

**“WHO’S THE CONSPIRACY
THEORIST? NOT I:” FEEDBACK
LOOPS BETWEEN ALTERNATIVE
RESEARCH COMMUNITIES AND
ACADEMIA**

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OUTLINE

- Moving away from "conspiracy theorist"
- A brief history of ufology
- My method
- Ufologists' research areas & methods
- Feedback loops between ufology & academia
- Conclusion

Why move away from
"conspiracy theorist"?



Calling all who are interested in alternative areas of research "conspiracy theorists" associates lower-harm theories like the notion that the government is covering up alien contact, with higher-harm theories that are highly socially harmful, like Q-Anon and anti-vaccination theories.



- Ufology
- JFK Assassination theories

- 9/11 theories

- QAnon
- Anti-Vaccination theories

FOLK SOCIOLOGY?

A certain kind of alternative inquiry

“...we live in an age in which the vast bulk of knowledge can only be accessed in mediated forms which rely on the testimony of various specialists. Contemporary approaches to epistemology, however, remain anchored in the intellectual ideas of the Enlightenment. These demand first-hand inquiry, independent thinking, and a skepticism about information passed down by authorities and experts. As such, we may find ourselves attempting to use epistemological schema radically unsuited to a world whose staggering material complexity involves an unprecedented degree of specialization and knowledge mediation.” (Jane and Fleming 2014, 54; my emphasis)

UFOLOGY: A HISTORY

1947: THE YEAR OF UFOS

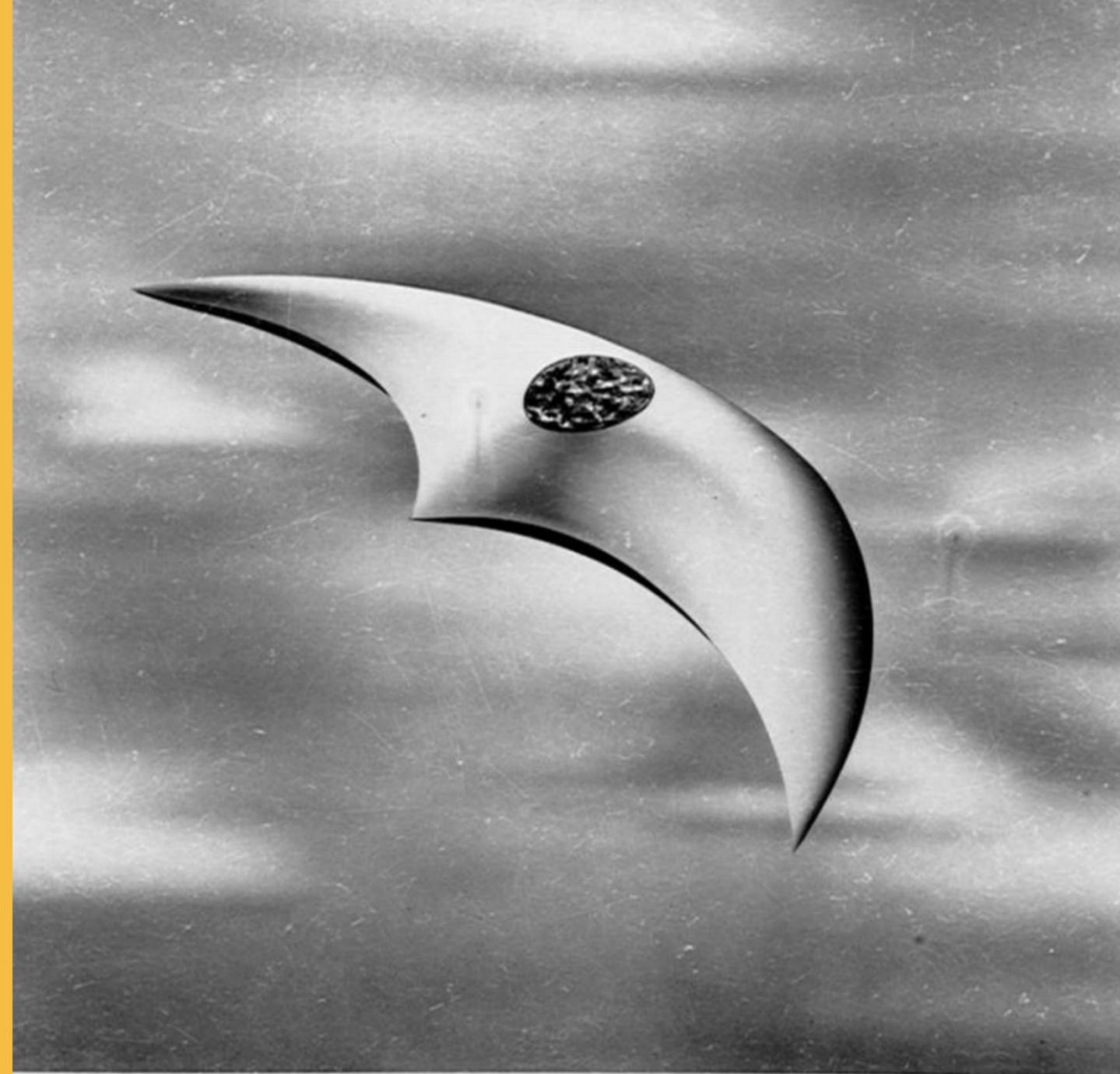
In June 1947, pilot Kenneth Arnold encountered odd flying objects "like saucers skipped over water" (illustration right) over Mount Rainier. The following month, something unknown seemed to crash at Roswell, New Mexico.

