The Resonance of Unseen Things

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Once upon a time, a representative of the U.S. military went to battle against the charlatan power of alien magic. John G. Bourke, captain of the Third Cavalry of the U.S. Army, made an ethnological study of what he called “our savage tribes” over twenty-two years of his position in the territories of the Southwest. Only one thing was preventing the Native assimilation to white society: the medicine man’s sleights of hand. In 1892 Bourke wrote, “Notwithstanding the acceptance by the native tribes of many of the improvements in living introduced by civilization, the savage has remained a savage and is still under the control of an influence antagonistic to the rapid absorption of new ideas and the adoption of new customs” ([1892] 2003: 1).

For Bourke, this antagonistic influence was the medicine man’s ability to control the identity of Native people and keep them enslaved to the past. He concluded that taking savage children to live at the boarding schools at Carlisle and Hampton might eventually convince Indians to abandon the miraculous technologies of the medicine man and embrace the miraculous technologies of the modern age instead. Only modern “wonders” could compete with their resistant magic (with “these wonders” a category in which “ventriloquism” has the same weight as “electricity”):

It will only be after we have thoroughly routed the medicine-men from their entrenchments and made them an object of ridicule that we can hope to bend and train the mind of our Indian wards in the direction of civilization . . . teach the scholars at Carlisle and Hamp-
ton some of the wonders of electricity, magnetism, chemistry, the spectroscope, magic lantern, ventriloquism . . . then, when they return to their own people, each will despise the fraud of the medicine men and be a focus of growing antagonism to their pretensions. (Bourke 2003: 144–45)

In short, the savage youth would be kept at boarding school against his will because he was still ignorant of the good it would do him and his people; and in this captivity, he would be converted to the wonders of modernity. Then the native could return as a changed person to spread the good news. For he was already, though he did not recognize it, “our . . . ward”: a captive who would not acknowledge captivity.

The narrative underlying the boarding school policy is a three-part story of removal, conversion, and return. It is, in essence, a policy informed by a naturalized instatement of a genre with deep American roots; it is a captivity narrative. It reminds us, first, that the captivity narrative often has a shadow story that accompanies it, the conversion narrative and second, that the American master narrative of containment and assimilation is itself an iteration of the captivity narrative genre.

An extensive body of scholarship has shown us that the captivity narrative expresses anxieties and desires about colonization, gender, and race. The genre has been compulsively productive from the beginnings of American colonization. Often considered the first distinctly American literary genre (Derounian-Stodola 1999), it has for centuries organized a durable American mythos (Slotkin 1973). I use captivity narratives here, not primarily as a way to analyze a literary tradition, but rather as an entry into thinking ethnographically about connections that people make between less clearly marked experiences in America. Narratives of many kinds—in public media, and in throwaway moments of everyday life—elaborate the trope of captivity, worrying over the dialectic of freedom and containment, and revising how those terms relate to power.

This chapter, then, continues to describe and perform a vernacular poetics. I focus here not on the shape, history, or limits of the genre, but rather on the resonance that emerges as people create parallels between various stories and images, and as they use those parallels to theorize power. It emerges in moments of American metadiscourse about what people often call the weird stuff in the world: the inexplicable, the uncanny, the apophenias that point to a pattern and structure lying beneath the surface of things.
These narratives splinter into the two-pronged trope that is expressed sometimes as explicit captivity and its restoration, sometimes as a more amorphous containment and release. The trope poetically compresses a fluid structure of feeling as the seemingly oppositional poles of the dyad coinfuse and tear each other down. They show how abduction can be both a traumatic ordeal, and the seed of a larger flight.

The stories in this chapter themselves produce a layered effect that tells us something about the ambivalent, ongoing project of narrating American identity through conquest. To perform this effect myself, I tell captivity stories throughout this chapter and let them reverberate against each other. The sense of things here comes from iterations that build up, and the accumulation itself creates a larger story. The vernacular theory of power is performed in these resonating poetics.

Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola (1999) says captivity narratives dramatize a member of the political and social majority becoming vulnerable to a less powerful minority group. In part because of this implicit reversal, captivity narratives allow complicated power dynamics to surface along with the anxieties and fantasies that attend them. Most famously in America, the capturing “minority group” means Native Americans kidnapping white settlers—often white women. In their memories of encounters with alien and savage others, white captives, upon their return, justified Euro-American expansion. At the same time, from within their captivity, they sometimes achieved a kind of ambivalent liberation from the naturalized constraints of their own society’s conventions (Castiglia 1996). Living as a minority among the captors, the captive could begin to imagine a something else.

When John Bourke wrote his ethnological expose of the medicine man, captivity narratives in which Indians captured whites had been flourishing in America for over two hundred years. When there was a scarcity of fact-based memoirs of whites in captivity, fictive versions rose up to fill the demand (Ebersole 1995), though both factual and fictive stories would bend to the genre’s conventional sway. Even when understood to be authentic renditions of material events, the story of Indians capturing a white American was a clearly marked genre in popular culture—an explicitly entextualized narrative. From the beginning, though, as Pauline Turner Strong (1999) has described in depth, what was not so clearly texted was the counternarrative in which whites captured Indians. The events that never became a codified popular genre might have included, for instance, stories of early colonizers
abducting Indians and taking them aboard their ships. One of the catalysts to King Philips’ War in 1765 (the context of Mary Rowlandson’s famous captivity) was the kidnapping by Massachusetts Bay colonists of three Indian children.

John Bourke alludes to “recent deplorable incidents in the . . . Dakotas” ([1892] 2003: 451), which, despite “improvements” in modernization, should remind whites that Indians are still savages. Thinking of “incidents” in the Dakotas might lead us to recall Wovoka, the Paiute from Nevada who as a youth had been adopted by whites. Wovoka’s visions of Native revitalization were a catalyst for the Ghost Dance religion; that revitalization movement led to the massacre at Wounded Knee. People were dancing the ghosts back into the world then; the white settlers would vanish, the buffalo would fill the prairie again, the ancestors would return, everything would all become whole again. That is the famous dream of the Ghost Dance, later written into the dominant master narrative of progress and regrettable, but inevitable, loss.

Less famously, when Wovoka was four years old, a conflict erupted between the Paiute and a militia of white miners at Pyramid Lake. Hundreds of Paiutes were killed. It began when white traders captured a couple of Paiute women. The experience of these female Paiute captives did not enter into the texted, genred world of Indian captivity narratives. It was just another scuffle between savages and rough-edged pioneering men. But the pervasive story of Indians kidnapping whites became, as Strong puts it, a hegemonic tradition in Raymond Williams’s sense, taking shape through a “radically selective” process of making tradition (2000: 4). The recognizable generic form that we recognize as a captivity narrative emerged only as all other possible elements, experiences, and memories were excluded. And the exclusion—the unspoken forgetting—itself made meaning as surely as did the foregrounded story.

When the captor is the savage, the trauma of confinement is dramatized in the captive’s experience. The captivity is a clearly marked ordeal, with discrete points that mark its narrative beginning and end. But when the captor is the state itself, then its acts of containment are told through images of paternal or civic benevolence: health, sanitation, progress, enlightenment. At the time Bourke’s report appeared, the Ghost Dance had already failed its desperate dancers; the massacre at Wounded Knee had already taken place, the U.S. military had already proven its physical power. Now, in keeping with plans to convince the enemy of modernity’s “wonders,” Bourke was advocating no more
slaughter but a civilized containment of alien people: incorporation and conversion where possible and separation when it proved not to be.

Nor, of course, did a sense of genre accrue to the hegemonic form into which the white captivity narrative, and its accompanying conversion narrative, gently evolved: the state’s self-proclaimed benevolence, its taking of wards. This was to be seen not as a story, but as a policy unfolding ineluctably in the realms of civilization and health, “wonder” technologies, the unfortunate but rational eradication of anachronistic savage ways via the containment of the reservation, and the boarding school. This kind of containment was not, of course, to be read as a constructed or entextualized narrative, shaped by selective omissions. It was increasingly just part of the progress of everyday life.

