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**The Flight of the Ordinary:  
Narrative, Poetics, Power and UFOs  
in the American Uncanny**

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**The Flight of the Ordinary:  
Narrative, Poetics, Power and UFOs  
in the American Uncanny**

**by**

**Susan Claudia Lepselter, B.A., M.A.**

**Dissertation**

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## **Dedication**

In memory of Joe Travis and La Rae Fletcher

And to the people of Rachel, Nevada, and the Austin UFO Experiencers' Support Group

## **Acknowledgements**

In the interest of protecting their privacy, I have changed the names and some identifying (but otherwise insignificant) details of everyone who appears in this dissertation, with the exception of people who have already chosen to appear in the media. When writing about people who are not public figures, I have routinely disguised their identities -- though not their words.

Over the many years that I have been listening, I've never stopped being dazzled by the imaginative, intellectual and moral force that animates the stories I have heard, stories about both uncanny and everyday life. I wish I had room to include all the narratives I have been told over the years. But many, many stories that don't appear here directly were just as important in shaping my ideas. I am grateful for them all.

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**The Flight of the Ordinary:  
Narrative, Poetics, UFOs  
in the American Uncanny**

Publication No. \_\_\_\_\_

Susan Claudia Lepselter, Ph.D.

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This dissertation on uncanny narrative in America during the 1990s is an ethnography-based contribution to studies of narrative, poetics, the uncanny and American popular culture. Scholars in a range of disciplines have been drawn to study the “uncanny” as part of an effort to theorize the social, aesthetic and psychological characteristics of modernity. Uncanny discourses are stubbornly resistant to, yet inextricable from, modernity’s processes of rationalization and disenchantment. This dissertation argues that while the experience of the uncanny is irreducible, the specific content of UFO abduction narratives, fantastic conspiracy theories and stories about uncanny synchronicities draws on narrative fragments from a range of social memories. The dissertation looks closely at the poetics of stories to trace the ways in which disturbing cultural narratives and images are condensed and intensified in the uncanny. I argue that the intertextual parallels of various social memories are foregrounded in

uncanny stories, and that the uncanny thereby reveals a popular theory of power in contemporary life. Among other themes that emerge in the uncanny, the dissertation looks at ambivalent and naturalized expressions of American class, and the tropes of mobility and paralysis as part of a larger “structure of feeling.” I situate UFO abduction narratives in relation to the foundational American genre of Indian captivity narratives and discuss the ideas of captivity and abduction as open-ended tropes. I draw on stories both from texts that circulate in popular culture and from stories I heard during fieldwork in a UFO experiencers’ support group in Austin, Texas, and as a worker at a UFO-themed café in Rachel, Nevada, a former mining town next to the Nevada nuclear test site and the secret military base known as Area 51. This area has spawned conspiracy theories and rumors of UFOs, and I look at how uncanny stories there, and in Texas, interact with the spoken and implicit stories of ordinary life.

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## **The Flight of the Ordinary: Introduction**

This dissertation follows the leaps and boundaries of UFO narratives, conspiracy theories, captivity narratives, ghost stories, and little tales of everyday life. Fantastic stories, like ordinary personal memories, arise amid larger memories and experiences in America. But these larger narratives -- of class, loss, gender and colonization, and of the body's unmoored location in a world of accelerated technological change -- are often left unspoken, the contours of their landscapes only partially visible from where we stand on the ground. Most of all, then, this dissertation follows the ways in which historical trauma and unresolved memory can become lodged in the bright, broken bits of stories about fantastic things.

Many of the stories I think with were told to me directly, either one-on-one or in a group. Others are items of public culture, from mass market popular and academic theoretical books, radio, movies, newspapers and TV news, and the World Wide Web. These are "publicly available signs" that circulate through social space, and there are many ways that their textual flows can be tracked, critiqued and analyzed. In this dissertation I try to follow a bit of semiotic movement that has always been irresistible to me -- that ineffable leg of the semiotic journey where the public sign is internalized, and then reproduced as another sign, or another story -- one that's stained with other signs from the inner place it's been (Urban 1996)<sup>1</sup>. For public culture moves between people and through social space; but it also moves quietly from the foreground to the background of our awareness, where texts -- despite the finished boundaries of their circulating forms -- can continue morphing, their bindings opening up again to cross-

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<sup>1</sup> Urban (1996) makes an analogy between the childhood game of "telephone" and the circulation of discourse, in which material is often transformed in the course of its passages.

pollinate. And from that cross-pollination, stories can emerge whose genealogies are not always immediately apparent, and can only be traced backwards from the trails they leave in discourse. This level of cultural circulation lends itself readily to the production of metaculture (Urban 2001), intertextuality (see Bauman and Briggs 1992), and -- as I explore here -- the uncanny.

Some stories that I tell here are from hundreds of years ago, and some from half a century ago; but the ones I heard orally, from people I knew personally, were told (or re-told) at some point during a long stretch of the last decade, from 1992 through 1998. When I think of that period now, it seems like a strange eye in a hurricane. The Gulf War was over, and the events of the next war against Iraq were brewing. The events that began in 2001 in this country – the World Trade Centers crashing down and burning, the mysterious anthrax scares, the “code orange” days, the arguments for public safety through the erasure of civil liberties – all this was still in the future. Yet in many ways, these things were lurking in the uncanny talk that mushroomed in the period between the two American wars in the Middle East.

To remember a sense of the public feeling of the beginnings of that time frame in America, you might think of it as the first year of the Clinton administration (and ending, in 1998, at the height of the Monica Lewinsky scandal.) In 1992, *The X-Files* had not yet appeared on television. David Koresh was not yet a familiar name. There were still yellow ribbons hanging raggedly in some trees, leftovers from the Gulf War. The extent of the anti-government, conspiratorial discourses mushrooming in the country were not, in general, a topic of mainstream knowledge. The country was in a recession. By 1998 there was a boom. But for many people, talk of booms and busts did not necessarily make a big difference, only to the way they thought of themselves in relation to master narratives of class mobility.

Beginning in the late 1980s there was also a boom in UFO discourses. And in 1992, to those who believed in them, or who just cared intensely about whether or not they were *real*, there was an awareness that UFOs were considered to be a strange and marginal passion, a stigmatized, trivialized discourse, linked to "the tabloids" as a code for the habitus of an imaginary base of uneducated, lower-class readers. UFOs were like the fat Elvis. In Austin, Texas, there were people whose intellectual and social lives revolved around the quest to make UFOs acceptable -- as they put it, "mainstream" -- both in everyday discourse and as a subject for investigation in authoritatively recognized venues of science, not just "Ufology" (see Dean 1998). But at the same time, in the same city, there were other people passionately organizing their lives around UFOs, who felt there was something meaningful in their marginality. For them, the fact that most people *didn't get it* was part of the point.

Beginning in 1992, and continuing until 1995, I was part of a group that at first was called the Austin UFO Abductee Support Group and soon after changed to the UFO Experiencers' Support Group, to accommodate a wider range of the uncanny, unexplained memories told by people who, drawn to the idea of UFOs, were showing up at meetings advertised in the newspaper. I was led to the Experiencers through the Austin chapter of its parent group, the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON), an international organization whose mission was to make UFOs a credible topic of scientific investigation. There was both overlap and contention between the two groups, and The Experiencers' Support Group was my home base in the Austin UFO worlds. Modeled on Alcoholics Anonymous, it started as a formal, therapeutic and confessional forum for telling uncanny stories, meeting in public libraries and municipal spaces. Quickly it became a group of friends who "supported," intellectually stimulated and just hung out with each other, mostly at each others' homes, always telling stories, stories, stories -- about UFOs, aliens,

and more, all the weird stuff that just happens to you, the strange little “apertures in the ordinary” (Harding 1987) that no one talks about out there in the big, weird, wide open world. The more you prime yourself towards those apertures, the wider they grow, and more and more weird stuff gets in. Any of it was fit for talk in the Experiencers' group. For a few months in 1997 and in 1998, after I'd moved away from Austin, I participated in another community made up of many uncanny storytellers. That was in Rachel, Nevada, a rural hamlet located on the border of the vast military-industrial complex of Nellis Air Force Bombing and Gunnery Range and the Nevada Test Site, and the secret military base called Groom Lake, or Area 51. This place is literally an enormous secret - - it is four million acres of unacknowledged bomb range (Patton 1998:3). Its 4,742 miles of restricted airspace (ibid.) is known as Dreamland; and in fact the secret was a dream of the Cold War come to life in the desert, a hugely funded, technological dreamspace of the Atomic Energy Commission, the Department of Energy and the U.S. military in conjunction with private contractors like Wackenhut and Lockheed. This is the place that produced covert aircraft like the Stealth and the U2 during the Cold War, the place that supposedly built the fabled Mach 6 speed plane Aurora, which is said both to be real and not to exist. It's connected to the Nevada Test Site and the nuclear detonations that occurred for decades there. Local people in the area still talk about seeing the buildings set up around the test site, and seeing their ruins.

The existence of Area 51 was for years flatly denied by the Federal government ; in the mid 1990s, there was a vaguely-worded admission that highly classified security activities and tests were conducted in this area, although the name Area 51 was still not used in an official way. The borders of this vast forbidden land are vague, since it was not supposed to be there to begin with. (But in Rachel, everyone could see a picture of the secret base by looking at a satellite photo taken by the Russians, hanging up in the

Area 51 Research Center, which is located in a bright yellow trailer filled with books, pamphlets, and maps -- and it was a great source of irony, for anyone who cared enough about these things to look at it, that for Americans to photograph the secret land is illegal, when a weapons disclosure treaty allowed Russia to do so.) In the parched desert land of dry lakes and prickly Joshua trees, the secret place became fertile ground for the uncanny, for conspiracy theories and rumors about otherworldly things. I came to Rachel originally because of the UFO stories I'd heard about this place, but once there, I was struck far more vividly by the restless interplay of uncanny and ordinary stories, and the ways in which their proximity expressed a particular blend of desire and nostalgia, a mix of otherworldly displacement and the deep specificity of a place in the American West. The ways these discourses came together suggested other kinds of anxiety about colonization and the earth, secrecy and theft, nature and loss, and the vulnerable boundaries of the human body.

By the middle of the 1990s, the image of the alien had exploded in popular culture. Suddenly UFOs and aliens were everywhere (see Dean 1998). Some of those who had been at the center of the UFO groups drifted away to join storytelling worlds that formed around other, still more marginal discourses. For some of the people I knew in Austin in the early 1990s, the events that happened at David Koresh's compound in Waco in 1993 were a traumatic turning point, compressing the way they thought about America and what they called the *powers that be* with a kind of sudden click that made everything, as they put it, *just come together*. The government was killing people who did not believe *the party line*. *They* could come and do it to anyone who wanted to live the way they saw fit. Even worse, the media was on *their* side. Koresh was demonized, the government too easily let off the hook. The day of the fire in Waco, Carla, the leader

of the Austin UFO group called me in sorrow and rage. I had absorbed the news about Koresh stockpiling weapons, and to some extent, that day, I suppose I had accepted the media analysis that this was a tragedy rather than a crime (although soon afterwards I came to agree with Carla about the criminality of the murders there). *What do you think! What do you think?* she demanded, in a slow voice of controlled, quavering emotion, testing me, testing my place on an important side of an invisible line. I did not yet know what I thought. *What is a cult? A cult is a culture. A cult is a culture that THEY don't like,* she said. *We are supposed to have religious freedom in this country. It's a lie.* It was the beginning of a terrible revelation: unseen powers, consortiums of the media, the government and covert groups of the rich, elite and powerful, were testing the American people. They used the story of Koresh's child sexual abuse to play on easy American sentiment. The Waco compound was a lethal experiment they conducted on ordinary, marginal people, to see what they could get away with. And they did get away with it. To Carla, and to many other people who thought like her, a war had been declared. And her way of seeing and saying it – *a cult is a culture* -- was a kind of poetic rhetoric that carried a weight of its own, an unassailable truth about the unseen paradigmatic structure of things, glimpsed through language. She practically hung up on me in a frustrated rage.

By the time of the Waco horror I had heard a lot of talk about Area 51 (and the next year, an article about the secret base and its professional muckraker, Glen Campbell, even appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*). But I had heard only vaguely of the town that was next to it, Rachel. I had seen a blurry picture of the local café in a UFO magazine. The café was called the Little A'Le'Inn, and it was said that aliens came in there from Area 51 and sat at the bar. The owners, Pat and Joe Travis, smiled in the smudged, black and white photo on the magazine's cheap newsprint. Though I didn't

know it, Joe believed in many of the same things that Carla did. They were both charismatic storytellers with abandoned Southern Baptist origins, driven by the designs they saw -- vast architectures of conspiracy, hidden webs of the powers that be. Like Carla, Joe had always just felt that something was wrong. And one day for him too, it all *clicked*, it all *came together*, in a plot by the powers that be. But although they had both come from poor backgrounds, Joe was now making money at his café. He owned his own mobile home and had bought land. He was in a stable third marriage. Carla, a temp worker who had been married eight times, had nothing permanent but her convictions, her fierce intellect, and her ability to meet new people who, for a while, formed a world with her, based on a feeling of *something more*.

In 1987, the gothic fantasy fiction writer Whitley Streiber had published *Communion*, a first person memoir of his terrifying alien abduction experiences. People I met throughout the 1990s, both in Texas and in Nevada (as well as elsewhere in the country) told about the impact of seeing the book's cover, the now-familiar face of the little gray alien with its enormous, terrifying black eyes. People said the book made them remember things they had already known and forgotten. The image, the idea, the word, the story -- *abduction* -- it struck a chord. It seemed so true, so instinctively, uncannily right. Many people felt a *click* there, too, an organizing convergence of the vague, ominous sense that something just wasn't right. The idea of abduction by an alien race just seemed like it must be what had happened to them. It just hit them, (rather the same way that people who have been sexually abused sometimes remember their experiences suddenly after hearing a key trigger.) It somehow explained the way things were -- the idea of a power beyond what you could see, a force that inscripted your body and tracked your movements, and erased your memory, and did things to your reproductive

organs...it just made *sense*, it just fit in with the feeling they'd already been having. Some people acted on this feeling and underwent hypnosis with therapists sympathetic to the abduction experience, to see if they might unearth a whole memory. Many people have, through hypnosis, recalled alien abduction. Many others remain in the space where the haunting feeling of abduction brings together a nagging, familiar sense of something that was already there.

You could say all that in different words -- (perhaps, now, in words that make that same kind of intuitive sense to *me*.) Another way of describing an image or idea that seems to organize a whole range of feelings and social experiences, that appears in stories of different kinds and links them together, that makes a pattern out of things you never before knew how to pull together, is to call it a trope. The more I heard over the years, the more it seemed clear that *abduction* was a big, big trope. But it was only half the trope. The other half of abduction was the release, the coming through it to the other side.

The questions, though, remained. What was abducted from a person, and who was doing it? What experience of power were people describing that fit so well with stories of uncanny forces? And why did you forget your captivity, just to remember it all again in something you thought might be a dream?

Why did things just feel so inexplicably *wrong* anyway, and why did uncanny stories and conspiracy theories seem to give those vague things such an affecting narrative and poetic voice?

The book *Abduction* was published in 1994 by John Mack, a Harvard psychiatrist who worked with UFO abductees and did not dismiss the reality of their experiences out

of hand. Mack was respectful of his patients, he told their stories faithfully, marveled at the similarities between them, and did not explain the similarities away. He said the people were not insane. He said the way truth was figured by official, elite perspectives was out of touch with truth on the ground, where a new paradigm was taking shape, an ability to transcend the paradox of material and imagined reals. He left the material reality of abduction aside, instead emphasizing how abduction experiences could be turned to new perspectives and spiritual growth. Because of Mack's academic and writerly credentials (he had previously won a Pulitzer for a biography of Laurence of Arabia) the book generated a different kind of attention than UFO books usually did. In its wake, normal, middle-class looking people who said they had remembered being abducted by aliens were appearing on talk shows on every television station. These shows were sometimes watched together, by the friends in both Austin UFO groups. Some people were thrilled that abduction was finally getting media attention. Some wanted to look at UFOs as hard science – “nuts and bolts” people, as they were called in UFO worlds.

Others, like Carla, became even more suspicious the more she saw UFOs on primetime. She liked John Mack's book very much. But *they* were beginning to incorporate the margins. As time went on the UFO thing was everywhere on TV, *the X-Files* were here, there were UFO movies coming out all the time. She could smell hegemony from farther away than anyone I had ever met. Soon she had left the UFO Experiencers group and joined another group -- a group that identified with the militia movement (though I don't think they had weapons) called the Constitutional Study Group. She'd become politicized in a different way. She was no longer talking so fervently about UFOs, inner dimensions or unusual spiritual experiences, but more and more about the New World Order, the threat of world wide socialism, and the plots that

global networks of Jews were secretly cooking up with Janet Reno, the Trilateral Commission, and wealthy powers that be across the brutalized body of the world. While she used to make structural charts about different ways of being gendered – according to her, there were male men, female men, male women and female women – now she made structures about the evil Jews who were taking over the world versus the “Semitic” Jews, who were not so bad. I wasn’t sure what kind she thought I was. The plot was the work of the rich, but it was socialism -- not so much because of any economic plan so much as because they would take away your individuality, your freedom. A global government was already in place. Signs were still to be discovered and deciphered everywhere; but they were no longer signs about the presence of other beings, no longer messages about her inner spirit, in all its wounds and glories. She had always had a huge, universalizing impulse, a intellectual style of making connections -- reading signs of herself outward into messages that more and more people were becoming enlightened, that things were going to change. She, like many other people in the UFO and conspiracy worlds, had always felt that the earth was getting ready for a change, earth -shaking disaster was coming like a day of revelation, with the earth just literally shaking us off her back. But now the signs were hints about the plans of the powers that be. The change coming in the world grew more and more ominous and planned. It would not benefit the earth. *They* were related to Satan. The new world that people I knew had been dreaming into existence was becoming the New World Order and the day it arrived would be hell.

Many people do end their worlds, then drift off to a new one. Carla did this, as she often had before in her life before, through eight marriages, an estranged child, temp jobs and many, many moves from state to state, city to city. The little UFO group passed into the hands of a bright, intense, self-educated young man named Lenny with a keenly

organized, passionate take on every bit of literature he had ever seen on the topic of the paranormal. Carla and I continued to call and email for years about *what was going on* in the world as she saw it, until our friendship drifted too, and one day it was clear that we were no longer in touch. But by then I had listened to stories in Nevada, the land of drifters. That was where I had realized that drift is part of the story.

To be precise, drift is half of the story. If drift is half, the other half is home. Did you think things always had only two halves? Here there are so many, piling up into an enormous, multi-faceted whole. There is mobility, across the structure from paralysis. There is the centripetal force of containment, and there is the centrifugal force of flight. There is abduction and release; there is captivity and restoration. There is the captive memory of amnesia and the released memory of recollection. All these are connected expressions of a larger two-part trope, a broad figure that includes all of these dimensions of the centripetal and the centrifugal. It forms what I'm going to call in the following pages a dialectical trope. I locate the dialectical trope in each section of the dissertation in a different way. It appears in various forms, and it is shot through with different sentiments. Containment can be cozy or it can be a trap. So can home. The trope's repetition organizes an amorphous and ambivalent structure of feeling, and it links different stories and memories together, corralling them into a genre. In each section you will see the trope in various incarnations, always putting its structural designs on things that ultimately resist any final *containment*.

There are some things that stay hidden. But inside the containment of a hidden space, inside the captivity of amnesia and repression, castoff things continue to move, to join up, to amass their abducted forces. As Freud said, the repressed part of

consciousness is not just an inert dumping ground, but is a force that exerts attraction, pulling other things into its space, making them part of the repressed underground story. And that, as Freud again said elsewhere, is also what leads to the uncanny. I'll go into this in more detail later. But first I think you have to look at what might be in that room, what got in there to begin with, even if now (as Freud said too) perhaps the original repressed memory is gone forever, and what remains repressed is what was pulled down there afterwards, *because it was like the original memory*, because of the association, although the original thing has long since vanished. What remains potentially recoverable is sometimes just the mimetic sign, the anxious signifier of a referent that is gone. And in conspiracy theory, that mimetic sign goes searching madly for the thing that it once signified.

But I will make a venture as to some of what is half-repressed in the stories I'm going to tell. Though it is never a one-to-one kind of symbol, the stories that point to a forgotten something suggest what that something might be. One thing down there in the basement, in the nuclear waste dump, is the experience of power in modernity, and the memories of social wounds that have never healed. There are stories of class and its invisible, unmarked limitations, and stories of race and gender, and the ways that things didn't go the way they should have. There are stories of nuclear fear. There are stories of the federal government's mid-20th century experiments on poor people, giving children plutonium-laced cereal, feeding them radioactive snacks after luring them to join the Science Club at school, and giving pregnant hospitalized women plutonium in what was said to be vitamins (see Welsome 1999). There are images of the body's containment in what feel like strange medical developments, the cloning, the surrogate pregnancies of poor women for rich. There are images of concentration camps. There

are images of slaves in America, and centuries of colonial genocide of Native American people, in a quick afterimage that flashes in the cowboy and Indian movie that you went to as a kid in Texas fifty years ago, when for a second you rooted for the wrong side, and didn't register anything except a feeling of *something wrong*... Linked up with the variable infinite experience of class, race, gender and loss, the likenesses, resemblances, and iconicities of these stories about power become the subject of the uncanny story, often focused on something called *the powers that be*. The original stories of historical trauma don't always make it up for air. (If they did, they would no longer haunt). Instead, the story becomes the uncanny parallels between the unseen originals –and that is something to notice too, because it is a story of power of its own. And that, in fact, is the object of this dissertation.

This dissertation is not an ethnography in the traditional sense, because the object of my study does not emerge in a single, unified place. How should ethnographies construct an image of their object? The inherent partiality of social interactions are traditionally figured as elements of a singular entity -- a whole predicated on the metaphor of the ethnography's own textual unity (Thornton 1988). In other words, the structure of the ethnographic text rhetorically suggests the shape of its imagined object. Many contemporary ethnographers are developing more contingent, changing and multiple objects than "that complex whole" (Tylor 1881) of a bounded, unified set of parts (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). The "senses of place" that are still deeply -- ambivalently -- felt in people's lives and various places are, to be sure, one of the major themes I explore (see Feld and Basso 1996). But since this dissertation is about neither a unified American subculture nor a folklorically marked-off genre or discourse, the structure of the dissertation mimetically performs the multiple, fragmentary but parallelistic nature of the sometimes elusive object I want to track. My multiple focus on

contemporary American imaginaries does not follow not a unified culture or place, but rather the intertextual nature of social and poetic processes, in genres of uncanny memory, and fantastic prophecy and everyday life. As Debhora Battaglia (n.d.) puts it:

...any anthropological project that orients itself to local “models of and models for” the social actions of coherent cultures and bounded societies – Clifford Geertz’s profound formulation - is unlikely to hold for the subjectivities we encounter [in ethnographies of extraterrestrial discourse cultures]. For theirs is a fluid sociality of *contact consciousness in an alien key*, of actors coming together in social *moments*, drawn to alien themes and special interests – say, conspiracy theories from “The X-Files” television series, or science futurism, or abduction discourse, or places for welcoming ET. Taken together, such sites of social action do not require the encompassing value of a coherent cultural system of belief in order to do the work subjects ask of them. Such subjects abide, suffer, and thrive in a historically contingent sociality, orienting themselves to the flickering light of mortal prophets, social gatherings of shifting membership, and an eclectic range of material touchstones of ET culture.

To stake out the boundaries of a unified discursive or cultural object would be false to the inherently obscure object of uncanny fascination: false to its unfinalized quality; and to the way it is both produced by stories, and exceeds them. Like the more "popular" storytellers, I circle around the object of the uncanny, allowing for its uneasy weight, and for its power as something ineffable -- or more precisely, as something that is glimpsed only through multiple effects, appearing in narrative form. In fact a multiplicity of verbal and image forms, and the relations that build up between them, *is* the social object of the uncanny.

What I am trying to write about is not a bounded place or a singular genre, but rather the way that hard-to-name structures of feeling become formalized, aestheticized, and meaningful through narrative and poetic utterances. Still, as in a more traditional

folkloric study, the object here is still something that I observed and helped people to make. Like most art forms, it is expressive, and it produces feeling, sociability, meaning, and the embodied, patterned sense of aesthetic rightness that Feld (1994) calls "groove." But the thing that people make, here, is not one story, myth or poem form. Instead it is the intertextualing, poetic process of recognizing the resemblances and patterns of other stories, and using that *chime* to cast a new story. And the impact of these chimes, the strange rhyme they feel down to their feet, sometimes arise from the hidden, the forgotten, the unspoken and the repressed. As I'll explain, this is what makes the uncanny, and it is what gives them, for the people here, a particularly urgent feeling. My dissertation therefore engages various processes of co-construction between such categories as interior life and public sign, desire and hegemony, imagination and materiality, the real and the fabulous --concepts often naturalized and reified, but whose closure is always deferred by uncanny presences.

Although the object of the dissertation is a social/poetic process, however, it's derived largely from stories I heard and impressions I made over the course of ethnography, in all the complex blend of subjectivity and empiricism that entails. As far as I know, this is the only ethnography-based anthropological work that focuses largely on UFO experiences in America. This fact seems to be changing.<sup>2</sup> Following years of fieldwork in Brazil, Robin Sheriff (personal communication) sees American abduction narratives as part of the intensifying global narrative trend on topics such as organ and body part theft, stories that reflect the uncanny anxieties of global postmodernity. The political theorist Jodi Dean (1998) has written extensively on the ways in which UFO discourses reveal anxieties about truth, science and authority in postmodern popular

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<sup>2</sup> There are several anthropologists beginning promising projects in this area, and excellent some recent writing calls for anthropological attention to the topic of UFOs and abduction (Battaglia n.d., Sheriff n.d.).

culture. UFO beliefs have for decades been a topic in the study of religion and psychology (Jung 1953, Thompson 1991, Lewis 1995, Lieb 1998). And scholars taking a narrative-centered approach to folklore have seen UFOs as part of a long tradition of fairy and little-people lore (Bullard 1988), or legend (Degh 1977). The unfinalized quality of abduction and UFO experience is wonderfully reflected in the work of folklorists like Rojcewicz (1987, 1989) who tracks the Satanic quality of the UFO-related “man in black” figure, and Hufford 1977), who studies the nearly universal experience of the “old hag” sensation, in which a sleeping person is accosted by a supernatural being. For both Huffard and Rojcewicz , the indeterminate nature of these experiences offers a way to wrestle with paradigms of scholarly distance and immediate experience. This is what non-academics do, too, when they become saturated in UFO talk: theorize and deconstruct their ideas of experience, authority, and the real.

The dissertation is arranged into four chapters of various lengths. The first chapter is a theoretical discussion of my understanding of the uncanny as social and aesthetic entity. The second chapter locates UFO abduction narratives inside a larger history of an American narrative genre, the captivity narrative, and introduces the dialectical trope of captivity and freedom. The third chapter is an ethnographic, highly narrative-based exploration of uncanny and realist discourses in Rachel, Nevada, in which I attempt a mimetic production of the tropic resemblances and patterns that are present between different kinds of story in a specific place. The fourth chapter ethnographically explores the abductee support group in Austin, and again is a based on narratives that I listened to and recorded during my time with my friends in that group.

Unanswered questions arise in each chapter, questions that straddle both academic and ethno-philosophical genres. One might ask these questions in a variety of socially and intellectually situated ways, and while post modernism lets me read the fragmentation, contingency, and productiveness of signs, I also want to think about the traditionally stubborn mystery of "culture."<sup>3</sup>

How might it appear if *not* as "that" complex whole? How does "it" circulate in its more inchoate and overlapping forms? Throughout my dissertation, an implicit idea of culture is shaped by a spectrum of influence. From Bakhtin, it takes as a given the utterance as irreducibly dialogic and always layered with the historical sediment of other utterance; from Benjamin it assumes the rationalized world as a source of enchantment and the allegorical sign, with its split between signifier and signified, as the source of its own redemption. Without Foucault's theory of power as ubiquitous and thoroughly productive even of its own forms of protest, it would not have been possible to understand the incredibly similar idea of power's sourceless, multi-pronged ubiquity articulated in American uncanny ethnotheories. From Urban, there is the assumption of culture's core condition as one of continual movement, and its complex processes of replication and transformation as it passes between social beings, incarnated in the particular material vessels that allow for passage but also transcending them. From Feld, there is the sense of culture as related to style, in the ways that specific patternings of expression are socially experienced across multiple venues. From Stewart there is the sense of culture as textualized by its own producers, inseparable from narrative and poetics, and as something that can often be witnessed at its strangest in the most fleeting,

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<sup>3</sup>Some historically oriented anthropology argues against the culture concept because of the oppressive commodifying, reifying, folklorizing use that has been made of it by nation-states and intellectuals alike; here I'm trying to retain an idea of culture that is both self-aware of its pragmatic uses by powerful agents, and yet does not dismiss the kinds of processes which still fall under its name.

random and ordinary moments. From all these theorists there is the sense of meaning's interdependence with form, pattern, style and the poetic.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the dissertation, I try to suggest how through story, the sinister, the traumatic, and the disintegrated sometimes recuperate vivid sociability and meaning. To try to relay this impression, at times I present objective pieces of discourse that I picked up intact as they once agitated the air. These clearly bounded stories are marked as formal narratives, either through emphasis of their poetic form or by use of quotations. At other times, my voice will open up to a play of reported speech, in a kind of ethnographic version of poetic ventriloquism (S. Stewart 1995) or a form of "contaminated critique" (K. Stewart 1991). As Kathleen Stewart has described her own ethnography, my style here "at times...performs a sharp disjuncture between discourses -- mine and theirs...at other times it attempts a hybridization" (1996:40). At these times, I try to represent the style of other people as it lives inside my own voice, presenting their words as reported speech inside a story I myself am telling -- erasing neither of us, opening up my memory and interpretation to their words, and compressing us both into the imaginative and hermeneutic zone which, through my writing, we share.

And so, this dissertation sometimes mimics the way uncanny stories grow powerful: through the sense of truth that accumulates out of built-up, intertextual parallelism. The voices here slip between abstract theory and concrete image; for the stories themselves *are* theories, dramatic voicings of epistemological positions. And so my own style of representation moves between a performative mimesis of other peoples'

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<sup>4</sup> This last idea of culture, of course, has a particularly enduring legacy in anthropology, from Boas, Benedict, and Bateson on.

voices, and more clearly bounded "theoretical" or "ethnographic" observations, as I try to saturate you here in the dense poetics that have saturated me.

To this end, I use several kinds of representation here, shifting between 1) objectively tape-recorded narratives (edited for brevity's sake at times, as indicated by ellipses) 2) my own separate, interpretive commentary in the voice of "theory" and 3) a kind of hybridized style which plays with the boundaries between my own stylistic voice and those of others, each co-infused with aspects of the other.

I want my "hybridized" voice to convey the powerful force of stories that might be too easily dismissed or rationalized by a more distanced kind of analysis. I want to suggest how seductive this narrative force is when you encounter it -- how good at spinning a discursive field that supports its own logics, and how well it can permeate the resistance of other systems. How else to reckon with its prolific growth in America? I don't want my own theoretical voice to clearly stand above the others, easily explaining, reducing (or even, as if often the case, confidently forgiving) their excesses and illogics, because such is not my experience of this discourse. Rather it was of being narratively and poetically infected, altered -- not as a full-fledged conversion, but as a destabilizing opening into other kinds of theories and other structures of imagination. My style here therefore performs the ethnographic experience of hybridization and partial permeation, as a way of dealing with the very real, often disturbing, seductive power of the discourses I present here.

# Chapter One: Theorizing the Uncanny: Conspiracy, Haunting and The Loss of Something Forgotten <sup>5</sup>

## I. CONSPIRACY THEORY

I wonder. What is the difference between a “conspiracy” and a “conspiracy theory?” Take two stories -- two plots -- about other people’s plotting. One story arises transparently from the ominous minds of its authors, the collaborators who have crafted this plot in the dark. This plot is uncovered by authoritative readers, who unearth it like pot shards which just need to be fitted together. These trusted readers piece the plot together to reveal the intention and wholeness in the design. It is just a matter of time until that design will be implemented in the world. That is the story we tell about “conspiracy.”

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<sup>5</sup> This chapter goes back and forth between “stories” and “theories” to illustrate my understanding of the social/poetic life of the uncanny. I begin with a few assumptions: First, that uncanny stories contain their own form of theory. Second, that I know more when I draw on different schools of theory and make use of them as makes sense: the so-called “ethnotheory” of story, and the more clearly marked “theory” from academic genres -- literary, anthropological and psychoanalytic theory. Third, that my own voice in writing is always an open and mimetic instrument; so while some of my prose will be mimetic of academic theoretical and analytic conventions, other areas of my prose will follow uncanny narrative conventions that I hear in ethnographic contexts. This double style performs the way anthropologists always learn, from both sides of their education – the academic and the ethnographic. Furthermore, since my ethnographic and academic worlds share the same Euroamerican intellectual and historical heritage, they also produce overlapping fields of meaning -- overlaps that would be too easily obscured by focusing only on the differences generated by their vernacular versus formal origins. In this chapter, as in the rest of the dissertation, I let different genres play off each other to arrive at my own theoretical argument about the uncanny. My own theory – my “thesis”-- of the uncanny is a hybrid of both levels of influences, and I try to share it both by telling stories, and by explaining it in straightforward academic theoretical prose. The theory of what I call the social uncanny, as I develop it here, will inform the rest of the dissertation. In the first half of the chapter, I think about conspiracy theory and the meanings of haunting. Towards the middle, I argue for a social and poetic theory of the uncanny that can be used as an entry into different kinds of ethnographic narrative worlds. At the end of the chapter, I closely analyze two uncanny personal memories (one from fieldwork in Nevada, and one from Texas). I look at them in light of two different themes that are important to my ideas of the uncanny -- the poetics of repetition, and the trope of paralysis – shot through, at each point, with the unspoken, infinitely varied containments of power and class.

The “conspiracy theory” is a plot too, but it is a contingent story, always still being written by its readers. It is a half-baked story rising against the walls of its own cramped space. It can never be fully pieced together. Each shard of the plot suggests another story. It will never happen; or perhaps it is happening right now, even as the “theorists” receive its cryptic and prophetic signs. Who has made this magnificent, terrible, unending plot? Why can they never be found?

The “real” conspiracy is no theory, sir! It is real! It is dangerous and as damning to the conspirators as a stash of parts that could be used to make into bombs. The real conspiracy is a blueprint that already casts the shadow of an unbuilt house. It is a continuous, transparent relation between authors, agency, talk and action -- the crime-beyond-the-talk that will surely occur if the conspiracy is not found out in the nick of time. The talk, the authorship, leads directly to action.

But a conspiracy *theory*? What is that? Here the proof is never proof enough, the evidence is just another part of the story, the agent’s face is never revealed, the plot is a never-ending allegory into other half-remembered stories and the authors are the same ones who are piecing it together from overwritten signs. The authors are the ones yelling “author, author!” into the dark, not knowing it’s they who have created the drama in a kind of blind bricolage, out of the things they had at hand. Or maybe not, perhaps they have not dreamed it all themselves. Maybe they really are on to something. Who are we to say? There’s always a shadow of a doubt, and sometimes prophecies come true.

In any case, conspiracy theorists sometimes stop theorizing long enough to make new plots, which are actual “conspiracies.” Which is what happened in June 1996, for example, on Long Island, New York, when three men -- “conspiracy theorists” -- were busted for plotting to murder several local Republican county officials by radioactive poisoning, then burn down and take over their headquarters. The conspirators stole

radium, storing it up in kitchen canisters, planning to sneak it into the local officials' toothpaste tubes, to smear it by night on their car doors, and to put in into their ventilators. They would contaminate the prophetic places the victims would touch so they'd die a slow death of cancer. The author of this plot was a guy named John Ford, a former clerk with the Suffolk county courts who had been retired at half pension for chronic absenteeism, a man who had tried to be a rising star but petered out, a one-time semi-insider who had once run for a local committee office himself and didn't win.

John Ford was a middle-aged man who, like most anti-social plotters in this tale type, lived with his mother; he lived with his mother until she herself died the year before of cancer, as news reports of this weird story were quick pointed out. The loss created by the mother's cancer, the future plot to create cancer in another...here was an inkling of iconicity, although it was immediately rounded off to a psychological explanation: it must have been that her cancer death sent John Ford, they say, off his rocker and around the bend. He went crazily into that space which is comfortably represented as beyond social significance – the different, seemingly asocial space of a “loner. “

Local papers reported on the story frequently throughout that June, accumulating details of colorful American strangeness. John Ford, despite his loner status, was the president of the Long Island UFO Association. He was balding and slicked back his scant dark hair like a 50's style member of the John Birch Society, to whose magazine he did in fact subscribe. He had many illegal guns. He lived on the ur hidden-psycho street of small, tidy houses. He left the floodlights to his house on day and night – (i.e., he was paranoid). John Ford believed the government was covering up evidence of alien spaceship crashes. He began to seem fanatical even to the Long Island UFO Network. They wanted little to do with him after he showed them a photograph he'd taken of a crashed UFO in flames, which they felt was a picture of burning aluminum foil. But the

Long Island Pine Barrens were on fire. John Ford saw a downed UFO in the blaze. Aliens had set the brush fires. Aliens would consume Long Island in fire. No one would listen. The government was trying to hide it, but he knew that they knew that he knew. And he knew they were going to kill him. So, he was going to kill the government; he was going to eradicate the powers that be, in the available form they took -- local suburban councilmen. Just as the aliens had set fire to his turf, he would burn the house of power with his own arson. Just as power had invisibly injured him, he would dose its local incarnations with the invisible power of radium.

Ford hired two friends from the Long Island UFO Association: Joseph Mazzuchelli, a convicted petty burglar and local tattooed character, and Edward Zabo, an electrical inspector for the Defense Department. Zabo stole the radium, perhaps from his job at the military contractor Northrup Grumman. And Mazzuchelli tried to hire others to help in their task. The three became simultaneous heroes and writers of their own plot, with Ford the lead author.

It was another example in the growing genre of petty anti-government madness that was spreading in the 1990s. Now, here there is another story: the one about the bizarre-but-dangerous little guy. (Kathleen Stewart has called this narrativized figure “the little man with the big head”[personal communication]). This story is finalized in quick strokes, through signs that point to social class as a habitus, without having to name it. The quick strokes of Ford’s portrait evoke that vaguely shameful, familiar but *in-between* class position whose liminal image presents neither the folk rootedness of traditional laboring bodies, nor the authority of the elite. Rather it suggests a kind of banal desperation -- the embarrassment of striving for cultural authority without born-to-privilege ease. Here are stereotyped figures, real but also storied, who throughout the 1990s, break out of pathetic, classed hyper-correction into horrors of excess: uniformed

postal workers who snap and rampage; the secretary who drowns her toddlers in a wild hope of marrying the rich boss and erasing the life she'd begun; or UFO-believing, conspiracy-theorizing, murder-by-radium plotters. This story evokes a double image: the villain is at once a purely individual deviant, and a typed figure of liminal class *ressentiment*. He is both passé, and futuristic-fascist, with his hoarded guns, and his magazines that still rant anachronistically about Communist plots, and still run vilifying photos of the Rosenbergs dug up from God knows where. Here the Constitution is read as a fundamentalist text and the rights of the citizen are clung to like a raft in a paranoid dream of drowning.

But the social aspect in this story suggest not paranoia so much as a kind of narrative schizophrenia; a split, that is, between the promise and the actual package, between the master narrative and the life you somehow got. It's a ghost story of lost potential that rides the back of the real, in the ungraspable slippings and losses of a life. Here is a story of eccentrics who are not, in fact, beyond the margins of anything at all -- John Ford, for instance, strove and dreamed and tried to run for office before he sank back down, and Ed Zabo worked a low-level job for the Defense Department -- but, from half-inside, their breakdowns mark points of structural implosion.

As always in the uncanny, the foundation of the real is here a shifting ground. What's *real* is the conspiracy theory's dense figuring towards meaningfulness, among blanched-out histories and forgotten memories. These stories don't explain anything. They crack the sky into vertigo, then wedge themselves into that crack and shape it with the resonance of other stories.

On the sliding American uncanny landscape, the real is not what you can finally prove but what you *just know* -- that aliens are burning the world in fire. Or that you are an alien yourself, or a hybrid. Or that you have a child out there somewhere and THEY it

ripped from your body. THEY are tracking you with an implant in your brain. THEY stole your eggs and sperm. THEY leave their signs in body scars that have no ordinary source, in half-memories that won't close in on solid referents, in spreading terrors of invasion. One day you are pregnant, the next day that baby is just *gone*. THEY stole it. THEY take you out of bed while you're still sleeping. They put foreign things inside you -- embryos and half-born thoughts -- then rob them back. We can't see them but do they see us, they know where *we* are at every minute of every day.

And I don't know *what's going on*, says Carla, but I know it is not right. *They* don't care about *human rights*.

These accounts of the body's uncanny invasion and the earth's unnatural violation open into more stories, conspiracy theories perhaps, which also unfold around omniscience and defilement. We are being colonized. And the Government knows *what's going on*. The Government is covering it up. A few months before the group suicide of Heaven's Gate, which took Hale-Bopp comet as a sign of the impending end of the world, people across the country were calling a late night uncanny radio show to say: A comet is heading straight for us, and behind that comet is a terrible thing four times the size of our planet, a thing made of metal and mud and guided by intelligent eyes. It will swallow us up, and THEY KNOW, their scientists have the data in secret logs. And THEY have underground bases filled with crashed ships. THEY make deals with the aliens. THEY offered us up as guinea pigs, THEY are watching and THEY KNOW -- until the alien THEY and the Government THEY converge into an allegorically felt figure of unseen power and agency, an overwritten, unfinalized THEY who invade and track ordinary experience from oblique, omniscient heights.

Amid the subtle hegemonies of everyday life, this narrativized trope of a vast, cosmic-political THEY fingers a nerve. Throughout the 1990s, it picked up steam,

materializing in dreams that people told each other in awe, and new TV shows like *The X Files*. It hovered in the peripheral vision of ordinary experience. In everyday life, THEY haunt you amid talk of endless temp jobs and jobs that weren't supposed to be temporary, distant families and lost faith. The trope of THEY insinuates itself into inexplicable sensations of rip-off and displacement. The uncanny late night radio show, hosted by Art Bell from his home in "the Nevada desert," flourished and became a hit. Everyone knew his talk about the escalating signs of apocalypse, what he called "the quickening." When you turned on his show, THEY were outed in the voices of 4 a.m. insomniacs home from the night shift and bursting with elaborate theories of the universe and signs of the world's destruction<sup>6</sup>.

THEY *know* the earth is whispering its last breath under radiation and piles of trash. Look around. Listen to the news! the callers say, hearing their voice go out across a nation. You know we are in the midst of plagues. You know THEY are hoarding secret piles of bubonic plague to spread on the population. It's time to prepare. You know the frogs are deformed, born without legs, or with extra legs that are withered and useless, phantom limbs that show what's gone. They're crawling now from the cleanest headwaters. I heard the pelicans are dying, because the fish they eat are the living dead; the fish look pregnant but no, their bellies are swollen with *rot*. I heard the manatees are going, and the honeybees are dying out too, and soon the other insects will follow; and there will be no more food. And we will all starve on a bare earth littered with the skeletons of buildings and empty freeways. The invasion is sneaking in the borders of the earth and penetrating the margins of the body with clinical ease. And THEY are

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<sup>6</sup> For more detailed analysis on apocalyptic thought in American culture, see, for example, Boyer 1992; O'Leary 1994; Dellamora 1995.

watching, screwing it all and protecting themselves, they are building themselves mansions and resorts underground where they will be safe, and hiding the truth from us.

Carla was the leader of the abductee support group, til she got the feeling there was *more going on*. She packed up and left Austin on a sudden hunch, and joined a Constitutional Study Group. She started to *make connections*. She'd been getting restless and wary as the uncanny theories that had shaped her social and imaginative life were becoming increasingly incorporated by THEM. *The media* was taking it over and *something wasn't right*. The stories that everyone ignored or called crazy were now all over the damn TV, in shows called hip, a constructed subculture sponsored by prime-time advertisers. Just like with everything else, THEY were making the contingent seem to be *theirs*. THEY make it into pure *style*, she said, THEY get rid of the truth. THEY know what they're doing all right. It is part of the plan.

*Dear Susan*, she writes to me in 1996, *there is so much going on that you have to be careful. Are you sure you want to find this out? They are devious and brilliant and work through lies and deceit. They were back in Biblical times, they caused the fall in the garden. Their greatest accomplishment is to convince people that they do not exist. I think they've taken over the world monetary and political system. These are the Rockefellers and Rothschilds and others so hidden we don't know their names. The thugs in this world who push us tax-slaves around and make laws that only apply to us - not to them. And Henry Kissinger said: We can implement the New World Order when the people think there is an invasion from outside. THEY are using mind-control technology perfected through CIA programs...through TV, and movies -- in Independence Day notice how everyone comes together and obeys the government. Susan we are being set up for a fake extraterrestrial invasion. They will use the Blue Beam and other technologies to scare people to death and make them accept world-wide socialism.*

*World money will be issued and a global police force will enforce their orders. Yes, we really have been invaded, but since “they” are guiding the education system, the media and the field of psychiatry, they make the rules. Little people like me are discounted - I’m a crackpot. But this is what I think is really happening. Watch for a fake “invasion” sometime between now and 2002. The ones who aren’t fooled by it have places prepared for them in “collection centers” and new prisons all over...Honey this is scary stuff, are you sure you want to go any further?*

There are plot fragments here which leave trails, the ghosts of peripherally glimpsed effects of power and class, desire and loss. Like all ghost stories, these theories work by an urgent mimesis of shrouded things, shedding strange light upon that which is meant to be hidden.

What should I hear haunting me in the sometimes numbing, sometimes dizzying theories of John Ford? In the swirl between stories of the government hiding UFO crashes, or faking them? In alien invasions into the tender boundaries of bodies and minds and planets? In the dense, disturbing images of secret radium and contaminated bodies; or in Ford’s and Zabo’s failed attempt to mimic the cunning, invisible, pervasive power they thought was aimed at them?

What would it mean to listen to all of this, and to hear neither a private fantasy nor any single real story at its base, but rather to notice the fallout of many social memories, accumulating in unpredictable forms?

When you gaze back at the image of the omniscient eyeball, when you listen to the story of the watchful cosmic-political THEY, you hear an inchoate theory of something glimpsed and felt in the modern world. You hear a half-spoken, submerged experience of power as pervasive and structuring to the core -- a core that still protests, but in the language it is given.

## II. HAUNTING

Ghosts haunt us with the historical injustices of the past; their uncanny presences hold open social memories that seep into the present and disrupt its attempts at narrative closure. The uncanny denaturalizes the familiar, until the strange and the frightening lead back to what we already know, to what was meant to be completely forgotten. This is the social work ghosts do, rattling the chains of historical traumas that won't remain buried as they should, until *the real* itself becomes contested ground, in both its pasts and presences (Derrida 1994, Gordon 1997, Ivy 1995, Morrison 1988, Pemberton 1994). But in late 20<sup>th</sup> (and early 21<sup>st</sup> century) America, the ghost of memory often haunts through the *futuristic* figure of a UFO.

What happens when you listen to UFO talk ethnographically -- when the uncanny is shot through with the ordinary noise of life? Then you hear many kinds of stories, and silences, all filled with multiple, layered senses of being abducted or caught, and multiple dreams of release. These are stories filled with interconnecting imaginaries of injury and redemption. Some memories are branded clearly into narrativized awareness. Other memories are more like backgrounds or shadows that give depth and emotional weight to things visible on the surface. In all of them, you hear ghosts.

I have far fewer answers than questions: How do you let yourself know, in the theories and stories you are told, the weight of the past or the intimations of the future, and to take them seriously as signs (-- but as signs of what?) And how do you defer the will towards that referent long enough to will yourself instead "to follow ghosts...to follow where they lead, in the present, head turned backwards and forwards at the same time" (Gordon 1997:57)? It requires attention to the story itself; to "be willing to follow ghosts" as they appear in narrative is to follow the shades of the story. It's to place your

step inside its prints and “track along in its wake” (Stewart 1995) so that “the real” has a chance to crystallize not as an outside referent, but inside the story itself.

