

07 **RESONANT APOPHENIA**

UFOs, aliens, lizard people, secret networks of unworldly abductors working with the government, technologies of the sinister . . . Stories of uncanny conspiracy tell their audience about many and various things. But their themes keep circling back to a sense that life in America is shaped by some ineffable, enormous power, a power that can be seen only in the patterns of its effects.

Fantastic conspiracy stories, like ordinary personal memories, arise amid experiences of class, loss, race, gender, and the body's unmoored location in a world of accelerated technological change. But those experiences are not always articulated. Their shapes as stories are only partially visible from wherever one stands.

During the Trump presidency, outraged conspiracy theories were tweeted relentlessly from the dead center of power. Many liberal Americans regard the political deployment of far-right conspiracy theory as the inevitable fallout of conspiracy theory itself, critiquing its mood of paranoia, its failures of rationality, or its faulty notions of evidence. But the meaning of any conspiracy theory is inextricable from the situation that generates it: conspiracy theory issued as official propaganda means something different from theory emerging from the social margins, where histories of violent and insidious plots; experiences of invasion, theft, and destruction; experimentation and abduction by powerful agencies against Indigenous people, Black people, poor people, and vulnerable people, underscore the fact that some conspiracies by the powerful are not "theories," but histories and memories. The meanings of conspiracy narratives are inseparable from their situated position.

Many current conspiratorial themes are alive and blooming across the internet now—stories of sinister governments and their secret dealings

with aliens, uncanny surveillance, and terrifying plots by the shadowy powers that be—and always, the impossibility of knowing any final verdict about what the truth might be—have been growing for decades. Such theories and stories were common during a time I was listening carefully to them, for years, over a long stretch of the 1990s. There is a restless, germinating affect to note, a gathering intensity, when one looks back in time there—a stirring, still-inchoate, gathering affect—something that was even then already ripe to multiply and circulate, something that decades later could be sucked up into new media technologies and transformed, moving from the margins into official narrative, from late-night radio into major news channels, supercharged from vernacular talk into propaganda, shifting in its new situation from a restless, endless figuring out into the potential reifications of policy. The necessary affect was already there. In many small stories, people always theorized and felt conspiracies from the sidelines of political and economic power, and—because this is how modern power works—the injury those stories spoke of was recognized as something that might, in fact, be taken up and used, in resonant forms, redeployed from the center itself.

The time I want to think about here, though, is like an eye in a hurricane. The First Gulf War was over and the next wars against Iraq and Afghanistan had not yet begun. The twin towers of the World Trade Center were standing unmarked against the skyline. No one could yet have theorized that it was government bombs and not the planes that caused the towers to collapse, or that Flight 93 was completely staged, or that all the Jews stayed home that day. All the fraught events that quickly followed in the aftermath of the towers' destruction—the medicalized terror of anthrax scares, the secretive “code orange” days, the arguments for public safety through the erasure of civil liberties, and even years later, the growing uneasiness over the government's ability to read one's email or listen in on one's phone calls—all these still lay in the future. And yet, for some people, when these anxious events did occur, they did not seem so very unfamiliar.

A sense of trauma fills many of the stories I am relating here. Its source is often elusive, not just for a skeptical critic but also as an element of the story itself. People telling these uncanny stories can only wonder about what really happened; but they just know *something is wrong*. Lauren Berlant (2011, 80) wrote that “the trauma produces something in the air without that thing having to be more concrete than a sense of the uncanny—free-floating anxiety in the room, negativity on the street, a

scenario seeming to unfold within the ordinary without clear margins, even when a happening is also specific.” Here you can explore the intense elaboration of this affect as it moves from a fleeting sensation into the center of things.

In the period during which most of the ethnographic stories here arose, the Tea Party did not yet exist. Antigovernment conspiracy theory was commonly described in dominant media, if mentioned at all, as marginal or kooky. Before the mid-2000s, it was hard to imagine anti-government conspiracy theorists achieving the empowered political base that Donald Trump activated first in the birther movement, and then in the claims of election fraud. Yet in many ways, libertarian discourses and movements based in the conspiratorial sensibility that achieved political ascendancy in the early twenty-first century were already latent, not just in the common populist strand long-standing in America, nor in some quintessential “paranoid” quality of American character, but specifically in the uncanny talk that intensified in the 1990s.