WAVES OF SIGHTINGS

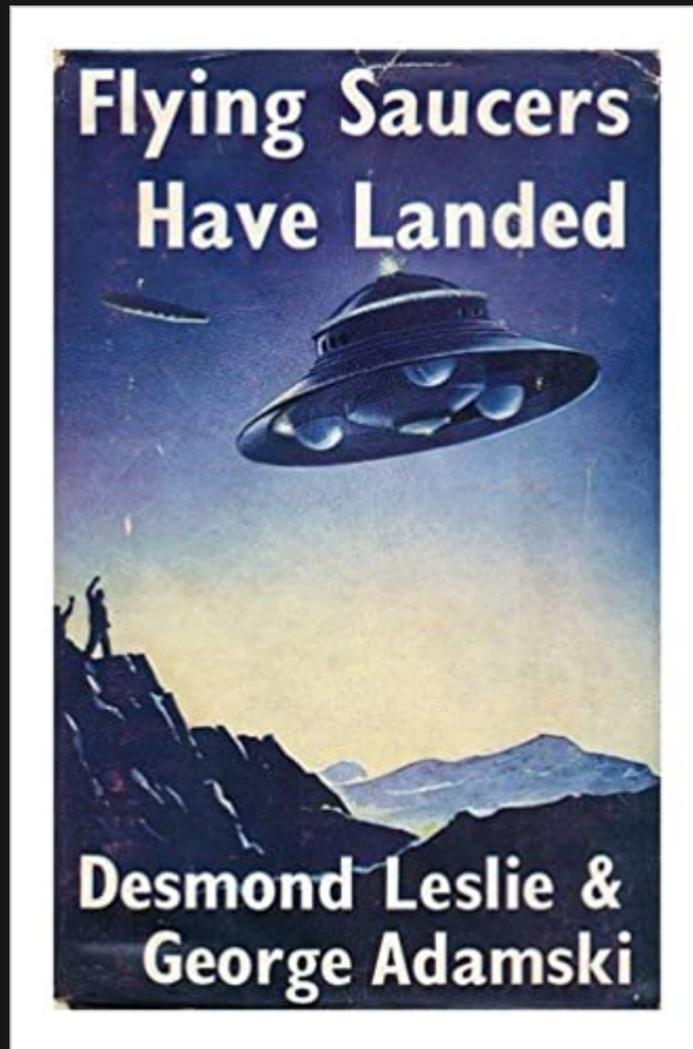
1947 kicked off the first wave of sightings in the U.S.. Another significant wave started in the Spring of 1952, with 1501 sighting reports from around the country in a single year; a third took place from 1965 - 1967, with nearly 3,000 reports of sightings in those years.

INTEREST FROM THE MILITARY

The military instituted Project Sign in 1948, which concluded the following year that while most UFO sightings were terrestrial in origin, a small number may be extraterrestrial. This conclusion was rejected, a new project was instituted (Project Grudge), which took a much more skeptical approach to the topic. In 1952, Project Grudge gave way to the famed Project Blue Book, which ran until 1969.

