror affecting his family through his employment as a salesman by the greedy land developers behind Cuesta Verde and its violation of the dead.

Once again, the task of restoring the family is more or less left to the mother: it is Diane who ventures through the portal of the children’s closet in order to reclaim Carol Anne from the “other side” and she is also the first one to believe in the presence of the ghosts occupying her home. Perhaps of even more importance is Diane’s willingness to engage with the alternative belief systems (as opposed to the ineffectual authority of Father Delaney in *The Amityville Horror*) proffered by both the middle-aged parapsychologist Dr. Lesh (played by Beatrice Straight) and the diminutive clairvoyant Tangina Barrons (portrayed by Zelda Rubinstein). When Dr. Lesh’s scientific approach, highly dependent on technology, proves unsatisfactory, Tangina is brought in to determine what is taking place in the house and exactly what to do about it. She prefigures the ghost hunter and interventions based in difference later found in paranormal reality television (which I will discuss at length in Chapter V).

With the paranormal presence abolished and the Freelings reunited, Tangina proudly declares (for the documenting camera of Dr. Lesh’s crew, no less): “This house

⁵⁴ Curtis, *Dark Places*, 203.

is clean.” Even so, the Freelings no longer wish to occupy their house. On the family’s last night there (while Steve is off giving notice to Teague and Dana is out with friends) the spirits in the house renew their assault on Diane and the children, this time with a vengeance. Their attempts to escape are complicated when coffins begin popping out of the floor throughout the house, spilling rotted corpses in every direction and thus confirming viewers’ suspicions about the reason behind the haunting. Steve returns home at this point and, seeing the carnage as well as hearing his family’s screams—realizes the truth: Teague’s company left the coffins and only moved the headstones as a cost-cutting measure. Having finally made it outside, Diane and the children join Steven. The family attempts to flee in the family’s station wagon, along with a newly returned home Dana, once again rendered hysterical. As the family drives away (Robbie, in the backseat, howls, “The house is coming!”), their house implodes, apparently sucked into another dimension. The Freelings stay the night at a Holiday Inn: traumatized, homeless, and no longer so certain that their nightmare will ever be over.

Poltergeist also offers an ambiguous ending, articulating the impossibility of closure in dealing with trauma and the frightening possibility of its return. Rather than substantiating the heteronormative family, *Poltergeist* ends with a suburban neighborhood rendered a post-apocalyptic boneyard, with coffins emerging from manicured lawns, corpses lying in the streets, water and gas mains broken. There is no guarantee that the horror will not follow the Freeling family and start up again in a new location (and in the sequel, it does just that).

Ghostbusters and Ghost Dads: Post-1980s Paranormal Family Horror

A historically situated subgenre, the paranormal family horror film's first cycle lasted a decade, beginning in the mid-1970s following the success of *The Exorcist* and other films dealing with demonic possession, and ending in approximately the mid-1980s with the release of *Poltergeist II: The Other Side* (dir. Brian Gibson, US, 1986).

According to Tony Williams, the sequel works to “soothe Steven’s economic and personal insecurities and change him into a kinder and gentler patriarch.”⁵⁵ In other words, he retains his patriarchal power but, rendered soft through the intervention of minority groups including Native Americans, his power is no longer a potential source of horror. This would seem to have resolved the challenges leveled against patriarchy and the so-called assault on the nuclear family, yet paranormal family horror and its articulations of family trauma continue to haunt theaters.

Revolving primarily around perceived assaults on patriarchal authority within the family, paranormal family horror articulated this threat (posed by such social movements as second wave feminism, the civil rights movement, queer liberation, and later, downward mobility and economic downsizing), as comprising an outright and horrific attack on the family, projected onto the paranormal. Even as these films often sought to restore the family, paranormal family horror also articulated anxieties surrounding the family and engaged with family trauma (often in the form of domestic violence and child abuse), previously unacknowledged and concealed from public view.

⁵⁵ Williams, *Hearths of Darkness*, 225.

Paranormal family horror appeared to have become obsolete by the second half of the 1980s, as these kinds of films came to be viewed as passé and overly predictable. By this time, the paranormal would seem to have become a laughing matter, as seen in the release of popular paranormal-themed comedy films such as *Ghostbusters*, *Beetlejuice*, and *Ghost Dad* (dir. Sidney Poitier, US, 1990). However, far from being entirely dormant, paranormal family horror films continued to be made through the 1990s: the *Amityville* franchise would spawn a legion of straight-to-video sequels, along with the occasional made-for-television film, including *The Haunted* (dir. Robert Mandel, US, 1991) and *Grave Secrets: The Legacy of Hilltop Drive* (dir. John Patterson, US, 1992). A notable resurgence in paranormal family horror took place during the late part of the decade with the release of *The Sixth Sense*, *Stir of Echoes* (dir. David Koepp, US, 1999), and *What Lies Beneath* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, US, 2000), among others, while the more recent popularity of films such as *The Haunting in Connecticut* (dir. Peter Cornwell, US, 2009) and *Paranormal Activity* and its sequels, which utilized realism in the style of *The Blair Witch Project* (dirs. Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, US, 1999), represents another major cycle in paranormal family horror, occurring alongside paranormal reality television.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ There's no maybe about it: the paranormal family horror film seems to be enjoying renewed cultural currency in recent years. If the paranormal family horror film of the late 1970s and early 1980s helped to create the narrative template for paranormal reality television, then the current cycle seems to be an outgrowth of these programs and their investment in family trauma. Space concerns prevent an in-depth analysis of this more recent cycle (beginning in 1999 and continuing to the present) and its engagement with paranormal reality at this time; however, when this project is expanded into book form, an additional chapter will elaborate on the relationship between contemporary cinematic and televisual representations of family trauma in conjunction with the paranormal.

Family trauma, largely consigned to the private sphere earlier in the century, became a matter of public discourse in the 1970s and also became an integral part of the paranormal family horror film, articulating the presence of domestic violence, sexual dysfunction, and financial and class-based anxieties occurring in concert with the paranormal. This emphasis on family trauma can also be found in paranormal reality television, along with a number of narrative characteristics established by paranormal family horror, including the “too good to be true” house, the suggestion of pre-existing family trauma, the primacy of archival research and backstory, the ineffectuality of religious and scientific authorities, the failed patriarch susceptible to possession by the paranormal, and the heroic mother.

In my next chapter, I will establish paranormal reality television as a subgenre , suggesting the appeal and function of its programs despite their repeated failure to visibly produce the ghosts and demons that their premises would seem to offer. Like the paranormal family horror film, paranormal reality articulates family trauma through a convergence of genres and modes within the medium of television. Chapter III will explore how, in paranormal reality, narrative conventions associated with horror, melodrama, and reality television, along with elements of the gothic, converge in television to “make strange” the institution of family.

CHAPTER III

GHOST STORY CONFESSIONALS: ARTICULATING FAMILY TRAUMA

IN PARANORMAL REALITY TV

Only the silent, sleepy, staring houses in the backwoods can tell all that has lain hidden since the early days, and they are not communicative, being loath to shake off the drowsiness which helps them forget. Sometimes one feels that it would be merciful to tear down these houses, for they must often dream.
--H.P. Lovecraft, "The Picture in the House" (1920)

"Silent, sleepy, staring houses," whether in the backwoods or the darkest heart of the suburbs, have been an important setting for gothic literature and paranormal horror where, as Lovecraft suggests above, they are capable of revealing "all that has lain hidden." This revelation may include things concealed inside the house itself (ghosts and assorted entities) along with anything beneath it (a desecrated Native American burial ground or portal to hell). However, the houses in paranormal family horror films such as *Poltergeist* (dir. Tobe Hooper, US, 1982) or *The Amityville Horror* (dir. Stuart Rosenberg, US, 1979) were anything but "silent" or "sleepy." And while these houses may stare, the audience for paranormal reality television returns their stare countless times over, informed by shifts not only in thinking about family trauma but changing perceptions of the paranormal as well.

Following Hall, paranormal reality articulates – or establishes -- a relationship between the paranormal and family trauma, through filmic conventions drawn from the paranormal family horror film as described in Chapter II. Annette Hill, in *Paranormal Media: Audiences, Spirits and Magic in Popular Culture*, writes that "when people

engage with paranormal matters, they show a web of personal, emotional, psychological and physical connections and contradictions.”¹ This web of connections and contradictions is depicted through paranormal reality and its programs, articulating family trauma and allowing those lonely and silent houses described by Lovecraft to speak.

Just as domestic violence and other forms of family trauma gained greater visibility in the 1970s and 1980s, the paranormal has moved from the margins to the mainstream in recent decades, despite having long been present in popular culture. Thus, in the past ten years the paranormal has made its presence more emphatically known throughout cable television and its particular demand for niche programming. Paranormal reality, however, takes place in its own specific medium of television, whose melodramatic representations of family, along with conventions established by the paranormal family horror film, reality, melodrama, and the gothic, activate a chain of meanings linking the paranormal to family trauma.

This chapter opens with an overview of paranormal reality’s development as a television subgenre and cultural phenomenon whose articulations of family trauma derive from cultural and historical factors as well as the earlier paranormal family horror film. Acknowledging the subgenre’s popularity with audiences and generally unfavorable critical reception, along with the eventual backlash against its programs and the failure of ghosts to make any appearance, I then describe representative episodes of four paranormal reality programs (*A Haunting*, *Ghost Hunters*, *Paranormal State*, and *Psychic*

¹ Annette Hill, *Paranormal Media: Audiences, Spirits and Magic in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1.

Kids), suggesting typical narrative trajectories for these programs and how they represent the generic convergence that makes paranormal reality unique in “making strange” family and home through their association with the paranormal.

Paranormal Reality as Subgenre

Annette Hill observes that in recent years, paranormal beliefs have entered the mainstream,² no longer viewed solely in terms of horror occurring at the fringes of society but also as a means to enlightenment and empowerment, yet another form of new age practice.³ Advancing the paranormal as a term designating extraordinary and unexplainable events including not only hauntings but the appearance of angels and aliens along with telepathy,⁴ Hill states that “paranormal matters are when something extraordinary happens in what we like to think of as our ordinary lives.”⁵ Indeed, the past decade has reflected this proliferation across numerous media platforms, from paranormal romance fiction (in the form of the *Twilight* series and its many imitators) to a resurgence in the popularity of the paranormal family horror film, witnessed in the success of such films as *The Haunting in Connecticut* (dir. Peter Cornwell, US, 2009), *Insidious* (dir. James Wan, US, 2011), and the *Paranormal Activity* franchise. At the same time, television has also proven a particularly congenial medium for the paranormal in the past decade or so, primarily in dramas (*True Blood*, *American Horror Story*,

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 37

⁴ Ibid., 2

⁵ Ibid., 3

Supernatural, *The Walking Dead*) but also in the realm of reality television, a generic hybrid that would at first glance appear highly contradictory in its mediation of reality in conjunction with the extraordinary and bizarre paranormal.

In *Gothic Television*, Helen Wheatley observes that beginning in the mid-1990s there occurred “a diffusion of the Gothic across a wide range of cultural sites, a relative explosion of Gothic images and narratives prompting a renewed critical interest in the genre.”⁶ Similar to the increased interest in the paranormal during the same period, this proliferation also demonstrated a concentration in television. A renewed presence of the paranormal occurred in television during the 1990s, witnessed by the success of programs such as *Twin Peaks* (1990-91), *The X-Files* (1993-02), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-03), and *Angel* (1999-04), all of which featured the hybridization of horror and the procedural drama, a process that would remain at work into the next decade in programs including *Dark Angel* (2000-02), *Tru Calling* (2003-05), *Medium* (2005-11) and *The Ghost Whisperer* (2005-10).

While numerous genres have been seen as displaying aspects of the gothic,⁷ Wheatley offers a general description of that which constitutes the “Gothic television narrative,” a mode to which paranormal reality unquestionably belongs:

a mood of dread and/or terror inclined to evoke fear or disgust in the viewer; the presence of highly stereotyped characters and plots, often derived from Gothic literary fiction (e.g. the hero or heroine trapped in a menacing domestic situation by an evil villain, or the family attempting to cover up hidden secrets from the past); representations of the supernatural which are either overt (created through

⁶ Helen Wheatley, *Gothic Television* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2007), 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

the use of special effects) or implied (suggested rather than fully revealed); a proclivity towards the structures and images of the uncanny (repetitions, returns, déjà vu, premonitions, ghosts, doppelgangers, animated inanimate objects and severed body parts, etc.); and perhaps most importantly, homes and families which are haunted, tortured or troubled in some way.⁸

Wheatley's enumeration of the characteristics of the Gothic television narrative refers to and draws extensively on Freud's account of the uncanny, with the uncanny "located in the moments in Gothic television in which the familiar traditions and conventions of television are made strange, when television's predominant genres and styles are both referred to and inverted."⁹ Paranormal reality, as gothic television, draws upon and experiments with existing television genres and styles, making strange the heteronormative family through the convergence of genres and modes in the uncanny medium of television.

Paranormal reality television's origin can be most immediately traced to the debut of *Ghost Hunters* on what was then known as the Sci Fi Channel in October 2004; in its first two months on the air, the series averaged 1.4 million viewers, showing an increase of 37% from the same period in 2003, and raised the delivery of the prized 18-34 demographic in its timeslot by 106%.¹⁰ The show's success led to an influx of programs airing on cable (as opposed to broadcast networks, where this brand of programming has yet to penetrate) and featuring real-life ghost hunters investigating reportedly haunted locations. Building upon the generic codes and conventions established by reality

⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰ Denise Martin, "'Ghost' Still Haunts Sci Fi," *Daily Variety*, December 1, 2004.

television, this subgenre emphasizes detection and surveillance, making use of electromagnetic field detectors, along with infrared and night-vision cameras, as well as digital voice recorders,¹¹ designed to capture electronic voice phenomena or “EVP,” defined as “the words, phrases and meaningful sounds heard through radio static or on other recording devices that count, in the minds of believers, as evidence of ghosts.”¹² As such, paranormal reality television and its popularity are highly dependent on belief, based upon the presentation of evidence gained through the technological surveillance for which reality television has become known in the past decade.