To remember a sense of the public sentiment during the time frame I invite you to explore here, you might think of it as beginning at the first year of the Clinton administration and ending in 1999, as confusing predictions began to haunt the media with visions of an apocalyptic Y2K, when “the computers” would all break down and society would fall apart. My friends in rural Nevada were gearing up for Y2K with extra stores of canned food and ammunition; my friends in New York City laughed at how ridiculous the doomsday rhetoric in the media was, how technophobic, but still they filled their bathtubs with water on December 31, 1999. *You never know.*

In 1992, when I first met UFO believers in the midsize southern city I call here by the pseudonym Hillview, *The X-Files* had not yet appeared on television. Master narratives about American history—its settlement, genocide, captivities—were shifting in public culture, uneasily for some people, as old themes of triumph and destiny began to lose claim to a monologic real.

There were still yellow ribbons hanging raggedly in some trees, leftovers from the Gulf War. In 1992, the country was in a recession. By 1998—when Hillary Clinton was mocked for accusing her husband’s opponents of a “conspiracy”—there was an economic boom. But for many people, talk of booms and busts did not necessarily make a difference, except to the way they thought of themselves in relation to master narratives of class mobility. There was a sense that the true driving force of economic

and political life in this country, and in the world, was not to be found in the surface ups and downs that might be declared on the news (see Dean 2009). Instead, there was a sense of occult and sinister operations, something that went far beyond the moment's booms and busts and elections, back thousands of years, forward into the future, beyond America, beyond Europe, beyond the earth itself. There were forces of good and evil, forces that became manifest in our politicians but that transcended them by far. *They* gained power through their links to each other, building up strength and intensity through subterranean connections. All these were things people did not name directly, calling them connecting forces and the powers that be.

APOPHENIA

Apophenia refers to the experience of perceiving connections between random or unrelated objects. This definition, though, already contains within it a specific point of view, an assumption of power. Who decides what is really related or unrelated? Who defines whether the relations between objects—or between events, or between spectacles of dominance across various contexts—are random and arbitrary?

In mainstream psychology, apophenia is called an “error of perception,” in “the tendency to interpret random patterns as meaningful” (Hoopes 2011). But the people I write about here cultivate apophenia not as an “error” but as a way to begin seeing those things that have become invisible. They foreground the naturalized patterns that normally go without saying. It is in one sense an endless bricolage (Lévi-Strauss 1966), but rather than building something concrete from the “odds and ends” at hand, here the product is never finished; you select the part for the rush of its echo to another part. Here each found or revealed sign leads on to other resemblances, other openings.

People who feel uncanny conspiracy as a rush of the real pay close attention to parallels and resemblances between stories. And the parallels produce a feeling and an aesthetic sense of resonance. I argue that the resonance itself becomes another story. More than a story, too: the sense of uncanny resonance becomes an expressive modality, a vernacular theory of power, a way of seeing the world, an intimation of the way it all makes sense. It becomes both performance and theory, creating a sense of an occult design that might someday be apprehended below the jumbled

surfaces of the ordinary. Accumulating and recursive images and the felt connections between them reveal how historical trauma gets lodged in the bright, broken bits of fantastic things.

I use the term *resonance* to mean the intensification produced by the overlapping, back-and-forth call of signs from various discourses. The uncanny narratives here acquire affect, intensity, and meaning through their resonance and dissonance with other more familiar cultural narratives, those that can seem like the inevitable shape of the real and that are less overtly marked as constructed narratives. Resonance describes the social, affective, and aesthetic dimension of a perspective based in apophenia, finding connections between signs and often understandings that process as political. Here those connections are based on resemblance and repetition. This effect entails mimesis; but the resemblance is partial and fluid. It is felt. And the intertextual connections feel vertically layered rather than horizontally bridged.

Resonance is not an exact reiteration. Rather it is something that strikes a chord, that inexplicably rings true, a sound whose notes are prolonged. It is the just-glimpsed connections and hidden structures that are felt to shimmer below the surface of things. It attunes to anxieties in the atmosphere (Stewart 2011). It is what makes people say, “Now it all fits together” and “Something just clicked” and “My whole life I just felt like something was going on, and this explains it.”

