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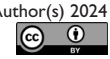
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The Shape of Bigfoot: Transmuting Absences into Credible Knowledge Claims

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Abstract

Bigfoot exists. If not as a biological creature, then as a cultural object about which people *know* with a high degree of stability. It also exists as an object which some people organise their lives around. Those who collect evidence of Bigfoot's existence as a biological creature are known as Bigfooters. Among the most persuasive forms of evidence that they collect are witness accounts of encounters with Bigfoot. Since the 1960s, there have been organised efforts to collect and sort these accounts; for example, thousands are now available online through the Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization (BFRO). Notably, many Bigfooters report that it was an encounter of their own which was the catalyst for them to get actively involved in this research.

The article is part of a larger project examining the epistemic community of Bigfooting, which has involved 166 semi-structured interviews with people involved in Bigfooting and the subject of Bigfoot. These interviews explore the way in which Bigfooters make and contest knowledge, and during these interviews scores of participants shared personal tales of their own close encounters. We add to the work in the sociology of mystery by exploring the ways in which these stories are used to make knowledge claims. We argue that these stories 'make room' for Bigfoot by constructing an absence which can then be filled by what we know to be the 'shape' of Bigfoot, literally and figuratively. We also show how our interviewees present themselves as legitimate interpreters of these absences; when making an incredible claim in a field known for hoaxes, there is an imperative to be seen as credible and not credulous.

Keywords

absences, Bigfoot, credibility, culture, encounters, legitimacy work, Sasquatch, stories

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Introduction

Bigfoot occupies a peculiar position in the American imagination. Alongside a few other objects – ghosts, angels, and extraterrestrial aliens – Bigfoot is an object disavowed by science but in which a sizeable proportion of Americans aver a belief. According to (Bader et al., 2011), as many as 1 in 5 Americans believe in the existence of Bigfoot. But even those who do not believe in Bigfoot, know of it, they know what it looks like and how it acts. According to Fitch (2013: 21) 'Bigfoot has become, probably more than any other paranormal phenomenon, a part of American mythology and culture.' Against this background of belief and knowledge, a much smaller number of people organise their lives around these objects, collecting, collating, and sorting evidence for their existence. These communities and their practices could be seen to be physically acting out a legend, what Ellis (1992) might recognise as 'ostension'. The project of which this article is a part is intended to treat seriously the Bigfooting community as a knowledge-making group.

Belief in and knowledge of Bigfoot and other objects of similar status feeds on and is fed by powerful forces of Modern cultural reproduction. From the pulp magazine fiction of the 1920s, through the B-movies of the 1950s and 1960s, the cult hit television series *The X-Files* in the 1990s, and now to the present-day fashion for 'factual' television programmes such as *Ancient Aliens*, *Ghost Adventures*, and most importantly for this article *Finding Bigfoot* and *Expedition Bigfoot*, the uncanny is extremely popular. These documentaries present objects from beyond the fringes of institutional science as fit subjects for rationalist, naturalistic investigation. Perhaps we should not be surprised by this phenomenon. Some have argued that interest in the monstrous, mysterious and the occult rises in significance during politically turbulent and socially stressful times (Kurakin, 2019; Tiryakian, 1972).

But even in the eyes of those who dedicate large parts of their lives to these objects, knowledge claims about Unidentified Aerial Phenomena (UAPs) or Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs), ghosts, and Bigfoot are often explicable as misunderstandings or misperceptions of mundane phenomena. Worse, these fields are riddled with hoaxes, some of which have become part of their canon (Loxton and Prothero, 2013); a fact that troubles many Bigfooters (Blu Buhs, 2009; Daegling, 2004). Therefore, Bigfoot encounters take place not only against a background of belief and knowledge but simultaneously in a landscape of entertainment, fiction, scepticism, fraudulent behaviour, and incredulity. Given this, what would it mean for a Bigfoot encounter to be plausible? The interviewees in our research are a special category: all have been involved in *Bigfooting*. Many locate the origin of their interest to a personal close encounter with Bigfoot. As Bigfooters, they are members of an epistemic community and because of this socialisation, they can see the traces of Bigfoot which most would miss. This article demonstrates the ways in which they use their socialisation to fill the *absences* at the heart of their encounter with the shape of Bigfoot and, against a backdrop of incredulity, legitimate their right to fill these absences by presenting themselves as credible rather than credulous. The article adds to the growing literature in the sociology of mystery (Boltanski, 2014; Ginzburg, 1979, 2013; Harrod, 1971; Kurakin, 2019) and the sociology of absences (Frickel et al., 2010; Scott, 2019).

Encounters as Socialised Knowledge

Bigfooting groups such as the Bigfoot Field Researchers Organisation (BFRO), the Olympic Project, Project Zoobook, and the North American Wood Ape Conservancy (NAWAC) have shared ideas of what Bigfoot is (and is not), as well as agreed ways to go about collecting evidence. However, Bigfooting, like any knowledge-making community, involves disagreements, with different views entailing different factions. For example, evidence of Bigfoot cloaking – the ability to disappear on cue – is dismissed by the group which self-describes as the 'Apers'. The 'Apers' maintain that Bigfoot is an uncatalogued ape and are the dominant faction of the Bigfooting community, especially in the BFRO. They see themselves as working in the tradition of primatologists such as Jane Goodall, and distance themselves from those who hold to more paranormal beliefs. That there is both a naturalistic and a paranormal approach to Bigfooting is a division that occurs in many cryptid subcultures (Bader and Baker, 2019).

But while some have pursued cryptozoology, including Bigfoot research in earnest, with seriousness and dedication (see Bindernagel, 2010; Heuvelmans, 1958; Meldrum, 2006), to most, cryptozoology is a material part of an extended fiction, a slice of the wider entertainment complex, with some kind of relationship with science but also drawing on and contributing to science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Therefore, while the ordinary North American is not socialised into the *evidential practices* of Bigfooting, even outsiders, including sceptics, are able to recognise the constellation of themes, motifs, and symbols of an encounter with Bigfoot. The fact that they recognise the conventions of encounter narratives is why there are irreconcilable interpretations of evidence; to the believers, the stability of the encounter confirms the existence of Bigfoot, while to the sceptics the story of the encounter is the reproduction – however unwitting – of genre tropes. To which the believer might say in frustration, as did one of our interviewees, 'you don't get it until you're in this stuff!' But here we find a regress; a key path to getting 'in this stuff' for many Bigfooters is their own encounter, a moment that changes their view of the North American forests (Fitch, 2013).