Critical reception for the subgenre, however, has been anything but welcoming, and while initially popular with viewers, there was, by 2010, a glut of paranormal-themed programs and a critical backlash that had been growing for the past several years (accompanied by a 2009 spoof episode on the animated series *South Park*, no less). As Mike Hale noted in a December 2009 *New York Times* article, “The ghostbusters of reality television never actually see dead people. They spend an awful lot of time talking to them, though.”¹³ Most critics have complained about paranormal reality’s failure to ever produce the eternally promised ghosts; of *Paranormal State*, one critic writes: “the show’s spirit sightings boil down to a ho-hum collection of ominous noises, the occasional self-opening door, and pronouncements like, ‘There are bad things here.’”¹⁴

¹¹ James Hibberd, “In Search of Today’s Ghost Stories,” *Television Week*, August 22, 2005.

¹² Virginia Heffernan, “Haunted Mouses,” *New York Times*, December 16, 2007.

¹³ Mike Hale, “Consigning Reality to Ghosts,” *New York Times*, December 13, 2009.

¹⁴ Karla Peterson, “The Difference Between Fright and Wrong,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, December 10, 2007.

This ever-deferred satisfaction has led the paranormal reality subgenre to be likened to soft-core cable pornography and professional wrestling,¹⁵ while another critic also dismisses *Paranormal State*, which focuses on college-aged ghost hunters based at Penn State University and seems to be the most critically reviled, as “*Scooby-Doo* meets the *Blair Witch Project*,”¹⁶ with yet another critic labeling these same individuals as “a group of losers and fools.”¹⁷ Joe Nickell, a columnist for *Skeptical Inquirer*, a magazine that debunks paranormal phenomena, states: “You have ignorant people on these shows misleading the public [. . .] There’s no end to these stories being out there because they sell. That’s the bottom line.”¹⁸ Like reality television at large, paranormal reality television has also been charged with the exploitation of its subjects, particularly children; *Psychic Kids*, for example, is premised entirely on children and teenagers who have had traumatic experiences with the paranormal, who are then turned loose in haunted locations to see their reactions to any phenomena.¹⁹

The lack of visible ghosts in these programs suggests that their appeal must lie elsewhere. Grant Wilson, co-founder of The Atlantic Paranormal Society (TAPS) featured on *Ghost Hunters*, asserts: “This kind of show is popular because almost everyone has had a paranormal experience or knows of someone who has.”²⁰ Others have

¹⁵ Hale, “Consigning Reality to Ghosts.”

¹⁶ Michael Murray, “Show is Creepy for Wrong Reasons,” *Ottawa Citizen*, July 5, 2008.

¹⁷ Jonathan Storm, “Supernatural Hokum,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 9, 2010

¹⁸ Robert Dominguez, “Ghost World,” *Daily News* (New York, NY), August 16, 2005.

¹⁹ Teresa Wiltz, “On Reality TV, Who’s Minding the Kids?,” *Washington Post*, July 26, 2008.

²⁰ Dominguez, “Ghost World.”

suggested that paranormal reality television's appearance and popularity originate from the national anxiety following the trauma of the 9/11 terrorist attacks²¹ or the precarious financial situation of many families in the midst of global recession, while Ryan Buell, founder of the Paranormal Research Society (PRS) appearing on *Paranormal State*, has pointed to the ongoing war in Iraq²² which, along with 9/11, has reminded Americans of their mortality. Buell also observes: "The bottom line is that some people are terrified by things that are happening in their homes and don't know how to deal with it."²³

Buell's statement hints at an alternative reading of paranormal reality television and its appeal, based not in their ghostly subject matter and its confounding absence, but in a series of investigations made into haunted homes on behalf of tormented families in post-9/11 America. As Buell notes of Matthew, the troubled young boy appearing in *Paranormal State*'s first episode, "You could tell he was carrying some burden; he wasn't running around saying 'I saw a ghost!' [but] there was something going on with him."²⁴ Meanwhile, in *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, Bernice M. Murphy writes: "it seems as if the ultimate horror most likely lies within the family home, and in the dysfunctional nature of the ostensibly average suburban family."²⁵ This

²¹ Jenny Eden, "Media: They Are Not Alone," *The Guardian* (London), January 23, 2006.

²² Justin George, "Visitors from a New Twilight Zone," *St. Petersburg Times* (St. Petersburg, FL), December 8, 2009.

²³ Andrew Ryan, "Who Ya Gonna Call? Ghostbusters in Goth Clothing," *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto, ON), December 7, 2007.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (Houndmills, Basingstroke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 141.

“ultimate horror,” set forth by Murphy in the form of family trauma, reflects what Esther Madriz terms the “reality of violent crime, in which most victims know the perpetrator.”²⁶ Douglas Kellner, in his article “Poltergeists, Gender, and Class in the Age of Reagan and Bush,” writes: “When individuals perceive that they do not have control over their lives and that they are dominated by powerful forces outside themselves, they are attracted to occultism [. . .] the occult becomes an efficacious ideological mode that helps explain incomprehensible events.”²⁷ Under this reading, paranormal reality functions as a “ghost story confessional,” whose participants, through surveillance, dramatic re-enactment, and personal testimony, articulate family trauma, experienced alongside the paranormal within an ostensibly haunted house. In the sections that follow, I describe typical episodes from representative programs *A Haunting*, *Ghost Hunters*, *Paranormal State*, and *Psychic Kids*.

A Haunting: Narrative Trajectories of Paranormal Reality TV

As a subgenre, paranormal reality shows a surprising degree of diversity in its programs, with some programs focusing more on investigative aspects (*Ghost Hunters*, *Ghost Adventures*, *Paranormal State*) while others emphasize dramatic re-enactments (*A Haunting*, *The Haunted*) or feature more specialized concerns (*Psychic Kids*, *Celebrity Ghost Stories*). While Chapter IV will examine specific narrative characteristics of

²⁶ Esther Madriz, *Nothing Bad Happens to Good Girls: Fear of Crime in Women's Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 111.

²⁷ Douglas Kellner, “Poltergeists, Gender, and Class in the Age of Reagan and Bush,” in *The Hidden Foundation: Cinema and the Question of Class*, eds. David E. James and Rick Berg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 218.

paranormal reality, establishing how they articulate family trauma, this chapter's overview of paranormal reality as a phenomenon necessitates a brief laying out of the subgenre's most common narrative trajectories. Using four representative programs, I describe what the viewer can expect from an average experience of paranormal reality television.

A Haunting, which relies primarily on re-enactments (accompanied by some testimony by real-life individuals narrating their paranormal encounters) can perhaps best be typified by the "Dark Wrath" episode, in which protagonist Cindy and her longtime boyfriend Jake move into an isolated Midwestern farm house along with their two daughters. Cindy and the girls begin to complain of odd happenings and become fearful of their new home, but Jake (who is often at work when strange things happen) is at first disbelieving, and then angry. One evening, Jake comes home late and chops through the locked back door with an axe, attempting to attack Cindy. He is apprehended by the police but in the aftermath, Cindy realizes that an earlier attack against her, in which a disembodied force attempted to smother her with a pillow, was in actuality Jake, possessed by the evil in the house. She does not press charges against Jake, whom she believes to have been under the house's influence, but at the same time, she does not allow him to return home.

In "Dark Wrath," Jake is presented as transforming from loving and dependable to violent and unstable as the result of the entities found in the home. His behavior is never presented as something for which he is responsible or could even remotely be held culpable, a narrative recurring throughout *A Haunting* and other programs in paranormal

reality (and discussed at greater length in Chapter IV). Holding these paternal figures accountable is the last thing on the minds of the women and children²⁸ retelling their stories of family trauma alongside the re-enactments of *A Haunting*: it was the house and its ghosts that changed him. While Jake's transformation is presented as a shocking plot twist, the text does feature suggestions of prior existing discord within the family. Jake is presented, from the beginning, as both distant and prone to angry outbursts. One scene features Cindy standing alone in a darkened room and startled by the sudden appearance of Jake, whom we have been led to believe was at work and out of the house. Even before the narrative reveals Jake as the victim of possession, he is presented as dangerous and unpredictable to his family, evoking the paranormal-possessed fathers of the paranormal family horror film examined in Chapter II. Cindy and the girls are eventually forced to move following an unsuccessful exorcism and the possession of one of her daughters by the malevolent entities in the house.

By contrast, the typical episode of *Ghost Hunters* is considerably less engaged with family trauma than it is with conflict among the members of The Atlantic Paranormal Society (TAPS). The series follows investigations made by the society,

²⁸ I say "women and children" here because it is they who are primarily figured as the protagonist-victims threatened by the paranormal and a possessed patriarchy in these programs; I should also mention that they are, for the most part, presented as white, heterosexual, middle-class women and children. As a subgenre, paranormal reality begs questions of *who* can be haunted (the answer emerges that, according to these programs, only white, heterosexual, middle-class families get haunted; families of color and queer families are virtually non-existent across the programs surveyed for this dissertation). What initially seems to be the absence of race, however, reveals intriguing constructions and intersections of whiteness, heterosexuality, and social class. Interactions between, for example, the college-educated and relatively privileged white students of *Paranormal State* and the frequently working to middle-class haunted families they seek to assist, or interventions into troubled heterosexual family dynamics made by queer-positioned mediums such as Chip Coffey, suggest what has long been repressed alongside family trauma in television and its representations of the nuclear family.

headed by Jason Hawes and Grant Wilson, who work as plumbers during the day. In the “Mishler Theater” episode, the team visits two reportedly haunted locations: a theater and a railroad museum. As part of their investigation, they interview personnel at both sites and are shown setting up their audio and visual surveillance equipment, during which team members argue about missing equipment, complete with bleeped-out profanity. Despite a series of false alarms, the surveillance fails to turn up anything of note. Near the end of the episode, a backyard barbecue is held at which Jason, Grant, their families, and other members of TAPS are seen relaxing and during which the two men’s wives complain about how much time Jason and Grant spend away on investigations. Shortly after, given the lack of conclusive evidence, the team determines that neither the theater nor the railroad museum are haunted, review potential cases, investigate and dismiss a reported haunting at a hotel, and make plans for their next investigation (and the next episode). If *A Haunting* is noteworthy for its investment in family trauma, then *Ghost Hunters* is notable in its absolute avoidance of such articulations (it should also be observed that *Ghost Hunters* tends to focus more on public buildings rather than private homes, although such investigations do occur on occasion and have articulated family trauma in their own fashion).

An episode of *Paranormal State*, “The Fury,” is much more visibly concerned with trauma in the family. The program’s opening sequence informs us of the investigations made by the Paranormal Research Society (PRS), a group of Penn State students led by Ryan Buell, who claims to have had traumatic childhood experiences with the paranormal. In this particular episode, the group travels to Moundsville, West

Virginia and the remote farmhouse where the client, Kathy, resides with her young daughters and husband, Farmer. Kathy purchased the house nearly ten years before and had experienced paranormal activity for some time but admits that when Farmer moved in, it worsened considerably; she also discloses that the haunting is causing discord in her marriage. Farmer, a lumberjack, concedes that the “house is something I can’t control” and reports seeing a shadowy creature in their bedroom while Kathy’s oldest daughter, Carly, has violent nightmares that act as premonitions of tragic events (for example, she dreamed of her mother receiving third-degree burns from a fireplace mishap before it ever happened). Members of PRS discuss the information gained through interviewing the family and become convinced of a “Native American” angle, prompting archival research into the property and its history.

Meanwhile, psychic and medium Chip Coffey (who will be considered in more detail in Chapter V) arrives, reportedly without prior knowledge of the case. He tours the house and gives his impressions, seemingly confirming the presence of angry Native American spirits, whom Chip believes are trying to destroy the family by going after the “man of the house.” When Ryan attempts to communicate with the spirits, Farmer begins to behave erratically, taunting the entities and ordering them out of the house. He becomes increasingly agitated by the house’s energy and grabs Ryan, with Chip declaring: “There’s your activity.” A Native American shaman is brought in to advise that many bodies of Native Americans remain buried on the property (referring back to the desecrated burial ground trope introduced in Chapter II) and warns that the dead can influence the actions of the living. Chip and Ryan urge the family to remain strong and

stick together, while also burning sage to drive out the spirits, whom they encourage to move on. The children are put in contact with a child psychologist, and a post-script reports that the family remains in the house despite ongoing activity (this is common for paranormal reality, with total closure a rarity when dealing with haunted families).

Psychic Kids: Children of the Supernatural also features Chip Coffey but focuses primarily on children reported to be in communication with the dead. The “Night Terrors” episode presents three children: Kali, Caleb, and ReAnna. All three claim to be able to see the dead, which leaves them physically ill, socially isolated for fear of ridicule, suffering from anxiety, and unable to sleep. Their mothers are unsure of how to help their children, prompting the arrival of Coffey and child psychologist Dr. Lisa Miller, who speak to the children and the mothers, arranging for all of them to meet at an Arizona ranch reported to be haunted and built on sacred Native American land, once again invoking the desecrated burial ground trope. Once gathered, the children discuss their experiences while the mothers²⁹ also share their feelings and their fear that their children will be considered mentally ill.

The three children are then equipped with lanterns and led through the darkened ranch (this is the most bizarre and problematic aspect of this series) to see what they might experience, resulting in the children becoming intensely frightened and running off while filmed with night vision cameras. Chip calms them and tells them not to give in to fear (this keeps with the empowerment narrative found in much of paranormal reality), urging them to face their fears and by the episode’s end, the three children seem more

²⁹ For the most part, we do not see fathers in *Psychic Kids*. This more or less eliminates the “possessed patriarch” figure, but their very absence points again to the failed patriarchy that runs throughout both paranormal reality television and the paranormal family horror film.

comfortable and confident, their experiences having been validated.³⁰ As in *Paranormal State*, a post-script reveals that all three still see spirits but have become less anxious and are better equipped to handle their encounters with the paranormal.