ABDUCTIONS

People I met in Hillview and at UFO conferences in the Southwest in the 1990s often told the same origin story: it was about how their lives shifted into a register of thinking and talking about aliens when they discovered Whitley Strieber’s 1987 book *Communion: A True Story*. Some people said just seeing the book changed their lives. (Strieber was already a successful writer of gothic fantasy fiction when he described his own weird alien abduction experiences in *Communion*.) The book flooded people with feelings and half-memories. Even before they identified with Strieber’s strange narrative and its tone of anguished questing, the cover image struck people with the immediacy and intensity of revelation. It was the first time they saw a picture of that iconic alien face dominated by enormous black eyes like a giant insect, or like a Nazi in a gas mask, or a surgeon peering down at you as you veered in and out of awareness on the operating table. But

also like none of those things exactly, not specifically one of them alone. People I met said it was that cover—and then the book—that made them remember things they had already known and, over time, forgotten.

Throughout that decade, alien abduction discourse intensified. People passed around battered paperbacks by Budd Hopkins telling abduction stories from his work with abductees. Hopkins's books widely circulated the now-familiar abduction narrative: how aliens come to your bedside, paralyze you, silence you, and float you out of the room and into their nightmarish clinical surgeries. His colleagues in abduction research added repeating elements: How “abductees commonly feel that data of some sort is being extracted from their minds” (Jacobs 1992, 97). How the aliens steal not just your thoughts and feelings but your eggs and sperm, the babies in your womb; how they put trackers up your nose, silently follow you year after year, so you can just feel that presence.

The image, the idea, the word, the story, struck a chord: *abduction* seemed instinctively, uncannily real. People felt an organizing convergence of a vaguely ominous sense. The word itself, *abducted*, with its Latinate sound and hard split as your lips pop between its consonants, was somehow more clinical and official than *kidnapped*, the *duct* inside it a rushing force, a channel that carries you away. *Abduction* expressed an overspilling sensation of captivity and containment by something you can't control; it communicated a feeling about the unseen forces that inscribed your mind and body . . . it just *made sense*, it *fit in* with what people said they had already known and felt. 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 liminal space where the haunting feeling of abduction brings together a nagging, familiar sense of a *something* that was already there.

You could say all that in different words, a new vocabulary, 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 see it as a trope. The more I heard over the years about things *just fitting together*, the more it seemed clear to me that abduction itself was a greatly capacious and affecting trope, one that was changeable and alive. It spoke to the nagging, unresolved underside of the dominant national trope, freedom.

And abduction was only half of it. The other half of abduction was release, the coming through containment to the other side.

Some people tried to reduce the stigma of UFO belief; as they put it, they wanted UFO investigations to “go mainstream.” But other people identified with its marginality. The proliferating UFOs in television shows and movies and books didn’t sit well with those who felt intuitively that UFOs belonged to the unincorporated realm of the *weird stuff*. They didn’t want UFO belief to “go mainstream.” And they didn’t trust “science” to approach the mystery of UFOs without killing something irreducible in what that mystery meant to them. For these people, the fact that most *folks just didn’t get it* was the point.¹

Many people in American UFO discourse communities of the 1990s arranged their political, social, and emotional affinities not around ideas of a “left” or a “right” political wing but around ideas of invisible centers of power (Dean 2009). In this specific structure of feeling and imagination, the margins oppose that occult, sinister center, a black hole that invisibly sucks people into its gravitational pull. My closest friend in the UFO support group where I did fieldwork eventually drifted into a social world that actively sympathized with the militia movement. It was sometimes difficult to understand her support for right-wing militias along with her intense championship of gay rights and gender nonconformity. Many UFO believers plucked stances from both traditional right- and left-wing ideologies, relating not to traditional activist political lines but instead to a sense of distance from the powers that be (see Dean 2009, 1998). The prepper bookstore I visited in Nevada displayed militia manifestos and apocalypse-preparedness handbooks next to Noam Chomsky’s *Manufacturing Consent*.

My friend Carla could smell appropriation and incorporation from miles away. She hated the way “the UFO thing is everywhere now.” For Carla, talking about UFOs expressed her distance from a sinister power that tried to control ordinary people. The power came in various manifestations, emerging from bloody centuries of the past. As the powers that be, it was always present in some form. If you were not careful, it incorporated you into its zombified center where you could no longer think for yourself.

