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White Esotericisms?
New Directions in the Study of Race and Esotericism

Justine M. Bakker

Justine.bakker@ru.nl

Amanda Lucia. *White Utopias: The Religious Exoticisms of Transformational Festivals*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2020. xvii + 299 pp. ISBN: 9780520376953. €27.99.

Susannah Crockford. *Ripples of the Universe: Spirituality in Sedona, Arizona*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. 251 pp. ISBN: 9780226778075. €29.99.

Susan Lepselter. *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity, and UFOs in the American Uncanny*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016. x + 181 pp. ISBN: 9780472121540. €32.99.

Tentatively, but finally, race has emerged as a category of analysis in the academic field of esotericism.[1] The catalyst was, without a doubt, *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience*, a comprehensive volume published in 2015. Edited by Stephen Finley, Margarita Simon Guillory, and Hugh R. Page, Jr., it demonstrated that esotericisms informed or shaped alternative ideas about

1. Consider, for instance, that the two most significant recent volumes include chapters on "race" and esotericism (Hanegraaff, Pasi, and Forshaw, *Hermes Explains*; Asprem and Strube, *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*). Readers should note, however, that scholars in literary studies and other fields did already explore this intersection. See Bakker, "Race and (the Study of) Esotericism."

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blackness, and *vice versa*.[2] More recently, the widely read blog *The Immanent Frame* published "Out There: Perspectives on Black Metaphysical Religion," a series of short essays on the "widespread and varied occult interests and mystical orientations of Black communities in the twentieth century."[3] Reading the two collections in tandem provokes a question: if one can write confidently about something like "Black esoteric traditions" or "Black metaphysical religion," are there also esoteric movements, currents, practices, or texts we should categorize as "white"?[4]

It is remarkable—although, as I will explain, not that surprising—that scholars in the field of esotericism studies speak with ease and conviction about Black esotericisms but seem hesitant to definitively pair "white" and "esotericism." Indeed, even though several scholars have published on the intersections of esotericism and white supremacy over the years,[5] as well as on the explicit racial

2. See also: Finley, Gray, and Page, "Africana Esoteric Studies and Western Intellectual Hegemony." That said, Finley, Guillory, and Page were not the first to publish on Black esotericisms (see: Bakker, "Esotericism, That's for White Folks, Right?" 24n16 for a comprehensive list). Other more recent publications include: Knight, *Metaphysical Africa*; Dorman, *Princess and the Prophet*; Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*; Finley, *In and Out of This World*; Finley, "The Afro-Theosophysics of Robert T. Browne"; Gray, "Traumatic Mysticism of Othered Others"; Knight, "The Supreme Wisdom Lessons and Problem Book"; Clarke, *A Luminous Brotherhood*.

3. Harris and Roane, "Out There: Perspectives on Black Metaphysical Religion." In a recent editorial for this journal, Aren Roukema and I reflect on the shift from esotericism to metaphysical religion: Bakker and Roukema, "10 Years of Correspondences."

4. In this review, I follow many others inside and outside the academy in capitalizing Black to indicate a shared sense of identity, community, and history of people of African descent. There is much more debate over the question of whether one should capitalize white when talking about whiteness in a racial or cultural sense. I use lowercase when I talk about white people, in part to not replicate the use of capitalized White in white supremacy groups. However, scholars like Nell Irvin Painter—who wrote one of the foundational histories of whiteness and white people—have made a compelling case to capitalize White as well. Painter writes that a capitalized White leads to "unmasking 'Whiteness' as an American racial identity as historically important as 'Blackness'—which it certainly is. No longer should white people be allowed the comfort of this racial invisibility; they should have to see themselves as raced. Being racialized makes white people squirm, so let's racialize them with that capital W." See: Painter, "Why White Should be Capitalized."

5. Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*; Staudenmeier, *Between Occultism and Nazism*; Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun*; Gilman, *Blood Talk*; Zander, "Sozialdarwinistische Rassentheorien aus dem okkulten Untergrund des Kaiserreichs"; Strube, "Nazism and the Occult."

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theories of esotericists like Rudolph Steiner, Helena P. Blavatsky, and Julius Evola,[6] this essay is the first to explicitely probe the rubric of "white esotericism."[7] Why and how does whiteness remain so often hidden and obscured? Is there such a thing as "white esotericism"? And if so, how can or should we delimit this category? What does it reveal? What does it obscure? And what is lost if whiteness is left out of the study of esotericism?[8]

The three ethnographies under consideration in this review offer some, and various, answers to these questions—although none of the authors planned to write about whiteness. Of the three, Amanda Lucia's *White Utopias* is most explicitly concerned with the topic at hand: Lucia explores religious exoticism and the viscosity of whiteness at "transformative festivals" like Burning Man. In the two other books—Susannah Crockford's *Ripples of the Universe* and Susan Lepselter's *The Resonance of Unseen Things*, both ethnographic studies concerned with esoteric belief and practice in the southwest of the US—whiteness is often a more implicit, but equally haunting, presence.

While all three books help us understand how white Americans use or engage in esotericisms to reject, critique, and distance themselves from white civil society, they collectively paint an immensely complex picture of the ways in which esotericisms are used to reproduce, transform, and transcend (if only temporarily) normative constructs of whiteness. These esotericisms are not grounds for explicit iterations of white supremacy or crude racial theories. They are grounds for critiques of white civil society that, at the same time, reproduce

6. Strube, "Theosophy, Race, and the Study of Esotericism"; Staudenmeier, "Racial Ideology Between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany"; Staudenmeier, "Race and Redemption"; Koren, "Between Racism and Universalism"; Zander, "Anthroposophische Rassentheorie"; Santucci, "The Notion of Race in Theosophy."

7. That said, in writing this essay I became aware of the controversy over "whiteshamanism" or "White Shamanism": as Amanda Lucia's *White Utopias*, under review here, shows, Indigenous scholars have been critiquing the appropriation of Native spiritualities in New Age discourse since the 1990s; 36.