Each of these programs have their own narrative trajectories yet articulate family trauma to varying degrees, made possible through paranormal reality's reliance on conventions associated with melodrama as well as horror and reality television. While drawing on conventions established by the paranormal family horror film, paranormal reality distinguishes itself through this generic convergence in the medium of television, which I explore in the section that follows.

Generic Convergence and "Making Strange"

A fixture in the family home since the 1950s television has become an accepted and familiar part of domestic spaces, bearing spectral images of into homes and therefore an ideal medium for articulating family trauma through a convergence of genres and modes. Closely aligned with horror and the gothic³¹ and sharing their sustained emphases on family, paranormal reality is, like melodrama, deeply informed by psychoanalytic concepts, particularly Freud's theorization of the uncanny and the "return of the repressed" along with the processes of the displacement and projection.

³⁰ Scholarship on reality television and neoliberalism will be helpful in considering this aspect of paranormal reality and expanding this dissertation into book form.

³¹ Much as Linda Williams has suggested of melodrama, Brigid Cherry has argued that horror, given its diversity of subgenres and propensity for generic hybridization, might be more easily thought of as an "overlapping and evolving set of 'conceptual categories' that are in a constant state of flux;" see Cherry, *Horror* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 3.

In her book, *Re-viewing Reception: Television, Gender, and Postmodern Culture*, Lynne Joyrich writes: “In the 1950s, television erupted in the American home and placed itself firmly within the realm of family domesticity, and consumerism—the very ground of the movie melodrama.”³² Here, Joyrich is noting not only the close historical relationship between television and family, but also television and the melodramatic mode, observing that “television is ‘occupied’ by (or ‘pre-occupied’ with) melodrama and vice versa.”³³ Unlike the film melodrama, however, television melodrama is less easily defined as a genre,³⁴ and has come to figure into a variety of television genres.³⁵ Perhaps the television genre most commonly associated with melodrama is the soap opera. Of programs such as *Days of Our Lives* (1965-) and *General Hospital* (1963-), Joyrich observes that television “has continued to rely on melodrama, deploying its iconography and language in texts.”³⁶ The melodramatic mode of the soap opera mixed with other genres during the 1980s and onward,³⁷ while continuing to privilege the family itself. As Joyrich notes:

TV parallels melodrama in its form as well as content as it centers on familiar space, a situation fostered by the (usual) size of the screen and its customary

³² Lynne Joyrich, *Re-viewing Reception: Television, Gender, and Postmodern Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 45.

³³ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁴ Linda Williams would say that film melodrama is also difficult to consider as a separate genre, and should instead be classified as a “melodramatic mode” from which different film genres can borrow in configuring their address; see Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” in *Refiguring American Film Genres*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 43-88.

³⁵ Joyrich, *Re-viewing Reception*, 47.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

location in the home. Together with the low visual intensity of the medium and the smaller budget of its productions, these factors encourage television's reliance on background music, the close-up, confined interiors, and intimate gesture rather than action—elements that resonate with melodramatic conventions.³⁸

This resonance between television and melodrama prompts Joyrich to position television melodrama as “ideally suited to reveal the subtle strains of bourgeois culture with all of the contradictions it entails.”³⁹ Both television and melodrama have proven particularly suited for representing the American family.

During the 1970s, family trauma gained visibility on television in daytime soap operas, with Roger Hagedorn noting that shifts in demographics and audience over the course of that decade were as much responsible for the inclusion of controversial and previously taboo material as the advances made by second wave feminism in the same period: in particular, an increase in the number of women working outside the home and a corresponding decrease in daytime viewership.⁴⁰ In addition to portraying family trauma and highlighting the effects of domestic violence, these storylines were notable in that they portrayed rape occurring not as the result of an attack by a stranger, but between either married couples or within intimate relationships.⁴¹ While, as Elana Levine describes in *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television*,

³⁸ Ibid., 52.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Roger Hagedorn, “Doubtless to be Continued: A Brief History of Serial Narrative,” in *To Be Continued . . . Soap Operas Around the World*, ed. Robert C. Allen (New York: Routledge, 1995), 38.

⁴¹ In 1968, *Days of Our Lives* depicted Dr. Laura Horton's rape by brother-in-law Bill Horton (whom she later married), while *Guiding Light* would, in 1979, feature the villainous Roger Thorpe raping his wife, Holly, who pressed charges against her husband. These are only two of numerous rape narratives occurring in daytime soap operas during the late 1960s and 1970s.

the daytime soap opera of the early 1970s demonstrated its own brand of ambivalence in dealing with both family violence and sexual assault,⁴² it contributed to the increasing public discourse surrounding trauma in the family.⁴³

During the 1960s, another subgenre, termed the “fantastic family sitcom,” became a staple of prime time television through programs including *Lost in Space* (1965-68), *Bewitched* (1964-72), *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965-70), and *My Favorite Martian* (1963-66), among others. A hybrid genre, the fantastic family sitcom made use of generic conventions established in earlier texts, creating what Lynn Spigel refers to as “a series of displacements and distortions”⁴⁴ and allowing a space for addressing cultural anxieties located in and around the American family and its suburban milieu. For Spigel, “the sitcom format was an apt vehicle for this because it offered ready-made conflicts over gender roles, domesticity, and suburban lifestyles, while its laugh track, harmonious resolutions, and other structures of denial functioned as safety valves that diffused the ‘trouble’ in the text.”⁴⁵ As with paranormal reality, the “trouble” in the fantastic family sitcom was found not in the supernatural or sci-fi agencies at work, but in the purported normalcy to which they seemed so diametrically opposed. Like paranormal reality, the

⁴² This occurred perhaps most egregiously on *General Hospital*, in its transformation of rapist Luke Spencer into a hero and having him marry his victim, Laura Baldwin, in a much-ballyhooed wedding two years later.

⁴³ Elana Levine, *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 210.

⁴⁴ Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and the Postwar Suburbs* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 117.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

fantastic family sitcom of the 1960s was able to to “make the familial strange”⁴⁶ in a manner perceived as “safe” through its use of fantasy to articulate the racism, sexism, and classism found in suburbia.

Of the work done by the fantastic family sitcom, and specifically in terms of its focus upon family, Spigel observes that the subgenre “provided a new mode of expressing family relations. In the fantastic sitcom, science fiction fantasy invaded the discourses of the everyday, so that the norms of domesticity were made unfamiliar.”⁴⁷ Despite the safety supposedly afforded by the situation comedy structure, Spigel sees the fantastic family sitcom as leaving that space of question and critique open, never entirely erased by the roll of the end credits: “Even if the sitcom form defused these tensions with safe resolutions, the genre denied absolute closure, coming back each week to remind viewers that they too might be living in a suburban twilight zone.”⁴⁸ This deliberate reference to *The Twilight Zone* (1959-64), an anthology series that made frequent use of conventions associated with the horror genre, suggests that as a medium whose narratives recur on a weekly basis, television itself possesses its own power for examining families confronting their own horrors.

Much as with television and melodrama, family has proven central in the horror genre with Tony Williams, in *Hearths of Darkness*, suggesting that “all horror films are really family horror films containing psychic mechanisms that are derived from clinical

⁴⁶ Ibid., 122.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 135.

cases associated with dysfunctional families.”⁴⁹ Underlying “family horror” is the “return of the repressed” in the form of the uncanny, derived from the work of Sigmund Freud who states that “the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.”⁵⁰ Drawn from the German word “*unheimlich*,” the uncanny is opposed to the “*heimlich*,” defined by Freud as “belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, friendly, etc.”⁵¹ Thus, the very concept of Freud’s uncanny, so fundamental to horror, is principally grounded in the home; indeed, Freud gives a secondary definition of *heimlich*, as “concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know about it, withheld from others.”⁵² In paranormal reality, the “heimlich” family home becomes the uncanny haunted house, a place of waking nightmares eventually made known to the viewing public. Indeed, as Freud points out, “Some languages in use to-day can only render the German expression ‘an *unheimlich* house’ by ‘a *haunted* house.’”⁵³ When something become *unheimlich* or uncanny, it not only represents the familiar becoming strange but also marks the concealed being revealed.

Another psychoanalytic concept on which horror depends is the defense mechanism of projection, which in horror involves the presence of the “Other” in the form of the monster. Robin Wood, of the “Other” in the horror genre, writes: “Otherness

⁴⁹ Tony Williams, *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film* (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), 18.

⁵⁰ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey et. al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1966-74), 220.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 223.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 241.

represents that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with [. . .] in one of two ways: either by rejecting it and if possible annihilating it.”⁵⁴ For Wood, horror relies upon a formula consisting of three variables: normality, the Monster, and the relationship existing between the two.⁵⁵ This formula is also at work in paranormal reality, with normality personified by the white, heterosexual, middle-class family, and the monster embodied in various forms of the paranormal (ghosts, demons, etc.) with the crucial interaction between the two informed by the process of projection. Paranormal reality, like the horror film, suggests that the true horror may in actuality be the heteronormative family itself, termed by Wood as “one of the great composite monsters of the American cinema,”⁵⁶ with the uncanny conventions of horror working to reveal trauma based in the family even amid its displacement onto the paranormal.

Like melodrama and horror, reality television arguably operates as both a genre and a mode while also placing a narrative emphasis on family conflict and its resolution. A hybrid form, reality television makes use of and refashions the conventions and codes of other genres, including the observational documentary, tabloid and investigative journalism, the “docudrama,” the game show, and the soap opera.⁵⁷ In *Paranormal State* and other programs of its kind, investigative teams seek not only to assist and comfort the family, but also to prove the existence of the paranormal (and arguably, this is one reason

⁵⁴ Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan . . . and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 65-66.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁵⁷ Bernadette Casey, Neil Casey, et al., *Television Studies: The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 197.

why people tune in, not because they feel like watching a straight-up family melodrama with paranormal overtones). Distinguished aesthetically from melodrama and horror, reality television's significant emphasis on the surveillance of the family home is a key factor in the convergence of genre, mode, and medium that makes possible paranormal reality's articulations of family trauma.

Paranormal Reality as Trauma Narrative

Following the 2008-09 collapse of the mortgage and banking industries and the resulting recession, bringing with it unprecedented unemployment⁵⁸ and foreclosures, home and family have been perceived as threatened as never before,⁵⁹ a destabilization that plagues the families featured in paranormal reality television. Helen Wheatley points out that "predictions indicate that the next generation's way of life will probably be worse than our generation's,"⁶⁰ a dire prophecy with direct implications for both families and the homes they seek to inhabit. Horror critic John Kenneth Muir has commented on the typical narrative arc of *A Haunting*:

There's the *honeymoon stage*, wherein a happy couple buys a "fixer-upper" that they shouldn't be able to afford. Then there's the *uncertainty stage*, wherein the family moves into the haunted house and begins to experience feelings of apprehension, nightmares and a general sense of wariness. Then there's the *recognition stage*, where the occult is acknowledged and steps are taken to get help (either moving, conducting research at the Hall of Records, or bringing in an

⁵⁸ Helen Wheatley, *Gothic Television*, 21.

⁵⁹ Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 197.

⁶⁰ Wheatley, *Gothic Television*, 22.

expert [. . .]). Finally, the beleaguered family achieves a sense of safety after escaping from the house, in the *Let's-All-Take-A-Deep-Breath* stage.⁶¹

As outlined by Muir, these stages also speak to oppressive family situations, particularly articulating the stages of “progressive entrapment” associated with cycles of family violence, including what has come to be known as “Battered Woman’s Syndrome.”⁶²

While each program’s primary narrative portrays the family’s traumatic encounters with and attempts to expel occult forces from their home, there is also a pronounced focus on breakdown within the family, nearly always posited as being symptoms of the haunting. Many times, the families consider moving to escape the paranormal torment, but as demonologist Lorraine Warren, frequently featured on *A Haunting*, *Paranormal State*, and *Psychic Kids*, advises: “Leaving the house is not the answer, because what’s here is going to follow you. You have to deal with it. You must deal with it.”⁶³ Warren’s insistence on dealing with the paranormal and warning against its ability to give chase echoes a similar caution offered by Elizabeth M. Schneider in her work on domestic violence: “leaving provides battered women no assurance of separation or safety; the stories of battered women who have been hunted down across state lines and harassed or killed are legion.”⁶⁴ These warnings offered by both Warren and Schneider demonstrate

⁶¹ John Kenneth Muir, “TV Review: *A Haunting*: “Echoes From the Grave,” *John Kenneth Muir’s Reflections on Film/T.V.*, last modified November 12, 2007, <http://reflectionsonfilmandtelevision.blogspot.com/2005/11/tv-review-haunting-echoes-from-grave.html>.

⁶² Ann Goetting, *Getting Out: Life Stories of Women Who Left Abusive Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 6-8.

⁶³ “Hell House,” *A Haunting*, season 1, episode 3, directed by Joe Wiecha, aired September 27, 2005 (Eugene, OR: Timeless Media Group, 2008), DVD.

⁶⁴ Elizabeth M. Schneider, *Battered Women & Feminist Lawmaking* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 77.

the connections between these two forms of “horror stories,” articulated throughout paranormal reality television, a process less determined by repression than projection.