Another Story

Once upon a time, aliens starting coming down from space to colonize the earth and abduct human beings. They followed the bomb, and the bomb had changed what was possible to think (see Masco 2006). For some years before that, UFOs had been witnessed skipping in the sky, as the first news report put it, like saucers. When in 1947 one crashed in the New Mexico desert near Roswell, local people found the futuristic debris out in the desert: unknown metals that crumpled in a ball and then unfolded without a crease, and the men couldn’t cut it with their knives or burn it with their lighters; they also found streamer-like parts covered by some kind of hieroglyphic code. Some say that right after the crash, the military came to people’s houses in the night and warned them: you didn’t see it, you weren’t there, and keep your mouths shut. Then the official explanation was that what had been found was only a weather balloon. Later, people told of seeing alien bodies killed in that crash. The bodies were small as children, but strangely formed like terrifying radiation experiments with huge heads and weird hands. [And later still, investigative journalist Annie Jacobsen (2011) believed that, in fact, these “alien” bodies were the result of Soviet human experimentation, performed in the wake of Nazi medical experiments, and made to look like existing American movie images of aliens.]

At the time Roswell was the only military base with an atomic bomber unit. By 1947 everyone knew the gruesome deformities caused by nuclear exposure. The bombs had been dropped in Japan, and the
fallout of nightmarish signs had drifted across the ocean. But these weren’t people found and covered up in the desert. They were aliens.

Some say the government shipped those crashed aliens out of there, first to Ohio and then to a secret place called Area 51 on the edge of the Nevada test site. The powers that be hushed it all up about the UFO. Then they started working with the aliens. The aliens possessed technology so advanced it seemed to be magic. They were invading the natural borders of our bodies and our land. But human powers also wanted the wonders of alien technology to use in our wars.

The aliens began to abduct people, it was said, to harvest our reproductive material, to make hybrids between aliens and humans. And the powers that be gave the aliens a green light, but made sure that abductees would forget it all when they returned from their weird captivity. They let aliens do this, some people said, in exchange for the high-tech alien information we used during the Cold War. Abductees would miss what was taken from them (sperm, eggs, time, replaced by the vague feeling of invasion), but they would never know exactly what had been lost. Let us think it was only a dream. That was the story of Roswell; that was how uncanny captivity narratives planted their seeds, in a resonant collusion of invaders and the government, colonization and war, experiments on the body and unspeakable apocalyptic fallout, abduction and power, all taking root in the American southwest.

In Roswell, an industry grew around the secret of the crashed UFO like a pearl around a grain of sand. Movies, books, a huge internationally visited UFO museum, a few smaller UFO museums, a yearly summer festival that stuffs the town so full of travelers they spill into the desert, all centered over the decades on Roswell. A congressman from New Mexico named Steven Schiff appealed on behalf of his constituency for federal secrets of official UFO-related policy to be released through the Freedom of Information Act. My UFO group friends in Texas said: He got the pages, all redacted, blacked-out passages everywhere so you can’t read it anyway.

Of course they don’t admit it, my friends said. They were behind it all along.

One day at the Roswell International UFO Museum I asked a young woman selling souvenirs what the people here thought of the UFO obsession surrounding her town. She said thoughtfully, “Well, it’s been good, since the bus factory started laying people off.” The bus factory in Roswell closed in 2002. The military base at Roswell has also been
closed, since the late 1960s. But Roswell is a big town with an air of cheerful industriousness in the middle of the rural desert land.

After the UFO museum, my companion and I strolled Roswell’s main street, stopping in here and there to chat with clerks in shops, which, though selling ordinary household goods, also displayed little aliens in their windows. Some of the clerks had grown up around here. Others had headed to the desert from back east to be near the UFO action, or to meet like-minded people who were into things like channeling, Native American spirit quests, and healing rituals.

Who lived here, before the pioneers came? Who knew this land long before the Roswell military base opened and closed, taking jobs with it, before the UFO museum brought more jobs back again? Were they Apache, Navajo, Zuni? None of our UFO tourist brochures told us that. On the road out of there, as we drove north through the changing landscapes, we saw people selling trinkets from roadside carts. They sold things that together created an indexical field of the “American West”: Indian arrowheads supposedly found in these parts, UFO guidebooks, alien dolls, pioneer old-timey tools, and papoose dolls of no specific tribe wrapped in cellophane, the faces pressed up against the plastic like stillborns. One cart had a hand-lettered sign: Friendly Indians.

At one point we drove out to the desert to find the famous Roswell UFO crash site. Walking off the dirt road into the hills, we were high-spirited until for some reason the air seemed to shift. The atmosphere became uneasy. Things seemed suddenly weighted with a kind of half-meaning. I felt the sense of an evaporated history, the disturbing absence created by one world conquering another.

Captivities

The fallout of the still-open wound of Native American colonization and genocide drifts into space alien stories. Guilt and confusion and injury sometimes survive the fading of their overt material referents, become uncanny emotional tropes, float into varied patterns of discourse and experience, and give impact and weight to other stories about inscrutable power, and loss.

It would be a mistake to say that the UFO abduction story is symbolically “about” that single history of American conquest. Instead, I’m trying to show how the captivity narrative points to multiple other social memories; how bits of those other stories accrue inside its form,
and create new stories with social and poetic effects. One way to think about this process is by considering narrative and poetic memory as a complex, shifting, and expressive social form. Marita Sturken (1997) says that memory dwells “outside a definition of truth, evidence and representations of the real . . . [memory is an] inventive social practice” (259). She wants to “rethink culture’s valorization of memory as the equivalent of experience;” instead, she considers it “a social and individual practice that integrates elements of remembrance, fantasy, and invention . . . [memory] can shift from the problematic role of standing for the truth to a new role as an active, engaging practice of creating meaning” (ibid).

What might it mean that memory is not the “equivalent of experience?” On a simple level memory is, of course, imperfect, mutable; it cannot transparently represent objective events. But “experience” itself includes fantasy and imagination, even in the most materially grounded, well-documented event, and therefore Sturken’s idea can go further. Memory “exceeds experience” also because it can transcend the individual “owner” of the actual experience. Once even a private memory circulates—as utterance, narrative, discourse—it becomes social (Bakhtin 1984; Urban 1996). It escapes ownership and becomes a living, growing, changing thing. Then even those who didn’t “have” the original experience can still take in and “have” the memory, absorb it as a kind of inner speech—and can alter it, transform it, let it express new, latent meanings that outrun and distort the transparent sense of the original experience.

Take, for example, memory in the women’s Indian captivity narrative. Written, first-person memoirs of white women’s captivity by Indians were from the beginning channeled through and framed by commentaries of pastors and husbands, often absorbing their editorial voices and influences in ways the reader can’t determine. Fictional captivity narratives are not always clearly distinguishable from “fictional” memoirs (Derounian-Stodola 1999); and furthermore, even the most genuine memories may come to resemble their fictional forms. But there is more to think about: what if the haunting imaginaries of American colonization, its fears and justifications, its guilt and ambivalence, is a social and cultural memory that outlives the individual settlers who were captured by Indians? Then in new guises the narrative itself can remember (Stewart 1996) themes that echo and multiply inside it. The memory becomes explicitly social as it twists into uncanny forms, as its “authenticity is derived not from its revelation of
any original experience but from its role in providing continuity” [Sturken 1997: 259]. Then the continuous, overlapping elements resonate back and forth in time, with meanings that still can’t rest. “Continuity” creates parallelisms that in themselves gain meaning at the level of metaculture [Urban 2001]. At the dense point where the various stories overlap you can see a real that is more complete, more true to phenomenological experience, when it is piled up in a heap of other stories than when it sits on its own. The accumulation itself is part of the larger story. And that common element of truth is, in part, the endless struggle over power that keeps repeating itself in countless social dynamics over time, sometimes foregrounding gender, sometimes race, sometimes class. Sometimes the phenomenology of power can only be told in how its effects reverberate between many different social categories, many different individual memories, and between many different, deepening layers of historical time.

Thousands of women’s Indian captivity narratives were published before 1880. But why would the social need for these stories remain now, long after the establishment of Native American colonization in America? In what sense is colonialism’s hegemonic project still incomplete? How does it overlap with uncanny forms of captivity like UFO abduction stories? How can we see the ways in which they coalesce into experience that resonates in both fantasy and material life?