8. This question is inspired by Rachel Schneider and Sophie Bjork-James, who ask in a recent essay to which I return below: "what is lost when whiteness is left out of the study of religion?" ("Whither Whiteness and Religion," 176).

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or reinforce racialized and hierarchical political, social, and cultural structures. This is precisely why these books are so important, and why they present "new directions" in both the field of esotericism and critical whiteness studies.

White Esotericisms

Before we delve into the individual texts, some general remarks about whiteness and esotericism are in order. As I have suggested elsewhere, whiteness functions as one of the foundational structures of the field of esotericism studies.[9] This is evident from and has had implications for how the field looks, the narratives we tell (or not), the theoretical frameworks we use (or overlook), and the materials we study (or ignore). Scholars in the field are overwhelmingly white, we have mainly looked at currents and movements that are majority white, we have paid too little attention to theoretical frameworks that draw from Black studies, critical race theory, and de- and postcolonial theory, and we have told a somewhat limited story about rejection, deviance, and normativity.[10] Moreover, this overwhelming whiteness was, until recently, hardly acknowledged, recognized, problematized, or theorized. Whiteness was, quite simply, an uninterrogated norm. This does not mean that such whiteness is pure, absolute, or total, but that it functions as scaffolding: it is the locus of our definitions, concepts, and frameworks.

Alongside and occasionally in conversation with a long-overdue embrace of race as an analytical category, scholars in the field of esotericism have debated the use of the adjective "Western."[11] At this point, the various arguments and

9. Bakker, "Hidden Presence."

10. See also Asprem, "Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered"; Bakker and Roukema, "10 Years of Correspondences." Together with Tanya Cheadle, I am currently developing a workshop on "normative esotericism," generously funded by the Radboud-Glasgow Collaboration Fund.

11. For essays that tackle Western and race in conversation, see: Finley, Guillory, Page, "Introduction"; Finley, Gray, Page, "Africana Esoteric Studies and Western Intellectual Hegemony"; Bakker, "Hidden Presence." See further, for the debate on the adjective: Granholm, "Locating the West"; Asprem, "Beyond the West"; Roukema and Kilner-Johnson, "Time to Drop the 'Western'"; Strube, "Towards the Study of Esotericism Without the 'Western'"; Hanegraaff, "Globalization of Esotericism"; Pasi, "Oriental Kabbalah and the Parting of West and East in the Early Theosophical Society."

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positions in this debate are well known: on the one hand, the adjective was put in use to sharply distinguish the then-emerging field of Western esotericism from religionism. On the other hand, it is rather imprecise, obscures that esotericism is a "globally entangled subject,"[12] and functions, as I argued elsewhere, as a "metalanguage for white."[13] To that end, I suggest that the only reason to keep the adjective Western—although not without problems or complications—would be to provide a platform to ask and probe questions about whiteness.

Another way to facilitate such discussions is, perhaps, the moniker or rubric of "white esotericism." In suggesting this, I take inspiration from recent writings on "white religion." "What would admitting to and naming the categories of both 'white Christian' and 'white religion' expose about the strategic and tacit identity-formation processes at work in scholarship and social life alike," Christopher Driscoll asks in the introduction to his 2015 publication *White Lies: Race and Uncertainty in the Twilight of American Religion*?[14] Such naming is not without concern and risk, however. As Rachel Schneider and Sophie Bjork-James argue in their insightful article "Whither Whiteness and Religion?": "Even using a term such as white religion is likely to provoke discomfort or confusion in part due to fears that it will serve to reinforce the cultural power and discursive authority of whiteness."[15] There is no reason to assume that the same would not hold true for "white esotericism."

Yet, as Schneider and Bjork-James also argue in conversation with Aisha Beliso-De Jesús, "critical attention to whiteness and religion by scholars of religion is necessary to provide a diverse range of scholars institutional space in

12. Strube, "Towards the Study of Esotericism Without the 'Western,'" 45–66.

13. Bakker, "Hidden Presence." I made this claim in conversation with Sylvester Johnson's work on white and American religion ("Religion Proper and Proper Religion," 160); in writing this article, I realized that Christopher Driscoll made a similar claim in *White Lies*, when he argues that American religion has served as "proxy and code word concealing a more focused assessment of 'white religion'" (Driscoll, *White Lies*, 14).

14. Driscoll, *White Lies*, 3.

15. Schneider and Bjork-James, "Whither Whiteness and Religion," 177.

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which to examine how white supremacy has functioned across space and time in ways that could help resist white supremacy."[16] Concerns over the discursive authority of whiteness are important: given the marginalization of scholars of color we must be careful not to centralize or "amplify" the voices of white scholars.[17] However, precisely because conversations about the relationships between colonialism, whiteness, and religion have so far been primarily the domain of scholars of color, scholars who are interested in religions practiced by mostly white subjects, have been allowed to abstain from discussing race.[18] Although there are exceptions, of course, this definitely holds true for the field of esotericism. It was, as noted above, the pioneering work of Stephen Finley, Margarita Guillory, and Hugh R. Page, Jr., all Black American scholars, that marked race as a *constitutive* category of analysis; until then, discussions of race were limited to explicit forms of white supremacy, like occult aspects of Nazism.

Given that much of the institutional force and presence of the field of esotericism is in Europe,[19] this focus on explicit forms of white supremacy is perhaps not surprising. Where conversations around race have been part of the public and academic domain for quite some time in the US—the main focus of Schneider and Bjork-James's article—in Europe, as sociologist Alana Lentin writes, there has been a general "silence" around race.[20] After the Second World War, race would be increasingly seen as a problem originating in science: it was a pseudo-scientific concept, that had to be disproven on scientific grounds, as UNESCO's "Statement against race and racial prejudice" would indeed do in 1950 when it declared race a harmful, destructive myth.[21]

16. Ibid., 192.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. I need to be careful here, of course, but considering that the overwhelming number of degree programs, journals, and book series dedicated to esotericism are located in Europe, I think this claim is justified. That said, this European hegemony is a problem in itself.
20. I take this idea of "silence" from Alana Lentin: "Europe and the Silence About Race."
21. Lentin, "Europe and the Silence About Race," 496.

