

Knowing Others: The New UFO Esotericism of D. W. Pasulka's *American Cosmic: UFOs, Religion, Technology*

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Within Islamic traditions there exists an esoteric and literary form that can be translated as “easy depth,” where an elegant simplicity of style enfolds a layered complexity of content.¹ A reader derives understanding from such a text according to the level and background of knowledge they possess; in this way, all readers can benefit to some degree by the reading of it. Such a literary form certainly exists, if perhaps unnamed, within Western esoteric traditions, and unsurprisingly, examples of it show up in the most unexpected of places. Diana Walsh Pasulka's book on UFOs, *American Cosmic*, is one such example of this style, in the inverse relationship it expresses between its seemingly straightforward narrative and the layered complexity of the UFO phenomena that it discloses. That is to say, the book expresses an *esoteric* dimension, not least in the ways it indexes the contemporary organization of a distinctly modern (and socially influential) set of esoteric knowledges that have arisen around the UFO phenomenon.

1. السهل الممتنع in Arabic.

American Cosmic is therefore not a conventional book, and as such, merits more than the conventional review that allots praise or censure according to a single academic standard. What we offer here, then, is less a review than a series of reflections built around the book, including examples from outside of it, that aim to shed light upon its layers of complexity and gesture towards the novel vistas of exploration it potentially opens up. As we hope will become clear, the bewildering complexity of the UFO phenomenon is not only impossible to capture from within a single academic discipline, but also seems to transcend *all* of them combined. Any deeper understanding seems to have been found only within realms that stand between the academic disciplines and currents of thought that have long lain outside of, or at least unspoken within, the academy.

For Pasulka, a professor of religion, this required a continual collaboration between established academics, independent researchers, and those who have experienced UFO phenomena in various ways. In the same spirit, the reflections of this essay have arisen through a collaborative effort between researchers from very different knowledge backgrounds. As such, the essay hopes to nudge those of us within academia to stand outside of our comfort zone, even if just a little bit, in considering the anomalous phenomena that the UFO represents. As cultural observers and commentators have come to realize, the historical stigma against UFOs is not due to any strangeness inherent to them, but is a peculiar construction of the Cold-War era, a lingering legacy of its specific anxieties.² That stigma has finally begun to recede, making available striking new possibilities for research.

Hovering Judgment

On its surface, *American Cosmic* reads as a straightforward ethnographic narrative. A more careful reading, however, reveals this not to be the case; at various crucial points the narrative finds itself confounded, unable to rely upon a central staple

2. See, for example, von Rennenkampff, "UFO Stigma, Alien Conspiracy Theories Are Relics of Cold War Paranoia."

of the ethnographer's toolkit—the suspension of judgment about the reality of the phenomena under study. Ethnographies of anomalous phenomena—such as the Jinn, or UFOs—typically proceed by suspending judgment about whether they actually exist or not; it is the only way their analyses can be accepted as legitimate within an academic milieu. So they purport to write not of the Jinn or of UFOs themselves, but of the *people who believe* in them, how those people act upon or practice those beliefs, and the social conditions and effects of those beliefs and practices. The presumption that anomalous phenomena can be studied without regard to their actual existence can be an effective analytical strategy, but it risks falling into a socially reductionist attitude—the idea that *all* such phenomena are *essentially* social in nature. That is, the idea that they can be legitimately studied whether they actually exist or not becomes the idea that this is the *only* way they can be legitimately studied; what was initially an analytical strategy comes to be (mis)taken for a fundamental reality.

