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Alien Nation

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ALIEN NATION

The hidden obsession of UFO literature: race in space

Luise White

In a typical UFO abduction experience, somebody is repeatedly taken aboard alien spacecraft to be studied. Sometimes homing devices are inserted in the abductees' bodies and sometimes their emotions are observed. Usually they endure a number of invasive medical and occasionally mental procedures; semen and ova may be removed and it is not uncommon for women to be impregnated and to have a fetus removed from their bodies. Several female abductees have been shown the children produced by their ova and alien gametes; they look like big-eyed aliens, only more human.

The similarities in both the plot and details of these accounts, all recalled under hypnosis, are striking. Indeed, these similarities—particularly among the accounts given by people who had no particular or previous interest in UFOs or science fiction, and who seemed loath to seek publicity—are what have encouraged researchers to believe these are true stories.

What does it mean when a lot of peo-

ple tell the same story? It may mean, as many researchers have assumed, that the story is true. It may mean simply that the story is a genre. True or false, these stories *are* presented to us as genre of recollection and authorship. Most books on the subject are the biographies of individuals who, with the aid of hypnotic regression, retrieve memories of years of abductions and experimentation. When they first seek expert help, most of these people are not consciously aware of alien intervention in their lives. They are instead aware of the sensation of “missing time,” of marks on knees and limbs, of feeling watched and monitored, of unplanned and abruptly but painlessly terminated pregnancies, and of great anxiety over UFO phenomena. The people who suffer from such symptoms usually seek some kind of counseling and invariably end up with someone well-versed in, or at least sympathetic to, UFO lore who uses hypnosis to bring the abduction experience to conscious memory. These experts sometimes write books about the abduction experience, and

sometimes coauthor as-told-to books with individual abductees. As the fame of these experts spreads, abductees write to them, sharing experiences they said they could only fully describe after having read about someone else's abduction. These experts go on to hypnotize these individuals and then incorporate their experiences into later publications. And a genre is born.

In some respects, David M. Jacobs's *Secret Life* represents a new sort of publication on UFO abductions. Although abductees came to Jacobs in this way, he is concerned to present a structured collage of abduction narratives. He illustrates each phase of the abduction experience with a wide variety of quotes from abductees, including excerpts from hypnosis sessions. As a historian by profession, Jacobs has made it his task to present a wide range of oral testimony that, in his view, proves the reality of UFO abductions by showing the commonalities in so many individual experiences.

Abduction narratives, as a genre, tend to configure themselves as stories about race

But I am also a historian by profession, and find these mass-marketed narratives of abduction to be highly illuminating—not about aliens, but about ourselves. For abduction narratives, as a genre, have a curious tendency to configure themselves as stories about race. As a genre, I say: the generalization holds equally of the eighteenth and nineteenth century first-person narratives of Americans captured by Indians as it does of our contemporary compatriots' accounts of being accosted

by extraterrestrials. Without notions of racial difference, there is virtually no abduction literature. Nineteenth century New England captives who stayed in Indian society never wrote their memoirs, although many were literate; whatever contemporary Americans' national obsession with children taken abroad in custody disputes, those children do not grow up to write their memoirs either.

Mind you, I'm not talking about race as most *Transition* readers understand it, that socially constructed idiom that elides culture into physiological stereotypes, but rather about old-fashioned, discredited eighteenth and nineteenth century ideas about race. The concept of race invoked by abduction narratives is that of European imperial expansion, and it is informed by the questions of physiological difference and technological hierarchies, concerned with anatomical difference, and obsessed with the possibility of interbreeding. We don't have to look much further than Bram Stoker's *Count Dracula*, a classic first-person abduction fiction that is very much a product of the 1890s, to see ideas about race and the idea that race mixing is most clearly measured in the mixture of bodily fluids: vampires, after all, were a separate race, one that ate, slept, and reproduced differently from humans.