Most of these encounters are accidental, taking place before they began Bigfooting. But it was that encounter which opened the door to Bigfooting, with 'Bigfoot' becoming the object around which they organise a significant part of their lives. There is a general pattern to these stories, in which the encounter produces an absence, a central unknown, which the witness fills – either there and then, or later with the benefit of more Bigfoot knowledge. Of course, we should bear in mind that these stories are being told after their lives have been changed in this way. These stories are knowledge claims made now and not then, which they make *as Bigfooters* and not as startled witnesses.

The witness testimonies told by our interviewees are therefore more than individual accounts. They are testimonies told by Bigfooters, drawing on their socialisation as Bigfooters, and in this way they also tell us something about the Bigfooting community. Our interviewees describe encounters in terms that are comprehensible to a community of people who have made Bigfoot an object for rational, naturalistic enquiry. Knowledge of this kind is social; it is shaped not simply by expertise but by trust, shared experience, credibility, and civility (see Shapin, 1994). They have also acquired the shared language of Bigfooting (Collins and Evans, 2007). But the testimonies are also narrated for an audience primed to disbelieve, and this includes us as sociologists.

Bigfoot and Bigfooting

Recounting an encounter with Bigfoot produces a story. According to McDrury and Alterio (2003: 31), 'storytelling is a uniquely human experience that enables us to convey through the language of words, aspects of ourselves and others, and the worlds, real or imagined that we inhabit'. These stories do not exist in correspondence only with the events and experience of the teller, but also with stories already told. That is, Bigfoot and Bigfoot-like creatures are not simply a product of the age of mass media. Stories of a large, bipedal beast stomping around the forest slopes of North America have a history that predates European colonisation, rooted in indigenous culture (Daegling, 2004; Regal, 2011). These creatures have gone by various names, the most well-known is 'Sasquatch'.

'Sasquatch' was introduced into English by J.W. Burns in the 1920s. Burns worked on what was then the Chehalis Indian Reserve and anglicised the Coast Salish word *Sesqee* (Suttles, 1980), *Sesquac* (Strain, 2008), or *Sokquetal* (Ilacqua, 2014), variously translated as 'timber' or 'cannibal' giant. According to Loxton and Prothero (2013), these tales were of particularly large *people*, 'wildmen' who lived away from settlements. For others, they were of eight-foot *ape-like* creatures (Coleman and Clark, 1999).

'Bigfoot' is a later invention. It is customarily traced back to an article by Andrew Genzoli in the *Humboldt Times* published on 5 October 1958. As the well-rehearsed story goes: around 30 company workers were preparing a timber access road between Bluff Creek and the Klamath River (Bader et al., 2011). Arriving at work on the morning of 27 August, Jerry Crew noticed huge footprints circling his tractor. It soon became apparent that other workers had their own stories of enormous footprints appearing around the site. Their supervisor 'Shorty' Wallace – a well-known prankster – speculated that the creature responsible had also thrown a 700-pound tyre into a ditch, as well as removing a diesel container. Over the following months, Genzoli and another journalist, Betty Allen, visited the area, recording more tales of strange happenings (Blu Buhs, 2009). By October, stories of a large ape-like creature had featured in 18 issues of the newspaper, including a front-page story with a photograph of Crew holding a plaster cast of a footprint. The imprint was said to be left by something with a 'big foot', and this fragmentary description stuck.

The most well-known Bigfoot encounter occurred in 1967. It involved three main characters: Roger Patterson, described as charming but constantly in debt (Blu Buhs, 2009), Bob Gimlin, a horse-rancher, and 'Patty', the Bigfoot these two men captured on film. Patterson, who had been fascinated by Bigfoot, convinced Gimlin to join him on an expedition to film fresh footprints reported by early Bigfooters, Rene Dahinden and John Green. On Friday 20 October, they revisited an area that they had inspected a few days earlier. Around a bend in the creek, they came across a massive ape-like figure (Meldrum, 2006). They reported that their horses were spooked, rearing up at the sight of the creature. Gimlin managed to stay on his horse and rode further up the creek, aiming his rifle at the beast (Meldrum, 2006). Patterson was thrown, but managed to remove his camera from his satchel. The now (in-)famous film recorded a hulking, ape-like creature with a flat face, pronounced snout, pointed head, and breasts, striding along a dry creek bed, arms swaying, seemingly unconcerned by the presence of the two men

(Hall, 2018). Frame 352, in which 'Patty' looks over her right shoulder has become *the* iconic image of Bigfoot.

The 1960s was something of a golden age for Bigfoot, a period in which the seeds of the organised Bigfooting that we see today began to germinate. Dedicated individuals began researching the subject in the field and in the archives. These included Green, a graduate of Columbia University's journalism school. He is credited as establishing the practice of collecting and organising accounts of Bigfoot encounters, interviewing hundreds of witnesses (Green, 1994).

Collecting Bigfoot encounter stories was accelerated and transformed by the internet. In the mid-1990s, Matt Moneymaker established the BFRO and its accompanying website and database. In our interview, Craig Woolheater, who established his own Bigfooting group in Texas, later to develop into NAWAC, details the impact the website had on collecting encounters: 'I think that the BFRO put Bigfoot on the internet. [It] has catalogued many, many reports. So, they've brought it to more of the general public' (Craig Woolheater). No longer was the collection of Bigfoot testimonies dependent on dedicated researchers travelling up and down North America. Now, those testimonies did the travelling themselves. Today, the BFRO hosts an accessible (inter)national database including reports from every state in the continental USA, as well as many from Canada. Washington (721), California (461), and Florida (343) are the states for which there are the greatest number of reported encounters. Alongside the website, the BFRO also organise expeditions, with people paying to be led by Bigfoot investigators.

One of the BFRO investigators is Dr Russell Jones. He described, in interview, how he found the BFRO immediately after experiencing his own encounter:

> 'And when I came back, I Googled Bigfoot, and the BFRO comes up. They get about a million hits a month on their website. And they were having an expedition, which they do between 10 and 20 times a year.' (Dr Russell Jones)

Today, Dr Jones is part of the BFRO himself, involved in the effort to collect and systematise witness accounts.

Perhaps a parallel can be drawn here with the way in which institutional science engages 'citizen scientists' in the labour-intensive task of tracking the distribution and movement of wildlife (Bonney, 1996). Bigfoot researchers are also dependent on members of the public, but unlike those amateur naturalists who deliberately collect data according to standards set out by professional scientists, Bigfoot encounters mostly involve 'happenstance' witnesses who try to make sense of an encounter after the fact. Importantly, the BFRO is explicit that the collection of witness reports is not a wholly scientific way of knowing. Their website frames this activity as a kind of pre-science and draws as many parallels with journalism and law as it does science.