But perhaps that line between fantasy and materiality is too pat. The women’s Indian captivity narrative was always caught up in fantasy and expressively displaced female fears of an “oppressive” dark wilderness to which wives were often reluctant pioneers [Kolodny 1984]. At the same time, it expressed the tensions and inconsistencies within the master narrative of colonizing Indian land (see also Strong 1999, Ebersole 1995, Castiglia 1996, Slotkin 1973, Faludi 2007). Woman’s Indian captivity narratives always allowed the American colonizing project to underscore other unmarked power relations, especially gendered ones, within white society itself. You could say that now, the Indian captivity narrative “occupies” UFO abduction narratives with all its ambivalent expressions about power. And I want to look at how other stories chime in with them, too.

Michael Sturma (2002) has methodically compared parallels between Indian captivity narratives and alien abduction stories. He describes, for example, each genre’s theme of paralysis, noticing that the captivity or abduction entails being helpless, immobilized, stuck. Sturma quotes Communion (106), where Whitley Strieber, in a mem-
ory of his own alien abduction, describes himself as helpless and immobile as an infant. Sturma notices that Euro-Americans captured by Native Americans use strikingly similar motifs and images, speaking of paralysis, helplessness, and a frozen ability to speak.

And although Sturma does not as explicitly recognize the pole of liberation that opposes this paralysis, he does recognize many points that you could think of—and that many abducted think of—as escaping containments of many kinds. He sees, for instance, that both historical “captives” and uncanny “abductees” begin to identify with the other side, sometimes to feel a liberation in the crossing over.

One thing is clear: the European domination of Native American land is an uneasy, still-unresolved, foundational master narrative. It’s a legacy filled with competing ideologies, both guilt and glamour. It ambivalently ricochets from images of pastoral settlement (the perfect containment) to genocide (the keenest social entropy). The loose ends of that ambivalent dyad are still being woven into compulsive narrative meaning. When the image of abduction just seems to resonate inside fields of imagination and experience, then, I suggest, inchoate stories about some kinds of immobility are gathering momentum, even in their still-inarticulate forms. Mostly I think about the unspoken stories of class and its damages, both in the enormous, work-related damages to the body, and in the little everyday injuries that gather up in their own unsayable patterns. Together they shape a felt sense of the real. I want to suggest how tropes from “factual” captivity narratives collude with fantasy and personal experience. They generate uncanny, class-inflected understandings about being trapped, about escaping, and always about what some call the powers that be.

Each Will Despise the Fraud of the Medicine Men

Being abducted by aliens can be so traumatic that one man has devised an invention to thwart it. Aliens use mind control and communicate through telepathy, and they have unimaginable technologies that leap through quantum logics of time and space, but at everyday physical commonsense tasks they are completely inept. A man named Michael Menkin (2003) created a thought helmet to physically block aliens from reading our minds. His extensive website takes you through a detailed set of instructions, over several web pages, from step A through step J. Here is the instruction from step A:
1. Hold the hat open and push the paper into the hat. Push the paper against the inside and top of the hat. A newspaper will do.

2. Take the hat with the paper in it and put it over your head. The paper should be just above your ears and flush with the front and the back of the helmet. Pull the hat and the paper down over your head. Make sure the paper and the hat are secure against your head.

3. Remove the hat and the paper, taking care to keep the paper with the hat.

4. Use a marking pen or grease pencil and draw a line on the paper where it meets the hat.

5. Remove the paper from the hat and cut along the line you just made.

The paper shape is the pattern from which you will cut the 8 pieces of Velostat. (12 pieces if you use 4 mils thick Velostat.)

Note: Minimum shielding is 8 sheets of Velostat 6 mils thick or 12 sheets of Velostat 4 mils thick. Some abductees report success with helmets using only 5 sheets of Velostat but 8 sheets are recommended as the aliens transmit a tremendous amount of energy. Use more sheets if you can get them in the hat. (Menkin 2003)

The instructions continue over the seven separate web pages of alphabetized steps, taking you through the proper cutting to the final application of tape (horizontal) and reminding you, at the end, to apply “tape to any areas that need reinforcement. Remember, you will sleep with the hat on” (Menkin 2003). On other areas of the website, there are photographs of the helmet’s creator and other satisfied users, testimonials about how effective it is, and admonitions to wear it as much as possible—even “24/7”—since aliens have been known to take hats from closets (as happened “in Kentucky”) and to interfere telepathically by making you put the hat away when you were about to place it on your head. The best defense is “to wear the helmet as much as possible” (Menkin 2003).

The helmet is a simple mechanical gadget, but aliens have spindly, flaccid fingers and a weak understanding of normal material properties. As long as you use plenty of sticky tape, aliens can’t get it off your head. (Once my friend and I were driving in the desert and we saw a family standing helplessly by an overheated car. My friend went over and showed them where in the engine to pour water. What would have
become of them, out there in the sun? My friend returned to our car and told me in an amused voice that the stranded father was a physicist at the university, but didn’t know how to put water in his engine. In a way, the aliens’ helplessness with the tinfoil thought control helmet is that kind of story). Menkin would know where to pour the water.

Made from ordinary things, constructed easily enough by following the step-by-step process outlined in detail by the inventor, the helmet represents the modest, practical resistance of the human as a skilled craftsman, an ordinary working maker, protesting the invasion of an alien mode. This alien mode includes a focus on technological connections rather than goods, high-level and high-speed transmissions, and the unbearable power of its thinglessness. Here alien power is thwarted by the fantastic banality that the humbly constructed thing does, in fact, retain.

What I’m getting at here is the metaphoric poignancy in this helmet’s bit of concrete magic. It signifies a protest, however fragile or marginal it might appear, voiced by the residual age of making a clearly usable thing. As with Tom’s dynamo in chapter 1, here the invisible, untraceable encounter with the alien points to the charged mechanical objects; these are crafts and tools that flag a vanishing age of visible production. The helmet’s power to block the alien depends on the value the workingman places on his craft (for Mr. Menkin insists he’s not out for profits; he is not a capitalist, not an entrepreneur but rather a maker, sharing his bricolage for free with other like-minded abduction-resisters, his neighbors on earth).

In one sense, aliens conjure an image of postmodern power that seems to move in transmissions free of material constraints. It’s a mode of power made manifest in connections and networks rather than in clear material production, a power that we are told endlessly accrues in “flows” instead of “goods” in the neoliberal age. And yet the helmet insists, with its precarious victory, the alien mode is still itself hostage to the vanishing power of the ordinary material thing.

Aliens have come here to earth, some say, to examine the concrete workings of our bodies. They take our literal sperm and eggs, the stuff of our innate power to make, to materially reproduce. And despite their ability to jump through time like quantum tricksters, they still need that actual stuff. For whatever their inscrutable alien ends may be, they need the fallible human body, much as any blindingly complex corporate system of information and power still needs, and takes what it needs, from labor. Someone, somewhere in the world, is in a
factory making the microchips that *they* use to track us, as aliens track
us. And aliens need sperm, eggs, bodies.

Here then is one captivity. The vanishing and the residual—the
working but vulnerable body—is caught by the shock of the alien new
and the seemingly immaterial base of its occult power (Comaroff and
Comaroff 2000). Here on Menkin’s website is a thing, a piece of handy
making—a helmet—that seems to hold that alien power off with its
own materiality, just maybe a bit. Its humble bricolage summons a
structure of feeling that is still game but increasingly trapped. It sum-
mons something real that fights becoming a ghost.

Ghosts

Once upon a time, I am watching a video on YouTube. It is 2008. The
video is called “Indian Aliens” and its context is as opaque as anything
else on YouTube. You see only the face of an unidentified teenage girl
who seems to be Native American. Her presence as a performer is
strong: a half-submerged smile, hinting at without quite breaking into
irony. The background paneling and couch suggests a modest home.
She seems to be reading her lines from another computer off-screen.

The video begins with a tinkling sound, evoking “spaceships.”
Then the girl begins to perform with a spoken introduction:

Do you think there are aliens waaaa-aaay out there in space?
I don’t know, buddy. All I know is, I’m not scared.
Because I went to boarding school!