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However, such a disentanglement of race and politics in Europe obscures that, although disproven on scientific grounds, race continues to facilitate and structure the oppression, subjugation, and segregation of people of color. It obscures that racial hierarchies do persist, although they are today concealed in words like background, culture, ethnicity, civilization, or religion.[22] It obscures, too, the close intersection between race and colonialism; in Europe, race remains often associated with the Shoah and the scientific racisms of the nineteenth century, rather than the project of endless differentiation that finds its origin in the symbolic year of 1492.[23] This silence around race is even more deafening when it comes to whiteness: to begin to recognize race as something that belongs to racialized peoples is one thing, to acknowledge that whiteness, too, is a racial category—and one that shapes and is informed by esotericisms—would be another. As Richard Dyer once wrote in the opening pages of his famous study of whiteness, *White*, "white people are not racially seen or named . . . Other people are raced, we are just people."[24]

Yet, as Schneider and Bjork-James also insist,

> to not substantively address whiteness in the study of religion has consequences. Not only does it reinforce an analytic division between race and religion, it also works to obscure the racial dimensions of dominant Western forms of religion, particularly Protestant Christianity in the United States, as well as the religious dimensions of white supremacy.[25]

Two things are important here. First, Schneider and Bjork-James make clear that the relationship between race and religion works both ways: it is important to understand the racial dimensions of religion, as well as the religious dimensions of white supremacy. Second, the statement reveals a gap, which is also apparent in the rest of the article: Schneider and Bjork-James and, by extension, scholarship on whiteness and religion—after all, they provide an extensive, thorough state

22. Lentin, "Europe and the Silence About Race"; Nye, "Race and Religion."
23. Lentin, "Europe and the Silence About Race," 496.
24. Dyer, *White*, 1. Also cited in: Schneider and Bjork-James, "Whither Whiteness and Religion," 179.
25. Schneider and Bjork-James, "Whither Whiteness and Religion," 177–78.

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of the art—focuses primarily on Protestant Christianity in the United States. Although understandable, this focus is also rather one-sided and limited. The authors are aware of this, concluding towards the end of the article that "it is important not to confine the study of whiteness and religion to Protestant Christianity" or, indeed, the US.[26] They list several important interventions that unsettle this focus, including studies that interrogate whiteness in Judaism, Mormonism, Buddhism, and Western Buddhism. Esotericisms are, except for a brief mention of Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke and Mattias Gardell on the influence of paganism and Odinism on the racist right, absent.[27] The three texts under consideration here offer a helpful and much-needed different take on the relationship between whiteness and religion.

White Utopias

White Utopias, a nuanced study of spiritual growth, meaning making, altered states of consciousness, self-critique *and* cultural appropriation at contemporary transformative festivals, finds its origin in an observation. Spending many days at Burning Man, Wanderlust, Lightning in the Bottle, Bhakti Fest, and Shakti Fest—an astonishing 129 days in total—Amanda Lucia began to wonder: why were those around her so overwhelmingly white? This was particularly apparent at Bhakti Fest and Shakti Fest, two festivals specifically dedicated to yoga. While these take place in California (where white people are the minority), almost 90 percent of those participating were white.

While Lucia noted this as significant, many of her informants resisted her "centering of whiteness" (xvii). Why? Lucia finds an answer to both questions with the help of the concept of "viscosity, or the stickiness of whiteness in countercultural spaces," which she borrows from Arun Saldanha's study of whiteness and psytrance in Goa, India (4; see also 150). Saldanha develops this term as part of

26. Ibid., 193.
27. Ibid., 185.

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his materialist theory of race: developing a critique of social constructionism and its focus on ideas and representations, he wants to understand race "in terms of bodies and spaces."[28] Like Saldanha, Lucia uses the term to understand how and why the subjects of her study fostered spaces of white hegemony, despite their obvious attempts to decenter whiteness, escape the constraints of white society, critique hegemonic Western modernity, and challenge white supremacy (which is why they felt uncomfortable when confronted with whiteness).

In five chapters, four interludes, an introduction and conclusion, and two appendices, *White Utopias* explores how and why such festivals become spaces of white hegemony. Three concepts are central: the aforementioned white viscosity, white possessivism, and religious exoticism. White possessivism is a form of representational politics in which whites do not only learn from but "embody, possess, extract, and redistribute" alterity as a "form of social capital" (36). At transformative festivals, this is grounded in and facilitated by religious exoticism, a concept Lucia borrows from sociologist Véronique Altglas, and that refers to "a constructed representation of the other in the service of the production of the self" (8).

In Lucia's study, religious exoticism names a "project of white identity making" (18), specifically one that entails a "*critique of one's own positionality*" and a "*search for something else, something beyond the familiar*" (37; emphasis original). This also helps her to answer a second major question: why were the majority-white participants at transformative festivals so drawn to Indic and Indigenous practices? While we may expect, at festivals where yoga is the common denominator, a dedication to Hinduism and Buddhism, transformative festivals also display a consistent and deep engagement with Indigenous spiritualities. Lucia found that teachers and participants often "hybridized" Indic and Indigenous, a practice that goes back to the counterculture of the 1960s and is, more generally, a feature of New Age tropes and practices (7). For participants—a "subsection" of people who identify as spiritual but not religious, specifically the group who has turned

28. Saldanha, *Psychedelic White*, 9.

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away from “Abrahamic religions” to “Hinduism, Buddhism, and Indigenous religions, and occasionally Sufism, Kabbalah, and Western esotericism”—these spiritualities helped to formulate critiques of white civil society (11).

Yet, precisely this religious exoticism, she concludes, “served as a deterrent to nonwhite potential participants” (4) as it “romanticizes racialized others as unsullied, exotic, premodern subjects” (8). The primary focus of Chapter 1, Lucia invokes religious exoticism as part of a nuanced, comprehensive, and rich exploration of cultural appropriation which shifts the focus from dress, hairstyles, and the ruses of ethnic isolationism and essentialism to inequality, oppression and white supremacy: it is “systemic racism,” she writes, that “makes these cultural appropriations so offensive” (61). In Chapter 2, Lucia homes in on questions of authenticity and knowledge production. She distinguishes between “experience-authenticity” and universal knowledge, and “lineage-authenticity” and local knowledge, a distinction usually—although not always—bifurcated along racial lines (88).