But the stories told by abductees are not always the same as those told by the experts. UFO abduction narratives are a sort of alien ethnography reconfigured by the hypnotist. The images of race and culture that obsess abductees are often turned into the linear symptoms of alien abduction by the experts. For example, the inability to account for periods of time is the most common sign of UFO ab-

Discussed in this essay

Secret Life. Firsthand Documented Accounts of UFO Abductions, David M. Jacobs, New York: Simon and Schuster

Encounters: A Psychologist Reveals Case Studies of Abductions by Extraterrestrials, Edith Fiore, New York: Ballantine Books

The Andreasson Affair, Raymond E. Fowler, New York: Bantam Books

The Andreasson Affair—Phase Two, Raymond E. Fowler, New York: Bantam Books

The Watchers: The Secret Design Behind UFO Abductions, Raymond E. Fowler, New York: Bantam Books

Intruders. The Incredible Visitations at Copley Woods, Budd Hopkins, New York: Ballantine Books

Into the Fringe: A True Story of Alien Abduction, Karla Turner, New York: Berkeley Books

Communion. A True Story, Whitley Strieber, New York: Avon Books

ductions—abductees are often first alerted to their plight by their distress at being unable to account for two or three hours, or in the case of one abductee, eighteen minutes. Ideas about time and its subjective reckoning (African time, Jewish time, anything, in fact, but WASP time) are one of the tropes by which racial and cultural differences are marked; even vampires reverse the order of the working day. Jacobs, however, saw his initial task of ordering these assembled missing hours: “Most of the reports consisted of snippets of stories, beginning in some logical order but then ending abruptly or swerving off into wild, fantastic flights of fancy. As an historian, I required a chronological narrative.” This is not Evans-Pritchard among the Neur (who “have no equivalent to ‘time’ in our language, and they cannot . . . speak of time as though it were something actual, which passes, can be wasted, can be saved, and so forth”) or even the abductee who told researcher Edith Fiore that the aliens’ “message” for humankind was “Something about the unacceptance and misconception of time,” but a third party reorganizing information for a canon of evidence that may not be of much concern to individual abductees.

But what happens when we look at these stories in some of the ways historians have learned, in the last fifteen years or so, to read evidence produced in dialogue? The very nature of interrogation of any sort tells us not only about the world of the aliens, but the world of the interrogators. Some authors have suggested that these insights apply not only to the world of witchcraft accusation and confession, but to the most intimate practices of history and ethnography. When evidence is derived from interviews, whose

narratives emerge? Can we ever hear anything but the inquisitors’ categories? Or do the stories that surface nevertheless reflect a reality known only to the abductee—framed, surely, by the inquisitors’ questions, but couched in the terms of a shared vocabulary, with which memories are negotiated? Or, finally, do dialogic interrogations and confessions simply reveal, as a historian of early modern Germany has argued, the conflicts between interviewer and informant? The concepts and categories of UFO abduction accounts seem so close to, and such a part of, contemporary American racial neuroses that it is important to look at the issues of hybridity, genetic dominance, and colonization these narratives reveal, and into the words and images with which hybridity is described.

Indeed, what may be significant about UFO abduction narratives is that they have become mass products in recent years. Aliens, Jacobs claims, have been among us, abducting humans, for fifty years, but even thirty years ago there were not half a dozen mass market paperbacks in print about alien abductions. Historians and psychiatrists didn’t write about them, and other historians didn’t see this literature as a potential weapon in the battle against identity politics. In a complicated world, perhaps made even more complicated through its academic representation, who speaks for whom, and who silences whom, with what right, authority, and authenticity, have become bargaining chips in debates about race and ethnicity. Any contemporary literature that even suggests that we can “read” another culture from the words and bodily markings of their victims raises serious and timely questions about how we think about race and cul-

ture. Indeed, ideas about racial separateness and racial purity and ideas about authentic representation are compromised in such a literature—partly because of the texts available to us, of course, but also because of the ideas about interdependence between racial groupings that produced the texts we have. Whether pop-

UFO abduction narratives have all the tedious health of subversive texts

ular culture or, as Jacobs claims, a brand new academic discipline, UFO abduction narratives have all the tedious health of subversive texts. Not only do they mount the usual attacks on government secrecy and orthodox science, but they traffic in the awkward politics of our times: what is the nature of racial difference; how is it expressed; who can—and who does—express it?