Robin Wood, on repression and the horror film of the 1970s, writes: “In psychoanalytic terms, what is repressed is not accessible to the conscious mind [. . .] We may also not be conscious of ways in which we are oppressed, but it is much easier to become so: we are oppressed by something ‘out there.’”⁶⁵ While not informed entirely by the processes of repression and oppression, paranormal reality nevertheless concerns itself with what is “out there;” thus, in these programs, haunted families do not repress any trauma in the family, but instead articulate it through the paranormal, standing in for less immediately visible family trauma. Because of these programs’ designation as reality television, however, the subgenre is particularly subject to challenges regarding its authenticity. In the first episode of *Paranormal State*, team leader Ryan Buell, in addition to dispatching his own crew of paranormal investigators, also consults a child psychologist in order to assist a family whose young son claims to be communicating with the angry dead. Buell states: “Whether it’s paranormal or not, they’re asking for our help, we need to go in there.”⁶⁶ While appearing to grant full faith to the accounts given by the subjects, the series also attempts to maintain a sense of objectivity and avoid causing any additional trauma to the family. In the case of *A Haunting*, the series itself takes no stand on whether or not the individual’s story is true; the producers strive only for faithfulness in retelling the survivor’s account of what transpired. As series producer

⁶⁵ Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan . . . and Beyond*, 64.

⁶⁶ “Sixth Sense,” *Paranormal State*, season 1, episode 1, directed by Bradley Beesley, aired December 10, 2007 (New York, NY: A&E Home Video, 2008), DVD.

Larry Silverman related in an online interview, “We decided early on [. . .] we were going to just tell the story they said happened to them.”⁶⁷ Associate producer Joseph Maddrey, in an interview with John Kenneth Muir, declares: “Our mission, first and foremost, is to scare the audience. The true stories depicted in each episode were chosen with that goal in mind.”⁶⁸ While “scare potential” may be the most compelling factor in the production of *A Haunting*, the producers are also aware that the series is about giving utterance to traumatic experience, with the presence of family trauma often acknowledged as a factor contributing to the paranormal activity. Maddrey sets forth: “Many of the participants in these episodes agreed to be interviewed because they want others to know that hauntings are real. They believe that a program like this may help people in similar situations to cope with the unexplainable. We are giving them a voice.”⁶⁹ While paranormal reality television is primarily structured as horror and sold as reality television, it is also a site granting the participants some credibility, a sense that their trauma and pain are real and cannot be entirely dismissed.

Disbelief is something that survivors of paranormal activities struggle with throughout their ordeal. Just as, Schneider notes, “women who have been subjected to abuse are frequently silent – they do not discuss the events with anyone they know, and

⁶⁷ Hauntedreport, “Fiendish Friday Interview: Larry Silverman of Discovery Channel’s *A Haunting*,” *Blogcritics Video*, last modified October 19, 2007, <http://blogcritics.org/video/article/fiendish-friday-interview-larry-silverman-of/>.

⁶⁸ John Kenneth Muir, “TV Preview: *A Haunting* Arrives!,” *John Kenneth Muir’s Reflections on Film/TV*, last modified October 28, 2005, <http://reflectionsonfilmandtelevision.blogspot.com/2005/10/tv-preview-haunting-arrives.html>.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

they are often unwilling to talk to police or other officials,”⁷⁰ so those experiencing paranormal activities remain silent about their situation. For survivors of domestic violence, this silence is largely the result of the denial afforded their claims by law enforcement, the media, and even loved ones. Schneider emphasizes the threatening nature of battering, as “it strikes at our most fundamental assumptions about the nature of intimate relations and the safeness of family life.”⁷¹ Of the denial faced by survivors of family trauma, Schneider writes: “we need to deny its seriousness and pervasiveness in order to distance ourselves from the possibility of it in our own lives, to deny the interconnectedness of battering with so many other aspects of family life and gender relations.”⁷² Such denial is accompanied by the attribution of pathology to domestic violence survivors,⁷³ similar to that directed at individuals going public with accounts of encounters with the paranormal.

Paranormal Reality and Articulating Family Trauma

Paranormal reality, as a critically marginalized subgenre, examines the troubled American family, articulating cultural anxieties surrounding family trauma, made possible through the convergence of genre, mode, and medium. Reality television structures the articulation of family trauma in melodramatic terms occurring inside the compelling aesthetic of immediacy for which reality television has become known.

⁷⁰ Schneider, *Battered Women*, 107.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 23.

Finally, narrative and aesthetic conventions taken from the horror film and the gothic invoke the psychoanalytic concepts of the uncanny and the “return of the repressed,” as well as the projection of disturbing or incongruous aspects of family onto the paranormal.

In the same manner as the fantastic family sitcom of the 1960s, paranormal reality succeeds in making strange a familiar institution often mistaken as a given: the uncanny American family and its equally uncanny domestic setting. Despite what would appear to be paranormal reality’s narrative emphasis on eradicating spirits from the haunted family home, its tendency towards a lack of narrative closure, endemic to the medium of television itself, continuing to articulate family trauma. As one subject, featured in an episode of *A Haunting*, relates:

They did the best they could and they made the decisions they felt were the right decisions. But I just wish to God that they would have found some other way or some other home or someplace else that we could have gone and had some normalcy in our life because our childhoods were robbed because of this house and the things that transpired in this house.

For the family members telling their stories, paranormal reality television signifies an opportunity to inform others that they are not alone and to revisit their own traumatic experiences, attempting to make peace with them and refusing to run, lest the haunting continue. In Chapter IV, I examine the specific narrative characteristics and conventions, employed by paranormal reality to articulate family trauma, structuring how these programs attempt to make sense of extraordinary events and familial breakdown.

CHAPTER IV

HOW TO HAUNT A HOUSE: PARANORMAL REALITY NARRATIVES

“It's only by our lack of ghosts we're haunted.”
--Earl Birney, “Can. Lit” (1947)

Although Birney was referencing Canadian literature, he could have just as easily been describing paranormal reality television where, no matter how forcefully they are summoned, ghosts fail to materialize for investigators and camera crews (barring special effects-augmented re-enactment scenes in a program such as *A Haunting*). Of the ghost in a series such as *Paranormal State*, Karen Williams, in her article “The Liveness of Ghosts: Haunting and Reality TV,” observes: “The idea of the ‘ghost’ is always blurred, as each situation [. . .] is rife with a network of symbolic haunting already: family disputes, violent death, suicide, molestation, domestic abuse.”¹ Paranormal reality television is haunted by its lack of ghosts, while also notably concerned, as Williams suggests and as established in Chapter III, with familial breakdown and trauma articulated through the horror of the paranormal. While Chapter III delineated paranormal reality television as a subgenre and phenomenon, this chapter analyzes specific narrative aspects of paranormal reality to determine how, as a subgenre, it articulates family trauma, building upon a similar model established by the paranormal family horror film discussed in Chapter II.

¹ Karen Williams, “The Liveness of Ghosts: Haunting and Reality TV,” in *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted Spaces of Everyday Culture*, eds. María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Preen (New York: Continuum, 2010), 160.

Beginning with the “too good to be true” domestic space of the haunted family home (usually purchased for a suspiciously low price despite its seemingly utopian nature), I examine how the accumulation and escalation of paranormal activity parallels the cycle associated with domestic violence and the process of what has been termed by domestic violence scholars as “progressive entrapment.” Moving from a “honeymoon” phase, in which the family first acquires and moves into the house, to an increasingly oppressive atmosphere of dread and terror, the family experiences sustained difficulty in defending itself against the paranormal and finds it necessary to either leave the house or seek outside help. I then briefly explore how families depicted in paranormal reality television are constructed, with a “dread of difference” surfacing not only in the hauntings themselves but also in representations of families existing outside the heterosexual, white, middle-class family ideal (again, one comes away from paranormal reality suspecting that queer families and families of color are somehow given wide berths by the paranormal). I then investigate how these heteronormative families interact with the paranormal, primarily in terms of gender, with the most visible articulation of family trauma being the recurring figure of the “possessed patriarch,” the husband and father driven to the emotional and physical abuse of his family as the result of possession by the entities in the house.

As the counterpart of the haunted family, the ghost or entity also works to articulate family trauma, often as the spectral reminder of some past domestic tragedy and requiring the act of “excavation” (through communication with the spirits or by undertaking archival research into the house’s history) that provides a means of

unearthing the past and coming to terms with trauma present in the family. Making the decision to go public leaves family members open to scorn and ridicule, similar to that afforded family violence survivors seeking to make their experiences known. Karen Williams suggests the true potential of these programs as she writes: “What these shows suggest, in their lack of documentable paranormal reality, is that the power of reality TV lies as much in its depiction of the *experience* of reality as it does in the depiction of reality itself.”² In lieu of tangible entities, we see families attempting to cope with being haunted as well as experiencing familial breakdown, with family trauma articulating as the real ghost of paranormal reality television.

Too Good To Be True: Progressive Entrapment in the Dream House

Nearly all of the episodes comprising these programs begin, like the paranormal family horror film, with families moving into what they consider “too good to be true” homes, purchased or rented for conspicuously less than fair market value and often notably spacious, imbued with historical character, or otherwise comfortable and highly desirable. Some of the houses featured are every inch the traditional haunted house, abandoned by previous owners and in decrepit condition, described by realtor types as “fixer-uppers,” more affordably priced and requiring extensive renovation. Others may be in better condition, yet are no less intimidating in their evocation of the gothic. These houses, whether they are initially marked as haunted or not, call to mind the glamour and prosperity of an oppressive past as well as the increasing difficulty of obtaining home

² Ibid., 154.

ownership in the economically turbulent early 21st century, once again suggesting the undercurrent of financial anxiety that informs paranormal reality and its articulations of family trauma.

More often than not, however, they are recognizably middle-class homes, built in the past century, and located in typical suburban neighborhoods, devoid of the traditional gothic trappings commonly associated with the haunted house.³ Some of the houses featured are less than ten years old, while others are apartments or mobile homes. The overwhelming majority of the locations are in the continental United States, in predominantly suburban and rural settings as opposed to urban. Families seek out affordably-priced housing, possessed of plenty of room for their various members (in a noteworthy number of episodes, there is a baby on the way). Neighbors may avoid the house, local folklore may suggest something odd about the property, and realtors may even disclose past misfortunes to explain the lower price, but for the most part the families depicted are thrilled by their discovery and set about moving into their new home. Yet it soon becomes clear that there are very good reasons why these properties are so easily had and the dreams of their owners so simply attained (however briefly).

The new owners of these homes soon discover that they are not alone, whether as a result of a previous tragedy in the house, a family member's dabbling in the occult, or the house itself being built atop a desecrated burial site. There is always a catch in paranormal reality, involving the presence of either ghosts in the form of a haunting connected to past tragedy, or a demonic presence already present in the house. Sooner or

³ Unlike the haunted houses of literature and film, the family homes on display in paranormal reality are not granted malevolent sentience or any sense of a "life of their own." The emphasis is on the afflicted family and the paranormal forces they encounter as they go about their familial and domestic business.

later, the presence reveals itself, often through a series of accumulating symptoms (noises, apparitions, nightmares, etc.) and often accompanied by other strange events, including the onset of bad luck for the new owners or even the deaths of household pets. Narrative after narrative witnesses families forced to make decisions about how to deal with their situation: to reclaim their home, co-exist with whatever they share their home with, or attempt to escape.

Even at this preliminary stage of plot development, the narrative works to articulate family trauma, particularly in the form of domestic violence. What horror critic John Kenneth Muir has termed the “honeymoon stage”⁴ of paranormal reality television echoes the initial stages in the battering cycle, as outlined by sociologist Ann Goetting in *Getting Out: Life Stories of Women Who Left Abusive Men*. In her introduction, Goetting writes: “Typically, a woman is seduced into a battering relationship by the charming and charismatic side of a man’s dual personality.”⁵ Here, the abusive partner of domestic violence is articulated through the haunted house and its gradual entrapment of its new owners, blinded by their attraction to the seemingly ideal house and a bright future. As the family, initially unaware of the malevolent presence in their home, exhibits gratitude for their good fortune, the individual unwittingly entering into an abusive relationship “is thrilled and feels fortunate to have found this desirable [partner] who is so caring.”⁶

⁴ John Kenneth Muir, “TV Review: *A Haunting*: “Echoes From the Grave,” *John Kenneth Muir’s Reflections on Film/T.V.*, last modified November 12, 2007, <http://reflectionsonfilmandtelevision.blogspot.com/2005/11/tv-review-haunting-echoes-from-grave.html>.

⁵ Ann Goetting, *Getting Out: Life Stories of Women Who Left Abusive Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*

However, as noted, this overwhelming sense of thankfulness is soon subdued by the same kind of accumulation found in paranormal reality's representations of haunting. Much like the haunted house, the abusive partner begins to show his or her true nature, a gradual and often subtle process described by Goetting as engendering "a climate of intimidation, self-doubt, blame, humiliation, and fear to progressively entrap [the abused partner] in a relationship of servitude."⁷ This closely parallels the progressive entrapment experienced by families in programs such as *A Haunting* and *Paranormal State*, marked by intimidation and a steadily accumulating series of characteristic symptoms.

Regarding escalation in the battering cycle, Goetting writes: "The batterer may smash things, destroy the woman's property, abuse her pets, and display weapons. Intimidation can extend to direct threats—to leave her, to injure her, to commit suicide, to report her to welfare authorities—and ultimately escalate to include physical assault."⁸ Symptoms of escalating abuse bear a striking resemblance to the escalating symptoms of the hauntings experienced by families in paranormal reality television.

Family, Trauma, and the Dread of Difference

Paranormal reality television depicts its fragmented families almost entirely in nuclear terms (married couples with children, with fathers as primary economic providers, a gendered division of labor in the household, and the expectation of emotional

⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁸ Ibid., 8.

self-sufficiency within the family itself)⁹. The cumulative effect, after endless hours of viewing these programs, is the recognition that families of color and queer families simply don't get haunted. At least, they don't in paranormal reality, where family is securely affirmed as middle-class, heterosexual, and white. Even as paranormal reality subtly positions queerness as a potential anodyne for trauma affecting the heteronormative family, erasures of sexual difference in considerations of family trauma have dire consequences for queer families as well. As with families of color, the subgenre's suggestion that queer families do not get haunted, through their absence in series narratives, parallels a similar absence in discourses surrounding domestic violence. Elizabeth M. Schneider acknowledges that "the mainstream domestic violence movement has long operated from a heterosexist perspective."¹⁰ Schneider writes that "without expanding our definitions of battering beyond the traditional heterosexual framework, it will be impossible to reach out to and assist battered lesbians and gay men in the community."¹¹ Confining the presence of visible queerness to individuals seeking to help heteronormative families, paranormal reality denies queer families the space for articulating family trauma that it provides others.