Carla had politicized her distance from the *powers that be* in a way that would soon itself become “mainstream” in populist public culture, forcing her to move on yet again. After a while 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 worldwide

socialism, and the plots that global networks were secretly planning with then-attorney general Janet Reno, the Trilateral Commission, and wealthy powers that be across the brutalized body of the world. After a few more years, she left the UFO group and got caught up elsewhere. She and her new intellectual companions saw that the world as they knew it was ending.

Another community of uncanny storytellers emerged in central Nevada, a land of both drifters and homesteaders.² Rachel, Nevada, is a rural hamlet located on the border of the vast military-industrial complex of Nellis Air Force Bombing and Gunnery Range, the Nevada Test Site, and the secret military base called Groom Lake, or Area 51, the hugely funded dream of the Cold War come to life in the desert.³ There, what you more vividly heard was the restless interplay between uncanny and ordinary stories. This was a place not just for “conspiracy theorists” but also for hardworking western people with strong community bonds, people who valued the decency of everyday accomplishments and had a fierce attachment to a legacy of independence. The inextricability of the uncanny and the ordinary expressed a particular blend of desire and nostalgia—a mix of otherworldly displacement and the deep specificity of a heavily textualized, lived-in place in the American West. The ways these discourses of settlement—uncanny and historical—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. I had heard these same themes in Hillview.

The central meeting point in Rachel was a UFO-themed café called the Little A’Le’Inn. Joe, who owned the café with his wife, Pat, believed in many of the same things as my friend Carla from Hillview. Both Joe and Carla were charismatic storytellers with abandoned origins in charismatic churches. And they were both driven by the partial designs they saw: architectures of conspiracy, webs of the powers whose hidden strands you could tease out, a bit at a time, through talk. Like the other people I write about here, their sense of hidden meaning was an “occult cosmology,” the term used by Todd Sanders and Harry West (2003, 6) to describe the “ontological dimensions” of covert systems; it was a cosmology expressing a vernacular theory of power.

Like Carla, Joe had always just felt it in his bones: *something was wrong*. And one day for him, too, he said, it “all clicked,” it “all came together,” “everything just made sense” as a plot by the powers that be. But Joe, who had a poor childhood, was now making a good living at his café. Though he liked to keep life simple, he owned his mobile home, and he had bought

land. By midlife he was in a stable, long-term third marriage. Carla, by contrast, was moving around. She had nothing fixed in place 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 that there was always *a something more*.

VULNERABILITIES

For some people, the ominous powers in the world came into sharpest relief as a coherent belief when the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives raided David Koresh's Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, in 1993. The Waco incident crystallized an already-developed feeling of *how things are* and played out this sense of subterranean sinister developments in an overt, concrete display of government violence against civilians. There it was on the news: the government was killing people who did not toe the line. They could raid anyone who wanted to live the way they saw fit. The media was part of it, showing things in the news from only their own side. *They* demonized Koresh and let the government off the hook, keeping the public in a perpetual state of deception. It was maybe even worse than Ruby Ridge the year before, because now it seemed the government was going after not just overt independence and freedom but also spiritual belief.

The day of the fire in Waco, Carla called me in sorrow and outrage. I had been watching the television news about Koresh stockpiling weapons, but I was too stunned by the whole disaster to make any immediate judgment (although soon afterward I came to agree with Carla about the criminality of the raid there). "What do you *think*?" she asked, in a slow voice of controlled anger, testing me, testing my position on an invisible line. I did not yet know what I thought. She heard the newscaster brand the Branch Davidians a cult. She said:

What is a cult?

A cult is a culture.

A cult is a culture

That they don't like.

And she added:

We are supposed to have religious freedom in this country. . . .

It's all a lie.

For Carla, watching the Waco complex burn was at once a terrible revelation and a confirmation of what she already *just knew*: that unseen powers, consortia of the media, the government, and covert groups of the rich, elite, and powerful were intentionally testing the American people. In her view, they used a rumor of Koresh's crimes of sexual abuse to play on easy American sentiment. The Waco compound was a lethal *experiment* they conducted on ordinary people to see *what they could get away with*. And, she noted, they did get away with it. No one watching the news revolted. To Carla, and to many other people who thought like her, the Branch Davidian fire was a declaration of war by the powers that be.