What do we learn about race from UFO narratives? Alien abductions homogenize differences, except for one. Jacobs insists that the abduction experience put people beyond the boundaries of race, gender, and class. The people who came to him were “Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, white, black, male, female, younger, older, professional, nonprofessional, married, single, divorced, employed, unemployed, articulate, and inarticulate.” An abducted woman hypnotized by researcher Edith Fiore, however, indicated that race itself was an alien invention. Curious as to why she saw “about twenty black people” sitting on a bench on the aliens’ ship, she asked an alien, “‘Why are all these black people here?’ And he said, ‘Well, these people were sent down into

the most difficult of circumstances, like poor ghetto places, for a very high service there. These are different souls.’” The aliens called themselves “the Planters. They go to different parts of this world . . . to check up. . . . we were planted here thousands of years ago to start a colony.”

Descriptions of aliens are descriptions of a separate race. Depending on who you read, they are malevolent or occasionally benevolent, technologically superior but cold (if they cure an abductee’s illness, it’s merely “equipment maintenance”), curious about human reproduction, but beyond that they are alien, as physically different as different can be. They are small and bipedal, with big heads and huge eyes and rudimentary noses or no nose at all. Alien skin is contested terrain; some suspect alien body stockings while others think of their having exoskeletons, but whatever covers their bodies, it is usually grey in color. Karla Turner and her family, all of whom had abduction experiences, called the aliens the Greys. Some abductees report gendered aliens. One male abductee told researcher Budd Hopkins that an alien “was well endowed—she definitely had mammaries,” but most abductees say that aliens have no genitals. (It’s hard to read this and not think of the Hottentot apron.) In UFO literature, gender tends to be located in the eye of the beholder. The abductees hypnotized by Jacobs admitted that they frequently ascribed gender to aliens and tended to think of the ones who reassured them or who took them to shipboard nurseries as “shes.” One abductee told Budd Hopkins that gender was ascribed because of conduct, not physiology, and another told Edith Fiore, “I feel they’re mostly male. There’s a few females. But they don’t do

very much. It's the males that do everything. The females assist." Jacobs's more detailed exploration of the abduction experience revealed nonsexual differences and divisions of labor among the aliens, however. They seemed to have a hierarchy based on height. The drudge work of abduction was often done by the smaller beings while the high tech work of mindscans and surgery was performed by taller ones.

And what do these alien races want to know about humans, or, perhaps more correctly, what do humans infer from alien actions and behavior? Aside from a few passing attempts to understand human intelligence or emotions, they are all but obsessed with human reproduction. On the one hand this makes perfect sense: if aliens bud and humans reproduce sexually, human sexuality might be something novel and hard to figure out, something that required intense and prolonged investigation. But in fact aliens don't seem very curious about human sexualities at all—so far, only heterosexuals have been abducted, as Jacobs's list of differences shows—they are instead concerned with how humans reproduce, the mechanisms by which men and women have sex, bond, and nurture their offspring, in utero and extra utero. As one abductee told Edith Fiore, "It isn't the sex they want. It's the reproduction." What aliens want from humans is pretty much what nineteenth century ideas about race wanted to find out—what was the physiological extent of biological and cultural differences, how different did they actually make different races, could races interbreed and if they did, what would the offspring look like, and where could they live?

So, what are these stories about? UFO

researchers claim that because these stories are so similar, they are all about UFOs. My argument is somewhat different: because these stories are so similar, they are about all these issues and images that they have in common. I think it is in abductees' descriptions of alien intervention in the reproductive domain that we can learn about ideas about race, maybe not those emanating straight from Alpha Centauri, but what is contained in popular ideas about race and the imperatives it carries on this planet, in this country, in this decade. These ideas are not about race as some self-contained category, but are embedded in those powerful domains of race, gender, reproduction, and nation. These domains are not only intimate terrain, they are deployed in the language of Western understandings of race, understandings that make cultural practices biological. Thus, for all of aliens' meddling in human reproduction, they never once interfere with a sex-role stereotype. Conventional, if not old-fashioned, ideas about who has sex with whom, under what circumstances and encouragements, and who mothers and who nurtures are not something extraterrestrials care to tamper with.