The limits of this analytical strategy become especially evident when it confronts technology. For example, a study of nuclear technology could not adequately gauge the social effects of nuclear radiation solely (or even primarily) in terms of people's beliefs about it, and without regard to its actual existence. Such effects do not depend on people's beliefs. Something similar confronts *American Cosmic's* narrative: an undeniable technological dimension to the UFO phenomenon. Pasulka recounts a trip she takes blindfolded with some scientist colleagues to a little-known site in the New Mexico desert to recover “artifacts” from an alleged UFO crash. At first, she approaches this experience from within her disciplinary frame of religious studies, which enables her to view the alleged crash site as the scene of a *hierophany* (a manifestation of the sacred) for her scientist companions and consider the role it plays in initiating their emerging spiritual belief system. But she soon finds that this approach can only partially capture the depth and complexity of what is happening. When she is confronted with the anomalies of the artifacts they recovered, whose

engineered characteristics seem to defy the most advanced current technologies in ways that perplex and astound even the best of scientists, her disciplinary frame is thrown into question. She finds herself instead being initiated into a world of top scientists who quietly, often clandestinely, study UFOs, and where the suspension of judgment about their actual existence becomes, by all conventional standards, very difficult to sustain.

Such standards are of course a historical product of our present age, where techno-scientific evidence has become the paradigm for all evidence, and with which all other candidates for truth must contend. That is one reason why, when in 2017 the *New York Times*³ featured official jet-fighter sensor footage of strange objects flying in seemingly physics-defying ways as part of its groundbreaking story on a recent, secret US-government-sponsored UFO study, the media conversation shifted entirely to become much more favorable towards UFOs. As technology has become ubiquitous in our ways of life, it has also become indispensable to how we think, especially about reality and truth. The philosopher Martin Heidegger spoke of this as the technological *enframing* of our era, which affects “everything that is: Nature and history, humans, and divinities.”⁴ Pasulka draws upon this concept in the book to explore the growing power of current media technologies to shape our imaginations, inflect our memories, and even structure our perceptions in forensically precise and biologically calibrated ways *below* the threshold of our explicit beliefs, at the level of our sensorium. These media technologies now serve to organize the gamut of our (even most profound) experiences—including UFO experiences.

This leads Pasulka to speak of a new *form* of religiosity that is arising, one that relies more on techno-scientific evidence than on faith, and that does not depend on belief systems because it works through technologies that shape our interpretations at a substrate below, and so sometimes in spite of, our beliefs.

3. Cooper, Blumenthal, and Kean, “Glowing Auras and ‘Black Money’.”

4. Heidegger, *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, 30.

It is therefore a form of religiosity that she sees as encompassing all of us, not just “UFO people,”⁵ shaping our deepest imaginations and expectations of the divine to accommodate an increasingly technological mold. The UFO, with its incontrovertible techno-scientific dimension and its pervasive presence within our technologically mediated imaginations, best exemplifies this new form of religiosity that is arising as part of our technological age. But it is just here that things begin to get ... a little weird. Because as soon as the exceptional techno-scientific credentials of UFOs make it impossible to suspend judgment about them, *they stop behaving like technology*.

UFOntological Shock in a Technological Age

Dreams...who would expect the artifacts to appear in the dreams of those who are, even unknowingly, in proximity with them? But sometimes they do. And who would expect them to inspire ideas (that often arrive as “memories”) amongst these scientists, that lead to the creation of influential, even socially transformative, technologies? But that is what some of these scientists claim, and Pasulka notes that their technologies are in evidence. She speaks disconcertedly of the remarkable reverence they have for the artifacts, seeing them as sacred gifts, due in part to their interactive and transformative qualities. Some of them have even been led to wonder whether we are studying the artifacts or they are studying—and even altering—us.

One of the scientists Pasulka speaks of, the enigmatic “Tyler D.,” speculates that the artifacts generate some kind of “information field” that interfaces with people in different ways. This might help explain why UFOs seem to appear very differently to different witnesses at the same time. Pasulka recounts the testimony of a married couple who witnessed a UFO in conjunction with a healing event in their family. But while the wife saw a well-defined metallic

5. “UFO people” is a term sometimes used to refer to those who are interested in, study, and (claim to) have encountered UFOs, on the premise that they collectively form a distinct subculture. See Baniyas, *The UFO People*.

object with distinct lights, the husband saw a translucent, reddish plasma energy with fuzzy borders; also, the details that each recollects around the incident were very different. Nevertheless, the simultaneous healing and UFO sighting was, for both, a profoundly moving event. While it converted the husband away from his staunch atheism into an open agnosticism and lifelong quest to comprehend the UFO mystery, for the wife it reaffirmed her already strong Catholic faith.