Mary Steedly (1994) talks about how the real crystallizes inside the uncanny story. She calls it “narrative experience...where lives are told and stories lived” (15). Here, material realities don’t vanish from fantastic experience, they do remain inside them. But to enter these stories you cannot reduce the fantastic imagination to a symbol of something else that is materially real, any more than you can reduce a “sacred significance bestowed upon worldly arenas” to a simple “cover for something else: status anxiety, the quest for control of one class by another, personal or collective neuroses, a reaction to the shocks and realities of new social and economic environments, or some other psychological or material concern” (Abzug 1994:viii). The otherworldly, the sacred, the fantastic, and the uncanny are a form of human experience with a real of their own. They can’t be cleared away in the light of sociological or psychological explanation. But at the same time, specific material and historical contingencies bleed in, and affect the forms which that human, always social, experience acquires.

What’s even harder to see is that it works both ways. The fantastic imagination resides in and helps to produce the ordinary realities of material life. (For Lacan, writes Zizek (1989:47) there is “always a hard kernel, a leftover which persists and cannot be reduced to a universal play of illusory mirroring. The difference between Lacan and “naive realism” is that for Lacan, *the only point at which we approach this hard kernel of the Real is indeed the dream...*It was only in the dream that we approached the fantasy framework which determines our activity, our mode of acting in reality itself.”)

How to see that just as politically and imaginatively pressing as the materially real are the lives that were never lived? Desire and hegemony run in what might be thought

of as the untold but instinctively known “ghost stories” of the self’s un-lived “potential” -- the just-glimpsed, alternate life narratives which, fed by ideologies of self-realization, hover always alongside the thwartings and wrong turns of the actual. Where the two stories crash there is absurdity or tragedy, and often a broken space that gives rise to the uncanny.

Roofers were working on the house and the one with a missing leg was progressively going more and more insane. All roofers are a little bit mad, my housemate says, and even when the sane one comes in the house for a drink of water he talks about his dreams of buying “invisible land,” going underground, to survive when this government shit hits the fan. But this one-legged roofer was really unraveling. It took days before I knew that, because at first his stories were the same as everyone’s in the UFO world. He’d seen the saucers in the desert, they spun into underground bases. He implied unspeakable dangers, he drew diagrams, charts and graphs. They were the same stories and the same kinds of drawings I knew from ordinary, sane people -- postal workers, single mothers, cooks, secretaries and tech workers at Sematech. Then he said his leg had been taken by “THEM,” -- government officials. He said he simply knew too much, and the leg was a warning. Next they’d take his life. He became aware of secret, lethal electronic codes, which he beeped into the telephone, trying to murder his unsympathetic brother by remote control. The brother was on the other end, yelling HELLO? HELLO? to the sound of pushbutton beeps, and the roofer muttered because nothing works anymore. After we’d hastily driven him to the brother’s house, telling the sister-in-law to get him some help (for that was his only family in town) he stolidly walked the five miles back, in the hot Texas sun on his one leg. The stump was bloody and sore over the wooden peg. There was obviously nowhere left for him to go. But here

is the thing. Maybe because I had listened to his UFO stories and looked at his drawings, he brought me a gift: a filthy, single nylon leg cut off from a pair of panty hose. Herbs brewed inside this stocking, he said, would cure any ailment and create perfect health. We stood outside the house with its unfinished roof. I took the single stocking that unfurled and flapped in the slight breeze like a miniature shadow of a perfect leg as he limped off on his missing one; and I did in fact remember him by it, remembered him limping and raving, and wondered at the other life -- what it was supposed to be.

For Merleau-Ponty the phantom limb which aches where the physical limb once was is “not a memory...of something now absent” but “quasi-present. It is the refusal of an experience to enter into the past” (Grosz 1994:89, on Merleau-Ponty). And there are plot fragments here which ache like phantom limbs, the ghosts of something that lives on in the imagination, whether or not it once was really there.

### **What is it?**

It is something real, though sometimes the only way to think about it is through its effects in story. The “it,” the phantom object of the uncanny or fantastic story, is never a single “real” thing. Thinking through the uncanny and the fantastic opens up the more general process of how narrative exceeds its literal, referential function to tell a “something more” (Stewart 1996: 5-6). But the uncanny still demands to be read as true to some ambiguous but felt and embodied experience. It is presented as a memory. It dismantles narrative conventions of realism and replaces them with uncertainty, even as its emotional force demands the listener to attend to the teller with the same openness demanded by the genres of any personal narrative.

The theorist Gerald Vizenor (1989) links Native American trickster tales to processes of postmodernity. Like trickster tales, the American uncanny is a space where fragments of narratives come into play. These fragments are fleeting parts of “stories that

one hears, that one acts out...as a mass of millions of insignificant and serious little stories that sometimes let themselves be collected together to constitute big stories and sometimes disperse into digressive elements”(3). The movement between an impulse towards unifying “big stories” or master narratives, and shattering “digressive elements” shapes both the uncanny and the poetic. As Vizenor writes, in the multiplicities of meaning in uncanny trickster narratives, such “freedom is a sign” itself, (ibid: 13), a generative space of its own.

For all the above reasons, I argue that “the uncanny” is strongly linked to what Jakobson (1960) called the poetic function of language, from which there arise implications with inseparable affective, aesthetic and social dimensions. Now I will look more closely at this claim to think both about how it “works” semiotically, and to consider its effects.

The uncanny carries a sense of the liminal, not as a transition in a linear progression to a new re-integrated state but rather as particular “structure of feeling” (Williams 1977) that is cast in what Turner (1981) has called “the subjunctive mood” of liminality: it “is a time and place lodged between all times and spaces defined and governed...by the rules of law, politics and religion and by economic necessity” (Turner 1981: 161).

But this is not quite right; while the uncanny is experienced as something “lodged between” the spaces of code it is also completely saturated by “the rules of law,” not outside them. But in the light of an uncanny space, naturalized rules *almost* appear to be what they are -- rules, conventions, constructions. As Turner (1979, 1981) writes of the liminal (and also of the “liminoid” (1981), its more naturalized form) this space breaks down code into its parts. The parts loom out of order, and become grotesque. They acquire the horror of taboo in Mary Douglas’ (1966) sense of the term -- of things *out of*

*place* that threaten a naturalized order (Douglas 1980). Douglas recognized that such ambiguity has its seductions as well as dread; for “the richness of poetry depends on [it]...aesthetic pleasure arises from the perceiving of inarticulate forms” (ibid.: 37).

Or think of Kristeva’s (1982) abjection, the sense of being shattered and placeless, ab/jected, thrown/from the unified image of the reflected body. Her sense of abjection is an embodied state that derails the division between subject and object, in

which there looms...one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible...it lies there, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, it worries, and fascinates desire...(ibid.: 1).

But in Kristeva’s abjection, “nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory” (ibid.:5). Kristeva says specifically that this utter unfamiliarity of abjection, is “more violent” than the uncanny. And the uncanny *is* haunted by the familiar, *is* disturbed by the shadows of memory. And yet, like “the abject” in her scheme, the “unconscious contents remain here *excluded*, but in a strange fashion...not radically enough to allow for a secure differentiation between subject and object, and yet clearly enough for a defensive position to be established” (ibid.: 7; emphasis hers).

In the uncanny, the naturalized “indicative mood” of the ordinary (in Turner’s metaphor) grows contingent with its own “subjunctive” latent critique. Things as they are threaten to fall apart. Like poetry, they are glimpsed in their constitutive parts, often through repetition, or the intensification of tropes. But if they were to appear *fully* as conventions, they would no longer be uncanny.

In the latter case their double-voicing through repetition and parallelism would be fully consciously crafted, politically rich, poetic critiques, like Gates’ (1988) reading of black “Signifying.” Signifying is a double-voiced denaturalization of a code, and a critical play that makes “room for maneuver,” but it isn’t uncanny. Rather it is a poetic

response, rising out of a consciously artful and participatory social identity, speaking in its relation to a dominant other. But in the double-voiced, poetic decomposition of the uncanny, such critical denaturalization isn't ever fully complete. It remains half articulated. The dominant it speaks to is often disturbingly internalized. In the stories I tell later, the uncanny occurs not as an articulated response to oppression in any specific historical moment or against any specific group. Instead it speaks of the hair-raising feeling of a creeping hegemony, a forgotten trauma distilled into the air, the terrible conviction that something isn't right. An alternate order emerges in the imagination. It rises from the partially-visible dominant one -- an uncanny order in which elements from various imaginaries of hegemony and freedom blend together, intensifying all their effects, and then transcending them. You could say that too much ideological light and air would stunt the growth of the uncanny's distortions.

In effect then, like theories of room for maneuver, this social uncanny twists the persistent anthropological question of agency and resistance, in this case with a sense of the ambivalence and ambiguity in the encounter between power, imagination and desire (Tsing 1993). It can speak of alienation, abjection and nostalgic placelessness. At the same time its sudden eruption in story can heighten the sense of attachment to and immanence in a place. It can derail hegemonic discourses with the nonliteral, as it "depends on the claim that things are not what they seem" (Stewart 1996:206). And Steedly, writing of Karo uncanny narratives at the border of totalizing modernist forces in Indonesia, sees how the uncanny bridges a sense of the strange with patterned structures of social meaning:

These stories are not simply products of individual imagination; nor are they transparent reports of what happened to a certain time and place. They exist within socially constituted patterns of domination and subordination, and within culturally defined patterns of meaning. They are structured by Karo narrative conventions as well as by the social context of their telling. Directly or indirectly

they refer to other stories, other experiences, other moments in the teller's life...But these stories are not told as illustrations of some officially established generic truth. They are told because of their strangeness: because they are partial misfits within an official order of things (Steedley 1993: 239)

A theory of the social uncanny presents a few dominant themes. One is a sense of vague but pressing danger which is expressed not by direct reference to material conditions, but by attention to the message of danger itself. Another is a sense of contingency inextricable from its telling in narrative -- a slippery experience that can't be finalized by official truths or totalizing hegemonies. In its forms seemingly inside the dominant, along the paths of their multiple, naturalized hegemonies, it plays on the immanent liminality of partially articulated ideology --like a semi-emergent "political unconscious" (Jameson 1981). It involves the denaturalizations of both pasts and futures, such as elaborated centripetal discourses of nostalgia (Ivy 1995) and centrifugal ones of apocalypse (Ricoeur 1981); and always, it scats along the poetic interplay of order and chaos, code and contingency.

### **III. THE POETICS OF THE STRANGE: TODOROV, FREUD, JAKOBSON**

Two texts probably have been most important to academic theories of the uncanny, Tzvetan Todorov's The Fantastic, and Sigmund Freud's "The Uncanny." In Todorov's structuralist design, (1977) the fantastic, the uncanny and the marvelous exist in direct relation to each other. What Todorov calls the "fantastic" genre, however, is most like Freud's notion of the *unheimlich*, the uncanny.<sup>7</sup> For Todorov, the "uncanny" means that a strange, troubling effect is resolved by the end of the story through its final attribution to natural causes. In the "marvelous," the strange effect belongs to an other

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, Todorov uses the example of Hoffman's tales to analyze the "fantastic" genre; but these same tales are used by Freud to interpret the *unheimlich*.

world in which magic events are part of the order of things. But the fantastic, says Todorov, is never resolved one way or the other. Is it natural or supernatural? The fantastic “occupies the duration of this uncertainty” (Todorov 1977:25).<sup>8</sup> Todorov’s fantastic creates a third space between the real and the imaginary, and makes manifest the tension between them.

Although Todorov’s definition of the “fantastic”(rather than the “uncanny”) more closely correlates with my own understanding of American discourses, he mentions briefly that the “uncanny” depends upon a sense of encroaching “taboo,” a disturbing return of some secret impulse. As Todorov acknowledges, this is his one point of agreement with Freud: and for Freud, similarly, the uncanny signifies a dreadful return of the repressed.

But before launching into those uncanny “returns,” it’s important to dwell for a minute on what Freud actually meant by repression. His 1915 essay of that name is a beautiful and haunting essay, whose psychoanalytic framework contains an implicit theory of chains of signification. Here, he seems to imply that the problem of the split between the signifier and the signified, and the way that signs can develop away from the original referent, is not a sterile problem of pure linguistics but a human condition drenched with affect. Freud writes that in the first phase of repression (primal repression) an instinct is rejected and kept from entering consciousness. Then there is a second phase of repression, which he calls “repression proper.” In this phase, what gets repressed are:

such trains of thought as, originating elsewhere, have come into associative connection with [the original repressed thought.] On account of this association,

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<sup>8</sup> “In a world which is indeed our world...there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion... and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place...[in which case] reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre...The concept of the fantastic is therefore to be defined in relation to those of the real and the imaginary” (Todorov 1977: 25, emphasis mine).

these ideas experience the same fate as that which underwent primal repression. Repression proper, therefore, is actually an after-expulsion (1956:86).

An *after-expulsion*... for repression is a vigilant officer, expelling anything associatively connected to the original offender. But the place of exile is not an inert heap of dead images. Rather it has its own “forces”—desiring not simply to return to the light of consciousness as one would assume, but also to pull down, to its exiled space, other signs, other associations. To preserve the functioning whole of the psyche, connected chains of meaning are “attracted” away from consciousness to what has already been repressed, and “assimilated” there. “It all works only because “these forces” of repression “co-operate” with the project, bringing more of the same into their exiled arena, and assimilating them there:

it is a mistake to emphasize only the rejection which operates from the side of consciousness upon what is to be repressed. We have to consider just as much the attraction exercised by what was originally repressed upon everything with which it can establish a connection. Probably the tendency to repression would fail of its purpose if these forces did not co-operate, if there were not something previously repressed ready to assimilate that which is rejected from consciousness (ibid.: 86-87).

And then what happens there, in the dark world of the ego’s rejects? Removed from the light and air of consciousness, associating with each other to their heart’s content, Freud says, the forbidden drives multiply “like a fungus;” they acquire “extreme forms of expression;” their dangerous impulses grow “extraordinarily strong”(ibid.). So when they do emerge, they no longer seem like part of the person but instead “are bound...to seem alien to him,” and to “terrify” him with the growth and distortions of the instinct that has become even worse than when it was first repressed to begin with (ibid.).

And furthermore, once ideas and their associated links are expelled, it takes a lot of energy to keep them out of consciousness. They are lurking down there, attracting new thoughts and growing like a fungus, but they keep trying to get back inside. Most

suggestively: repression is not “as when some living thing has been killed and from that time onward is dead” (ibid.:89); rather the repressed keeps trying to get up from its grave like a ghost. And the “continual effort” to keep them down there is “directed not only towards ideas” but as well towards “that part...which has become detached” from the idea. This detached part, this secondary sign or phantom of some ejected thing, develops a “charge of affect.” Detached from the original, it still floats around, available to perception as a strong, mysteriously charged feeling with no clearly observable referent. And sometimes – although “repression leaves symptoms in its train” (ibid.:93) – the symptom is all that’s left. Sometimes there is just the charged affect. The original referent is gone – sometimes it really is not available, it really is forgotten. But the chains that came after it are still drenched with affect, still pulled by the forces of repression. Sometimes, he acknowledges, the original “it” of the haunting feeling can’t be named (ibid.).

It is hard to read this essay and not to think of repressions that originate outside the individual psyche. It is hard not to imagine social forces of repression which in some arrangements of power, eject disturbing elements from the whole; and it is hard not to see other, less obvious arrangements, where the exiled both “co-operate” in and haunt the processes of their own expulsion. It is hard not to think of these things when you consider memory itself as social – with its affective charges circulating in stories with impossible referents, its forbidden things growing more monstrous and terrifying, and its own mushrooming intensifications revealed as “the alien.” Then it is not any single individual wish or instinct that grows dangerous and strange in the forgotten space; then socially repressed *returns* sneak into circulating stories.

But what is it that has been expelled?

In “The Uncanny,” Freud writes that in the *unheimlich* (the uncanny) something is revealed that was supposed to remain repressed (especially surrounding death or object loss, for example, castration.) It would seem, he writes, that the *unheimlich* would be simply the opposite of the ordinary German word “*heimlich* or *heimisch*,” (familiar, native or belonging to the home); it would seem that the *unheimlich* would be frightening simply in opposition, because it is *unfamiliar*. But the truth is more complex. Tracing the history of the two words, Freud finds that among its shades of meaning, *heimlich* (homey, familiar) sometimes means its opposite, *unheimlich*;

What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*...*heimlich* is not unambiguous ... on the one hand it means that which is familiar and congenial and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight...Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops towards an ambivalence until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*... (ibid.: 375-377).

This foray into what he considers “the aesthetic ...[domain] of feeling” suggests that the uncanny presents a problem of poetics. It reveals a glimmer of the chaos always hinted at in the ordering principles of opposition. On one level, here is an opposition (*heimlich/unheimlich*) which merges, and becomes disturbing through the loss of its *difference*, a merging both longed for as an ultimate healing, and yet abjectly feared, because, “coinciding with its opposite,” the wiping out of difference means the loss of meaning, a chaotic absence of distinction.

Freud says that the uncanny disrupts the ordinary flow of time when an otherwise unremarkable event inexplicably recurs, seemingly pointing to an invisible agency or design through what he calls “involuntary repetition” (ibid:390):

...We of course attach no importance to the event when we give up a coat and get a cloakroom ticket with the number, say, 62; or when we find that our cabin on board ship is numbered 62. But the impression is altered if two such events...happen close together, if we come across the number 62 several times in a single day...We do feel this to be uncanny and unless a man is utterly hardened

and proof against the lure of superstition he will be tempted to ascribe a secret meaning to this obstinate recurrence of a number... (ibid.:390-91)

In this passage, you see how the feeling of the *unheimlich* begins to match up with a feeling about *form*. The events or images themselves are meaningless. It is when they are suddenly revealed as connected to each other that their connection grows charged with the intimation of hidden significance, a “secret meaning,” (ibid.) or an intuition of relations that seem to be — somehow — purposefully constructed.

Freud’s “secret meaning” invoked by repetition brings to mind Roman Jakobson’s unconscious grammar invoked by the poetic function of language. Roman Jakobson wrote that the poetic function of language foregrounds the “palpability” of signs with attention oriented to the message itself. It “deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects,” (1960: 358), turning the major emphasis of the signifier from reference to poesis. Through “the reiterative figure of sound,” (ibid.:359) the flow of speech is “experienced as it is with musical time” (ibid.: 358; see Feld 1994:190). The poetic function of language hooks reference into form, drawing on the unconscious patterns of language, and making use of them for pleasure. Jakobson’s insight was that these effects occur through the poetic use of *repetition with variation*. Repetition with variation:

projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination... Equivalence, normally the device of selection, is promoted to the constitutive device of sequence (1960:358).

This is virtually a Cubist insight -- or like the ineffable sensation of seeing your own bones in an X-ray. One of its effects in poetry is a feeling of heightened significance that transcends the referential meanings of the words themselves. In the uncanny, what might be thought of as “rhyme” or even “groove” (Feld 1994) occurs through repetition with variation with other stories and images. There is intertextual

resemblance between *uncanny* stories, but also through intertextual resonance<sup>9</sup> with other, often unmarked cultural narratives: the historical narratives of power relations that are naturalized and submerged; half-articulated or unconscious local theories of hegemony and of the body's inscription by power. Mimetic tropes of many half-forgotten social memories begin to accumulate, to layer upon each other and become intensified. And in the uncanny, a similar experience of just-glimpsed parallels and heightened significance moves urgently towards its "something more," the just-glimpsed "secret meaning."

There is a *feeling* of a hidden "deep structure" which if seen in its entirety would finally "make sense" of the immanently open-ended fantastic. It is expressed in figures of an omniscient colluding government, or omniscient aliens, or a sense that an inexplicable "synchronicity" underlies seemingly random coincidences. Anything strangely connected, any co-incidence, any pattern of events or images with an inexplicable meaning – it might have something to do with UFOs. If a member of the Experiencers' group got Freud's cloakroom ticket with number 62, it might have to do with UFOs...for a simultaneous sense of contingency and design, an inkling of some complete "grammar" of meaningfulness that is intimated but always ungraspable, is felt to be lurking just beneath, or beyond, the glimpses offered by any utterance. In stories of UFOs, ghosts and fabulous conspiracies, a structure is *produced* through attention to the message's intertextual repetitions and parallels -- just as a structure is produced through

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<sup>9</sup>I use the term "resonance" here to suggest a particular poetic process: the intensification of texts produced by the overlapping of signs from various discourses. This intensification entails mimesis, but is often heard as more partial or fluid than in true "iconicity of style" (Feld 1988). Metaphorically, one could think of narrative resonance as an intertextual "half-rhyme," which in poetry produces a more ambiguous sense of structure than does full rhyme. UFO discourse shows how new forms emerge through the hybridization of elements from genres which, although discrete, also share some trope or theme, some implicit, felt resonance. It produces aesthetic intensity and the poetic pleasure of "repetition with variation" (Jakobson 1960) which resides not only in consciously artful stories but also in the lived and embodied metaphors (Johnson 1987) and the felt, discursive practices that compose phenomenological reality.

metacultural glossing (Urban 2001). In other words, the question here is not whether a “deep structure” exists *a priori*; rather “structure and its breakdown” is a meta-issue in discourse itself.

In the worlds where UFOs matter, people constantly talk in theory/narratives whose themes and poetics perform the tension and fluctuation between such unity and fragmentation. People say: connect the dots! They draw a structure from the incidents; the structure is an effect of discourse about the “dots,” but the dots never make a completely closed constellation. There is always another dot, another possible design.

One day Tony called with an urgent voice. He was blind, but he vividly remember everything he used to see, and even more – things that he once had excluded from the picture, things he’d edited out because they didn’t make sense – now he let them back in, with the *unheimlich* sense of sudden memory. And among other signs of the bizarre, he urgently wanted to story for me his sudden childhood memory of seeing a *dog’s black eyes*. He was now connecting that image to pictures of aliens’ black eyes. Here the two sets of eyes, the ordinary and the strange, become parallel signs. They begin to form an irreducible montage in the image he produces, a picture in the dark, lit by his imagination. The iconic shape and color of the alien eyes intensifies -- and disrupts-- his older image of the dog. But the image of the dog is, in a way, the newer one; it was only summoned because of its connection to the more significant image, the alien eyes. Now the remembered eyes of the dog, suddenly cast into the position of uncanny resemblance, is re-narrativized (in inner speech, and then in a circulating story) as uncanny, as well. Now he wonders if it really was a dog he saw after all. Maybe, he thinks, in both excitement and dread, maybe it was an alien; and maybe the dog’s eyes in his memory were really a screen memory for the black eyes of an abducting alien. In Tony’s story, the parallel look of the eyes enter into a relationship of combination. Their

resemblance itself make the ordinary image uncanny. UFO discourse imagines, like Freud, a chain of semiotic association, the dog's eyes forgotten because they were like alien eyes; but in fact perhaps the dog eyes were the false referent, perhaps consciousness invented them to block out the alien, and then, since they were too similar, ejected them too. Now the dog eyes come back, but what do they mean? Can you know for sure?

And how could you not think, too, of Tony's own unspoken feelings about *eyes*, given the phantom status of his own vision? Once he was a cardiologist and saw the beating of a heart. Once he had a beach house and looked at the ocean. He was married and saw his wife look back at him. Then diabetes made his eyes fail, his wife left, and he now lives with his parents in a small Texas town, set back up in his childhood bedroom. He moves through the house, touching the familiar objects of his childhood to feel his way along, the smooth wood ball of the banister, the wallpaper, the shelf of his mother's doll collection.... Once, he says, he used to be too proud to think about all this, he was superficial and rich, and he married a superficial woman who would leave a man when his eyes failed. But now he remembers from long ago something he'd shut out of his mind -- seeing a UFO like a liquid light of every color, the size of a football field, over Onion Creek Bridge. He edited it out before, no one in the car with him talked about it. His father was in the air force, and they didn't talk about the weird things they saw in the sky. Now he remembers the black eyes of a dog, looking at him. Why would he even remember that, he wonders? Why would it haunt him, if it wasn't really something else? Where would that dog have come from? His own eyes are lost. But, he says, if he hadn't gone blind he wouldn't have been open to seeing this other stuff. Other stories always get inside, opening the final grammar even wider

When it was my turn to speak one day at the UFO Experiencers group, I talked about my *weird experience* of having many co-incidences with the number 333. When I

got a laundry ticket it was 333, when I opened a book at random it seemed always to be that page, and when they issued me a student ID, there was the number staring at me. In my teens, I told them, I used to wake up each night at 3:33, and when I did, my heart would sink with the dread of the half-dream state, before I looked at the clock. Please don't let it be...I would think, but each time, it was. What was I to make of it? In the middle of the night, with the branches of the mimosa tree tapping my bedroom window and the uneasy feeling of a silent suburban house in which you are a child, I would look at the digital clock and the three glowing 3's -- in their 1970s style, shaped with a flat, angular top -- would look strangely angry, as if they were marching in a row. Once in a particularly strange encounter, I told the UFO group, when I was a teenager at a rock concert, a strange boy came up to me and told me out of the blue that he woke each night at 3:33 and had never mentioned this to anyone else. The group listened and then other number pattern stories started to emerge. One person woke up at 11:11, another at 12:12. Someone figured out the difference between all these times was yet another uncanny number in an old magic book. Lenny added some of the numbers and got 71, which was the number of a local highway where many UFOs had been seen. The number story creates the effect of a rhyme, a repetition with variation, a parallel. And so an underlying order, a "paradigm" or "grammar" of meaning is intimated -- first my own, that lurked in my own private stock of weird things; and then another pattern emerges, and accelerates my own memory into the shared, patterned field of the social. There was an immediate assumption that our private numbers, added together, would get us closer to the pattern. For repetition with variation produces not just a sense of formal aesthetic pleasure but even more seductively and urgently, the intense feeling of meaningfulness, the engine of uncanny discourse's social life.

But what *did* it all mean? That open space made room for so much talk. There were many, many other things that among these friends remained unspoken. But what could be counted on for story was the urgent drive away from the arbitrary dead ends of the ordinary, towards a feeling of *something more*.

### **Repetition and Paralysis: The poetics of “Something More”**

Through the uncanny, we can sometimes see other ways of entering into the lived terrains of class and race and gender — categories which, if spoken as abstractions in many social worlds, sound too flat, too distant and formal to encompass the overlapping and partialities of their embodied and felt effects. You might think, first, of the workings of everyday life. In a passionate critique of British sociological objectifications of class and gender, Carolyn Steedman writes movingly of working-class “longing” in her own mother’s desire, not for revolution or even class solidarity, but rather for redemption through the material things that lay out of her reach, clothes and houses which grew charged and powerful. Steedman writes that her mother’s “sense of the unfairness of things, could not be directly translated into political understanding and certainly could not be used by the left to shape an articulated politics of class” (Steedman 1986: 8).

Instead of projecting onto her mother an “articulated politics” of either class or gender, Steedman asks, “what becomes of the notion of class-consciousness when it is seen as a structure of feeling... with one of its components a proper envy... Class and gender, and their articulations, are the bits and pieces from which psychological selfhood is made” (Steedman 1986:7). Here, coveted things become signs in an alternate life story, one that rides the back of everyday life and its random disenchantments. What did

her mother want? Steedman says: A New Look Skirt, a timbered cottage, to marry a prince.

Even in this ordinary longing for an everyday thing, stories often circle around their missing objects, infusing the boundaries of categories like class and gender with their disturbances and desires. Sometimes, to enter inside those structures of feeling we call class, race and gender is to notice the ways in which they don't just stay put on their own foundations. The spaces of *departure* from the rooted signs of class position are often the most intricately imagined, as well as the most despised. There is the disgrace (and, sometimes, the relief) of *just giving up* while you are falling from one class position to another lower one. There is the parallel shame of desire exposed: amidst the master narrative of easy class mobility, the too-visible straining to rise is a danger.... These liminal spaces themselves become fertile ground for uncanny elaboration, for stories of unwanted dislocations and sublime flights from the ordinary.

Marie was my co-worker at the Little A'Le'Inn in Rachel, and my housemate in the Travis's home. She shrugged her shoulders on UFOs – *If you think about it*, she said, *I'M an alien, YOU'RE an alien, a MEXICAN or a FRENCH PERSON is an alien, and that LIZARD is an alien* – but she had a way of narrating the events of her world into mysterious agencies and uncanny synchronicities. Marie was a widow in her mid-thirties – she had been separated from her husband but still embroiled in their connection, and right before he died (stumbling blind drunk across the road, he was hit-and-run by an elderly man still blurry from eye surgery) he'd left a note and candy for Marie. He wrote that he loved her, he wanted to be together again. She had written him back: I love you but we drive each other crazy. Then he was gone.

Right before that her brother-in-law shot himself. They came in and there he was sitting in the chair with the gun on the floor. First they all thought it was someone else who did it, but it was his *other personality*. (What was his other personality? I ask, and she ignores me to continue the story of co-incidences.) At the funeral, they had dream catchers for him and instead of buying flowers they got balloons. The goat skin on the dream catcher turned bright yellow and that was *kind of weird*. Someone said dream catchers catch your soul. And when they the released the balloons into the air, the balloons made a heart shape in the sky; and then all of a sudden a white dove flew right through them. And the dead man's little daughter said: There goes my daddy, flying through the heart. Well, said Marie, that was *kind of weird*. Then after that, Marie's nephew died. She went to his casket and *said her good bye's* and she felt like *that was that*. It was time to start a *new chapter in the book of my life*, she said, and *this chapter was Rachel Nevada*.

Then in Rachel, one day, a young man from the town died in a freak car accident. The night it happened, Marie was hit in the head by a picture of her dead husband that fell off the wall for no reason. That was *kind of weird*, she said. The next morning we got the phone call about the accident, and she understood. The falling picture was her dead husband, Marie said, telling her not to go to the funeral here in Rachel. She'd been through enough.

Marie hadn't lived here too long, a couple of months. Pat Travis, the owner of the café, was an old family friend and had needed help, and when she called Marie came up the next day from her parents' home, a few hours away.

A couple of people who worked in the café were having car problems. And Marie said:

OK, I haven't quite figured this OUT yet  
but it's like there's something  
and it keeps me here.

That's why I can't get my CAR fixed.

My water pump went out  
when I went to go pick up Bobby in town.

My water pump decided  
to go out in my car.

Ok, ever since then,  
we have been tryin'  
to get a water pump  
to FIT that car.

And we can't find one  
to FIT it. ..

But for SOME REASON,

we have exchanged  
that water pump now

FOUR TIMES

and four times now

it will not work

on my car.

So there is some UNNATURAL FORCE

keeping me here.

It must be something good

or it wouldn't keep me here.

I usually don't stay

where there's nothing good.

So there is something

keeping me here

causing this TIME WARP.

The car situation with everybody –

I think that it's all CONNECTED in a way...

Because if you think about it,

we've all become so close to each other...

So even though we all come from *the same thing*,

it's like we were brought together for a reason.

Susan: What do you mean by *the same thing*?

Well – drugs, uh, prostitution.

We all have something in common.

We all have something in common,

in an unusual way.

Marie and I were just chatting, sitting in the house in our pajamas, and this story wasn't told in a traumatized or haunted register. It was on the level of uncanny smalltalk,

a free-floating bit of speculation on the ways of the interconnected world and its unseen forces of agency. In the play of ordinary events, there were some kind of extraordinary forces that simultaneously dramatized Marie's own immobilities and put her in the center of a drama that was larger than what we could see from our places on the ground.

First there were the terrible events – the deaths of young people close to her, including her husband, all in a row. The fact of all the deaths was strange, but the strangeness was made significant by the signs that they left in their wake. The dead lightly haunted, left tracks of their continued presence. They appeared in conventional guises, balloons and dream catcher and doves. They were no more limited by the clichés at their disposal than was the deep, complicated love of her estranged husband limited in its expression by the conventional gesture of buying her a card and candy. The ghostly signs showed their mourners that the dead were at the funeral, making use of the things bought for the funeral – the dream catcher, the balloons. Marie's "passed away" husband knew her well enough to know she'd had too much death; he gave her permission to skip yet another funeral in Rachel. She said she got *flack* from some people in town for not going, but she shrugged it off. It was too much, and if they didn't understand that, she knew it was all right from a much more authoritative source.

She told those events without much feeling, because it wasn't that kind of conversation, and we did not have that kind of relationship. We were friends, and she often told me the most personal things I could imagine, stories of terrible child abuse and parental betrayal, her mother's chronic illness and the toll it took on Marie, the details of her former work as a prostitute and a phone sex worker...but they were not really disclosures in the usual sense. They were perhaps signs of the fact that she had lived, in

fact, through a lot of trauma, and she told things that sounded terrible in a way that sounded numb. She told them as if these were simply her stories – the things that had happened to her. And she could tell them without an emotional aperture opening up in the telling, without making them an automatic passage to an interior self. Instead they always open outward, into meanings and intensifications that exist outside, inexplicable but part of a pattern.

Here, after Marie tells me here about the series of deaths, she tells about being caught in Rachel, about a force that traps you in this town. The water pump itself “decided” to go out. “Something” is keeping her here. In this tiny, informal fragment of story Marie uses a lot of verbal repetition, as if to mimetically enact the structure of the uncanny message itself; if you try to hear her words out loud in your mind you can hear the repetitive thud of the cadence, as it tries to emphasize the built-up weirdness of normal things:

**My water pump**

went **out**

when I went to go pick up Bobby in town.

**My water pump**

decided to go **out**

in my **car**.

And:

..to get a water pump

to **FIT** that car.

And we can't find one  
to **FIT** it. ...

And:  
we have exchanged  
that water pump **now**  
**FOUR TIMES**  
and **four times now**  
it will not work  
on my car.

In a sense she constructs a mimetic little "time warp" of her own. Inside it, I had no idea whether she wanted to leave or not, whether it was frustrating to be here with a broken car. This is a way of talking that does not try to explain the subjective *experience* of immobility, but instead draws on the force of the paradigmatic, emphasizes the redundant, and shows the story's own ability to circle back instead of moving on. And that bit of story leads her directly to the next *weird thing*: that all her coworkers are joined here, unable to escape because *something* is keeping their cars from moving as they should. They are close as siblings, as she told me, because of yet another uncanny recurrence: the common life narrative they have found they shared -- prostitution, drug addiction -- before they came out here and got clean, shook it off.

But they didn't shake it all off. They didn't move all the way on. Through its coincidence, the common thing is still trailing them -- like a phantom limb, or like a phrase, repeated in inner speech. It's still there, what she again repeats as "the common thing, the common thing." She says their common thing is "unusual." It is unusual enough that

its recurrence is meant to be uncanny. In other words, it's not like saying they all have brown eyes. It's *kind of weird* that they all have this common unusual thing, and so perhaps that *thing* is not just a sad past but the index to a *something more...* something that is not just the life you did not want, or wasted youth before you threw it off to try to start over in midlife but – you just know it on a hunch – maybe the things that happened are, in part, because of larger structures, forces and powers beyond what you can see. There is a hunch that it's not all your own fault – that you are caught in something beyond your own choice, there are things in the world other than your own “personal responsibility,” although that master narrative of personal growth and potential clashes always with the sense that you were somehow caught.

Maybe there is a reason she can't move. Something out there is bringing them together, the waitress, short order cook and the orphan floor mopper and the dishwasher, and it's holding them in place. This place. It's not their own agency, and it's not random luck. But what that something is remains wide open.

The poetic interplay between code and contingency can itself become an object of fascination. It appears in stories in various incarnations: order and chaos, the centripetal and centrifugal forces of things you might not understand...and in UFO talk, it ties in with that obsessive motif, the interweaving experiences of paralysis and mobility.

#### **IV. TRAUMA, MOBILITY AND PARALYSIS**

Psychological trauma theory takes it as a given that experiences of forced immobilization and trance-like forms of disassociative memory go hand in hand. Trauma elicits strange kinds of memory: scenes re-lived as the self moves outside the body;

hyperawareness; the sense of everything around the scene fading away; amnesia. And there is the kind of forgetting punctuated by disparate, distorted scenes, re-emerging in dreams and flashes. Disassociative kinds of memory occur when trauma is accompanied by physical or emotional paralysis, the sense that there is *nothing you can do* (Herman 1997). Traumatic constriction can be forced by the perpetrator. Or it can be a shocked response to the overwhelming sensation of helplessness in the moment of violence, the paralysis of terror – being caught in the headlights.

Most importantly, the paralysis caused by acute trauma does not disappear with the end of the violent action. It remains a force of inertia, outlasting the original referent. And maybe it resonates with other kinds of immobilizations – with both the static, helpless sensations that often go without saying in everyday life, and the wildly fantastic immobilizations of uncanny abduction.

Traumatic memory, like UFO abduction, causes missing time. The trauma is experienced with terrible immediacy, but the impact of that presence, paradoxically, happens belatedly (Caruth 1995). Traumatic perception is full of such gaps; the “greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it” (ibid.). The most consistent features of traumatization are this frozen delay of one’s reactions, and the repetition of the memory as it intrudes, full of belated affect, into everyday life. The sense of paralysis is repeated in the aftermath of the trauma, for instead of “owning” one’s memory, the traumatized person is “in its possession” (5). The memory seizes you, descends on you; and the traumatized person herself becomes “the symptom of a history [she] can not entirely possess” (ibid.).

Caruth moves a step from Freud’s idea of repression to observe that the traumatic memory, when it overwhelms you, is not a symbol, not a distortion of an unconscious wish or desire. Instead it is a revisitation with a terrible literality, a “nonsymbolic

quality” that repeats the original violation. Caruth writes that it is “this literality and insistent return which thus constitutes trauma” (ibid.); yet at the same time, the returning event, in all its literalness, is not integrated into ordinary experience; it is “marked off;” it “possesses the person” in an altered state; and therefore its truth, the reference of that literal memory, is an uncertain terrain, open to question both by the person possessed by memory and by those who try to offer therapeutic healing (ibid.:6).

One way that uncanny memories accumulate such a feeling of urgency and power is through these strangely familiar themes of trauma – the repetition of its poetics; its sense of terrifying immobilities; and the intense desire it speaks of for flight. Take UFO abduction narrative, for example: there is the strange sense of disassociated memory, the tormenting question of what really happened. There is the belated experience of immediacy, and the haunt of repetition. There is the experience of paralysis, and sometimes, even within that trap, there is flight. In the uncanny, these motifs heighten the confusion that always exists between traumatic inner experience and objective truth.

To be clear: I am not suggesting that UFO abduction is a symptom for a more real trauma, like child sexual abuse. (In fact, many people in the Experiencers’ Support Group, and some hypnotherapists who work with abductees, believe that the recovered child sex abuse memories proliferating in public culture are actually symptoms of repressed *UFO abduction memories*, because UFO abduction is harder to believe, “more traumatic.”) Instead I am suggesting that the trope of paralysis in UFO stories casts fantastic experiences into a specific, social and personal structure of feeling. And that for *many* reasons, there is an ascendancy in contemporary life of the narrative of trauma and disempowerment, memory and recovery. For that focus on trauma and its truth is itself a social as well as individual story, in a moment of its own belated, traumatized remembering (cf. Herman 1994). What I am trying to say is that in the uncanny, as in

other domains, there is a restless elaboration of just what the real might be; there are truths that are felt to be too vast and yet too naturalized to grasp; and again and again you hear it: I was paralyzed, I was immobilized, I was shut off, I simply could not move.

**And there's nothin I can do**

We were sitting around the table at Buddy and Bear's South Austin place -- Buddy, Bear, Buddy's then-girlfriend (later his wife) Sharlyn and I, passing a guitar, drinking beer, joking and teasing, and as always telling stories. My tape recorder was on, covered with cigarette ashes, the cats half-sitting on it, pretty much forgotten. Buddy told this story:

-Did I tell you about the time

I woke up in the middle of the night

and I was paralyzed...

And there was two objects.

I say **objects**

because they were not human.

One of them was at my head side,

another was there by my midsection....

The one that was towards my head

had a thing in his hand.

Called a *WAND*.

It had a green light at the end of it.

And I couldn't move,

I couldn't do anything.

I was watchin him,  
he took this wand,  
put it by the top of my head  
like that  
and my head started tingling,  
[Buddy makes high pitched pulsing noise]  
just tingling from the top of my head  
and started movin it *real slow*  
down my head,  
and down my body.  
And as he moved it on down,  
the area at -- between the wand...  
started to tingle.  
And my brain goin wn-wn-wn-wn- wn-wn-wn-wn --  
Have you ever heard a dynamo?  
Susan: NNN-nnn.  
Buddy: It's loud. It's mighty loud --  
DYNAMO --  
it's a *power* producing unit.  
It's round, it spins, it spins.  
Like a generator.  
And it produces a lot of noise  
[louder] WNWNWNWNWN

that's what --

inside of my BRAIN

It was goin **WNHWNGWNGNGNGGN.**

Like a dynamo!

But my body tingled

outside my body...

And I couldn't MOVE.

And as he [the alien] went down,

the point between *here*

and where he started to tingle,

the rest of it was,

nothin happening,

and as he went down,

that area from here to there

would tingle and VIBrate.

And my mind would go

**whangwhangwhangwhngwhngwhng.**

Electronic dynamos in my BRAIN.

Got about to my knees, they quit.

They pulled it away

and my whole body was just,

whng whng whng

from my toes to my head.

Just sittin there vibratin,

whng whng whng whng.

Like a vibration in my system.

Sharlyn (erotically): I wish I was around. (Laughing.)...

Buddy (ignoring her) Now, they disappeared.

*Pssshht!* They were gone.

I remember layin there,

and the sun comin up,

and I can see light startin to come through the windows,

and there's about an hour,

and I finally managed to get up

and walk around.

But just tremblin,

and the vibrations still on my skin

and shortly inside o' my body.

It was about an hour to an hour and a half

before I could finally settle down,

really move around naturally.

I couldn't before that.

Susan: You were a KID at the time,

or an ADULT?

Buddy: I don't KNOW!

I just remembered it!

It just came to me one day

all of a sudden boom,

memory just start poppin into my head.

Susan: Wow, so you'd *forgotten* for a while,

and then it just popped back into your head?

Buddy: I remember the gas heater

up against the wall,

that produced a light

that lit up the room because of the fire...

a low light,

I can see things there...

They're there.

And they're doin things to me

and there's nothin I can do about it.

What can we say about the place of the real in a memory like this? First you notice the intensity in Buddy's voice. It is painful to listen to this story. The confusion of the real adds to the discomfort, for the experience itself is clearly a phenomenologically real experience, whatever its real might be. The trauma here has returned with the immediacy Caruth describes, possessing Buddy. His voice is creaky and low, it sounds traumatized. Its immediacy suggest no buffering lapse of time between the event and its retelling here. If ordinary narrative constructs the past as

stretching clearly behind the moment of storytelling, this uncanny time is different. Buddy's urgent voice is meant to perform his feeling of some unmediated experience – not to represent that experience in an ordinary sense, but to create a presence. The aliens are summoned by the story and begin, through language, to occupy the room. There they are; in the present tense, he says, “they’re there.” In the present tense he says, “there’s nothin’ I can do about it.”

This telling seems to speak a kind of disassociated memory, outside of normal time, with the hypnotic power to collapse the discrete borders between an original “event” and its memory, between the form of narrative and the subject of the narration. At the height of the story he describes his body this way: “the area where he started to tingle...” Is this “he” the alien, “tingling” Buddy’s body – an unusual use of “tingling,” like tickling -- or is the “he” Buddy himself, disassociated, seeing himself from the outside? This kind of pronominal ambiguity happens in times of disassociation, in trauma or trance (cf. Urban 1989). Sometimes in that altered state you see yourself from the outside – the uncanny moment described by Freud, the self becoming an object. I think of another story told to the UFO group by a middle-aged woman -- a memory about aliens immobilizing her as a little girl in a rural Texas field. She described herself lying down, with the strange beings surrounding her, doing something to her that she didn’t understand, and she said, I know I was still young because I still had bangs...as if she could see her own bangs, looking down at herself from the outside. There’s this aggravating look on this little girl’s face, she said, which is me...

In the shifting terrain of the real, Buddy’s embodied feeling of powerlessness is the one bit of terra. The more Buddy is objectified by the aliens, the greater looms his own subjectivity in the narrative. His feelings and sensations swell up to fill the whole space of story. The entire scene is mapped onto the subjective points of his own body;

the structure of the narrative follows the linear path of how the sensation itself travels. In contrast the “outside” circumstances – the “setting” -- are ambiguous and liminal, set in the indeterminate space of bed during a late-night awakening: are we to take it as a dream or as “real?” After the invasion is over, the room returns to focus – the heater, the light. Before that, everything had vanished but Buddy’s body and the alien wand. In the absence of any signposts to grab on to, is Buddy supposed to understand “paralysis” as caused by alien technology, or by his half-dreaming body unable to move?

But as with any trauma, the dissociation still arises from the conflict between “they’re doin things to me” and “there’s nothin I can do about it” -- the enforced passivity of violation, the aroused rage with nowhere to go. And that is a sensation that does come and go, in a myriad of unspoken fleeting moments that are immediately put back down.

It makes me think that even the most egregious, fantastic, uncanny traumas that seem to mediate between waking life and dream do articulate with unspoken injuries, the subtle ordinary traumas whose pervasive violations and sense of disempowerment sometimes start to seem like the air you breathe. Stewart (2005) has called some of those moments ordinary “trauma time.” I am not saying that the uncanny simply represents or symbolizes those times. I’m saying that, like the excluded images mushrooming into terror in Freud’s darkness, the forgotten attracts the forgotten, creates a domain of associations, and hints, in the stories we do see, at yet another structure.

Caruth reminds us of the traumatic memory’s possession of the traumatized. Buddy describe an alien “possession” that echoes the demonic possession common to the world of Buddy’s rejected southern Christian childhood, what he called his “Bible thumper” relatives – possessions which also involve struggles for control over the body (Csordas 1990). Often, Buddy would tell us how, when he spoke of his alien encounters,

his grandmother thought he'd met Satan, and tried to make him drop to his knees and pray. Then he would perform a different encounter, one between the grandmother's Christian voice and his own:

“ ‘Get on your knees boy’ –  
‘I don't care, I'm not gonna do it!’”

he said, alternating voices between grandmother and himself. But the polemical battle of his childhood -- between good and evil forces in a clearly Christian world – has changed. Now it is between two models of “possession” – the Christian and the uncanny. And here too, you can't help but think of other kinds of mobility and paralysis – the constant ambivalence of leaving something behind, the circling back and trying to move on, the way the past arises both as a feeling of loss and the sense that you can't ever shake it off...For sometimes Buddy said he was not going to take in the Baptist language he grew up with. At other times he tried to synthesize his past with what he wanted for his present: *God comes on a spaceship*, he would say – it was what Bear called “his famous line.” And after telling us about the terrible alien dynamo, Buddy said, Buddy said: She [the grandmother] thinks it's the devil.

Well, you can expect that  
from people who read the Bible  
and the only thing they know is –  
I think that's ignorance, myself,  
I really do.

Because the Bible is written in a way  
to express forms for people  
of that day, of that time,  
to understand.

And then for science  
to translate into later periods of time,  
for where we can understand.  
Why God appeared upon a cloud,  
to me, somebody appears to anybody on a *cloud*,  
they're just not floatin on air,  
they're ON somethin.

Susan: Mmm.

Buddy: God comes on a spaceship...

I mean, a cloud, appears to uh –

when Jesus came back --on a cloud –

and appeared to Mother Mary –

or was it, no, Mary MAGdalene.

At the well. She didn't believe it was Jesus.

And then He also went to Doubting Thomas.

Doubting Thomas didn't believe it was Him.

He told him to feel His wounds and his palms,

or actually there's no muscle here [pointing to his own palms, then to his wrists];

when they nailed people it was right in the wrist,

which is right next to the palm,

cause you have that BONE right there

that kept it from slippin off on the spikes [holding his wrist up].

You get nailed in the palm,

the muscles'd tear and fall off,

so they nail it in the wrist.

That's been proven.

Shroud of Turin shows us.