In paranormal reality, racial and sexual difference are erased in order to maintain the ideal American family as middle-class, heterosexual, and most of all... white. Robin

⁹ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 66.

¹⁰ Elizabeth M. Schneider, *Battered Women & Feminist Lawmaking* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 68.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

R. Means Coleman, in *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present*, discusses the horror genre and its “affirmative construction of Whiteness through racial segregation or exclusion,”¹² noting that in horror films, “Blackness became a sort of ghost story symbol or invisible bogeyman.”¹³ People of color have been systematically excluded from the largely white and suburban domestic spaces depicted in paranormal reality, a genre-based red-lining practice. Even as families of color have been excluded from the articulations of family trauma in paranormal reality, they have also been overrepresented in the media in relation to family trauma (with an emphasis on domestic violence and the stereotype of the fatherless family receiving welfare). While racial minorities have been unfairly portrayed as prone to trauma in the family in media coverage, they are denied the privileged status afforded white families in paranormal reality.

Constructed by paranormal reality television, family is almost exclusively presented as not only white and heterosexual but emphatically middle class. This emphasis becomes particularly intense in *A Haunting* and its dramatic re-enactments of the events in question. While the original family members appear on-camera to describe their experience, the re-enactment replaces the original family members with professional actors. In this process, *A Haunting* revises its families, dramatically (and frequently hilariously) altering the physical appearance and demeanor of the original family; in the re-enactments, everyone is camera-ready, blandly attractive and as prepared for a

¹² Robin R. Means Coleman, *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 147.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 146.

paranormal encounter as much as they are to shoot a toothpaste or cough syrup commercial. *Paranormal State*, *Ghost Hunters*, and *Psychic Kids* all eschew the re-enactment style used by *A Haunting* and also feature slightly more socioeconomically-diverse families; however, when lower-middle to lower-class families are depicted, it is not uncommon for the program to suggest their partial complicity in their ordeal, having attracted the paranormal either through their own dysfunction or other forms of excess associated with lower-ranked social classes. This perspective is rarely applied to middle-class and upper middle-class families on display. While they might fail to question an absurdly low house price or foolishly tinker with a Ouija board, they are rarely depicted as pathological or highly complicit in their own trauma.

“The Devil in Syracuse,” an episode from the first season of *Paranormal State*, provides an example of the subgenre’s engagement with lower middle-class families. The client is a woman named Teena, in her late 30s and living in a single-wide trailer in Syracuse, New York, with her husband Raymond and their two small children. Lead investigator Ryan, after visiting the house and speaking with the family, gives his preliminary diagnosis of the situation, a judgment not only of the phenomena but of Teena, her family, and their home as well: “You take away the demonic, and there’s still a lot of depression, there’s still a lot of sadness, there’s still a lot of struggle. If the demonic are here, they have a lot to feed off of.” Teena, at this point, sadly interjects: “So we kind of brought it on ourselves?” Later, Ryan meets with Teena and gives her some “homework,” stating: “the house, symbolically, it’s saying everything’s a mess in your life, they feed on that; the house needs to be cleaned, because that’s a sign you’re saying,

‘I’m getting my life back in order.’ Ryan’s conflation of an orderly house with a safeguard against the demonic evokes stereotypical conceptions of the lower-class family as disorderly and excessive, far from the middle-class ideal against which the paranormal is repeatedly opposed in these programs. one that recurs throughout the subgenre as well as contemporary popular culture, encouraging identification with the middle to upper classes by degrading the legitimacy of any other option.

This is particularly visible in *A Haunting* and the disparity between the actual family members and the actors portraying them in the dramatic re-enactments constituting the bulk of each episode. Of this structuring of victims in the media, Esther Madriz writes: “Media representations of the victim are consistent with images of what ‘being an American’ means. The press loves victims if they are white, middle-, or—better—upper-middle class. Moreover, the media generally present victims as decent, responsible, hard-working, family-oriented people.”¹⁴ This remains true in paranormal reality, where any indication of difference outside the heteronormative family is either rendered horrific and complicit in the haunting or disappeared completely through formal mechanisms such as those involved in casting *A Haunting*’s re-enactments. In other words, when it comes to paranormal reality and its articulations of family trauma, there are families who are capable of being haunted and deserving of our empathy, and there are those who are not.

That this stratification of empathy is primarily signified through women and, in particular, mothers, should come as no surprise, as both the paranormal and paranormal

¹⁴ Esther Madriz, *Nothing Bad Happens to Good Girls: Fear of Crime in Women’s Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 76.

horror have long been gendered as feminine. The media and policymakers continue to portray both family trauma and domestic violence, social problems affecting all genders, as feminized problems, focusing judgment and blame on women and their response (failing to leave an abusive marriage or notify the authorities) rather than male perpetrators and their actions towards their spouses and children. In both the paranormal family horror film and paranormal reality television, mothers are responsible for cleaning up violence and trauma in the patriarchal family home.

Cleaning Up after Patriarchy: The Heroic Mother

Carol J. Clover, in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, observes the gendered nature of horror films dealing with the paranormal and writes that “its supernatural discourse in general is [. . .] emphatically a discourse of females.”¹⁵ Citing the agency displayed by mother Diane in facing her family’s ordeal and, with the assistance of two older women (parapsychologist Dr. Lesh and clairvoyant Tangina), rescuing her abducted daughter from the spirits invading the family’s home, Clover argues how the men in *Poltergeist* (Diane’s husband Steve plus the two male scientists aiding Dr. Lesh) are “shunted aside”¹⁶ in the film’s narrative. This valorization of heroic mothers, also found in paranormal reality television, empowers the maternal in a manner unusual for horror while also deriving its strength from stereotypes emerging from the melodramatic mode and its portrayals of motherhood.

¹⁵ Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 73.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

Horror, as a genre in both film and television, has historically premised its representations of motherhood in terms of what Barbara Creed has conceived of as the “monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject.”¹⁷ As Patricia Brett Erens points out in her analysis of *The Stepfather* (dir. Joseph Ruben, US, 1987), numerous horror films have suggested the mother as the family’s source of horror, rather than its savior, making endless use of narratives in which adult children emerge twisted and dangerous, the result of being too closely attached to the maternal.¹⁸ Many instances in paranormal reality, however, set forth the mother-child relationship as a healthy and even necessary component of surviving trauma, whether in the form of a ghost or an oppressive family situation. This positioning of the maternal in paranormal horror, as noted by Clover, and paranormal reality departs from other representations of mothers in horror, where they are presented as Oedipal harridans, resulting in Freudian case studies such as Mrs. Bates in *Psycho* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, US, 1960) and Mrs. Voorhees in *Friday the 13th* (dir. Sean S. Cunningham, US, 1980) whose own pathological child rearing practices transform their respective sons into mother-obsessed serial killers.

Addressing paranormal horror and its gendering as female in *Dark Places: The Haunted House in Film*, Barry Curtis states that “the spatially complex and contradictory

¹⁷ Barbara Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection,” in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 35.

¹⁸ Patricia Brett Erens, “*The Stepfather*: Father as Monster in the Contemporary Horror Film,” in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 362.

spaces of haunting are often closely associated and identified with the woman whose responsibility it is to investigate, understand and ‘lay’ the ghost.”¹⁹ In paranormal reality, mothers are overwhelmingly the first to believe and sympathize with their children’s fear concerning what is transpiring in their home, taking action to keep the family safe and whole, while also seeking to cleanse the house of any malevolent presence. During numerous testimonies in these programs, mothers voice their intention to fight for their loved ones, despite their own fear: “I’m in defense mode. I’m in Mama Bear Mode. Don’t mess with my kids.”²⁰ Another mother, undertaking a cleansing ritual to release her young son from demonic possession, states: “I’m not a priest. I’m not a shaman. I was just the mom, and I was fighting for my family.”²¹ In both cases, these mothers are referring to an external threat, but they could just as easily be referring to more immediate trauma arising from inside the family and articulated through accounts of the paranormal. It is the emotional strength and courage of mothers, as opposed to the physical strength and patriarchal power of fathers, that guides the family through their paranormal ordeal. Fathers might fall under the sway of the house or desert the family, but mothers stay and see their family through.

Paranormal reality represents a mother’s story, in many ways; however, it is a story informed by both notions of both empowerment and essentialism, reiterating

¹⁹ Barry Curtis, *Dark Places: The Haunted House in Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 16.

²⁰ “Dark Forest,” *A Haunting*, season 2, episode 9, aired September 21, 2006 (Eugene, OR: Timeless Media Group, 2008), DVD.

²¹ “Demon Child,” *A Haunting*, season 2, episode 3, aired July 6, 2006 (Eugene, OR: Timeless Media Group, 2008), DVD.

paranormal reality's close relationship to the family melodrama,²² a mode often premised on what Linda Williams has termed an "idealized empathic but powerless mother."²³ At the same time, however, this valorization of gender difference exhibits essentialist notions of the feminine and motherhood, placing the burden of the family's survival on wives and mothers. Elizabeth M. Schneider observes that "women have been socialized to stay in the family – to keep the family together no matter what."²⁴ Schneider notes that "a whole category of bad mothering is reserved for women who appear to be placing their own needs or interests ahead of their responsibility to the children,"²⁵ enshrining fixed understandings of how motherhood should and can be performed, understandings that also come to inform how we conceive of family trauma and "proper" responses to it by mothers and women as a whole. Although the privilege granted the heroine mothers represents a source of empowerment in the face of the paranormal and family trauma, it also propagates narrow and essentialist understandings of gender and creates a disproportionate responsibility for women in the face of patriarchal oppression and violence.

Although playing upon an essentialist stereotype, paranormal reality's mothers, in their consistent role as heroine, emerge as what may be the sole source of strength and admiration for their families. Fathers, meanwhile, exhibit little power beyond initially

²² Tony Williams, *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film* (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), 6.

²³ Linda Williams, "'Something Else Besides a Mother?': *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama," in *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film & Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 321.

²⁴ Schneider, *Battered Women*, 77.

²⁵ Ibid.

denying their family's suspicions of paranormal activity, forcing them to remain in the house or ordering the children to go back to their own beds, doing nothing but endangering them further in myriad displays of patriarchal authority and privilege. It is almost always mothers confronting the paranormal and searching for remedies to keep their family safe and intact, while fathers are usually at work, out of town, or even simply just not around.

By Patriarchy Possessed

Fathers prove decidedly less dependable than mothers in paranormal reality, where they are the least likely to believe in the paranormal and the last to accept what is happening beneath the family's roof. After realizing what is occurring, any attempts to protect his family and property prove futile, confined to shouting at and challenging the ghost, demanding that he and his family be left alone. Even as the father finds himself unable to protect his family, he often also experiences problems with work or finances, imputed to the paranormal ("the business was fine until we moved into that house"). These two specific failures become crucial when the family seeks to move from the haunted house, and is prevented due to a lack of funds or delays in putting the house up for sale. He simply can't defend his family physically or financially. In paranormal reality, both traditional masculinity and fatherhood are stripped of the power typically granted them by society and its constructions of gender.

Besides representing a failed or absent patriarchy, fathers in paranormal reality television also become active sources of danger to their families, in the form of the "possessed patriarch": the family patriarch, benevolent before moving into the house,

begins to drink excessively and engages in frightening displays of rage and violence -- all of which are blamed on the oppressive nature of the house and its ghosts, evoking the paranormal family horror film and similarly weakened/dangerous fathers such as Jack Torrance in *The Shining*. One example of this recurring narrative in paranormal reality can be found in yet another episode of *A Haunting*, "House of the Dead," where Bill Bean refuses to heed his wife Patricia's suspicions that their home is haunted, ignoring her pleas to move. Bill also commences drinking heavily and becomes abusive towards his wife and family, ultimately abandoning his wife and children, who are left to cope with whatever is occurring in their home. Oldest daughter Patty, in her testimony, states: "When I was 16, being in that house was difficult. One reason being the presence that I always felt, the fear, constant fear." Son Billy also claims: "I would go outside, every night, and look up at the sky and just want something to take me away. Just take me away from all this." These statements, although referencing the events of the haunting, could also be applied to children dealing with traumatic abuse in the family home in which the family patriarch is presented as going from loving and dependable to violent and unstable as the result of the entities found in the home. The patriarch traumatizes and then abandons his family, either through leaving or through forcing his wife to take the children and depart, closely aligning fathers with the paranormal and the threat it poses to the family. The possessed patriarch of paranormal reality embodies horror through his depiction of the uncanny family man, one seemingly hell-bent on controlling and destroying his family.

Invisible Guests: Ghosts and Other Entities

Monstrous patriarchal figures may offer one of the more visible articulations of family trauma in paranormal reality television, but regular viewers nevertheless eagerly anticipate the appearance of the paranormal, an anticipation which is rarely fulfilled. Entities encountered by the various families and hosts in these programs are sometimes visible (as in the special effects-enhanced re-enactments of *A Haunting*) but are usually not seen by the audience at large, being found instead primarily in the close analysis of events during a paranormal investigation, with the ghosts or entities existing only through description.

Rather predictably, several ghosts in these programs are figures from non-recent history; some of these may be figures representing the irrational brutality of national history while others may simply belong to a pantheon of pathological or otherwise tragic white people from previous generations, perpetuating that gothic sense of dreadful inheritance in history and the inability of escaping a brutal, irrational past. A number of the hauntings presented are also suggested to be the work of “Native American spirits” or those connected with slavery, with racial difference serving as a source of racialized dread rather than an indictment of past injustices (as discussed in Chapter II). While some entities may be the ghosts of persons once living, others are attributed to the “demonic”; in paranormal reality, the demonic is usually described as being much more frightening and dangerous. In paranormal reality, demons are distinguished from ghosts in that they are non-human malevolent entities, capable of shifting forms and waging war in order to take and maintain control of the family members and their home.