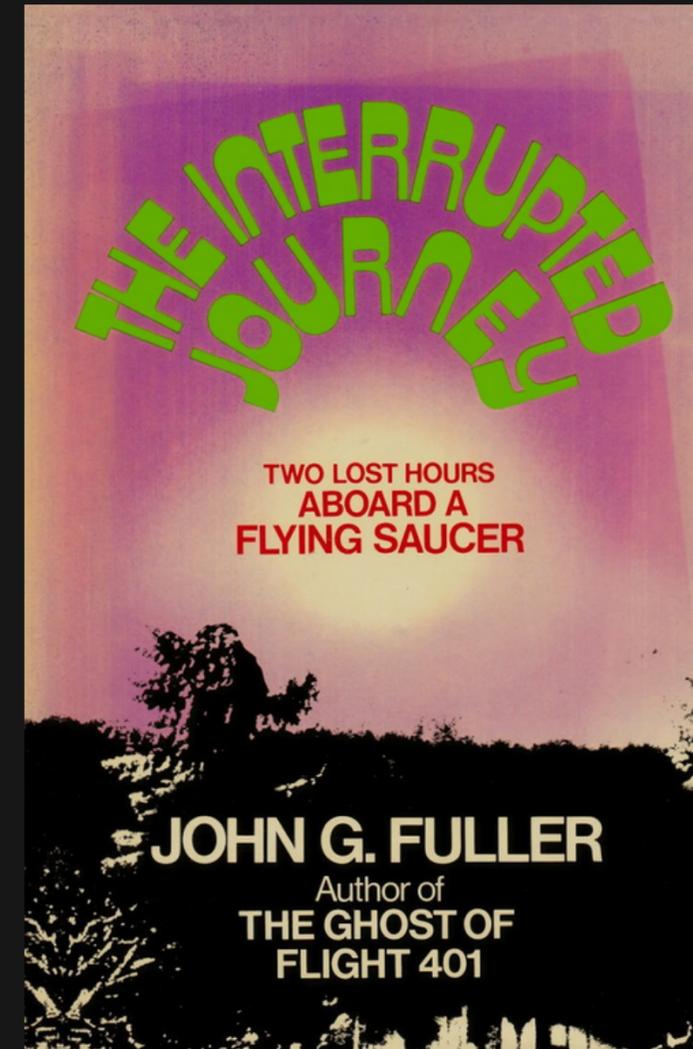


*The Flying Saucer as I
Saw it... by Kenneth Arnold*



The earliest "contactees," who claimed to have had conversations with humanoid extraterrestrials, were given the message by these aliens that humans must stop messing around with nuclear energy.

In the 1960s, a new kind of phenomenon emerged, that of the *abductee*, who was taken by aliens against their will.





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“The simple act of admitting [the possible extraterrestrial origins of ufos] just as possibilities puts us beyond the pale, and we would lose more in prestige in the scientific community than we could possibly gain by undertaking the investigation.”

“The trick would be, I think, to describe the project so that, to the public, it would appear a totally objective study but, to the scientific community, would present the image of a group of nonbelievers trying their best to be objective but having an almost zero expectation of finding a saucer. One way to do this would be to stress investigation, not of the physical phenomena, rather of the people who do the observing--the psychology and sociology of persons and groups who report seeing UFOs.”

“Ufology...has had to monitor its own folkloric and religious assumptions and strive for more scientific objectivity, hampered by the fact that the wider society, including academia, regards ufology’s very premise as folklore.” (Roth 2005)

METHOD

RECRUITMENT

Cold emailing & snowball sampling of individuals who self-identify as ufologists or UFO researchers, especially those who have done archival research relating to UFOs.

GROUNDED THEORY INTERVIEWING

I interviewed each participant in two sessions, between 45 minutes and an hour long. Coded the data using grounded theory coding methods, including in vivo and process coding. Interviewees were able to choose to either be named in the study, or they could choose a pseudonym.

RECOMMENDED TEXTS

Charmaz, Kathy. *Constructing Grounded Theory*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2014.

Seidman, Irving. *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*. 3rd ed. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2005.

“...mainstream science separates itself from discourse around UFOs. Serious ufologists distance themselves from contactees, channelers, hoaxsters, and ‘nut cases.’” (Dean 1999)

**"According to...Kathy Charmaz, interviewing draws on skills in the traditional 'feminine role,' -- a 'passive, receptive, open, understanding approach...recognizing and responding to the other's feelings and being able to talk about sensitive issues without threatening the participant.'"
(Reinharz 1992)**

What can we learn from ufologists?

“To create new ways of classifying people is also to change how we can think of ourselves, to change our sense of self-worth, even how we remember our own past. This in turn generates a looping effect, because people of the kind behave differently and so are different. That is to say the kind changes...” (Hacking, 1992, 369).

References

Hacking, Ian. *The Looping Effects of Human Kinds*. Oxford University Press, 1996.

Jane, Emma A., and Chris Fleming. *Modern Conspiracy: The Importance of Being Paranoid*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.

Reinharz, Shulamit. "Feminist Interview Methods." In *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, 18–45. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Roth, Christopher F. "Ufology as Anthropology: Race, Extraterrestrials, and the Occult." In *E.T. Culture: Anthropology in Outerspaces*, 38–93. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.