Buddy tries to distance himself from what he called "ignorance" and Bear called "Bible thumpers," but again he is drawn back in to his own religion, talking about the Crucifixion in the intimate, densely imagined style of someone steeped in it. He is, clearly, still possessed by his grandmother's world, though it's an ambivalent possession, and at times (*no, Mary MAGdalene*) he is beginning to forget it.

What can you make of all this? You could focus on the immediacy of technological imagery: the sound is not just (through simile) "like a dynamo," but *it is* "electronic dynamos in my brain." Buddy performs the part of the dynamo, the loud, obnoxious noise he can't "explain" but can iconically reproduce. *Ever hear a dynamo?* he asks, and then throughout his narrative embodies that sound, becomes it, recreates its invasion. Here you might think of the way technology appears in UFO discourse. Aliens have greater technology than humans; this is their power. Technology in UFO discourse is opposed to nature, to feeling, to the body. Sometimes the aliens are forces of technology run amuck. They can't feel anymore, they are like futuristic robots, drones using a terrifying technopower to subdue and claim what they've lost, the natural bodies of humans. And sometimes the aliens are here on earth precisely because of the dangers of our own technological excesses; we're going too fast, we're going to blow ourselves up, and the earth is a ruin beneath our dangerous gadgets.

But though the dynamo is a bit of technology, it is neither a terrible nuclear bomb, nor a mysterious DNA splicer. Rather it is an element in a field of familiar signs that point to working class labor, the tools that are used by bodies in an ordinary realm, the realm of work. The dynamo is a “power producing unit,” in Buddy’s polysemous words. It produces power -- human power, the power of wealth, and the ordinary-fantastic energy of electricity that runs invisibly through the natural world, waiting to be harnessed and concentrated through specific modes of production. What’s uncanny, here, is how the homely tool reverses its ordinary function of “producing power” for unmarked human use in unmarked relations of power, and becomes, instead, the means of intensified human subjugation. Like Hoffman’s doll, the tool loses its place as an implement for use, and becomes a user of bodies: animated, enchanted, fetishized, magic.

And speaking of Hoffman, you might notice the residual images of fairy tales -- how this alien strength occupies an indeterminate realm, transgressing the boundaries between genres of childhood fairy tales and modern industry. Buddy says right away about the tool held by the alien “object:” “One...had a thing in his hand. *Called a wand.*” This last striking sentence implies that the “thing in [the alien’s] hand” is *already* “called a wand” in some pre-established world of meaning, a narrative realm of fairy tales. An existing universe of objects is implied, in which things have names that evoke entire fields. But this is not just a modern telling of a fairy tale. This story mimetically links worlds of “magic” and worlds of “technology,” and the “green light” at the tip of the wand carries the intensified power of dual association: it shines simultaneously with the archaic power of magic and the modern power of technology, all shot through with the uneasy sense of the uncanny power residing in the laborer’s tool.

But none of these analyses is a final story. None of them “explain” the experience of the uncanny terror, although they do articulate with it. None of them are more real

than the experience of abduction itself. It might be a dream, it might be a memory that just *pops up* with no single event ever established as a referent. But the dream is a real experience; the paralyzed moment between dream and waking is real; the floating memory is a real present thing, whatever it might point to. The signs of everyday life and sacred fading structures bleed inside it, altering the specific social shape it takes. What's real for sure is that it lets you see the everyday as unnatural once again, with its dynamos, its power, its countless embodied possessions.... But still, the sense of the uncanny will not be reduced to another narrative told in the conventions of realism. ,

For what you have to notice most of all is the emotion in Buddy's voice -- a voice so full of violation and terror that it almost overwhelms the listener. What remains constant -- not reducible to any other sign but holding them all -- is the terror of paralysis as a thing in itself, the being *held down*, the abduction of will in the overwhelming wish for motion, for flight.

## **Chapter Two: Captivity Narratives: The Abduction of Memory**

### **I. ONCE UPON A TIME: CONTAINMENT AND FREEDOM**

#### **A Story**

Once upon a time, a representative of the United States military went to battle against the charlatan power of alien magic. John G. Bourke, Captain of the Third Cavalry of the United States 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. The problem which he fervently hoped his information would help to solve was the "friction" between whites and "a race that, in spite of some serious defects of character, will be for all time to come looked upon as 'the noble savage'" (2003:1). But the noble part of the savage was being derailed by a reluctance to assimilate, and only one thing was really getting in the way of potential progress: the medicine man and his fraudulent sleights of hand, which kept the red man enslaved to ways of the past.

"Notwithstanding the acceptance by the native tribes of many of the improvements in living introduced by civilization," wrote Bourke, "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" -- this antagonistic influence being the medicine man and his power to control the identity of native people (ibid.). In a monograph published by the Smithsonian Institution at the end of the nineteenth century, Bourke provided the government with hundreds of pages on the "personality of the medicine men, the regalia worn, and the powers possessed and claimed" in the hopes that such knowledge would expedite the federal mission to bring the savage inside the American fold. The policy of taking children from their families and forcing them to live

at the boarding schools at Carlisle and Hampton, he concluded, might win Indians over to the miraculous technologies of the modern age. One kind of wonder was better, one kind of miracle more civilized, than the other:

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 Hampton some of the wonders of electricity, magnetism, chemistry, the spectroscope, magic lantern, ventriloquism, music, and 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: 144-145).

The savage would be taken to the boarding school and kept against his will, because he was still ignorant of the good it would do him and his people; and in this captivity, would learn the right wonders of modernity that would overcome the wrong wonders of the medicine man. Then the "scholar" 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 U.S. government had begun taking Indian children to boarding schools about thirteen years before Bourke published this report. The narrative underlying the boarding school policy is a three-part story of forced removal, conversion, and return. It is, in essence, a policy informed by a naturalized instatement of a genre with deep American roots: the captivity narrative. Its expression in the materiality of this historical reality reminds us, first, that the captivity narrative almost always has a shadow story that accompanies it: the conversion narrative. And it reminds us, second of all, that the American master narrative of containment and assimilation is in itself a form of the captivity narrative genre.

When the captor is the state itself, then its acts of containment and conversion are told through images of paternal or civic benevolence: health, sanitation, civilization,

enlightenment. For at the time of Bourke's monograph the massacre at Wounded Knee had already occurred; the magic of the Ghost Dance had failed its desperate Native dancers; the United States military had already proven its might, had for example "surprised and destroyed the main village of the Cheyenne...the destruction [was] complete...the cold became so intense that on the night after the fight eleven papooses froze to death in their mothers' arms...this blow...resulted in the surrender" of the Cheyenne, and of the Sioux leader Crazy Horse (Bourke 1892:31). It was, Bourke stressed, important now to learn from the Ghost Dance and the massacre at Wounded Knee, or what he could at this point of victory call, in a tone of regret, those "recent deplorable occurrences in the country of the Dakotas," (ibid:1) not to teach Indians to "despise" themselves, but rather to "impress upon each one that he is to return [from Boarding school] as a missionary of civilization. Let them see that the world is free to the civilized and that law is liberty" (ibid.: 144).

For more than 200 years at this point, captivity narratives had circulated in America. These were stories in which Indians kidnapped whites. Savage captors did not destroy a village and, regrettably, let the papooses freeze; they monstrosly killed white babies. They either murdered, or worse, actually converted their captives. From the beginning of the colonial encounter, though, captivity went both ways (Strong 1999). And as the captivity narrative in America became a story of Indians capturing whites (mostly, white women), it became what Strong calls a hegemonic tradition in Raymond Williams' sense, taking shape through a "radical selectivity...out of which its specific form emerges and by which other elements are excluded or obscured" (Strong 1999: 2).

When Bourke wrote about the dangers of the medicine man and the need to take Indian children to boarding schools, the captivity narrative was going strong in America. It was clearly seen as a story form, sometimes true and sometimes fictional. It had

specific narrative elements, a beginning, a middle, and an end. In Bourke's time, it had conventions such as a Romantic style of depicting natural landscapes, scenes of anguish that recollected great emotion in the tranquility of the safe return (or sometimes from the settled assimilation to life in a tribe)<sup>10</sup>, and ethnographic, insider scoops on the details of Indian life. Ordeals of the body and the subjective experience of her physical suffering were portrayed with compelling immediacy. What was not so clearly texted was the erased counter-narrative in which whites captured Indians. This counter narrative that was not told might have included, for instance, stories of abduction as early colonizers took Indians aboard their ships (Strong 1999).

Nor, of course, did a sense of story 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 as a policy unfolding ineluctably in the realms of civilization and health, wonderful modern technologies, the absorbing hugs of assimilation, the unfortunate but rational eradication of anachronistic savage ways, the establishment of the reservation, and the boarding school. This kind of captivity was not, of course, to be read as a constructed narrative, shaped by selective omissions. It was increasingly just part of the progression of ordinary life.

### **Another Story**

Once upon a time, aliens starting coming down from space to abduct human beings. For years before that, UFOs had been witnessed skipping like bright, reflective saucers in the sky. When the one in 1947 crashed in the New Mexico desert, local people found its trail of debris: unknown metals that crumpled up in a ball and then unfolded without a crease, and the men couldn't cut it with their knives or burn it with their

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<sup>10</sup> As Wordsworth, defining a Romantic tradition, said was the essence of poetry itself.

lighters; and streamer-like parts covered by some kind of pink “hieroglyphic code.” The military came to the people’s rural houses in the night and told them: you didn’t see it, you weren’t even there, and furthermore, keep your mouths shut if you want to stay alive. No one will ever find your body in the desert by the time the animals get done with you. Then the military insisted to the press that what had been found was only a crashed “weather balloon.” Years later the local people told of seeing alien bodies killed in that crash. The bodies were small as children, but strangely formed like radiation experiments with huge fetusy-looking heads and weird hands. At the time Roswell was the only American military base with a nuclear weapon. 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 Nevada, and they hushed it all up about the UFO. Then they permitted more aliens to begin a program of abducting humans, in exchange for the high-tech alien information used during the Cold War against the communists. That was the story of Roswell; that was how uncanny captivity narratives planted their seeds, in a narrative 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.

An industry grew around the secret of the crashed UFO, like a shiny pearl around a grain of sand. Movies, books, a huge internationally visited UFO museum, a few smaller UFO museums, a yearly summer festival, all centered over the decades on Roswell. Ten years ago a congressman from New Mexico named Steven Schiff appealed on behalf of his constituency for federal secrets of official UFO- related policy – code

named “Majestic 12 “-- to be released through the Freedom of Information Act. My UFO group friends heard: *YEAH he got pages, all blacked-out passages everywhere so you can't read it anyway.* He received a letter from the Director of National Security Analysis that circulated on the Internet and said in part,

*Dear Mr. Schiff: In response to your request, we asked several agencies for their views on the authenticity of the publicly circulated written material referred to as Majestic 12. The origin of this material is unknown, but it is purported to represent highly classified government records explaining unidentified flying object recovery procedures and the crash of a disc-shaped aircraft near Roswell, New Mexico, in July 1947....[various agencies including the Air Force] responded to the inquiries by stating that their knowledge of Majestic 12 was limited to the written material submitted to them by nongovernmental persons. These agencies added that they found no records in their files relating to Majestic 12... According to the Information Security Oversight Office and the Air Force, the Majestic 12 material should not be treated as if it had ever been actually classified by an executive branch agency or government official. We found nothing in our work that contradicts the conclusions reached by these agencies (Davis [alleged]: 1995).*

Of course they don't *admit* it, people say. They were behind it all along.

One day, at the Roswell Museum in July 1996, I asked a young woman who was selling souvenirs and sipping a soda what the people here thought of this UFO business. She said, “well, it's been good, since the bus factory closed.” The military base at Roswell has also been closed, since the late 1960s. But Roswell's 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 its main street, stopping in here and there to chat with clerks in shops which, though they sold ordinary clothes and household goods, all had little aliens in the window. Some of the clerks had grown up in these parts. Others had headed west from places like Pennsylvania to be near the UFO action, to meet other like-minded people who were into things like Native American healing rituals, channeling, and spiritual quests.

Later on we drove out to the desert to try to find the famous UFO “crash site.” Walking off the dirt road into the scrubby hills, we were high-spirited until suddenly the air shifted. The desert spread wild all around us in the lush amber light of late afternoon. Soon it would get dark. It would be so easy to get lost in the expanse. There were no signs, no places to obtain water, just the pressing heat, and the mechanical ticking and buzzing of invisible desert life. You felt, somehow, watched. There was a sense of presences, of life that had come and gone before all this. At once I felt the sense of an evaporated history, the disturbing absence created by one world conquering another.

Who lived here, before the pioneers came, before the Roswell military base opened and closed, before the UFO museum? Some band of Apache? We didn’t know. In the quickly darkening scrub we hurried to find our car. Safely back on the road out of there, as we drove north through the changing landscapes, we saw people selling trinkets from roadside carts. They sold icons of the “American West:” Indian arrowheads supposedly found in these parts, UFO guidebooks to secret places, alien dolls, pioneer old-timey stuff, and papoose dolls wrapped in cellophane with faces pressed up tight against the plastic-wrap like stillborns. One cart had a hand-lettered sign: FRIENDLY INDIANS.

Stop for a moment on that see-saw -- from the routine production of the business of everyday life, to its deconstruction into strangeness, and back again. That shift is the

first manifestation of a trope I want to observe in this chapter about captivity narratives. The trope has two related parts, which you could call stasis and mobility. It is a trope that appears in a variety of mutating incarnations: as rootedness and transport, as paralysis and flight, as convention and disruption. All these images are linked. They are multiple forms of a structure of feeling, a recurring motif that keeps trying to tell us something. This two-pronged trope suggests something like Bakhtin's opposition of centripetal and centrifugal forces, and incorporates what was, centuries ago, first narrated in America as "captivity and restoration." It's what contemporary American conspiracy theorists call on the one hand *independence* and on the other, sometimes, *being caught* and sometimes, with a lump in the throat, nothing at all.

You can be caught, captured, paralyzed, immobilized, stuck. You can be released, restored, redeemed, mobile, free. The tension between those antithetical poles combines and resolves into a continuously shifting image that, despite its own protestations, always contains both of its own ends. I think this dialectical trope is a symbolic core of the abduction narrative. Captivity narratives in general spin upon it. And I think of the trope that way, "dialectically," because its two antithetical poles -- captivity and release -- construct a third term, which is born in the meta-awareness of the relatedness between them. Metacultural glossing itself makes them form a structure; then the structure becomes a discourse, it circulates and lives (Urban 2001, 1996).

This chapter traces the dialectical trope's various permutations and connections within a genred, historically deep zone of overlapping American narratives. I look at its changing appearance both in master narratives of American identity and in unconscious ways of shaping experience. I want to see how distinct but interrelated stories co-generate through images of captivity and redemption -- and how, by echoing each other, those stories may construct a naturalized sense of the real in American life. Some of the

stories I'm talking about are framed and clearly texted, while some, hardly seen as stories at all, bleed into the naturalized organizations of everyday perception.

In the stories I'm going to tell, the trope of containment-and -release poetically compresses and frames a fluid structure of feeling. I want these parallelisms to demonstrate what I've been hearing in my years of listening to "captivity-and-freedom's" multiple, storied forms: how the seemingly oppositional poles of this dyad co-infuse, and co-construct, and tear each other down. How in a long lineage of American narrative, sometimes the captivity is, itself, the liberation. How the abduction can be both a traumatic ordeal, and the seed of a larger flight.

One traumatic history that keeps haunting is the story of how the West was won. It's a story of forcing something foreign into a *heimlich* home, and the ambivalent historical processes of keeping alien people apart while at the same time trying to incorporate them into the naturalized real. It's also a story of constructing an imaginary Western landscape as both a wild, savage-infested terrain to be dominated, and as a visually stunning, innocent paradise ready to be occupied – with the latter discourse emerging full force at a time when it could blot out the Civil War back East (Goetzmann 1992), its personal tragedies, and the doings and undoings of its national and racial metanarratives. Throughout the dissertation, I've been arguing that unresolved histories partially emerge in uncanny stories. In this chapter I look specifically at the fallout into contemporary narrative culture of one of those unresolved national histories, the still-open wound of Native American colonization and colonial genocide in America . I look at how in uncanny space alien stories, traces of this legacy bleed into personal memories. Guilt and confusion and injury sometimes survive the fading of their overt material referents, and become emotional tropes, floating around like ghosts, pasting their faces onto the bodies of other stories, giving them impact and weight. If the dialectical trope I

want to follow is a constant theme in multiple kinds of captivity narratives, then it points to *a something* that both mutates and persists.

In this chapter, I want to think about the persistence of the captivity narrative as one way that a particular history continues to haunt. But it would be a mistake to say that the UFO abduction story is just “about” that single history. 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 essentially expressive social form. Marita Sturken (1997) for instance thinks that memory dwells “outside a definition of truth, evidence and representations of the real...[memory is an] inventive social practice” (259). She calls for social theory to “rethink culture’s valorization of memory as the equivalent of experience. If memory is redefined as a social and individual practice that integrates elements of remembrance, fantasy, and invention, then it can shift from the problematic role of standing for the truth to a new role as an active, engaging practice of creating meaning” (ibid.) So too, she argues, is *forgetting* a social action. Amnesia, like memory, is a meaning-making practice and the absences it produces can be filled in or transformed (see also Stewart 1996 on the cultural uses and narrativized meanings of forgetting and “re-membering”).

What does it mean to consider with Sturken that memory is not the “equivalent of experience?”<sup>11</sup> On one level of course it means simply that memory is mutable, not representational in a realist sense, that it doesn’t necessarily conform transparently to events that can be documented as having materially, historically,

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<sup>11</sup> See also Halbwachs’ groundbreaking study on social memory.

occurred. But “experience” itself *includes* fantasy and imagination, even in the most materially grounded, well-documented event, and therefore her statement can be read to go further. Memory exceeds experience also because it can transcend the “owner” of the actual experience. Once even a private memory circulates as utterance, as narrative, as discourse, or as image, 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, the “women’s Indian captivity narrative” – considered by some scholars to be a specific “genre,” (a subset of, but still generically separable from, stories which feature the Indian captivities of men). In the first place, written first-person memoirs of 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. Secondly, fictional captivity narratives are not always clearly distinguishable from “factional” memoirs (Derounian-Stodola 1999); and furthermore, even the most genuine memoirs may unconsciously 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 memory that outlives the women who were captured by Indians? Then in new guises the captivity narrative itself can remember (see Stewart 1995) 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 elements between different narratives that have been produced over time -

- especially the dialectical trope of captivity-and-freedom – reveal meanings that still can't rest. Continuity between forms 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 truth* that is simply 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 – most important for this chapter – between many different, deepening layers of historical time. The story felt as true is not framed by only one “history” or one “memory” at a time. This is an essentially Bakhtinian understanding of utterance and narrative, which I am applying to cultural expressions of power and its struggles. And what I'm trying to show through this perspective is that in multiple forms of captivity narrative, the accumulation of that struggle over time, through seemingly different events, and expressed in myriad narrative forms, still captures attention, still points to the ambivalence of containment and the desire for release.

Derounian-Stodola thinks of the genre of captivity narratives this way first, most broadly: “any story with a captor (usually from a minority group) and a captive (usually from a majority group)” (1999: ix). She herself briefly mentions UFO stories as part of a taxonomy that includes “such distinct but sometimes overlapping forms as the slave narrative, the spiritual autobiography, the providence tale, the UFO abduction story, the convent captivity narrative and the sentimental novel of seduction, as well as the

Indian captivity narrative” (ix). She says that the basic narrative skeleton places a member of a majority group at the hands of a minority captor; and so when the captive is a woman, her own “minority” status in her own society rises to the surface and creates the potential for her conversion, via her eventual identification with her “minority” abductors. And yet, this is a slippery formula to hold on to. When you think, for example, of Strong’s discussion of a “selective tradition,” you recall that in some less well-circulated stories the captor is in fact a member of, or represents, the “majority group.” And sometimes, when you read a captivity narrative, you can sense that white women in the wilderness felt themselves to be in the minority, with hordes of savages who knew the land surrounding their vulnerable home. The captivity narrative makes you question who is in control at all and whose point of view you see through, shaking up any clean sense of identification with “majority” and “minority” groups.

For from the beginning, captivity narratives are stories that ruminate on complex dynamics of power and how the upper hand can change in the blink of an eye. How power shapes your vision and your being; but how at the same time, something, sometimes, escapes its transformations. How power manifests itself in both benevolent and destructive incarnations. But what might be the connection between phantasm and history, between "the uncanny" and "the ordinary" in varied subgenres of captivity narrative? How can we see the ways in which they coalesce into experience which includes both fantasy and material life? In order to try and figure this out, I’m going to look at a different stories and images, and see what their mimeses to each other can tell us.

Michael Sturma (2002) has also noticed structural parallels between alien abduction and Indian captivity narratives. He compares the two genres’ focus on a theme of paralysis:

The captivity/abduction usually begins with feelings of helplessness and throughout their experience the captive tends to remain passive. Typically the victim of alien abduction becomes immobilized and experiences a form of paralysis. Feelings of helplessness are a common motif. In his book *Communion* (106) Whitley Strieber describes himself "as helpless as a baby, crying like a baby, as frightened as a baby." The captives of Indians described similar feelings of helplessness, sometimes using very similar language to alien abductees. Mary Schwandt, taken in Minnesota by Sioux during an 1862 uprising, states "I became as one paralyzed and I could hardly speak" (Quoted in Kestler 397).

And although Sturma does not as explicitly recognize the pole of liberation that opposes paralysis, he does recognize many points that you could think of – that many abductees think of -- as escaping containments of many kinds. He sees, for instance, that “Often the captive or abductee is profoundly changed by their ordeal, experiencing a shift in personal identity. At one extreme they may come to completely identify with another culture....”

UFO abduction stories are (on one level) a poetic incarnation of this “genre,” the captivity narrative, which since Puritan times has produced and reproduced both hegemonic and oppositional discourses of personal knowledge and American identity (Strong 1999). Alien others (first human others and then, sometimes, not) have been narratively kidnapping Euroamericans for centuries.<sup>12</sup> Indian captivity stories were the first distinctly American literary genre (Kolodny 1993, Derounian Stodola 1999), and

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<sup>12</sup> Their stories have been told from the abductee’s point of view or, sometimes, from that of her seekers. I’ll discuss this more below.

have for centuries organized a durable American mythos (Slotkin 1973). Thousands of women's Indian captivity narratives were published before 1880.<sup>13</sup> 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? What are the processes of its mutations?

One thing is clear: the 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 ultimate social entropy). The loose ends of that ambivalent dyad are still being woven into compulsive narrative meaning. From the beginning of the American colonial project, captivity narratives have struck a nerve around the desires and anxieties associated with colonizing American land.

What were some of the specific anxieties of colonization for women? For centuries, suggests the historian Annette Kolodny, women's terrified fantasies of Indian captivity both expressed and "displaced" the fearsome experience of moving into dark wooded stretches of wilderness, a terrain that was most compelling to the fantasies of white men; pioneer women, in general, longed for open spaces, which had greater visibility, and more potential for domestic control and community connections. "What we are examining here," she writes of female fantasies that emerge from the pioneer experience,

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<sup>13</sup> Of the four best sellers in America from 1680 to 1720, three were captivity narratives. From 1823—1827, only four books in America sold more than 100,000 copies; three of them were Cooper novels that had Indian captivity plots, and the other was James Everett Seaver's *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison* (Ebersole:9). The genre in time became an overtly fictional form as novelistic tales were written to keep up with reader demands (not surprisingly, the "facticity" of many true texts is also mixed or hard to determine.)

are not blueprints for conduct, but contexts of imaginative possibility. Fantasy, in other words, does not necessarily coincide with how we act or wish to act in the world. It does, however, represent symbolic forms (often repressed or unconscious) that clarify, codify, organize, explain, or even lead us to anticipate the raw data of experience. In that sense, fantasy may be mediating or integrative, forging imaginative (and imaginable) links between our deepest psychic needs and the world in which we find ourselves...Consider, for example, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women's fearful fantasy of captivity in a hostile wilderness. The recurrence of these narratives surely suggests an imaginative elaboration of [a pioneer woman named] Elizabeth House Trist's sense of being "oppress'd with so much wood towering above me in every direction and such a continuance of it" (10).

The captivity narrative, then, expressively displaced female fears of an "oppressive" dark wilderness to which wives were often reluctant pioneers. 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). Entering what was for women the "oppressive" land was linked to complex feelings about encounters with the natives who lived there and were themselves "oppressed," much as women often were themselves (a point made in depth also by Castiglia). Woman's Indian captivity narratives thus 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.

Now I will try to let different kinds of captivity-and-liberation stories resonate against each other. I want different kinds of stories -- from women's Indian captivity narratives, to UFO abduction stories, to yet other forms of abduction -- to generate yet a new story about history, experience and power, and to play out the simultaneity of their effects. Then different kinds of "captivity" become linked, conflated and compressed,

each adding strange weight to the other. In what follows I'm going to look at what seem to be different kinds of captivity narratives that have circulated at various times in America, and think about their effects as they echo and incorporate each other. I am going to think through two big types of genred captivity story: the "woman's Indian captivity narrative" and the "UFO abduction narrative." In smaller interludes here and there a few other forms of captivity narrative will enter the text to resonate as they will. Sometimes I want to recall a story I've already told, to hear how it haunts the others, and to make explicit the multiply layered densities of a genre. In all of the stories here, I want the reader to hear the repetitive dialectical trope of immobility and freedom.

And always I want see how the unspoken stories of power can infect what I am arguing is a social sense of abduction. When the image of *abduction* just seems to resonate inside a field 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 patterns. Together they shape a felt sense of the real. What I want, in these pages, is to suggest how tropes from overtly texted and "historical" captivity narratives collude with fantasy and personal experience. I want to see how they generate uncanny, class-inflected, deeply storied understandings about being trapped, about escaping, and always about what some call the powers that be.

## **II. IN THE WOODS**

Once upon a time, on November 5, 1975, in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest in northeastern Arizona, seven men returning through the woods from a logging job saw a huge, luminous UFO descend from the sky and hover above the pines.

The beat-up pickup truck was washed in its strange, silent light. One of the guys, Travis Walton, got out of the truck to get a better look. The others screamed for him to stop but he kept on going; and then all of a sudden the beam of light hit him and he arched back, knocked off his feet, looking, in the drawings you see, like a holy man smitten by the light of God.

The other guys panicked and fled. But there in the Apache-Sitgreaves forest, Travis Walton, like generations of other whites in Indian forest stories, “became an unwilling captive of an alien race” (<http://www.travis-walton.com/witness.html>) .

When the guys got their wits about them and drove back to rescue Travis or collect his body, he was gone. He went missing for five days. Then he mysteriously reappeared, dumped back on a nearby rural road, naked, disoriented, and with a five day growth of beard.

Travis Walton said he was zapped unconscious by the beam of light and remembered bits and pieces of his UFO abduction, memories that he put into a book, his uncanny captivity narrative. Here is one part that I want to think about, as Walton wakes up disoriented in the UFO and thinks he is “in the hospital.” Staggering up, he hits a bench of “utensils” like those in a hospital. He thinks at first that he has been taken to an emergency room until the “sudden horror” hits him:

I could see the blurry figures of the doctors, leaning over me with their white masks and caps. ...Abruptly my vision cleared. The sudden horror of what I saw rocked me as I realized that I was definitely not in a hospital... (Walton 1997)

The “entities” begin to walk towards Travis with “outstretched” arms, like some kind of undead zombie. He lashes out “like a cornered animal” and strikes at their “spongy” atrophied flesh. Here he gets a good look at them as they stand “mutely” watching him:

They were a little under five feet in height. They had a basic humanoid form: two legs, two arms, hands with five digits each, and a head with the normal human arrangement of features. But beyond the outline, any similarity to humans was terrifyingly absent (ibid.).

Travis notices that their clothes have no seams and that their hands, extended towards him, have no fingernails. Their bald heads are “disproportionately large for their “puny bodies.” And the only thing you can see on their faces – the only feature that is not “undeveloped” -- are their eyes, which are luminous and enormous. But their mouths don’t open at all:

With all the screaming and the hysterical questions I had thrown at them, they never once said anything to me. I did not hear them speak to each other. Their mouths never made any kind of sound or motion. The only sounds I heard were those of movements, and my own voice...(Walton 1997).

The story of Travis Walton is one of the most famous UFO abduction cases. I remember the first time I went to a UFO meeting, a member came rushing up to me and before even an exchange of names he said: *Have you heard about the Travis Walton case?* Although some of its details are idiosyncratic (especially the witnesses at the scene of his abduction, and the disappearance for days instead of hours), Travis Walton’s abduction narrative has elements and motifs that resonate with many other memories of abduction by “little gray” aliens. The clinical aspect of the UFO examination shifts, in Travis’s perception of it, from benevolent to gruesome – or, you might say, in the uncanny, the terrifying aspect of the naturalized clinical space is able to rise to the top, leak out and be seen. At first Travis thinks he is in a hospital, a safe place. Then something feels wrong (his shirt’s bunched up) and he thinks it’s an emergency room. And then, after he realizes he’s in a UFO, that he’s like a “trapped animal,” with his “back against the wall” before these alien examiners, he still sees the room as filled with “instruments” whose purpose he doesn’t know but which are clearly “arranged” into a reminiscence of other, more familiar orders in the technologies of everyday life: “There

was nothing I recognized, but some of the chromelike objects reminded me of those in a laboratory or doctor's office” (ibid).

This hyperclinical nightmare articulates the implicit terrors of the dream of everyday life and its unspoken structure of knowledge and power. The naturalized benevolence of the clinical space (the hospital, the emergency room) morphs into its uncanny opposite and becomes the emergency itself. The ordinary venue for containing trauma becomes the generator of trauma. The centripetal order of the clinical closes in on its own imagery, disrupting instead of healing, stoking a wild centrifugal impulse to smash its smooth containment.

Here you might inevitably think about Foucault’s (1979) analyses of the invasive, productive power of the clinical and the examination. But here Foucault has fallen down a rabbit hole. Everything is heightened: In contrast to the near bodiless-ness of his alien captors, Travis Walton, the rugged outdoor male working class laborer, becomes reduced to his body. He tries to smash things to escape, but nothing breaks. He screams and pleads; they are silent. What else is there to say about the “alien race”? They don’t hear him – their ears look vestigial. They have huge bald heads dwarfing their “soft” and “puny physiques.” With their lack of embodiment and feeling, hyperdeveloped technology and big white bald heads, well, they are almost literally eggheads. Their fingers have “no fingernails,” almost as if their hands have become surgical gloves. In the same way their clothes have “no seams.” And most striking is that their faces are dominated by their huge eyes. They are beings who are designed to look, to examine, *take in* – the taking in, the abduction.

They don’t seem to want to physically hurt Travis. That’s not the point. They are clinical.

There is just *so much* here, drifting from piles of memory and history and settling into a story that tells something specific: a feeling about power. There is Nazi-influenced imagery; there is the oddly resonant idea of what Travis calls “superhuman strength of a trapped animal” – that is, the animal-ness of the human compared to an alien, who is neither human nor animal but a “hideous entity.” And so the “superhuman” element of the self is not the brain but the body, which struggles and fights its captivity. Even though he’s suffering, he’s still vibrantly alive in his identification with his body and his desire for freedom coming down to a single unified impulse, so much more animated and full of his own life force than the blank “entities.” In that, there is the body’s immanent rebellion at its capture and clinical objectification, its natural rage at being trapped.

But here’s where the rabbit hole (through which that bald egghead, Foucault, is falling) twists into a Mobius strip. In the “first American literary genre,” layered inside the UFO abduction story like sediment, it’s the Indian – the savage, the wild animal, the natural man, the pure body, the strong-bodied but technology-weak other – who is the abductor. It is the Indians who should appear in the Apache woods and make you what he calls “an unwilling captive of an alien race.” Here, 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’s become Travis’s land, conquering our earth. In the light of their strange gaze, Travis Walton’s captive powerlessness brings into high relief his centrifugal urge: that surging, embodied, emotional animal-humanity, which strangely enough mimics the colonizer’s image of the Indian. In terms of narrative identification, the abductee has traded places.

### **Examinations: Two Short Stories**

Once upon a time, Saddam Hussein was rooted out of his lair and abducted by the forces of the United States military. After so much pursuit and elusion he was at last a

captive. There was a photo that appeared on the front pages of all the newspapers -- the image that epitomized his fall, the sign that was circulated to make clear the overwhelming power of the U.S. In this photograph, Saddam Hussein is not being tortured or killed. He's being examined with a wide-open mouth by a United States military doctor.

When the journalist Daniel Pearl was abducted by a Pakistani radical liberation group, the photograph that was circulated in the media showed him in chains with a gun to his head. It was a terrible image, full of pain and the knowledge of imminent death. Daniel Pearl was physically overwhelmed. His torture was obvious. The terrorists themselves were invisible in the photo, except for a hand that held him. A propaganda video released by the group was circulated on the Internet as well, showing Pearl being harshly interrogated about being a Jew, and then the gruesome beheading. Pearl's throat was slowly sawed open. His severed head was held up by the hair.

The Pakistani group displays its power to terrify by showing the spectacular suffering and death of its captive. The disembodied head of Daniel Pearl is a sign of the group's physical strength, its willingness and capacity to inflict damage in a state of war. It was rumored on the internet that their knife was not sharp enough to behead him well, and it prolonged his agony. That story bolstered the main idea: the terrorists might not have the material stuff, but they had the will to inflict destruction and death, and that was more dangerous.

But, in direct opposition to this image of Daniel Pearl's physical torture, interrogation, and death, Saddam Hussein's photograph in captivity shows a different kind of spectacle: the clinical display of the superpower. It would have been a lesser victory for the United States had Saddam Hussein been simply killed. It would have been counterproductive to the image of the U.S. mission to show him being tortured. Instead

there he is, being examined by the doctor. His head's tipped back, and his mouth is open to the glowing wand of medical inspection. The beam of light illuminates the inner tissue of Saddam's mouth, showing you the red, unbelievably intimate vulnerability of the fallen dictator's soft palette. We look, with the point of view of the observer, into Saddam's face, and see not an equal or greater opponent, but the face of a patient. The doctor looks at his patient, but Saddam Hussein's eyes look off to the side, to a spot on the ceiling. He has unruly hair and a beard. The doctor has a smooth bald head, smooth gloves, and amplified eyes, with a barely glimpsable face. He looks a lot one of Travis Walton's aliens: bald, surgically gloved fingers without nails, amplified eyes, a smooth garment without seams, doing an exam of the captive. The captive has a mouth, the clinical captor has eyes.

I would call this imagistic mimesis uncanny. How could this image from a real military invasion and war occur after so many scores of alien abduction images? We can't say here, of course, that anything was directly "copied" from anything else. This is what makes it uncanny, fantastic -- these images from such disparate domains arising in what is still a shared field of both latent and explicit signs, a field in which our social world takes root and circulates, makes dreams and fantasies, and happens in real material life. How hubristic it would be to assume that Travis Walton is inside the shared field of signs, and the *powers that be* are above it.

In the photos of both Pearl and Hussein, what's invisible is summoned and filled in by the mind's eye, and thereby made into inner speech and image, felt as core knowledge, anticipation, instinct, and dream. Both the "terrorists" and the "superpower" use spectacular displays to create this effect, but what is implied is different. Certainly the display of the medical exam doesn't communicate concern for Saddam's sore throat or dental health. Rather it signifies the United States' ability to capture the subject at a

deeper level. The physical brutality of the Pakistani terrorists shows the ability to kill. The display of the American force is different. It evokes not tortured bodies but other kinds of capturings, colonizings, missions, hegemonies. What isn't necessary, of course, is a display of physical force, since Iraq and Afghanistan had already, at the time of this photo, been thoroughly and visibly bombed to bring their people into democracy. Soon they too would understand that, as John Bourke would say, "law is liberty."

But how do so many forms of captivity story come to mimic each other? How do interrelated tropes of paralysis and agency, immobility and mobility, captivity and restoration, all enter the narrative fabric to weave over time a patterned real? What do they say about history and haunting?

It's through these tropic mimeses that some stories become ripe for the uncanny. The uncanny stories work out psychological and social conflicts not through, say, the internal character development of the novel, nor solely through the heightened episodes of fairy tales (Dalton 2004), but rather through the patterned action of their intertextual similarities. Their poetic transmigrations leave an open space for haunting, for memories of power that can't be contained by any single category like race, gender or class. Some stories don't eliminate the fantastic from expressions of power's built-up impacts. Some stories don't scrape fantasy out of experience. The uncanny piles such categories as race, class and gender on top of each other over time and notices their co-incidences, to nag about things that still haven't had their say.

### **Alien Abduction**

The genre of alien abduction has a meta-origin story. The "first modern abduction," is what people call it. It all started, people say, 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.

The Hills’ is the story whose narrative elements became the foundation on which subsequent abductions’ veracity could be judged by a growing body of investigators who wanted to align themselves with mainstream science and psychology. Serious abduction researchers, as they thought of themselves, began trying to distinguish what they thought of as “the wheat from the chaff,” (Jacobs 1991) where narratively atypical abduction testimonials, especially those remembered without the benefit of hypnosis, were dismissed as “confabulation” (Jacobs 1994) and the pure “wheat” consisted of narratives that sounded like the Hills (Hopkins 1981,1987, Dean 1998, Thompson 1991). As in the Hills’ case, the more typologically consistent stories were usually forgotten and recovered to memory later. In these stories, memory itself became the subject of a secondary captivity story: it was stolen away, converted in captivity with false images or “screen memories,” then through the help of professionals, released.

But even while memory was in captivity, strange fears and feelings remained behind as traces. Detached from their own referents but pointing towards them though a dense field of semiotic distractions, mysterious signs of the trauma mimic the cultural process of uncanny memory itself. As became typical in later cases, the abducted memory-of-abduction was patched together from eerie hints. 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 type, and the teller’s original amnesia of that story was one of its key motifs. Then 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, what is that "something," what is that horror?

But let's go back to the first UFO abduction. One popular scholar with a Jungian bent for archetypes called the Hills abduction story the "origin myth" of the genre (Thompson 1991). Everyone who is into UFOs knows the basic facts. The Hills were an interracial couple from New Hampshire. 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 marked point of the story — it's not a detail crucial to the UFO abduction itself, but it is crucial to the story as a story, a mark of specificity, a particularizing fact, and more than that, something key that resonates implicitly with the themes of race and hybridity in captivity narratives of the past, and abduction stories to come.

So anyway, driving their Chrysler on a lonely road, your normal, average, mixed-race couple called 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 the husband, 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, and then spread in a line across the road, and 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 off-stage. But what is that other thing?

(And the aliens coming in a line across the road... remember that from all those Westerns where the Indians come over the hill — and Spielberg used it too, in

*Close Encounters of the Third Kind.*<sup>14</sup>

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 of the scene at hand. Each ember is a clue to the bigger fire that 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 is 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"... Why, why?

Yes, these are real names and real places. And yet thrust into the uncanny 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 abduction stories that are nested inside this strange one. The couple's mixed race status might give that theme an extra jolt of trouble, a sense of race as part of a larger structure of things whose workings aren't always visible at the surface -- and then, when you think of race, the missing time half-evokes also a kind of "middle passage" in a spaceship, its bewildered passengers immobilized with invisible, uncanny chains. Different troubled histories layer up inside the *feeling* of their connection.

As signs, the names point to *a something*; and on one level at least that something *is* the mimetic accumulation of invasions. For in the dreamlike story of alien captivity, the polysemous quality of signs begins to pulse with the uncanny light of meaningful fluke. They seem to refer to something urgent but obscure. Weird, isn't it, a

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<sup>14</sup> This image of the alien attackers coming in a line across the hill originated with the film *The Seven Samurai* and then was taken up as an iconic image in Western films with Indians approaching over the horizon. Spielberg then used it purposely in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* to evoke a standard familiar movie motif. Thanks to Erica David for this information.

white guy at a UFO group might say -- because at UFO groups, the work is piecing together the iconicities in things, in everyone's memories, dreams, books, road signs, numbers, and seeing some kind of pattern. Weird that the first abduction was at a place called Indian Hill. After everything we did to the "red man" and all. "*We* were like aliens to *them*," I often heard the UFO experiencers say. "We invaded their land."

(A mid-20th-century double feature: earthlings and Martians, cowboys and Indians.)

In the course of talk whose flows and accumulations construct a world, people at UFO groups speak about Native Americans and other tribal peoples very often. Sometimes people say they are thinking about their own forgotten screwed over, noble Cherokee ancestors. *I just know I've got Indian blood*. They talk about the fact that long ago, aliens came first to Indians. The ones who came through space or time to the Indians weren't clinical abductors. They were wise and spiritual, sharing secrets of the universe with a worthy ancient people. Now because of modernity and its violent thefts, those secrets are mostly lost. Most often this kind of talk turns to identifying with the ones whose world was ripped out from beneath them before they knew what was happening. "We screwed the Indians out of their land and we ruined nature," people say. Now the aliens are doing it to us.

A few years ago, the Science Fiction Channel hired archaeologists from the University of New Mexico to lead a group (mostly UFO researchers) on a search for buried scraps of the crashed UFO near Roswell. The group kept a web log. One of the amateur diggers was happy to see that the land here had not been disturbed by humans, it was pure and pristine, and that would help determine that metal found here was from the UFO. Then he noted that the team "bagged" some Native American artifacts. Here was the narrative sediment of UFOs and Indians, layered, literally, 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 evaporated history, the disturbing absence created by one world conquering another....)*

This is how uncanny conspiracy theory builds, sign by mimetic sign. As it builds it makes a spiral of your naturalized identifications and allegiances, twists your identity so that it goes into different directions at once.

UFO talk cathects American Indians not as specific people or peoples, but as indices of that lost time when the earth was still unbroken, its relationship to humans untraumatized. When Carla moved to Arizona from Texas, she went, in part, she said, to “be near Indians.” I visited her once in Tucson when she was there and although she had not met any Indians 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 which appropriate and (only if they are lucky) commodify some fabrication of “Native American” things as pure, spiritual indices to the sign of the “earth.” Both UFO believers and New Agers in general talk often about shamanism and the channeling of spirits from the past (Brown1997 ). I was given a session in Austin one afternoon by Mark, a New Age alien contactee (as he called himself) who chats with Reptilian aliens in his living room. They come down through the ceiling that opens lid by lid like an eye, he says, and then sometimes they play scrabble with him. Scrabble? An almost laughable shock of the mundane into the bizarre, and yet scrabble is, in a sense, a fitting emblem of uncanny poetics, each letter potentially doubling from one word into the next, building up in ways both arbitrary and designed... And these Reptilians give Mark the power to lead people

on guided visualizations, to find their Native American "power animals." (When I closed my eyes to find a power animal I could only see a chicken, but 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 19th century spiritualist practices, and again, with what Bourke called the wonder of electricity -- and even of space alien magic itself, which as Bo told in the previous chapter, has been known to use a paralyzing "wand".

People at UFO gatherings talk about how space aliens can be found in ancient Indian cave drawings. How the Indians know the truth. Someone gave 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, all Aboriginal peoples of the world can become a sign of potential recovery, of freedom from the captivities of modernity -- pointing backwards towards innocence, and forwards towards apocalypse or redemption.

One day, four of us from the abductee support group were meeting in Carla's little living room in Austin, and there, 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, uncanny talk turned to Indians and signs of abduction. I had my tape recorder on.

Brian: I have a little Native American blood. I have a little Cherokee.

Carla: The Indians are a part of this. You -- [turning to me, as a grad student in anthropology] -- have you studied the Indians much?

Susan: A bit, some.

Carla: Are UFOs a part of the worldview, or... the consciousness -- the worldview of a lot of Indian tribes. [Her intonation, beginning as a question, levels off, implying a declarative statement by the end of the sentence.]

Susan: Well, there are things that have been interpreted that way. But you know I think more by white people though...

Carla: [sounds slightly disappointed] They're [the Indians] just not identifying it [their mythology] with UFOs? (Changes to a lighter tone.) I'm reading this book ...I've got one [book] going in the bedroom, one in the bathroom. [General laughter, which relieves the slight tension caused my disagreement. A more enthusiastic mood reappears]. If I don't go BLIND! I'm trying to read all this stuff! ...it's really interesting, *really* interesting. The Indians' traditions that had come down, word of mouth, [making a gesture of forgetting a familiar word] what do you call it that they pass along?

Susan: You mean, uh, like mythology or folklore?...

Carla: Yeah [i.e., she knew those terms but they'd momentarily slipped her mind] it includes the original fathers, the mothers, the ancestors...that Sky Woman, that came down in a Basket? You know, the Basket People?

Brian: It's like those Aborigines with their Sky Heroes. The way their culture *started* was, their god *sent* them [to earth] 20,000 years ago? My dad subscribed to the *Readers Digest* series, "The Quest for the Unknown." He only got the first two books of it, but the second book was called *Earth's Mysterious Places*.

Mary: Oh, I have that!

Brian: -- that particularly grabbed me, the introduction -- of the Kogi Indians down in South America. They claim they were the guardians for the health of the world. And they say that, "HEY, it's being destroyed by greed. " [Brian is talking in the imaginary reported speech of a Kogi person, performing what the Kogi would say to the

whites:] “We weren't going to *say* anything, but we have to come out and make ourselves known now, and let y'all know this....” That one grabbed me. And another one about aborigines sounded like UFO origins, you know.

Carla: Well, who are the Dog Star people? The little Dog Star people in Africa? They had drawings on their caves of all the planets that they [scientists] hadn't even discovered yet? And they [the ‘Dog Star People’] discovered Pluto, they already knew about Pluto, they knew exactly what it was, what its orbit was and everything!...

Brian: [leading off from the Pluto remark] Have y'all seen VENUS lately? It looks really weird. Connor Vernon [an Austin television weatherman] says it's NORMAL, but (very suspicious tone) *I don't know*. It could be a UFO.

On one level you could critique this discourse as a now-familiar New Age based steam shovel that dehumanizes as it romanticizes the other, eliding politics and history. It conflates all “tribal” peoples into an atemporal, nonmaterial, ersatz spiritual blur. But it's also good to recognize that the people talking here – a temporary clerical worker (Carla), a blind woman on a small disability allowance (Mary), a young man struggling with what seemed to me to be some kind of undiagnosed mental illness that got in his way and kept him living with his parents at their modest home (Brian) – these people are not, themselves, the powers that be. And it's good to think about what they are connecting to here. On another level (after the New Age steam shovel) their talk reveals a troubled American unconscious, a shifting, unstable desire, trying in the way it can to construct and express a different point of identification -- one that just doesn't feel at one with the material power of the world as it is. It wants to set up camp on the imaginary bank of the other side, whatever that is, and hopes with real fervor there's some other kind of power lurking there, beyond the ache of the ordinary and beyond the powers that be.

One part of this talk carries the class-inflected tenor of the autodidactical quest for truth, an easy mark to dismiss by people who think that *Reader's Digest* "Quest" isn't part of a superior knowledge sphere. (Nor an escape from corporate dissemination.) 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*. That's why there was tension in the moment Carla questioned me, as someone pursuing a graduate degree. Carla regarded academia with more reverence than resentment, and she expected it to answer the kinds of questions that were for her deep quests for wisdom; but when she saw that in fact my access to the university didn't help with those quests in her terms – when, here, I doubted that Native Americans were naturally connected to UFOs -- then a shiver of confusion and a bit of social distance arose between us. (This kind of thing was not infrequent. Another time, for example, I turned down an invitation to give a talk to the two Austin UFO groups about "anthropological evidence that the Incas were visited by spaceships." The invitation was extended to me in a serious way, asking me to be honored to contribute from my access to the university and I could feel the disappointment, the sense that I was wasting my resources.) Sometimes it seemed that my place on the fence was a kind of inexplicable refusal, getting in the way of Carla's intellectual and spiritual drive. And sometimes she'd just incorporate whatever it was that she could use. She called me one day and said she had suddenly "gotten" -- her word for sudden realizations -- that the only way to understand *what's going on* was through linguistics. Her drive to talk to her fellow searchers, (which usually included me) was more passionate and energized than any academic group I'd ever seen, and expressed a hunger to understand the world as a potentially unified connection of the social, the scientific and the cosmic. There was a sense that lots of people have been screwed over by the powers that be, but that with

enough reading – a dog-eared, passed-around paperback in the bathroom, another by the bed – well you could prove, some day, that those powers that be weren't the final tier of authority, that they existed, yes, that was the first thing to prove, but once you did that, they could perhaps be *made use of* in some way that mattered. And so, connected to that class register of a specific, intellectual, self-taught style is a desire for a world where knowledge can come through channels other than the socially authorized and elite ones. Not the scientists who arrogantly think “they” discovered Pluto; not smug, smiling TV weather man “Connor Vernon.” And in that imagined intellectual utopia, where subtle registers of habitus and the arbitrary limitations of unspoken class values no longer mattered, a meta-mythology took hold: the story that aboriginal “myth” that could be as powerful as any other knowledge, that the Native Americans held knowledge and power before the constraints of the way things are today, and that you could maybe, maybe get to it through talk.