But Lucia is not just interested in critique; in the second half of the book, she takes seriously that transformative festivals produce the conditions for—and encourage and celebrate—participants to engage in acts of self-transformation. She aptly observes that in the realm of religion, forms of cultural appropriation can lead to very serious forms of identification, or “conversions in all but name” (9).[29] Lucia is clear on what is at stake for these participants: they are not just looking for play or tourism, but fundamental and thorough change. Through geographical dislocation, dietary practices, and bodily exercise, participants deconstruct the normative self and shape it into a new form. At festivals, such ascetic practices, which are the focus of Chapter 3, produce increasingly “open, porous, and vulnerable selves” (149) that, in turn, welcome wondrous and peak experiences induced by psychedelics, devotional music and the natural environment, which further “shock” the self into a new form.

29. Indeed, Lucia remarks that very few participants would identity as Hindu or Native American religion, in part because these religions are ethnoreligions (41). See also page 167, where Lucia explains that many at Bhakti and Shakti fest regard activities grounded in Hinduism—like chanting Hare Krishna—as universal spiritual experiences, rather than linked to religion or Hinduism.

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These mystical experiences are the focus of Chapter 4, where Lucia also returns to the concept of white viscosity as a "subterranean theme of analysis" (150). Lucia cites Saldanha at length: white viscosity explains how white bodies aggregate and, as such, create spaces that are less penetrable by people who are not white. This much is clear. What is less clear, however, is how this works precisely at transformative festivals. Is there something specific about spaces that produce peak experiences—her insightful discussion of the social construction of wilderness would suggest this (154–55)—or is it merely about the sheer number of white people present at these festivals, which produces a kind of impenetrable boundary?

While Lucia is convinced that such acts of self-transformation are genuine, she also problematizes the intense focus on personal transformation—where "the performance of the ascetic self becomes the ideal" (136)—and the creation of temporary utopias, at the general expense of seeking political solidarities and the transformation of society more broadly: participants choose existential meaning over revolution and rebellion. Lucia lists several moments in which participants at transformative festivals clashed with Indigenous communities over issues of appropriation and inequality, although she also makes clear that some festivals do engage in community work. This tension between individual growth and transformation and the wider social worlds in which these take place becomes particularly apparent in the final chapter, when Lucia dissects the longing for "freedom" that, she argues, undergirds the ideology and practice of many who participate and that creates a kind of "ideological commons, united in mutual experiences of and reactions to late-capitalist modernity" (217).

This search for an ideological commons, too, minimizes diversity and reinforces homogeneity as it "impacts ethnic diversity in its homogenizing tendencies, demanding outward signifiers of social inclusion" (221). Lucia illustrates this point with an experience of an African American burner who noted that people responded much more "standoffish" when his "hair looked like every other 'scary black person' the white Americans are used to seeing in

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their movies and TV shows" than when he had dreadlocks, which at Burning Man suggests the "friendly, hippy, bohemian negro idea that gets attached to having dreadlocks" (219). Burners engaged, used, and reinforced racial stereotypes.

Over the course of her fieldwork, Lucia writes early on in the book, she gave up her decades-long practice of yoga (3). And indeed, her central claim that "white possessivism," ultimately lies "at the very heart" of these festivals (20) is convincing, even if she mitigates it somewhat in the conclusion. The overwhelming whiteness of such spaces, she speculates, may also be attributed to "the fact that many people of color are located in more secure religious and cultural centers that are less comfortable with spiritual bricolage and religious exoticism" (221–22). She provides little evidence for this claim, however, and acknowledges that it requires further study. To be sure, the Black esotericisms with which I opened this review would complicate it—primarily as it relates to bricolage but, as the scholarship of Philip Deslippe, Alexander Rocklin, and Jacob Dorman demonstrates, also when it comes to religious exoticism.[30]

I appreciate how Lucia balances a careful, if occasionally biting critique of cultural appropriation, the politics of representation, and systemic racism with a deeply felt appreciation for the sincerity of her informants' desire to transform themselves and critique normative "Western" ways of being, knowing, and feeling. As she herself asks towards the end of the introduction: how can we "evaluate the ways in which the religious exoticism inherent in spirituality is simultaneously a genuine engagement with alterity, a radically transformative method, and an often exploitative form of cultural appropriation?" (32)

White Utopias performs the answer. In so doing, Lucia also demonstrates the complexities in studying whiteness: many participants and teachers take issue with white norms, but their class and race privilege also creates new norms—around conceptions of freedom, authenticity, and knowledge production, for

30. Deslippe, "Hindu in Hoodoo"; Rocklin, "Hindu Alterity and the Performativity of Religion and Race between the United States and the Caribbean"; Dorman, *Princess and the Prophet*.

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instance—and reinforces white hegemony. As she details in her informative but easy-to-miss appendix on “Methodology,” several teachers rejected any acknowledgment of white privilege, because “many have built their careers on white normativity, which allows them to present themselves as universalistic exemplars, as postracial subjects” (239).

Ripples of the Universe

If *White Utopias* is about a set of practices, then Susannah Crockford’s astute, beautiful, and compassionate ethnography is about a place: Sedona, Arizona. The book opens with a photo of Sedona’s “natural” and built environment: an image of one of Sedona’s most famous mountain peaks with apartment buildings at the forefront of the image. This is a fitting image: *Ripples of the Universe* is about how places attract and make people, and how people populate and create a space.