As we have said, Bigfooters face two related problems. While many 'encounters' can be explained as misidentifications, with witnesses fooled by nature, their own senses and their own imagination, claims of encounters with and evidence for Bigfoot are also riddled with hoaxes – deliberate attempts to fool. The BFRO's parameters of what constitutes a legitimate Bigfoot encounter must be set with this in mind. Matt Moneymaker explains the process:

> 'Everything we have is all about filtering out the ones that you don't want to pursue and then filtering it down to just the best nuggets [. . .] You have hoaxes, misidentifications and then you have very likely incidents [. . .] If they have to write it up, that filters out some of them and if they leave their phone number and email address, making themselves available for someone to call them, or visit them, that filters out a lot as well because you're only going to have the people who are like, 'okay, they're going to not write this up [. . .] I'm particularly looking for those with multiple witnesses.' (Matt Moneymaker)

Moneymaker has played a crucial role in the revival of the prominence of Bigfoot in North American culture. In 2011, he began presenting the cult television show *Finding Bigfoot*. According to Moneymaker, this revival of interest in Bigfoot, and the practices of Bigfooting, was associated with an increase in the number of testimonies uploaded, both contemporary and historical. To use the words of our interviewees, it reduced the 'stigma' associated with the subject. It is against this background of renewed popularity in Bigfoot in culture and entertainment, that we conducted our research.

Methods

This article is part of a larger, ongoing project on the epistemic community of Bigfooting. Our interview-based project involved taking Bigfooting seriously as a community organised around the 'formative intention' to make robust knowledge claims about the existence of Bigfoot. We argue that Bigfooting is a rich setting in which to explore ideas about the ways in which a culture comes to decide what counts as legitimate evidence, what is considered bunkum, and what is left undetermined. The purpose of our project has been to 'recover the rationality' of the community of Bigfooting, to understand and make sense of why Bigfooters persist in pursuing a programme, which, if it was ever on the scientific shelf, is now long past its sell-by-date. At best, Bigfoot research might be characterised as an undone science (Frickel et al., 2010).

To date, this has involved conducting 166 semi-structured interviews with members of the Bigfooting community, typically between 45-minutes to 75-minutes in duration. These were conducted over the telephone (Stephens, 2007) and by using Zoom (Howlett, 2021). The Bigfooters interviewed include active field researchers and investigators; those who devote at least several weekends a year to collecting evidence of Bigfoot. This evidence comes in many forms: casts of footprints, audio recordings of calls, physical material such as hair, environmental DNA (eDNA), as well as more subtle traces such as characteristically bent trees. This evidence is often shared with the wider community, a community which includes archival researchers, a smattering of academics and, hovering on the edge, several Bigfoot sceptics. Therefore, as well as interviewing active field researchers, our research on this community included interviewing anthropologists, presenters of Bigfoot documentaries, museum curators, and cryptozoologists. The interviews explored the ways in which Bigfooters produce, share, and evaluate their evidence. However, for all these efforts, by far the most prevalent type of evidence available to Bigfooters are witness testimonies. While we often asked about the role of witness testimonies in Bigfooting, our interviews also produced testimonies of participants'own

encounters. Most of these encounter stories were the result of Lewis beginning interviews by asking interviewees to describe how they came to be involved with Bigfoot research.

The project began with much smaller scale intentions. Lewis first recruited through Twitter a handful of interviewees with some kind of public profile – well-known Bigfooters and Bigfoot television personalities. These interviewees recommended further potential interviewees, sometimes vouching for the project and for us as sociologists. As a result of this *ad hoc* snowball sampling, the coverage we obtained of the Bigfooting community grew far beyond our initial ambitions and expectations. On occasion, as if to mirror the practices of Bigfooters themselves, *tracking* down some of the more obscure interviewees and making contact involved a high degree of patience. As most of the participants were based in the USA, and on the west coast at that, there was a considerable time difference; most interviews were undertaken late at night and in the early hours in the UK. All interviews were transcribed, either by using Zoom's transcription tool – which entails a degree of 'tidying up' – or by a professional transcription service. All participants were offered the choice to be anonymised. Only a handful of participants asked to be provided with a pseudonym with the rest actively preferring to be named.

We approached the analysis of these transcripts through thematic analysis. But as Braun and Clarke (2006) admit themselves, what makes a 'theme' is both fuzzy and disputed. We organised the large corpus of interview data into themes based around our existing interest in 'evidence production' and 'claim making', themes which we developed and refined as the project progressed. One line running through the themes relating to all kinds of different evidence was that of *absence*; the ways in which participants make sense of not only the undeniable absence of evidence for Bigfoot but also the smaller scale absences within particular forms of evidence. In this article, we detail nine different encounters to explore the ways in which these absences are used to produce knowledge claims about Bigfoot.

Encounters as Stories and as Knowledge Claims

There are a variety of ways to have a close encounter with Bigfoot. Some of our interviewees *saw* Bigfoot. These visual encounters tend toward a form; they are often fleeting, mostly involving a single person who witnesses the partial or obscured view of a massive, hairy, bipedal creature in the woodlands. The creature may be seen running across a road, peering from behind a tree, or seen in silhouette against the sky as it walks down a mountainside.

There are, though, other ways of encountering Bigfoot; most of our interviewees who had encountered Bigfoot had not actually seen it. These kinds of encounters include large rocks being thrown at the witness by an unseen creature, or for the witness to hear bloodcurdling howls that reverberate through their body. By far the least common kind of encounter are those in which the witness has had some kind of interaction with a Bigfoot, whether through physical contact or via gifting, in which Bigfoot is said to leave something for humans as a form of communication.

'That's the Only Options Available'

Bigfoot is understood to be nocturnal, and the forest at night is the setting for much Bigfooting fieldwork. Those who encounter Bigfoot while Bigfooting have had an encounter of a different character to those who, say, catch a glimpse of a large biped crossing the road at sunset. Actively searching out traces of Bigfoot, travelling into woodlands reported to be Bigfoot habitat, and having the image of Bigfoot firmly in their mind, these encounters by design are the ambition of all Bigfooters. Many Bigfooters go into this space equipped, carrying with them cameras, microphones, even parabolic dishes, and drones. Cliff Barackman, previously of the BFRO and one of the presenters on *Finding Bigfoot*, describes an encounter that occurred on site when filming for the programme:

> 'The only time I've seen one wasn't a good sighting, [but] I'm inclined to think it was a Sasquatch. We're actually filming *Finding Bigfoot* in North Carolina. At the very beginning of the show, Moneymaker says, 'There's something on the hill' [. . .] That was the very first night we were out there trying to figure out what night investigations were about. The backpacks were really weird at the time; the batteries didn't last long [. . .] We didn't have the format for the show [. . .] We're just blindly stumbling around in the dark trying to make something to make the network happy. And we're on break, and we're frustrated with the producers because they were pushing us to say things that weren't true or that we felt were misrepresenting what was happening. We're hiking about 1½ to 2 miles into the woods. It was cold, it was February up in the mountains of the Appalachians. And then I hear Moneymaker going, 'Who's on the hill?' [. . .] and we're ignoring him at this point [. . .] 'Who's on the hill? Who is that? Bobo, is that you?' 'No, dude'. 'Cliff, is that. . .?' 'What, Matt? No'. Then, 'Somebody's on the hill. Who are you? Who is that?' And basically [. . .] he saw a bipedal figure, standing about 70 yards away. The hill went down, and it kind of went up, and about 70 yards away, there was somebody watching us. Moneymaker yelled at it, and it started walking. He yelled at it again [. . .] then it did something really peculiar.
>
> Matt had a thermal imager. He said something like, 'Identify yourself', or 'Who are you?', or something. And the thing froze. In mid-step. On one leg. Just totally froze, which is a known Sasquatch behaviour. They have been seen doing that dozens and dozens of times. But all animals do that. Like when the gig is up, 'Oh, you're not [. . .] hidden anymore.' They totally freeze, because that's their best defence. This thing froze on one leg for several seconds before it started walking again. And right around then is when I turned my thermal imager up to it, and I saw a biped [. . .] It was a human or a Sasquatch. That's the only options available for what I observed [. . .] And it was walking in a very peculiar fashion. It didn't walk like a human at all. It also didn't walk like Patty from the Patterson-Gimlin film, like a big arm swing [. . .] The arms were kind of scooping forward like when you're in the shallow end of a pool and you're walking.' (Cliff Barackman)

Convincing Bigfoot encounters need a good storyteller (Maslen, 2022), and the rise of Bigfooting as factual entertainment television has demanded that the search for evidence of Bigfoot has the structure of a story. Notably, most Bigfooters do not claim to have had lots of encounters, if any, and they will rarely present the few encounters that they have had as definitive. Cliff Barackman is a respected contemporary Bigfooter, having spent

decades in the field. He begins his account with the qualifier that this was not a clear sighting. The encounter with a bipedal figure at night is partly viewed through a thermal scope. Barackman does not see Bigfoot; he sees a shape, first a silhouette and then a heat signature in contrast with the relative cool backdrop of the woods. He sees the movement of this shape. What he does then is construct an absence. It is a biped, and therefore not an animal known to live in the North American forests. This narrows the range of possibilities, leaving Barackman with the 'only options' to fill the warm blob on the scope being 'a human or a Sasquatch'. But if, as Barackman says, 'It didn't walk like a human at all', there is a space that can only be filled by the unknown. Or, in the case of Barackman, the known. An encounter with Bigfoot by design is notable for the wealth of knowledge of Bigfoot that Bigfooters bring to bear. By the fact that Barackman is a Bigfooter he can make several statements. He can compare what he saw with what he knows about Bigfoot. While it did not walk like Patty, it did display 'known Sasquatch behaviour' including freezing with one leg up. While he concedes that 'all animals do that', the absence cannot be filled with any other animal. Only Bigfoot.

Barackman's licence to make this claim is not simply based on his expertise in Bigfooting, but his credibility. As well as the caveat that this was not a good sighting, Barackman presents himself as a reluctant witness, describing himself as initially 'ignoring' Moneymaker's claims to have seen something. He is not credulous. He places his attitude to the encounter in the context of his frustration 'with the producers because they were pushing us to say things that weren't true.' He is not one to exaggerate claims; he is credible.

'No One Associated it with the Bigfoot Mystery at that Time'

Another encounter from a BFRO member was told by Matt Pruitt. In some ways this was another encounter by design. But not one with the mind and senses socialised to see Bigfoot.

> 'So, we had encountered a number of stories,[. . .] basically *local legends* about a place that was supposedly haunted, where these frightening ethereal events would occur. Now, in retrospect, once again those are fairly consistent. People would talk about, disembodied howls or screams or projectile stones in the night and [. . .] reflective red eyes and all that sort of thing. But no one associated it with the Bigfoot mystery at that time [. . .] It was a summer night between my junior and senior years in high school [. . .] On a whim we went out to this place, and we were going to camp there. The bulk of the stories revolved around [. . .] a cabin that was inhabited. And it was now abandoned, it was supposedly, like, the nexus of these strange events. And so we thought, 'Oh, we'll go out there at night and set up camp, and we'll go hike up. We'll find this cabin in the dark and see what happens. And so *enroute*, we went there and set up this camp [. . .] Long story short, we were trying to hike in the dark with these flashlights [. . .] This was 1999, so pre smartphones [. . .] But a friend of mine did have this VHS camcorder, and we heard these sounds that initially sounded like things following us or paralleling us [. . .] that we assumed to be wildlife or animals. But then it escalated into, like, the loud breaking of branches and then [. . .] what sounded like them being struck against larger trees. So, those sounds are on this tape, and you can hear us describing them. It sounds like wood being broken and slammed together [. . .] and then there were these vocalisation sounds, and we got so scared. It

> got so unnerving [. . .] that we actually ran back down the mountain, got in our cars and [. . .] came back for our tents and stuff the next morning.' (Matt Pruitt)

Like so many horror movies, this was an expedition led by teenagers in which there is an encounter with 'something'. Although legends can inspire trips at any stage of life, expeditions undertaken by young people have especially captured the interest of scholarly work (McNeill and Tucker, 2018). This scholarly attention in young people's *legend tripping* likely stems from the ways in which young explorers and thrill-seekers engage with and interpret legendary narratives, often bringing fresh perspectives and a sense of adventure that resonates with academic inquiries into cultures and sub-cultures. Pruitt and friends visited the site in anticipation that they would encounter this 'something' known to local legend. What is important is that, at the time, this experience – the sounds of wood breaking, of howls – was not understood in terms of Bigfoot. Instead, it was an absence waiting to be filled with an explanation, which was provided when Pruitt learned more about the 'shape' of Bigfoot. Pruitt came to learn that '*wood knocking'* is a method of Bigfoot communication (McMillan, 2014), which Bigfooters explain is a known feature of ape behaviour (Kalan et al., 2019). This provided an experience that had originally been understood as supernatural – essentially unknowable in the schema of 21st-century rationality – with a 'naturalistic', though of course not universally accepted, explanation.