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 all the time. Talking and talking, the words building huge structures and ladders, the way prayers themselves seem to make something become present 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. And so class-based frustration and desire, identification with the screwed over Native Americans (“I have Cherokee blood”), a denial of elite science's official final word, meet up with a desire to identify with the overtly conquered from a vanished time, before the lines of *being caught* and *getting free* were shot through and structured with class shame. Therefore this sort of talk is never about local Native Americans today, screwed again by poverty or its shadows of self-destruction like the people you know, or like you yourself have been. It's instead

always about the fallen royalty who are outside of all that, a world before all that, a world from which they were knocked down like tragic figures. It becomes part of a single idea, 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.

Like a colonial captive writing about her time with Indians centuries before, the captivity then is only of the body, and you have to struggle to keep your mind and soul free from those bonds. (I'll go into this in more detail below.) Maybe this sense of free-floating captivity has something to do with the variety in the list of "symptoms of abduction" that circulates at UFO meetings and on the web. You aren't expected to recall the uncanny captivity itself. But there are so many signs squeaking through your amnesia, indices and marks of the experience: nose bleeds (from the alien sticking an implant up there), trouble with interpersonal relationships (from the trauma), a taste for salty foods (inexplicable, but noticed as a connection between abductees), and then one of them is having "Celtic or Native American blood," or a mixture of the two.

But wait. I was telling you a story about Indian Hill in the White Mountains, and what happened to Betty and Barney Hill. So anyway, the aliens made Betty and Barney forget all about the abduction afterwards with their awful technologies of amnesia. The Hills just went on home. They knew something was weird and wrong, though, because they were missing two hours that night. And so the emblematic feature of all abduction stories came to be what was lost from it, an absence called "missing time." It's an absence that fills up with unbelievable, horrible presences. More weird things happened then to the Hills after they were home, eerie signs that couldn't be explained: dead leaves left mysteriously on a table. Pink powder staining a dress...

Everything that might be randomly and neutrally inexplicable in an ordinary context now indexed a fearsome gestalt of uncanny enigma. And the repressed abduction just kept leaking out. It signaled to Betty in nightmares that went on for five nights and then “just stopped.” For Barney, it was an unspecified dread about something he couldn’t quite see - - what he in his mid-twentieth century, psychology-of-modern-life discourse called (and this is somehow poignant to me,) simply “stress.” After six months of shared, vague anxiety and Barney’s ulcers, the Hills went to a psychiatrist who hypnotized the couple one at a time, and even though they were put in separate rooms and couldn’t hear each other being hypnotized, the UFO abduction memory came pouring out from both.

In their hypnotic trance, they both remembered the aliens taking “hair and skin samples.” The racial difference between Betty and Barney’s hair and skin, a marked sign in a married couple in 1961, was unmarked in most accounts of the aliens’ interest, the “hair and skin samples” becoming simply “human” in the Hills’ joint otherness to the aliens.

In the overt content of the story at least, the abduction foregrounded gender instead of race as the marked difference between the Hills. The racial gap is narratively healed, as the gap between “all humans” versus “aliens” is forged instead. Gender, however, both binds the Hills together as “human,” and makes them distinct from each other. The aliens probed their gendered bodies. They put a needle into Betty’s navel in an operation that people say prefigured laparoscopy. From Barney, they stole sperm.

These aliens were small and gray with big heads and what Barney called big black “wraparound eyes.” Betty at first remembered big noses, but Barney remembered the noses as little slits, which with the huge eyes and invisible mouth became part of a standard gray “alien abductor” face. Betty made a picture of the “star

map” they had showed her: later a schoolteacher who read about the case made a three dimensional model that linked it to Zeta Reticuli,(though the accuracy of this map was later dismissed by a debunking Carl Sagan.) The Hills never got over it all, and Barney died a few years later at the age of 46. In UFO and conspiracy websites, books and magazines the question still runs: what did the Hills remember? And all the alien abductees who came after them?

In the impossible dialectic of absolute forgetting and transparent accuracy, the uncanny reveals another possibility. Through its transformations, it foregrounds aspects of the real that for many reasons have been elided and obscured. But what are the secret referents of these strange signs? Social memories haunt UFO stories; and I am trying to let those obscured memories emerge. But it can be a subtle emergence. The uncanny story does not mask any singular, hidden but still-intact, monologic narrative. So how do we get to the multiplicity of what gives fantastic stories an irreducible sense of the real? Why do they carry, for many people, a gut feeling of urgency, and an inkling of a just-out-reach meaning?

### **III. SECRET IMMOBILITIES**

Being abducted 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 Mr. Michael Menkin (2003) has created a thought helmet to physically block aliens from reading our minds. His extensive web site takes you through a detailed set of instructions, over several web pages, from Step A through 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” (ibid.). On other areas of the web site, there are photographs of Mr. Menkin and other satisfied users of the hat, 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”(ibid.).

The helmet is a simple mechanical gadget, but aliens have spindly, flaccid fingers and a daft 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 that the stranded father was a physicist from the University of Arizona but even though he knew all sorts of fancy things about curved time or whatever he didn't know how to put water in his engine. Ha ha! In a way, the aliens' helplessness with the tin-foil thought control hat is that kind of story.) Menkin would know where to pour the water. He is laboring through the leap of commonsense, materialist faith that thoughts can stay inside your head if you just reinforce your skull.

Made from ordinary things, easily enough constructed 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 thing-less-ness – an alien power 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 hat's bit of concrete magic -- in the protest, however loony or feeble it might appear, voiced by the residual urge of making a clearly useable thing. The hat's power to block the alien depends on the unassuming value the working man places on his craft (for Mr. Menkin insists he's not out for profits – he is not a capitalist, not an entrepreneur – he is simply a maker, sharing his contraption for free with other like-minded abduction-resisters, the way, both proud

and modest, you'd share with your neighbors any Rube Goldberg thingamajig you'd come up with, if it helped.) The abducting alien fits, in one sense, an imaginary of an ineluctably abducting mode of postmodern power that seems to move in transmissions free of material constraints. It's a strange power made manifest in connections rather than in production, a power that we are told endlessly is about "flows" instead of "goods," but that is still itself hostage to the vanishing seductions of the ordinary material thing. But they are here, after all, to examine the concrete workings of our bodies. They get our literal sperm and eggs, the stuff of our innate power to make, to materially reproduce. They still need that! For whatever their inscrutable alien ends may be, they need the fallible human body, they humiliate it by taking what they need and just wiping out your knowledge of their selfish taking, much as any blindingly technological operation still needs, and gets what it needs, from *a somebody's* labor.

Here then is one captivity. The vanishing, the residual -- the working but vulnerable body -- is caught by the blinding shock of the alien new and the seemingly immaterial base of its occult power (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). Here is a *thing*, a bit of making -- a "hat" -- that seems to hold that alien power off, a bit. Of course, though, the invisible web of transmissions continues to catch up the residual urge; Mr. Menkin, after all, disseminates information about his thought control hat not by taping paper signs across his neighborhood, nor by talking across the yard to his neighbors, but, of course, by using the Internet. 15

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<sup>15</sup> The dead-serious and traumatized tone of Menkin's website has been incorporated into a series of blog ironies and freeform, cyber-cult displays of eccentric facts; for example, one blog is actually called "thought control hat" (I think it grooves on the absurd randomness of the phrase, like the poetics of a band name. By the way, this site randomly uses the phrase "turtles all the way down," employing the words like a decoration in various spots on the web page, as words that have no contextual significance and become just ironic-sounding funny words unrelated to anything else. Elsewhere, the web encyclopedia Wikipedia contains an entry for the more inclusive category of "tin foil hats" -- "While there have been and still are many people who believe in the actual utility of such devices, the wearing of tin-foil hats has become a popular [stereotype](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tinfoil_hat) and term of derision, particularly in [Internet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tinfoil_hat) culture. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tinfoil\\_hat](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tinfoil_hat)).

But still. What does it mean to remember (after for a time forgetting) that you've been abducted by a UFO?

And then what does it mean to construct your social and intellectual life around the idea that memories of UFOs are real memories? To go to support groups for UFO abductees, to stay late in the glaring Dilbert cubicle of your secretarial temp job exchanging stories with other UFO believers on the internet, to spend your evenings searching the skies for weird lights? To go out to a 24-hour store in a panic and buy rolls of tape to make *that hat*? To wake up during the night in a sweat of partial memory that *just feels like UFOs*? What does it mean to move to a place in the western desert because you want to be near where the government stole our right to know about the UFOs and alien bodies that have crashed down like old hopes?

Heard against the din of everyday life, UFO abduction talk brings up multiple connotations of captivity, and the desire for multiple kinds of escape, which are often far more difficult to name and to track than any single kind of abduction. Then the trail leads to a social sense of the uncanny and to the restlessness and politics of memory as a social matter. Class is not a topic of conversation in an abductee support group, not directly. And it's often said that abductees come from every position in society. I want to be clear that I am not claiming that abductees all share a single class identity. But in some social worlds, and from some vectors where stories are mediated through inchoate frustrations and shames, the abduction story has a particularly compelling resonance. No – this is certainly not only an allegory of class. And yet see how the inarticulate stories of class in America can resonate into, and find a place within, a narrative complex that incorporates many embedded histories and phenomenologies of power, and its captivities.

The UFO provides a story of being caught and the desire for redemption from an unspoken captivity ... the story of magnificent, inscrutable technology with a felt but enigmatic interest in the body caught up in its power ... the collusion of the government with alien forces, joining together in fantastically pervasive but invisible ways through the powers that be ...and the saturating desire expressed in a flight of the ordinary. And all these themes have a stronger pull in some social worlds than in others. In some places, from some positions, they make a more urgent kind of sense. You could say that what once was thought of as the hidden injuries of class (Sennett and Cobb 1992) have become, late in the twentieth and early in the twenty-first century, the hidden class within injuries, because the feeling of being injured itself is so much more discursively and narratively present than its source (see Stewart 2005 on the banality of trauma; also Berlant 1997).

At UFO abductee meetings it's as if all the hurts of a life have collected into this one gigantic unbelievable trauma of alien abduction and become organized there, under its name: abduction, the biggest imaginable rip-off in the whole wide universe. The word *abduction* gives a meaningful theme, a connection, to all the random injuries of the ordinary, the ones whose specific details have been forgotten but whose stain remains, and sometimes becomes a disposition. At UFO meetings you often see people with a glow of pain about them, as if the wounds of old experience demand to be seen as unhealed, generalized into mute, resentful postures of the body and the face's etchings.

But sometimes people have a different kind of glow – the look of pain transcended, the expression of intentional peace. Sometimes the abductee comes out the other end with a kind of beatific wisdom and a strange acceptance. She's had a conversion experience. She's special; she's gotten to know the alien. Sometimes she thinks she might be alien herself.

Something similar happens in women's Indian captivity narratives. Sometimes the captive emerges to tell about a horrible other. Sometimes, though, she crosses over. Sometimes it becomes a kind of conversion narrative, a conversion into a zone of the hybrid.

I want to think in a moment about hybridity. But again, I'm not trying to limit its resonance to a specific class habitus. Look too at how signs of gender fix themselves into the uncanny trauma of abduction. In 1994 I was getting to know Christina, who lived in an enormous modern wood and glass house overlooking a wooded bluff in a wealthy suburb of Austin. She was divorced with two children and though clearly there was at least one other source of income – her ex-husband was a businessman – she said she made a living now by “being a visionary, looking into other people's lives” – a talent that had descended on her, she said, because of the trauma she'd gone through in her life, including her divorce, as well as some kind of traumatic “everything” that she could not name. She said her trauma “broke [her] in half” and when she came back together she was suddenly able to “see things out of my point of view.” She had transcended herself, in other words. She could break through the limits and containment of her specific life and its boundaries into the unrestricted freedom of not having a limited point of view at all. Now her daughter could do it too.

She told me that after being abducted and “inseminated” by aliens they stole her hybrid child. She said: *I saw a tiny little fetus taken out. I allowed myself a moment of grief.* Dozens of hybrid babies were suspended in the UFO. She said: *I'm glad I got to go in the nursery and hold the babies.*

Christina said:

I saw the fetus go out, I saw the fetus leave. And it was through the vagina, it wasn't through, you know, my belly or anything. And that is the point that I haven't

really worked through. It just seems to sort of scream inside of me that I haven't worked through that one out yet.

Susan: What were you feeling when they were doing that to you? Were you angry, were you --

Christina: I was OUT. I was just totally out. But at the same time I could see it. I could see it, and I did have an emotional response that's huge, vast, tremendous. But I was immobile -- that's what I mean by out -- I was *immobilized*.

-- So, uh, it was ten years later that my daughter -- OK, and then through that ten year period I rejected [this knowledge] and protected my daughter, I projected all experience and talk about UFO stuff with her, I was protecting her. It was about seven, eight months later that I became pregnant with Lindsay [her human daughter.] So uh, so ten years later when she, when we were living in Arizona --Because I was always running...It was ten years later that Lindsay said she saw a little girl that looked like her sister on the back porch. And those are the drawings that I showed you.

-- It's come, since then, it's come to me that looking at the bigger picture, getting off the planet, looking down out there at the universe, that everything is evolving and always has been. So we too and our race is evolving, and we couldn't continue to do things as we are doing them. So things are -- we're at a tremendous point of change, dynamically in ourselves, in a cellular level we're evolving.

-- So I do believe we're creating a new race of people.

Christina's story of abduction becomes a conversion narrative. Here the dialectical trope of captivity-and -release is played out in her reaction to an uncanny experience. She moves from being "completely immobilized" by the aliens -- "totally out" -- into a position of identifying with them and being able to rise above the ordinary

limits of human point of view, like aliens, to see more than other ordinary people, from above. First it is “they” (the aliens) who do things to her. By the end, she says, “we” are “creating a new race of people.” She’s no longer biologically raped, now she’s joined right in, holding the hybrid babies and contributing her human, emotional, maternal talent to the alien project. From lying flat and paralyzed, she moves to a perspective of supervision and agency above the whole “planet.” From the cramped limitation of not seeing, not knowing what is happening to her own body, looking through a fog, she gains what feels to her like privileged wisdom – an omniscience that is now like the aliens’ who can see beyond the borders of earth. And the midwife to this conversion is the reconciliation between the uncanny hybrid child and the “ordinary” human daughter. The hybrid comes and finds the ordinary human girl, gazing at her through a window. Then Christina’s image of herself changes from an immobilized female abjection into a kind of powerful mother figure who has given birth to a new generation of children who will reconcile the difference of their “races.”

This memory is told in registers that evoke intensely gender-centered zones of meaning. The alien abduction is like an intensified and heightened foregrounding of the “ordinary” paralysis in a medicalized birth experience, where babies are taken from you and put into what she calls a “nursery,” and in which you are “allowed” (her word) to hold your baby for a period of time before handing it back.

At the same time, implicit social narratives of racial purity and mixing braid into, and poetically underscore, the more palpable experience (for her) of gendered , medicalized immobility. Two different social memories (one of race, one of gender) intertwine. It’s safe to say that Christina herself, blonde, fair, and blue-eyed, has only directly experienced the gendered vector of this intertwined narrative. The embedded narrative of race, purity and hybridity is the unspoken social memory that, in a way, does

let her “see beyond” her own experience. And the emergent parallelisms of the racialized and gendered memories grow dense and full as they accrue onto each other in the uncanny story. They are expressed, once again, in the dialectical trope of patience and agency -- oppositions that again come to co-embody each other the immobilized patient is transformed into a visionary above the world, creating new life forms.

Those new life forms embody the most salient point of mimesis between racialized and gendered stories. Genetic engineering and its play on a female body, and the mix of what she calls two “races,” come together in the hybrid child. Now that hybrid child is the source of redemption. The child’s uncanny visitations, she says, force Christina to acknowledge and speak about her trauma, to stop what she calls “running,” to heal from what she called a “nervous breakdown” into the elevated space of a huge, whole, picture. Each pole of the dialectical trope of captivity-and-restoration winds into the other like a snake eating its own tail. The abduction becomes a flight from everyday containment. The captivity becomes its own redemption.

At least, inside the bounds of her story it does. The redemption is still not quite satisfying to the listener, is it? It would be too easy to say with Christina that she has been freed into vision, that the hybrid has blessed her with its reconciliations. Why don’t I really buy her declaration of gaining visionary power? Why do I believe in her captivity far more than I do her freedom? (And why, too, did many people in the UFO experiencers’ group say that they thought Christina was not quite on the level? Her story of uncanny abduction, in fact, seemed too perfectly typed to Carla, too exactly like the ones in the books.)

In part my –and maybe Carla’s – inability to believe in Christina’s final freedom is because of the larger social stories still haunting and hovering outside the frame, staring in the window like the hybrid daughter, still waiting their due

acknowledgment. She says she stopped “running” from her uncanny abduction experience. There are other things to run from though, other abductions, invasions and thefts. Other visions still need to rise above the borders of their own limited point of view. Carla and the others in the UFO experiencers’ group told their stories as part of an ongoing open-ended question. To them, Christina’s story sounded suspiciously finalized. It’s as if they were saying: We don’t know *the everything* that still presses to be heard in these memories. But the uncanny reveals the partially forgotten as it begins to leak out of its captivities, not yet fully liberated, neither totally excised nor fully incorporated into the real.

On the one hand, you can look at things as they pile up like this. On the other hand you can break them down into their structured units. Michael Sturma (2002), as I said above, has also noticed the structurally analogous components of Indian captivity narratives and alien abduction stories. He outlines their thematic parallels in a kind of list of morphological narratemes, in a hermeneutics of what he rightly calls their “narrative parallels. ” Sturma lists their shared thematic categories as: 1) Crossing Frontiers; 2) Physical (by which he means the narrativized description of an ordeal into the unknown); 3) Mortification (most striking is his observation that, as part of what he calls “an initiation,” both Indian and alien captives are often stripped of their clothing, “metaphorically...divested of the outward trappings of their own culture”); 4) Ambivalence (that is, the ambivalent quality of the captive’s identification, and the frequent conversion to identification with the captor); 5) Sex and Difference (how captivity narratives tend to be “sexually charged,” from the titillations of 19<sup>th</sup> century fictions to the sexualized experiences of UFO abductees); 6) Spiritual Transformation; and 7) The Warning and the Return (that is, he observes that the captivity is a sign of

imminent danger -- for the Puritans it was a sign of God's displeasure and a journey into the hands of Satan; for the abductee, it can be a warning of apocalypse.)

This is an excellent list. It lays the patterns out across the table, thrusts the paradigmatic axis into bold relief. Look at how the stories have parallels, amazing resemblances, mimetic themes.

But then look again at how the uncanny story folds its narrative twin back inside itself. The genres aren't just parallel; they are also embedded, packed into sedimented layers of history and half-remembrance. And then see too how they open out again and point to the "parallels" of yet other stories, often the ones without books.

Locating UFO stories partly in relationship to the genre of "captivity narratives" historicizes and contextualizes their shared, structured themes of captivity and redemption as central tropes in an American social imagination. It's vital here to see these tropes as symbolically capacious. These are unfinalized images; and in their uncanny manifestations within UFO and other fantastic stories, they articulate with their historical precedents of captivity in intriguing ways. It's important to remember that UFO abduction stories don't reduce to simple "versions" of Indian captivity narratives (any more, say, than could slave captivity narratives be considered this way). Rather uncanny stories reveal some of the ways that a persistent but mutable American genre articulates implicit narratives of power, elaborations of the always-unfinalized dialectic between containment and breaking free.

Looking at structural units as Sturma does can highlight themes in multiple directions. You might also make a list like this, (one that consciously echoes Vladimir Propp's analysis of the folktale:)

1. The hero is engaged in an ordinary and habitual activity that requires little conscious reflection, such as driving, sleeping, or working at a spinning wheel.
2. Members of an alien race capture the hero or heroine of the story.
3. The hero-captives experience feats of physical intensity and endurance. The boundaries of the body are tested. The experience of the body itself is heightened, its borders coming radically into view.<sup>16</sup>
4. When the hero-captive is released he or she often possess an altered self with a new identity. The captives come away with a shaken up foundation of the real. The abduction makes the events of before and after click into a different focus.
5. The extreme helplessness of the hero in captivity becomes the vehicle of agency, and the precondition of her authorial voice.

Here then is a dream. A Man in Black writes this list. Maybe he works for the government and is gathering information for the war against charlatan magic, to be launched against Mr. Michael Menkin. They've already put in the museum the Ghost Shirts, which were supposed to protect Native ghost dancers from the army's bullets. The shirts are gone now, but the hats are coming.

The list of narratemes is placed by the Man in Black in two files: UFO ABDUCTION and INDIAN CAPTIVITY.

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<sup>16</sup> The denaturalization central to captivity happens at the level of embodied experience. Ebersole puts it very incisively, and though he is talking about Indian captivity he could be describing UFO abduction just as easily, as he writes, "The captive "has to acknowledge the essential elemental needs of the "human-body-as-boundary" – that is, a boundary of fundamental exchanges : severe hunger and thirst...the body is experienced extruding blood, pus, bile, entrails, embryos, dashed brains, excrement and vomit...in the world of the alien Other, strange sights, sounds, odors, and tastes assault the captive's senses, while dreams, flashbacks, hallucinations and uncontrollable screams, sighs, tears and tremors emerge from inside. In such situations the body...[registers] porous boundaries of inside and outside, self and other, past and present." (7-8\_) – stories allowed the ask "what does it mean to be human?"

Suddenly a woman runs into the room from the UFO meeting in the room next door (the Man in Black is in a special room at the public library.) She is breathless and her hair is wild. She would look like a gothic heroine, except she wears a sweatshirt with a Schwa face appliquéd on the front.

She grabs the files and throws the papers up into the air. Then she throws in pages from her diary and some cut-out articles from the news. She watches them settle in piles on the floor -- both arbitrary in the ways of their settling, and determined by what is there to begin with.

#### **IV. WOMEN'S INDIAN CAPTIVITY NARRATIVES**

Now, I want to talk for a while in more depth about women's Indian captivity narratives themselves. If *The Interrupted Journey* about Betty and Barney Hill is considered the origin story of UFO abductions, in scholarly and popular discourses, the genre of women's Indian captivity has a foundational, meta-origin story too: "A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson" of 1682, which became America's first best-seller. Beginning with Mrs. Rowlandson's text, colonial captivity narratives drew heavily on Christian hermeneutics to structure a traumatic experience with order and meaning. In Rowlandson's story, as in hundreds of widely circulated texts that followed, "captivity" and "restoration" were opposing poles in an ordeal that transformed Rowlandson's faith, putting it through a test of fire. By weaving Biblical quotations and Christian interpretations into each episode of her abduction, Rowlandson's early narrative became religiously significant in a way that transcended its literal events. Then "captivity and restoration" were understood as polysemous signs of God's intervention in both the political project of colonization and the personal design of an individual pilgrim's progress. Each "remove" to which Rowlandson was led on her

journey, as each episodic location was called, was to be read as both a geographic place and a spiritual space.

In UFO abduction stories, epistemological uncertainty replaces the Indian captivity genre's overarching theme of faith. (What happened? Was it real? asks the UFO abductee and the reader of her tale .) Indian captivity narratives also cloud the transparency of representation: (who is the author? Whose voice is this, representing the first person narrative? Is it "fiction" or an attempt at mimesis of some "non-fictional" event?) Yet despite these questions, there was this definitive historical reality: Native Americans did kidnap white settlers for motives as varied as ransom, adoption into a native family to replace a dead child, or for killing in the context of war. But the sense of indisputable reality in the text often only heightens the fluid power of the sign. Indian abduction transcends literal historical events into what Gary Ebersole calls the "rich narrative and imaginal activity that has taken place around the topos of captivity. The captivity narrative has been a major vehicle for reflecting upon the meaning of the European occupation of the captured space of the New World as well as upon the ways in which humans are captured by the spaces (sociocultural, linguistic, and geographical) they inhabit" (Ebersole 1995:3).

Uncanny alien abduction stories might grow out of similar imaginary soil: a fabulous musing on the limitations of the spaces we inhabit, and the ways in which alternate life stories – both past and future ones – always seem embedded in the rut of the way things are. And so too might the stories of everyday life that shoot through and around them, the narrative backdrops of frustrations and desires, being caught, letting go.

## **Interlude: Other Captivities**

### ***Trials***

A newspaper blows over to where I'm sitting today on a summer afternoon. It shows the opaque, arresting face of Elizabeth Smart, the Utah girl who was taken captive into the mountainous wilderness behind her big, suburban house, and the wild-eyed man who kidnapped her along with his dead-eyed wife. On the TV show I saw about this, for it was on every channel, all the time, the narrator proclaimed that Elizabeth's life was forever divided into two halves, the "before" and "after" of her abduction and captivity. In the pictures of before, she played the harp in a big house, her blonde hair tousled with activity, her face shining with innocence and privilege. Then she was abducted by the savage people to live as some kind of wife-child. They wanted to adopt her, rape her, convert her. It turned out they were in the woods behind her house the whole time, and she could hear the search parties calling her name. Later, the trio walked around Elizabeth's city, passed by the things she had always known. So close, it was as if the normal and the crazy were parallel dimensions, slipping in and out of the same frame. There was some dreamlike way that the episodes of Elizabeth's ordeal followed a plot that seemed already vaguely familiar. Its narrative trail was addictive as a fairy tale.

The kidnappers and Elizabeth their victim camped out there in the mountains, lighting small fires, going hungry, and they stayed on the go, moving from place to place, just like the endless journeys endured by women captured by Indians, who always kept them moving through the exhausting wilderness too. Elizabeth Smart's kidnappers transformed what had been the lovely scenery behind comfortable homes into a psychotic old-west setting of wild people capturing a maiden, sexually and religiously indoctrinating her into their ways.

The man had been a drifter, a nomad, an itinerant hired hand. Mrs. Smart had hired him to do some kind of repair work on the outside of the house. He was an invisible class presence who became bizarrely – wrongly -- central to their world.

As for the redeemed Elizabeth, it was said that her trauma derailed her. When the cops took her abductors away, said the TV narrator in a voice of mystery, Elizabeth's first question was what would happen to them. Would they be all right? Since Patty Hearst a generation earlier, everyone knew that the trauma of captivity could blur the victim's lines of identification. Still, that moment unnerved the narration. And why, by the way, hadn't she tried to escape when she had heard the searchers calling her name? A psychologist had to be brought on, to emphasize that it wasn't Elizabeth's fault. She had survived and that was a victory.

And remember that other child, Steven Stayner? I heard about him when I was a child and was forever disturbed. It was told like a ghost story. It was true but it seemed impossible, as if it emanated and then materialized from fear itself. A pedophile abducted six or seven year old Steven Stayner on his way to school and kept him for the rest of his childhood, plucking him from a middle-class family to some dark world in trailer parks. They too moved around. He "adopted" the boy in a sick charade of parenthood and inducted him into unspeakable things. The boy adjusted to his life with the captor. He forgot his origins. After seven years, the man captured a new little boy, maybe a preschooler, and the amnesia faded. As Steven's memories of his own abduction came into focus he took the new little boy to the cops, and told his recovered story. After he was returned to his family, Steven couldn't adjust to normal life though, and as a very young man he died in a motorcycle accident. There was an article in the *New York Times* about his death, I remember, its tone subdued and confounded, as if acknowledging that the young man's premature death resulted from his abducted life.

But it didn't even end there. Just a few years ago, three female hikers were murdered randomly in Yosemite National Park. The unsolved murder, narrated on the news, poisoned the image of the gorgeous Western landscape as an idyllic space, infecting it with dissonance and fear. The murders stained the safety and innocence of hikers in a nationally bounded "western landscape" meant for the enjoyment of the public. That is why the crimes were such a big story as police tried to solve them. Soon the murderer was found to be Cory Stayner, the late Steven Stayner's older brother. *Cory* had not been abused or kidnapped by any pedophile. Why was he a killer now? It was mentioned that as a teenager, Cory was jealous that Steven was allowed to continue drinking and smoking after being returned to the family. But still that didn't explain a murderer. Unlike Steven, Cory hadn't been directly injured. Damage had been done in some less direct way. The original captivity had a refractive effect in the family, damaging the boy who had remained in safety but imagined his brother's abduction, and the left-behind boy was ruined by the wound of captive's absence. His brother's missing time made something go missing in Cory.

This story, unlike Elizabeth Smart's, didn't become an addictively compelling narrative with a satisfying sense of closure. After the killer was found to be Cory Stayner, it wasn't on the news every day. There was a sense of things to glance at and then let your mind tiptoe backwards again. The narrative connections and fulfillments were disturbing, rather than satisfying. In the Stayner case, it was furtively understood that the two tragedies in the family were somehow, uncannily related -- that Steven's monstrous captivity had leaked out of the event itself and disrupted everything in its wake, created horrors by ripping holes in the fabric of ordinary benevolence that keeps all kinds of unspeakable things contained.

### *And Tribulations*

In the captivity genre's first American form, the captive's recovered voice recollected horrific tribulations. Sometimes she remembered watching her children killed during the initial Indian raid on the settlement or die slowly from their wounds while in captivity. Sometimes the captive was separated from her children and had to worry about what they were enduring or whether they were still alive. At the same time the (now recovered) captive journalistically recalls her own experience. Intense hunger was sated with food that would have been unthinkable to consume before – rotting small game, organs filled with offal. There were physical feats of endurance like wading through rivers and skinning animals. The narratives also detailed ethnographic descriptions of distinct Indian personalities and of elaborate Indian customs and methods of subsistence. And in early narratives, captives typically interpret help that comes from Indians during the ordeal as evidence of a providential divine hand in the captive's survival (Castiglia 1996, Strong 1999).

After an episodic narration of ordeals and divine interventions, mostly during a journey, at last the captivity narrative comes to its denouement. This is the release from captivity into a transformed kind of everyday life: The woman is either ransomed back to her own people; or she is bought by other (also alien to her -- for example, French Canadian) whites for marriage; in one colonial case (Hanna Duston) she kills her abductors with a hatchet, exhibiting uncanny female strength. Or she becomes a member of the tribe through adoption or marriage.

Here it comes again: that morphing, dialectical trope – stasis and movement, containment and its explosions -- in the metadiscourses of captivity.

You could say that by portraying the capturing other as innately savage and unpredictably aggressive, captivity narratives simply justified colonial policies of

containing Native American peoples. In this light, when Euroamericans are forced as captives into a journey through a metaphoric and literal wilderness, the centripetal stability of “settlement” -- the farm, the colony -- faces the threat of chaos, but at the same time its own stability is emphasized. In comparison, it is more like an English town than like the savage life in the wilderness. The narrative of forced movement also echoes larger European discourses that equated savagery with “nomadism” or mobile rootlessness, and civility with the unmoving, bounded stasis of the homestead, the farm, and the ideal of land ownership on the other (Mooney 1891; for similar discourses pathologizing “nomadism” in Romani peoples, Lepselter 1999).

But in some stories captives come to identify with and sympathize with their captors. Then captivity itself can either be said to annihilate the captive’s autonomy – in the discourse of the “Stockholm syndrome” – or else, as Castiglia sees it, identification with the captor can become a venue for liberation, the means by which the confinements and exclusions of everyday life are revealed to be a construction. Gradually taking to Native American life, sometimes the captives begin to see from the others’ point of view. Kindnesses received from within the experience of captivity begin to seem human and personal.

This gradual humanization of the other appears in the narrative of Mary Jemison, who was kidnapped by the Seneca to replace a dead daughter. Jemison married and had children with a Seneca man and eventually became a matriarch, declining offers to return to the white world but agreeing as an old woman to be interviewed by a white writer. Her story, a long ramble both through the events of her captivity and her life as a Seneca, became part of a popular subgenre, that of the “transcultured captive” (Derounian-Stodola 1999: 121) – the most dangerous kind of story, since it suggested that white civilization wasn’t inherently desirable and could conceivably be rejected for its

savage alternative (Kolodny 1984). At many points after her initial captivity, Jemison could have left Indian life, but chose to stay savage. Maybe her narrative was so popular because her family life with the Seneca had many dramatic sorrows that lent themselves well to story. One of her sons murdered the other. But the violent escapades of her half-white, half-Indian sons seem not so much to condemn Seneca life itself as to reinforce anxieties around the charged space of hybridity.

If you focus on these cultural conversion stories, then, you might say that captivity narratives performed a task of social criticism. They humanized the enemy. They revealed latent dissatisfactions with unmarked gender roles. And most threatening of all to the order of things, they questioned the self-evident fact that savage society should be conquered and civilized. But whether they were read in registers of critique or containment, all captivity narratives offered a way of thinking and feeling through the often troubled and ambiguous experience of white settlement. The stories moved invisible formulations of both race and gender to the foreground where they mingled in the dynamics of their encounters<sup>17</sup>.

As power dynamics changed between whites and Indians over centuries of colonization, so also change the poetics of personal narratives from different eras. In seventeenth century Puritan stories, you see the white settlement as isolated and vulnerable. From these early stories it isn't clear that one day things will shift and that

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<sup>17</sup> Narratives like Jemima Howe's whose daughters were married off to the highest bidder by her captors "explore the powerlessness of women as mothers, daughters, sisters and even authors" (Derounian-Stodola: 95). But the containing function of early captivity narratives is their most striking feature from our perspective centuries later, especially if, like Strong (1999), you notice that the Indian point of view is absent -- and that awareness of its absence is absent from most gender-focused scholarship. However, as Strong acknowledges and as others scholars, such as Castiglia and Kolodny, emphasize, the genre also opened up ways for women to rewrite their own positions, portraying female captives as resourceful, courageous and strong. Liberated in their captivity from conventional gendered constraints, they implicitly deconstructed assumptions of women's natural dependence, which could then lead to other kinds of social and racial deconstructions as well. Of course, it is easy to overemphasize the natural affinity between a woman's new found strength and her political awakening to the humanity of the Other. Hanna Duston, who killed all the Indians with an axe, was probably the woman who felt her strength the most profoundly.

the Indians will become the defeated minority. It isn't obvious to them that the captive's personal vulnerability clashes ambiguously with the rising supremacy of white nationhood. Or that, as she fears for her life in captivity, her symbolic position of power within an agenda of genocide will have to be reconciled with her powerlessness as a woman. But I think these implicit ironies grow closer to the surface later on in the colonizing project. In the 19th century, when whites had clearly gained power and when federal policies of genocide had taken root, a gap opens up between what is known, and what has been more obviously obscured.

In the earliest captivity narratives, the moral structure of things is cleaner. In the 17th century's "emerging genre of spiritual captivity" (Strong 1999:2), the occupied land may be rightfully and divinely the property of the colonist, but it's far from a safe haven. The woman who is abducted into unknown wilderness begins to explore what becomes a spiritually unknown space, conquering fear and vulnerability through each step of her survival. God's intervention at each juncture underlines her special position, as a stranger in a strange land. 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 narratives, 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 dramatically unlike later developments in the genre. For example watching her children murdered is sometimes recounted in what for the modern reader is an irreducible voice, where sparsely 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. This voice compresses sentiment into its own stark poetics of intensified containment. Another instance of this kind of compressed poetic: 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 reserve and emotional distillation of this stark voice, ironically, brings the modern reader stretching towards it more intensely, in order to cross the distance. The Puritan captive similarly 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. She has entered an otherworldly journey; and the "point" of this 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. Everything signifies a real beyond itself.

For early colonial captivity narratives took seed and grew within a larger climate of Elizabethan –era stories -- testimonials which matter-of-factly incorporated accounts of the supernatural, stories whose strange manifestations could easily be compatible with truth claims. “After all,” writes Richard Dorson (1950) 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” (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” (ibid). In captivity narratives that passed through the editorial hands of Colonial preachers like Cotton Mather, the otherness of the new world was literally otherworldly: “the Indians themselves represented a bizarre phenomenon that could not be disputed, and they added further to the New World's mythology. If the English accepted a personal Devil and his human consorts, they could not very well deny practice in the black art to the red heathen” (ibid.).

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century John Bourke saw the medicine man as a charlatan whose main dangers lay in keeping the rational light of modernity from his people. But for Cotton Mather, medicine men were dangerous because their profane magic really worked. Then good and evil were independent forces; they were something real in the world to be identified and narrated as pulling at the individual soul. Therefore a folklorist like Dorson can categorize early colonial captivity narratives as part of the “sagas aplenty” that included “stark tales of boat wrecks off the coastal and island shores, capture and enslavement by the savages, hunting and skirmishing in the deep woods”

(ibid). In Dorson's mid-twentieth century, folkloristic view, the social implications of colonization and the implicit frustrations of rigid gender constraints are far less palpable than are the imaginative reaches of a far-off European/American folk tradition. Recent scholarship zeroes in, incisively and crucially, on the political social cracks revealed by Indian captivities; but Dorson's focus on poetics and zones of imagination also remind you that early captivity tales are not simply social statements but also quite otherworldly to us, part of "a world of the marvelous, [whose] possessors were attuned to its marvels and afire to give them lasting memorials" (ibid.).

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 into 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 -- who was so skilled at shaping women's captivity narratives into lessons of Puritan doctrine -- this story, genred in his own time as a "true tale."

Cotton Mather wrote that he had heard from the "pen of the reverend person who is now the Pastor of New Haven" (Mather 1950) that a ship bound back to England had not returned the following spring. The New Haven pastor wrote to Mather of what is in a sense, a Colonial UFO: "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" (ibid.).

The New Haven pastor James Pierpont informs Mather about this ship, built in Rhode Island, which leaves New England "so walty" that this Reverend Pierpont fears it must founder and sink at sea. Despite his fears, the ship embarks with the

Reverend praying for the Lord to do as He will with the souls traveling upon it. When the next spring, “no tidings of these friends arrived with the ships from England, New Haven's heart began to fail her” (ibid.). Then, the next June, reported Mr. Pierpont,

a great thunderstorm arose out of the northwest... about an hour before sunset a ship of like dimensions ... appeared in the air ... seemingly with her sails filled under a fresh gale, holding her course north, and continuing under observation, sailing against the wind for the space of half an hour (ibid.).

Pierpont writes to Mather that crowds gathered to watch the sunken ship sail through the air:

Many were drawn to behold this great work of God; yea, the very children cried out, 'There's a brave ship!' ... Quickly after the hulk brought unto a career, she overset, and so vanished into a smoky cloud, which in some time dissipated, leaving, as everywhere else, a clear air. The admiring spectators could distinguish the several colors of each part, the principal rigging, and such proportions, as caused not only the generality of persons to say, 'This was the mold of their ship, and thus was her tragic end,' but Mr. Davenport also in public declared to this effect, 'That God had condescended, for the quieting of their afflicted spirits, this extraordinary account of his sovereign disposal of those for whom so many fervent prayers were made continually (ibid.).

And Cotton Mather emerges from this text-within-his-text to address his own readers as Pierpont has addressed him, letting them know the urgency of this telling of a true tale: “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 (Mather 1950: 161).

And so, believe it or not, here is a 17<sup>th</sup> century “airship” off the coast of New England -- a colonial unidentified flying object that resolves into a clear picture of a ghost ship, the souls of the voyagers lost in the passage going backwards to the Old World from the New. It is capsized if not captive. 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 then *already* is an uncanny American narrative in which a UFO haunts the ambiguous process of crossing worlds.

In this light, you could say that the voyage across the sea to the New World was always a mimetic image that shaped the imaginations of those who later headed West into the New World of the territories. You could also say that the vast sea was something like the vastness of space into which, a few centuries later, ventured what were to be called astro/nauts (certainly the word itself bespeaks a connection with sea exploration) and out of which came other incarnations of ghosts, strange creatures, and other forms of captivity. But while uncanny UFOs are always “unidentified,” here the UFA (unidentified flying “APPARITION OF A SHIP IN THE AIR”) is an object quickly identified. First of all it is an apparition. Second of all, it is a direct copy of the known ship. Ghosts in this kind of religious context, are signs that often have a singular referent (cf. Gordon 1997); the direct link between signifier and signified speaks of an orderly world.

The air ship is, without hesitation, incorporated into a tight fabric of cosmological and semiotic meaning. This haunting, then, is not disturbing or disruptive but rather 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 captivity narratives evoke a very different world from Mather’s and Rowlandson’s. As the language of the journey into savage territory becomes more lushly emotional and less spiritual, the captive’s voice expresses ambiguity between sign and referent (which I’ll demonstrate in a minute). And at times she becomes gothic, sounding like a writer of her time, influenced by Romantic

sensibilities. Not as thoroughly permeated by hard faith, nor as steeped in the marvelous as part of the everyday world of God, a different aperture for the uncanny opens up in the newer sensibility. While I don't pretend to be able to cover centuries of changes in uncanny American sensibilities, it is worth noticing a few differences over time that are most salient to my discussion here. I think of the pioneering westward journey into a new New World as part of a narrative zone drawn more from spiritualism than Puritan spirit. Captivity and haunting take on a different poetics of affect.

Compare Mary Rowlandson's 17<sup>th</sup> century recollection of her children's deaths (the brains-knock't-out children, above) with the memories of Fanny Kelly, who was abducted by the Sioux in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> 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 (1990:56-7).

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 the 19<sup>th</sup> century text above, these forces bleed into an ambiguous subjectivity. It is Kelly's ghost of *painful memory itself* – not a ghost that lives independent of her affect – that becomes an agent of haunting. Her perception is saturated by countless gothic texts, countless terrifying representations of savages, whose projection into an uncanny meta-image is –

at least to a degree self-consciously – indistinguishable from her own imagination. Her intimate memories – images that are the epitome of a former *heimlich* life – become uncanny at the moment of their loss. They are pictures and sounds from her inner stock of homely images, seen in the moment of becoming externalized ghosts. They are powerful because they are, like many uncanny things, “condensed” (her word). In a traumatic moment, this condensed essence of the familiar is sensorily superimposed upon another “picture” from her inner stock of images – this one not an intimate 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. Her narrative is filled with ethnographic observations and detailed descriptions of practices like the Sun Dance, and comments upon the fault of whites for corrupting the Indians with alcohol in the first place. But the experience was agonizing; her husband fled the raid, leaving her to be captured, and her young daughter Mary was indeed killed as Kelly feared. At one point, too, Kelly was told she too would be killed for having accidentally broken one of the Indian’s pipes and she prepared to die; at the last minute her life was spared, leaving her traumatized with fear.

On an unremarkable day later during the captivity, riding on horseback along with the Sioux on what “seemed to me an endless journey,” an Indian 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 horrifically 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 has to envision, now, just 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 an awful sense of ghostly 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, the Indians, 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.). Later, unable to recover from what she’s seen, she tells the Indians she misses her own mother, since she believes that to be “the only grief with which the red nation had any sympathy” (142).

But the traumatic sight of her daughter’s scalp and shawl produces 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 (in the 17th century narrative) Rowlandson’s children die, their mother, of course, describes being grief-stricken. Despite struggling with sinful despair during her ordeal, she never narrates the kind of wildly unbridled angst that two hundred years 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. In Kelly’s 19<sup>th</sup> 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 could 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 trauma 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 kind of the uncanny. The demons are no longer part of the Puritan world’s fantastic elements. Now 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.

The form taken by the 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 19<sup>th</sup> century, white settlers, even at their most vulnerable, had to feel 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 their vanishing, the imagined Indian became less a figure in a powerful Puritan demonology than a symbol of new ways to access spiritual worlds; and Native religion became less an aspect of black magic or evil witchery, and drifted more towards the positive spiritual alternative to be appropriated for white personal growth that remains in New Age religions today. At the same time that a rationalist discourse advocated eradicating Indian religion, Shakers in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century invited hundreds of "unidentified spirit-Indians" and a thousand Chippewas to participate in their trances in upstate New York, and the famous late 19<sup>th</sup> 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 1997:162-3).

To those intimations of vanishing that pricked the white imagination in the course of changing power relations between whites and Indians, you could add the inescapable climate of moral ambiguity that had to layer in during the 19<sup>th</sup> century with contemporary discourses about race, slavery and abolition. You could layer in

ambivalent Romantic discourses about industrialization as, more and more, Indians became central to a cluster of symbols about a marked, entextualized “nature.” And, of course, you could trace the construction of nostalgic settlement of wild western land – land that becomes, of course, the fantastically texted landscape of both American colonization and uncanny conspiracies, the “West.”

### **Captivity, Hybridity and the Land**

In both fabulous and realist glossing on colonization, there is first the land itself. The land is perhaps most overtly (or at least most visibly) an obsession in movies of Indian captivity. That’s the case in what’s probably the most famous of these films, John Ford’s 1956 classic Western, *The Searchers*; and it’s true too in, for example, *The Missing*, a recent meta-Western. In both films, Indian captivity narratives are saturated with tangled themes of hybridity, race and gender, and always, shot through with a romantic sense of the conquered land.

In *The Searchers*, two men pursue a child named Debbie who has been kidnapped by Comanches. As the little girl tries to hide during an Indian raid on her family’s Texas home, clutching a doll to her chest, she is darkened by a menacing, silent shadow that passes over her; she looks up to see it, her face full of terror, and that is the last moment we see of her childhood. Though it is cast by an encroaching Indian captor, Ford’s use of shadow gives the maximum emotional jolt to the viewer, in part because, as it approaches and darkens, it holds an inkling of indeterminacy – a shape of a generalized omen, the unfinalized, nightmarish feeling of horror. (And in fact the passing shadow is weirdly similar to the shadow of a UFO that passes over people and ordinary things, darkening them with ambiguous fear of what was coming, in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.)

Debbie’s uncle is Ethan, played by John Wayne; he’s the prototypical questing, unattached, hard-bitten solitary Western hero, who has returned to Texas from an

unspoken trauma in the civil war. This is a buddy picture in which John Wayne plays the reluctant buddy; the persistent buddy is Martin, his nephew and the partner in the search. Martin is Debbie's half brother. Martin is a white-Indian "mixed blood" who has been raised by whites; Ethan is a fierce Indian-hater.

The men's journey is an episodic quest to reclaim the kidnapped girl for the white world. When they finally find her, a decade or so after her disappearance as a child, she's a beautiful young woman of marriageable age, now played by Natalie Wood. After all the searching, though, finding her is not the climactic end the viewer expects; instead, Ethan (John Wayne's character) suddenly wants to kill his niece because she's gone Indian. Ethan's attempt to kill the same girl he's been tracking for years, his life work, is the culmination of his "Indian hating:" she's too tainted to live. But his murderous rage also seems to conflate her cultural conversion with an implicit suspicion of her sexual defilement. Essentially she's no longer a cultural "virgin" and therefore no longer eligible for marriage in white society. A whole interconnected web of dangerous impurity is compressed into the sudden image of the young woman Debbie shot against the landscape, her dark eyes, hair and complexion confusing the clarity of whiteness "beneath" the Indian clothes.

Black haired and dark-skinned but white, Natalie Wood is contrasted on the one hand with the fair, peachy-cheeked but hot-tempered girl who waits back home expecting to marry Martin, and on the other hand, with a stolid, comical "squaw" whom he actually does marry, briefly, in a blunder of misunderstanding, and who triggers his frustration and rage at being stuck with a tagalong Indian wife until she's disposed of. Debbie's character mediates between two female types: the totally white woman whose pioneer-girl frankness signals an overly transparent self, and the blindly obedient, totally Indian woman who seems utterly opaque. It's as if the captive girl's transculturation reveals the

contingency of racial and cultural boundaries themselves. Martin, the half-breed who lives as a white, is an emblem of incorporative, centripetal assimilation; but Debbie's transculturation in the opposite direction becomes defilement. Her crossing of racial and cultural boundaries is expressed in the femaleness of her body, seen in the figure of gorgeous, vaguely exotic, Natalie Wood, whose image replaces their inner picture of the little girl with the doll. The white child of their imagination is suddenly, confusingly, sexually mature, beautiful, and wearing an Indian dress. And so John Wayne rushes over to kill her.