The result of six years of fieldwork—Crockford lived in Sedona for almost three in total—*Ripples of the Universe* is divided in five thematic chapters flanked by an introduction and conclusion. The introduction offers an elaborate discussion of spirituality—which, for the people of Sedona, meant “a path, a route through life” (7)—and related concepts: energy, vibration, frequency, manifestation, vortex, ascension, alignment, and awareness. Firmly grounding Sedona’s “cosmologies of spirituality” in a longer lineage of secularisms produced by “the haunted metaphysics of American Protestantism” (10), Crockford explains that, for spiritual seekers in Sedona, everything is energy. All energy vibrates, at various frequencies. As such, everything is connected, but this does not mean that everything is equal: the higher the frequency, the closer to the universe. “Energy negotiates equality and hierarchy,” Crockford concludes (20). Although most likely branded as New Age believers by outsiders, those on the path in Sedona she encountered had little patience for this term. “Woo woo meant new age and new age meant woo woo,” writes Crockford, and “nobody chose to be associated with either” (7).

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The introduction also serves to introduce Crockford's main themes and concerns. Refreshingly, class is central. Deeply immersed in theory and widely read in a range of different fields, Crockford writes deftly about the ways in which people in Sedona reframed "poverty as a choice" (6), even as they worked in the "digitized gig economy" (10). She confidently links neoliberalism and spirituality both historically and conceptually: "spirituality is the complement to neoliberalism; the spiritual side of pure capitalism" (28). Let that sink in. And then consider, too, that Crockford makes the convincing case that even though the spiritual path is, at its core, about raising one's vibration and changing society, such change is not fostered through organized, collective action, but through individuals that act independently (13).

Spiritual seekers in Sedona embraced a particular American conceptualization of society as composed of individuals and of the self "as bounded, discrete, and constituted only by itself (and not through social relations with others)" (31). In such a society, race and class—and the ways in which they forge or limit opportunities—are seen as mere fictions (30; see also 109–11); change is in your hands, and in your hands only. Yet importantly, she points out, "by resorting to individual solutions to social problems, the existing political order is reified, not rejected" (152).

In its critique of the individual nature of spirituality, Crockford's book reminds me of *White Utopias*. But whereas Lucia's critique aimed for the lack of political engagement and community-making across the color line, Crockford demonstrates that the people of Sedona are also profoundly isolated from *each other*. Although her interlocutors emphasize positivity and wellness—and although Crockford is an immensely funny writer—the book mainly captures a deep sense of loneliness, alienation, sadness, and despair. Class, no doubt, is a central difference here: "being God in your own universe is also a way to make money" (31). Put most crudely: the protagonists of *Ripples of the Universe*—which, too, are mainly white (22)—work in the gig economy that the seekers

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in *White Utopias* would use (or, indeed, develop).[31] Put another way, participants at Burning Man can critique white civil society and conceptualizations of self because they, ultimately, benefit from it. Reading the two ethnographies side-by-side, and in the context of an exploration of whiteness and esotericism, thus demonstrates the importance of intersectional readings: race and class must be studied together.[32]

This is evident, too, from the subsequent five chapters, each of which is organized around a particular theme. Chapter 1 analyzes the production of Sedona as a "sacred space of special energy" (35). Crockford pays specific attention to how this narrative at once appropriates and encapsulates Indigenous spiritualities—people in Sedona engage in vision quests and medicine walks, often divorcing these practices from their original context—and overwrites Indigenous claims to land sovereignty. "The recorded history of genocide of Native Americans," Crockford observes, "was rarely addressed by those involved in spirituality" (51). Crockford confidently weaves together Indigenous scholarship on appropriation and genocide with ecocriticism and theories in religious studies about sacred space and transcendence.

However, people remain present and central; often, the same people return in different chapters. The second chapter is, for instance, dedicated to "the idiosyncratic belief system of Peter Gersten," a Sedona resident who predicted the end of the world on December 21st, 2012. Smartly, Crockford uses this singular worldview as a prism to reflect on the narrativization of the self in the context of forms of hyperreality produced by capitalism. Peter returns in the fifth chapter, now in the context of the overlap between conspiracy theories and spirituality (157).

31. The reader should note that Lucia's final chapter is also about capitalism and whiteness.

32. Although race has, as noted, recently emerged as a central category of analysis, class remains an overlooked concern in our field. Crockford has done much to address this (see also her "What do Jade Eggs Tell Us About the Category of 'Esotericism'"). In the summer of 2025, *Correspondences* will publish a special issue on class.

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In the third chapter, Crockford links stories about aliens and abductions to alienation "from the norms, expectations, and ideals that [her interlocutors] associated with 'mainstream' American society" (96). In Sedona, some believed they were "starseeds"; in choosing this alien identity, Crockford observes, they adopted a stigmatized status but were also responding to already existing feelings of alienation. This chapter also returns to the issue identified above: according to some, "following the spiritual path granted the opportunity to overcome or discard race and class" (111). Some consider race for instance an exclusively earthly fiction: in embracing an alien identity, one of Crockford's informants, the ethnically mixed Mynzah, rejected the racial identities ascribed to him (114). Others reframe poverty as a choice.

Crockford is skeptical here. Rather than transcending race, discourses about alien races often replicated American racial discourse (122). And "rather than liberating themselves from labor alienation my starseed interlocutors were caught between depending on state welfare or employment-related benefits and the precarious unregulated short-term gig economy" (121). Likewise, the fourth chapter demonstrates that while Sedona dietary practices—organic, non-processed, or simply no food at all—purported to reject and move away from mainstream American foodways, they end up reproducing and celebrating normative understandings of perfect bodies: "the bodies with the highest vibration were thin, young, and free of disease" (150).

In her conclusion, Crockford reflects on her methodology, explaining that she let spiritual seekership guide her ethnographic practice: she let the wide variety of available spiritual practices inform what she should do and where she should go. While this could have led to rather disjointed chapters framed around practices, the chapters instead feel quite tight and neat. In part, this is because each takes on a particular theme—with conspiracy theory as "counter narrative" as the central organizing theme of the fifth and final chapter—but I think this also has to do with the ways in which each is structured around a protagonist

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or set of protagonists. It is the spiritual people she meets and engages, rather than spirituality per se, that seem to guide her ethnographic practice. Dedicated to "the people of Sedona, love and light," *Ripples of the Universe* thus achieves something remarkable: it performs precisely the commitment to community that, Crockford argues convincingly, this form of spirituality often lacks.