Strange as these claims may all sound, they receive independent corroboration outside of Pasulka's book. Consider for example the findings reported in a statement by a manager of the once-secret US government-sponsored study mentioned earlier. The statement noted that "multiple eyewitnesses co-located in the same vicinity frequently reported seeing widely different events" and that the "evidence was multiplying that the UFO phenomenon was capable of manipulating and distorting human perception . . ." It further noted that by viewing "the human body as a readout system for UFO effects" the study successfully worked "to bypass UFO deception and manipulation of human perception by utilizing molecular forensics to decipher the biological consequences of the phenomenon."⁶

The resonances between the words of this manager and Pasulka's accounts push us into unexpected terrain, especially as they help raise a question implicit to her book, based on a connection that some of its readers might easily miss. That is, if UFOs and their allegedly associated artifacts can shape our (creative) imaginations, inflect our memories, and even (re)structure our perceptions at such a visceral substrate, then what makes how they interact with us different from how our increasingly sophisticated media technologies interact with and transform us? Could it be only that our "information fields" are far cruder than theirs? Might this be a meaning of one of the book's epigraphs, which quotes David Bowie's enigmatic statement, "the Internet is an alien life form"? If these questions begin to destabilize any ready assumptions as to what a UFO is or might be, then they are only one example of how UFOs stop behaving like technology while remaining (un)cannily like technology. Because things get *even stranger*.

6. See NewsNow, "Statement from a Senior Manager of BAASS."

Thus, what should we say when the effects of the artifacts seem especially pronounced amongst “experiencers”—people who have had close UFO encounters, or when such encounters sometimes seem to follow along family lines, even across generations? What should we make of the fact that some of those family lines exhibit rare neuroanatomical features that a number of scientists think are correlated with enhanced intuitive—that is, psychic—abilities,⁷ and that in many cases experiencers report acquiring psychic sensitivities after their encounters?⁸ Just what have UFOs to do with psychics, their abilities, or their family lines?

Such unexpected connections often lead Pasulka’s scientist-colleagues along mind-bending paths of exploration. One of them, Tyler D. again, accompanies her to the Vatican’s private archives in hopes that their records of the miraculous feats of saints and mystics will shed light on the physics of UFO propulsion. Implausible as this may seem, it would not be the only recent instance where top aerospace scientists have looked into esoteric practices to help develop exotic propulsion concepts. A 2019 propulsion conference at MIT led by a former Lockheed Skunkworks engineer featured “Anomalous Human Capacities: Levitation, Qi, Psychics, Savants, Superhuman Strength” amongst its topics for scientific discussion; along with talks on “Inertial Induction in General Relativity” and “Coupling of Gravity and Electromagnetism” were titles like “Quantum Consciousness” and “The Physics of Mystics: Superhuman Powers in the History of Religions.”⁹

These connections between the esoteric, the psychic, and the UFO also turn out not to be new; if official documents from government archives are to be believed, they have been discerned and pursued by researchers for decades, since at least the 1950s.¹⁰ And in a stunning seeming coincidence, the seventeenth-century mystic whose records

7. See for example Wargo, “What’s Expected of Us in a Block Universe.” See also Green and Nolan, “Incidental MRI and Genomic Findings in Human Striatum.”

8. Vallee, *The Invisible College*.

9. Basterfield, “Hal Puthoff Talked about AATIP at MIT on 23 January 2019.”

10. A 1950 Department of Transport memo by Canadian engineer Wilbert Smith refers to U.S. investigations into “mental phenomena” possibly related to UFOs.

Pasulka and Tyler happened to focus on at the Vatican turned out to (reportedly) regularly bi-locate to the precise location of the alleged UFO crash site she was taken to. Was this *mere* coincidence or the sign of a more perennial, mystical connection?