The subtext of this struggle lurches even closer to the surface as the "mixed blood" Martin restrains Ethan and saves the captive girl's life (itself an ironic echo of the Pocahontas myth.) The actions in the final scene are emotionally laden but unexplained, like elements in a myth. At first Debbie resists their attempts at rescue and it seems that her conversion has been completed, that she's crossed over into fully assimilated Indianness. But finally it seems that her original memory returns to her. Again, here, it's as if an amnesia has lifted. Then she succumbs gratefully to Martin, who carries her over the horizon back towards civilization. Her captivity is over; now she is about to return, transformed. Although they are half brother and sister, their reunion is strangely romantic. It is as if transcultured Debbie, not the fully white nor the fully Indian woman, is whom the half-breed is meant to marry. Both of their mixings will return from captivity to the incorporation of the white world. But the sense of a positive, fertile hybridity retains a trace of anxious impurity -- an inkling of incest.

Part of the brilliance of *The Searchers* is that it leaves you not so much with an impression of characters' actions making sense within a plot, but instead with the odd, resonant feeling of a social dreamwork beyond the plot itself, hashing out unresolved implications. This strange captivity narrative seeks to redeem both the man's mixed

blood, and the woman's far more threatening mixed culture, by bringing both types of "hybrids" back into the fold. Maybe this redemption will happen through marriage and the settlement of a landed homestead – but always with that strange remainder of disturbance, their half-sibling relationship. The image of hybridity and all its unspoken messages can slip easily into the uncanny.

*Christina thought about her hybrid child that came and gazed through her window and she said: We're at a tremendous point of change, dynamically in ourselves, in a cellular level we're evolving. So I do believe we're creating a new race of people.*

In *The Searchers*, the women's Indian captivity narrative becomes a vehicle for trying to resolve the alien into the familiar. This story equates racial and cultural resolution with domestication of the wild alien land. Here racial and cultural mixing become linked to a sexualized hybridity. In contrast the pure whiteness (and uncontaminated maleness) of John Wayne and the pure Indianness of the Comanches remain outside the possibility of romantic domestication -- the starkly white male "individual" of John Wayne and the starkly Indian collective "tribe" ironically occupying similarly peripheral spaces that oppose the romance and emotion of the couple. The mixing of their own gendered blood will in all likelihood create new frontier families, a combination of individuality and collectivity, maleness and femaleness, whiteness and Indianness, absorbing difference into a single idea (the colonizing family unit). In this idea of America, alienness points to sexual and emotional fruitfulness, as long as it can be incorporated and contained. Once captured, racial and cultural otherness is a necessity, like gendered otherness, to be folded into a bond that will wipe out its distinctions.

This transformative symbolic action happens only when the woman's Indian captivity narrative is retold as a "Western," a change that happens most significantly in the switch of story to the male searcher's point of view. In the typical women's Indian

captivity narrative, the story centers on the ordeal of the captive; her searchers are narratively obscured until they return to her point of view. In the “Western,” though, the captivity experience is the absent narrative. The male quest becomes the story, and the captive is like a kind of Penelope, waiting for a role until the denouement. This refiguration of the woman’s Indian captivity narrative’s point of action (from the usual perspective of the female captive to that of the male seeker) is, I think, one way that the trope of captivity-and-redemption can be expressed from a male point of view, and a way that one American genre, “the woman’s Indian captivity narrative,” is transformed into another, the “Western.”

As is typical of John Ford’s Westerns, the land in this film rises up with all the presence of a character, filled with disinterested hardship and the promise of redemption. This is true, as well, in the more recent film *The Missing*, which self-consciously tries to engage with *The Searchers* and tries, rather facetiously, to correct its gendered typologies.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The title of *The Missing* itself continues *The Searchers*’ idea that the captive is “missing” from the story -- that therefore the point of view will be like *The Searchers*’. The newer film tries to correct the complex troubles of race and gender simply by putting a female character into the seeker slot. (The movie attempts a kind of updated Western through its outraged-mom movie feminism.) It’s now the kidnapped girl’s mother who trots across the Western landscape in the footsteps of the Indians. Recast as female, the rugged seeker here plays reluctant buddy to her own father who years ago ran off to live in the wild and adopt Indian ways. The lone male figure is renarrated as an emotionally pathetic guy who now regrets having shirked his domestic obligations. His redemption for abandoning his family is achieved through the now-adult daughter’s grudging forgiveness as his “Indian” tracking skills come in handy while they search for her own daughter. Together, they overtake the band of captors and captives before the girl is “sold to Mexico” by a purely evil, greedy Indian “medicine man” and his compliant gang. The captive daughter is being held with a bunch of other teenage girls bound and gagged in a cave being guarded by male Indians. The girls are covered with make up and gaudy clothes to be sold as prostitutes. This image bears little resemblance to the conditions described in most women’s Indian captivity narratives, where if she wasn’t killed, she worked alongside the captors and their families during the trek. The function of that image in *The Missing* (other than the vaguely pornographic – which of course was also known to 19th century women’s captivity stories) is that the rescued daughter goes home to become a real pioneering frontier gal. What’s valorized in the end is the elevation of pioneer style, the dun-colored attire of a Ralph Lauren ad, itself achieved through a hybridization of “Hollywood Indian” and white aesthetics into a frontier look. (Before her captivity the daughter didn’t like her mother’s clothes and longed for fancy city styles. Her transformation is that now she wears tasteful pioneer clothes.) The father’s wanderings have come to redemptive usefulness restoring a frontier domesticity that nods to “feminism,” but still retains deeply demonic representations of Indians, especially the evil “medicine man.”

The empty purity of nature itself seems to erase the politics of its occupation, its claims and its thefts. In part that's because the land over which their drama plays is "the West," the major site of white-Indian conflict by the 19th century, (when both these films are set.) And, as I want to show in the next chapter, the idea of the West as a natural space of loss and desire, captivity and freedom, and anxious hybridity remains intact in the uncanny UFO abduction narratives that colonize the narrative Western landscape in the twentieth century.

For in both uncanny abduction stories and Indian captivity narratives, the West is always already an inscribed sign conditioned for nostalgia, a space where the most optimistic speculation of settlement was -- even at its most vivid -- already threatening to fade. Take for instance these passages by Fanny Kelly, the captive whose daughter was killed when she tried to help her escape. Attempting to establish historical context for her story of captivity and trauma, Kelly (or her editor) sets the scene for a "West" already ripe for ordeal of her coming captivity:

The years 1852 to 1856 witnessed, probably, the heaviest immigration the West has ever known in a corresponding length of time. Those who had gone before sent back to their friends such marvelous accounts of the rapid development of the country, the fertility of the soil and the ease with which fortunes were made, the "Western fever" became almost epidemic. Whole towns in the old, Eastern States were almost depopulated. Old substantial farmers, surrounded apparently by all the comforts that heart could wish, sacrificed the homes wherein their families had been reared for generations, and, with all their worldly possessions, turned their faces toward the setting sun. And, with what high hopes! Alas! How few, comparatively, met their realization (Kelly, Clark and Clark 1990:3).

Even this short paragraph is packed with a metanarrative of immanent nostalgia. As the narrator tells it, the rush West that led to her captivity was already a kind of dream-action based on fabulous storytelling, “marvelous accounts” of endless possibility. That phrase reverberates backwards with the histories of the early colonizers who sent back to Europe their own “marvelous accounts” of the Americas the way Kelly’s kin sent theirs back to the East. And it reverberates forward, a century later, with fantasies of the endless potential of space exploration as a new frontier for new pioneers (Sturma 2002, Dean 1998). Then the East (as centuries earlier Europe itself) becomes narratized as a lost home, a forever-disrupted foundation. And, as I will discuss in the final chapter of this dissertation, as outer space becomes seen as a habitable place Earth itself becomes a lost home in UFO discourse.

Foregrounding the implicit disease metaphor in the cliché “Western fever” (which in its usual sense connotes excitement and passion) Kelly sees the disruptive get-rich-quick story as a feverish symptom, a delirium. For Kelly the fever is “an epidemic” virulent enough to “depopulate whole towns.” The firm ground of established Eastern life itself loses its solidity and becomes a vulnerable dream, unsettled as people abandon their towns. In Kelly’s passage, the delusion (the centrifugal fantasy of the West’s endless potential) unravels the real (the centripetal, settled East), just as the age of NASA is felt to impoverish the heimlich earth (a point, again, that I detail in the final chapter.)

Western expansion and its dreams of the new are metaphorically infused with the counter-fear of apocalyptic rupture. The “fever” image thus leads Kelly to a conventional, sentimental metaphor of death: the “setting sun,” the “poetic” emblem of the West, also of course metaphorically suggests the setting sun of death. From this perspective, the West -- even from its texted beginnings -- is already loaded with its own inklings of disintegration. It is always already a meta-place whose image is impossible to

occupy. In a sense, this structure of nostalgia from the get-go questions the “endless potential” of white occupation, since disappointment is part of its fabric, and leaving the east causes its ineluctable destruction. The migration story tells of a gap between hope and destruction, between centripetal stability and centrifugal flight, and between the ambivalence of containment and flight; and that gap makes a space for another story of inevitable calamity which embodies those same tropes: the captivity story.

Captivity both destroys and elevates the naturalized sense of “home” from which the captive is torn, just like the movement West did to the image of the East in Kelly’s passage above. On one level, the “home” is literally your house with your things in it, the comfortable, enclosed, protective space-in-one-place contrasted to the mobility, and exposure, and unfamiliarity of the captive’s journey. The home, of course, was iconically a female space and the wilderness into which the captive is thrust is the male space in which she must survive with unforeseen strength and wit. Kolodny argues that for 19th century American novelists, the frontier home of the west was also based on “an ideology that was inherently nostalgic” because “at the heart of their western vision was a fantasy of home that, although they did not acknowledge it, harked back to an earlier era” (Kolodny 1984:165). In 19th century novels the frontier home became the center of a pre-existing domestic fantasy transferred to the west during a heavy period of migration and becoming, there, an emblem of feminine cultivated space, in a land which was itself fantasized as an Eden; as one novelist put it, the land was “literally flowing with milk and honey” (ibid.). It reinvoked the image of the virginal wilderness which, in earlier centuries, had been established for the new world and its Eastern woodlands. This ideal of an Edenic new world could perhaps compensate for the nostalgia for and loss of the eastern (or European) home. Then that deep nostalgia, combined with the idealization of a natural land, reappears in as much intensity as ever in the imaginary of UFOs. In the

newer narratives, though, the Edenic earth itself *is* the lost home, *is* the source of its own nostalgia. There is nowhere else left to go. This home is the place of endless milk and honey, and the aliens are coming back here to get it.

As the Western land becomes a nostalgic and texted site, it becomes a landscape. Then nature provides an opportunity for Romantic aesthetic sentiment possible only in response to urban modernity. Here is a passage written by Sarah F. Wakefield of her journey in 1861 to “Indian country” in South Dakota a few years before she was abducted by local Sioux:

Although I was nervous, I enjoyed that ride, for a more beautiful sight than that prairie, I have never seen. It was literally covered with flowers of all descriptions; the tall grass was waving in the breeze and it reminded me of a beautiful panorama. It seemed really too beautiful for Nature’s picture....When we arrived at the Redwood River, we all exclaimed, what a romantic spot!” (Wakefield 1999:242).

This land is not just a place to farm or homestead but also a framed and aestheticized “Nature’s picture” that fits into pre-existing imaginative structures of innocence and then, inevitably, loss. As Wakefield continues to describe the new landscape she slips more implicitly into a painterly vision, so that the very operation of seeing enters into a framed perspective. What she sees is indistinguishable from her ideas of it, most likely from the visual art of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when artists’ renditions of gorgeous Western landscapes became the primary mode of the western land’s circulation as an idea of a place (Goetzmann 1992). Here is Wakefield’s remembered vision of entering the place in which she was to settle, a painterly experience cast into memory, and recalled as Romantic narrative:

The scenery around Rush Brook was grand. Enormous hills – almost mountains – were on every side...and when a person...commenced descending, they would tremble with fear for awhile but at last they would entirely forget all danger, while

looking at the beauties of the scene. Away down between the hills, among the brush, could be seen these wild men roaming in pursuit of game, while their wives and children bathed in the stream, and from the top of the bluff they looked like babes, the distance was so great (244-245).

This astonishing passage could be read in multiple layers. You could focus here on longstanding genres of seeing, from European art traditions of far-off peasants working in the fields, to the Western romance with a pristine world in which native people, seen from the privilege of the heights, are part of the natural world, as “wild” as the untouched land. You could notice how the immediacy of vision collapses into a pre-existing story about pastoral innocence. For out of the infinite ways one could describe the visual effects of distance and height, Wakefield does so by seeing the “wild men” as “babes.” Representing the hunters as innocent “babes” suggests that for her “the distance was so great” not simply from peak to valley, but also socially. It reminds you that to some extent perspective is always constructed and layered with implicit meanings. All these points matter, feeding into the captivity narrative of which this scenic description is the preliminary set-up. The main point for my discussion, though, is how captivity narratives can foreground the shiftable nature of point of view itself. From the heights Wakefield forges a vantage point of privileged benevolence. The wild, alien others are soon to be seen up close: they will be her servants, the patients in her husband’s practice as a physician, and then her captors. Some will be the agents of her liberation from the captivity. First though they are spread out below in a “scene,” part of the natural world that’s giving her such a rich visual and emotional experience.

A century later, Wakefield’s elevated perspective is turned on its head when uncanny aliens arrive from their own heights, not across mountains but across space, not in wagons but in UFOs. Then the subject position flips. Then it is *they*, the aliens and the captors who see *us* as objectified little figures below conducting our everyday business;

then it is the alien gaze that looks down upon the natural human elements of a pastoral realm, which from their supertechnological alien world, has already been wasted and lost. Their alien faces are all eyes. And through their alien eyes, we can see ourselves – humans -- as innocent babes. We can *feel* that because we live here we have a birthright to this land and that their invasion is just terribly wrong. In the reversed mirror of the uncanny, it is aliens who “take in” the vanishing human, and the story is told from the point of view of the surveyed. Then being *taking in* like that is linked clearly to desire and need, invasion and captivity. As Wakefield’s gaze across the valley sets up her captivity narrative, the alien’s consuming observation is the first part of an uncanny abduction.

What is the point of point of view? In captivity, the sudden proximity of the other and the sudden absence of the familiar create opportunities for strange shifts in point of view. The unstable point of view can reveal the immanent polysemies of history, memory, and fantasy. Its fluctuations show the contingency of identity; and in that contingency lies the potential for undoing naturalized structures of allegiance and power.

Captivity narratives produce a shifting point of view that can embody more than one position at once. In the uncanny, those shifts multiply. In UFO abduction stories, point of view morphs like a shape shifter. Sometimes you are special; sometimes you are sheerly a victim. Bo’s story in the previous chapter is one instance of the intimate, tiny ways that point of view can come unhinged. In a more public story – take, say, the 1994 movie *Independence Day*, which unlike *The Searchers* does not try to evoke subtle subtexts or psychological uncertainties -- point of view still spins into strange configurations and leaves unsettling remainders, almost, it seems, despite the film’s overt attempt to deliver the simplest, most black-and-white configuration of allegiances possible. Here, aliens attack earth; they are the invaders. At the same time, the hero

(played by Will Smith) is a soldier who quite overtly evokes soldiers from what was the recently televised war of Desert Storm, as he tramps through deserty land to kill aliens. Once he suggests Desert Storm, then the American invading soldier becomes the hero, his heroic actions of offense and defense are fused, and the uncanny alien he kills is aligned with Iraqis who had to be killed far from our land. At the same time, though, the history of American colonization and Indian genocide whispers through. Who is the victim? Who has been invaded? With whom do you identify?

Pauline Turner Strong (1999) has written extensively of the Indian captivity narrative's dual impulses, on the one hand towards the "oppositional typification" of distance and objectification and on the other towards a connective, "transformative identification" with the Indian other. Sometimes these two poles appear antithetical. But – as I've been arguing for "captivity" and "freedom" themselves – sometimes the act of "othering" is itself abducted by incorporation and identification. As Strong explains it,

The captivity tradition is a privileged arena for considering how identification with an Other underlies and complements even the most extreme opposition to that Other. To anticipate my argument, among indigenous peoples captivity is itself an incorporative, transformative operation upon Captive Others. On the other hand, Anglo-American captives often resisted identification with their captors with an urgency that reveals the force with which the possibility of "turning savage"--becoming other--was experienced. (1999:8)

And Carla says: *Imagine what it looked like to the Indians when the Spanish came; they thought the whites were gods, they had no way to understand what was happening. That's what's going on now with the aliens, we can't understand it with our worldview...*

Sarah Wakefield never “converted” in captivity, never married inside the tribe or became an adopted Sioux. But at one point, in order to protect them from some murderous Indian men, a Sioux wife helps Wakefield and her children dress in Indian clothes and rub dirt on their faces to darken their complexions. This startling episode performs the always-present possibility of transculturation. At the same time it seems to signify – like those fairy tales in which a princess dresses in old furs or rags – that identity and difference are always “deep” and transformation an illusion. Here, as always in captivity narratives, there is ambivalence about the immutability of identity.

Wakefield’s narrative is simultaneously a memoir of trauma, and a polemic advocating for better treatment of Indians. The experience of captivity terrorized her, but ultimately, since she saw it as an act of desperation, it bolstered what was already a humane position towards Indians and politicized it. It’s clear from certain defensive passages that Wakefield was criticized by whites for being an “Indian loving” traitor. But she continued to insist that the only reason the Indians rebelled and captured whites was that they were cheated, starved, and stolen from, and that the fault – the evil – lay with the whites who’d driven the normally just Indians to desperate straits. Her call for humanitarian action is both spiritual and political, told from the conviction of Christian liberation theology, and clearly part of a larger 19<sup>th</sup> century religious reform movement, in which the sacred must be enacted on earth through radical political change (Abzug 1994).

Wakefield’s transformation was resolved and political, while other captives’ transformations led – strikingly like UFO abductees -- sometimes to simply feeling different, alien, of no world in particular (Sturma 2002). Her text is at the same time shaped by benevolent condescension to the ignorant savages, but for her time Wakefield’s positions are remarkably nuanced and open. Wakefield’s direct, politicized

articulation of her observations and beliefs – and her position within a larger structure of reform -- leads her in the opposite direction from a nebulous, uncanny trauma, with all its leaky repressions and unspoken injuries. She seems strengthened and energized by her experience -- parts of which were filled with terror (one almost unbearable night, hiding in some grass, she almost killed her children rather than have them possibly tortured) but parts of which, she saw, became opportunities to make deep relationships with specific, kind Sioux people. Perhaps her advocacy had to do with the already-abject plight of the Indians at the time she was abducted; unlike a Puritan captive in a New World where it seemed savages ruled and the colonies were a tiny and vulnerable, by 1861 it was impossible for this thinking, ethical woman to see herself simply as a victim of people being targeted for genocide. And, too, as the wife of the reservation doctor, she was at the time of her captivity already intimately involved with the Indians in her day to day life – not suddenly abducted by absolute aliens.

But even as Wakefield uses her captivity narrative to advocate for better treatment of Indians, a *something else* still leaks out to complicate and confuse. Her husband was the doctor sent by the United States government to provide care to the Indians. They were trying to do their Christian good. But he was also part of larger program, which systematically was trying to eradicate the authority of “medicine-men” and replace them with the authority of modern medicine.

Modern medicine was a powerful sign. It was to be supplied to the Indians by the United States government as a vehicle for modernity and the custody of “our wards, “ not created and practiced by Indians like traditional healing practices. In many ways, the Indians were becoming patients; the whites were literally “agents” of the powers of the state. Images float up here. Saddam Hussein being examined by the military doctor. Abductees being examined by aliens. Again, the UFO abduction points to the strange

shifts and tears in the larger story. Now the medicalized patient is the captive. Now the alien is the patient, and the doctor's wife is the captive.

And so the uncanny makes questions that still lingers and remains: is Wakefield an active part of colonization and its damages? Like the Vista worker who comes to West Virginia and tries to help the poor by telling them how to organize their lives (Stewart 1991), the physician and his wife are caring people who may still read by their eventual captors as "interrupting" the structures they're ironically trying to better. Interruptions make holes in the elaborations of a specific discursive construction . The interruption can contain, incorporate, drown out or win over its addressee. Sometimes, though, interruption provokes a centrifugal flight away from the voice of power. Sometimes, an inkling of refusal itself interrupts the ongoing journey of authority and its naturalizations.

#### The Interrupted Journey

After Barney Hill died, Betty kept living on in New Hampshire in the house she'd had for fifty years, giving interviews and appearing as a regular figure on the UFO circuit. The Hills' case has been written and talked about, perhaps, more than any other abduction case. It is, as they say, the origin myth of alien abduction stories. The images that arose there have never seemed to fade from the narrative worlds of UFOs: the strangeness and menace of the aliens; their clinical invasion of the Hills' bodies, done with prophetic reproductive technologies; the abduction and eventual return of the Hills' memories; the whole, dense tangle of powerlessness, terror and wonder at it all.

One day, as I'm writing this chapter about captivity narratives, I do a Google search for the Hills' name with no particular goal in mind, and, among the thousands of hits, find a 1999 profile of Betty in her local New Hampshire newspaper, which has gone on-line. The article is called "The Grounding of Betty Hill." Almost forty years after the

notorious abduction it turns out that Betty is “sick of talking about UFOs” (Robinson 1999). The article tells how Betty has shifted her energies from UFOs to her own family pedigree, tracing her ancestry in New England to the beginning of colonial days in America. She wants to concentrate on being “grounded” in history – so grounded, she says, that many of her ancestors met the Pilgrims. She no longer resembles the somber, traumatized person familiar from past interviews. Indeed, as she cheerfully tells the local reporter about all the scoundrels and rascallions in her colorful pedigree, her old UFO abduction story begins to seem like a badge of another American typification: the authentic, old-bloodline, salty crackpot. (Of the eminent Dow branch of her family, as in Dow Jones and Dow Chemical, she jokes, "You've heard the Dow motto?...Any sane person who claims to be a 'Dow' is an imposter. No kidding!") The reporter’s voice seems charmed by spunky, elderly Betty as, instead of the expected UFO book, she holds a genealogy in her lap, and reads out the impressive names of ancestors: the Dows, the Traftons, the Rollins.

And it turns out that:

Betty was not the first in her family to be abducted. A number of early Trafton and Rollins colonists were carried off by Indians. But back then, technically, the European settlers were the aliens, colonizing the New World they had recently discovered. The metaphor doesn't hold together, but that's Betty's point exactly. Every thing she's done since 1961 has a flying saucer spin. Now she wants to be just plain down-to-earth Betty Hill. (Robinson 1999).

This local-color, breezy piece gives me an uncanny double take. How incredible, I think – here where I’ve stumbled onto the *Seacoast New Hampshire*, the Indian captivity narrative is explicitly linked to the fundamental UFO abduction narrative. The reporter, Dennis Robinson, both highlights and downplays that link; he frames it as

another quirk in an eccentric life. As Robinson notices, “the metaphor doesn’t hold together.” Betty and Robinson both back away from the simultaneity of metaphor: instead of a paradigmatic connection stressing the mimesis between the two stories in a single narrativized life, they foreground the syntagmatic connection, the stretch through time in which Betty’s family had two separate events. One captivity story came before the other. Now it is meant to replace the other. She wants to forget the alien abduction and move on the captivity narrative which “grounds” her solid Mayflower pedigree and makes her “plain [and] down to earth.”

And yet the parallel, the resonance, still doubles back and makes you see the two captivity stories in a tense equation, “a metaphor” whose ends indeed are open. What is it that for Dennis Robinson doesn’t quite “hold together?” It’s not, as one might expect, the fact that one story occupies for him the realm of myth, the other the realm of history. Instead, he says, the metaphor is strained because in the 1961 story, aliens traveled from space and abducted Betty from her homeland; but in the other story, her abducted *ancestors* were the ones who traveled to a strange land. The English were both the traveling aliens and the captives, back then.

What kinds of ideas leak through the cracks of this strange construction? You might hear the residue of a history that has effectively been erased by the “selective tradition” of Indian captivity narratives: that in fact whites captured Native Americans in large numbers, though those stories have not been able to flourish the same way as the others (Strong 1999). Or you might simply notice that what these stories *do* is make captivity and redemption into a shifting seesaw, a dizzying ride that confuses straight formulations of identification. And that, through those inevitable spaces where they do not hold together, the uncanny starts to take hold.

At the end of Robinson's piece, by the way, there's more kookiness. It seems that ten years ago, Betty Hill took a vacation to Mexico and learned from the Mayans that their "ancestors came from outer space." The proof, she says, is that "they only grow to five feet and they all have round heads." At the close of the piece, Betty and her bemused interviewer note that Betty, "surrounded by almond-eyed cats," looks like a Mayan herself – and Betty, catching on, proclaims that she too is five feet tall. It's a jokey closure that still reveals an idea. The conquered Mayans are the aliens. Five-foot Betty is, maybe, a Mayan. Maybe she too is an alien. Maybe she is like those who abducted her.

In this chapter I've wanted to see how the American genre of captivity narratives swell up with uncanny resonance. See how different kinds of captivity are poetically compressed, loaded into a story that seems to pulse out a sense of a *something more*. Take the stuck, the caught, the paralysis of unspoken class experience. Or the immobilizing frustrations of gender, or race, or the multiple histories of power and its mimetic designs, or the productions of the self and the family, and the inarticulate, complex interweavings of all those things, all those memories and amnesias, idiosyncratic in every life. All of these are layered as well with the faintly recollected disturbance of an invasion central to the land on which they breed. UFO abductions point back to another genred layer, Indian captivity narratives, adding density and history to the inchoate sense of being caught. In the next chapter I'm going to look at how some of the themes that come up here return in varied forms of everyday life: the material and the uncanny, the nostalgia and desire of the West, and how these play out both the master narratives and inarticulate phenomenologies of power.

When the dialectical trope of captivity and freedom points in multiple directions, when it includes a polysemous quality of resonance, the uncanny and the real begin to fuse. Then hauntings happen in unexpected places.

## Chapter Three: Why Rachel Isn't Buried at her Grave

### I. DESERT VANISHINGS: INTO THE WEST

Having followed our stories from the previous chapter into the American West, here we are, with its captivities and liberties, its settlements and expeditions, its ambivalent hybridities, and its ghosts. Here we are in this place that became “American” inside the grooves of dual master narratives, one of a federal government whose arms can stretch beyond civilization and gather up savages, the other of a land so far from the center that you can play rough or get into deep trouble without any grownups around to contain things.

In the stories I tell here, the dialectical trope of captivity-and-freedom emerges in myriad related forms. It mutates in discourses of restriction and possibility, nostalgic histories and ambivalent futures, a closed forbidden zone and open range. It is shot through with hegemonic ideals of class mobility and narrativized elaborations on being stuck or slipping back. In this Western place you can see, perhaps more easily than in many other American landscapes, how everyday life becomes a metacultural performance linked to history, and how it stays in perpetual co-construction with the pull of the fantastic, the flight of the ordinary.

I begin with Area 51, the notorious center of uncanny American conspiracy theory. You've probably heard of Area 51 and its restricted airspace known as Dreamland. Part of the vast complex of the Nevada Test Site and Nellis Air Force Bombing and Gunnery Range, Area 51 is the high-technology military base whose existence was meant to be a federal secret, and which, people say, has *something to do with UFOs*. The birthplace of clandestinely developed craft like the U-2 and the Stealth bomber, Area 51 sits in the multiply-texted, sparsely populated land of the central

Nevada desert -- a place where for hundreds of miles there's nothing much else but federally-owned ranchland, the half-buried scatter of old mines, and the bleached wood skeletons and partly-intact stone walls of forgotten homesteads. A generation ago, mushroom clouds could be seen blooming over the prospectors' ruins.

Area 51, people say, is where *they* took the UFO that crashed near Roswell in 1947. They hid it in the mountains, in an underground base of many levels, up there next to the Test Site. The stories I am going to tell arise at the interface between the loud secret of Area 51, and the small settlement closest to it: Rachel, Nevada, population 90. Through this spare terrain you can see a dense field of meanings emerge. Here the futuristic imaginings of UFO narratives blend with ghost stories, haunting with the still-open wounds of history.

From Rachel, it's 45 miles to the small, mostly Mormon town of Alamo in one direction, 110 to the hard-bitten military base town of Tonopah in the other. As news of this place began to circulate beginning in the late 1980s, on the web and in the media, people began driving out to poke around and look for UFOs. Rachel became increasingly well known in popular culture throughout the 1990s for its proximity to this emblem of forbidden power and rumor, and for The Little A'Le'Inn, a canny, UFO-themed cafe that sprang up there, bringing UFO pilgrims and tourists of bizarre Americana into the remote Tempiute Valley.

At the Little Ale'Le' Inn there was photographic evidence of UFOs on the wall, stacks of libertarian newspapers on the racks, gift shop shelves in a corner filled with alien mugs and Area 51 T-shirts (most of it made in a bus out back), a gun behind the bar,( and sometimes on top of it), and anti-government signs and cartoons everywhere, centering on the evils of Bill and Hillary Clinton and their cronies. A local Nevada artist had painted parts of the bar with haunting alien faces and fabulously colored UFOs.

There was a pool table, a couple of slot machines, and out front, a jokey black silhouette of a little gray: Alien Crossing.

The café was a constant polyphony of discourses. Grand conspiracy theory mingled here with the cadences of everyday small town small talk, and the long, quiet spells of any out-of-the-way café. Into sudden cool indoor space, from the glaring sun or vast pressing darkness that lay behind its metal doors, came retired RV travelers on their way to Roswell, New Mexico, or to view petroglyphs as evidence of alien visits to ancient Native Americans; hired hands from the nearby farm; ranchers, cowboys and down-and-out drinkers; lone drifters passing through, and drifters who had settled here and become locals; families touring the United States with kids; military personnel from the base; and the solitary guys who, everyone knew, had a job “up there” in some working-class capacity at Area 51 but who couldn’t talk about it – they’d go to prison if they mentioned where they were employed. Maybe they spent their days *up there* fixing the plumbing or driving a van, who knew? Much as you could talk about what the Government and the aliens were doing *up there*, everyone just knew not to ask too much about what anyone sitting in the café really did for their paycheck in the same place.

And of course, there were people who worked at the café and inn itself. They washed the dishes. They did the laundry, carrying piles of rough white towels in their arms as they moved between the trailers. They mopped the floors and scraped the grills and prepared the food and served the Alien Burgers. They learned how to do it the way Pat, the owner, liked it, for she had worked for decades in cafes before this one and she knew the way it should go. (You don’t wash the lettuce, you take off the outer leaves and feed them to the pigs. You save time and you don’t waste a thing.) Some of the café workers were locals, but many had just followed arbitrary tides to this strange place in the middle of nowhere, and then later drifted off again.

In Rachel, government radiation monitors click discretely behind old-fashioned, freestanding gas pumps decorated with paintings of UFOs. Warplanes zoom overhead, every so often giving a sonic boom that can crack the foundations of mobile homes. Single men move out here, leaving behind some other life. They use Radio Shack equipment to eavesdrop on the staticky commands of military pilots, they drink and chattily theorize in the bar, feeling at home in the middle of nowhere. The guys who did it all day, as an art form, would take the others "plane spotting:" you go as high as you can and wait for them to buzz you, the F-16s, the F-11s, and if you're lucky, the strange ones you don't know, the ones they make up there...On a lark or on a pilgrimage, tourists come here from all over the world to drive the dirt road through desert ranchland and witness the signs at the perimeter of the secret base: *No Trespassing, No Photography, Deadly Force Authorized*. You can pick up parts of detonated bombs, bits of military debris, scattered among the Joshua trees. Some people use the parts to decorate their trailers. At night tourists and sometimes locals gather at "the black mailbox" to watch for eerie lights. A mother and two adolescent daughters up from Vegas ran in one day, breathless and high-colored, hair flying, planning to sleep out in the desert all night to search for UFOs -- *I want to get abducted, I want to get abducted*, cried the twelve-year-old girl, *Oh, I want a scar*.

In this chapter we remain in the densely narrativized West of Fanny Kelley, Sarah Wakefield, Crazy Horse and John Bourke. But we're setting ourselves down here at another point in its history, the end of the twentieth century. The millennium is around the corner and everyone here smells it. People in Rachel are talking about Y2K. People from elsewhere -- Japan, England, Belgium, California, Florida -- are coming here for

UFOs, not for Daniel Boone. The pioneer theme is fading as an unquestioned metacultural myth, already overdetermined in a new way by a changing American and global political metanarrative of settlement. Yet all those old memories of colonization, conversion, and genocide linger on, scattering fallout in stories close enough to touch. For grandparents who are from this area like to tell you of their grandparents coming in the covered wagon, stories they heard early and often enough so that the images entered the nuclei of their cells. *My great grandfather used a covered team to haul freight to the mines. Fought the injuns on the way too.* But those who moved here more recently from back east have similar images dreamed into their cells, too.

In the stories that I think about, the fabulous and the fantastically conspiratorial bleed into the genres of everyday life. Ghost stories occupy histories with more straightforward claims to the real. Uncanny afterimages flash behind ordinary stories of power. Travelers' tales are stuck with the sad persistence of elsewhere. And a sense of grounded, strong, emplaced well-being constantly bumps up against its doppelganger, an imaginary of the sinister that insists on its injuries, and on the mysterious agency of the powers that have caused them.

In this chapter, I often disrupt the boundaries between the ordinary and the fantastic, because that is my ethnographic understanding of the way that some people imagine, feel and live. I show the resonance between things that through local eyes are considered intact, and those that seem to be plummeting down. Because my ethnographic object is the structuring of poetic, affective and imaginative life, I often eschew chronological narrative order, and instead present scenes in a sequence that illuminates their parallels and ironies. My primary rhetorical device here is telling stories I have heard in an order that makes their own themes emerge more clearly as a form of unfinalized, often indeterminate, social and poetic ethno-analysis.

For years the military flatly denied the existence of Area 51. Even after, finally, a grudging admission in the mid 1990s, that an experimental military base the size of Connecticut did perhaps occupy central Nevada, they were trying their best to keep snoopers away. Patrolling the unmarked borders in white Cherokee jeeps, its guards arrested blundering hikers, Greenpeace activists and outraged conspiracy theorists alike. In Rachel, people talk about how *they* forced down a small plane that wandered by mistake into Dreamland; and a crew of military guys tackled the lost pilot and injected him with something that knocked him right out. Last thing that poor guy saw after being forced from his plane was some grim military dude kneeling on top of him, with a huge, hypodermic needle. After *they* figured out that he was a small-time pilot with a bad sense of direction and not a spy, they dumped him at the border of the base, a victim of missing time like Travis Walton. Pat Travis, the co-owner of the café, told of a guest there who snuck past the borders. Months after the guest had returned home to Hawaii the military came asking after her, going through Pat's guest book and taking her address. (The point of Pat's story, though, was how rude this woman was, after Pat had been hospitable to her, writing Pat a snotty letter for ratting her out to the powers that be.) And Frank, a dignified, intelligent retired miner, a lifelong rural westerner who paid little attention to Area 51, told of going hunting for chuckers in the mountains and apparently getting too close to the border. Seven helicopters buzzed him, getting tighter and tighter, lower and lower, though they are not supposed to come down on civilians like that. He got out of his pickup. They said they were protecting him: there's live ordinance around here, they told him. They said they had to watch out for Greenpeace. ("Did I look like Greenpeace? In a tiny, canary yellow pickup?") They were, he said, very rude, and he -- clearly not someone to be taken for a tourist or a rabble-rouser -- told them they'd better put up a

*post* in that area if there was *live ordinance* around. They did it, too. But telling this story made him stiff with controlling his memory of the insult. *I would not bother them up there*, he said, *and anyone that does is just stupid*.

But sometimes you would see the guards in their white Cherokees, sitting in the jeep with the doors wide open in the hot Nevada sun, blaring their radios. It was a on one level just another tedious job around here – they used to be Wackenhut, now it's some other contractor. The guards looked young and bored. And Frank had another story of the border guards too. Once he was trapping up there with his two granddaughters. Coyote and wildcat. They set traps right next to the border of the base and went home. And no one bothered them. But the next day, they were a whole mile away from the border, and all of a sudden the guards in white Cherokees came zooming over, lights flashing. Frank and the little girls talked to the *young fellas*. Well, said Frank, I was a lot closer yesterday, I was right next to the sensor, you knew I was here. Why didn't you stop me then? Oh, well, you know, said the guards. Live ordinance around here, they said, shrugging. Today it seemed they were bored and felt like using their flashing lights, felt like an encounter. They all chit- chatted a while until the granddaughter tugged Frank's leg, whispering and pointing to the Cherokee. *What's she saying?* asked the guard. *That you guys have a flat tire*, Frank replied.

And while the federal government was trying to keep everyone at bay, the state of Nevada was stoking the commodifiable desire bred by high-tech military secrecy. In 1996, Nevada State Highway 375, the remote public road running closest to Area 51, was christened the "Extraterrestrial Highway." The fact that nothing was really on this road was part of its eerie appeal (nothing, that is, other than Rachel, which if you weren't looking for it would be passed in a blink). At each end of the 150 mile stretch of the desolate highway, official green road signs were erected, embossed with white UFO

icons and the words “Extraterrestrial Highway” in a font that looks vaguely “computer-modern.” Little packets for tourists were made up in manila envelopes that said “The ET Experience,” with maps of the area, and information about rumored UFOs, lists of businesses within the hundreds of miles that were this “area,” like “Jo Ann’s Country Cookin” and “Spaceship Full Auto Service.” Along with a glossy brochure on the ET Experience, they threw in a brochure about the Pioneer Experience. In 1997 Priscilla “Pat” Travis, the Little A’Le’Inn’s co-owner with her husband Joe, won an award from the state for bringing tourism into poor, rural Lincoln County, which previously had relied on half-hearted promotion of old-timey outlaws, ghost towns and the pioneer past. She hung that proud plaque on the café wall, next to a clock depicting Jesus with his hands out, counting out time to the End.

Was the end really near? The same year as Pat’s award, Popular Mechanics magazine published a widely-read story asserting that all covert military operations had ceased at Area 51 and been moved to a new site in the Utah desert. But all the Rachel people I talked to about it refuted the magazine’s claim. The reporter’s story, they said, was attention-grabbing (*well that’s what sells magazines*) but *wrong*.<sup>19</sup> This was not

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<sup>19</sup> (When I was working at the Little A’Le’Inn in 1998, The X-Files people called asking us to send a bunch of souvenirs so they could make an episode about Rachel. With great excitement boxes of alien mugs, Area 51 T-shirts and other uncanny doodads were sent off to California along with snapshots of the café. But a year later, when the episode came out, it also was wrong. Rachel looked like Roswell. The gas station in town was modern and gleaming instead of small with free standing pumps, and the UFO café they depicted was, as Joe would say, GIGANTIC.)

surprising, given people's generally suspicious impression of the media.<sup>20</sup> Local people said the Popular Mechanics reporter actually drove up the wrong unmarked dirt rancher's road, and saw none of the warning signs or checkpoints that famously signal the beginning of forbidden land; and so, people shrugged (with their humorously flat way of conveying just how stupid he was), he just went home. Didn't even stay here long enough to see the weird lights with unnatural movements that appear regularly over the town at night. You can see them all the time, look up and there they are. In the deep black night sky, a faint faraway glow looks like a huge distant wildfire, but is actually Las Vegas 100 miles south. Stars hang all the way to the ground. In this pressing velvet dark you see flares that just disappear, rockets that curve in glorious arcs, orange orbs that float over your head and come down towards you and then shoot off, lights that do right-degree angles at high speeds, three lights in the sky that converge into two, then into one, until the one just disappears.

Still, it would not be surprising to anyone here if UFO talk was in fact moving on, following the constant elusive *elsewhere* constructed in all conspiracy discourse, with its restless centers that do not hold...nor would anyone be surprised if it was all just plain *closing down*, the way so many things did in the rural west -- mines, jobs, towns, plans...And as for bringing lots of revenue into the county, it hadn't really panned out anyway. At a county meeting mostly about roads and the sheriff election, someone called out, *Only Rachel gets anything from UFOs around here*. And there was a sense that the peak of tourism and fame might have coincided with the intimation of its own inevitable obsolescence in Rachel.

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<sup>20</sup> Left and right wing discourses converge in conspiratorial attitudes towards the mainstream media. In the general suspicion of how *they* represent things, you would find radical Christian evangelical pamphlets, militia-based newsletters and books by Noam Chomsky nestled up side by side.

## **Missive from Washington**

The federal government, which in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was at once omnipotent and invisible, still retains that magic duality in a 20<sup>th</sup> century West riddled with secret military forces, where the iconic weary wanderers from the Civil War morph into solitary, covert personnel from the Cold War. And then there are those who mimic the latter image, which is itself already fading – like the insurance salesman who drove out from California, bragging about everything he knew, equipped with hundreds of dollars of scanners and night-vision goggles. He let some of us peer through them as we hung out at the black mailbox, so we could see the dark desert all in green, the Joshua trees like underwater plants, and the strange little lights coming from Area 51.

In a remote desert café, surrounded by pictures of UFOs, a teenage kid named Jacob plays pool for hours with his middle-aged uncle. (There are two uncles, twins -- John and Wayne. John works hard in the café as a short order cook, or in Alamo at a garage. He is intense, close-mouthed smart, divorced with a little daughter. Wayne has never married, he is a sweet alcoholic who drinks from ten in the morning and seems to be fading into a benevolent, poignant empty space of his own. The two uncles are completely identical, except that John has a long black ponytail down his back, and a long black drooping mustache, while Wayne is as hairless as a fish -- I have alopecia, he explains. He has no idea why.) Jacob's gotten a crew cut, and is trying to stop what they call “smoking the fish” (pot) for a little while (Wayne won't give him a beer til he's of age). Jacob's older brother Zeke is the town's golden boy, and last year graduated from West Point; the whole family attended the ceremony. The silent grandfather seems proud, with his crosshatched face and memories of pioneer grandparents, and the grandmother, brought back from his time overseas in the military, with her German accent and, on outings into the remotest mountain spots of her husband's boyhood

adventures, a picnic basket of ornate little food memories of her own. She sometimes lapses, almost trance-like, into tales of her childhood in a war zone, her father who was forever missing in action.

Unlike his older brother, Jacob never took to school much, over in Alamo; he felt ostracized for his dark Mexican looks, the legacy of his own vanished dad. He is smart as a whip but he is at a crossroads, and I worry – I don't know if he'll pull himself together and follow after John's work ethic and control, or whether he'll drift into limbo like Wayne. But he is trying to straighten out for the urine test so he'll have a chance to get out of nowhere by joining up with the army's good deal. If he can get into the military he'll be able to *go somewhere*. He will learn a skill and some discipline, and return with a straighter spine, get a good job and start paying child support for his baby living in another town. The military offers that familiar conversion narrative.

But alongside it, there is the absent omnipotence of military power. This is the place where invisible planes are stealthily made, where nuclear bombs were tested in the sky and under ground. Some say the poison is still here and still emerging and that it has riddled the place with cancers – this one has cancer, that one has cancer. Others scoff and drink water off the ground because this is the deep rural countryside with the freshest air and water you could ask for. A man in his sixties remembers without rancor how the blasts blew windows out of his boyhood home in northern Arizona, 90 miles away from the center of the explosion in Nevada. Another recalls seeing the sky flash while he rode his horse across the spare subtleties of this land he probably knew better than the planes of his own body. *Didn't bother us any. Didn't hurt us a bit.*

Omnipotent, invisible *powers- that-be* emerge when die-hard independent men clench their jaws, thinking of the government that for some incomprehensible reason owns all the ranchland. Across these expanses, the stately pace of your cattle and their

low, brass symphony heals your need for words. You laid down the miles of pipe under ground, even into the outer rim of covert military land where you have a special dispensation to chase your cattle, and now water flows here in a hard place. Things are going well. The land is yours in the deepest sense. But *they* don't acknowledge that. The wives get a headache when they think of it, while collecting the ostrich eggs (the ostrich business does better in Texas, she hears, better in the south), or weeding the garden, or driving two hundred and fifty miles to get medicine from Wal-Mart.

American Western continuity, felt to be inextricable from the land, can itself inspire the bitterness of its inevitable loss. It is a loss that echoes with other losses, come and gone before. The E.P.A., the entitled, privileged know-it-alls, can steal *all* this on some whim. They can divert your water, or shut down your well, or try to close the nearest dump -- which is *already* 100 miles away! -- cause some damn endangered rat got in it. You can't keep animals out of a dump! Besides, your friend adds in, as you bond over it at the bar, the wild animals *like* dumps-- coyotes, wildcats -- it's where they go to "get their munchies." What do they know of this in Washington?

North Las Vegas drops off into emptiness as you leave the city limits and drive into the Great Basin, a deep-set, harshly beautiful terrain curtained on all sides by pleated mountains. Except for the town of Alamo, there's nothing but scrubby desert for two hours until you scale the heights of Coyote Summit and then, coming down a curve, you can see Rachel, a scattered sun-glint of trailers along the left side of the road. People who live here describe the moment of descending Coyote Summit as a deep feeling of returning, the beginning of the place's sense of emplacement, being back home.

The café is in a double trailer with an extension. A painted alien face occupied a sign outside, turned to the highway: *Earthlings Welcome*. Across the road can be seen

the remains of collapsed old mine structures, forms whose overdetermined , already-entextualized outlines give shape to the amorphous expanse that quietly holds them.

Every year Pat and Joe Travis organize the Ultimate UFO Conference. In 1997, I was visiting Rachel for the first time, on a day trip from Las Vegas with friends. We happened to arrive the day of the conference. An ad-hoc country band played on a makeshift stage with tunes belted out by a man known in Area 51 discourse-circles as the author of a video polemic called *Secrets of Dreamland*. The small room jumped with tourists, abductees, UFO storytellers and conspiracy theorists. A few locals sat at the bar, refusing to become parts of the Area 51 show. When I asked the boy working the cash register how he liked living here, he said, in a laconic low voice, that he was getting out of this town and moving to Reno. Sometime soon. That turned out to be Jacob. His teenage critique of a nowhere place was filled with restrained emotion. But Pat Travis took a break from the kitchen and told us about light beams that come through the door. She said a “hybrid” always sits in that booth right there. And:

--One day, Pat said, a man came walking in here and he says, *I must talk to Jimmy. I have been told that I am here for a JIMMY*, and she said, there’s no Jimmy here. And the man says again, *well I am supposed to be here because of someone named Jimmy*. Well, then Pat remembered her grandson was named Jimmy, and he had been in a motorcycle accident. He was messed up so bad the doctors said he could never walk again; and the man went and visited Jimmy in the hospital down in Vegas, and after a while, even though he still can’t walk, Jimmy started getting better. The doctors can not explain it. Every once in a while the man came back here to the café, until his work was probably done and he moved on. He was, Pat said, probably an alien; or he could’ve been an angel.

Up at the bar, the grandmotherly, buxom waitress named Raylene nodded sagely and told about all the strange lights she's seen; she'd lived out here next to Area 51 for years. She said, *some people've seen light beams come right in that door*. Her father, and then her husband, and his father too, had followed work around the western mines, I later learned; now her husband -- that was Frank -- was too sick to work, his body ruined by years in the hard rock pits. That afternoon, when I asked Raylene how people in Rachel made a living after the local Union Carbide tungsten mine had closed a decade before, she grinned, looked pointedly around at the tourist crowd buying Area 51 stuff, and said, "Honey, by our wits."

From the kitchen, a young woman taking a break quietly sang along with Lee Ann Rimes. Later I found that Kimmy, age 22, was having dramatic times with Jacob, and it would be years of ongoing breakups and reunions, each of them moving away and coming back to this town, heartbreak never erasing the idea that *we're bonded for life*. There were not many young people around here, anymore.

Kimmy was Raylene's granddaughter; and she would eventually get thousands of dollars from her father's black lung settlement case, and drop 500 dollars in Raylene's lap, making her grandmother -- who had not a dime and had to work as a waitress with her diabetes and heart disease and painful feet -- pass out.