Soon, up comes a synthesized drumming. She nods along and begins
to rap. She raps the desire to fly off with the aliens into space, leaving
behind the “dusty res,” the “tribal politics,” and “the BIA [Bureau of
Indian Affairs].” She will transcend comic annoyances on the reserva-
tion, such as a “crazy” local character. She dreams that the spaceship
will fly her to a place beyond all this, a place where you don’t hear about
“soldiers killed today” on the news. She raps that even “Grandma” is
planning to go; this Grandma character says that everyone in Washing-
ton “is drunk with power today.” The girl raps that “grandma’s put her
spacesuit on,” a spacesuit that was “banned by the BIA.”

This spaceship is not the sinister vehicle of a clinical alien plotting
to steal reproductive material with high-tech magic. Rather it is the
vehicle of fantastic and transcendent rescue, taking Native people
away from the captivities of ordinary existence and flying off to the
“rings of Saturn with ease.” Soon the performer modulates from the
rap into a Hollywood-style iconic “Indian” minor key beat, humor-
ously inviting all Native friends to “pack up your fry bread, and a brick
of commodity cheese”—and to escape from earth with the aliens.
These aliens are not conquerors, but rather a means to overcome the
already-conquered world and its troubles. She emphasizes: “Boarding
school survivors, you’re welcome on this flight.”

Next she shifts to a nostalgic recuperation of a past. The song now
dreams a time before the “dusty res,” before the BIA, and before the
Indian boarding school, but nonetheless a past that takes place in the
imaginary of outer space. The song dreams a time and place where all
Natives might be united in “cosmic powwows, way out there in space.”
The image summons a comic, YouTube-era echo of the Ghost Dance.
Maybe, the song muses, aliens in their futuristic spaceships will take
us backward, back to a time before the plunge of things down to the
way they are now. In this abduction there will be “no soldiers killed
today,” that is, no Indian kids signing up for a stint in the ordinary U.S.
military; instead we will meet unconquered Indian warriors from yest-
erday, recuperating and revising the one war that really mattered. The
song, then, comically dreams a time-space that revitalizes the future
and redeems the past:

And if we should go back in time
I wanna see Custer there.
Running’ from the Indians
Trying to keep his yellow hair.
[Minor key Indian beat]
Hey—ya! Hey—ya!
[Spoken]:
. . . No way, John Wayne.
I’m not scared.

John Wayne and Custer appear together in this revised imaginary
landscape. The cowboy actor who generated “fictional” characters and
the “factual” cavalry commander of the Indian Wars are collapsed into
the song’s recognition of one, inescapable story. Abduction here is a nar-
rative implicitly understood to be co-produced by both fictional representations and historical events. Inside the framework of alien abduction, the historical captivities of the American past become redeemed.

I wonder if she’s written the song herself, or if it has circulated on Native networks on the Internet; maybe it’s been passed from hand to hand. Some Googling lets me know that the performer is Inupiat, and goes to high school in Kaktovik, Alaska. But Kaktovik is not the “dusty res” that this song both embraces as a rooted place and wants to transcend. Nor is Kaktovik a place, apparently, where “fry bread” would typically be eaten (Fox, personal correspondence). But something comes together with these images: in a narrativized sense of historical Native experience, politicized and poetized in its memory of Custer; in “dust” and “fry bread” as recognizable, representative icons of modern indigenous American life; and in the shared imaginary of a comic/cosmic revitalization. The white fear of alien abduction is nothing compared to the abductions of history. And so dread is replaced here by both desire and deadpan humor: “I’m not scared [of alien abduction], I went to boarding school.”

Here, then, the real abduction narrative is the boarding school story, and the true captivity is on earth—not as a necessary spiritual condition, not as an irrevocable plot by supernatural aliens, but as a wrong turn in the contingency of the historical and the political. It’s clear here that boarding school is an abduction too. But the boarding school trauma inoculates its captives against the contemporary terror of alien abduction. In a small, jokey YouTube video, myths intersect and make a new story. The UFO—the ultimate sign of the other—here reverses and redeems the Indian captivity narrative, taking the earthly other into a chronotope of revision, revitalization, and redemption on YouTube.

YouTube viewers, unsurprisingly, leave their comments, some of which are meant to shock and sully in the commonplace way that anonymous, online misogynistic, racist, and blankly insulting comments do. My heart sinks; I hope the girl does not read them. And after a while, the YouTube video is simply gone too. Did she take it down because of the comments? There is no way to know the story of its circulation or disappearance. It is another ephemeral object in the technologies of this world. I am glad I saw it, that I transcribed the song while the video was still posted; I am glad the lyrics are, for me, still a thing. The performance is, perhaps, now fittingly thought of as another ghost, resonating still with those who saw it after its vanishing.
A Vanishing

Once upon a time, on November 5, 1975, in Arizona’s Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest, seven men returning through the woods from a logging job saw a UFO descend from the sky and hover above the trees. One of the men, Travis Walton, got out of the truck to get a better look. And there in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest, Travis Walton, like generations of other whites in Indian forest stories, became, as his website puts it, “an unwilling captive of an alien race” (http://www.travis-walton.com/witness.html). He went missing for five days. Then he mysteriously reappeared, dumped back on a nearby rural road.

The story has been told and retold for three decades. This was the first abduction story told to me at the first major UFO convention I attended, in the early 1990s. A UFO believer approached me and without introduction asked: Do you know the Travis Walton case? The question was phatic, a marker of community.

In this abduction case, Walton is zapped unconscious by the beam of light and awakens in the UFO. He thinks, at first, he is in a hospital: “There was nothing I recognized, but some of the chrome-like objects reminded me of those in a laboratory or doctor’s office.” That is what the UFO most looks like, a hospital or a lab, with rows of things that Walton calls simply “instruments,” indexing a scene of “science.” He sees the aliens approach. They are silent. They are hairless; next to them his own hair is a sign of naturalness, unruly excess. They have no fingernails either; the hands that clinically reach for him are pure white, with no seams or knuckles, as if their very hands have become surgical gloves, and it is as if their faces, which reveal only the eyes, have become surgical masks. But this is no hospital; this is a nightmare negative image of a hospital. Or, you might say, it is another example of how the uncanny partly reveals the hidden, terrifying aspect of knowledge and power in a nightmare of medicalized domination.

This hyperclinical nightmare articulates the implicit terrors of everyday life and its unspoken structures (see Brown 2007 for a thorough and insightful elaboration of medicalized imagery and the body in alien abduction narratives). The clean well-lighted space, the ordinary venue for containing trauma, becomes the generator of trauma. Travis Walton tries to smash up the instruments, he says, like an animal that has gotten loose in a lab. But, fantastically, or through the “wonders” of some new technology, nothing breaks. Here you might inevitably think of a
Foucauldian sense of medicalization. But here Foucault has fallen down a rabbit hole.

There is so much here, drifting from piles of memory and history, and settling into a story that tells an unfinished feeling about power and containment. There is the Nazi-influenced imagery—the nightmare of the medical experiment that drifts into UFO abductions from the very beginning, and then overlaps with images of atomic experiments on human and animal bodies; there is the oddly resonant idea of what Walton calls his own “superhuman strength of a trapped animal”—that is, the animal nature of the human compared with an alien. And so the “superhuman” element of the self here is not the brain but the body, which struggles and fights its captivity.9

Here is where the rabbit hole twists into a Möbius strip. It is not hard to hear the Indian captivity narrative layered inside this uncanny, unfinalized UFO abduction story like sediment. In the older story it is the Indian who is the savage, the devil, the wild animal, the natural man, the strong-bodied but, ultimately, technology-weak other. It is also the Indian who is the abductor. It is Indians who should appear in the forest and make you what Walton calls “an unwilling captive of an alien race.” But here the Indian forest becomes the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest (Barbeito 2005; Lepselter 2005); it belongs now to the nation. There is a knowledge trying to surface here, as always, that territory once belonging to Native people becomes entextualized within a Euro-American Indian place-name, an ordinary, unmarked sign of conquest. And in this contained forest, and inside the UFO, the abducting “alien race” is an intensified image of the white man: now this pale, high-tech, clinical alien race is descending upon what has become Walton’s land, conquering what is in this narrative his native place, his earth. In terms of narrative identification, the abductee has traded places: once the captor was less technological, more “natural.” But it is now the captive who claims “native” rights to the place being invaded—the earth.