'Well, I Know What it is Now'

Another encounter in which the absence is retrospectively filled with Bigfoot comes from Shane Corson, a senior member of the Olympic Project. Over two nights, he too encountered 'something':

> 'In Oregon, I had a two-night encounter with something. Well, I know what it is now; it's a Sasquatch [. . .] Two friends and myself on this remote backpacking trip in the Mount Hood area of Oregon State were hiking into some high mountain lakes to do some fishing. We cooked a meal, built a rather large fire. We go to bed about 11.30 pm and around 1.30–2 am, it's the middle of nowhere, deep thick forest, just dead quiet, no wind or anything, I hear what sounds like two rocks being clapped together and it's getting closer and closer [. . .] We're, kind of, in a triangular formation and my buddy wakes up and he goes, 'Shane, are you awake?' 'What is that?' I said, 'I'm not sure [. . .] It's really weird. Sounds like two rocks being smacked together.' And I thought to myself, 'Well, could it be elk, antler, something of that nature?' I was trying to rationalise this, trying to figure out what this could be. Could it be a racoon doing something silly? Chomping of teeth, bear will do that? But it's getting closer and closer and then it stopped. Then maybe 30 to 40 yards off our little camping area [. . .] you hear something just stomping around in the woods and it's circling our camp. It's just stomping back and forward and then a whack, which sounded like something hit a tree. So, we're just sitting there quiet. My [other] buddy [. . .] slept through the whole night. Finally, this thing [. . .] started up that clanking sound again and it retreated. Well, we just, kind of, sat there eventually went back to sleep, no harm, no foul.
>
> The next morning, we wake up, we talked about it a little bit [. . .] None of us had an answer [. . .] We head back to camp in the evening again, do the same scenario, cook a meal, talk around the fire, go to bed about 11.30 again. And, about 1.30 to 2 am, you hear that same sound and it's getting closer and closer, this clank and it's repetitious. Well, it stops again, 30–40 yards I'm guessing from our camping area, and once again, you hear this prancing around, this bang,

> bang, sticks being broken, large limbs on the ground are just being stepped on and snapped. And it's circling us and once again my buddy wakes up in his tent and goes, 'Shane, are you awake?' I said, 'It's back', and he's hearing something off to his left. I'm hearing something up behind my tent, so I said, 'Well, I don't know if there's two of whatever these things are, but we're hearing something in two different directions.' But it's loud, it's cracking, it's breaking. It sounded more aggressive, it sounded faster paced and it's just back and forth around our tents. Then we're just sitting there listening. Dead quiet night again.
>
> Then we hear on the tree just these five really powerful percussives[. . .] My buddy woke up and he goes [. . .] 'What the bleeping hell was that?' and I said, 'Shut up', because now things are getting weird and [. . .] it seems more aggressive. Silence again, then I hear just a big thud [. . .] It was a rock. Something or somebody had thrown a rock at our camp. It ended up being about the size of a softball [. . .] My buddy's, freaking out. I thought, 'He's definitely afraid of bears. He's going to start shooting,' so I decided I was going to unzip my tent and tell him to calm down [. . .] I was probably looking out for maybe 20 seconds, and I noticed movement off to my left, [where] almost directly in front of me [was] a large Douglas fir. From behind this tree, I see something swing back and forth and what I saw was a hand, an arm, a shoulder and a head that would pop out from behind the tree. The arm and the shoulder was on the front of the tree [. . .] whereas, the body was behind it, but it would pop out and it would just swing back and forth [. . .] It did that for a few seconds and it peeled away from this tree, and it went up this hill and just disappeared.
>
> This thing just appeared to be massive; I could see fingers, I could see a thumb, I could see hair on the back of its arm, and it appeared to be either black or brown, just massive. About a month later I [. . .] eventually got [. . .] the gung-ho to go back out there because at that time I thought I was done with the woods, done with everything [. . .] We found the rock that was thrown. I measured where this thing was standing [. . .] There was a branch above its head, so it measured around between seven [to] seven and a half feet, roughly. The black bear up here are not seven feet tall and [while] they could walk bipedally, they can only do short distances and they don't have this thing's gait, its stride was incredible.' (Shane Corson)

Despite Corson having a remarkably close encounter, actually seeing a seven-foot tall biped, in his account, all he knew at the time was what it was not. There was a space in his story that was not a human, not a bear, and definitely not a racoon or elk. As he says, 'I was trying to rationalise this, trying to figure out what this could be.' Later, like Pruitt, Corson came to learn that Bigfoot has been reported to throw rocks to scare away humans. This knowledge provided Corson with the ability to 'see' the phenomenon differently (see Berger, 1972). Indeed, the encounter proved to be the catalyst for Corson to begin researching Bigfoot, in part to validate his experience.

The late 20th-century idea of Bigfoot, and the knowledge produced by Bigfooters, of its anatomy, its gait, its behaviour – knowledge popularised and rendered as entertainment on programmes such as *Finding Bigfoot* – allows these encounters to be understood as Bigfoot. In another culture, at another time, these absences might be filled with another shape.

'Something on Two Legs was Walking Around in a Crescent Shape'

The campfire story in which an outdoorsperson catches sight of an unknown, potentially monstrous animal is a fixture of American folklore. Teddy Roosevelt's memoir, *The*

Wilderness Hunter, includes a story told to him of a murderous beast in the borderlands between Montana and Idaho. The creature is said to have left huge footprints. This encounter has retrospectively become part of Bigfoot history, and notable for this article in that the footprints – a quite literal absence where the feet have made an impression in the ground – are described in terms of being unlike those of a bear. If it was not a bear, then what?

Some of our interviewees had their own campfire encounters. In trying to make sense of what happened, the shape of Bigfoot fills the inconsistencies and absences.

> 'In Canada we have these large swathes of Crown land that are available for public use and are designated for what they call random camping [. . .] We'd established a campsite off a dirt road. And we had no other humans around us.
>
> So, that night, we went to bed fairly early around 10. And I was sleeping in a single-man-shelter [. . .] And my friend had gone to sleep in about an eight-man tent. So, we had our tents probably about 15 to 20 metres apart from each other. And then in the middle of the night, probably between 2.30 and 3.30 am, I was awoken by something touching my head, through the loose material of the tent. And because it's a single man shelter, I can't really sit up or do anything [. . .] And then, my next experience, while being thoroughly awake, was having a large hand, come press through the loose material of my tent, grip my head [. . .] How I always describe this to people is, when you see LeBron James, the American NBA player, grip a basketball, it looks like he's holding a grapefruit [. . .] The analogy I always use is: imagine a hand where the full circumference, including your fingers, would be as large as the largest frying pan you own in your house. And then imagine that gripping and wrapping around your head. And then imagining it palpating the shape of your skull. What grabbed me had no claws that penetrated through the tent. It had fingers that were quite wide [. . .] They were at least an inch in diameter across, and it was articulating its wrist from left to right. And feeling. The sensation that I compared it to is when you put your hand blindly into a backpack [. . .] and feel around looking for an object.
>
> So, typically what people ask me at this point is, 'Well don't you think your friend might have been playing a prank on you?' And so, my friend has sleep apnoea. While this experience is happening [. . .] I could hear him snoring in his tent [. . .] But the first thing that he said to me after he got out of his tent was, 'What were you doing walking around my tent late last night [. . .] because he had taken his tent and put it closer to the bushes? And behind his tent, something on two legs was walking around in a crescent shape, around the perimeter [. . .] And so he could hear it walking through the bushes. But it didn't touch his tent as far as he was aware. And the other thing was when we woke up [. . .] we examined all of our valuables. We had left multiple $800, $900 fishing rods on a picnic table. We had left a number of other valuables [. . .] And nothing was stolen [. . .] It seems kind of ambiguous because still, in the end, something with five fingers and an opposable thumb came and grabbed my head, at 3.30 am, in pitch black. It wasn't my friend, who I could hear snoring.' (GK)