What was this symbiosis of the uncanny and the banal? After returning home to New York I called Pat and Joe Travis to ask if I could waitress for a month or two at the Little A'Le'Inn, to write about the stories I heard. Someone had just quit, and Pat said I could stay with her and Joe, in their mobile home next to the cafe, in lieu of waitress wages.

Come on out, said Pat's daughter Mary on the phone, when I called the café a few weeks later, from the Las Vegas airport. Be careful. Don't forget to look for cows in the road. You know, this is *open range*.

### **Open Range**

Some people in these parts pour themselves into their hard rural work. You improvise a way to fix something in one of its endless variations of wear and tear. There is a tangible, unspoken satisfaction when your improvisation works, because your skill has become unthinking, and your mind is alive, focused and in synch with your hands. That unspoken satisfaction carries a lot of weight and transforms the ache of physical labor. Its feel of independence seems a part of the place's birthright.

Jack, a busy, optimistic rancher, lives with his wife Dorothy on a little farm a few miles from the café. He has made everything here, wood and metal. In their sixties, with grandchildren, it is Jack and Dorothy's second marriage, of only two years; and they still kid each other in restrained flirtation. He does his outdoor work with a fast, graceful efficiency and, like Frank, *pays no mind* to that Area 51 business. But Jack does agree with the neighbors' bitter critique of the powers that be in Washington. Used to be, you could go out and rope a wild jackass. No more. They say it's cruelty to animals. It isn't cruelty to animals, cause the animals get too *thick*. Like the wild horses out here, got too thick. They'll just starve. They overgraze the land. People out here'd shoot em, feed em to the pigs. Sell the bones. There is no waste involved. Otherwise you get too many wildcats and coyotes and they starve too. But you can't shoot em, anymore.

Over the years, land has been seized in this area of Nevada – by the military, wanting more forbidden miles around the base; you can see on the maps in the Area 51 Research Center -- how the places *you aren't allowed to go* have expanded. Looking at these maps is eerily like looking at historical maps of Indian reservations in this area and

seeing the expanding land around their borders over the years. Centuries of political struggle between the federal and the local, between the urban and the rural, escalated in many ways in the 1970s (Davis 1997). But for many people in the rural west, the struggle becomes a kind of narratively compressed shorthand – a way of aligning oneself with the west and the rural, with decades of sagebrush rebellions against federal control of western land (ibid.) and urban ideas of what nature ought to be. A wider sense of *rip-off* gets distilled into a sense of an undifferentiated power that's after your autonomy and your land. It's a sense that is in fact bolstered by the complexities of land politics and its sometimes strange alignments. Wildlife is in fact protected on the base; the tanks must stop in their tracks for the endangered desert tortoise (Patten 1997). A natural cycle has been disrupted by the government. It doesn't seem right. Powers with no connection to this place throw a wrench in the interconnected chains of life and death that make up this land, natural connections which he regards as integral to his livelihood. But *they* claim to be the advocates of nature, the protectors of the environment.

What do *they* know about it – the words *animal cruelty* are disrespectful, given all the care and knowledge with which he keeps the chicken coop so clean, and rigs up a low little spout for the pigs to drink fresh water any time they want, and feeds all the animals natural alfalfa or grain instead of slops; he can sell people down in Flagstaff organic eggs and meat, because they like that. The alfalfa comes from the big farm right in Rachel, whose hay throwers frequent the bar in the café to drink and carouse a bit along with the low level workers up at Area 51. Meat you raised yourself is better than store-bought, so he doesn't know if he prefers to sell his pigs, or eat the pork himself.

He feeds the runt piglet by hand, kneeling down in his cowboy hat, his stiff shirt tucked neatly into his jeans, his square jaw dignified, silently holding the pink, plastic baby bottle to its tiny mouth.

Jack's goat is good for both her silky alpaca coat, and her milk. He says: *Come on. Come on now*, in a low firm voice and the pretty little goat trots over, jumps on the wooden milking platform and puts her head through a metal loop to get in position for milking, then checks in with Jack, looking back at him over her shoulder. After Jack milks her he says, *I made this stand too wide. I'll make a new one tomorrow*. A narrower platform will get him closer to the goat when he milks. He is always improving on the way things work. He laughs at the clumsy way I pull, when I want to give milking a try. In five years Jack and Dorothy plan to be *entirely self-sufficient*. They will show people that you can do it. Jack will build a smokehouse for home-made bacon. The first time I had a conversation with Dorothy, over at Pat's house, she mentioned that in their two years of marriage Jack had *never once tasted store bought bread* -- she bakes it all herself. They've got their dairy products, eggs, chicken, the garden. They have grazing cattle. All they'll need is salt and pepper, and they can go get that kind of thing once a year.

Jack grew up on a farm in Kingman; but before he came out here to Rachel, where his brother had got a ranch, he moved around and did other kinds of work. *Heating and cooling. Up in Flagstaff, get up any time of day or night when they called to fix the air conditioner*. He has been a sheet metal worker, and he has worked in a mine. He talks about these jobs with the same balanced pride as he does his ranch and farm work. But he nearly always had animals. After some time in Missouri he longed to come back to his roots in the west because he likes it better...why, because you can go anywhere on open range, and no one's gonna bother you or tell you not to. Except of course at the base.

But there was one day when Jack was taking me around in his pickup, showing me the region. He waved to the guard at the checkpoint at the base and then we drove on

in, because he's allowed to go up and follow his cattle. My breath came fast, driving past the notorious red and white signs: *Keep Out, Deadly Force Authorized*. (I saw the BACK of the sign!) White sensors that looked like periscopes stuck up out of the ground among the twisted Joshua trees, and poles topped by silver balls; and I craned to see them as we bounced along the dirt road. *Are those the heat sensors?* I asked Jack. People had told me the heat sensors could distinguish between a cow and a deer. One person even said the heat sensors could differentiate between animals of the same species. Jack didn't pay attention to the sensors – *that's air force*, he said simply. He was showing me the water lines, where he and his brother Pete had put in all the pipes so the cows could drink up here. He was proud of this, talking fast, in his stoic, concise way. He told me how they'd found the right spots, what kinds of materials they used.

Later on, after we left the military area, we climbed up onto the ruins of an old mine on Tempiute Mountain. We ran up the sides -- he still ran up the steep rocky hill in his cowboy boots as fast as a goat, with his dignified white head, weathered face, upright upper body, and a cigarette dangling from in his mouth. He showed me the old caving-in tunnel, old tracks that disappeared into nothing, materialized bits of the prospector past. But all of a sudden a man imperiously approached us, seemingly out of nowhere.

-- What are you doing here? Get out, you can not be here, he said to Jack.

Jack's response was formal and formidably polite. Still the man was overbearing, authoritative, ignoring Jack's posture, rudely pointing us the way out.

Was the man military, or Union Carbide? Was this barren place still in secret use? Was it coming back to life, was it being held on to by some source of power threatened by our presence? We had no idea. Like Frank, up at the base that time, Jack's dignity had been insulted. He was an upstanding man. He would not knowingly go where he was not supposed to go. He was a rancher in a starched shirt and ironed jeans,

twice the age of the man who ordered him with unknown forces backing his authority. Jack was not to be taken for a vagrant, a lowlife or a troublemaker. We got back in his pickup. *He shouldn't have talked that way. We weren't doin nothing wrong.* All the way home his jaw was set tight, and he was quiet. Quietly burning.

At home Dorothy has a disheartened mutedness like many women around here, a “just-humoring-the-boys” face that suggests unspoken hard times. But a kind of performed feminine beleaguery also becomes an ongoing sass back to a husband’s masculine vigor. *(Before we were married I came home from work and Jack and my son were moving all my things out of my house, moving me in to Jack’s place. My jaw dropped to here, and I said, what do you think you’re doing? Almost all my stuff was gone! Well he just **decided** to move me into his place.* Jack laughs and says, *We were goin together a while, it was time to get married!)* But her voice gets a serious rise when she says: “The ones back East don’t know anything about it here, or why we do the way we do, but the ones back East are the ones who make the rules.”

Things around here were changing. Jack did not analyze it much, he worked, and fixed things, and had deep knowledge of what he did. But asked about what was making things change out here, he said, "the environmentalists."

For the rational, no-nonsense rancher, and for the area's fabulous conspiracy theorists alike, environmentalism was a word with a dark, strange aura. The EPA was an agency that tried to control policy on the open range. Its policies viewed the land as *public* in many ways, required to expand its use beyond grazing into such public uses as national parks. Conservative constituencies in the West traditionally clashed with both the EPA and the BLM for economic reasons. But in story, for some people who had no direct economic interest in the potential development of land, those acronyms also had

become a kind of fantastically demonic emblem of the powers that be and its dominion over land; it was an enemy of the individual, and a right arm of the New World Order that would subsume you in its wake. People talked about the E.P.A. often, not mentioning specific policies but letting the sound of the initials resonate with an implicit, amorously sinister implication.

Joe: Constitutionally they [the government] can't own any land  
in this United States

except a ten mile strip of land called Washington DC.

But somehow they rob the people of the land

And thereby the people can't come out here

and use the land as they see FIT...

They're even tryin to put the ranchers out of business.

They're saving this land for – for – WHATEVER.

Susan: (thinking he meant military seizures of land, at the base, not the EPA)

You mean like nuclear experiments?

Joe: I think it's more closely related to the New World Order.

The U.N.!

You know this SO- CALLED E.P.A.

is nothing but a communist PLAN

to eliminate the people from the land.

Of course this is my opinion, from what I have read.

This American heritage thing!

This rivers act!            If they get this into effect,

the government will control the watershed.

They're destroying our country right before our eyes.

Lloyd: It's called PEOPLE CONTROL.

Joe. It's called PEOPLE CONTROL, that's illegal.

Lloyd: You can't even go walk a trail – without paying the government – you gotta go get a TICKET. (the word ticket is spit out in disgust.)

To walk a TRAIL.

They have made it impossible for you or I to stake a CLAIM.

But there are several gold and silver companies from England.

They have no restrictions whatsoever.

This land was still being fought for. Nature was still being taken captive. *Something* alien from the federal government was staking out a land claim, imperiously asserting its right to decide what was best for the land and the people who lived on it, taking away the way they had always lived. The fact of paying the government to “walk a trail” showed how it was not, in fact, a public space – it belonged to *them*. And they did not represent Lloyd. This was the place where you should be able to *stake a claim* like the old timers – a kind of jackpot of the mountains north of Vegas. But now you could not try your luck with the land; only the other powers, the other players in the global were allowed, it had become big-time, and they had gotten it all for themselves. Here you have on the one hand an anti-corporate discourse merging with a conservative one (against land protection) that often serves corporate interests. But that is not the point: the point is the sense of power, grabbing things away.

The counter narrative of federal protection has an uncanny resonance, the sense of a terrible thing that you just know in your bones to be true. It has the impact of a silent, uncanny chime with other stories of this land's colonization by the federal government -- not just the histories of federal and local struggles, but also the unfinished

legacy of settlement and missionization, haunting the landscape with a shifting, unstable point of view. Who were the natives here? Who was going to take away their land, their way of life?

The question, lurking in the background, could summon ghosts.

--You can almost picture a big old chief sitting up there on that cliff just watching us, mused Ida one day, gazing up at the top of a mountain. Ida was eighty, an air force widow. We were out looking over the breathtaking view of the valley with Jack.

-- What people lived here anyway, before the whites? I asked.

-- I don't know, maybe the Sioux? she said.

-- I had a book about it once. Had a blue-gray cover, Jack offered.

One local cowboy, Nick, gave me an arrowhead he'd found in the desert. I put it in a little plastic case from a gumball machine, so it wouldn't break. I didn't know if it was really an arrowhead, but I knew people liked to find them, some put them up in framed arrangements on their trailer walls.

But talking with Nick, I thought even the cowboy in the cowboy and Indian story feels himself to be inside the narrative's denouement. I was sitting with Nick in the bar, where he was telling me all the stories of his Wild West family, this who killed a man, and that one who killed another man, and the time his grandpa drug his woman home one time, making her walk behind the horse... Everyone said Nick was a little crazy; black sheep of the family. As he told the stories of his grandfather, who never had to answer to the law, he was, at this moment, waiting for his hearing to come up on domestic abuse charges. *That bitch*, he muttered to his blank-eyed friend, talking about it, when they'd had a few beers. But now, in the light of day, he was being a gentleman, talking about cowboy work, how they round em up. He was as always wearing his cowboy hat with the bandana tied around the brim, describing his seasonal work with a faint laconic mirth.

An overweight tourist in a big flowered hat -- a loud imposing presence -- pushed open the café door and seized the air in the room. She interrupted Nick in the middle of his sentence about roping.

-- WHERE'S THE UFO? she demanded. IS THERE A UFO HERE TODAY?

A bit later Nick ruefully said: We [cowboys] are dinosaurs.

Who knows if the things in the sky are UFOs, or fantastic secret military aircraft? It didn't much matter to many of the watchers I met. The lights were mysterious and uncanny, whatever their origin. Ricky was from the Bay Area, talked like a surfer dude. He had come out here for months at a time, for three years in a row. Ricky was a plane spotter. He just wanted to drive around and *see cool stuff*. He said: I don't really care where the stuff comes from. The stuff they **make** up there is weird enough. Maybe it's a really really new kind of plane and it can do these incredible things. And I just feel like, here I am, on the *cutting edge*. I am seeing things that in 20 years might be common. But right now they're only *here*. And it's just so cool to be able to see them. I don't think they're UFOs. But, well, where the technology **came** from -- that's a different question. *Where did they learn how to make it?*

Being here on the cutting edge meant being part of a future before it happened. It meant occupying a wide open yet contained space where inchoate things were evolving, bearing witness to embryonic technologies that would some day establish the lines of everyday life. Who knows where they come from? The technological origins might well be extraterrestrial; but the strange things Ricky watched in the sky were for him material emanations of unseen powers, and that was enough. In fact, it was pretty much the same thing. He was seeking his extreme experience in fleeting illuminations that conceded, though never revealed, the uncommon gestation of common futures. He could bear witness to an enormous secret growing in the dark, casting a glow over the scattered

foundations of lost wells, and the old, broken-down mines, flashing out its power over the *open range*..

## II. ORDINARY MARKS AND MONSTROUS MUTILATIONS

It takes six men to brand the cattle, Jack tells me. One of you on a horse with nine inches of lariat, and you rope the calf and get it down, tie it, two men layin atop of it while another man brands it and cuts it [neuters it]. You inoculate it then too; takes less than one minute. Then the calf is up and running again. You keep three branding irons in the fire at the same time, so one of them is always red hot for the next calf. Jack and his brother Pete work these big jobs together; out of their nine siblings, only one has gone east for good. It is Pete whose mailbox on the road became known as the “black mailbox” -- a marker for the spot that supposedly offers the best view of UFO activity over the base. Every UFO buff with an internet line knows about the “black mailbox” near Area 51 and every UFO tourist at the Little A’Le’Inn, after eating an alien burger and inspecting the UFO photos on the walls, goes over there to search the skies. When local guys with nothing to do feel slightly restless, they might go over to the mailbox at night, especially if there are any tourist girls in town who might be open to an authentic local voice. The location of the mailbox, twenty miles down the road, is given on a 35-cent map you can buy at the café. A couple of years ago Pete got so sick of it that he painted his black mailbox white; but people still called it “the black mailbox” and kept going there, many a night.

Inside Dorothy and Jack’s sweetly decorated, tidy mobile home Jack illustrates the shape of his cattle brand in some cornmeal scattered on a counter. Back east they don’t know how to brand, anymore. Just tag the cow’s ear. That’s all.

At Pete's black mailbox, Wayne and Billy look up at the sky. Billy's a dishwasher in the café, drifted up from Vegas. He stutters and shies back when he speaks. Tonight

was his 40th birthday. He was an orphan, grew up in foster homes. He said this was his first birthday party. He called Pat “Mom.”

Wayne and Billy are drinking beers, gazing at the stars that seem to pulse across the sky, the big moon, the darkness that presses down on you like a lid. All of a sudden, the local habit of smirking over the gushing UFO tourists seems to melt away. They are reeling with awe and drunken exuberance, heads back, arms up, glorying over the stars and their own imaginations stretching out into the open space, exclaiming that they see eternity out here, infinite, UFOs, galaxies, time, all of it in the sky.

In the groups where I heard UFO stories in Texas, sometimes people mentioned the underground base in Nevada. People talked about abduction, about how aliens track you beginning in your childhood with some kind of device, paralyze you, experiment on you, steal your eggs and sperm. Nestled among such stories I had heard a lot of ominous discussion about Area 51. The Roswell UFO glowed and hummed in a secret chamber underground there. Aliens lived in rooms below the surface of the mountain, nourished by enormous vats of blood. They didn't have to eat or drink the blood, for they had no mouths; just stuck their skinny arms inside the vat and the blood was absorbed by their skin. People in Texas said that at Area 51, the government and the aliens work together. A man named Bob Lazar said he had seen the craft and with little seats for the aliens there. He said he'd had a big science job as a “physicist” at Area 51, but others said he was a low level tech worker on the periphery of the military industrial world. But the powers that be said Bob Lazar was lying or insane. Maybe Lazar *was* insane, but that didn't mean you could trust *them*. Maybe *they* had just used this insane guy and puffed up his story themselves as disinformation, so now anyone who told the truth about *what they do* would seem nuts. But maybe he was a hero, a whistle-blower on the powers that

be. *They* don't let you get away with talking, they would have made him just disappear if he hadn't gone on Las Vegas TV so fast. *They* erased his employment and education records – made him disappear on paper.

But maybe Bob Lazar was lying anyway...

Some say that the UFO is gone now; others believe it still sits, deconstructed by scientists in its secret mountain chamber underground. Some people say there was never a UFO at Area 51, UFOs are their disinformation, UFOs are a form of government mind control so we won't know what they really do. Soon they will stage the extraterrestrial invasion with holograms. Apparitions of spaceships in the air will fly across your spinning retinas and there will be hollow images of aliens taking over the streets. Then the terrorized people will give the powers that be complete and utter control.

Some say government scientists at Area 51 dismantled that UFO piece by piece. The aliens co-operated, to tell us what was what. *They* used “reverse engineering” to figure out how it worked, and this is how they actually invented the integrated circuit -- *we couldn't have done that alone* (see the confessional account by Corso 1998). Some say what *those scientists* took apart were the crashed extraterrestrial bodies, examining their exotic organs and strange blood. That's what the alien autopsy showed on Fox TV. They captured the wounded extraterrestrials after the crash, wanted to see what was inside them -- just like *they* do to *us*. On TV, an alien autopsy was said to be the broadcast of a mysteriously discovered film of unknown origin or authenticity. It showed a strange body that looked almost-human. Though I was prepared to see the televised alien autopsy as a stunt, it gave me a nauseous, uncanny spin. Surrounded by white-gowned pathologists in a 1950s-style dissection lab, the sad, inert, large-headed body looked like someone who had been deformed by radiation, But that is what the aliens do to us. They experiment on us. They take *us* apart. To them we are nothing, doesn't

matter if you yell, scream or try to fight, they just use your body to get what they need, just like they do to the planet itself, bleeding nature dry.

*They* -- the government, or the aliens or both, just a dreadful and othering *they* – mutilate cattle and sheep in the deserts of the west. They cut them right down the middle with a perfect edge and suck the blood and organs clean out. *They said* it was coyotes and vultures. Human bodies have been found that way too, some say, with cuts so clean it had to be done by a laser.

At the bar of the Little A'Le'Inn, Joe Travis talked with Lloyd and Dwight and me about the uncanny cattle mutilations. Lloyd, who lived in Rachel half of each year, was a traveler, a retired janitor, and a Vietnam Vet who knew what the government did to people's bodies. They'd screwed him over; his health was a wreck since Vietnam, when he'd been exposed to Agent Orange. Nothing *they* did surprised him anymore.

I asked if cattle mutilations were still going on around here.

And Joe said:

Former senator Floyd Lam had a prize BULL

Mutilated within *fifty yards* of his office.

This one lady, Jane Crawford,

She had a cattle ranch,

And a prize COW,

I think it was a cow,

It was MUTILATED.

So they just drug it off

To a re-mote area.

Well the COYotes wouldn't bother it<sup>21</sup>.  
The VARMINTS wouldn't bother it, YOU know.  
So uh, a couple years later, I think she said,  
She was ridin out in that vicinity,  
So she just rode by where this COW  
Had been DRUG to this PLACE, you know.  
And she said of course the top part of it, the skin,  
Was all dried out.  
But through the HEAD she could see part of the JAW  
Where the jaw was removed.  
Whatever – MUTILATED.  
And you could see THROUGH the top part of the head,  
The flesh on the lower side, next to the ground,  
Looked like it was FRESH KILLED,  
And it had been layin' there for *two years*.  
Susan: Woah!  
Joe: And like I say – the varmints in the desert,  
They didn't *bother* it.  
You know, coyotes are scavengers.  
They'll eat anything.  
Lloyd: YUP. Human being or anything else out they can get out there!  
Joe: They'll eat anything --  
Lloyd: YEAH --

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<sup>21</sup> The word coyote is pronounced with two, not three syllables: KAI-oat.

Joe: --but they didn't bother this carcass.

I heard every one of them [mutilated carcasses] will you know just LAY there  
for a long time,

Before it goes back to nature.

Everything else, you know, just rots immediately.

For some reason, *they don't*.

Susan: Well -- what do you think it IS? Doing it?

Joe: It's anybody's guess. I don't believe it's Satan,  
I don't believe it's *that*.

Susan: Yeah, that seems unlikely.

Joe: And the *precision*

of the *incision*

of these things that are mutilated,

It's as though, you know,

It's a COOKIE CUTTER DESIGN, you know.

It's not just something that's *haphazard*.

Or not ragged like an animal bite

Or somethin like that.

So what it is, and why it occurs,

I don't know...

Lloyd: We got a book out there in the trailer...

There was one [mutilated carcass] lying right on the side of the road.

And they said it looked like it'd JUST BEEN KILLED.

Everything I've ever read, every one of those is EXACTLY ALIKE.

The cuts are just *absolute, total* perfect.

What can you say about the power doing these monstrous things?

You see the carcass but never the killing; for it is secret, yet it leaves its remainders right in your face, right up against the road where you'll find the trace, evidence of its invisible presence. Even the office of the senator is nothing next to this thing.

It is unnatural. It grossly disrupts the order of things. It scares off the scavenger-varmints, which in God's approved natural cycle helps dead bodies return to the earth. The imperfect, ragged tear made by an animal's teeth in the natural world is replaced by the chilling perfection of a surgical cut. It reduces everything to sameness, the standardized product of a "cookie cutter" mold.

This dead carcass is *too dead*. Instead of moving through the process of life and death and decay, the mutilated carcass seems forever to have been JUST KILLED. Its remains stay horribly on view. The uncannily mutilated bodies are stuck forever in the moment of their injury like an unresolved trauma, frozen out of the birthright of *process*. *They* mutilate the assumption that a wound will *not stay the same*.

Why else would the word mutilated always denote these perfectly alien deaths, not the raggedly torn-up carcass that the coyotes get to? A torn-up body is natural, but *this* is what has been mutilated: the unquestioned right of the body to the progress, resolution and absorption of its own trauma. The mutilated body is reduced to a cookie cutter form, an inanimate product, for some high-tech inscrutable power. Animals and humans are on the same side in light of its alien gaze.

You know how they *say* time heals all wounds. But the thing is, with this stuff, some of them just don't go back to nature for a long, long time. Mutilated by unseen powers.

## **Mutilated by Unseen Powers**

One hears other stories, circulating in other spheres, and feels the uncanny chill of repetition. A strange lawsuit was widely reported in the mainstream press, helped along by a media-savvy lawyer. Before going to Rachel I read the briefs, saw it on 60 Minutes, but didn't hear about it in the Texas groups. Workers at Area 51, whose existence was denied by the federal government, had fallen ill; two had already died, perhaps from exposure to unknown industrial toxins. The workers had been instructed to burn waste in huge open-aired pits on the grounds of the secret base. Because of the association with Area 51, media reports of the case carried a faint accent of unnatural horror. The poison smoke choked the workers for years as they stood over the pits. They worried: why won't they give us protective masks? Shouldn't we be wearing gloves?

The secret scientists who dissected alien bodies wore gloves and masks; and the aliens' hands and faces seemed to be sealed, masks and gloves built in as they experimented on the bodies of humans. But the people doing regular jobs out at the base to make a living were just in their own skin.

Maybe the stuff was invisible paint for the invisible Stealth bomber, the workers thought -- invisible paint with graphic effects. But of course they didn't really know *what* it was. They were low-level sheet metal workers at an ultra high-security base in the middle of nowhere. They weren't allowed to tell anyone where they worked. They didn't know what they were doing in there -- they just knew they were sick. The monstrous concealment of what had hurt them seemed to seep into the descriptions of their failing bodies. Their skin became "fish scales" and turned the bed sheets red. Their biopsied tissues showed toxins "rarely found in humans," as one newspaper put it (Leiby 1997). Ill workers and widows, some of them anonymous, had instigated the lawsuit against the EPA and the Department of Defense, not for money but for information. They wanted to

know what poisons from the source of power had infiltrated the boundaries of their bodies. They had found this high-profile lawyer to represent them, a professor at Georgetown University. After winning one round at a hearing in 1996, the suit was twice thrown out; it was ruled that classified military information at Area 51 would be endangered by a trial<sup>22</sup>.

When I went to Rachel for the first time and asked around, local people said not to talk about it. In the next years, demonstrations against government secrecy that

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<sup>22</sup> This lawsuit was dismissed in 1995, and then again on appeal in November 1997 in the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court. President Clinton issued an executive order in 1995 to shield the military from the suit, saying it was protected from having to divulge sensitive information in the interest of national security (and later, President Bush re-affirmed this order.) Documents for the case were sealed. An EPA report into the conditions of the place was deemed classified. In 1998 the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal of the workers' cases, agreeing that national security interests overrode the workers' rights to information. In June 2002, the 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court again heard arguments that "the Department of Justice attorneys improperly used national security to hide embarrassing statements." (Rogers, Keith. *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 4, 2000. On the web: ([http://www.lvrj.com/lvrj\\_home/2002/Jun-04-Tue-2002/news/18894771.html](http://www.lvrj.com/lvrj_home/2002/Jun-04-Tue-2002/news/18894771.html))). In August 2002, the *Review-Journal* filed a motion to unseal the court records. The judge in the case did release the records, but they arrived with large portions blacked out, according to the *Review-Journal*. (Rogers) and in April 2003, the Court of Appeals ruled that the Justice Department "did not abuse national security when information was struck from court documents" in two of the 1994 cases (Rogers, Tuesday April 15, 2003. On the web: [http://www.reviewjournal.com/lvrj\\_home/2003/Apr-15-Tue-2003/news/21110975.html](http://www.reviewjournal.com/lvrj_home/2003/Apr-15-Tue-2003/news/21110975.html)). For more on the Area 51 toxic waste case and other information on Area 51 that is beyond the scope of this essay, see Phil Patton's excellent journalistic study, *Dreamland: Travels Inside the Secret World of Roswell and Area 51* (New York: Villard, 1998), or David Darlington, *Area 51: The Dreamland Chronicles* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997).

focused on these lawsuits were held at the borders of the secret base. But in October 1997 Mary looked down and chopped onions in the cafe kitchen, and said, *The military is just doing its job.* People said: *You can't ask who works there. Ten years in Leavenworth if they even tell where they work.*<sup>23</sup>

One meandering afternoon, a couple of Rachel people and I saw the workers' bus returning from the direction of the secret base. We were driving the back dirt rancher's roads that cut close to the border of forbidden land, to watch fighter planes zoom in formation through the air. Before the small white bus itself became visible, we watched its trailing dustcloud in the distance. *Here they come, here they come.* Then the bus jolted past us. Its windows were made of darkened glass, and yet behind the panes, faint outlines of the workers' heads suddenly ducked down when they saw us watching them. Darkened glass wasn't enough concealment.

I called the lawyer in Washington D.C. from Rachel's only payphone, which was on a wall near the café. I huddled into the phone, against the wind and the friends coming and going from the café who walked close by to see what I might be doing on the phone. The lawyer himself spoke to me in his own rushed tones. He said:

- - UFO stories are a distraction. That's all anyone seems to care about out there. I don't know anything about that UFO stuff. *This is real;* a real case.

-- Yes, it's real, the most important thing, but no one talks about it here in Rachel. They say the military is just doing its job. But then I hear that the government is experimenting on people up there, using people as guinea pigs, hiding UFOs...There's just such similar imagery. Maybe there *is* some kind of relation.

-- There's no relation. Those UFO stories are who-knows-what. This is an issue for the EPA, an issue of Clinton's misuse of an executive order to hide environmental crimes.

I heard his frustration. *This is real*. It was important *because* it was real. People's lives had been hurt; and to him the UFO stories were a kind of false consciousness, luring people away from the reality of exploitation. Like the conspiracists who think UFOs are disinformation purposefully spread by the powers that be, this view sees UFOs as disinformation spread by something called culture, a superstructural distraction made by the people themselves. But I had to wonder. What *is* the relation between narrative levels here – between stories of UFOs and other more realist secrets? Between genres that are perhaps too hastily labeled as utterly distinct, marked off so clearly as the imaginary and the real?

How could you give due weight to the materially real without scraping out and throwing away all the levels of its expression? How, in fact, could you understand that this *real* came into being inside and next to the very structure of imagination that sometimes seems to try erasing it? You might say that fantasies distract us from a real problem. You might even say these fantasies are distorted symptoms of a singular, real source of injury, and that when you locate that real problem, its symptoms will simply vanish. But I imagine a subtler kind of mimesis -- one in which multiple material and fantastic terrors co-generate, each rising out of a shared imaginative and social field, perpetually making another layer of the real. In these stories, you can hear many half-articulated fragments – about class and place, and about the body and its boundaries, its exploitations and mutilations, and the ambivalence of its pride in its own, rugged work.

## Roadkill

I come walking up to the cafe one afternoon and there's Jacob pacing in front, waiting for me.

“I was lookin for you! Hey -- look at this.”

He holds up a big dead swaying rattlesnake, which he grips by the neck. I bend to see. Its alien face fills the visual field between us with strangeness – its pointed head, its blank obsidian eyes.

“Roadkill,” Jacob says. “I'm gonna take it and throw it on the grill. You gonna eat some? You ever eat snake? It's good. Well, I was here *waitin* for you.”

I agree to come over later and try it with them.

Then he says, “Thought you'd want to take a picture of it.”

“Thanks, “ I say. I go inside and get my camera, and come back to where he is waiting.

He holds the snake up for my camera. This is his sign of his place, performed for the outsider. The rattlesnake, the meta-icon of rugged dangerous desert, entextualizes Jacob now, who holds it up like a fisherman with a big barracuda. In this image he is the desert male in a cowboy hat and a lip-dangling Marlboro, who throws a rattlesnake on the grill. He gives a sultry grin; I snap the picture.

He sees himself from the inside and outside at once. A few days ago, poking around the old mines, I joked with him about how much he looked the part, and he asked me if I could help him get a gig as the Marlboro Man on a billboard.

I try to imagine Jacob at the moment he was finding the snake on the highway. From far away, through his dirty windshield, he can spot glints and shadings that mark a change in the landscape, things that are invisible to me until pointed out and then they look as small and nondescript as a seed. To me, his eye is an incredible skill, but to him

it's nothing. He once saw a tiny glitter as we drove along a dry creek bed and realized that it was a beer can, and by the colors that marked its brand, who had been by here, and yup, done a notorious bit of mischief that everyone had been speculating about.

I think of him speeding as usual and noticing a slight flash in the dirt as sun hit the snakeskin, and then screeching over in his truck to see what it might be, crouching down in the dust, smiling when he sees the snake's still good and whole. I wonder if all this is background in his own mentally developing picture of himself; or whether that part, the finding it, is too naturalized for him, a hidden charge -- a practice whose meaning is meant to be cropped from the icon's frame. For holding and eating a rattlesnake figures "authentic" and "Nevada," and so does making use of what you find in the scarcity of the desert -- a mode of survival. That's what he knows he signals in his Marlboro Man smile. But eating roadkill can also figure a different kind of danger -- of poverty and caste and contagion and things "picked up" (junk or disease) from the margins of catastrophes. Roadkill -- the word itself is a bleak poem. Does it suffuse Jacob's own inner picture with another figure montaged onto the Marlboro Man -- white trash/Mexican rebel? Or is it just a leak, a *punctum*, where meaning seeps unconsciously in to the manifest image of the young man in a cowboy hat holding up his desert trophy? In any case I snap the camera as he wishes.

"All right then," he says, nodding courteously.

They don't come fetch me for any cookout. Later that night though, Jacob comes back to the trailer with just the rattle, a gift for Jessie to keep in a box at her bedside, next to the precious ostrich egg taken from the Medlin's ranch. Jessie was the Travis's eight year-old granddaughter, whom I often took care of. She was living with her grandparents now because her daddy's girlfriend didn't want her, and her daddy was in jail. *Drugs*, they said simply. Her mother was not in the picture. A month before, Joe and Pat found

her alone in the Las Vegas apartment on a stained bare mattress surrounded by garbage on the floor. (Most nights, when I returned to the trailer to mind her while her grandparents stayed working late in their bar, she moaned in her sleep, with terrible cries that sounded like a grown woman, she sat up with her eyes open, still asleep, until I pushed her sleeping body down into the bed and closed her eyelids, and tried to put her moans and cries back inside her sleeping, sad, overweight child's body -- as if there, back inside her, they would only be dreams, and then not matter. But I knew they would.)

“Jessie will like the rattle when she wakes up,” I tell him.

And Jacob tells me why they didn't come get me:

“We didn't eat that snake: my cousin said, we don't know if it **bit** himself in that cooler. Doesn't matter [about the poison from biting itself]; if you cook it, you burn the poison off. But when they get that SCARED [enough] to bite themselves, when they see the truck comin? It makes the meat go bad. Like when you scare a deer before you shoot it, the meat goes bad.

“Yeah,” he says, shuffling his feet, “I just brought that snake here cause I thought you'd want a picture.”

“Well thanks. I'll send you a copy,” I say.

We poke at the cleaned rattle in his palm. When the snake gets too scared the meat goes bad. Like when the deer gets too scared the meat goes bad. You eat its fear, and you get sick too. Bad meat, tainted by shock, must be thrown away.

There it is: the shock, the flash in the panic, the traumatized recognition -- it becomes a substance. It becomes matter -- it "matters:" its trace seeps outside the traumatic moment to stain and alter the real, with its own poison, a leak of traumatic adrenalin, that simply doesn't burn off.

## Conspiracies

As the master narrative of the glorious pioneer past grows stale and crumbles on the allegorical landscape of the American West, the UFO story seems to rush in to take its place. It too soon becomes familiar, with its recycling tropes of conspiracy, the hugeness of power, and the rush of a future felt to be coming too fast. But you might notice how all these tropes are suffused with another theme: the tension between memory, repression and return. And in uncanny images of displacement, you can hear a grounding in losses that have no single definite object, but are shot through, always, with the inchoate injuries of class, and power, and change.

Joe Travis used to be a carpenter; Pat Travis was a short order cook. They moved out here to the high desert because they wanted to start over, to get out into the real West, where Joe says you could be a pioneer and make a life of your own. But in 1988, when Joe's hands *went bad* and he could no longer work at his trade, the couple took a risk and bought what was then called the Rachel Bar and Grill, a ramshackle desert café that had gone under five times over the years. The rumors of the Area 51 UFO began a year later; and that's when they changed the cafe's name to the Little A'Le'Inn. Along with the emblems of their die-hard independent rural Western sensibilities -- posters admonishing the coming of the New World Order, bumper stickers that say "Freedom's Precious Metals - Gold, Silver and Lead" [lead as in bullets] and "Thank you for holding your breath while I smoke" -- they had the sign painted with the face of a huge-eyed alien turned out to the lonely highway, and filled the walls with evidence of UFOs.

Long ago, Joe was a little boy in Kentucky, before his father and mother moved the family from the hard land where the farm wouldn't take, from the place where they were poor, and still used a plough with a horse. They moved to find work in the cold

factories of Detroit -- a move made by many poor Kentuckians and one Joe, who was ten at the time, says he never got over (cf. Hartigan 1999, Stewart 1996). It was a move that left him feeling permanently adrift, until he came West and started his life over *like a pioneer*. Before he found the sunshine of Nevada, though, he was caught in the scar left by the wound of his family's move. He said:

When I was 10 my parents moved from Kentucky to Michigan.

And whatever roots I had at that age it was in Kentucky.

You know, young people usually stay around where their mother and dad are.

I guess, I guess that's the law.

Susan: Oh yeah, you were only ten.

Joe: But I went in the service in 1957.

When I got out of the service

I told mom and dad, I said,

I'm a-goin down to Kentucky,

I'm gonna head down there.

But when I got down there as a young adult

I didn't like Kentucky any more than I did Michigan.

I went back to Michigan cause there's no work in Kentucky.

I went back to Michigan

and got in the carpenter trade.

Went back to Michigan.

And I hated it for thirty years.

In 1979 I left.

Then I – I wasn't happy, I wasn't satisfied,

I didn't feel like I was AT HOME.

I just didn't like where I was livin.

No matter where --

Before we were married I went up just south of Chicago,

Indiana,

I got a job at U.S. Steel up there at first,

Then I went to work at American Steel ...

I was running machines, you know,

drill press, you know,

just various production machines.

And...

I didn't like it there any better'n I did Michigan.

So I went back...

My oldest daughter was born in Hammond Indiana.

We went back to Michigan in 61, I believe.

I went to work at General Motors Truck and Coach.

I was a press operator. Ran machines.

Any dummy can run machines.

You put the STOP in there,

You push the button.

Then I was ending my second marriage.  
And I had already decided, my God,  
I was in Michigan,  
And God I hated that place.  
There was MOSQUITOES  
And BLACK FLIES  
And DEER FLIES  
And TICKS.  
I hated that.  
I HATED that.

I went back to Michigan.  
I started an addition on my house,  
Still had to do some things, put the toilet in.  
Well it was HER house [the wife he was leaving].  
It's not right that I should leave a job undone.  
It was my job, my idea.  
I took two months to finish the job.  
Then I packed all my stuff and said: ADIOS.  
And I headed west.  
And I've never, never been sorry one day.

I wouldn't LIVE in that country back there.  
Not a day.

My dad retired in '85;  
they moved back to Kentucky.  
As you know we were down there recently  
for my sister's wedding anniversary.  
And you LOOK at that place.  
MY GOD it's depressing.  
You got TREES all around!  
And it's WET!  
And you walk out in the morning,  
and your FEET'S WET!  
All the DEW!  
The HUMIDITY!  
Everything is ROTTING.  
Ever since the beginning of time!

More than any other kind of personal story, people in Rachel told about their travels, long, long narratives that could sound sometimes like an itinerary of surfaces. *I went here, and here and here, and here I had a flat tire, and then I went here and here...* Or: where are you from? *We lived here, and then here and then here...* Ambivalent meanings spin out in tales of mobility and staying put, of freedom and home. Once, Kentucky was an imaginary home he would some day reclaim in the long, lived-out odyssey and the idea of a return one day.... But when he got there it wasn't right. The place that stayed behind was always already rot. Because he had traveled too far, there was no hometown left for him to dream about. And that was both a rupture and a

liberation. As everything unraveled he built a house that he would never live in; and when it was done, and he was in a wide open space with nothing left, he headed west, which is of course a story whose outlines are already in place...

Now he felt free. Now, he told me, it took him only three days to "acclimatize" to the heat. He drove around, free; and on the second day found work. He learned how to adjust to the burning sun of Las Vegas. You lay your saw in the shade so it won't burn you when you pick it back up again. You do the same with all your tools, lay em in the shade. And from that strange moment when he jumped whole-heartedly into his own rootlessness, he began to settle down.

Soon after he got to Nevada he met and married Pat, a 37 year old mom who had been married four times. She had travel stories of her own, and she had also come to start over here, in Nevada, after years of settling down and then fleeing, leaving husbands and jobs, crossing the country on buses, in cars that coast the last miles home on fumes, waitressing, working as a short order cook, counting on luck -- like the extra pennies she'd forgotten in her closed bank account, or the time a total stranger came up to her in an all-night diner and gave her a hundred dollars, and said, *get those kids home safe*.

Now they are here, settled in. Married all these years, and pillars of the community.

The Little A'Le'Inn was making the Travis's unprecedented money. For the first time in their lives they weren't just scraping by. They were buying land in Rachel. They had added on a lot to the café, and bought a bigger trailer to live in next door. Pat said she could never afford to give her daughter a real girly room before. Mary was grown now, lived a few trailers down, and worked with her mom in the café. Now the second bedroom was filled with a stiff, ruffled bedspread and curtains, for Jessie. But the new

trailer still had holes in the walls. When people asked Joe why he didn't get a house instead, he railed that this was what he liked better, what do you need THAT for? In Nevada, people told me, there are so many trailers you have to pay home property tax if yours has a permanent foundation. It's affordable; and you can always just haul it and move away.

Pat says that Joe is a preacher behind the bar. His father really was a preacher, back in Kentucky. One afternoon I sit beside Joe on a barstool in the near-empty cafe while he drinks his Old Milwaukee and strokes his bushy gray beard. He's already done his work for this morning, using his carpenter tools in the shed out back to make items to sell in the gift shop: he's wired a lamp with an alien head base, poured the little plaster spacemen into molds before gluing them to magnets. Now he's preaching *the way things are* in the cadences of revelation, as he says:

The powers that be  
are every day striving  
to destroy the Constitution...  
And they will.  
And they *have* done it.  
When I see 'em coming up that road I'm ready.  
I'll go out there and meet 'em on that road.  
I keep this gun right here on the bar.  
I'll meet 'em in their tanks.  
They're coming to take our guns,  
to make us their slaves.  
They've already *built* the concentration camps.

Well, I'd rather die on my feet  
than live on my knees.  
They are into the occult.  
On the back side of the one-dollar bill  
on the left-hand side -- see here darlin,  
there's a circle and a pyramid,  
the pyramid of Giza,  
the all-seeing eye of Lucifer  
or Satan  
or whoever you would like to put in that position.  
When this *pyramid*, is in place,  
then the New World Order  
or Satan  
will be in charge.  
You know symbolism is everywhere in our daily lives.  
From what I've learned  
and what I understand  
this evil is set about to take over the world.  
I have to believe,  
I have to pray to God,  
that they won't succeed this time.  
Cause the tyrannical people that are in charge,  
well, if they in fact do usher in  
this New World Order,  
the people have never known slavery

such as they will suffer  
under the hands of these people.

That's my firm belief.

The people of this country have no idea,  
in my opinion,  
what's coming.

How can I understand this talk, in light of Joe's sanity, his decency and kindness? What, I might begin by asking with him, *is coming* here? Or perhaps I should ask not only *what's coming*, but what's *already been here*, naturalized and partly forgotten.

What should I hear in Joe's conspiracy story, and in those circulating around him amid the souvenirs at the Little A'Le'Inn? Why is the fabulous prophecy of a white man from Kentucky a montage of these specific tropes, in which the Satan of boyhood sermons is infused with still-restless images of slavery and concentration camps, co-articulating signs of some un-named power watching *the little man* through the all-seeing eye of the dollar?

You might think of forgotten referents: the endless Western histories which are here combined, condensed, and transformed into something new (cf. Urban 2001).<sup>24</sup> You could write, in these mutations, the fragments of many other narratives --

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<sup>24</sup> Also according to Turley, the punishment for disclosing any information regarding Area 51 as a workplace, including the fact that one worked there, is ten years in prison. Since my visits to Rachel in 1997 and 1998, however, there has been increasing discourse about the suit, from newspaper articles to press conference/demonstrations, including the two People's Rallies at the base border. For more on the Area 51 toxic waste case and other information, see: Patton 1998, Darlington 1997.

<sup>24</sup> The processes I am musing here -- that is, the ways in which old material is transformed into new forms through cultural and semiotic movement -- have been mapped out in relation to modernity and the problem

real stories of slavery, or the uncannily parallel histories of twentieth century experiments on human minds and bodies: by the CIA, or by the Nazi's Dr. Mengele, or by the doctors at Tuskegee, or by the recently unearthed records of Federal government testing out the effects of radiation on the poor (Welsome 1999). . Or you could retell the half-glimpsed stories of countless colonialist invasions and ruin, stories of the Native Americans in this very place, as perhaps Dolphina, the adopted Navajo granddaughter of local whites, might come in and be told she can't buy a drink, because there is an Indian law here.

Meaning here emerges, too, in the sound and the feel of Joe's talk. And so you might, like Freud, look at recurrence and repetition. The images *themselves* are meaningless. It's when they are repeated -- suddenly cast into parallel relation --that their *connection* grows charged with the intimation of hidden significance, a paradigm, the uncanny's sense of what Freud called the "secret meaning. " Then something inchoate begins to emerge: an intuition of some vast structure -- a structure that he builds in the act of interpretation, in his fabulous glossing (Urban 1996, 2001). Resemblances begin to spin like rhymes into a logic. It dreams into being a world imagined as somehow, somewhere, a web of entirety, a structure that exists if you could only get to it -- a structure made of likenesses. Some connections emerge by spinning outward and noticing similar images, and some spin inward, through the secret nestings of meaning inside words. There are iconic etymologies that show you more connections. As Joe puts it:

Well they worship the *owl*,  
because the owl can see in the *dark*,

---

of culture by Greg Urban (2001). Urban observes that a continual sense of "newness" is one of modernity's primary values -- an effect which, when mediated by nostalgia and ambivalence, seems to generate a sense of uncanny vertigo in the stories I present here.

so therefore he's very wise...

You know when you talk about college graduates,

they become *alumni*;

*illuminated*.

This all ties together,

and it's, it's

it's amazing...

What is in fact a *poetic* production of resemblance emerges here. It involves not just the pleasure of form, but even more seductively and urgently, the uncanny's sense of intensified significance, and the *agency* felt to be restlessly lodged in the structure (Jakobson 1960).

You might see the uncanny in Joe's feeling for what Taussig calls the magic of the state and in the amorphous social discontent which refuses class consciousness. You might see it in Joe's identification with master tropes of freedom and individuality and ownership and nationalism from well inside an intersubjective sense of being generally *out of place*, just *screwed over*. When a man first came into the bar testifying the New World Order and the devious plot of all the powers that be, Joe says it stopped him dead in his tracks. It was his conversion narrative. It hit him like a bolt of lightning, he said. Because like he said, all his life he just *knew* that *something wasn't right*. This man gave him the words.

The neighbors too, ranchers or farmers. perhaps hay throwers, machinists, miners, welldiggers or just dreaming drinkers and settled down drifters -- all curse that far-off federal power when they think of how *they* can come and just seize a man's land, land that was bought and paid for with a man's own money. Or a woman's -- that one lady holed up in her place and would not *budge*, and the ATM could not get her out of there

for weeks. But finally the government just storms in and seizes your house and property because they say they need it for “something else.” And right here in the shadow of the military (now, you don’t blame the kids up there in uniform, doing their job) your own guns will be taken, so you won’t even be able to defend the land you live on. Without your guns you won’t even be able to hunt for food when the day comes that you have to, and some people say that day is coming soon. Almost everyone in their own way feels the anxiety of things slipping, and the encroachment of the powers that be.

Sometimes when Joe preaches the congregation chimes in with its amens. Here Joe was talking about picking up a Mexican hitchhiker who was here because he couldn’t get work at home. NAFTA wasn’t helping the Mexicans and now they had to come up here and get American jobs. But it wasn’t the fault of the poor. He preaches and Lloyd responds from the pew of his barstool:

Joe: It’s not [the fault of] the people!

It’s not the people,  
it’s the governments!

It’s OUR government,  
and THEIR government --

Lloyd: – the governments!

Joe: You got it!

They are working hand in hand  
to enslave the people!

We are all enslaved.

Don’t think for a minute that we are not.

Jack: Oh I KNOW we are. Oh I KNOW that we are.

Joe: And they are fast turning this country  
into a third world country.

Lloyd: Out for profit!

Joe: A short time ago  
we were the number one country  
in the world.

Jack (bitterly) We're number TWENTY now.