The Resonance of Unseen Things

If Lucia writes about a set of practices, and Crockford about a people and their place, then the third and final book under consideration here—Susan Lepselter's beautiful, haunting, and transformative *The Resonance of Unseen Things*—is about a story. Based on fieldwork conducted as a graduate student in the southwest US in the 1990s, Lepselter traces a collection of stories about hidden, sinister powers. Some of these she heard directly from people she met waitressing at the Little A'Le'Inn and attending UFO experiencer meetings, others she lifted from popular culture. Aliens, UFOs, and abductions are often central to these stories, but Lepselter is adamant that she is not writing a book about UFO culture.

"What happens," she asks in the introduction, "when you listen to UFO talk ethnographically—when the uncanny is shot through with the ordinary noise of life?" (16) For Lepselter, this produced a kind of "destabilizing opening into other kinds of theories and other structures of the imagination" (18). More concretely, she locates and traces a form of apophenia—"the experience of perceiving connections between random or unrelated objects" (3)—and the feeling of resonance produced through this experience: "something just clicked," her interlocutors would say, or "it fits all together" (5). She shows how stories congeal, how they stick, and in doing so produce affect.

Lepselter's book is about people who connect the dots, and in that connecting, find solace, purpose, meaning, and narrative. These parallels, she argues convincingly, *become* a story: a story of captivity and liberation, power and vulnerability, agency and subjection, grounded in the singular American master

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trope of freedom, and embedded in experiences marked by class, race, gender, trauma, and living on the margins. As another reviewer insightfully noted, Lepselter accomplishes this task "by largely disembodying her interlocutors, focusing on the aesthetic resonance of the narratives rather than the social identities of the storytellers."[33] She does this on purpose, the reviewer also notes—a point to which I return below—but in the context of *this* review, it is important to stipulate that most of the people Lepselter talks to are white.

The Resonance of Unseen Things consists of six more-or-less thematic chapters and a coda. The first chapter, "Vulnerabilities," doubles as the book's introduction: it offers a brief reflection on the book's central terms, sites, and style. The latter is informed by Lepselter's ethnographic experience, specifically her sense of being "narratively and poetically infected, altered" by listening (18). Instead of subjecting her material to a theoretical analysis—Crockford's forte—she "performs the ethnographic experience of hybridization and partial permeation, as a way of dealing with the very real, often seductive power of the discourses I present, and with their prolific growth in America" (18). At points in the narrative, the distance between her and the stories she recounts even collapses. In the coda, Lepselter relays her own experience of resonance, produced by talking to a fervent UFO believer and unknown "Man in Black" who approached her at the airport one day: "conspiracies snaked through my blood, touched forgotten images, and linked together in a chain of unstoppable increase" (162).

There are other ways in which Lepselter bridges the distance between her and her interlocutors, theory and folklore, academic and vernacular, poetics and talk, and epistemology and experience. Lepselter's most successful strategy is the use of poetic form: in several instances, she presents the words of her interlocutors as lines and stanzas. Consider how she, as part of an extensive mediation on class-informed feelings of immobility and captivity, reproduces the story of Stephanie, someone she met in a UFO community:

33. Mahmud, "Review."

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> My water pump went out when I went to go pick up Kelly in
> town.
> My water pump decided to go out in my car.
> OK, ever since then, we have been trying to get a water pump
> to fit that car.
> And we can't find one to fit it . . .
> But for some reason,
> we have exchanged that water pump
> now four times
> and four times now
> it will not work on my car.
> So there is some unnatural force keeping me here.
> It must be something good or it wouldn't keep me here.
> I usually don't stay where there's nothing good.
> So there is something keeping me here causing this time warp (31–32).

Lepselter then asks her reader to read it out loud: "if you try to hear the words out loud," she writes, you can "hear the repetitive thud of her cadence." And indeed, with Lepselter's help, we begin to notice that the words water pump, fit, and four times are repeated. The story, she concludes, "reiterates the structure of immobility in its form" (32–33). In paying specific attention to form, Lepselter demonstrates that these stories present a kind of poetics of the uncanny, an "American vernacular poetics" as she calls it in the opening paragraph of the book (1). The effect is immediate, and haunting: I keep thinking about this book, about the stories it tells, the histories and memories it uncovers, the futures it opens up.

This is not just because of style, though: Lepselter's analysis is astute, thought-provoking, and radically compassionate. In Chapter 2, Lepselter expands on some of the themes introduced in Chapter 1, in particular resonance, repetition, and captivity. With the help of Roman Jakobson's theory of language and Kathleen Stewart's writings on affect, Lepselter explains how people make meaning by connecting seemingly random events. For members of the Hillview UFO Experiencers group—Hillview is the fictional name she gives to one of her central sites; the other is a well-known UFO-themed bar in Rachel, Nevada—

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everything can, for instance, be connected to a UFO. As such, the UFO "becomes a sign expressing that simultaneous sense of contingency and design, an inkling of some complete 'grammar' of meaningfulness" (24).

Again, for Lepselter it is not about UFO talk per se, but about how people make sense of their surroundings. Moreover, such apophenia is connected to power: stories of captivity, abduction, and subjugation emerge in the context of the master trope of freedom and liberation (a trope also explored by Lucia and Crockford) which is fully embedded in histories of colonization and enslavement. "I have tried in these pages," Lepselter writes towards the end, "to show how America is still haunted by its own historical crimes and wounds" (157).

In Chapter 3, Lepselter turns to captivity narratives as a way to think ethnographically through how people stitch together various stories of abduction. A truly impressive chapter, Lepselter does not only describe but also performs apophenia: she brings together colonial writings about Indigenous peoples who capture and abduct white people with twentieth-century stories about UFOs to suggest that we find traces of the former in the latter. "The fall out of the still-open wound of Native American colonization and genocide," she writes, "drifts into space alien stories" (52). Lepselter is careful, though, not to overstate her case: it would be a mistake to say that the UFO abduction story is *about* Native American colonization (52). Yet, as memory comes to exceed experience– "escap[ing] ownership" to become "a living, growing thing" (53)—others can join in. Here, too, Lepselter avoids quick judgment: we can critique "the New Age discourse of appropriation," but UFO lore also reveals "a troubled American unconscious, an unstable desire born out of legacies of both colonization and class" (78).