Ghosts are often strangers to the families they haunt, the result of a previous occupant's tragic death (illness, violence, accident, suicide) in the family home, and many family homes in paranormal reality are haunted by dead children. Some have died as the result of illness or accident, but others did so following criminal mistreatment including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, with the child's death usually caused by a caregiver figure. Homicide victims are often present as ghosts alongside their killers, also trapped in the home as the result of their crime. Even when they are not actively malevolent towards the family, they are presented as fearsome in their (dis)embodiment of difference. In some cases, the ghosts may be known to the family, with relatives having returned to haunt either their surviving loved ones or the house where they died. These ghosts often speak of depression, suicide, abuse, addiction, and other forms of trauma having taken place in the family's history, revealing previously concealed/unacknowledged trauma including significant spousal and child abuse in both the past and present. It's worth noting, in closing, that for the most part, the ghosts in paranormal reality are rarely the friendly sort. A few may seek assistance from the living, but they are still presented as horrific in their insistence on being acknowledged through the excavation of past and present trauma.

Excavation and Going Public

Of this excavation and its necessity, Curtis writes: "In the haunted house it is necessary to excavate in order to discover the source of the disturbance, but excavation carries with it the danger of releasing repressed meanings and bringing unexpected

entities back to life.”²⁶ Excavation takes place in forms both literal, through the altering the house via impromptu remodeling, ripping out walls or floorboards in search of answers (or human remains), and figurative in the necessity of families acknowledging and dealing with their own trauma, distinct from the paranormal. As part of this excavation of family trauma, members must also overcome their reluctance, shame, or fear in discussing past experiences or conflicts, sharing their stories through either the re-enactment format of *A Haunting* or through more direct interviewing as found in *Psychic Kids* or *Paranormal State*, with paranormal investigators consciously acting as mediators or unofficial family therapists.

One of the more overt examples of family trauma and its articulation through the paranormal in these programs is found in the “Dead and Back” episode of *Paranormal State*, where the investigative team is contacted by Viki, a middle-aged Alabama woman being tormented by a “shadow man” who has taken up residence in her home. She avoids sleeping in her bedroom and stays out of the kitchen, as those rooms are where the entity’s presence seems to be the strongest. As part of the team’s questioning, Viki mentions her late father, an abusive alcoholic who died while cleaning a gun that fired by accident. It is soon suggested that the entity, which “smells of booze” and seems intent on physically harming Viki, may indeed be the ghost of her father, who Viki reveals to have sexually abused her as a child, abuse that Viki had largely repressed, along with previous experiences with the paranormal, until the advent of the haunting. Lead investigator Ryan and psychic/medium Chip Coffey urge both Viki and her grown daughter Niki to

²⁶ Curtis, *Dark Places*, 110.

acknowledge and stand up to the ghost, with a fed-up Viki shouting at the entity that he cannot stay while Ryan verbally casts him out of the home. Afterwards, while Viki still reports a dark presence in the house, she can at least sleep in her own room again. “Dead and Back” is but one example of how paranormal reality articulates spousal abuse, sexual assault and incest, and substance abuse in the family.

While family trauma may manifest most visibly as violence or addiction originating in the family, it can also take subtler forms, relating to recent tragedy or loss in the family (whether through illness, death, or in one case, parental abandonment following a divorce). Divorce itself is often present in these narratives, which feature a remarkable number of single mothers along with recently remarried parents moving their blended families into uncanny new homes. The marriages we do see are frequently undermined by relationship strain, often aggravated by financial problems and resulting in an atmosphere of chronic tension. Integral to paranormal reality is the necessity of the family telling not only their ghost story but making public their own traumatic family story as well.

However, when these families seek to go public with their trauma, they face yet another ordeal from the skepticism and outright ridicule to which they are subjected in telling their story and attempting to locate resources. Their increased visibility in the community makes them prey to suspicious neighbors and friends as well as curiosity seekers and exploitation, often creating an atmosphere of shame and stigma, resulting in the further isolation of the haunted and traumatized family. Families in paranormal reality are frequently accused of seeking attention, suffering from mental illness, or being of an

otherwise weak and pathological mind--similar accusations are all too often leveled at the survivors of family trauma. Ann Goetting points to the importance of concern, belief, and support for domestic violence survivors,²⁷ even as a patriarchally-structured society often works to keep individuals in abusive family situations,²⁸ the result of insufficient moral and legislative support for those trying to escape a home haunted by trauma. One woman, in an episode of *Psychic Kids*, relates: "If you tell other people, they don't even believe you. They might think you're crazy, then they might even try to take your kids away from you."²⁹ This statement sets forth the stakes involved in going public with one's traumatic experience with the paranormal and simultaneous articulations of family trauma, suggesting the continued high stakes surrounding the reception of accounts of family violence and trauma. Charges of deception and pathology undermine survivors of family trauma, stigmatizing their experiences and hindering their attempts at disclosure. Fearful of public humiliation and articulating their own trauma through the paranormal, the families of paranormal reality television also find themselves isolated and reluctant to seek outside help.

Paranormal reality's decided lack of visible ghosts compels the subgenre's reliance on personal narratives provided by families living in allegedly haunted houses. These narratives of paranormal activity articulate family violence and trauma through

²⁷ Goetting, *Getting Out*, 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁹ "The Demon House," *Psychic Kids: Children of the Supernatural*, season 1, episode 3, aired June 30, 2008 (New York, NY: A&E Home Video, 2008), DVD.

specific conventions of paranormal horror, originating in the “too good to be true” home into which the family moves and the progressive entrapment that occurs as symptoms of a haunting begin to accumulate. While mothers are shown to be resourceful and heroic, the result of essentialist notions of intuition and empathy, fathers are seen as weak in spiritual and financial terms, the last to believe their loved ones’ claims, especially susceptible to harming them as the result of possession, and helpless to protect them in their failure to provide the monetary means for escaping the home. Entities encountered by the family articulate past forms of family trauma (by way of previous tragedies in the house) while also linked to historical trauma at the national level including slavery, warfare, and the exploitation and exclusion of Native Americans and other minority groups and demonstrating the necessity and potential cost of excavating and dealing with past trauma in the family. At the same time, these programs and their articulations portray the isolation and shame experienced in attempts to go public with their accounts, subject to the belief of their community along with viewers of paranormal reality.

Chapter V explores paranormal reality’s attempts to negotiate both the paranormal and family trauma through the “ghost hunter.” As Chapter IV has suggested, family in paranormal reality’s articulations are aggressively constructed as white, middle-class, and heterosexual, erasing difference or marginalizing difference as a source of horror, aligned with the paranormal and the threat it poses to the heteronormative family. However, it is in the process of negotiating or managing the paranormal that difference is finally allowed a degree of visibility, assisting the troubled families presented in each episode.

CHAPTER V

REVERSING THE DREAD OF DIFFERENCE:

THE REAL GHOSTBUSTERS OF

PARANORMAL REALITY TV

So, what side of the rainbow are we working tonight, Dr. Lesh?
--Steve Freeling (Craig T. Nelson) to Dr. Lesh (Beatrice Straight) after meeting
the clairvoyant Tangina Barrons (Zelda Rubinstein) in *Poltergeist* (dir. Tobe
Hooper, US, 1982)

Addressing *The Exorcist*, Carol Clover notes: “In its fully secularized form, the exorcism story is not a horror drama at all but a psychological one in which [. . .] the afflicted person is not possessed but emotionally distressed, the exorcist is not a priest but a psychiatrist, and the treatment not incantations, but some version of the ‘talking’ cure.”¹ How this “cure” for trauma is reached in paranormal reality’s articulations of family trauma, however, is a process largely determined through the “ghost hunter,” informed by the interaction between what Clover refers to as “White Science” and “Black Magic.”² Describing White Science, Clover writes that it “refers to Western rational tradition. Its representatives are nearly always white males, typically doctors, and its tools are surgery, drugs, psychotherapy, and other forms of hegemonic science.”³ Meanwhile,

¹ Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 67.

² *Ibid.*, 66.

³ *Ibid.*

the rational tradition represented by White Science is juxtaposed against Black Magic, which Clover describes at length:

Black magic, on the other hand, refers to Satanism, voodoo, spiritualism, and folk variants of Roman Catholicism. A world of crosses, holy water, séances, candles, prayer, exorcism, strings of garlic, beheaded chickens, and the like, its inhabitants are blacks, Native Americans, mixed-race peoples (especially Cajuns and Creoles), and third-world peoples in general, children, old people, priests, Transylvanians—but first and foremost, women.⁴

Clover's thorough discourse upon Black Magic makes it clear that, in opposition to White Science and its emphasis on rationality and patriarchal authority, its counterpart is the domain of the marginal, manifesting difference generally obscured in representations of family found in paranormal reality. Though noting the gendered nature of this distinction, Clover also suggests that the "occult horror film," in its competing traditions, "repeatedly elaborates the distinction between White Science and Black Magic in racial, class, and gender terms."⁵ This tension between established and emerging sources of knowledge and power demonstrates paranormal reality television's most visible grappling with difference, including not only gender and race but also queerness, otherwise erased from the subgenre's articulations of family trauma.

Throughout paranormal reality, salvation (or at least its potential) has been embodied in the figure of the ghost hunter, a category including experts in technology and surveillance, psychics, mediums, sensitives, priests,⁶ shamans, Wiccans, and other

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 67.

⁶ It is worth noting that organized religion, in paranormal reality television, is primarily signified as Roman-Catholicism (consistent with its sister subgenre, the paranormal family horror film, discussed in Chapter II), with white men of late middle-age clad in priestly robes and making use of both scripture and holy water in the service of blessing afflicted homes. Even when the featured religious authority is not expressly stated as representing the Roman-Catholic church (assorted pastors and bishops are also seen, of

practitioners of alternative belief systems; even trained and licensed psychologists and mental health counselors, all employed for the purposes of helping family members negotiate trauma. Ghost hunters act to validate their experiences without taking objectivist stances regarding their veracity. Investigations undertaken by ghost hunters into the heteronormative family offer what may be paranormal reality television's most visible engagement with difference in the form of gender, race, and sexuality. Traditional masculinity is undermined through ineffectual aggression towards the spirits and displays of abject fear by male ghost hunters, followed by overcompensation typified by anger and the continued taunting of the ghosts. At the same time, while female ghost hunters are predictably depicted as largely subordinate to their male counterparts, they also emerge as principle figures in the emotional function of these programs (similar to the heroic mother discussed in Chapter IV), and foster empowerment from fear.

Racial difference is made visible among ghost hunters, but remains contradictory even as it is depicted as benevolent, with the racial Other being a distinct minority among the majority of ghost hunters, implicitly raced as white. Represented in programs such as *A Haunting* and *Paranormal State* as shamans and otherwise mystical figures, persons of color occupy minimal space in the narrative, their knowledge and practices frequently appropriated by white ghost hunters and family members. Meanwhile, seeking to help families rather than threatening them through previous associations between queerness,

vague denominational affiliation), they continue to draw upon its practices; indeed, one "independent priest" states that he nevertheless follows Roman-Catholic rituals for interacting with the paranormal. However, much as in the paranormal family horror film of the late 1970s and early 1980s, mainstream religion is not presented as the sole route to salvation for these families; instead, it is presented as one option among many, ranging from more conventional to alternative recuperative and therapeutic practices.

monstrosity, and horror, queer ghost hunters present and embody alternatives and resources for families who feel they have nowhere else to turn.

Integration vs. Exorcism

Making emotionally and spiritually-oriented resources and tools available to their clients, the ghost hunter functions as an unofficial family therapist. Nearly every episode in the paranormal reality programs under discussion depicts this recuperative process in articulating family trauma. Judith Lewis Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery*, writes that “taking steps to change it becomes signs of strength, not weakness; initiative, not passivity. Taking action to foster recovery, far from granting victory to the abuser, empowers the survivor.”⁷ Empowerment as a means of combating the paranormal is perhaps the ghost hunter’s most significant contribution to his or her client. After all, it has been demonstrated that these programs often end with families still experiencing strange occurrences in their home, and as far as any pseudoscientific aims, ghost hunters have yet to obtain any visual or audio evidence that definitively proves the existence of the paranormal. Instead, the ghost hunter’s function lies in instructing family members how to live with continued activity and take the actions necessary to remain in their house. Furthermore, Lewis Herman notes that other forms of trauma can bring into sharp relief “underlying tensions in family relationships”⁸ which, as discussed in Chapter IV, are frequently present within the larger narrative of the paranormal and usually treated by the ghost hunter alongside the haunting itself.

⁷ Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 159.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

By helping to construct the narratives that comprise paranormal reality, ghost hunters are assisting their clients to engage in the cathartic act of articulating their paranormal experiences, not only to the investigative team but, because this is television, a worldwide audience. While many are eager to share their stories related to the haunting, some family members have to be coaxed into providing greater detail and more background on the family's situation and emotional state. Using an analogy that proves particularly useful for articulating trauma through the paranormal, Lewis Herman also reminds the reader that "the goal of recounting the trauma story is integration, not exorcism."⁹ This integration, as opposed to exorcism (a "miracle cure"), is fundamental in treating traumatic disorders and can be achieved, at least partially, through the reconstruction offered by telling one's story, which "transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor's story."¹⁰ Through discussion and receiving both empathy and validation from the investigative team, the client is then able to view their frightening, extraordinary experience as somehow fitting into their ordinary experience, as an acknowledged and accepted moment in his or her personal historical narrative. Of treating traumatized individuals, Judith Lewis Herman notes, "The goal is not to obliterate fear but to learn how to live with it, and even how to use it as a source of energy and enlightenment."¹¹ This empowerment is gained first through presenting the narrative of one's experiences, countering the feelings of helpless and isolation that prove characteristic of psychological trauma. By placing these inexplicable events into a

⁹ Ibid., 181.