GK runs a Sasquatch website and was one of only a handful of participants who asked to remain anonymous. It was universally acknowledged among participants that Bigfoot is a stigmatised object, enacted by others and felt by the community. By requesting to be named, most of the other participants were attempting to challenge the *felt stigma* (Scambler and Hopkins, 1986) and shame associated with the topic.

Using GK's own words, the encounter presented is quite 'ambiguous'. Expressions of doubt, and even scepticism, are often part of the personal context in which the story is told. Not only is he not credulous, but he also remains open-minded about his encounter. GK never actually sees the intruder. Rather, what is constructed is an absence within the story. The absence is constructed implicitly; it cannot have been a bear as it did not have claws but fingers and an opposable thumb, and it could not have been a human, as not only was the hand 'impossibly large' there were also no other people around. The mundane is ruled out, piece by piece, and yet the encounter remains. Bigfoot exists in the space left behind.

'You Start to Question Everything All at Once'

Some encounters require other people to fill the absence. Leo Frank had his face-to-face encounter in King's County, Novia Scotia.

> 'I was taking a shortcut up through a stream and [. . .] along the side of a stream, you know, I came around a corner and right at the bottom of a waterfall I see what looks like the back of a black bear, which is very common for down there. So, I just started to back up a little bit and this, what I thought was a, black bear stood up, turned around and looked at me. One arm was wet, he had that in the water, I don't know if he was injured or hand-fishing or whatever, but he stood up, turned around and [. . .] looked right at me. I stopped and froze where I was, and it was just staring [. . .] Everything that I knew just stopped because this was a hair covered man in a brook that I'd walked thousands of times before [. . .] When it happens, everything stops, and it's like you start to question everything all at once [. . .] but at the same time, you can't really think of anything [. . .] And my uncle said, 'You know, what you're describing sounds like Bigfoot'. And I'm like, 'Wait, Bigfoot, up here'? So, no, I wouldn't go in the woods for quite some time after that. Which is odd for me because ever since I was a young child, that's where I spent most of my time, playing in the woods. But, yeah, it threw me for a loop, and [. . .] from there it was going to bookstores and libraries and things like that to try and find out what information I could find out about Bigfoot.' (Leo Frank)

Frank positions the encounter in the context of the familiar – taking a shortcut through an area he knows well. He presents himself as someone who knows the woods; he is not the kind to be spooked by a landscape he had 'walked thousands of times before', he is not the kind to mistake a black bear, 'common for down there', for something uncanny. When the shape he had presumed to be a black bear revealed itself as a 'hair covered man', everything stopped 'and it's like you start to question everything all at once [. . .] but at the same time, you can't really think of anything'. The imagination of this experienced woodsman cannot name the object that he is seeing. Frank is a reluctant witness; he claims it needed the knowledge of his uncle to fill this absence. And so, once again, we have a witness contextualising his experience within the Bigfoot framework.

'I Mean, I Can't Unsee it, Right?'

Within our corpus, there are several Bigfoot encounter accounts from people working or hunting in the woods. The defining feature of these is that the witness can draw

credibility from the fact that their employment or hobby puts them at home in the woods. This is their everyday working environment. As part of that, they have *expertise*. Todd Neiss, retired soldier, and the founder of American Primate Conservancy – a Bigfoot organisation – told us of a vivid encounter he had working as a combat engineer.

> 'Growing up in the Pacific Northwest, you hear the stories about these creatures [. . .] But I paid no heed to that at all. But in April of 1993, I had kind of a rude awakening. On this particular day, we had headed up into the mountain, in Clatsop County. We had special permission by the timber company to utilise their rock quarries, gravel corners [. . .] where we would train and practise using very large amounts of different kinds of explosives. It was a beautiful day, not a cloud in the sky, other than the ones we were sending up. And so, I had my window open, and it was just natural for me having hunted that area for deer, elk to look for wildlife.
>
> [. . .]
>
> This is one that we had detonated several hundred pounds of plastic explosives at [this site] about an hour earlier. And when it did come into view, the first thing I noticed were these three very dark figures standing right out in the open, exactly on the spot where we had detonated the explosives, and like we were, 'What the hell are those people doing down there?' Because we had [. . .] literally two rings of security to keep civilians out of the area for obvious reasons. And we practised what they call 100% integrity, so everybody is counted for it, and we don't send people out to wander about, you know? [. . .] I just thought, 'What are those people doing down there?' Then I realised that what I was looking at were not people by any means. They were standing on two legs like we do, they were standing three abreast and watching our convoy descending the road across this ravine.
>
> I should point out, the one that stood in the middle was I would estimate around nine feet tall. The two that flanked it on its left and right were a foot or so shorter [. . .] But getting back to the profile, these arms were nowhere near the right ratio for humans, just a little bit below their knee in just a normal stance. And the legs also were disproportionate to the human being, way too long. They looked like bodybuilders [. . .] huge traps where the neck was [. . .] It looked like the head was planted on these shoulders, because these traps appeared to go from their ears straight up to their shoulders. Barrel chested, shoulders of four or four and a half feet wide, easy. You could see a very pronounced taper from the barrel chest down to their waist.
>
> That one in the middle stood there like a statue, it really didn't seem to move at all. These two on either side of it exhibited this swaying motion, rocking back and forth, left to right, shifting weight from one foot to the other. And they did this the entire time I watched them for about 25 seconds [. . .] There's a point at which you go from denial to having to accept what you're seeing. I mean, I can't unsee it, right? After about 25 seconds, we finally took another turn, and I lost sight of them. And I just kind of collapsed back in my seat and tried to process what I had seen; it was just incredible.
>
> When we got down to that safety staging area, I just instinctively started jogging back up the road while the follow-up vehicle was still coming in behind us. And I didn't dare go out of sight of the group, because that whole 100% integrity thing. [. . .] But I went as far as I dared and I'm straining to get a view of that quarry, but unfortunately there was a mound blocking. I'm on my