Even the very question of whether humans have sex with aliens—are these races biologically compatible?—depends on which researcher you read. According to Jacobs, men and women do not have sex with aliens; instead, they either had sex with each other, often under rigid mind control or because aliens made them "envision" their real life partners, or a fertilized egg was inserted into the abducted woman from whom it was originally taken. Other abductees reported intense attraction to gendered aliens or pleasure at alien procedures. Indeed, one abducted

woman told Edith Fiore about being immobilized on the aliens' "table" with "this heat in my body, in my reproductive system. It's like starting from there and going out. It's in my ovaries. I don't want to go home. I want to stay here." Budd Hopkins knew of four men who reported cases of sex with aliens, but he was at pains to point out that he knew of no cases where women had sex with extraterrestrials. But only a few abductees claimed to enjoy any of these experiences; most of those who recalled what might be called alien-induced orgasms found the experience humiliating, although none found it painful. Nonprocreative activities were another matter altogether, as another abducted woman told Fiore. "It was a terrible feeling. They put something in my rectum! It was terrible."

But the mechanics of human reproduction are struggled over in abduction narratives—not by the aliens, but individual men and women. Throughout descriptions of abductions, male genitalia are commonplace. Men's role in reproduction is so important in these accounts that

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with one or two exceptions, researchers and abductees use sperm and semen as synonyms. Jacobs writes of aliens' "sperm collection," whereas one abductee told Budd Hopkins, "They didn't even get any sperm. I had a vasectomy a couple of years before this." If there is such a thing as UFO abduction discourse, that discourse

has a lot of penises in it. Some men, abducted during sexual intercourse, managed to check the time of their return and thus record the length of time they maintained their erections: "it's got to be a record." Another man told Edith Fiore about the aliens' physical examination: "Poking at me. Poking at me! I'm not circumcised! It's embarrassing." Even where there are no actual penises, phallic signs and symbols abound. The abductee Betty Andreasson Luca saw hybrid fetuses in the shipboard incubation room; their eyes were round and wide-opened because "aliens circumcised the eyelids of those babies." Nosebleeds—caused by devices inserted into the nasal cavity—are a common early sign of alien abduction; abductees frequently awake with their night clothes and hair drenched with blood. There is a body of thought in which noses can represent penises in ethnic descriptions, viz., the Jew's hooked nose represents that other body part specifically marked by Jews, the circumcised penis. Some of these copious nosebleeds bring ideas of male menstruation into play, not because genitals and genders are confused, but because these narratives provide a venue in which men's fertility can be both feminized and overdetermined. Nosebleeds provide a powerful image of deflowered abductees, male and female, while ideas about male reproductive fluids are congealed into the "sperm" humans know aliens want. One abductee told Jacobs, "they're taking a sperm sample, obviously, because it's not piss they're pulling out of there."

In contrast, the descriptions of women's bodies by researchers are far more alien than anything the actual extraterrestrials come up with. In fact, according

to both abductees and researchers, aliens are said to have a knowledge of women's bodies and the cycles with which they change that surprises ordinary humans. For example, according to Jacobs, "Even biology has no effect. Physiological changes in a woman's reproductive cycle do not prevent abductions. Women who have had tubal ligations and hysterectomies . . . continue to be the victims of abductions, although they are spared the typical gynecological procedures." Another woman recalls, under hypnosis with Jacobs, being given a hybrid infant to feed; he asks if she put the baby up to one breast or both. Elsewhere, listening to a woman describe how aliens dressed her before sending her home (aliens tend to return abductees to the wrong bed, the wrong street, or with a nightgown folded over their feet), he asks, "Did they put your underpants on the correct way?" One abducted woman recalled in hypnosis with Edith Fiore, "They take my eggs! They know how to probe and get them." Another woman told Jacobs that aliens inserted a needle in her navel to extract ova when she was menstruating. Budd Hopkins explained that it was entirely possible for teenaged girls to be impregnated by aliens, have the fetus removed, and still be virgins. These girls used tampons and "could easily have been penetrated by a probe thin enough to remove a tiny fetus without tearing the hymen."