¹⁰ Ibid., 175.

¹¹ Ibid., 199.

narrative and seeing themselves as part of a larger community, and realizing that others have had similar experiences, clients are able to feel increased control over their experience. Lewis Herman states: “The survivor no longer feels possessed by her traumatic past; she is in possession of herself.”¹² Yet at the same time, as Lewis Herman notes and as the inconclusive final scenes of countless episodes in this subgenre suggest, “Resolution of trauma is never final; recovery is never complete.”¹³ Whether the spirits are definitively laid to rest, these families clearly have a great deal of work ahead of them in restoring their sense of safety in their home and their emotional bonds to one another.

Getting to Know the Ghost Hunter

This process begins when investigative teams are contacted by families experiencing paranormal activity. Case managers or other designated personnel then complete intake procedures, gather basic information and then compile a list of accumulated symptoms which are then used to determine whether the team will investigate, a determination generally made by the team lead.¹⁴ The investigative team meets the family and receives a tour of the house, observing any sensations or events occurring as they move through the house. Further interviewing of the family takes place at this time, outlining paranormal occurrences in closer detail: for example, a child psychologist may speak to the children in the family, while dialogue with the parents may uncover symptoms not immediately related to the paranormal, including strain in the

¹² Ibid., 202.

¹³ Ibid., 211.

¹⁴ On occasion, *Paranormal State* has conducted promotional tours for the purposes of gathering information for potential new investigations as well as meeting fans (Justin George, “Visitors from a New Twilight Zone,” *St. Petersburg Times*, December 8, 2008).

marriage, financial stress, substance abuse, or any other previous trauma in the family. This process of excavation also consists of looking into the history of the house through archival research and talking to neighbors about tragic occurrences on the property or in the neighborhood, slowly uncovering past trauma as possible motivation for present paranormal activity.

On *Paranormal State*, the team routinely completes their surveillance during what they term “Dead Time,” occurring between 3 and 4 a.m. in the morning (a time when ghosts and other entities are thought by many to be most active). During this time, with cameras and audio recorders in use, team members address and question the unseen phantoms, trying to provoke a response and suggesting an informal séance, while other team members remain alert, listening for strange noises in the house or any other phenomena. On occasion, a psychic or medium may be brought in and attempt to contact the dead through entering a trance state or engaging in automatic writing—a form of possession in which spirits are thought to direct the writing of the medium. Surveillance materials are closely analyzed: often no video or electromagnetic field results are found, but electronic voice phenomena is frequently present and shared with the client, who understandably finds the garbled and usually cryptic utterances of the dead to be simultaneously validating, disconcerting, and frustrating. This quasi-scientific validation of their traumatic experience proves cathartic for the client, permitting them to make choices about how to deal with the activity in their home. In an episode of *Paranormal State*, a young boy terrorized by spirits demonstrates marked improvement following the team’s investigation: he is once again able to sleep in his own bed and is shown

rollerblading and playing outside like any other child, free of fear.¹⁵ For the families and investigative teams of paranormal reality, however, there is rarely any sense of definitive closure. More often than not, the phenomena continues; should it cease, it typically does so only for a period, before commencing again, and the case remains open. Yet ghost hunters confer on the haunted heteronormative family the power to manage their traumatic situation, through encounters with difference affording a greater understanding of the unknown and a sense of validation as the result of the investigation and its findings.

Queer Engagement with the Heteronormative Family

While Chapter IV made it clear that, along with those of racial minorities, queer families are somehow magically exempt from being haunted in the same manner as heterosexual white families, queerness does figure in assisting families residing in haunted homes and dealing with breakdown and trauma. As with gender and race, the ghost hunter of paranormal reality television seems to represent a space in which difference is permitted to manifest as a viable source of authority and support for families, although not without its own share of contradictions. In this study, I am using “queerness” as an umbrella term, my own attempt to provide a more inclusive overview of how sexual difference operates in paranormal reality television. Harry M. Benshoff understands queerness to “encompass a more inclusive, amorphous, and ambiguous contra-heterosexuality.”¹⁶ There exists a longstanding perceived relationship between

¹⁵ “Sixth Sense,” *Psychic Kids: Children of the Supernatural*, season 1, episode 1, aired December 10, 2007 (New York, NY: A&E Home Video, 2008), DVD.

queerness and the monstrous, with religious and social conservatives advancing queer people as pernicious threats to the status quo, particularly the family.

Horror films, in particular, have reflected this conflation of the queer and the monster, as Benschhoff writes that, for many, homosexuality is still perceived as a “monstrous condition”¹⁷ in which “homosexuals supposedly represent the destruction of the procreative nuclear family, traditional gender roles, and (to use a buzz phrase) ‘family values’.”¹⁸ At the same time, Benschhoff notes how “queerness disrupts narrative equilibrium and sets in motion a questioning of the status quo,”¹⁹ suggesting how paranormal reality constructs the relationship between queerness, the paranormal, and the heteronormative family, with queerly positioned individuals enlightening and educating family members as they engage with the spirits and articulate trauma in the family.

Queer engagements with the heteronormative family, however, are not without their own contradictions. As Benschhoff observes, “certain sectors of the population still relate homosexuality to bestiality, incest, necrophilia, sadomasochism, etc.—the very stuff of classical Hollywood monster movies.”²⁰ In classical Hollywood horror films such as *Frankenstein* (dir. James Whale, US, 1931) and its sequel, *Bride of Frankenstein* (dir. James Whale, US, 1935), *Dracula* (dir. Tod Browning, US, 1931), and its follow-up, *Dracula’s Daughter* (dir. Lambert Hillyer, US, 1936), *Psycho* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, US,

¹⁶ Harry M. Benschhoff, “The Monster and the Homosexual,” in *Horror: The Film Reader*, ed. Mark Jancovich (New York: Routledge, 2002), 93.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

1960), and even *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* (dir. Jack Sholder, US, 1985), anxiety related to queerness is articulated through the monster, endangering the status quo of the family and necessitating its own destruction so that the heteronormative family can prevail and order can be restored. Paranormal reality television, however, many times articulates queerness as a recuperative force even as its ghosts, largely unseen yet presented in monstrous terms, continue to symbolically represent the queer menace advanced by social conservatives and the religious right. It is no accident that, given continuing fears regarding the recruitment and indoctrination of innocent children into living queer lives, the ghosts often target the family's children before anyone else.

"Coffey Talk": Queerness and Family in *Paranormal State*

Despite the horror genre's long-standing equation of queerness with the monster, queerly positioned ghost hunters such as *Paranormal State*'s Ryan Buell and *Psychic Kids*' Chip Coffey offer families an increased range of strategies for engaging with the unknown and negotiating trauma. These texts evince a decidedly non-monstrous relationship between lived queer experience and the paranormal itself. As Vito Russo, in *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, states: "Gay sensibility is largely a product of oppression, of the necessity to hide so well for so long. It is a ghetto sensibility, born of the need to develop and use a second sight that will translate silently what the world sees and what the actuality may be."²¹ This "second sight" of which Russo writes bears further thought, suggesting as it does that queer isolation may offer an enhanced ability to question the status quo associated with the heteronormative family.

²¹ Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 92.

Instead of existing as a social problem or a monstrous condition, queerness offers another way of dealing with trauma.

Having founded the Paranormal Research Society (PRS) in 2001, while a student at Pennsylvania State University, Ryan Buell's work as PRS Director has been motivated by his own traumatic experiences with the paranormal.²² Each episode of *Paranormal State* opens with Ryan's voice-over, explaining his own stake in the investigations undertaken by PRS, with Ryan intoning: "When I was a kid, my experiences with the supernatural terrified me, and I've been searching for answers every since."²³ Writing in his 2010 memoir, *Paranormal State: My Journey Into the Unknown*, Buell made another personal revelation, coming out as bisexual "in hopes that others will no longer feel as though they are alone or that they can't be religious."²⁴ Buell's public statement was as much about raising awareness of bisexuality as it was his own attempts to reconcile his Roman Catholic faith with his sexual orientation.²⁵ Only four months after Buell went public as bisexual, he announced on his blog that the fifth season of *Paranormal State* would be its last, citing a desire to pursue other PRS-related interests.²⁶

As it happened, his admission was not a surprise to some: numerous members of the paranormal entertainment industry were already aware of his bisexuality.²⁷ For the

²² Lauren Boyer, "What's Paranormal?" *Patriot News*, December 10, 2007, A1.

²³ "Sixth Sense"

²⁴ "A&E Host Comes Out as Bi," Advocate.com, last modified September 14, 2010, http://www.advocate.com/News/Daily_News/2010/09/14/A_and_E_Host_Comes_Out_as_Bi/.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ryan Buell, "Time To Say Goodbye!" *Timorem Omitte – The Official Blog of Ryan Buell*, last modified January 6, 2011, <http://www.ryanbuell.net/blog/2011/1/6/time-to-say-goodbye.html?currentPage=6>.

most part, fans responded in a supportive manner,²⁸ with one individual posting that “the purpose of the show is and will be the same as always. To help people who are being haunted by something they can’t understand.”²⁹ Some fans saw it as a ploy to sell books,³⁰ while others engaged in heated discussions (and dismissals) of bisexuality, as well as such commentary as “if he’s bi, then I’ll say ‘bye’ to his show. Tired of Hollywood constantly pushing their ‘alternative lifestyle’ agenda on us.”³¹ Overall, however, Buell’s sexual orientation, revealed nearly three years into *Paranormal State*, was well-received with the majority of controversy restricted to bisexuality itself and larger critiques of crass commercialism associated with the marketing of a celebrity memoir.

Meanwhile, a second queerly positioned figure appears on *Paranormal State* along with *Psychic Kids: Children of the Supernatural*. Chip Coffey is a psychic³² and medium reporting to be in communication with the spirit world. According to his website, chipcoffey.com, he has been “practicing” full-time since 2001.³³ In addition to his appearances on these programs, he also engages in nationwide lecture tours (“Coffey

²⁷ “Ryan Buell of *Paranormal State* Comes Out in New Book,” ParanormalPopCulture, last modified September 13, 2010, <http://www.paranormalpopculture.com/2010/09/ryan-buell-of-paranormal-state-comes.html>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² “Chip Coffey – Frequently Asked Questions,” *Chip Coffey.com*, <http://www.chipcoffey.com/faqs.html>.

³³ “Chip Coffey – About Chip,” *Chip Coffey.com*, <http://www.chipcoffey.com/about-chip.html>.

Talk with Chip Coffey”)³⁴ and holds private client readings (\$200 for approximately 30 minutes)³⁵ and will contact the dead on client request (\$500 for approximately 30-40 minutes, with additional family members and friends able to attend for another \$250 per person).³⁶ Bespectacled and of average height, with close-cropped silver hair and often seen wearing a leather jacket with a scarf, Coffey has never been publicly outed by either series in which he appears; his personal life and backstory are never addressed.

Chip’s early appearances in *Paranormal State* offer a welcome counterpoint to the youthful earnestness of the PRS members; a recurring consultant working with the group, Chip’s histrionic reactions to paranormal activity, his melodramatic engagements with the unseen spirit world, and his campy, exaggerated manner as a whole significantly contribute to the overall queer atmosphere and for some, the very appeal of the program. While Chip Coffey’s sexual orientation has not been specifically addressed within the series narrative, it is not difficult to read him through such a lens, considering how a queer perspective functions not as a dismissal or as an irresponsibly speculative act but instead, as a means of determining the function of difference in articulations of family trauma in paranormal reality.

The bulk of controversy associated with Chip involves not his sexuality but charges against him as a fraudulent psychic and medium. Online message boards in the paranormal community of the internet are rife with such claims: one user states that

³⁴ “Chip Coffey – Events and Public Appearances,” Chip Coffey.com, <http://www.chipcoffey.com/events-appearances.html>.

³⁵ “Chip Coffey – Frequently Asked Questions.”

³⁶ Ibid.

Coffey is “a backstabber, a bully, an identity thief, and a liar,”³⁷ even as others commend Coffey, highlighting his good intentions and the overall positive effects that he has had on the children he has worked with through *Psychic Kids*.³⁸ Unfortunately, accusations against Coffey often feature homophobic language,³⁹ aligning the man with the very same dark forces that, in these programs, threaten the family and most particularly, vulnerable children.

One blogger describes Coffey as “Michael Jackson in his guise as the Pied Piper of Neverland; gaily leading children into a fantasy world of their mutual devise,”⁴⁰ and dismisses him as both lonely and immature,⁴¹ two derogatory classifications all too often directed towards queer people. Other online commentators have termed *Psychic Kids* “child abuse,”⁴² and engaged in further conflation of homosexuality with pedophilia, reframing him in the monstrous terms afforded to subtly queered monsters in the classical Hollywood horror films of the 1930s and 40s as set forth by Benshoff.

Within the series narrative, both Ryan and Chip serve as sympathetic and (largely) non-judgmental listeners to clients who are primarily either children or wives

³⁷ Javier Ortega, “Skeptical Q&A with Chip Coffey,” Ghosttheory, last modified September 5, 2009, <http://www.ghosttheory.com/2009/09/05/skeptical-qa-with-chip-coffey>.

³⁸ StepTam, “good job Chip Coffey,” Randi.org, last modified April 27, 2010, <http://www.randi.org/site/index.php/swift-blog/938-this-is-how-rumors-get-started-part-i-chip-coffey.html>.

³⁹ “Brian Thompson Defends Chip Coffey!” Snarly Skepticism . . . (and Unofficial JREF Watch), last modified July 24, 2008, <http://www.theskeptoidzone.com/2008/07/brian-thompson-defends-chip-coffey.html>.