In less capable hands, this insistent, wide-ranging tracking of the uncanny may have felt forced or artificial, but in *The Resonance of Unseen Things*, each new chapter deepens connections and parallels, producing resonance themselves. Lepselter's mesmeric writing draws you in, deeper and deeper, into the minds and feelings of the people she met along the way: something is wrong, they insist, and nothing is what it used to be. Chapter 4, for example, continues to

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trace the "troubled American unconscious" by looking at stories of government cover-ups and "the powers that be"; Chapter 5 reflects on the proliferation and form of UFO abduction stories; and Chapter 6 picks up the theme of self-chosen marginality. Like Crockford, Lepselter conveys a profound sense of loss, drifting, and disappointment, but sees in how people deal with this—finding parallels, which belies a desire for "something more"—the seeds of a theory of power, about "its vastness, its hidden sources, and its just-visible clues" (155).

Class is, once again, important. But these stories are also haunted by race and, more specifically, whiteness even if race is only rarely an explicit concern in the text. Most of Lepselter's interlocutors, those that "join in" the memory of colonization and enslavement, are white. Moreover, race plays an explicit role in one of the foundational UFO abduction experiences, the abduction of the interracial couple Barney and Betty Hill, in 1961 (64–68). In her sixth and final chapter, however, Lepselter demands caution: yes, most people represented in her book are white, but the stories she traces transcend the boundaries of race and class. They do not belong to "a single social position," they exceed individual experience to take on a social life of their own (156). As Lepselter explains:

> I have taken stories, memories, and dreams from wealthy doctors and homeless drifters, men and women, young and old. A great many of the people here have experienced shifts in their economic position . . . Most, but not all, of the people represented here are white. But using social categories to analyze things like class position, here, would mislead from what I'm trying to say about the unfinalized structures of feeling and imagination that emerge in uncanny talk. These stories are memories and fragments that belong not to a single social position; rather they flood into and out of intersubjective spaces, and in doing so they express something about history and power. Memory and fantasy, like injury, exceed individual experience and become social, lingering and changing. My argument, in the end, is that what we need to know can be heard in the poetic resonance of these stories from multiple sources (156).

This is a rather unusual take, and I frequently wondered what someone like Crockford or Lucia, well-versed in critical race theory, would do with Lepselter's material. I should note, however, that in her reluctance to foreground social categories, Lepselter seems to take cue from her interlocutors. Consider the

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following story, which she shares in the pages preceding the quote above. At some point, Lepselter joined Linda and Ken—a couple she met at the café—to get Linda a new license. Linda was white and Ken was Black and, on their way back, their car was stopped by a police officer: "He had, I think, done a double-take at a black man driving in the deeply rural West with two white women" (154). The cop eventually lets them go, but for Lepselter, it is a clear sign of "racist harassment" (154).

Hours later, Linda spotted a UFO. As Lepselter tells it: "It was hovering on the coppery mountain to the north, a blinking and unnatural glitter, like a mirror tilted to signal us. *Wake up*, Ken, she [Linda] said. *That's a UFO, there it is*" (155; emphasis original). Back in the café, Ken and Linda would tell everyone about the UFO, but "didn't mention the cop" (155). It is unclear if she ever discussed the traffic stop with Ken and Linda, but Lepselter seems to take the fact that they did not talk about the cop as evidence for that what resonated for them was "the fact of power" and "its potential for transformation, and the strange pleasure of tearing holes in the real" (155).

However, there can be other explanations for why the couple did not discuss the police stop. Such stops may happen so frequently it's not worth mentioning anymore, for instance, or Ken may not have wished to share this experience of harassment with what we can assume to be a majority white audience. Perhaps Lepselter discussed these possibilities with them. As a reader, however, we simply do not know. This leaves me wondering about Lepselter's decision not to focus on social categories. On the one hand, I have come to think about Lepselter's insistence as a warning against overdetermination. It is not that race plays no role, but that a singular focus on race obscures—or, "misleads"—parallels and resonances between all those who live on the margins, none of whom can be "defined" by any one social category in particular. We would do well to remember this warning as we think about a concept like "white esotericism" (and I would not be surprised if Lepselter would object to the use of this moniker to describe her subject matter). On the other hand, I wonder to what extent the limitations and possibilities produced by race and class make

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some resonances, stories, and feelings—some variations of *the* story—more or less accessible, make it more or less possible to "join in." After all, the history and memory of colonialism, imperialism, and genocide that, as Lepselter's book shows so well, continues to haunt structures of feeling, continues to work its way into the "American vernacular poetics" of the uncanny, also continues to inform how people (are allowed or forced to) love, live, work, feel, and imagine.

White Esotericisms, Once More

In conclusion, I would like to return to the concept of "white esotericism" and think through what it reveals and obscures. To do so, it is helpful to look at how scholars have conceptualized "white religion."[34] In their aforementioned article, Schneider and Bjork-James conclude that, "to the extent that a white habitus is reinforced by religious practice and theological language—or itself functions with god-like power in relation to others—it becomes possible to discuss something like white religion" (191).

Schneider and Bjork-James conceptualize "white religion" here in two different ways and it is important to keep them apart. First, in relation to habitus, a term they borrow from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's famous analysis of taste and class. A white habitus, for Schneider and Bjork-James, is "a system of enduring dispositions, tastes, practices, preferences, moral norms, epistemologies, and ideologies—all of which are deployed in symbolic and material contests for capital" (190). Following Schneider and Bjork-James's argument, we can thus speak of white esotericism when esoteric practices and beliefs forge a white habitus: when they produce self-identifications or strategies of differentiation that mark or produce white as distinct, different, and perhaps even superior, and/or produce and reinforce racialized hierarchies.