Joe: We are the world's largest debtor nation!  
And this didn't happen by accident!

Lloyd: No, you know it didn't!

Lloyd chimes in with Joe, echoing him and building up the dialogic sermon, a chorus that echoed with the traditions of churches, and that came directly out of the structure of Joe's talk itself, and the kind of space he made open up for the listener.

As for Lloyd, he was traveling the country with his son Danny, a quiet young man with a talent for painting. Danny painted the aliens and logos on the truck the Travis's drove into Vegas for supplies. After Lloyd's divorce they got a camper and began to drift around the country. They went without a destination, traveling for months. But then they settled here, for a while. The two of them worked together in the Area 51 Research center, a trailer at the opposite end of Rachel's stretch, a place owned by the son of Rachel's first homesteader back in the 1970s.

Lloyd says: *I came out of Vietnam a bleeder. And **they** won't accept any responsibility for it.* After he left the Navy, he had worked as a school janitor; until one day he got a nosebleed and it would not stop. He was bleeding, and bleeding, and bleeding. In the hospital they had to they said to him: Have you been exposed to any

kind of chemical thing? Then he remembered getting spreading Agent Orange back in Vietnam.

Every few months he and his son had to travel back to Idaho, to try to get Lloyd's disability. *They* were giving him a hard time. There had been a lawyer, there had been a senator trying to help. None of it panned out. *Nobody got a nickel out of them.*

The government had betrayed him. Just like, he said, *they wouldn't admit it to people who'd been screwed up by atom exposure, until they all were dead.*

He talked about the details of his bleeding. It was unreal, he said. I was *bleeding like a pig*. He told about this time it happened, and that time in happened, in a flat voice that mapped out an itinerary of bleeding.

But his voice got animated afterwards, when he told me about the ghost who had appeared to him. There he was, over at the school where he was mopping up. He had closed every locker door, and *something opened them up again*. He had swept up a pile of papers and something took them out and lined them up, all in a row, neat as a pin. It made the hair stand up on his body. He saw something out of the corner of his eye.... Something, something was there. Lloyd saw the ghost, and telling about it made his eyes light up.

Sometimes, a sense of injustice develops into a structure of feeling -- one suffused with desire, betrayal, injury, and a sense of vanishing potential. And then, sometimes the uncanny is itself the redemption; -- the *something more*, the part that escapes, the return of possibility to the ground of necessity. Sometimes what comes into view is the simultaneous terror of, and hunger for, just being taken away.

### **An Abduction**

Lee worked for a while in the Little A'Le'Inn's gift shop, a corner of the café lined with shelves of souvenirs. Lee was in her 50s; thin as a rail, she always wore big

dark glasses, an oversized T-shirt and a visored cap marked with a UFO logo. While living in Placerville, California, she said, she'd read about Rachel, Nevada in a *Weekly World News* article – it said that aliens regularly came into the town to hang out at the Little A'Le'Inn. After seeing that article, Lee said she knew she had to move to Rachel. She made her way out here bit by bit, coming the last stretch on a three-speed bicycle. After she was here a while, she got a little camper to live in.

One day we are inside the town's Quonset hut – it is a fundraiser to buy a defibrillator for Rachel. I have come over with Shane and Sierra, ages five and seven, who live with their single dad. The kids are dancing, there is a band; and Lloyd and Dan are laughing with Lee, saying she is a hybrid, half-alien. And she agrees with them: I am half alien. Which half? I joke back. But then I realize she is dead serious. She answers: half alien on my dad's side.

Lee and I went outside where we could talk.

She says she's always known that she “didn't belong here on this particular planet. I was from somewhere else. And my parents weren't my real parents; and she says she has seen things, at night, behind trees – the little grays with dark almond eyes. When she was a kid they were watching her and she was really afraid. She could tell no one. Her grandmother used to say: don't be silly, don't be afraid of the dark. But, she said, kids aren't being silly when they are really afraid, and they don't understand what it is.

Her grandmother is dead now. But as far as Lee was concerned, that was not her real grandmother anyway. And her mother and father were not her parents. That is something she always somehow knew, though when she was a kid she didn't understand why. That is why they treated her different. And then she too had a conversion – not all

at once, but little by little, when she realized why nothing ever felt right, she didn't fit, and little by little she started "going more and more to the UFO side."

But now she knows, just knows, her real dad is here. And he knows that she is here, to find him. He is a Gray named Lomax, and they are keeping him at Area 51, holding him there. Every day, she says: Good morning Captain Ashtar, Good morning Daddy Lomax. Because she knows it, she feels it, and it is so, so strong.

*I have yet to see him, Lee says, but I think soon I will.*

The sunset turns the mountains orange and gold, makes them glow. Lee can hardly keep her eyes off them.

There's my famous Area 51 mountains, she says, that's where my father is, and that's where I want to be.

Here words come in a rush when I ask her if she thinks other people know about this. She says: people don't know what's coming. She says: it's not gonna be too cool when things go down with this New World Order things. Her friend Gino from South Dakota has been telling her to get prepared, to get ready.

They are gonna come for people, find you wherever you're at. They have devices that can find you. There is no way you can hide from them, even underground. They will come and get you, and even now they are taking people, making them slaves, doing experiments on them, in the mountains of South Dakota. And the people never come back.

People disappear, she says again, and they never come back.

Even kids, teenagers. It's been happening for a long, long time.

I ask about the missing kids. There was a pamphlet about them in the café.

-- People sell the kids and teenagers as sex objects, she say. To other countries.

-- Does that have anything to do with Area 51? I ask, confused. I still take her story for a causally organized narrative.

-- No, I don't think so, she answers. It could. I don't think so.

In fact her narrative is not organized causally. It is organized mimetically. She isn't talking about missing children because they are inside Area 51, although now that I mention it, it's possible... These things are linked because they are all affectively resonant images of captivity, chains of association making piled-up images of horror, in which the innocent are captured by unseen forces, never to be seen again. Again, the object of the story is the resemblance between the seemingly random and discrete captivities – the object is the glimmer of a pattern in it all.

(The next day, she gives me a gift from her camper: a tiny plastic box that has a recording inside, a high pitched voice screaming “Let me out, Let me out of here.” She loves it, the humor gets her in deep kick of recognition. Let me out! let me out of here! she shrieks, doubled up laughing.)

*Who* is gonna come for people and take them away? I ask now.

She shakes her head. “The military, the government, the New World Order?” Her answer trails off in the tone of a question. It is **THEY**, and no one knows exactly who they are.

Then Lee tells me about her three UFO experiences. The first one was in 1989, when she lived in Ukiah.

And the little town of Ukiah's lights went off one night.

I knew then things from another world was out there.

I started talking to them,  
communicating with them telepathically.

And somewhere in October or December or November of '89 --  
OCTOBER of '89 --  
there was an incident that happened.

My girlfriend's daughter came home from the lake.  
She was workin out there in the filling station.  
Uncle Earl -- her Uncle Earl -- brought her home.  
And Fern, her mother, was over at my place. We were talkin.  
And she come runnin upstairs  
and she says, Mom, Mom.  
And I told Tammy, your mothers up here.  
She come runnin in  
and she says, Mom, Guess what.  
Me and Uncle Earl saw a UFO.  
And I says *really?*  
And from what I understand,  
it was like a few seconds.  
It went away --  
just *wsssst*, out of sight.  
And there was other witnesses that seen it,  
but I really don't know if they reported anything,  
I don't know if they had it in the paper or what.  
  
Then she tells me the story of her own abduction.  
Lee says,

-- And then, towards November, or December, *I* was taken up on a ship.

-- You *were*? I ask.

-- Yup. I wanted to go. I wanted to go with them  
and I didn't want to come back.

But evidently, I'm back. I'm still here.

For a second, I'm struck dumb by the word "evidently."

-- What happened? I ask her.

Lee says,

-- It was late one night.

Wee early hours of the morning.

I was asleep in bed.

I would hear this popping noise behind my left ear.

I would wake up but nothing was around.

And then there was a bluish white light...

and I got up and I went to my front room window,  
which was a picture window.

I looked up

and there was this great big huge ship,

bigger than a house.

Bigger than a football field.

It was round and silver.

And I had my robe on,

and my p.j.'s underneath.

And I went around my bookcase,

and opened the door

and went downstairs.

I was barefoot.

And I went over the little rock yard  
onto the sidewalk and out onto the street.

And I looked up.

When I looked up, I did like this:

[she raises her arms above her head].

And I wanted –

I says, *Take me.*

*I want to go.*

And as I went up I could feel it,  
as I was going up.

I was in awe; I really liked it.

And as far as what they *did* to me,

I don't know.

That was *blocked out.*

All I remember is, I went up  
underneath this great big huge round silver disc.

-- Why didn't you want to come back? I ask her.

-- Too much crap here on this planet, she says.

Too much cruelty to people.

People aren't kind to one another.

I mean, *these humans,*

they need to learn kindness,

to be kinder to people.

Not so violent,  
not so much killing.  
Well I've lived on this earth,  
on this planet  
for almost 54 years.  
And I don't like it.  
I feel I'm *caught in between*, in other words.  
I've been here too long.  
I'd rather not be here.  
I'd rather be with my own kind...

My planet is gone. That's why I'm here on earth.  
It's totally destroyed.  
--- Is that gonna happen to earth? I ask.  
-- Probably eventually.  
The way things are doing,  
they're destroying everything...  
there's not gonna be anything left for anybody.

I can tell you something.  
We don't have birth certificates like you humans do on earth.  
We don't have money.  
It is not cold  
it is not hot,  
where I came from,

and yet I don't know exactly where.

My planet is gone. That's why I'm here on earth.

Susan: Do you know what happened to your planet?

Lee: No. It's gone. Totally destroyed.

Lee and I were quiet; and the air was sad.

-- There's my famous Area 51 mountains, she says, gazing at them as they go dark from orange.

-- There they are, I say.

-- That's where I'd rather be than anywhere else, she says.

Are you gonna stay living here in Rachel? I ask Lee a little later.

No, she says, I'm always on the move.

I never stay in one place too long at a time.

I'm like -- lost.

I don't know where I want to go

or what I want to do.

She hugs the solid presence of her skinny frame in its huge T-shirt, her lined face and the startling sorrow of her eyes obscured as usual by dark glasses and the low bill of a UFO baseball cap.

But as she remembers and tells the story of her UFO abduction another self emerges, transformed by its desire for otherness, and by its acceptance there. Suddenly she is not a lost middle-aged woman in a baseball cap with the ruins of a life somewhere behind her. Her story transforms her: she becomes a gothic figure: barefoot in a garden,

streaming with light, in a nightgown, her arms reaching up for the vehicle of sublime departure from *this place*. Earth.

A few weeks later, Lee was leaving “this place” – Rachel – and drifting again. But for a while, she’d settled here. She had made Rachel her home. Someone passing through Rachel had sold her the little camper to live in. The lights didn't work, and sometimes it didn't start up, but inside she had everything she owned -- knick knacks, a few clothes, meaningful photos taped to the walls, and dozens of jars of water drawn from the tap at the cafe, to survive on when things got bad. She had parked the camper on the far side of Rachel, closer to the Area 51 Research Center than to the cafe, and she would sit at night with Lloyd and Danny. She had adopted a puppy from the Travis's litter and kept it tied on a short rope to the front of the camper. The dog must have suffered in the heat all day but it was there for Lee whenever she came back home.

And then it was discovered that Lee had collected a stash of gift shop merchandise and squirreled it away in her camper, hoarding it along with the water jugs. She was planning to pay for the things – T- shirts, mugs and other trinkets -- when she had the cash, just keeping them safe, she said, to make sure they were hers. But Pat Travis was a sharp businesswoman with her own haunting memories of poverty and a constant vigilance against being ripped off, and she didn't see it that way. And perhaps there were other incidents as well. In any case, soon after the conflict, Lee was fired from the gift shop.

A few days later, she asked me to take her to get her driver's license, though she'd been driving for decades without one, moving from place to place. And so I took her on out to Tonopah and sat with her in the gleaming, chilly office. It was quiet, empty except for a woman in pink holding a toy poodle in a matching dog sweater. Lee hunched intensely over the driver's test, laboring on the questions of the law. I'd offered

to help her study, but she said she'd read the manual and knew it all. She flunked it so badly, the girls behind the desk looked at her with wide eyes and asked if she had the right booklet.

*We don't have birth certificates  
like you humans do on earth,  
we don't have money,*

Lee had said about her own planet. For her, the drivers' license was like those things: a charged sign, an ambivalent passport into the ordinary world and its laws.

On the long drive back to Rachel that day, we came upon the wild mustangs that run across federal land. They were grazing in the road and then running across the hills, their whole bodies alert to watch us. We pulled to the side of the road, got out and shut the doors softly behind us. There were no cars coming down the empty miles; we stood and watched the horses. Then Lee began to run after them.

I followed her. The mustangs were dangerous and Lee seemed wild. She was getting close to the stallion and he wasn't running; he looked poised to kick. I took hold of her skinny arm, said we should stand back.

Back in the car she was sullen and silent. She was angry at me for stopping her from running away with those horses. She said she'd wanted to *just go*.

After a stretch of empty miles Lee she announced a decision to leave Rachel. She was going to take her camper and move on out to Tonopah, and park somewhere in the desert near the DMV and go back every day to the clean well-lighted office until she passed the test. Why not, she said, It's free. The test is free.

And soon after, she was gone.

I looked for her camper in the desert when I made other trips to Tonopah, but I never saw Lee again.

### III. THE LICENSE

How are fabulous stories shaped by the inarticulate disappointments of everyday life? And how do people make sense of power's twin effects: restriction and possibility, forces which co-articulate with uncanny simultaneity?

Uncanny stories are always haunted by questions. In the stories I am telling here, the most central question (and the most maddeningly elusive) hovers over the constant, porous interplay between seemingly binary oppositions: the real and the imaginary, and their more material correlates, containment and mobility, limitation and potential. How is the interplay of these oppositions lived, embodied, and saturated with social meaning?

Though I keep the above large questions in mind, and though they are haunted by the uncanny specter of UFOs, the stories I want to tell in the next section come back to think more about the mundane, ordinary figure of *the license* – an ordinary metaphor that performs the dialectical forces of restriction and possibility emanating from modern experiences of power.

The word *license* is rather like the word *range*, a word you hear all the time in the west, saturated with meaning. There is *open range*, the absence of fences, the emblem of freedom. There is Nellis Air Force Bombing and Gunnery Range, in which the range is supposed to designate a place with definite boundaries, an area that does not leak out onto the life outside its span. The word contains the doubleness of the dialectical trope.

The word “license” does too. It can suggest lawless freedom -- a licentious abandon. And there's also the sense of “license” as a degree of freedom that is ultimately shaped by its own containment. In this sense, freedom is meted out by the authority of the state in its markers: tags and documents, concrete indices to an abstract idea of a social contract with power. The physical license you hold in your wallet always implies freedom to act, but maintains awareness of the law circumscribing the action. It

reminds the actor that freedom has been granted and that freedom can be taken away -- by what Taussig (1997) calls "the magic of the state," what others call the *powers that be*.

When it works, the agreement to move without anxiety inside a licensed realm seems natural for those whose imagined community includes the "we" of the representative-based state. Yet for those who don't feel part of the franchise, this ordinary zone of sanctioned freedom feels strange. Bureaucratic signs and procedures grow fabulous, charged with overdetermined meaning; and the conflict between law and freedom, which is supposed to remain unmarked, can grow uncanny in its emergent visibility. The *source* of power is felt to be simultaneously hyper-present and hidden. And its conflicts are expressed in a struggle for something like *poetic* license, which takes *the real* itself as the site of struggle.

In talk, it turned out that a topic of conversation that came up now and then was that several of the drifters who worked in the café had driven for years without drivers' licenses. Alongside the die-hard rural Western discourse against the licensing of guns, alongside the endless rumination about UFOs and what the government was hiding up there at Area 51, people talked, sometimes, about the anxieties raised by the Department of Motor Vehicles.

One afternoon, a dishwasher named Ken -- stretched out in the back of my car, with his wife Linda riding in front -- told me that everything about you lies in the opaque black coding bar on the back of your drivers' license. I'd heard suspicious talk about drivers' licenses before, from anti-government conspiracy theorists and fundamentalist Christians.

I had stopped in Austin on my way to Rachel, and Carla, the former leader of the UFO Experiencers' Support Group, had showed me a videotape made by Alex Jones, a local Texas radio show host with a conspiratorial vision. Carla had sent it along with me,

to give to the people at the Little A'Le'Inn, whom she felt would identify with it as she did. Carla and I watched the tape together in her Airstream trailer near the outskirts of town. She dragged intensely on her cigarettes as she took in Jones's message for the umpteenth time. In one segment, Alex Jones could be seen protesting the new procedure of *thumb printing* at an Austin Department of Motor Vehicles. *They* want to register you through the body now -- not just to leave their mark on you, as is promised in the Book of Revelation, but to capture the mark of your own physical individuation, to track you with your own embodied trace. Links from Alex Jones's website, it turned out, led to a whole slew of anti-licensing outrage. A Christian family in Alabama was suing the state for demanding that licensing of drivers be accompanied by social security numbers. The biblical mark of the beast was recast in the ordinary procedures of state bureaucracy; in its tracking and surveillance the state was becoming profanely omnipotent, displacing the awesome power of God with the power of computers.

The encroaching pervasiveness of social security numbers, long felt to be part of Satan's plan by some apocalyptic Christians, grows intensified as it appears to be mandated in more and more venues. A sample letter to the government in the movement to "Resist Enumeration" argues:

*More and more people are beginning to ask why - why does the government need all this personal information linked to my SSN? And why am I being pressured into getting a social security number for my children?*

*The Bible provides answers to these questions, along with instruction on how we should respond to the ever increasing demands for citizens to be numbered. God's People are admonished, by clearly stated example, to resist being numbered by government.*

*We're told that King David wanted to "know the number of the People" under his authority (2 Samuel 24:2). And, Satan caused David to number all Israel (1 Chronicles 21:1). God's Word further states that David's command to number Israel "was evil in the sight of God" (1 Chronicles 21:7). Because of the People's acquiescence to the king's enumeration plan, God sent a plague UPON THE PEOPLE (1 Chronicles 21:14). The "People" are now, once again facing new demands from the modern day "kings" to be numbered and registered. And again it is the responsibility and duty of the PEOPLE to resist; regardless of how powerful or godly the particular ruling authority claims (or appears) to be, and regardless of the sincerity of their justifications. For, it is the PEOPLE that will be held accountable if they do not resist....* (<http://www.networkusa.org/fingerprint/page6/fp-resist.html>).

Here the emphasis on the word "people" foregrounds iconicities between two fundamentalist texts, the Bible and the Constitution. Just as the power of the state tries to usurp the power of God, the power of a monarch-like computerized system usurps the power of democracy: *The "People" are now again facing new demands from the modern day "kings"...* And Carla, who grew up in a strict Christian home, no longer went to church, (and no longer ran the UFO Abductee Support group) but she religiously attended a Constitutional Study Group to track the encroachments of these powers that be.

This resemblance between Biblical and Constitutional narratives against the surveillance of "kings" is not interpreted historically, (that is, it does not discuss the Biblical background of the writers of the Constitution). Rather the paradigmatic, simultaneous, axis is foregrounded. And so the resemblance becomes not historical but poetic. A structure is felt to lurk below the surface of such resemblances, and just barely visible, its glimmer becomes uncanny. The parallelism between signs becomes yet another sign, pointing to a referent too large and pervasive to fully grasp.

But you don't need a Christian paradigm (nor any explicit ideology) to identify with such feelings. Rather you need a specific orientation towards power, an inchoate sense of your own distance from its invisible source, and a feeling of things slipping away into vast computerized networks (see also Dean 1998). The prophecy nods to a felt sense of our world being changed into another world, transformed by rushing technological advances in surveillance. This feeling acquires apocalyptic weight and Biblical grounding.

Now, as we sped along the empty desert highway, Ken took my license again and examined it. The thin magnetic strip, I noticed, actually resembled the redacted, blacked-out segments of documents released grudgingly by the government, in UFO-related documents secured through the Freedom of Information Act. The horizontal shape of the strip suggested a line of writing "inside" or "beneath" it.

Ken said: "*They got everything in there -- when you were born, what you did in the military, where you lived, what crimes you done...just...everything!*" Such items, even if they are on file (and who knows?), can never add up to "everything" about the phenomenological self; but the flat list was deepened for Ken by the immense single meta-fact that *they know*.

And Ken said: "Yeah, they got a whole information system up there watching you, from the sky."

It was two weeks after I'd taken Lee to take the test for her license. Now I was taking Linda for hers. Our car was the only one making its way through the desert, through federal-owned ranch land and the invisible borders of military property. We craned our necks to watch F-16s swoop in formation in the sky just south of the road, then stopped the car to blow the horn at meandering cows. Linda, Ken and I looked futilely for Lee now as we drove along same route she'd come before. We knew she was

parked illegally somewhere out here in the scrubby desert, living without running water or any way to get more, vulnerable to anyone who came along, just for access to the DMV and its free test..

Linda, my current passenger, had been licensed at one time, unlike Lee. Linda had gotten into some bureaucratic tangles when she moved between states. In her forties, Linda had a gaunt face that seemed much older. There was a look of pain in her eyes and in the square set of her jaw; and nearly every morning she was in fact painfully ill, often doubled in pain from a stomach-stapling operation that had taken off 200 pounds but never set right inside her. The stomach-stapling operation was an ordinary, material sign indexing an alternate imagined self and its potential life story. I hoped it really was the only thing making her so sick, for she was one of the people who had come to Rachel from a life of small-time prostitution and drug addiction in Las Vegas. Now here she was, trying to do something about what Marie saw as “the force” that kept them from driving away.

In their final weeks in Vegas, Linda and Ken had been desperate. When Pat came to the Salvation Army there to look for new workers, it was a stroke of fortune, though not the kind people hope for in Vegas. But Linda said without it, she'd be dead. She couldn't have survived Vegas much longer.

Once things had been different. She had built a decent working-class life, modest but respectable, and based on hard work and skill. She'd been a waitress for a decade in one of the hyper-clean and regular chains that thread across the United States. At the little desert cafe in Rachel, waitressing with quick movements and forearm-stacked dishes, Linda spoke of her years at the Tucson Pie Hut as a marker of professionalism, and more, of a different orientation to the world before things had slipped out of control.

She said: *we went to Vegas on a dream*. Like many who flood into that city, they wanted not just to get rich, but to start over. When they got there though, nothing worked out the way they planned. They gambled and partied, giddy with the carnival of possibility after years of the military and solid, decent work that never quite goes anywhere. Their drug use went out of control and the foundation of working-class life seemed to slide out from beneath them before they realized what was happening. In their final weeks in Vegas, Linda and Ken, along with Ken's brother Alex, had given up hope and were homeless, sleeping under a bridge.

Ken was half a generation younger than his wife, a handsome African-American man with a distant smile. Often I wondered what Ken thought when the bar at the café was full of the local white rural men, the cowboys and farm workers and drinkers who sometimes made racist jokes as if he weren't there. Ken's brother Alex, a Desert Storm vet who worked as a cook in the cafe, sometimes sat on the steps of my trailer and reminisced about life back home. He sang an old hymn he'd learned from their grandmother, one I'd heard from UFO abductees in Texas: *the earth is not my home, I'm just a-passin' through...* But it was Ken, not Alex, who really seemed to be just passing through the world. In Rachel he affected a mood so impenetrably affable that it seemed sometimes he *wasn't* really there, as if he were reserving his real opinions for a less unreal place. And then he would burst into sudden rages that evaporated again as if they hadn't occurred.

But today in my car, musing about the magnetic strip on the driver license, Ken seemed not to mind about anything. It was good to get away even just for a half-day's trip to the Tonopah DMV. A month earlier, his brother Alex had been wrongly charged with driving a stolen car — it wasn't stolen, but the person who sold it to him hadn't bothered to change the tags. Now the three of them had no legal car, no way to go

anywhere unless someone else would drive them the 200 miles to Vegas on their day off. And it was clear, though they never said so, that a black man driving an illegally tagged car would certainly be stopped in rural Nevada. Last time they had a day off and bummed a ride to Vegas, Ken and Linda had come back depressed; without a car they didn't know what to do and sat the whole time staring at the cinderblock walls of their cheap motel room.

But life in rural Nevada was a new frontier and they were again starting over. The three of them were anxious to fix things up, to become legal. They were all living in a trailer a few steps from the café, had fixed it up *real nice* with plants and decorations, and adopted a puppy from the Travis's latest litter. Unlike the intoxicating possibility of Vegas, *starting over* in Rachel was overlaid with the historical narrative of a stark and sober pioneer story. Ken and Linda were *clean* -- don't even *want* the drugs here, said Linda -- the desert itself was "like a rehab center." Here, she said you take responsibility for yourself. You work all day and you're too tired to party afterwards, and you have to be at the cafe at 8 a.m. Yes, the cafe workers would drink after shift, and maybe drive on out to the black mailbox, hopping into a car with some young tourists...and sometimes Billy was late to work with a hangover, but he kept trying to get back on track. For all the workers trying to start over after an abject turn in Vegas, a "rehab" discourse mingled with an imagined pioneer discourse. Their conflation created the promise of a new frontier for the self.

The up-from-Vegas workers saw themselves differently here, and shyly, on this road trip to get licensed, Ken and Linda told me their new dream. They had drifted long enough; they would settle and live here. They would save up their wages and tips. With hard work and time, they would buy land across the Extraterrestrial Highway from the Little A'Le'Inn; and on their land they would build a UFO-themed "putt-putt golf"

course. They had planned it all -- *the tourists drive up and have nothing to do after eating an alien burger, well now they can come play UFO putt-putt golf*. Ken and Linda would be their own bosses, they would own their land. Relatives would loan them the money. It would be an investment. They would make good on it and settle down.

This didn't happen. There were struggles between Pat and the Salvation Army workers, and after a while, the lot of them left Rachel. A year later, no one at the cafe knew where they were anymore.

But that day, Linda entered the frosty, gleaming office of the DMV. Though there was never a line, never more than one or two people in the place, you had to make an appointment a week in advance -- an empty gesture of bureaucratic rationalization that made Rachel people smirk. And that day Linda passed her driver's test. Afterwards we went to Burger King to celebrate Linda's new license. They insisted on buying me lunch. She had passed back into the license of the state.

Then, driving through the hard-bitten military base town of Tonopah, with its dusty hills and severe-looking casinos, something happened to dampen Linda's accomplishment. Our car was pulled over by a police officer. He had, I think, done a double-take at a black man driving in the deeply rural west with two white women. The cop vaguely hinted at a driving infraction, but didn't even bother to issue a false ticket. He just wanted to know why we were driving in his town. He manipulated a heavy silence. And when he saw that my drivers' license and my plates were from different states, he looked baffled. I'd never bothered to get a new license after I'd moved to New York City from Texas, and I had never worried about it. As he stared ominously at my license, I could feel us bluffing and dueling, him flashing the power of the state and me flaunting the disregard for minutiae that indexed my own middle-class ease, two small

expressions of the powers that be... But in his eyes I saw us all as a motley bunch at his mercy. It was tense until he decided to just let us go.

I was relieved to get away. But an uneasy feeling subdued us. I was angry; it was so clearly a racist harassment. Ken and Linda dreamed out the windows as we sped past the Tonopah Test Range, with its 1950s-looking rocket at the fence. The setting sun turned the desert copper colors. Ken slept and Linda told me about her life, repeated her waitressing resume, her history of moving around the country with a military dad. *You know I come from a good family*, she said...

Two hours after we'd been stopped by the police officer, Linda, Ken and I descended the last hill to see Rachel, ten more miles down the road in the valley below, a tiny encampment that from here looked both staunch and vulnerable in the nothingness of the desert. That's when Linda spotted the UFO. It was hovering on the coppery mountain to the north, a blinking and unnatural glitter, like a mirror tilted to signal us. *Wake up Ken, she said, That's a UFO, there it is.* Ken and Linda watched it with attentive acceptance. *Yeah -- that's something.* As we neared, the thing seemed to grow, becoming more metallic and gleaming more brightly with each mile.

*There's nothing up there usually*, Linda said. *I've come this way before, there's nothing. It's just the mountain. That is a UFO.* I couldn't argue -- I too had come this way many times, and had never seen anything like this on the mountain. A few miles later, the bright growing gleam disappeared as if a switch had been thrown. An unsettled feeling of the uncanny was palpable, specific as scent.

We had sped out of the world of ordinary power, away from the downpull of racist cops and frosty DMV offices. Now power was emanating instead from Area 51, the awesome center of inscrutable omnipotence, the place where the magic of the state gets infused with the supernatural. The cop's small, homely injury of the hour before

evaporated in this shift to imagination. Yet this unidentified shining object was not wholly shocking. The mystery of its power was still inside the experienced fabric of things.

Did Ken and Linda think this UFO was an alien spaceship or a top-secret military experiment? As usual, it did not seem to matter. What resonated was the very *fact of power* -- its vastness, its hidden sources, and its just-visible clues. What mattered was its potential for transformation, and the strange pleasure of tearing holes in the real. In the cafe, Linda and Ken told everyone about the UFO, how it had glittered and then *just like that* disappeared. They didn't mention the cop.

Later I talked to an old rancher who laughed at the UFO idea, teased me about it with his dead-serious, Western style of teasing, and finally said we'd seen the sunset reflection of some metallic piece from the old ghost mine up on Tempiute mountain. But that, I thought, was uncanny too. The old mine was the trace of other dreams before Lee's or Ken and Linda's, where other pioneers had come to dig for prospects, to wreck their bodies, to die or move on. A few old miners still lived in Rachel, struggling with state and corporate agencies for a few dollars, requesting their due compensation for busted up backs and lungs, sick and tired of all *the forms*.

### **You Can't Repair History**

At the rodeo, families hold hands and cans of pop. Tangled kids sit with their noses right up to the fence to watch the show, or a nice churchgoing man in a small-town official position introduces himself to an obvious stranger on the bleachers, chats for half an hour, calls over his wife and they invite you to dinner. Everyone here tonight glows quietly with the displays of rodeo skill, and the aesthetic formalization of this ongoing place. The horses are gleaming. This sense of health-in-a-place solidifies with the show

of cultural replication, as three-year-olds are led out into the rodeo ring, riding lambs. This lamb show says: One day, these tots'll be here riding horses and roping, and we have a valuable thing here, to teach and pass on. In the high school next to the rodeo grounds there is a 4-H show, filled with young people's home canning, quilts, and crafts. In the night spot in the next town, an old time brothel is the theme, with big dolls of ooh-la-la 19<sup>th</sup> century ladies in garters propped next to the pool tables with blasting rock music. The pioneer past is self-consciously marked here, a history that has passed, a "heritage." But the health, community and functionality of this Western land comes to the foreground at times and places like this, keeping a continuous imaginary with stories of the past. For some people, talk of Area 51, or any discourse of the sinister, stays most often in the peripheral vision of practical life, acknowledged, but doing its own irrelevant thing -- the way in a single field crows hop by the cows, each species co-existing but unaware of their connection, each intent on its own purpose.

The rodeo was in Panaca, Nevada, where the land gets high and wooded, up near the rural Utah border. When you drive south and west a ways, maybe 80 miles down to lower desert ground, to Rachel, you may find similar scenes -- a community fundraiser or the annual celebration of the town's official founding some twenty-five years before. But for many, many people here, public events can't ever stifle the sense that some kind of silent theft is afoot. There is some incremental colonization, a disaster coming, hyperpresent as an invisible toxin.

Sometimes the idea of the West itself becomes a metonym for the past -- a past which can be fantastically infused into narratives of disaster and survival. Then the threat of ruin emanates from an uncontrolled technological future realm, and a hypernatural Western past is the only chance of redemption. Gloria lives by herself with her animals way up in the hills, on a pioneer compound she'd constructed from wood and wire.

During my second visit in 1998, when the threatening hum of Y2K was in the air, she bought mules and leather harnesses and an old-timey covered wagon. Now, she said, when *the computers go nuts* and *the hordes* pour out from the cities, she'd be able to survive, the way folks did *back then*.

That same fall, a married couple came through Rachel in pioneer clothes, a stern and laconic pair who were driving their own covered wagon across the deserts of the southwest; fleeing modernity, they earned just enough to scrape by, parking on the side of the road and allowing themselves to be photographed.

One day a married couple from Fallon stopped in at Rachel, and began to talk at the bar in bitter tones. The air force had dropped "chaff" over everything on their property, and no one knows what it *does* to you; *we're their guinea pigs*, they said. But worse than the potential damage to their bodies, they said, sonic booms from the air force base near Fallon cracked their *foundation*.

It was a *place* that couldn't be re-placed. The government was *stealing our air space*. Here the sky itself becomes nostalgic as land, usurped and plundered by trespassers, by military booms messing up the clear Western air with sonic "graffiti." But it should be yours, as everyone nodded sympathetically at the bar -- *the way it used to be*:

-- What your *air space* is, said the wife,

is the very air you *breathe* is your air space.

You know it's just like when you buy a piece of property

it's yours to the *center of the earth*.

It's yours to the infinite, is what it should be.

That's the way it used to be...

As long as they do no damage

you wouldn't mind somebody  
walking across your property. .  
but when they devalue your property --  
-- Then they're trespassin – interrupted the husband,  
-- and constantly damaging your property, continued the wife,  
they come in and do GRAFFITI all over,  
then they're damaging your property...  
That's what they do us.  
They blow out our windows,  
knock our trailers off foundations,  
they crack our foundation on our building...  
Some of it's irreparable.  
It's an old building; an old historic building.  
Over to the *stage stop*.  
Some things you can never replace.  
You can never repair.  
You can't repair history.  
Some things are not tangible money-wise.  
You know.  
Some of the *antiques*  
and some of the old bottles and stuff like that they broke,  
they're irreplaceable.  
They could give ya a *monetary*,  
they could say, well, you go to a *bottle shop*  
and buy one like that for ten dollars.

But you'll never find another bottle like that.  
So what is that bottle worth?  
You know, it's not *that*.  
It's part of our Nevada history.  
It's part of our culture.  
These things are not compensatable.  
They say they compensate us.  
For the *damage they done*.  
But they don't.  
They only partially compensate you.  
They only replace the broken window;  
or replace a part of a structure --  
when you take old antique wood  
and replace it with new wood  
then what is the *value*?  
And that -- that's not reparable.  
I don't think they can *fix* that.  
-- We don't really *want* to be *compensated*, said the husband.  
We want to be left alone.  
That's why we live out in the middle of *nowhere*.  
Is for the peace and tranquility.  
The *knowledge* that we are free people,  
out in the middle of nowhere.  
-- Are you native Nevadans? I asked.  
-- No, said the wife, we're actually California transplants.

We own a little bar-café-mini-mart;  
see this picture,  
the pony express stopped here.

As the husband says, it's the "*knowledge*" of living "nowhere" which makes a texted meta-nowhere into the most intensely imagined *somewhere*. There's that: the history dreamed in California thirty years ago; the auratic objects--- the old bottle, the empty space-- bulging to contain that dream's "value." There is the magic of the living dead, as ordinary as the "Western" looking wooden walls of a mini-mart, but still extraordinary, charged with the master narrative of the frontier past.

And yet, inhabited so fully, attended to so closely, this same master narrative begins to loom bizarre. Its own effects are heightened, intensified, through a concrete performance. Its own naturalizations begin to give way, like a photograph enlarged and reproduced until it starts to look surreal.

And there are contradictions here. The imaginary of power is complex. The air force that borders Rachel commands respect; it is a different character in a different story from that of the Government and the Powers that Be. Although he echoed the couple, (*yeah we are their guinea pigs, that is right*) Joe in fact loves the sonic booms around his parts. Several times a day they shock the stillness, then let silence rush back to fill the void. In Rachel, when one man made a complaint that the booms cracked his trailer, others in the town signed a petition in "rebuttal...[to] a disgruntled Rachel resident" and sent it to the air force:

*Please don't mistake that boom for "disturbance"...it's the sound of freedom...*

There is always the excitement of a power that defines and incorporates its partial observers. And the uncanny allure of destruction.

But there are more everyday versions of this lived story about the pioneer past and its capacity for redemption. Pat and Joe said they were pioneers, too; they still worked 12 hour days up here, no different from when Pat's teenage mother in Iowa chopped wood to keep her kids from starving and freezing. After a whole day of cafe work, Pat might start her canning, filling the kitchen sink with peaches and jars, in a proud habit of *surviving* that metamorphosed slightly, in the rural West, into the apocalyptic survivalist habit of storing food. Here it isn't strange to store quantities of food, even last year, for the end of things at Y2K. *Yeah, feels good to know we did that ourselves*, Joe would say, surveying the homely mess in the sink below cabinets stocked with rows of store-bought canned beans, on sale at the Vegas Price Chopper.

Pat's elderly mother Irene came to visit from California. If you asked her about UFOs, she politely said, "well, to each his own." She was quiet and sharp, and her own life was an unmarked story of pioneer survival. Only when you asked, she would tell about getting married at sixteen and having six children, "four living." The story of moving to California was an old one with deep grooves. He went first to look for work and she followed with the children, but then she found out his brother had sent the bus ticket. Didn't you want us to come? Hell no, he said, he was having too much fun. ... After their divorce, she was working full-time in a fast food restaurant and had four part time jobs. And she got so tired, she went down to the welfare office to ask for "some help;" she only wanted:

The equivalent of 2 days pay.

For three months.

And I would pay it back to the state.

But I needed some time to rest.

I wasn't getting any rest at all.

They told me that:  
If I would quit my job,  
they would take care of me and my family  
*for life.*  
I told em:  
When I drop dead feed my family.

And she described the rural Iowa and Minnesota winters, where her husband was a blacksmith with seasonal work; and they would get so cold and be so penniless that he'd have to go down to the coal yard and steal a gunnysack of coal, "and I got so worried I was sick." She would cook potatoes and corn on the small heating stove, and they would do all right. And she was sure of her competence to survive:

We didn't have but a third of the five gallon bucket full of coal.  
To keep the house warm or keep the fire going.  
So I ordered the half ton of coal  
and the dray brought it out as far as the driveway...  
Because it was a 6 foot deep drift  
and he couldn't get the horses and dray through it.  
I says, dump it in the ditch.  
I tied an apple box on the kids's sled  
And hauled that coal back an apple box at a time  
And put it in the coal shed.  
And kept the fire going day and night  
And – so the kids --because this was s a big room

And there was ice inside the house, on the windows.  
I put the kids to bed that night with their snowsuits on and their overshoes  
With hot rocks wrapped in newspapers at their feet.  
And covered up good.  
I had strung blankets around the stove,  
the potbelly stove,  
And had the double bed for the kids and the cot for me.  
And put them to bed there.  
There was 3 or 4 of em at that time,  
Anyway, they didn't catch a cold or anything.  
And the house never got warm.  
Got up to about 30 [degrees]  
a few feet away from the stove.  
But they never got cold or sick.  
You do a lot of things if you have to.  
But after my divorce  
I had enough to keep us going.  
And I didn't spend it on things we didn't need.  
And it was just fine.

In the Little A'Le'Inn café, Jack comes in from his outdoor work and sits with Chuck, the local expert on UFOs and the military's covert weapons, who moved out here by himself from California, where he has a fishing gear business, he says, to live for years alone in a trailer, drive around late into the night with multiple scanners, and talk in nonstop paragraphs to anyone who will listen, all about the details of activity at the base.

Stepping into the café, other themes of this land come to the foreground, other ways to figure the real. In the constant interplay of everyday life and its uncanny parallels, you can witness the tension between them, and feel how they co-produce each other's dreams.

"The military base? It don't bother me," says Jack. "It don't bother the cows. Don't make em stampede, they get used to it, the planes come down real close over their heads and they don't pay it no mind. The horses, well, they do get spooked.

"I don't think it's UFOs, says Jack. Maybe later it will be; but not now."

Dorothy says, "I do think it's UFOs. My former husband and I we liked to travel to exotic places, like once, we went to Utah. Well, driving on the road they made everyone pull over, and there was a UFO on the back of a military vehicle. A big flying saucer; it was a UFO. This whole thing has been going on for hundreds and hundreds of years. Because the UFOs went to South America, and did those petroglyphs."

I was surprised to hear her so opinionated. Before she moved out here and married Jack, Dorothy lived in California, worked in the air force development industry. She lived on a farm, but worked on the edge of high-tech.

She says, "I have seen some weird things out here. How about that plane the color of the sky?"

Jack nods. "It didn't make noise. I saw its shadow. Went right overhead but you can't see it. Only way you know to look up is cause it throws a shadow. That's all you see, its shadow."

Dorothy chimes in, "You only see a shadow. That's the only way you know it's there, by the shadow on the ground."

Jack repeats, "Only by the shadow."

But he looks at her with a small shift.

“It’s just planes made in America. Don’t bother me that they have secrets. They need to have secrets to protect the people of the country. Those are airplanes, not UFOs.”

I say to Jack, “I have a feeling you only believe in what you see with your own eyes.”

His beautiful weathered face lights up briefly and then he soberly nods.

“That’s right.”

It isn’t the military that bothers him. But the government should keep its nose out of his business. Its long arm gets in the way, blocking open range like a sudden, wrong fence in the middle of his way.

Though sometimes, you can’t see what you’re bumping into. All you see is its effect on the ground. A something that gives you a faint sudden shiver though when you look up to see what has happened nothing is there. You don’t see the power that maybe protects or maybe violates you, that incorporates you into its own invisible shape. But there it is anyway, seen in its effects on the ground, the darkness it casts, and the shiver. Its shadow.

In the cafe, Pat eased her body up from the little table where she sat when there was a breather and told the customers the fantastic stories they came for: about the weird lights that zoomed into the room one night, or the alien who sat over there and never once got up to go the bathroom, or the ghost -- named Archibald -- who haunted the bar. Yeah, she said, there are lots of UFO sightings here. Why I heard they saw one just last night. You go on out to the Black Mailbox, well it's painted white now, and that's where you'll see 'em. You can buy this map for thirty cents. If you go at night you gotta drive slow not to hit a cow; you know this is *open range*.

If this homely land is the site of survival and redemption, it is also the place of uncanny abjection. In the prophecy of endless freedom, there is also the lived-in weight of what's been lost. Pat's mother had not been home again to Iowa...*it's all gone*...And loss is lodged in signs of catastrophe. The markers of potential earthly destruction -- from nuclear war, say -- are made oddly homely; the grand is re-invested with the losses of *personal* abjection. When Ray lost his hayloading job because "they got a machine," he went to live in the old "bomb shelter:" a carved-out earthy hillock on desert scrub next to the ruined wooden mill, a tiny space underground with crumbling earth floor and caving walls, and filled with the cast-off shells of scorpions.

*Unheimlich* rootlessness emerges in the endless stream of drifters, men who perform the losses or abandonments of some other life. Drunk, the widowers reveal the lost living world they remain loyal to as they wander the face of the earth. Middle-aged drifters with long graying beards sit in the bar, show every button they've collected on their eccentric hats, rattle off UFO sightings and Bigfoot encounters and long lists of place names that go on for half an hour, every road in the journey recalled, every flat tire, every mechanical insult in a solitary journey punctuated only on rare occasions, like this one, by speech.

The old man sits at the counter three times a day, stays an hour each time. He rails with the other guys about the Government, looks at pictures of UFOs over the desert, strokes his neat white beard, cracks a joke, leans forward on skinny elbows.

He came to Rachel because he saw it on T.V. Wanted to see the Extraterrestrial Highway. Saw a UFO once, yep, little light doin one of these numbers, ninety degree angle. Bets they're keeping one at the base out there.

Two days of my serving him coffee and beer, and he decides I'm the one to ask next:

"I'm lookin for a wife. I'm serious, man needs a wife. I'm alone. On the road. You available? I mean to marry."

I point ruefully to my ring.

"Oh well, that's too bad. All the good ones are taken I guess! Ones my age have a face like that road out there, ha ha!"

Then he reaches into his wallet and out tumble the photos: 1940s glamour shots of a girl in a yard, in front of a car, in a bathing suit, a fur-collared coat, squinting against the sun.

"Look here. This was my wife."

He waits.

"She looks like a movie star," I dutifully say.

"Oh, boy oh boy. She sent me these when I was overseas. World War Two that was. Guys went crazy! She was that beautiful. Yes, sir. Guys went crazy, couldn't believe that was my girl."

Then he shows me color pictures of a middle-aged man and woman: the kids.

"Bill was promoted, yep. Has a girlfriend for two years. Debby here she works in computers, five men workin under her. Looks like her mother..."

I ask him where he is from.

He strokes his beard: "You mean, FROM-from, or where I was last?"

"Whichever one...?"

"Weeelll, lived in L.A. for 30 years. Before that Cleveland, Ohio. Tell you the truth: I'm from nowhere. Nowhere is home. Home, home is up there."

He points to the sky. Next day he was gone.

## **Allegorical Repetitions**

And so the desert tarot deck sits at the bar: the drifter, the hermit, the psycho, the professor of liberty, the frontiersman. *We are pioneers. we really are, came here in 1972 as homesteaders and there wasn't the telephone til 79.* Vast desert space grows close and allegorical with a retinue of heightened generic figures.

Much like Benjamin's understanding of allegory as a system which revels in the arbitrariness of the sign, the self-performed stereotype reveals the arbitrary relationship between sign and signified. The "essence" of identity is not subsumed into its outward sign as a natural union of form and meaning. Instead, the formality and repetition of the stereotype precludes a sense of semiotic immanence. Its meaning is, you could say, displayed rigidly "below" it like a caption. In the retinue of typed figures, naturalized social meanings begin to fade. Their elements are no longer seamless, but rather disturb as obvious constructions.

In other words, when you perform the stereotype, you can talk passionately all day to a stranger without creating a sense of exposed interiority. The complex self is not erased, but the generic character is inflated and located on the social-allegorical landscape. The character is linked outward to the chain of other types -- diachronically through the inchoate sense of a master history composed of similar figures, and synchronically through the varied repetition of local characters, looming into lived surrealisms.

Then there are "psycho" characters. One was Edward, who worked in the café for a while, mopping the floor in a trance. He'd driven out here from Arkansas without stopping, because he knew it was the place he was supposed to be. (He frightened me, but Lynn said: It's just because he's from Arkansas. That's their culture.) Then one day

after I'd gone, his son showed up and Edward chased him around the café, shooting. They left and no one saw them again, but everyone liked to point out the bullet holes in the wall. Or there was the biker-drifter who came into the café, skinny and leathery, dusty and bleached, sporting roadwarrior rags and punky Aryan locks. How he sat in the corner and sent back his food because he'd ordered a "large fries" and it didn't LOOK LIKE A LARGE. How he said he found this place because he was *just riding*. He wasn't *from* anywhere, *just riding*. He'd been just riding for a loooong time. And he took this road from Tonopah, and here it was, the only place for more than a hundred miles, and he needed some damn COFFEE. How he drank at least 50 cups of it, getting increasingly agitated, sitting all afternoon and all evening in the corner. How he tried to scare the waitresses by playing his road-warrior-outlaw tarot card:

Out here, there's no LAW.

A man just takes what he wants.

He wants a woman, well he just takes her.

If her HUSBAND don't like it

he can try to shoot him, but heh heh,

I'm a good shot...

TAKE THIS KETCHUP AWAY!....

You're nothin much, are you.

You are just a WAITRESS out here in the DESERT!

Hey listen. Go ask the owner.

Do they need anyone to paint around here?

That night, after my shift, I was back at Mary's trailer, writing in my journal while Jessie slept, moaning as usual in her dreams. Mary was Pat's daughter; she called on the phone:

- - Susan, grab a shotgun. That weird biker who drank all that COFFEE is OUT THERE. I got a bad feeling about him. He was askin a lot of QUESTIONS. You know Carol Carter is up there at her place all alone and he was askin about her. I called the sheriff but you know the sheriff's 60 miles away and it takes him a while. I have a *baaad* feeling. So you just grab that gun in the corner by the TV.

I looked at the shotgun leaning in the corner. Someone had tossed a feed cap over it..

-- Well, I said, I'm not GRABBING any GUN. I can't shoot!

-- Just hold it! Jeez! You know, JUST HOLDING it looks intimidating!

I could feel her rolling her eyes.