By now one might be forgiven for feeling at least torn, if not bewildered and stretched to the limits of credulity about the UFO reality. But the scientists that Pasulka writes of are well-established and highly regarded in their respective fields; they are as discerning, careful, methodical and skeptical as those of us in the human sciences typically see ourselves to be. As she notes, they are “the smartest people in the room,”¹¹ and these are the conclusions and connections they are inexorably led to make through their research. Can we so easily write them off? Are our certainties ever so settled? At least this much is clear: UFOs confront us with a potentially paradigm-shattering mystery. If they disable us from taking a socially reductionist attitude by making it impossible to suspend judgment about their actual existence, they also disabuse us of a technologically reductionist attitude by piling disparate enigmas atop each other into ever higher degrees of strangeness. In this way, they scramble our academic disciplines and distinctions between the secular, the techno-scientific, the spiritual and the psychic, as well as between the realms of subjective (collective) imagination and material reality.

UFOs thereby induce what the late Harvard psychiatrist John Mack termed epistemological and ontological shock for the researchers who study them.¹² The UFO initiates them into a new world. Especially when it becomes evident that it is just one of a constellation of anomalies that may well sit not at the margins but the very center of our reality, and which researchers across academia, industry, and government continue to (mostly) clandestinely pursue with ever greater effort and intensity. But this raises for us a further question: if the UFO indeed exemplifies the new form of religiosity of our age, wouldn't it also give rise to a new form and organization of esoteric knowledge? Pasulka's narrative certainly intimates as much. If so, isn't that something we should explore?

11. Radio Misterioso podcast, interview with Diana Walsh Pasulka, 12/20/2017.

12. Mack, *Passport to the Cosmos*, 67.

The Saucers Will Keep Their Secrets

Any look into a potentially new form of esoteric knowledge around the UFO would have to start with the changed status of the modern secret. Secret knowledge has, of course, always been a common preserve of power. But with the rise of the Cold War, the practices of secrecy became indelibly saturated with the looming anxieties of nuclear conflagration, a threat thought to be forestalled only by sustaining the adversary's fear that the destruction would be mutually assured. Under this scenario, all official secrets became potentially existential ones, with the constant dread that the right piece of information, however minor, in the wrong hands might upend the fragile balance that kept devastating defeat, if not full annihilation, at bay.

An entire national security infrastructure subsequently developed around the generation and protection of secret knowledge, one that encompassed the sectors of defense, intelligence, technology development, and (in the case of the US) big business. Despite the end of the Cold War, this infrastructure has continued to grow and become further entrenched, drawing these sectors together into an ever tighter (and more profitable) security weave. As a result, secrecy today has become less a set of common practices than a gargantuan, self-perpetuating, and semi-official *machine*, a matrix of patent influence throughout our societies, and seen by those in power to be of global, existential consequence.¹³

Perhaps it is only curious coincidence that the first modern spate of UFO encounters took place when Cold War anxieties were at their height, at the very same time that this national security infrastructure was being established. Either way, UFOs became a highly classified subject, with much of the knowledge and research about them pulled deeply into the secrecy-security labyrinth: sectioned off within an array of tightly compartmentalized projects scattered throughout government and outsourced to industry; intricately sequestered within diversionary layers of secrecy through the use of specialized security clearances

13. For a consummate discussion of these changes, see Masco, *Theater of Operations*.

and ironclad non-disclosure agreements; and subject to such threadbare official oversight as to risk becoming unmoored from the security imperatives that placed them there in the first place. In consequence, whatever has been learned over the decades through these projects has become hopelessly fragmented, practically impossible to retrieve into a cohesive understanding.