The Resonance of the Clinical

Once upon a time, Saddam Hussein was rooted out of his lair and abducted by the forces of the U.S. military. After so much pursuit and evasion he was at last a captive. A photo appeared in many newspapers and websites. The image went viral as it epitomized the
American triumph. It is still surfacing in individual images across the Internet.

In the 2003 photograph, Saddam Hussein is not being tortured or killed. When the journalist Daniel Pearl was abducted by radical Pakistani liberation group in 2002, the photograph that was circulated in the media showed him in chains with a gun to his head. It was an image full of pain and the knowledge of imminent death. His torture was obvious. A propaganda video released by the group was circulated on the Internet as well, showing Pearl being harshly interrogated, and then the terrible beheading.

In direct opposition, Saddam Hussein’s photograph in American captivity shows a different kind of spectacle: the clinical display of the superpower. The compelling image shows Saddam Hussein being examined by a doctor. It was understood that the physical brutality in the Pearl image shows the captors’ ability to kill. The display of the American force shows the superpower’s ability to capture the subject at a deeper level. What is not necessary, of course, is a display of physical force, since Iraq had already, at the time of this photo, been thoroughly and visibly bombed.

But in the photo, Saddam Hussein’s head is tipped back, and his mouth is open to a glowing wand, the light of medical inspection. The beam of light illuminates the inner tissue of Saddam’s mouth, showing us the red, intimate vulnerability of the fallen dictator’s soft palate. We look, with the point of view of the observer, into Saddam’s face, and see not an equal or greater opponent; we see not an agent, but a patient. The doctor, in this photo, is the one with agency; he looks at his patient, but Saddam Hussein’s eyes look off to the side, to some spot on the ceiling. Saddam Hussein has unruly hair and a beard. The doctor has a smooth, hairless head, smooth gloves, and a barely discernable face whose only distinguishable feature seems to be eyeglasses. In fact, this military doctor looks a lot like one of Travis Walton’s aliens: bald, with any nails or knuckles invisible in surgically gloved fingers. He has amplified eyes, and a smooth garment without seams. He is examining the unwilling captive.

How might this image from a military invasion relate to so many previous scores of alien abduction images? We can’t say here, of course, that anything was directly “copied” from anything else. These images pile up from such disparate domains. One image comes from a vernacular realm outside the unanimously agreed-upon real, while the other is from a realm of clear historical and political impact. But they
arise nonetheless in a shared field of both latent and explicit signs. Despite the marginal cultural capital of Travis Walton’s story, it is still part of the field in which our social world takes root and circulates, makes dreams and fantasies, becomes myth, and happens in real material life.

Everyone knows that modern aliens are clinical abductors. But one day, when I am doing research with a group of UFO experiencers, there is tiny moment of narrative negotiation. A woman tells about her alien memory. She summons the dreamlike image and presents it to the room, the thing she has felt slipping for decades between the ordinary memories of her life. She tells us this was not a dream, but neither does she insist it has some objective reality outside her own experience; instead, she carefully clarifies: I’m saying I’m aware that this happened to me. And she tells us she was aware that “beings,” as she calls them, were doing something to her body. Another member of the group begins to put her story into its generic place from the standard accounts of alien abduction: he tells her the aliens were performing medical procedures upon her to advance their genetic mission. No, she says, they were not. That’s not what they were doing. Yes, he assures her. They each take hold of one end of her story and pull for a few minutes while the others in the group watch. He tugs toward finalizing her tale into the well-known track of medicalized alien abduction; she pulls it back toward an idiosyncratic and open memory, a centrifugal story that resonates with too many details to pin down (Bakhtin 1981). Everyone listens; soon the moment between them passes. But this little negotiation over the memory’s definition becomes part of the larger story.

Another Story

The “first modern abduction,” as people call it, occurred in 1961 with Betty and Barney Hill, an interracial married couple: “Most everyone knows the story of how Betty and Barney saw a UFO while driving through the White Mountains of New Hampshire late on the night of September 19, 1961 and were taken aboard it and given medical examinations by aliens” (Lawhon 2000). Like women’s Indian captivity narratives, UFO abductions began in the East and then migrated west across the country. Now “most everyone knows the story.”

The Hills’ is the story whose narrative elements became the foundation on which subsequent abduction accounts could be judged by a
growing body of investigators who wanted to align themselves with mainstream science and psychology. It was the origin story of the genre (Dean 1998). Serious abduction researchers, as they often designated themselves, began trying to distinguish what they considered to be real abductions, where narratively atypical abduction testimonials, especially those remembered without the benefit of hypnosis, were dismissed as “confabulation” (Jacobs 1992). It was sometimes said that the pure “wheat” had to contain clinical procedures on the body; other, seemingly wilder or less classifiable stories could be safely put aside as the “chaff” (Jacobs 1992).

As in the Hills’ case, many stories that began to comprise the genre were forgotten and recovered to memory later. In these stories, memory itself became the subject of a secondary captivity story: memory was stolen away, converted in captivity with false images or “screen memories,” then through the help of professionals, released. But even while memory was held in captivity, strange fears and feelings remained behind as traces. Detached from their own referents but pointing toward them though a dense field of semiotic distractions, mysterious signs of the trauma mimic the cultural process of uncanny memory itself. You could redeem the abducted memory-of-abduction by patching together the eerie hints and traces. Then, through hypnosis, the recovered trauma was funneled into a single narrative from the amorphous flow of impressionistic feeling. Through hypnosis the therapist could go into the scene of the captivity, taking the abductee along on an inner journey to relive the experience. The story, this way, became a codified type, and the teller’s original amnesia of that story was one of its key motifs. Here you can see that the UFO abduction story is itself a trace in the life of the social, an uneasy sign pointing to a half-forgotten disturbance beyond the individual’s story. In social life as on the body of an abductee, “horror leaves its traces” in strange, eerie events (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). But what is that “something,” what is that original horror?

Betty was from an old Yankee family, and Barney was an African American postal employee. The fact of their mixed race (unusual in a married couple at the time) is always a noted point of the story. It’s not a detail crucial to the UFO abduction itself, but it is a crucial mark of specificity, a particularizing fact. And more than that, it resonates implicitly with the themes of race and hybridity in captivity narratives of the past, and abduction stories to come. In Roth’s (2005) cogent analysis, 1950 space “contactee” stories grew out of white supremacist the-
osophy; the Hills’ 1960s story represents a move toward greater racial optimism. He incisively calls the Hills’ abduction narrative “the suppressed trauma of a mixed-race couple during the civil rights era” (Roth 2005: 61). [For more discussion of race and hybridity in this and other UFO stories see Roth 2005; Brown 2007; Barbeito 2005.]

Driving their Chrysler on a lonely road, the Hills saw what seemed to be a star coming closer and closer until finally it was no star at all but a UFO, and Barney could see strange “living beings” gazing back through the windows of the spaceship. Barney yelled, “We’re going to be captured!” like a pioneer in an old cowboy and Indian movie. There was no way to escape: the aliens came closer and closer over the horizon, spread in a line across the road, and then they captured Betty and Barney near Indian Hill.

It’s like a dream, with these signs poking up as iconic landmarks to remind you of a nagging other thing just offstage. [But what is that other thing?] It doesn’t make much sense on its own, this trail of signs, each sign like a single ember that must have floated in from a bonfire burning beyond the frame. Each ember is a clue to the bigger fire that both launched and connects them. Take the story’s place-names. Look at it like a conspiracy theorist would, stringing the embers together so your necklace glows in triumph. There are the White Mountains, there is Indian Hill, and the last name of the couple is also Hill, and the double occurrence of “hill” seems to factor each hill out and leave you with the resonance of the words “Indian” and “White” (Barbeito 2005 also notices the symbolic place-names in this narrative).

Yes, these are real names and real places. And yet thrust into the charged and fantastic narrative, with its constant begging for the reading of clues, the names become signs that underscore the theme of a troubled unspoken history. The words “White” and “Indian” might remind you implicitly of other, historically earthly, material abduction stories that are nested inside this strange one. As in Travis Walton’s story, these place-names tell us, of course, not that these narratives are somehow texted by an invisible author making symbolic choices, but rather how ordinary, and yet how troubled, are the legacies of theft and desire in the ubiquitous, unmarked use by whites of Native American place-names in everyday life (see Samuels 2001). The abduction story partially marks these names again as explicit indices to a story of invasion. The abduction story lets both the historical and the fantastic story resonate together as a feeling.