The second meaning of "white religion" emerges when a white habitus functions with god-like power in relation to others. The first scholar to use the

34. I realize, of course, that we cannot fully subsume esotericisms under the rubric of "religion" or reduce its study to the field of religious studies. See: Bakker and Roukema, "10 Years of Correspondences," 242.

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moniker "white religion" in this way was W.E.B. du Bois, one of the founding fathers of sociology. In an essay first printed in 1917 and later reprinted as "The Souls of White Folk," serving as a companion to his much more famous book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), he conceptualizes "white religion" in two ways. First, white religion is simply another word for white Christianity. Second, he invokes the moniker in the context of speaking of "super-men," "world-mastering demi-gods," and "super-humanity," thereby suggesting that white people claim God-like qualities. White religion, then, is not just another word for white Christianity: it also refers to, frames, and theorizes white people's claim to superiority. Du Bois's article, in turn, seeks to dismantle such claims. Referring to the war that is raging at the precise time of his writing—a war, Du Bois also notes, that is about "the jealous and avaricious struggle for the largest share in exploiting darker races"[35]—he concludes: "This is not Europe gone mad; this is not aberration nor insanity; this is Europe; this seeming terrible is the real soul of white culture—back of all culture, stripped and visible today."[36]

Du Bois's work, in turn, provides the starting point for two more recent explorations of "white religion," also discussed by Schneider and Bjork-James.[37] In his aforementioned *White Lies,* Driscoll argues that the central figure of white religion, whiteness, takes "shape as a kind of God," or God-idol, "marked by supreme value and ability" and the capacity to "provide the foundation to know, to be certain, and to live without fear."[38] And in *The Religion of White Supremacy*, Eric Weed uses Paul Tillich's work to argue that white superiority and white supremacy function, in the US body politic, as "ultimate concern."[39] Adamant that he does "not mean tattooed, bald-neo Nazis, nor men in white robes burning crosses," but "whites and whiteness as a whole," Weed's work

35. Du Bois, "Of the Culture of White Folk," 445.
36. Ibid., 438.
37. Schneider and Bjork-James, "Whither Whiteness and Religion," 190.
38. Driscoll, *White Lies*, 11, 12.
39. Weed, *Religion of White Supremacy in the US*, xxvi.

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refers, like Du Bois and Driscoll before him, to the intersection of whiteness and Christianity.[40] Given that all three write about the US, such a focus makes sense: as Weed writes, "the United States was the place in which Christianity and white supremacy could come together to form a new religious construct that makes white supremacy and the Christian tradition inseparable."[41]

What can we learn from these writings about white religion? I signal three important take-aways. One, there seems to be a slippage—conscious, but nevertheless—between white religion and white Christianity, which obscures both the ways in which other religious formations have contributed to whiteness and the centrality of whiteness to how people practice and live non-Christian religiosity.

Two, the whiteness in white religion is both irreducible to and extends beyond skin color and phenotype: whiteness names, as Schneider and Bjork-James also note in conversation with J. Kameron Carter, a regime of "political and economic power for arranging (oikonomia) the world"—and we may add here social, religious, cultural, and technological power.[42] As Du Bois wrote in "The Souls of White Folk" with devastating precision and seeming prophetic insight into our current ecological crisis:

> I am quite straight-faced as I ask soberly, "But what on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?" Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!
>
> Now what is the effect on a man or a nation when it comes passionately to believe such an extraordinary dictum as this? That nations are coming to believe it is manifest daily. Wave on wave, each with increasing virulence, is dashing this new religion of whiteness on the shores of our time.[43]

This brings me to the third observation: white religion names whiteness's assumed, claimed, or purported "superhuman" qualities: this assumes various forms, from presenting itself as "superhuman" and beyond fault (Du Bois), to

40. Ibid., xxi.

41. Ibid., xxiv.

42. Schneider and Bjork-James, "Whither Whiteness and Religion," 191. They cite, in turn, J. Kameron Carter's *Race*, 35.

43. Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 18.

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the epitome of certainty, truth, ability, and assurance (Driscoll). White religion, then, frames, names, and theorizes claims to white superiority.

Taken together, these observations provoke a question. In the work of Reed, Driscoll, and Du Bois, "white religion" is invoked to say something about the religious dimension of whiteness: whiteness acts "god-like," as the sole inheritor of the earth. Can we say something about the esoteric dimension of whiteness? Can theories of esotericism offer additional reflections on the nature of whiteness, beyond matters of divinity and ultimate concern? Could Kocku von Stuckrad's writings on the dialectic of secrecy, concealment, and revelation help us better understand, for instance, the ways in which whiteness remains hidden and obscured?[44]

In the past decade, the debate over what esotericism is has been rather dormant—overshadowed, perhaps, by the debate on the adjective "Western," and overwhelmed by the immense success of Hanegraaff's conceptualization of esotericism as a "waste basket" of rejected knowledge.[45] Yet, as Egil Asprem writes in his contribution to *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, "a number of different alternatives are on the table," from new positive definitions along the lines of Antoine Faivre, to genealogical approaches like the one proposed by Michael Bergunder, to his own "building blocks" approach, which "fractures" esotericism into "more fine-grained analytical concepts."[46] These are promising initiatives. After all, like the moniker "white religion," the term "white esotericism" could very well say something specific about the nature of whiteness itself.[47]

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44. Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge*.

45. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

46. Asprem, "Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered," 134. Asprem directs readers to a very helpful discussion of the "definitional progression" in the study of esotericism, also published in the *New Approaches*: Okropiridze, "Interpretation Reconsidered." See also the recently published essay on definitions by Steven Engler and Mark Q. Gardiner, "(Re)defining *Esotericism*."

47. I presented sections of this essay during the panel "Whiteness and Esotericism: Theory, Method, Sources," which I organized for *Esotericism and Practice*, the ninth biennial conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE), held in Malmö in June 2023. I thank Adrienne Rooney for her smart and constructive reading of a draft of the conference paper (as well as this essay), the audience for their insightful questions, and my co-panelists—Aren Roukema, Egil Asprem, and Fredrik Gregorius—for their wonderful contributions.

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