As Pasulka learned early on in her research, this culture of hunkered secrecy runs completely counter to the openness required of academic scholarship and review. And its regressive effects on our capacity to understand the UFO have been worse than could be anticipated. With researchers locked into their respective classified projects, unable to share and access potentially key data for their research, their only resort is the information available through what the cultural theorist Timothy Melley calls “the covert sphere”¹⁴—a domain into which secret knowledge leaks, appearing in twisted and fantasized forms through film, literature and social media, and where state secrets can be disclosed to public awareness without ever being officially acknowledged. Riddled with misinformation often for moneyed interests and routinely sown with disinformation as part of (counter)espionage campaigns, the covert sphere effectively works to blend fantasy and reality into a nearly indistinguishable blur. Even researchers with the highest security clearances are not immune to its seductive distortions, which then contaminate their projects and prospects for understanding UFOs with an impenetrable uncertainty. Pasulka likens their situation to the movie *Fight Club* (1999), where we see a network of individuals deeply dissociated and mutually obscured from each other and from what they know. The overall result is a milieu so epistemically murky that one is led to wonder just who or what might be more effectively manipulating and distorting our senses of reality: the UFOs, or the mechanisms of secret knowledge and deception that have sprung up around their pursuit. Either way, the saucers’ secret-keepers know not what secrets they keep. And so, the saucers’ secrets keep themselves.

14. Melley, *The Covert Sphere*.

The Esoteric Expanse

Elusive as they remain, UFOs do seem to have the peculiar habit of breaking our laboriously crafted secrecy protocols, seeming to appear whenever and to whomever, with their (assumed) motives for doing so obscure. This means that much of what can be known about them first takes place in a (semi)public arena, through encounters with common folk, before it ever gets classified away in the hands of the agencies tasked with their pursuit. It also means that, for all the technological prowess at our disposal today, the keys to our knowledge of the UFO remain with the “experiencers”—those who have UFO encounters, and the human dimension of their experiences. What Pasulka found most remarkable about even the low-profile UFO conferences she attended as part of her research was how experiencers, despite being publicly disdained and even ridiculed, nevertheless continually attracted and were surrounded by scientists as well as personnel from the defense, technology, and intelligence establishments.

Many of these latter folks, whom Pasulka calls “meta-experiencers,” were of the self-same “fight club” of scientists that she ended up writing so extensively about. And while some may also have had encounter experiences of their own, the one crucial difference is that these meta-experiencers have the skills and resources to mobilize and make technologically tangible the often-arcane information gained from these encounters in ways that experiencers cannot. An uneven relationship is liable to develop between the two, with experiencers serving as a standing reserve to inspire techno-scientific innovations and meta-experiencers often supplying an ostensibly authoritative interpretive background for experiencers to find meaning in their (in many cases ongoing) encounters. While this reflects the traditional master-disciple relationship of esoteric knowledge-transmission, it differs in that the meta-experiencers are in no way masters of their subject, being as much in search of understanding as experiencers are; meta-experiencers learn as much, if not more, from experiencers as experiencers learn from them. If each wallows in individual uncertainty, in tandem they can forge a path toward a

deeper understanding, fashioning through this process novel forms of knowledge-creation; in other words, the meta-experiencer-experiencer relation is at the crux of the esoteric knowing that has arisen around the UFO.

As we saw earlier, it is a knowing that comes in dreams and works through synchronicities; it is sometimes elicited by anomalous “artifacts” and in some cases travels through family lines; and most remarkably, it derives—or so it is claimed—from ongoing, often psychic, connections with non-human, possibly non-terrestrial intelligences that have become associated with UFOs. Pasulka describes the bodily protocols her scientist colleagues developed to sustain these connections, and highlights their striking resemblance to venerable meditative and yogic techniques used within many different religious traditions to induce altered states thought necessary to connect with entities from sacred or otherworldly realms. The early twentieth-century anthropologist Marcel Mauss famously advocated for a “socio-psycho-biological study” of these ancient body techniques and the altered states they produce, on the premise (with which these scientists would likely agree) that there are “necessarily biological means of entering into ‘communication with God.’”¹⁵ So while claims of otherworldly contact are in no way new, stretching back into antiquity and forming an integral part of the history of religions, Pasulka shows that they have taken distinctive forms amongst these scientists, who bring the most advanced science together with these ancient knowledges and techniques as part of their research, evolving novel practices of esoteric gnosis in the process.