Susan Clancy (2005) calls the Hills an ordinary couple and implies
that they represent the typical couple next door, strangely ignoring the narrative disruption of an interracial marriage in 1961. The couple’s mixed race status is, here and elsewhere, a detail that seems to get in the way. It might give an extra jolt of disturbance; it carries an implicit sense that race is part of a larger structure of things whose workings aren’t always visible at the surface (Roth 2005 elaborates on this theme). And then, when you think of race, the missing time also half-evokes a kind of “middle passage” in a spaceship. Its bewildered passengers are immobilized with invisible, uncanny chains; they remind us of other terrors, as they dread leaving their own world and becoming the possessions of these technologically dominating others. Different troubled American histories layer up inside the uncanny iterations, the implicit feelings of their parallelism between other histories of violation, transport, domination, colonization. They are unresolved injuries spewing back in a layered poetics, revealing the connections and parallels between many different histories of power and domination.

As signs, the place-names point to a something; and on one level at least that something is the apophenia in accumulated stories of invasion. In the dreamlike story of alien captivity, the polysemous quality of signs begins to pulse with the uncanny light of meaningful fluke. The details seem to refer to something urgent but obscure. Weird, isn’t it, a white guy at a UFO group might say—because in many social worlds where people think together about UFOs, the work is piecing together the apophenia in things, the coinciding motifs in everyone’s memories, dreams, books, road signs, numbers, and seeing a pattern. Weird that the first abduction was at a place called Indian Hill. After everything we did to the Indians. “We were like aliens to them,” I have often heard UFO experiencers say, speaking of colonizers coming to America. “We invaded their land.” Or: “When the Spanish came to the New World, no one knew who they were either.” Here, in this musing analysis, “we” are the Indians in a native land, and the familiar patriotic origin story of the discovery of the Americas has shifted.

Barney Hill died an untimely middle-aged death. He was haunted to destruction, said some of the people I knew, by his irresolvable trauma. But Betty lived into the 2000s, a salty New England lady who made appearances at UFO conferences and was periodically interviewed about her abduction. Shortly before her death, her local newspaper in New Hampshire interviewed her again. The reporter Dennis Robinson was clearly delighted by Betty’s eccentricities. But what she said surprised him. His story recounts that Betty is growing tired of
representing the mystery of UFOs. She tells him she does not want to be known as the abductee any more. She brings out her research. She is studying her own genealogy now instead of UFOs, and is completely immersed in an old family story: she wants the reporter to know that one of her Pilgrim ancestors was captured by Indians. This is what Betty Hill wants to be known for, instead of her alien abduction: the Indian captivity narrative lying dormant in her genealogy of abduction stories.

More Stories

Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative from 1682 is generally considered the “origin” of the American captivity genre. In the seventeenth-century Puritan captivity narrative, it isn’t clear from the text itself that Indians are well on the way to becoming a defeated minority, or that the war that is the context for her abduction resulted from the flooding in and domination by the English in one generation. Castiglia (1996) says that as Rowlandson fears for her life in captivity among savage “hell-hounds,” her symbolic position of power within an official agenda of racial and cultural genocide must be reconciled with her lower status, within her own society, as a woman. But these implicit ironies grow closer to the surface later on in the American colonizing project. By the nineteenth century, when centuries of genocide had already cleared the way for folklore and nostalgia, you can read a gap opening up between what is known and what has been more obviously obscured.

In the earliest captivity narratives, the moral structure of things is cleaner. Mary Rowlandson, abducted into unknown wilderness, begins to explore what becomes a spiritually unknown space, conquering the threat of despair and her own vulnerability through the various ordeals of her survival. Her sense of God’s intervention at each juncture underlines her position as a stranger in a strange land. She has entered an otherworldly journey; and the point of her own narrative is the journey of her soul, which has to emerge on the other side of an odyssey filled with demonic perils, tests, and moments of divine grace.

In a sense, even though she’s surrounded by savages, she’s alone with God and her own soul; and the Indians (rather than truly seeming to have their own autonomy) are like figures in a Dante-esque crossing through spiritual darkness. Their representation has been read as “demonology” expressed in the “imagery and folklore” of captivity narra-
tives, a set of motifs which “pre-dates the Puritans considerably” and continues beyond them in representations of alien others [Ramsey 1994].

The poetics of these stories is striking. She recounts her children being murdered in what, for the modern reader, is an irreducible voice, where sparingly stated facts seem to carry compressed enormities of emotion. For a modern reader, this stalwart condensation often heightens the shock:

Two of my younger Children, One Six, and the other Four Years old, came in Sight, and being under a great Surprize, cryed aloud . . . the Indians to ease themselves of the Noise [made by the younger child], and to prevent the Danger of a Discovery that might arise from it, immediately before my Face, knockt its Brains out. I bore this as well as I could, nor daring to appear disturb’d, or shew much Uneasiness, lest they should do the same to the other [child]; but should have been exceeding glad had they kept out of Sight till we had been gone from our House. Now Having kill’d two of my Children, they scalp’d ‘em [a Practice common with these People, which is, when-ever they kill any English people, they cut the Skin off from the Crown of their Heads . . .] [Rowlandson 1999].

This voice, simultaneously electrified by horror and resigned to it, says in the deep fabric of its expression that the ordeal is part of a plan heading towards God’s ultimate redemption. For the modern reader, it is an unknowable consciousness which, having watched her children’s brains “knockt . . . out” and then “scalp’d,” admits only to wishing that she “should have been exceeding glad” had those children kept out of sight until she, their mother, had been captured. You might say this voice compresses sentiment into its own distilled poetics of intensified containment. After two weeks of caring for a suffering child who was wounded in the raid, Rowlandson simply reports that one day: *It did cry for Water until it died.* The Puritan captive struggles to maintain a pious voice as she recounts her own physical suffering through cold and starvation while resisting terror, estrangement and abject loss by focusing on God and the commandment to avoid despair.

Everything here signifies a real beyond itself, for early colonial captivity narratives took seed and grew within a larger climate of seventeenth-century stories, testimonials that matter-of-factly incorporated accounts of the supernatural, and stories whose strange manifestations could easily be compatible with truth claims. “After all,”
wrote Richard Dorson of the narratives of this era, “America itself was hard to believe, and the borderline between strange fact and colored fiction could not be neatly staked” (1950: 5). Part of a deeper social and imaginative zone in which the strangeness of the expanding world was part of God’s creation, “the whole tradition of the medieval bestiary with its fabulous zoology, and the natural history of the ancients strewn with the incredible, lay behind the descriptions of the early travelers” (Dorson 1950: 5).

And therefore it’s worth noticing that in Dorson’s comprehensive collection of early American writing, among the marvels of strange, New World beasts, and unbelievably survived “accidents” involving spikes to the head; among the terrible enchantments of savage magic, and the ongoing, palpable struggle for God and salvation from the devil’s incarnation in Indian flesh—there comes also from Cotton Mather this story, understood generically in his own time as a “true tale.”

Once upon a time, Cotton Mather (whose father, Increase Mather, wrote the introduction to Mary Rowlandson’s narrative) told his flock about a sign in the sky of an unidentified flying object. He wrote that he had heard from the “pen of the reverend person who is now the Pastor of New Haven” (Mather quoted in Dorson 1950: 161) that a ship bound back to England had not returned the following spring. The New Haven pastor wrote to Mather about something strange: “Reverend and Dear Sir [wrote the pastor]: In compliance with your desires, I now give you the relation of that apparition of a ship in the air, which I have received from the most credible, judicious, and curious surviving observers of it” (161, emphasis in the original). “Reader,” confesses Cotton Mather, “there being yet living so many credible gentlemen that were eyewitnesses of this wonderful thing, I venture to publish it for a thing as undoubted as tis wonderful” (161).

And so here is a seventeenth-century airship off the coast of New England. It is an object that begins its flight as “unidentified” but resolves into a clear picture of a ghost ship. It is carrying the souls of voyagers returning to the Old World from the New World. The colonists return to heaven in clouds of glory, in an echo of Revelation that seems to solidify the spiritual standing of the colonies so far from their English home. Here, already, is an American narrative in which an otherworldly flying craft haunts the ambiguous process of crossing worlds.