-- Are **you** a good shot? I asked her, to change the topic.

She snorted and said,

-- I AM Annie Oakley. That is what I am. Annie Oakley.

Annie Oakley, the Weird Biker, the Female Hermit, the Woman Holding a Gun, (a part which I was not willing to try)... but in the end it was the figuring of my own typed character, denaturalized, entextualized and cast into play, which thrust the allegorical figuring of things into relief. I kept thinking about how, before I left the cafe, The Weird Biker had looked at me hard and said suspiciously,

Hey.... You don't look like no WAITRESS...you look a SCHOOLTEACHER.

#### IV. GHOST STORIES

Alongside the futuristic narrative of Area 51 runs Rachel's own ghostly origin story. The mines in this valley boomed and busted from 1865. The place would whisper down to ghost town when the mine closed, re-incarnating when the mine would open again. When Union Carbide last closed the mine in 1988, half the population drifted away. But by that time, there was a town -- a scattering of trailers including the Quik-Pik store and the café.

The first white child born in the valley was Rachel Jones, in 1977, delivered by her daddy, people said, in their trailer. And this was taken as a good sign -- births don't happen in a dead ghost town. That's when they named the town so it stuck, calling it Rachel after the baby; but there was something wrong with her respiration, people say.

The girl's parents went West to Washington State to find work; word came back that Mount Saint Helen had dropped ash on her, and she died, what with her bad lungs; and she wasn't more than three. They probably buried her out there in Moses Lake, but the people back here put up a stone and dedicated a cemetery, and named it all *Rachel* for the dead girl. *There's a stone there to her with her picture on it, people say; but of course she's buried somewhere else.*

This is not a formal ghost story; it is told in the genres of history. Yet here already the uncanny seeps into the real. The trace "remembers" in the name, in the cemetery stone indexing the baby who grows larger as the lost object. The stone marks the presence of its' object's absence, testifying the missing body, the corpse buried somewhere else.

Something here haunts. It's not the impression of a person known and missed through concrete intimate memories, but rather the lost possibility, the compression of the girl's narrative as it might have been, and how that lost, potential

story figures itself towards meaning. Rachel's birth seemed momentarily to push back the edges of haunting. But the edges were already there -- in the rusted clutter of old mines, in the land and water still remembering atomic tests, and in the traces of driven-out Native Americans whose exact fate local people do not know, but whose arrowheads they like to find.

And of course the boom didn't last. The girl died. The ghost town was returning, taking back land. The next revival was the UFO business, enterprising and canny, as Pat told the tourists stories of strange lightbeams, extraterrestrial customers who sat at a table from morning til night without ordering a thing, and the friendly ghost Archibald, who haunted her in the cafe. Only later, sitting in the dark and rubbing her feet after a long day of cafe work, did she tell me the story of Archibald in a litany of relationship tales. He was a boy, Archie. Her parents wouldn't let her marry him. This was forty years ago. She loved him. No one understood. And one day she tells me she still wonders about Archie, how her life would have been if they'd been allowed to just be.

Sometimes she talked a little bit about her boy, who at age 13 was killed in a wreck. Her own brother had died at the about same age, in the same way.

It was just last year that she could bear to put her son's favorite picture back up on the wall: two white horses on a velvet ground, with huge, dark eyes. When she sees it, she sees him. She calls it "his picture" -- as if she were showing me a photo of the boy himself.

Now, of course, her boy would be grown.

For along with the seduction of uncanny secrets are more homely American ghost stories. How to see that the ghost, so often, haunts because it never existed in the first place? Fierce ideologies of independence and self-reliance collide with other, unspoken

narratives -- the inarticulate disappointments of experience, and the specter of your own other life that never took shape the way, somehow, it should have. Then ordinary and fantastic stories can converge in the felt sense of some impenetrable source of abduction, some agent of theft, some plot by the powers that be.

What do you say about the inscrutable, capricious workings of power? How do you talk about some immobilizing force that you *just know* exists?

Fantastic conspiracy stretches always towards a totalizing (though never reached) final story; but the ghost stories of everyday life are always too varied, too ambivalent. Sometimes such stories are generated at the peripheries of power --from lost low-level jobs in high-tech industries, aborted careers in the military, abandoned hometowns, and the tiny, unspoken moments of the body's changing relation to the real and vanishing modes of production. Then the workings of a power that is too enormous to be seen except in glimpses become entangled with the ordinary failures of the very self which has grown inside its grooves. There is the miner where the mine has closed, the haymaker out of work *because they got a machine*, the short-order cook whose children were removed by the state, growing up *somewhere else*.

There is the simultaneous pride and shame in the kind of manual work that seems to hold out against the rush of high-tech futures. John and Aggie, between road trips to sell souvenirs at UFO conventions throughout the country, live for months at time behind the cafe in a school bus that John converted into a mobile home. From the bus they make, with great care, skill and satisfaction, the alien T- shirts and Area 51 stickers and mugs that sell in the cafe gift shop. John can talk for hours about the government's bitter conspiracy to hide UFOs from the American people; and how they have two Hubbell telescopes, one of which is a secret...and about how he has gotten signs of apocalypse, he has seen the whole earth going down in a cloud of black smoke...but unless you pry you

don't hear about the more homely unmoorings, the downward mobility after eleven layoffs from engineering jobs, at a high-tech manufacturer of warplanes. *Life on the road is great. We love our freedom*, they say...yet, at the same time, *We had a three bedroom house*, his wife says, *we were middle class people, we had everything...*

The texture of life is shaped through embodied hopes and disillusionments, and their play against inexplicable turns of event. When these everyday stories bear resemblance to fabulous conspiracies by otherworldly power against the human body, then each gives weight to the other.

*They won't pay him what they owe him after his back just snapped in that mine*, says Raylene, when she talks about Frank. *It wouldn't surprise me*, Raylene says in answer to my questions, shrugging, nodding her head towards Area 51. But the uncanny *they* is not what Raylene thinks about most days in the normal course of illness and gossip:

--I can hardly stand up anymore with these diabetes,  
and Art hates to see me have to work;  
but we don't have any money  
and they won't pay him for his back,  
they told him to find a job  
where he didn't have to stand, sit, walk or crawl.

Well I wrote back to em:

I don't know too many male whores.

If the rural west is the space of potential salvation, it's also the place of a kind of restless melancholy. Here are the familiar, lived frustrations of a place where *there's nothing to do*. The few young people drive fast through the desert at night, to shoot at jackrabbits that spring in front of your headlights. They follow back roads and dry creek

beds that no one else knows, to tend hidden glorious pot crops, to fall in love and dramatically break apart, or else, sometimes, to chase unnatural lights with strange right angle turns, the other life that always blinks from the direction of the base.

And there was the one night in August, when Marie's husband warned her, sent his picture falling off the wall. That was the night that Johnny, the 27-year -old grandson of an old Rachel homesteader, and Kim, Johnny's new bride, drank til the bar closed and then drove fast through the midnight desert, Kim in the driver's seat, Johnny in the pickup's bed, standing up to feel speed and wind, til he fell out, hit his head and died on the dirt road. Nothing dulls the horror and meaninglessness of young death. And yet -- *now wouldn't that be something if Kim turned out to be pregnant*, said Raylene, wiping her face of tears. And then, miraculously, Kim indeed was pregnant, growing larger every day in her silent aura of sorrow and guilt behind the Quik-Pik cash register. Eight months later, Raylene told me on the phone, Kim gave birth to a boy, and named him Johnny for his father --- marking the father's absence, giving it presence, in the baby's name. *And that'll be some comfort to her*, said Raylene. Because, perhaps, the thing to notice, sometimes, is not a clean division between uncanny and material experience, nor any easy allegory of class or power or colonization -- though these do bleed, wordlessly, into the picture. Instead you might notice the continual struggle between memory and forgetting -- the always ambivalent need to bury those things that have no room to be said, while still they struggle to make their mark in the real, sneaking in through all their transformations. And when objectless nostalgia and vaguely futuristic longing combine in a single structure of feeling, then ghosts and UFOs enter a shared terrain.

## Chapter Four: Here Comes a Change

In the uncanny stories I want to tell in this chapter, the earth is poeticized as the ground of the ordinary -- a "natural" ground which, in the disorienting realm of the unnatural, is said to be plundered and lost. And from within this flux, an image of *the human* rises up as ambivalently wedded to images of the "ordinary" hometown and of "the natural" earth -- with "the natural" itself a sign, one that is felt to be slipping away. Here, in stories and dreams, the earth is poeticized as the ground of the ordinary self -- a "natural" ground which, in the disorienting realm of the unnatural, is said to be plundered and lost. And from within this flux, a theory of the human rises up as ambivalently wedded to dual figures of the hometown and the natural earth -- with "the natural" itself a sign, one that is felt to be slipping away.

How do contemporary myths imagine the natural world, and poeticize the uncultivated earth? In the rationalized landscapes of America, nature is not necessarily poeticized through storied sites of specific emplacements, embodiments or memories. Instead, nature is spoken of as a site of nostalgia, a lost home, where embodiment and memory are achingly present only in their absence. People pass through the grid of the postmodern landscape; storied nature, families and "roots" are elsewhere. Or, perhaps, they're nowhere. What is left is a longing for a more "real" place, a more "natural" home.

In her work on the poetics of modernity in Japan, Marilyn Ivy makes a connection between the discursive elaboration of the hometown, and Freud's idea of the uncanny, the *unheimlich* -- uncomely. When the hometown begins to fade as an unmarked place, the

world of origins and of nature becomes densely imagined as both safe and terrifying, natural and strange, and filled with the returning spirits of a repressed realm of the natural.

In the UFO Experiencers' Group in Austin, Texas, people talk of longing for and loss of the vanishing ground of home. They story themselves as sometimes grounded in community and place, and then always slipping again into confusions and dislocations. And all these stories of the slippery ground of self and home, is embedded in stories of the earth and the extraterrestrial. The earth is a trope that's cathected in all mythologies of the postmodern world, but heightened in stories of UFOs. This group is where you get together to tell your encounters with the uncanny.

In the social worlds where questions about UFOs are always pressing, some people are designated to search for physical evidence, and sometimes they say they find it: dried rings of grass where the UFO set down and burnt the earth, and the animals won't go near it. Peculiar scraps of metal; the body and its mysterious scars – things that never seem finally conclusive, but still raise a doubt. In hypnosis sessions used since the time of the Hills to recover abduction memories, the abductee's voice itself becomes a physical sign, its moans, sighs and fearful whimpers indexing an experience being re-lived. UFO researchers determined to find the truth about UFOs follow a trail of bread crumbs, determined to identify the flying objects.

But that is not what happens in this group. Here the ground you explore is the self that you can't tell anyone else -- the middle-of-the-night memories, the synchronicities, the light that came in your window as a child and held you rapt in its glow, the feeling that might just have been a dream. If you want to talk "nuts and bolts" about UFOs, they

say, you can do it here if you want; or you can go to the other group — MUFON. There they like to talk science. If you want to tell the story of your self and its weird stuff at MUFON, they say, well, proceed at your own risk.

The experiencers' group began in the fall of 1992 when Carla, a veteran of Alcoholics Anonymous put an ad in the local paper calling for UFO experiencers. A.A., she said, was the only true church of Christ she had found, if one existed, a place where people loved you for who you were. She wanted the same thing here. Thirty people showed up to sit on folding chairs and tell true stories whose centers would not hold still. A woman told of flying over Austin, seeing men in business suits flying around here, a placid, Magritte-like surrealism that she said was *really fun*...Another woman told of a group of aliens who surrounded her and did something to her when she was just a little girl, lying in an empty field. *And whether or not it is real I cannot say. I am just saying I am aware that this is something that happened to me*....After a few weeks, a core of about twelve people remained -- they came every week, and then sometimes more than once a week, getting together on weekends, at each other's homes, soon marking the group as their main source of sociability by spending Friday and Saturday nights together, having UFO parties on Christmas and New Years Eve, and on summer nights, camping out in the little stretch of woods behind Bear and Buddy's place, to sit in the dark and search the skies for UFOs.

In the support group, character is thrust to the foreground, and performs its heightened particularity in opposition to the rationalizing forces of the world that presses you down. Character looms large in a social space that feeds on the eccentric, the marginal arena where the homely self fuses with its uncanny self-representation. Stories

that foreground your character, here, blend the fantastic and the everyday, give "the real" itself a tinge of excess.

There are Buddy and Bear, both divorced, best friends who live together in a on the edge of town. The yard is filled with skittish skinny cats; but in the bedroom there are displays of dozens of perfect little models Bear's made: heroes from fantasy worlds arranged on wristwatch-display cases that Bear gleaned from some old job. Bear is a 300 pound dumptruck driver with a graying ponytail; and there's a shiny smooth spot where his thumb should be, following a factory accident -- they still haven't paid him what they owe him for that thumb. Bear finds himself sleepdriving -- fell asleep on the couch watching *Unsolved Mysteries*, and the next thing he knows he's driving through a park where he would never even GO to. Now he sleeps with rings on all the fingers of one hand, 'cause when he does that, *nothing happens*; but one night, he woke up and *something* had taken off all his rings, *laid'em right there neat in a row on the pillow*. And the one night that the rings came off, he felt like *somethin happened*. Maybe they can only get him with no rings. He's not *sayin* anything, but *somethin'* got those rings off. It must be the UFOs again,

Before all this alien stuff started happening to him, Bear didn't scare easy. He's good natured and generous; he tells us about last night when some guy picked a fight in a parking lot, and Bear just picks him up saying *I don't want a fight buddy, let's just go*, and sets the guy by his truck and walks away. And another time, he saw a car wreck, and he tried to pull the guy from the burning car, and this guy's arm just comes off in Bear's hands. Now that didn't even bother him, even though he thinks it would bother most people. But now, when he saw a strange light in the mirror the other night, just a

little old light, for some reason he was shakin like a leaf. He says: It must be the UFOs again.

When Bear was a little boy he saw a man in black. He said, *My brother was walkin past my doorway. And he saw someone sittin on my bed. And he thought it was me. So he stuck his head in the room, but there was nothing there. And then I was at the neighbor's. And he come over and later that day he goes: Was that You sittin on your bed all dressed in black? I said no. And my brother described this little man in black, with a black trenchcoat and a black derby hat, and big round glasses and he had a book open in his lap. But when he looked up he was gone. So about a week later, I was ridin my bicycle to the store, come up on an intersection, about to get going; and about 30, 40 feet away was this man, about 3 1/2 feet high, dressed in a black trench coat, black derby hat, and round glasses, holdin a book. Wavin at me! I thought, Hey – that's what my brother saw.*

Why was the man on Bear's bed? Why did he wave at Bear? He doesn't know, but after he heard about men in black he thought it must be that – they have something to do with UFOs.

But even though he always read UFO comics, and draws little cartoons of aliens all the times, it all got going when he lost his job and moved in with Buddy.<sup>1</sup> And he thinks, they're really after Buddy.

He thinks Buddy's ex girlfriend might be an alien. Remember she had those weird eyes? He reminds Buddy. Remember it was like she could see through the door?

Buddy's short and compact with a tough walk; he's angry and smart, an excellent musician and a pro cook at a Bar-B-Q place. He shows a teenage daughter in

a school snapshot -- she lives with her mom, back home. Buddy had his troubles in childhood like anyone else -- local people in his East Texas hometown called him half-breed on account of his Filipino father who left when he was two; and Freudians say *anything that happens* it's on account of your childhood, *your mother this, your mother that*. But this UFO stuff is not because of some childhood thing. Buddy has seen things, felt things, and they were real. He says *if something happened, dammit, it happened*. Grew up real *strict* religious, but *UFO stuff* always happened to him-- even when he was two years old they reached their long arms into the backseat of the car to grab at him...

Buddy and Bear tell us their story together, taking turns, again and again, over months of time: how Bear woke up in the middle of the night hearing Buddy call his name; and when Bear ran in to help him, he slammed into a *force field*. No way to explain it but a force field. Bear could see a terrible black shape hanging over Buddy, trying to suffocate him, and Buddy was screaming *Bear, Bear*. Next thing Bear knew *somethin* put him flat back in that bed. So the next day he thought it was a dream; but he said: hey Buddy, did you have any weird dreams last night? Well -- Buddy'd had the same dream. That was real.

Madeline says that aliens come into her room, every night, she can't sleep; her husband won't listen to her. But the other night he screamed "don't take her, leave her alone!" and she awoke paralyzed to see a monstrous black shape above her, her husband swinging wildly at it. Next thing she knew it was morning but *he won't discuss this nonsense*. She says she is scared, scared, was creeping into her parents bed at the age of twenty-six, but then she was so lonely. Her first husband had just died. Cancer. She

smokes pensively, incessantly, her candy-colored yellow hair falling over her long pale face and her blue eye shadow. Bob used to see UFOs when he was a little boy and the family lived overseas – they moved around, military family. And now, he says, his own three-year-old son is getting visits too.

And Berta, who immigrated from Russia, has seen lots of UFOs. Now she's blind, can see only the vaguest suggestion of light, but there's one thing and one thing only she can see as clear as day, not like an image but really see: it's an alien called The Egyptian, who uncannily appears at bus stops, malls, whenever she needs help and drives her home. Other people see him too so he's real, but, she says, he is not human. She says: he is gorgeous, he has olive skin and black hair. She thinks he teaches in the archaeology department over at U.T.

There are a few blind people in the overlapping UFO communities, all of whom used to be able to see. Mary is always there with her dog Sancho. We often go to her house, the spare, colorless house of a person who has been blind for a long time. She remembers things she used to see, long long ago, things she used to love: a rock she held in her hands, and it was so pretty, it felt like something magic. She doesn't talk much about herself but one day she abruptly says:

*I have been taken to a planet with three moons,*

*I have been taken to Israel,*

*I have been taken to Paris.*

These weren't dreams, because when she dreams she cannot see. She had a bunch of strange things happen to her, times when otherness surrounded her -- *these*

*people I met on the beach -- I think they were aliens -- they said they were from Jerusalem and told me to change my life -- but nothing's happened in so long, and she feels so sad, missing them.*

Tony is blind now too, but his other senses tell him of the uncanny things around him. He is a MUFON guy, but fits in with this group too. He says he went with his friend to lay some wire, way out in the rural town of Alice Texas. And they heard a strange, strange sound. The hair stood up on his neck; it was a bizarre sound, it was very very bizarre. And Tony said: *What is that sound, Billy?* And Billy said: *It's just the barbed wire, blowing in the wind.* And then the smell began. And it was a horrible smell, and the wind blew up; and he said, *Billy, what is that smell?* And Billy said, *that is just a dead animal.* And Tony thought *hmmm..*and he didn't like it, he didn't like the whole day. There was something wrong. Maybe, Tony said, it was a dead animal; but maybe it was an alien life form, because other abductees have reported strange smells. And maybe that sound, I cannot reproduce that sound – maybe it was the UFO coming up behind me, and I couldn't see it, and maybe Billy didn't want to talk about it... Maybe he was being blanked out... And then all of a sudden Billy saw a hangman's gallows, out in the middle of nowhere. And Billy said: *It looks like a hangman's gallows. Well it's probably just a deer stand.* But Tony didn't think it was a deer stand, and why would a hangman's gallows be there in the field, a ghostly structure – what Billy saw, *way out there over in the field*, was probably a screen for a UFO.

On summer nights, a few of us would sleep out in the undeveloped land that stretched behind Buddy and Bear's place, where we'd lie side by side to talk the night

away and search the skies for UFOs. Around our clearing was what Buddy and Bear called "the woods," nature on the working-class edge of the city. People hunted in there, and we could hear the gun shots, though it wasn't much of a woods. But in we'd tramp through unbroken briars, Bear leading the way with his walking stick, huffing and puffing, along a path that branched into a deer path; and we would get tangled and lost til we found the clearing to lie in. Then we talked in the faint surrounding thrum of a distant highway, with everything cast in the nocturnal glow not of the moon but of Sematech, the government-sponsored microchip consortium which lay across the woods. Some of the UFO friends worked there.

In sociable talk, braided through with laughter, these friends tell of freefalling into the uncanny, out of the natural sites that are meant to root you in ordinary time and space. They recognize and bolster each other. Outsiders try to pin down your open-ended life. They call you crazy, they say you're on drugs -- they go what have YOU been drinkin or smokin. Yeah, says Joanne, like I was smoking or drinking when I was six years old -- that's when the creature started coming to surround her sleeping body. Well, says Carla, no one calls you crazy here. The weird stuff *is real* -- *whatever the hell THAT means!* As always in the uncanny, the real is a shifting sign, constantly produced and dismantled; it can never be pinned down or summed up. And so the familiar self-help genre of the support group becomes a place to confess not what you've *done*, but rather what you've *seen*; what you dream, and what you remember; what "weird stuff" *just happens* in the open, contingent world. This is how you narrate your altered self: by performing it on the see-saw of the real. They tell stories that force deferral of any quick judgment about what the real might be.

In the homey feel of the group, people speak with awe of seeing UFOs, silver discs hovering over power lines, or vast crafts oozing liquid light over the whole stretch of visible sky, or strange lights on the horizon making unnatural turns, just little lights that open the sky into vertigo. They tell of encounters with strange beings who trespass the natural world and transgress the boundaries of human bodies -- angelic figures in flowing robes or satanic men-in-black, tricksterlike reptilians, and sometimes, the ones who've made all the press these days, the little grays with big black insect eyes, who steal silently through the night to perform inscrutable medical operations on helpless abductees.

These beings, people say, might come from some other planet or galaxy. But probably they come from some other dimension or time. In fact, some say, the aliens are us, returning from the wasteland of our own hyper-technological future, turning back time to this moment at the end of the twentieth century, when *the natural* really started to collapse. Maybe the aliens are trying to warn us: some people are taken on UFOs and shown images of the world in nuclear destruction, the mushroom clouds rising, the cities falling. Or maybe the aliens are just trying to save themselves: nothing but high-tech forms, they've lost the spark of humanity and covet our emotion -- our naturalness. Now they're coming back to harvest the human nature they've lost. They're fascinated by the natural differences between humans, chart the embodied traces left by our biographies-- our weight gains, our hair losses, our scars. They steal your eggs and sperm, create hybrid creatures of alien and human, all to put some robust blood into their unnatural alien stock.

Christina remembered her own abduction, and said:

Because I had what I called  
blank time in my day,  
when people said, you know,  
when I was confronted and asked  
where did the baby go,  
what happened to the fetus,  
I couldn't recall.

I never went to the doctor,  
and nobody ever asked me if I needed help,  
or let's go to the doctor,  
let's check this out,  
throughout the whole time.

Never saw anyone.

So from beginning to end.

Through hypnosis...

I finally got into my subconscious  
deep enough to recall what had happened.

And I remember getting up in the middle of the night –

I don't know what woke me –

but something made me get up.

I walked down the hallway

and where I saw smoke

and I thought there was a fire.

But there was no smoke smell.

When I walked into the living room area,

the whole room was filled with these little lines of vapor,

like the trails of a stick of incense.

And I'm looking around,

and I just have a few seconds in that room

before I was touched on the back of my hip...

with something sharp.

At that point it must have been something to put me under.

And I just remember that I was in a prone position after that.

And immobilized.

I remember having my nightgown on,

and my nightgown was lifted

and a syringe looking thing

with white liquid was put inside me,

it was a great deal of liquid put in there,

a full six inches of white liquid.

And uh, I remember that it burned very much.

And after that my next memory

is standing at the side of my bed,

and then getting into the covers  
and (sigh) then waking up in the morning  
with no memory of what had happened –  
only that as I sat up  
I remembered in the area of my ovaries  
I was just *burning*.  
I was really burning.  
At that point I WAS pregnant. --

Abduction captures you in different ways – it is a conflation of the sexual (and my nightgown was lifted) and medical (and a syringe looking thing with white liquid was put inside me), a condensing of the always-latent potentials of everyday life. It is a strange place that reveals its otherness by the fact that you don't go to the doctor, don't participate in the ordinary structures of authority that are naturalized for your body. It is a place where your eyes can't see what is in front of you, but they can zoom in to see the impossible, the liquid in the gynecological syringe. There is a fog, felt on the inside of consciousness, seen as filling the room...and there is only the memory that comes back to possess you, or the memory of your body itself, the burning of your ovaries. They stole her hybrid daughter, but the child came back to visit.

Their omniscient gaze defies natural rootedness. Those aliens put their strange seeds in your womb and their tracers in your brain, stick it right up your nose with a terrible needle; and when you wake up, your pillow has a spot of blood, and you touch your bleeding nose but don't remember why. "It's like when *human* scientists tag those

animals to study them," Mary says, "the animals don't know what's going on either." From the earth-native's point of view, then, the subjective human being is linked to lab animals and the torn-up earth and the medicalized sexuality of bodies. Whether the aliens are storied as benevolent guardians warning us of our own technology spinning out of control, or as sinister high-tech thieves of human selves, these are stories of a too-present realm of the unnatural, urgently erupting into the anti-natural zones of postmodernity to point -- nostalgically -- to the eclipse of nature.

But as Kathleen Stewart (1992) and Susan Stewart (1993) have each suggested, nostalgia is a longing which has no definite object. In UFO stories, nostalgia saturates the natural earth, an index to the vanished realm of an uncontested "real." The sense of crisis is palpable; the earth is felt to be veering on its own axis, overcome by pollution and the weight of nuclear bombs awaiting the day of flight in their awful secret nests. Then the *earth itself* is often storied as a subject, a feeling body violated both by aliens and high-tech humans. Look at all the signs: earthquakes, fires, storms and floods. Gaia's gearing up for the big one. The earth is mouthing off. Again, the spoken feelings of displacement and loss are not limited to longing for one's specific childhood hometown, but for the earth itself, encoded with nostalgia as people feel it vanishing.

The alien-invaded earth, like the body of a disembodied soul, or like the remembered hometown of a dislocated suburban wanderer, is both longed for and despised. In Austin UFO talk, images of the "earth" and the childhood hometown are often metaphorically co-loaded with both the pleasurable intensity and the bad aftertaste of exile. In the support group -- between tales of abduction or stories of strange balls of light or creatures running an electric wand over your paralyzed body til the vibrations

penetrate your skin and you almost die of fright -- we talk, sometimes, of earthly life. Then the hometown is spoken of as the place of remembered child abuse, narrow minded meanness, and dead-end shit jobs. Even the ordinary recollections of its vanished aches can become strange, linked to the uncanny sense that the ambivalent ground from which you came is just not what it seems. One day, Ina remembers that her mother, who she always knew abused her, killed her pet and made her eat it. What kind of animal was it? I ask. *It wasn't a dog or a cat; but it was a goat, it was my little goat.* She went back to that tiny town in the Ozarks for a while, and decided never to return home again: *This place is the center of Satanic ritual abuse I feel it...* Here is the debris of the *too much*, the home as a containing trap; it is filled with the wounds of closeness and smashed desire, lodged in the ruins of the vanishing. But it's also spoken of as the place of remembered rootedness, prayer, order and closeness, and drenched with longing for the namedness of place.

The image of the ordinary earthly becomes an unmarked "real," the stable foundation of the known, set against the vertigo of the uncanny. The fantastic bleeds into the ordinary, infusing earthly life with open-ended desire. But at the same time, the ordinary frames and limits the fantastic with the specificity of habitus -- as when at parties for the support group we watch UFO videos at Trudy's brightly colored house, down past the Target store, where working class subdivisions themselves have names of desire, like Sir Gawain Place and King Arthur Court. Everything's neat as a pin despite three kids, with Trudy working full-time now, swing shift at the local microchip factory. Her little girls run crazy through the house as Trudy talks over the video to tell her deepest stories: how blue aliens appeared by her bedside, made her pregnant and then

stole the fetus; she had a hysterectomy last year, on account of her diabetes, and she dreamed they'd find a golden baby when they opened her up; but then nothing was there. She fills our cups with soda in the living room decorated with big portraits of *Star Trek's* Mr. Spock and Captain Kirk, with a parrot in a cage by the TV screaming *Beam me up, Beam Me Up*.

Sometimes the gap between "here" and that powerful *somewhere else* fills with desire. In another subdivision, in another part of town also glossed with royal English street names, I sit with Lana putting hundreds of stamps on flyers for a big MUFON event, a talk given by Stanton Friedman, a "Nuclear Physicist-Lecturer." Lana tells me about her new business opportunity, tries to sell me "Nancy Shakes." I just know this opportunity will drain her money. Her excited praise of fat-free nutritional shakes punctuates stories of a woman abducted over New York City, floated right over Brooklyn Bridge in her nightgown, and there were *important* witnesses; word is she was seen by the U.N. secretary.

A lived, deeply felt sense of the "*margins*" emerges as a *trope* that detaches itself from any single, particular experience. It becomes filled with multiple meanings, with the symbolic capacity for metaphor and montage. Social margins are mapped onto spiritual, epistemological and sensory margins. The margin in all its senses is felt to be the space of UFOs.

Carla cultivates the margins of social life, championing those who she thinks try to *break through the bullshit*. She nurtures gay male alcoholics, and teenage alcoholic "little girls" come to cry and sleep on her couch. Next day, sometimes, they tell her *a shape* passed through the living room. The margins aren't just sad; they're exciting, too.

Anarchy is coming, Carla can feel it in her bones. The day is coming when we won't need people to tell us what to do, soon we won't take it. The insiders in Washington won't release the information about UFOs. One day, as I'm walking into her house, I hear Carla, Brian and Mary talking: the government's hiding information on UFOs and trying to keep us all in line, but boy, are we *mad*. Fucking mad, she yells as I walk in, You can say FUCK here! *Fuck fuck fuck*, I call back. She laughs a powerful laugh and then sings: REV-O-LUTION!!! in a Spanish accent.

Carla says *this is a police state here* -- we saw that when Koresh was invaded. Yes, she said during the siege of Waco: David Koresh is talking to God and maybe he *is* the Messiah; and *I've been getting* that he's *got something to do* with UFOs. One day, at Luby's cafeteria after a MUFON meeting, she asked Roy, a middle-age man who lives in Waco: Do you think Koresh has anything to do with UFOs? Roy, a MUFON member, also writes meaning into the margins, but in the opposite direction: he desires the center. His crew cut, his science-talk, his slow, controlling speech let us know where he stands. Koresh, he tells her in a manly amused voice, is a dangerous lunatic, and the government had every right to invade. No, Roy says, Koresh has *nothing* to do with UFOs! Carla tells him *where to go*, slams back her chair and storms out of Luby's, making me run after her if I want a ride home...All the way home she is fuming, feeling it all crashing in. She says one day: I want to move away from America, to Canada. There the people are real, not phony like the ones *down here*, not so greedy and mean... *I'm just getting* that the people care about the real stuff, *up there*...

In the experiencer support group, stories of felt marginality are constantly resocialized, piled up with other stories through a social style of deep, unflinching

tolerance. Phil had no UFO stories, and never talked about uncanny experiences, but came to the group through Buddy; *he's off somehow* I wrote in my notes after I first met him -- he told unfunny jokes, interrupted with non sequiturs, and the group never picked up to build on what he said. But he felt comfortable here. Then one night, out in the field behind Bear and Buddy's, he suddenly asked, "Has anyone else had a serious head injury?" It seemed to me like a fraught moment, but everyone simply began telling their minor head injury stories without missing a beat. Phil said: *I was on my Moped, no helmet. Afterwards I told my Dad, I knew I wasn't going to die. My dad said: You mean you hoped. I said, no, not hoped, knew. I saw the Blazer coming straight at me and I thought, here comes a change...*

Then Carla chimed right in, "My mother said I fell off the bed but I wouldn't be surprised if she hit me," and Bear said his brother whacked him with a belt buckle. And then Brian said he was in a car accident once too, and his friend died; and he had to spend months in the hospital. *I wonder why it happened to me?* he said mildly. These were the very same words he'd said so many times before, in a much more dramatic, intensely searching way, about the tiny, weird things that seemed to occur around him and that made life seem uncanny: why were there cigarette butts near him in a neat row, why did he see a slug that left no trail of slime...why did it happen to me! – as if he were at the center of a vast design, with signs made of tiny bits out of order. Now he just shrugged, his voice in the register of everyday acceptance. No one made Phil's story seem extreme, strange, or even more significant than anyone else's. Storytellers closed ranks around him, brought him into a circle of narratives which were made similar by their place *inside* a felt outside. This space for the uncanny was, in fact, a home.

At one meeting, Carla tells us about her encounter, and the details of her childhood pile up as proof of real memory. Even as those details pulse with the solid presence of their own unquestionable reality, they also acquire the patina of a highly texted nostalgia. The ordinary, here, becomes the sign of the natural, the unbroken orientation in which the self can emerge on solid ground, as she says:

(W)hat tells me it was not a dream  
is of the *level of detail*

I remember waking up when I was nine years old and it was raining...

[deletions]

and there was this

*thing*

lookin in the window at me

and it wasn't a person

and it wasn't an animal

and I still can't remember that face

but I can remember the level of detail

I can remember the quilt on my bed

what the quilt looked like

it was a wedding ring quilt

that my -- it was a friendship quilt that my mother --

we lived out on a farm in Missouri

and this was back in the early 40s  
and all the women would embroider their names  
and they'd all trade pieces  
and they'd all have these friendship quilts...

I can remember the white cloth with the embroidered names  
and the other colors set in  
I can remember where the window was  
I remember there was no curt--[ain]  
I remember the wash --sewing machine at the foot of my bed  
with material folded up on top  
I can remember that whole thing  
my sister's bed over here  
and I cannot remember that face.

Those eyes that were holding me on that bed  
I mean  
hypnotizing me  
I **could not** move  
I was ab-so-lutely  
powerless to move

The loving details of the ordinary homely world -- the remembered quilt with its  
layers of human history, the sewing machine with its evocation of domestic work -- all

point to an indisputable *reality*, the ground of an oriented subjectivity interrupted by the uncanny. But in other stories, Carla told us how that homely place wounded her -- how she suffered in the meanest poverty, and endured cruelty by adults, a rape that no one believed, and how there, amid the quilts and sewing machines she just knew that there had to be more. She told me how much she hated her childhood hometown, but she told me this as we sat in her living room filled with dozens of pictures of that place, a black and white mother, house and land, all framed in a huge collage on the wall. And then the next year Carla abruptly moved back to that tiny Missouri town, the place she said she'd never forgive, 30 years after she escaped with her first of her eight husbands -- now everyone she'd known from the past was dead or gone, but she found herself a little house and settled in and tried to grow a garden. Tried to make it work again. But the winter was cold, and the neighbors did not speak to her, and when she tried to start a UFO group -- *somethin's telling me this is what I'm supposed to be doin' here--* hardly anyone showed up. They made her feel crazy and lost. One said she'd come over and then didn't come for weeks. She stopped by for five minutes and then left again, saying that Carla should visit her. *Don't hold your breath*, she said to me on the phone, what she wished she'd said to the neighbor...and then she lay down in her freezing house, and just gave up til one of her old Alcoholics Anonymous friends flew out there to that middle of nowhere, rented a U-Haul, threw Carla's stuff inside and just drove her back to Texas, with her crying all the way. But she didn't come back to Austin -- she moved right to another city, a new place, San Antonio. She said: *I was getting that it's time to move on...* I counted her moves over the past year and a half: four. In each, she had the framed montage of photos on the wall.

The home is a place to escape from, but in stories of the bizarre it is framed, and re-texted as the original, the natural, the real. Like the ordinary it is a space of ambivalence. And so too is the planet earth.

People say: I wasn't born to be on this earth. I knew all along that I was *different*. The people "here" are narrow-minded, mean; they make me feel crazy and judged. The only time I felt like I belonged in church, Carla often says, was when they sang a hymn that went "The earth is not my home, I'm just passing through" -- *I sang that one all right! I could relate to THAT!* Everyone knows that hymn; yes, that is true...

Margaret, at another meeting, says she knows she is just not *from* "here;" she doesn't know *where* she's from but she just knew since she was a young girl it wasn't this small-minded, mean little earth. Things here feel so wrong, so terrifying. She went to a job interview and on the way she saw "black people" who scared her. She got to the interview, and she saw that the boss had bare feet. It was more than she could bear; the wrongness of his bare feet made her feel dirty. Then she said she knew why she had felt scared of the black people before, because she knew it was wrong to be "prejudiced." She had really been scared because the boss was going to have bare feet. She had been given a premonition, a sense of fear that simply spilled into the world and saturated everything as a sign that the earth is off its axis.

The things of the world loom up and appear strange, signs that something is dreadfully wrong, something she just can't say...She used to be an alcoholic, but one day, as she was dying on the bathroom floor, a beautiful being from some other world appeared; she never drank again. One day as we're looking at clothes in a thrift shop -- the only kind of clothes she likes -- she mentions child abuse back home. As we leave

the store, she casually says, *Today is my son's wedding, back home...but I just can't go back there. Well, I'll see him another time...* Margaret is fragile and skinny, with the harsh terrain of her life mapped onto her face; when she speaks, her vowels are still as flat as prairies; but she left Nebraska long ago and she just cannot go back. She cries out during the meeting: "I hate earth food and I hate earth clothes, where am I *from*?"

"Walk-ins" from other planets occupy some human bodies, colonizing the self with half-remembered longings for another place, so maybe that's it; or maybe we're just earth-misfits, or, in moments of excitement, the vanguard of a new evolving breed, mutating with the fast-changing world. In essence, then, here is the dark side of Donna Haraway's (1990) "cyborg," moving simultaneously towards triumph and destruction, and pointing to a future of terrifying surfaces where "the natural" lingers only in always receding, already remembered, traces of "before" --before, when we were innocently, naturally embodied as animals; before, that is, we became the aliens' "test rats in a lab."

In the ordinary structures of the imagination, an opposition is naturalized -- between humans and animals, or between culture and nature (Fernandez 1986:32 , discussing Levi-Strauss). A similar opposition is cast in the imagined relationship between between aliens and humans. But the binary structure shifts; here human subjectivity is associated *not* with Culture but with Nature. The earth is rehumanized as our natural home, as humans are linked to animals, while aliens are linked to a technological hyper-Culture which subjugates and experiments on human animals. Instead of the totemic mythos which tells us "we were once animals"(Fernandez 1986 ) -- a structure which remains in the Darwinian narrative of evolution (Landau 1991) -- the

UFO story takes us to a new point in an evolutionary myth, one in which we see that we are *currently* "animals", while the potential human self --the overly technological alien - - descends from its future position and collapses the future (not the past) into the present. And this future-present is thoroughly infiltrated by the disorienting moves of "inhuman" technology.

But at the same time, in UFO stories, the planet earth is still imagined as an orienting place, a hyper-storied human hometown of memory, embodiment, nostalgia and desire. The earth is our naturally rightful home invaded by space aliens, who, like gentrifiers of the cosmos, let us see through their alienated eyes both its desired beauty and its small, rough, overemotional backwardness. Thanks to NASA, you can see the earth from the outside now -- and its image still startles, still demands attention, doesn't it, like the image of one's own body in an out-of-body experience, so shockingly small and solitary and beautiful and unrelated to the ground you're standing on.

## **Narrative Contagion: An Inconclusion**

On the day I was to return home from Rachel after my first visit in 1997, I went to interview Dean, the off-base military presence, in his tiny desert trailer. I'd come up here to his place once before; when I had car trouble, everyone told me to take it to Dean. Dean's mechanical abilities were honed for sophisticated "air force business," not made for tinkering on cars. He'd look under your hood graciously, like a city surgeon in a small town cleaning a skinned knee. He laughed when I offered him money. He "built" the computer they used in the cafe office, everyone said. He was kind and taciturn and had a faint Midwestern accent. He was supposed to keep an eye on the fanatics coming to Rachel. He was supposed to keep an eye on Chuck, the warplane buff who had given up his fishing-rod business in L.A. to live in the desert, intercept military radio on his CB, and hound the base's armed guards. The two of them chuckled about it. They had an alien burger together and said they were spying on each other.

Dean had a Ph.D. from Purdue. He lived here not because of an idea of the west or freedom but only because the air force told him to, and he was employed by the air force. He was waiting to be transferred somewhere where he could see a movie now and then. He was the face of sanity. He was the grownup here.

I heard things about him. When I used the town's only payphone or the phone in the cafe, Mary told me to watch what I said and not make it too private. Dean listened to everyone's phone calls from his special line. It was his job. He had to keep track of nuts who might come to blow up the base. After Mary finished gabbing once, he told her, cut down on the bedroom talk, it embarrassed him. But he was a gentleman. Both his wives had died in freak accidents, and he was perhaps not yet forty. His first wife was shot to death outside a 7-11. His second wife died from some kind of cancer or radiation thing.

He was now a man who needed space. He had to heal by himself out here. He been through a lot. He kept to himself. He ate alien burgers and he nodded politely in his trim fatigues, and he left a nice tip and fixed things and he did not bother anyone.

He asked me what I was doing here. "If you are at the University of Texas, then why do you live in New York?" His voice was suspicious in a blandly pleasant way. I explained myself, leaving things out like a criminal. We agreed I should come to his place so that I wouldn't think the government and Area 51 were evil, as many here were inclined to believe. I could interview him. That would be fine.

Dean's tiny trailer was stuffed with electronics, computers and monitors and little black blinking boxes. He was tired, having worked the night shift at the base. He began then to give me information. It was important that I know the government is not evil but is protecting us all. I must not tell anyone, I must not publish this, I must certainly turn off that recorder. If I told anyone, he would be killed.

-- Do you want to get me killed? This is not small potatoes. No. These are very serious things we are speaking of. I want to wake up in the morning.

- Wow, you must really trust me! I say.

-- Well don't be surprised, Susan, if you get a knock on YOUR door at three in the morning. But don't worry. No one is going to hurt you. Because you won't tell anyone. Do you believe in UFOs Susan? Do you believe we have been visited by aliens? Now I will tell you because you are a student and you are a seeker of the truth, and I believe in that. I give information to students only. They seek the truth. Now listen to me carefully Susan. Our government has in fact been in touch with aliens since the 1970s. Yes. They have been coming here for thousands of years. You know they have given us technology on earth since the beginning. There are no longer UFOs kept at Area 51, but what would you say if I told you indeed there was a UFO there at one time. I cannot say more. There

are no longer UFOs at the base. I didn't say there *were* ever UFOs there, I said there were no longer UFOs there. We are not in touch with the aliens now. There has been no contact for a while now. But they gave us so much. Do you know of time travel and the technology to become invisible? Do you believe in time travel Susan? Do you believe we can now travel at the speed of light? Do you understand physics? People thought it could not be done. Look at this Coke can Susan. What happens if it spins very quickly? Come on now, this is basic physics Susan. What happens to the Coke can, Susan. It heats up. This is easy stuff Susan. What happens when things heat up Susan. The molecules expand...

Yes Susan time travel has been mastered. Through very high speeds, Susan, we have learned how to make matter invisible. Do you think we could have invented this alone? Are you surprised at what I am telling you? I am only telling you things that have been declassified; but you would not know where to find them. But you must not tell anyone I told you. This is serious business and I, for one, want to wake up in the morning.

There is so much to know. It is dangerous. And it is wonderful. Of course we are not alone in the universe. How could anyone think so. Do you believe? Do you think we are alone in the universe Susan? How many light years to the nearest solar system Susan. Do you know how big the universe is? Do you know how small we are? I thought you were a student. I thought you were seeking knowledge of these things. If I knew you were going to write about something else I would not have spoken to you. Most of the students who come here want to believe.

I think: *Oh, my God. This is what conspiracy theorists call disinformation. This time travel and UFO stuff is their insurance that if I also write about the workers' lawsuits or anything else, I will look like a loon.*

-- I live here in this desolate place because my wives died. You might have heard. My first wife was shot outside a 7-11. Terrible. My second wife was a scientist. She worked for the military. She was working with radioactive material and there was an accident. These things happen. But that was too bad. That one was a good wife.

He shakes his head sadly.

When he says, "that one was a good wife," my brain begins to shut down and speed up at once. It sounds so wrong and flat. It sounds as if he is trying to perform his idea of a sad widower. I think: He was never married of course, they have given him this romantic story to explain why he is here. I think: He is insane. He killed her. He killed them both.

His intensity is a kind of suppressed rage I didn't notice before. He continues to speak. He speaks this way for three hours. He drums me with questions about basic physics using the Socratic method. In the sand outside his trailer, he draws a diagram of travel at the speed of light. I don't understand the diagram. He asks me about cultural anthropology and in a flattering voice says we are both scientists. He tells me not to talk. But it is not classified. But he wants to wake up in the morning. He tells me they are going to make Area 51 into a museum and open it to the public.

His eyes get more intense. He wants my address to send me "more Information." There is a lot, he says, that I could learn. He cannot give me this Information yet. He has

it, yes, but he has to check up on a "few things," first, before he can send me anything. Then he'll send it to me.

-- Come on. Write your address. Don't you want to know these things?

At once I don't want him to have my address. I am starting to back away. He steps forward, quivering, and says,

-- Come on! Take a risk! Do you know what they say about you? That you are MOUSEY! MOUSEY!

The little trailer is small; we have grown huge inside it, bumping our heads on the ceiling like two Alices.

*He is a low-level mechanic who fixes cars at the base, and he has embodied this discourse as part of a delusion of grandeur.*

*He might think I am spying and that he must protect the world from the likes of me. He might have read all those spy and murder tactic books from Loompanics that I sent away for myself, the ones describing how to "kill without joy," written by guys wearing camouflage in their mother's basements.*

*Maybe they **have** invented time travel with help from aliens. How do I know?*

*He killed his wives; hired a hit man for the first and poisoned the second; and perhaps this metal box he had me sit on has some kind of radiation in it, and it's getting into my organs.*

Dean was the last person I talked to in Rachel that day, except to say goodbye. I hugged the people at the cafe and accepted their small gifts and began the drive through the desert, back to Las Vegas.

My flight left at midnight. I arrived in the city hours early, and drove the streets in my rental car. I'd spent some time in Vegas six months earlier. Then the city was a

glorious riot, dazzlingly surreal and banal in strobing alteration, a comic festival of simulacra. Not now. The frantic lights shocked my system into anesthesia.

And then, waiting to board my plane, I was approached by a Man in Black. At first I did not realize, despite his dapper and telltale black suit, who had come to sit beside me. It happened so fast. He began to converse in a clipped Mexican accent. He had a mild case of dwarfism and sported a jaunty mustache. He showed me a profusion of colorful folders from his Business Seminar. They were so shiny, and had so many pie charts. He had been here for the edification and promotion of vitamins which counteracted obesity. He had perhaps not made a great deal of sales but he had certainly facilitated many situations.

He asked my name and I told him. He asked where I lived and I told him. He asked what I did and I said I was a writer. He asked what I wrote, and I said I was tired now, and it was nothing personal but I was going to read.

Ah! Susan! he said. I see you have in you *the sociological imagination!* Very good, very good. You have a lot on your mind. I will not occupy you.

He took my hand, and squeezed it very hard, and looked at me significantly; and then he walked into the crowd, and evaporated.

It was then I knew he was a Man in Black. He'd said...Sociological Imagination! He was telling me he knew who I was! This is what *they do*. How often had I read of this, heard it and tape-recorded it as folklore? After a bizarre encounter involving knowledge of UFOs, *they* send a Man in Black to find you. To warn you not to tell. It is always a bizarre and inexplicable encounter, often involving a foreign accent. It is uncanny in the classic sense; some think the strange men are automatons. Why did I tell him my real name?

At midnight we boarded the plane. The mood on board was muted, a pensive feel of lost money, with people dreaming out the windows -- a far cry from the reveling camaraderie in anticipation of jackpots on the flight from New York to Vegas. This was the downward turn of that wheel. The plane climbed. People slept and murmured to their children. My body was exhausted and rigid with the day. Over the fasten seatbelt lights, multiple silent John Travoltas were blasted by otherworldly beams of light. Conspiracies snaked through my blood, touched forgotten images, and linked together in a chain of unstoppable increase. The Man in Black had picked me from the crowd. I wondered if while distracting me he had slipped anything into my bag.

What is down there? a child asked behind me. That is the earth, her mother said. Outside, that vanishing ground was black with random patterns of light.

Inside, we passengers breathed each others' exhalations. Like the stories we told, we somehow made them our own breath. Our invisible contagions seeped into the cabin, entered each others' bodies, and began to culture there. I sat up straight, and waited for the plane to crash.

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