But what is perhaps most astonishing about these practices is how widespread they are within the scientific community, and how deeply they have shaped modern society, being responsible for several crucial techno-scientific developments over the last several decades. Among the many influential researchers who sought and actively explored mystical and psychic states as

15. Mauss, “Techniques of the Body,” 87.

sources of their scientific inventions, we might mention Marcel Vogel,¹⁶ who pioneered the studies of luminescence, created a whole industry of phosphorescent products and black light equipment, developed liquid crystal displays, and refined the magnetic stripe technology whose use has as a result become so ubiquitous today.¹⁷ We might also mention Itzhak Bentov,¹⁸ who helped establish the biomedical engineering industry, and invented the steerable diagnostic catheter, the first disposable hypodermic needle, EKG electrodes, pacemaker leads, and more.¹⁹ Neither Vogel nor Bentov possessed academic degrees, but each procured several dozens of patents, and while their names are not well-known, their many mystically derived (and often still unorthodox) ideas continue to be explored across academia, government and private enterprise. Yet the profound influence of their esoteric inspirations has gone largely unrecognized and unacknowledged.

Even more profound—and unacknowledged—is the influence of the new forms of esoteric gnosis upon the development of our space programs. Pasulka writes of the still little-known case of Jack Parsons, one of the founders of the U.S. space program and NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory; a devotee of Aleister Crowley, he regularly enacted rituals in the desert to summon occult entities for help in developing formulas for rocket propulsion. Running deep within the history of the U.S. space program, it turns out, are strong esoteric and occult currents, which is perhaps one reason why its archives, as Pasulka notes, still remain classified. But not just the American space program; the Soviet one too.

Indeed, the title of Pasulka’s book, *American Cosmic*, gives nod to the mystic movement of Russian Cosmism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which played a decisive role in the advance of early rocketry technology around the world, forming the basis of a pan-cosmic philosophy that continues

16. Bodian, “The Healing Power of Quartz Crystals.”

17. <https://www.ibm.com/ibm/history/ibm100/us/en/icons/magnetic/team/>.

18. <https://alchetron.com/Itzhak-Bentov#References>.

19. Muir, *The Book of Telling*.

to influence the U.S. space program. The post-Soviet Russian movement of “Noocosmology”²⁰ continues the work of the Cosmists, and bears striking similarities to the decentralized networks of (meta)experiencers that *American Cosmic* documents in the U.S.²¹ Occult and mystical currents also run through China’s space program,²² which was established by Qian Xuesen,²³ who happened to be a colleague of Jack Parsons and was also a founder of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory.²⁴ For better or for worse, these programs—all interconnected through shared esoteric and occult currents—have together been *the* most generative source of vastly transformative technologies that have enframed the modern world;²⁵ they have thereby shifted our perceptions and possibilities to a new planetary scale, and begun to redefine our place in the cosmos.

But not just our place; also, our selves. *Viscerally*. Many scientists have come to conclude that we cannot travel further into space in our current physical form. Influential groups like the Harvard Consortium for Space Genetics²⁶ have taken forward the idea that to truly explore space, humans will have to be genetically transformed, enhanced in body and mind, and at the level of our sensorium. This includes enhancing those intuitive²⁷—that is to say, psychic—abilities associated with the claimed connections to otherworldly intelligences that have been such an enduring part of our space programs. If so, what esoteric vistas might open up? With what consequences upon ourselves? This leads us to a final, central point.

20. <https://noocosmology.com/>.

21. Majsova, “The Cosmic Subject in Post-Soviet Russia.”

22. <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP96-00792R000200390004-0.pdf>.

23. Fang, “The Man Who Took China to Space.”

24. Chang, *Thread of the Silkworm*.

25. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NASA_spinoff_technologies.

26. <https://spacegenetics.hms.harvard.edu>.