You could say that the voyage across the sea to the New World was
already an image that shaped the imaginations of those who later headed into the West, into the new world of the territories. You might also say that the vast sea was something like the vastness of space, into which, a few centuries later, ventured astronauts. From that space came new incarnations of ghosts, alien creatures, and new stories of captivity. But while UFOs are always forever unidentified, the colonial flying object here is quickly identified. First of all, it is defined: it is an apparition. Second of all, it is a direct copy of the known ship. Unlike the modern UFO, which indexes the unfinalizable, this sign has a clear referent. And unlike ghosts that haunt profane realms, ghosts in a religious context often have a singular referent (Gordon 1997); the direct link between signifier and signified speaks of an orderly world. The airship is, without “hesitation” (Todorov 1975), incorporated into a tight fabric of conventional cosmological and semiotic meaning. This haunting, then, is not disturbing or disruptive. Rather it is a marvelously affirming sign of God; and thus Cotton Mather justifies “to publish it for a thing as undoubted as tis wonderful.”

Nineteenth-century women’s Indian captivity narratives can evoke a different world from Mather’s and Rowlandson’s. The language of the journey into savage territory becomes more lushly emotional, more oriented towards the ambiguous. A different aperture for the uncanny opens up. I certainly don’t claim to explain centuries of changes in uncanny American sensibilities, but it is worth noticing a few differences that are most salient here. In the seventeenth century, Mary Rowlandson’s narrative was a constant reminder of faith. Although nineteenth-century narratives also testify to Christian faith, they emerge in a different context. Rowlandson’s narrative contrasts in interesting ways with, for example, the narrative of Fanny Kelly, who was abducted by the Sioux in the mid-nineteenth century. Fanny Kelly had been captured with her young daughter, and in the midst of the forced journey put her child down in the tall prairie grass, telling the little girl to hide until someone back to fetch her. But then:

In the morning when permitted to rise, I learned that she had disappeared. A terrible sense of isolation closed around me. No one can realize the sensation without in some measure experiencing it. I was desolate before but now that I knew myself separated from my only white companion [her little girl], the feeling increased tenfold and weighed me down with its awful, gloomy horror (1990: 56–57).
The “awful, gloomy horror” gives everything a surreal tinge. The Puritan captivity narrative represents good and evil, and the natural and the supernatural, as forces that exist autonomous of the soul who encountered them. But in Kelly’s nineteenth-century text, these forces bleed into an ambiguous, unknowable subjectivity. It is Kelly’s painful memory itself—not a ghost that lives independent of her affect—that becomes an agent of haunting. Her perception is saturated by countless other gothic texts, whose projection into an uncanny meta-image is indistinguishable from her own imagination. Her intimate memories become uncanny at the moment of their loss. They are pictures and sounds seen in the moment of becoming externalized ghosts. They are powerful as images because they are, like many uncanny things, “condensed” (as she puts it). In a traumatic moment, she superimposes this “condensed” essence of the familiar upon another “picture” from her inner stock of images—this one not an intimate personal memory, but rather the recollection of what she calls “some weird picture” from the world of publicly available signs, which has shaped her only way of seeing the alien, and that floats up to entextualize the immediate scene before her:

In an instant a lifetime of thought condensed itself into my mind. I could see my old home and hear my mother’s voice . . . the hundreds of savage faces, gleaming with ferocity and excitement around me, seemed like the lights and shadows of some weird picture” (ibid.: 61).

When Fanny Kelly was abducted by Sioux (this was in 1864), she was, in general, treated well, and at one point was cared for as a guest in the house of Sitting Bull. But the experience was agonizing; her husband fled the raid, leaving her, and her young daughter, Mary, was indeed killed as Kelly feared. On an unremarkable day later during the captivity, riding on horseback along with the Sioux on what “seemed to me an endless journey,” a Native man she did not recognize rode up beside her. She writes: “At his saddle hung a bright and well-known little shawl and onto the other side was suspended a child’s scalp of long, fair hair” (Kelly 1990 [1871]:141). Although she had already known that her little girl Mary must be dead, now she saw the girl’s scalp, the hair separated from the person, and the empty bit of clothing whose “well-known” familiarity fills its shape with uncanny horror. The detached length of hair dreadfully summons up the image of the whole child. The existence of the part intensifies the nonexistence of the whole. It creates an inner spectacle for Fanny, who fills in a vision, now, with how that detached
hair came to be removed. The familiar shawl conjures her child’s absent body, and makes that absence palpable as a ghost. These disembodied parts lend a sense of phantasm that perhaps even seeing a whole corpse could not do. “As my eyes rested on the frightful sight I trembled in my saddle and grasped the air for support. A blood-red cloud seemed to come between me and the outer world and I realized that innocent victim’s dying agonies” (ibid.). Unable to endure “the torture” of seeing her child’s scalp and shawl, Fanny faints, dropping “from the saddle as if dead,” in a “merciful insensibility [that] interposed between me and madness” (ibid). When she regains consciousness, her captors, having guessed “the cause of my emotion,” have removed the scalp and the shawl from her sight. While she is still ill with agony, they bring her some “ripe wild plums which were deliciously cooling to my fever-parched lips” (ibid.) But the traumatic sight of her daughter’s scalp and shawl produces further ambiguous, uncanny effects. Soon she can’t even let herself know whether the “frightful vision that had almost deprived me of my senses” was a true memory or not. “I began to waver in my knowledge of it, and half determined that it was a hideous phantom like many another that had tortured my lonely hours. I tried to dismiss the awful dream from remembrance . . .” (143).

When Rowlandson’s children die, their mother describes being grief-stricken. Despite temporarily “converting” to “Indian” habits during the liminal phase of her captivity (such as relishing Native foods she would have disdained before experiencing the hunger of her journey) Rowlandson never narrates the kind of ontological vertigo that two centuries later, for Kelly, rips into the uncanny feeling of the haunted. Captivity results in transformation; part of the drama is whether the captive will emerge strengthened or irrevocably damaged. Rowlandson struggles with sinful despair. In Kelly’s nineteenth-century narrative, it’s no longer her soul, but her sanity, which is in peril. Did she really see that terrible thing, or was it a dream? She would take comfort believing that seeing the scalp was just an “awful dream,” if only that didn’t mean she was losing her faculties. If Rowlandson’s soul was tempted by despair, Kelly’s mind is tempted by a sinkhole of madness that overwhelms her sense of what is “real” with “wild belief”:

I seemed to hear the voices of my husband and child calling out to me. Then I would spring forward with the wild belief that it was real, but later would sink back again overwhelmed with fresh agony (ibid.:63).
Over time, American captivity narratives open up to this semiotically ambiguous orientation of the uncanny. The demons are no longer part of the Puritan world’s determined supernatural elements. Here the uncanny emerges as a struggle between the rational and the haunted, between the clearly known and the unbelievable. And it is connected inevitably to an absence: to an inchoate sense of a larger story that is not being told but is leaking into the picture—to a “missing time” that becomes inner speech and inner spectacle. A very similar sense of ambiguity about the real is a major theme in space alien abduction narratives as well. Did the abduction happen within ordinary material reality, or was it part of a different, more numinous real?

The form taken by any uncanny narrative is part of its time and place, an element in a whole fabric of everyday chronotopes (Bakhtin 1981); and the specific tone that emerges is inseparable from other social and narrative influences. You could trace a multitude of historical threads that weave together and come out to the same haunted destination in the end. It’s true that, as Dorson points out, religious practices changed, and with them vanished the unmarked acceptance of otherworldly forces. But it is also true that in the nineteenth century, white settlers, even at their most vulnerable, felt the overall balance of power between whites and Indians shifting, as colonization marched on, as the war against Indians increased, and as new fields of meaning arose in its wake.