In a literature in which the probe and the tampon are interdependent technologies, the issues and concerns of abduction narratives are about reproductive rights, childbirth, and child custody in distinctly modernist terms. Superman may have been an alien adoption story, but the ethics of adoption and childcare were not

debated in it. But if alien intervention in motherhood and paternity simply reinforces gender stereotypes, not every abductee agrees. Although a few male abductees were presented with hybrid five- or six-year-olds, abducted women were the ones most often shown the rooms containing as many as one hundred babies. In dozens of hypnosis sessions, abducted women resisted the biological imperatives of alien experimentation. One abducted woman told Jacobs about being taken to the shipboard nursery by a taller alien she thought of as she, who told her:

"They need mothers. They need something. They need their mothers, they need their mothers. They have to have their mothers." I say, "you should have thought of that before you started them, because I'm not going to get involved." She says, "Don't you care about them? Don't you care?" And I say, "Don't you care? Don't you care?" And now it seems there's almost something approaching anger in her. . . . And she says either "They're yours," or "It's yours," or "Some of them are yours," but there's some of those babies in that room that are mine. . . . And I say, "So what. I don't care, I don't care." And now it's like she shrugs and says, "It doesn't matter if you care or not. They need mothers, they have to have their mothers."

Many women want to mother these starchildren, of course. Another woman hypnotized by Jacobs recounted seeing a "live little fetus" in a container in the aliens' incubation room. When asked why the aliens wanted her to see the fetus, she replied, "He says, 'This is your child and we're going to raise it.'" I told him it was part of me and they didn't have any right. He says, "It's our right." An-

other, recalling with Budd Hopkins a fetus removed under hypnosis, sobbed, "It's not fair! It's mine! It's mine! I hate you! It's mine! It's not fair!" Later she was calmed when an alien told her, "You wouldn't be able to feed her. She has to stay with us. . . . A father . . . a father has to take care of his children." Betty Andreasson Luca, under hypnosis with her husband for her second book, forgot her personal outrage at a room filled with hybrid fetuses when aliens told her:

"We have to because as time goes by, mankind will become sterile. They will not be able to produce." . . . And they're telling me that mankind gets so upset when they take the seed. And really, the very first part that man and woman, when they came together, was to bring forth—was not for their pleasure, but to bring forth. And mankind keeps on spilling the seed of life, over and over again. And they cannot understand why man gets so upset when they take the seed. . . . they keep seed from man and woman so the human form will not be lost.

For all its dubious sexual politics, this account is about far more than hybridity and *metissage*. It is about how unessential and artificial a concept of race is. The woman who carries the children that will live with another race for humankind's own good reveals how much meddling and how much scientific engineering go into a concept of race and its embodiment. My point is not just that UFO abduction narratives contain a wide variety of positions on women's roles and mothering; the very process of retrieving the abduction experience foregrounds arenas of conflict between men and women about who has responsibility for child care, about

how child custody is argued and legalized, about who controls women's bodies, and about when that control must be surrendered for the greater good of humankind. UFO abduction narratives don't make the same hard and fast distinction between biological and social reproduction social scientists do; the whole emphasis on sperm and ova and which hybrid baby comes from whom cannot be divorced from what sperm and ova mean to these men and women, and how that meaning articulates and animates claims for control.

And this control seems to be something individual abductees try to wrest from researchers' generalizations about the abduction experience. UFO researchers love to address the question of the social context of alien breeding programs. Many experts have noted the similarities between the homing devices inserted into abductees and the transmitters placed on animals in the wild; one or two have suggested that what aliens do to humans is similar to what human scientists do to endangered species. Like any good sub-

If UFO abduction narratives contain contemporary debates about reproductive rights, women get the last laugh

versive literature, abduction narratives are humbling, positing humans' flimsy hold on existence, our need to cooperate with and respect each other, if not the aliens themselves. But also like a good subversive literature, abduction narratives are patronizing. So Whitley Strieber muses over how it was that Betty Andreasson