> tiptoes straining [then] I heard somebody call out my name. And I looked to my right and approaching me was [the] sergeant and he just yelled out, 'What are you looking at?' I said, 'Oh, nothing.' And he continued up my way [. . .] When he got right up to me, he says, 'I don't suppose you saw what I saw down at that second blast site?' Not that I needed it for corroboration, but it was good to know that somebody else shared that experience. He took a drag off his cigarette and looked left and right to make sure nobody else was within earshot and he said, 'I saw three huge, hair-covered Bigfoot, I guess.' (Todd Neiss)'

Neiss establishes himself as a sceptic, as someone unlikely to be perilously credulous, saying that he used to dismiss stories of Bigfoot. However, in a milieu in which 'you can't help but hear the stories about these creatures,', you have the knowledge required to fill the *absences* you might encounter. What Neiss saw 'were not people by any means [. . . with] arms [that] were nowhere near the right ratio for humans'. He knows what it was not, and the construction of this absence is legitimated by his experience as a hunter, by his familiarity with the wildlife of the region. The space that this opens, populated by the nine-foot tall shapes, is given substance and texture by the stories that 'you can't help but hear'.

This is one of the few accounts in which a corroborating witness appears and, as with Frank quoted earlier, this other person helps him fill the absence. Neiss and his sergeant can draw legitimacy from implicit claims of credibility, courage, and composure that are associated with military service. Neiss' sergeant even names the creatures, filling the credible claim of '*was not'* with a shared knowledge of 'what *is*'.

'I Thought it was a Gentleman, in a Fur Coat'

We can see similar legitimacy work and impression management in the next example. Thomas Shay, founder of the Northern Kentucky Bigfoot Research Group, describes his own formative encounter.

> 'It all started in '87. I went to visit my parents and I had a girlfriend who called me up and asked me to come and meet her in the town, and I was like 'sure', we live out in the boonies. So, while I was driving up the USB6, which is a road next to the Ohio River, I noticed this gentleman, at least I thought it was a gentleman, in a fur coat. And it's about 70/75 degrees [. . .] at this time of year and I'm trying to figure out why this guy has got a coat on [. . .] I didn't believe in Bigfoot at that time. So, I slowed down to see if maybe he was in trouble and I was looking out through the passenger window, I couldn't believe what I seen. To be totally honest at first I thought maybe somebody was dressed up in a monkey costume [. . .] I turned around, come back, pulled up at the side of the road and jumped down the car. I could still see it in the field, and I ran after it, and I got more than maybe 50 yards to it, and it turned on me and growled. At that time, I was like what am I doing here? So, I went back to my car. And I didn't go to my girlfriend's at night, I went back home told my parents, [who] said 'have you've been drinking?' I said no. So, I'm sitting there, and my mom looks at me [and says], 'are you going to meet your girlfriend?' I said 'no, I'm not going out the house tonight. I didn't know what I was seeing.' This is something that shouldn't even be in existence [. . .] I mean I could see the face. And I seen the back of it [. . .] It was just like a little fleeting moment [. . .] I'm a service member and this thing scared me.' (Thomas Shay)

As with the other accounts, Shay saw something. But in his account, it cannot have been any of the candidates that would allow it to fit firmly into what was known. It was not a 'gentleman in a fur coat', it cannot have been 'somebody [. . .] dressed up in a monkey costume'. His certainty that what he saw was an unknown, an absence, 'something that shouldn't even be in existence', is legitimated by his emotional reaction. While we might expect a performance of cool rationality to be a feature of credibility work, here Shay is able to mobilise his fear. He presents himself as a man who is difficult to scare, and like Neiss quoted earlier, draws on his status as a 'service member' as a shorthand for someone who is brave and resilient, especially in the American cultural context. This type of impression management (Goffman, 1959) was present in many of the interviews.

'I Was Crying. I Was Hyperventilating'

Descriptions of a witness's emotional reaction to a close encounter with Bigfoot are not an uncommon feature of accounts (see Waskul and Waskul, 2016 on ghostly encounters). Emotions can validate an account, feelings can lend a story authenticity and credibility. William Lunsford's reaction to an encounter while travelling on foot in the Arkansas woods remains vivid to this day:

> 'I knew it wasn't anybody that was trying to hoax me because there were rattlesnakes, there were cottonmouths, there were copperheads. We have panther, we have bears, we have coyotes, we have wild hogs that will grow up to 700–800 pounds and it will mow you over [. . .] and not even slow down. And so, I knew it wasn't anything like that. And so, when it stood up, it walked out and it confronted me there in the road [. . .] for however long it lasts, which it seems like an eternity, probably wasn't more than a minute. He walked back, grabbed the same limb, put it in front of his face, peeled all the leaves, walked back, and we confronted each other. And that's where I started making my peace with the good Lord! When you come in touch with your own mortality, you're really scared. I was crying. I was hyperventilating.' (William Lunsford)

Lunsford establishes his legitimacy in constructing an absence by reference to his expertise. He knows the local wildlife. As his sighting was not anything he knew, he is left with a space waiting to be filled. Others, those with less experience, might be fooled. Perhaps someone else would be misled by nature and their senses and fail to recognise an 800-pound wild hog, giving them the opportunity to see Bigfoot. Perhaps others could be naive enough to be the victim of a hoax. These possible explanations for an encounter with the unknown are admitted and rejected. But the encounter is not simply a void; in part, because it produced a reaction in Lunsford. For Lunsford, as with Shay, that reaction is one of the 'matters of fact' of the encounter. What was encountered was not just 'something', it was something that produced a profound emotional response in the narrator – traces of which he continues to carry with him. This too was a generic form of legitimacy work in stories of encounters with Bigfoot.