An ambiguous nostalgia is already in place, and sets the stage for a sense of haunting that permeates the trauma in Kelly’s narrative. In the intimation of vanishing, the imagined Indian became less a figure in a powerful Puritan demonology than a symbol of new ways to access spiritual worlds. Later, Native religion is popularly portrayed not only as an aspect of black magic or evil witchery, but more frequently as a positive spiritual alternative to be appropriated for white personal growth. At the same time that a rationalist discourse advocated eradicating Indian religion, for example, Shakers in the mid-nineteenth century invited hundreds of “unidentified spirit-Indians” and a thousand Chippewas to participate in their trances in upstate New York. The famous late nineteenth-century Boston spiritualist Lenora Piper summoned the spirit of an “Indian maiden with the unlikely name of Chlorine” to meet séance participants such as William James (Brown 1997: 162–63). To those “discourses of the vanishing” (Ivy 1995) that pricked the dominant imagination in the course of changing power relations between whites and Indians, you could add the nostalgic settlement of
wild western land—land that becomes, of course, the fantastically
texted landscape of both American colonization and uncanny UFO
conspiracies, the “West.”

Sedimented Captivities

Once upon a time, in the early 2000s, a friend from the Hillview UFO
Experiencers Group tells me about a show on the Science Fiction
Channel. The TV station hired archaeologists to lead a group (mostly
UFO researchers) on a search for buried scraps of the crashed UFO near
Roswell. One of the amateur diggers was happy to see that the land
here had not before been disturbed by humans; it was pure and pristine,
so, he said, metal found here must be from the UFO. Then the digger
noted that the team “bagged” some old Native American artifacts.
Here was the narrative sediment of UFOs and Indians, layered, liter-
ally, in the Western soil.

(There was a sense of presences, of life that had come and
gone before all this. At once I felt the sense of an evapo-
rated history, the disturbing absence created by one world
conquering another . . .)

This is how uncanny conspiracy theory builds, sign by mimetic sign,
until your sense of where you stand is multiple and simultaneous
too—invader and invaded, captive and captor. It is true that much UFO
talk cathects Native Americans, not as people with specific histories
and politics, but as indices to a lost time when the earth was still un-
broken, its relationship to humans untraumatized. One of my friends
from the Hillview group moved to Arizona, in part, she said, to “be
near Indians.” I visited her there once and although she had not met
any local Native American people, she had met other like-minded
white people, a few who drew the aliens that came to them at night
with strange faces like demons.

On one level UFO talk converges with other, New Age discourses
that appropriate and attempt to commodify (though rarely with much
financial success) some fabrication of the “Native American” as a pure,
spiritual index to the sign of the earth itself, as opposed to the alien
worlds of space. Both UFO believers and New Agers in general talk
often about shamanism and the channeling of spirits from the uncor-
ruptured past (M. Brown 1997). I was given a session in Hillview one afternoon by Mark, an alien contactee (as he called himself) who described chatting with Reptilian aliens in his living room. They come down through the ceiling that suddenly reveals it can open lid by lid like an eye, he says, and then, sometimes, the Reptilians play scrabble with him. Scrabble? I asked, dumbfounded. Well, yes, they like Scrabble, he said. It was a shock of the mundane into the unearthly, and yet Scrabble was, in a sense, a fitting emblem of uncanny poetics, each letter potentially doubling from one word to bleed into the next, building up in ways both arbitrary and designed. And it was these Reptilians who gave Mark the power to lead people on guided visualizations, to find their Native American “power animals.” (When I closed my eyes as he instructed me to find a power animal, part of me would not cooperate and I could only see a chicken. Mark tried to help me find a better one like a wolf or dolphin by taking a purple, glowing electrified wand from a velvet case of instruments he said he’d gotten at a yard sale, and passing its slightly shocking, tingling tip somberly over the outlines of my head and body.) This healing was itself reminiscent of nineteenth-century spiritualist practices, and again, reminiscent of what Bourke called the wonders of electricity—and even of space alien magic itself, like Tom’s paralyzing “wand.”

Once upon a time, in Hillview in the 1990s, I sit with people who are deeply immersed in thinking about all kinds of uncanny experiences, and the talk drifts to speculate about possible Native ancestors. I am a graduate student doing fieldwork with UFO experiencers, most of whom are white. It is a time before antigovernment conspiracy theory has a mainstream political platform, before Fox News, the Tea Party, or the birthers. There is just an inchoate feeling of coming into greater focus, a sense that something isn’t right. There is a feeling that something ineffable has been taken away. A few people say they feel they’ve got Indian blood, and of course many white Americans do have Indian ancestors they cannot name, untold stories of vanished but lingering white-Native interaction, thousands of specific episodes of violence, love and entanglement most white Americans cannot know in the erasures of colonization.

That one day, in Carla’s little living room, among the clinking ice in sweet tea, and the meanderings of the dog and the cat, and the hanging smells of cigarette smoke, our flow of casual talk about what we called the weird stuff again turned to Indians and signs of abduction. I
think I have some Cherokee in me, said Nat. Brian spoke of indigenous South American people he’s read about in a Readers Digest book, people from the Amazon who were warning us about the peril of the earth’s destruction; they knew about the vulnerable and sacred earth, how we’re destroying it. Brian says: It sounds like UFO origins . . . Then Carla told of the three well-thumbed paperback books she was reading simultaneously. She had learned from one of them that it was tribal people in Africa, the Dog Star People, who had discovered Pluto—not the European scientists who claimed to have found it all. Speaking of Pluto, Brian asked, have y’all noticed how bright Venus was in the sky right now? The meteorologist on TV said that was normal, but Brian wasn’t sure . . . it could very well be a UFO.

One part of this talk occurs in the register of the autodidactical quest for truth, a register too easily dismissed by established intellectual arenas supported by cultural capital. From Carla’s living room though, this talk is both the fabric of social feeling, the expression of intellectual hunger, and a way of saying that somehow, something beyond what we can see has just gone wrong.

Always in such seemingly free-floating, autodidactical, uncanny talk, there’s a feeling of another kind of captivity afoot. It’s felt in a kind of intensity that burns its way through that talk. Talking and talking, the words built structures and ladders, the way prayers themselves seem to make a presence in a little church. The words in Carla’s living room and everywhere she dove into conversation tried to break out of some invisible, ineffable constraint. Therefore it is true that this sort of talk is never really about real Native people who struggle with racism or classicism or the fallouts genocide, nor with any of the other ordinary insults of life that you, too, know when you leave this set-apart world of uncanny talk. Instead it’s about lost potential. It becomes part of a single field of disenfranchisement and cosmology, and it all gets wrapped up in talk of UFOs. Histories of colonization and the naturalized expectations of class come together then in a comprehensive structure of feeling and imagination, to combine in a unifying theory of power, of being trapped, and the potential for redemption.

Things are different now, people say; those long-ago aliens aren’t necessarily the same little grays who take abductees now. Now, because of modernity and its violent thefts, those old, otherworldly secrets are mostly lost. In the twentieth century, the government conspired with these gray aliens so we could get their technology, some say. And so some people dream a connection with a world ripped out
from beneath the feet of other people long ago. “We screwed the Indi-
ans out of their land and then we ruined nature,” a woman in the group
says. Now, people say, the clinical aliens are doing it to us.

People at UFO gatherings sometimes talk about how space aliens
can be found in ancient Indian cave drawings, or how the Indians know
the truth that goes beyond human experience. Someone hands me a
flyer at a UFO meeting. Do you have an interest in Native Americans,
or maybe some Native American blood? It could be a sign that you’ve
been abducted by aliens. In UFO talk, as in New Age discourses, ab-
original peoples of the world can become a sign of potential recovery,
of freedom from the captivities of modernity—pointing backward to-
ward innocence and forward toward apocalypse or redemption. It is of
course a vast trope of guilt and desire, emerging in various iterations
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too deep to point to as one single thing. He is compelled to try to un-
derstand the powers that he knows exist but that no one can ever really pin down. What he feels has happened cannot be solely linked, for him, to the legacy of American slavery that gives him his emotional metaphor, or just to colonization. It is not just the tropes of dreadful medicalization leaking in from images of Nazi doctors or pictures of animal experimentation, or mysterious animals cut in the desert like experiments, or the inchoate feelings of disempowerment in ordinary encounters with power when you don’t have the cultural capital to feel at ease within them (see Lareau 2003). And it is not just his, or anyone’s, youthful experience of the containments in hard times. He lays it up: the resonance that emanates from many half-remembered signs, letting him know that there is more to power than what meets the eye.