Luca—"a middle-aged American housewife" "who obviously had no idea what it all meant"—supplied the key images with which he figured out the historicity of alien intervention in human life, and so Jacobs patiently reassures his readers that aliens are no smarter than we are. "Given the right amount of information, human beings appear to be capable of understanding everything that the aliens are doing." Abducted women, on the other hand, often try to claim a piece of the universe, in a fancy, technologized colonialism. One woman told Hopkins, as she looked at the starry sky, that she knew she had a daughter somewhere out there; Betty Andreasson Luca explains under hypnosis whose protoplasm goes in which nucleus and why human women are stronger and better suited to artificial insemination than alien females. A true comprador, she was allowed to watch the insemination of other abducted human women. Such boastful visions of hybridity and superiority aren't all that amusing—indeed, when uttered by Victorian Englishmen they are the stuff of trendy literary studies—but these are spoken in the same context as the end of humankind. These women will reproduce even when their spouses' and hypnotists' seed has vanished, and there is a little one-upmanship here. If UFO abduction narratives contain contemporary debates about reproductive rights, women get the last laugh. They may have to have the children, but their seed carries on. It's the gendered version of "What do you mean *we*, white man?"

And this is what is so important about this literature at this particular time. UFO narratives contested the convoluted terrain of racial difference, not that of gen-

der—note that Budd Hopkins wrote about the four men who reported sexual relations "with apparently 'alien' females." The UFO abduction narrative is the opposite of essentialism; it argues passionately against racial exclusivity and depicts a universe in which races and even species must mingle and intermingle to survive. The men and women who claim to have seeded other galaxies argue against national and racial identities. Like the Ugandans who told me that the British "needed" African blood to make their medicines, UFO abductees report the most embodied extractions, the grossest expropriations, while arguing that within extraordinary power relations different racial groups depended on each other for their health and sustenance. Abduction narratives depict not only intimate exploitations, but intimate dependencies.

But why would anyone debate reproductive rights, even in the most humbling, anti-essentialist context, in the language of UFO abduction narratives? Why

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talk about child custody with images of aliens who can walk through walls when there are many other venues available to debate the issues of who reproduces and who parents? Is it only temperament that causes some people to become pro-life activists while others rage at a fetus taken against their will, by aliens? Frankly, there

isn't any way to tell: Jacobs, and to a lesser extent other researchers, refuses to allow political opinions to enter his list of the differences alien abductions level. Indeed, alien abductions are "proven" because they cut across every distinction but the one that makes people tolerant of UFO phenomena—belief. But the very fact that I have to ask why different people might choose or recall or think about complicated, emotional, embodied issues in different vocabularies has to do with the way we in the late twentieth century think about speech, and about who has the right to express what. If the strategies of ethnic and academic politics reduce memory and imagination to a rigid dichotomy between speech and silence, between speaking "about" and "in their own words," it's very easy to lose sight of where someone speaks, with what vocabulary and rhetoric, and with what images and ideas. Positioning the speaker does not position the speech. Once we start to think about selves and subjectivities, speech and silence cease to be opposites; both are strategies of varying degrees of reliability. The persistence of abduction narratives reminds us that there are different sites of

speech, that the location of issues and concepts is separate from their import, that speech "about" is a function of how memories are retrieved and how talking is negotiated as much as it is about appropriation.

Besides, what are the concerns and images of the current contests of reproductive rights? These national debates animate their own specific physiologies. Roz Petchasky has written about the "free-floating fetus" of the right-to-life movement, the embryo divorced from its mother, and much pro-choice rhetoric obscures paternity and makes abortion a matter of concern to a woman and her physician. UFO narratives address the same issues and insert contests over biological and social reproduction into them; this is a debate about the sperm and the ova, and which is stronger, and which shapes what imperatives of social life. The language of big-eyed aliens and laparoscopies from outer space makes these concerns racial concerns. The idea of race is an old-fashioned one, but then, the genre in which the authentic testimony reveals "truths" about racial and cultural differences is an old one too.