27. <https://spacegenetics.hms.harvard.edu/2018-symposium-space-genetics>.

Losing Knowledge

H.P. Lovecraft famously wrote of “the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents.” For him our inability to fully know what we know was not a bane, but a mercy, and he worried of the day “when the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.”²⁸ Throughout this essay, we have focused on knowledge—its forms, its contents, (the obstacles to) its clarity, its connections with (our senses of) reality, and our capacities to bring it into a cohesive, comprehensive, understanding. In so doing we have presupposed its centrality to ourselves and to *American Cosmic*. Such a focus is of course entirely appropriate for an academic milieu as well as for a journal of this kind, and the theme of knowledge does run throughout Pasulka’s book. But at the same time, there is a risk of obscuring one of its deeper themes. Here Lovecraft’s words might give us pause and help us take heed of a possible danger.

The danger comes not from UFOs themselves, which may have been with us longer than we know, but from the ways we have come to pursue them. The mystery of UFOs may be, for the reasons noted above, impenetrable. But that cannot quell, and will likely only spur, our insatiable curiosity about them. We will not be able to resist pursuing them ever farther, ever deeper. In that pursuit, we may lose touch with what knowledge can be for us, as means and as ends—and therein lies the danger.

We can only discern the virtues and vices of knowledge through the relationships we can imagine having with it. Within the technologically enframed thinking of our era, we have become overly familiar with knowledge as a thing to be possessed, grasped, correlated, created, (re)fashioned, controlled, implemented, and utilized; less familiar are other relationships with knowledge that might better fit our situation with UFOs. It might be more difficult, for example, to imagine situations where we *inhabit* knowledge, or where knowledge

28. Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu.”

dwells (silently) with(in) us, eliciting transformations never completely within our control, explicit awareness, or ability to predict. But this is closer to what experiencers report, and the changes they undergo. Significantly, the theme of transformation comes to pervade their lives.

The philosopher Michel Foucault, whom we now recognize was an inveterate seeker of esoteric knowledge, was famously asked why he felt so moved by the Islamic revolution in Iran, even as it emplaced an ideology he undoubtedly rejected.²⁹ He spoke, in response, of the deep (yearning for) personal and collective transformation that it expressed, and for which there are no (longer any) mechanisms that are shared as part of modern culture. For Foucault, the essence of spirituality was found in profound and unpredictable personal and collective transformations that can often arise from encounters with alterity. In this he recognized an affinity with his own scholarly pursuits, which were driven and defined by his lifelong quest for (mechanisms of) self-transmutation. Importantly, this involved being no longer subject to conventional forms of knowledge and ways of knowing. Is this so different from the situation with UFOs? Every person in *American Cosmic's* narrative, including the author, undergoes a profound personal transformation whether through encounters with UFOs or the process of studying them. The inner changes they experience go to the essence of who they are, beyond whatever technical knowledge they may have obtained. One could say the book is more about the transformations that knowledge elicits than the knowledge itself. In Foucault's sense, then, the book's deeper theme is spirituality.

Implicit in that theme may also be a cautionary note. There is currently a strong and growing resurgence of serious interest in UFOs across society. With the old stigmas around them on the wane, UFOs will increasingly become a stage for the kinds of broader societal transformation deeply desired by many

29. Foucault and Bremner, "Political Spirituality as the Will for Alterity," 121.

at this time.³⁰ So as the lure of learning more about UFOs intensifies, it might be worth staying attentive to how we pursue and relate to that learning, and the ways it may be changing us. As Pasulka's *American Cosmic* shows, this may be more important than having comprehensive facts on UFOs. And the stakes might be very high; for as the historian of religions Jeffrey Kripal aptly puts it, "*the UFO is finally about the nature and destiny of the soul.*"³¹ Isn't that also what (the study of) esotericism is ultimately about?

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30. See Lepselter, *The Resonance of Unseen Things*.

31. Kripal, "The History of Religions as Legitimate Science Fiction," 8. Italics in the original.

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