⁴⁰ Brandon K. Thorp, “This is How Rumors Get Started, Part I: Chip Coffey,” Randi.org, last modified April 8, 2010, <http://www.randi.org/site/index.php/swift-blog/938-this-is-how-rumors-get-started-part-i-chip-coffey.html>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Bea, “One Thing is Sure,” Randi.org, last modified April 21, 2010, <http://www.randi.org/site/index.php/swift-blog/938-this-is-how-rumors-get-started-part-i-chip-coffey.html>.

and mothers attempting to find help for their beleaguered loved ones. Through difficult conversations and painful revelations, Ryan and Chip listen carefully, inquiring not only about the paranormal activity itself but also about past trauma in the family. During the emotional confessions made by frightened clients, the two men exhibit patience and compassion while continuing to steer the client towards a state of empowerment and the ability to manage their fear. The queer ghost hunter is adamant regarding the importance of resolving individual and family trauma as part of larger attempts to counter any paranormal presence in the family home.

In addition to working well with female clients, Ryan demonstrates a particular affinity towards working with children claiming to be tormented by the dead, with his own traumatic childhood encounters with the paranormal serving as a means of forming an empathic and supportive bond with these children. Meanwhile, an episode of *Paranormal State* (“Vegas”) has Chip working with Savannah, a 14-year old girl whom the team identifies as a powerful medium and who also suffered a devastating sexual assault earlier in her life. In one scene, Chip sits on the girl’s bed with her, questioning her about her ability to see and communicating with the dead. Rather than acting as a figure of male authority prescribing a course of treatment, he offers to work with her, helping her to hone her talent and become less afraid of her abilities and the visions that it brings while also negotiating trauma and its aftermath.

Unfortunately, in a striking example of the homophobia to which the queer ghost hunter remains subject, one newspaper critic reads this particular scene in markedly

different terms, declaring Savannah's experience with the paranormal as "pedestrian"⁴³ and of Coffey, states that "you can see in him a need to be liked and valued, as if he was an outsider all his life and has finally found a niche in the paranormal,"⁴⁴ describing the scene as evocative of a slumber party and "as strange and creepy a moment as anything that I've seen on the show."⁴⁵ This kind of reaction aside, however, the queer ghost hunter⁴⁶ remains an important ally for the family in crisis, focusing on the management of the paranormal and family trauma. Queerly positioned individuals such as Ryan and Chip perform a masculinity that is a welcome alternative to (and shown to be infinitely more effective than) the more conventional and aggressive masculinity found in *Ghost Hunters* and *Ghost Adventures*.

Running Scared: Masculine Overcompensation and the Real Ghostbusters

In comparison to queerness, performances of so-called traditional masculinity, consisting of taunting and antagonizing spirits, rarely prove effective, with entities failing to appear and instead confining themselves to alleged appearances on EVP or tell-tale readings on electromagnetic field detectors. While nearly all the male ghost hunters depicted engage in this behavior to some degree, Zak Bagans of *Ghost Adventures* is particularly egregious in this respect. Of the supposedly dangerous phantoms they might

⁴³ Michael Murray, "Show is Creepy for the Wrong Reasons; *Paranormal State* is Like *Scooby-Doo* Meets the *Blair Witch Project*," *Ottawa Citizen*, July 5, 2008.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Another notable member of this group, also appearing on *Paranormal State*, is medium Michelle Belanger, born intersexed and occupying a representational space of gender that is far removed from other women featured in paranormal reality television. My reason for not discussing her at length in the chapter proper is that she is a recurring character and appears far less frequently than Ryan and Chip, suggesting that, as in ghost hunting itself, even queer representations of the ghost hunter remain decidedly male.

encounter, Zak insists that he will “provoke the shit out of ‘em” and give them “a taste of their own medicine.” Yet, as before, even these forms of overcompensation fail to compel the participation of any paranormal forces in the vicinity. Just as in this subgenre’s articulations of family trauma, masculinity, particular in its excessive forms, is not granted the privilege that it has often enjoyed elsewhere.

This failure of conventional masculinity in restoring the family (echoing the “possessed patriarch” discussed in Chapter IV) is furthered by paranormal reality’s depictions of male fear during each investigative team’s foray through poorly lit haunted locales. When startled by a sudden noise or shifting shadows, they panic, cry out, and even (in a burst of bleeped-out profanity) flee the scene, departing from socially proscribed ideals of how men should respond to fear. For example, one episode of *Ghost Hunters* depicts an investigation of a penitentiary during which case manager Brian Harnois and a cameraman, overcome by sudden fear, panic and flee the scene. Later, lead investigator Jason reprimands Brian: “You ran like a sissy.” Even the previously mentioned Zak Bagans of *Ghost Adventures* and his crew members engage in an inordinate amount of running and shouting; one episode depicts team member Aaron, a physically large man, in a state verging on hysterics after being badly frightened while sitting guard in a haunted attic. This slippage in the performance of traditional masculinity necessitates what is best described as overcompensation, the ongoing challenging and antagonism that are part of some ghost hunters’ fruitless attempts at removing the paranormal from the family home and assisting family members experiencing trauma. The failure of conventional masculinity, and the effectiveness of queerness in recuperating the heteronormative family suggests the power of difference in

articulating familial breakdown and trauma in paranormal reality television, including differenced based in race and its past associations with horror and the family.

The Further Adventures of the “Magical Negro”

In addition to signifying horror through the recurring trope of hauntings associated with desecrated Native American burial grounds (explored in Chapter II), individuals raced as Other, whether explicitly or implicitly, act as intermediaries between the worlds of the material and the immaterial, helping families experiencing traumatic assaults from the paranormal. Evoking a multiracial form of the “Magical Negro” described by Robin R. Means Coleman and discussed in Chapter II in conjunction with *The Shining*, the racialized Other provides assistance to white families through a purported “natural” congress with the paranormal.⁴⁷ An episode of *A Haunting* (“Cursed”) has an elderly Hispanic man informing the protagonist (also Hispanic), based only on a handshake with her, that her home is a portal for spirits and that she is in danger, with no further explanation of how he obtained this knowledge. Women of color are also seen “cleansing houses” of unwanted negative energy and acting as mediums and intuitives in the service of frightened white families confronted with the unknown. In “Casa de Los Muertos,” another episode of *A Haunting*, a Hispanic family is able to exorcise their son without consulting paranormal investigators or the representatives of organized religion, relying instead on the remembered expertise of an absent grandmother, again clumsily suggesting a sort of natural and genetically-based affinity

⁴⁷ Robin R. Means Coleman, *Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 235.

with the paranormal by virtue of their racial affiliation, an affinity that ultimately benefits only white families before once again consigning racial difference to narrative oblivion.

An episode of *A Haunting*, “Demon Child,” demonstrates how exclusion is achieved through the use of ritual, with the ritual itself becoming symbolic of racial difference, replacing its traditional practitioners and decontextualizing its cultural significance. In “Demon Child,” mother Jan Foster contacts an old friend, a Native American medicine man (she never indicates his tribal affiliation nor is he ever identified by his first name, she just calls him “Shaman”), and in the course of their re-enacted conversation, we see the man (whose dialogue is minimal) in a flannel shirt and bandanna proceeding to instruct her in a traditional Native American ritual. Jan must not only burn the required sage and sweetgrass throughout the house but also anoint its entry points with olive oil and pray for her son Cody’s deliverance from his imaginary playmate, “Man,” who has been revealed to be a demonic entity. This proves successful, for about three months; on the entity’s return, Jan once again contacts the shaman. The episode climaxes with Jan burning sage and waving about a feather, praying and casting the demon out of her home and the lives of her family. This second try proves successful, but also suggests how racial difference is commodified in paranormal reality television, where the symbolic power of ritual is placed in the hands of white, middle-class mothers, appropriating one of the limited spaces in which racial difference is made visible in conjunction with (white) family trauma.

Closing the Case

Episodes end with tearful and grateful clients, usually mothers, effusively thanking the respective investigative teams for their assistance, even when activity continues to occur after the ghost hunters depart. Their individual gratitude stems not from the successful “busting” of the ghosts in their home or attempts to gather visual and aural evidence, as found in *Ghost Hunters* or *Ghost Adventures*, but from the validation provided through the attention and empathy from investigators, as well as the mental health counseling referrals, improved relationships with family members, and an increased sense of safety and well-being in their home. Something might remain, but the heteronormative family is now equipped to manage the phenomena and deal with their trauma. Through engaging with sexual and racial difference, haunted families in paranormal reality television are able to see themselves as members of a distinguished group, one whose members have experienced traumatic encounters, paranormal and otherwise, and have lived to tell the tale.

CHAPTER VI

DEAD TIME: A CONCLUSION

This house is clean.

--Clairvoyant Tangina Barrons (Zelda Rubinstein), near the end of *Poltergeist*
(dir. Tobe Hooper, US, 1982)

“Dead Time” is the hour between three and four in the morning, in which the Paranormal Research Society (PRS) of *Paranormal State* holds their most decisive hour of investigation, sitting in the darkness, cameras rolling, listening for any sound to help the team determine what is happening. The results of this period are then used in determining how to handle the haunting: do they hire a priest or go in a more alternative direction? Should they bring in a medium to communicate further? At the very least, the conclusions reached from this “dead time” help family members to make sense of what is happening in their home. My conclusion to this project, then, stands as my own personal dead time, attempting to make sense of paranormal reality television and its articulations of family trauma. Given the ongoing nature of both the paranormal (with residual activity continuing in many cases) and the effects of trauma (as Judith Lewis Herman notes in *Trauma and Recovery*, recovery from trauma is never complete¹), it would seem rather difficult to produce any sort of definitive conclusion to this project, any satisfactory summation of what it is and what it all means.²

¹ Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 211.

² Along with the financial anxieties undergirding paranormal reality television (emerging from global recession and unstable domestic and foreign markets), further exploration of reality television’s investment

Paranormal-themed horror, with its long and diverse history dating back to mythology, folklore, and literature before film and television, continues to evolve, representing society's most closely-held fears through the process of postmodern articulation as described by Stuart Hall, activating a chain of meaning that substitutes the paranormal for, in this case, trauma taking place in the heteronormative family.

The paranormal family horror film of the 1970s and 80s articulated breakdown and trauma in the family through the cultural anxieties of its period, following a pronounced increase in public discourse concerning family violence. Films such as *The Shining* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, US, 1980) and *The Amityville Horror* (dir. Stuart Rosenberg, US, 1979) depict a perceived crisis of white masculinity following social and economic shifts during those decades, particularly the women's rights movement, which were seen as pushing the white, procreative, middle-class family ever closer to cataclysm. Failed fathers and husbands became possessed by the paranormal and attempted to destroy their loved ones, driven by money woes, alcoholism, and an underlying resentment of any resistance or threat to patriarchal control. Many times, the trauma articulated through the paranormal was then projected onto signs of difference, including race through the commonly cited desecrated Native American burial ground as motivation for a haunting.³ Despite being produced and released in a period of increased public discussion of family dysfunction, paranormal family horror films of the late 1970s and early 1980s articulate family trauma

in neoliberalism may contribute to my reading of these programs as a series of historically-situated trauma narratives.

³ This has become such a familiar narrative element that, as stated in Chapter II, when many viewers recall *Poltergeist* (dir. Tobe Hooper, US, 1982), they remember the family's haunted tract home being built over a Native American burial ground. In actuality, the cemetery on which the neighborhood has been built was a rural cemetery and, from the few ghosts we later see in a procession marching down the family's staircase, would appear to be primarily occupied by the remains of working-class whites.

through substituting the paranormal for direct signs of dysfunction. Paranormal reality television provides similar articulations in the face of economic recession, a rapidly shrinking middle-class, and most important of all, continued rates of family violence and abuse alongside highly-publicized accounts of mothers and fathers killing their own children and other family members.

Critics have suggested that in recent years, the paranormal has been mainstreamed, particularly in television, moving from the margins to popular serials including *Supernatural* and *American Horror Story*, along with reality television series such as *Ghost Hunters* and *Paranormal State*. Although many of these programs air on cable, their success represents the increased visibility of horror on television. Part of this new visibility, paranormal reality is where elements of horror, melodrama, the gothic, and reality programming, informed by psychoanalytic concepts such as projection and the uncanny, intersect to articulate family trauma.

Paranormal reality articulates family trauma through narrative elements such as the “too good to be true” dream house that turns out to harbor terrifying secrets, the progressive entrapment in that house by families unable to afford to move, the heroic mother, and most of all, the possessed patriarch, all substituting for and suggesting family trauma through the paranormal. Depictions of victims of the paranormal and suggestions of their complicity in the horror are informed by gender and class, determining whose story we hear and the belief and support they are granted by both the paranormal investigative teams and viewers. Finally, paranormal reality depends on the act of excavation, whether literal or figurative, and taking private concerns surrounding the

paranormal into the public sphere, a similar coming-out process at work in the reportage of domestic violence and other forms of family trauma.

Excavation in paranormal reality is not a means of exorcising trauma but of integrating it into the individual's life, requiring methods for managing and coping with continued paranormal activity and continued family trauma. Programs such as *Paranormal State* and *Psychic Kids* facilitate this integration through the figure of the ghost hunter, a space in which paranormal reality appears to reverse its dread of difference, although not without a host of contradictions. The failure of ghosts and other entities to materialize for investigative teams and camera crews, even in the face of aggressive overcompensation by heterosexual white male ghost hunters, requires an increased engagement with difference, otherwise absent in paranormal reality. With conventional masculinity shown to be ineffectual, these programs instead present queerly positioned individuals, people of color, and women as more effective in assisting families and laying the ghosts of family trauma.

Horror Begins at Home has established paranormal reality television as a site of struggle between meanings of family and the violence often found in the hegemonic nuclear family ideal. Using ghosts and other entities, who remain ever elusive to our eyes, paranormal reality de-familiarizes the people and places that television has helped us to take for granted, allowing for a closer look at the heteronormative family home and the horror one might find there. Although ghosts, demons, and other entities stand in for violence and trauma taking place in the family, paranormal reality television's articulations continue to remind us that, for many, horror still begins at home.

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