'That To Me Cemented Myself as Knowing These Things Exist'

The final witness account is from Marc DeWerth, a Bigfoot researcher with the BFRO. The encounter took place in the remote wooded area of Coschocton County, Ohio:

> 'I had my own sighting in 1997, broad daylight. I was so caught off-guard because, when I saw it initially, I thought it was a bear; and then it stood up and looked at me; and when it did, I realised what it was, and [it] became a whole panic situation. But after that day, I realised something when I was thinking about getting out of the whole thing because all the evidence or all the sightings was coming up [to a] dead end, every time [. . .] And there was ways to explain it off; and I'm thinking, 'Well maybe these people are just crazy'. And then after April 20th, 1997; [when I] saw what I saw, what it did, that to me cemented myself as knowing these things exist.
>
> I wasn't prepared at all, and I feel so bad I wasn't prepared because I wasn't even looking for Bigfoot, I was looking for badger dens that day off County Road 410 [. . .] We had hiked way back to a coal pile looking for these badger dens. There was a group of three of us, and one of the guys said, 'Hey, I'm going to go to the other side of the lake', he wanted to go photograph bald eagles. We started walking out and noticed something to our left or up on the higher tier above us was got all stirred up, like we heard all this movement. Assuming it was white tailed deer, we just kept going. And as we would go, we'd hear all this movement. We would stop, it would go. We would go, it would go. We would stop, it would stop. So, I finally told the other guy that was with me, 'Why don't you just go ahead, and if we split up maybe the deer will cross the little trail we're walking on, and maybe we'll see them and so he went ahead and I sat there for five or six minutes, and nothing was happening. And then, lo and behold, I get up and start walking; and as soon as I start hiking [. . .] I hear all the movement up above me. And it was literally playing cat and mouse the whole way out. And of course, I started getting very upset because there were rumours of a cougar down there. And I'm thinking, 'Don't tell me I'm being stalked by a big cat'.
>
> And I finally get to the point when I'm coming out of the strip mine, the whole strip mine slopes down like this, about 200 to 300 yards down to the dirt road where my Jeep was parked [. . .] And I could see way in the distance the top of my Jeep because it had these big lights on top of it, the bar above the roof. And I thought to myself, 'Well maybe I can run'. And then I thought, 'Well if it's a cat, and I run, it's coming'. So, I decided to just go down the decline, and just kind of sit down on the path I was on and listen [. . .] As soon as I do that, nothing happens. And I was just getting ready to stand up to walk out, to continue all the way down to the road, when I heard plain as day: crunch, crunch, crunch; like right over the top of me. I'm like, 'Oh, my God, it's a person' [. . .] So, as I turned, I looked back towards the direction where my Jeep was and all of a sudden, panned my head back like this, and about 70 feet in this direction up on a slope I see this black object squatted down. And I'm like, 'Oh, my God, it's a black bear'. So, I go to take my pack off; I had all this camera equipment in my backpack; and I go to take it off and it made some noise, and when it stood up [. . .] it turned, its ear on the side of its head was the first thing I noticed, and the flat face. Well, it turned and looked at me. It saw me. I almost fell backwards off the next tier of the strip mine. And in excitement, I grabbed my brand-new camcorder out and tried chasing it; which didn't go well. All I know is that I drove two hours home. And I don't remember any of it. I was literally a zombie.' (Marc DeWerth)

DeWerth's testimony is a story of a succession of eliminations; what he encountered was not a deer, it was not a big cat, it was not a bear, and it was not a human. All would be plausible, rational explanations for what he encountered, but DeWerth – presenting himself as having expertise in and knowledge of the wilderness – is able to rule out these possibilities. By describing this encounter taking place while he was not Bigfooting, DeWerth implicitly addresses the potential explanation that he was merely seeing what he expected to see, managing potential criticisms.

Beyond having a flat face and ears on the sides of its head, the creature's defining characteristics are not detailed. The description in the account centres more on the creature's actions, such as mimicking what DeWerth was doing, squatting down, standing up and looking straight at him. DeWerth had already positioned himself as a sceptical, sensible researcher whose belief in Bigfoot was wavering. Nevertheless, as a Bigfooter he can fill the 'black object' with what he and the Bigfooting community knows of Bigfoot physiology and behaviour.

Conclusion

Most of the Bigfoot encounters we collected in our interviews are testimonies with an absence at their centre (Frickel et al., 2010; Scott, 2019). These absences can be often understood as the product of the fact that Bigfooters are able to anticipate the ways in which listeners might explain the encounter they are describing. That is, the stories that the Bigfooters tell of their encounters are grounded in *anticipated [or anticipatory] stigma* (Ikizer et al., 2018). Throughout these accounts, we see witnesses anticipate that their encounter might be understood as a misidentification; that they had been fooled by nature and their own senses – what one of our interviewees labelled 'self-hoaxing.' But, as they maintain, it was not a cougar – it walked on two legs, it was not a bear – it had hands with thumbs, it was not a human – it was too tall, it had disproportionate arms, and so on. The witness has a licence to make these assertions because, unlike those who might be fooled, they have experience in the woods, they know the way that the forest and its wildlife looks and sounds. They are legitimate interpreters.

Equally, it was not a prank, it was not a man in a monkey costume. These are brave, experienced men – military men, in some cases – unlikely to be rattled by something that was not genuinely uncanny. More, they are not credulous; they present themselves as sceptics, they raise their doubts – of their senses, of themselves, of their family and friends. It takes a close encounter, a life-changing experience, to make them really believe. The witnesses tell stories in which the absence they construct is presented as credible against the expected objections that what they saw was mere misidentification or hoax. They are doing impression management.

And as the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes maintains, 'When you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.' Ginzburg (2013) describes this approach as the 'conjectural paradigm': a method that involves assembling clues from frequently disregarded and often overlooked traces and residues to construct a broader understanding of the object at hand. It is in this way that Bigfooters' claims for what *was* encountered appear relatively modest and rational, inviting us to follow the witnesses' argument for what it *was not*, and in so doing being open to an idea of *what it is.* In collaboration with the storyteller, the audience is then also expected to give this absence a shape, one widely known, if not widely believed. In other words, the absences in the encounters make room for Bigfoot; in the absence of seeing Bigfoot, it is found in the absences.

Science as the knowledge-making community *par excellence* is fundamentally social (Merton, 1979). Scientific knowledge is shaped by trust, credibility, disciplinary norms, and so on, embedded in and produced by the social context in which the scientific

knowledge is made (Shapin, 1994). Stories of Bigfoot encounters by Bigfooters involve attempts to define and then fill absences, so as to turn them into something that can count as evidence. But to make an encounter with the unknown – with strange events, with unexplained sounds, with a sighting of something – into an encounter with Bigfoot requires *knowledge* of Bigfoot. Knowledge gained from living in a milieu in which Bigfoot 'exists', knowledge which is expanded upon and refined, just like in science, through socialisation in a community. How tall is Bigfoot? What colour is Bigfoot? What does it sound like? Even if Bigfoot does not exist as a biological entity, these are characteristics that are known, at least within certain knowledge-making communities. Imperfectly. Tentatively. But, nevertheless, with some degree of reliability if not validity. They are known and are being used by those that know them to explain otherwise unexplainable encounters. Knowledge of Bigfoot is then partly derived from witness accounts that draw from a conjectural paradigm rooted in community knowledge, which excludes competing explanations of these encounters.

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