There is much to say about the ways that such incidents, especially the raids on Ruby Ridge in 1992 and Waco (and to some extent before that, the 1986 bombing of MOVE in Philadelphia), helped catalyze militia movements and talk of the New World Order in the United States (see Fenster 2008; Barkun 2013; Sanders and West 2003). But here I want to focus on Carla's way of speaking, as a way into what she saw and felt in the discourse about Waco.

She said: *A cult is a culture!*—And this poetic register best expressed the truth. For Carla (and for many of her intellectual and political companions), it was vital to avoid being duped by the television anchor's authoritatively referential register, which he used to intone about Koresh. Listening with her point of view in mind, you can hear it with ears attuned to the pervasive performance of power. The voice of the news broadcaster was a monologic appropriation, a performance that justified *their* actions by claiming the singular point of view.

This referential-based register—the performance style of the powers that be—denied the hidden, piled-up connections between things in favor of painting a lulling picture of rational cause and effect. But perhaps you could discover the deep structure of things in verbal parallelism and hints of hidden relationships. *They* rationalized their violence by calling Koresh's group a “cult,” defining it in a totalizing move. But attending to the verbal resemblance between *cult* and *culture* gave Carla the insight that what *they* called a “cult” was in fact a coherent entity of meanings and traditions, which is what she thought of as a “culture.” The Koresh compound was an autonomous culture that deserved its own sovereignty—but one that the authorities did not like. Noticing the parallel between the words *cult* and *culture* allowed her this swift insight into the validity of difference.

Just as there are overlaps between various sources of power, then—among the media and the government and other hidden groups—there are resonating overlaps in words. You glimpsed a grammar of “the real” here, through iconicities of language. *Culture* containing *cult* pointed to a larger etymology of things beyond language itself, a structure glinting through the words that represented it. Cult and culture clicked. For Carla there was always a sense of the inextricably poetic and political hidden structure in the world. There really was no separating the poetic from the political.

RESONANT APOPHENIA

But what was abducted from a person, and who was doing it? What in the experience of power fit so well with stories of uncanny abducting forces? What is the inarticulate and half-forgotten material that adds the resonant urgency and feeling of depth to stories of alien abduction and uncanny conspiracy? Though it is never a one-to-one kind of symbol, the accumulated stories that point to a forgotten *something* do suggest what that something might be. There are stories of class and its invisible, unmarked limitations; and stories of race and gender; and stories of the small, multiple ways that a life is disappointed by master narratives of progress and success. There are stories of nuclear fear, resonating in scattered and displaced effects within everyday life, the “psychic effect” that Joseph Masco (2006) has illuminated as the “nuclear uncanny.” There are stories of the federal government’s mid-twentieth-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 were said to be vitamins (Welsome 1999). There are images of the body’s containment in what feel like strange new medical developments, cloning, and surrogate pregnancies of poor women for rich women. There are images here that echo the medical experiments done in Nazi concentration camps. There are images of slaves in America, of the Middle Passage in a strange ship going to a strange new world. There are images of centuries of colonial genocide of Native American people, abductions into boarding schools and reservations, in a quick afterimage that flashes in the cowboys and Indians movie that you went to as a white kid decades ago, when for a second you rooted for the wrong side and did not register anything except

a feeling of *something wrong*. . . . Linked up with the variable infinite experience of class, race, gender, and loss, it is the parallels between these stories about power that *become the subject* of many uncanny stories. The original stories of historical trauma do not always make it up for air. (If they did, they would no longer haunt.)

Instead, the uncanny story itself is about the resemblances between the unspoken originals. The urge toward apophenia begins to resonate and hum. And that resonance is something to notice too, because it is a story of power on its own.

RESONANT CONSPIRACIES

Some guys were working on our house in Hillview, and Junior, the handyman with a missing leg, was going progressively insane. It took me days to notice that anything might be amiss, because it seemed everyone was talking about things from other worlds. Junior's smart, pragmatic partner Eddy came into the kitchen because he was thirsty; he talked about his dreams of going underground, about storing what you need down there to survive when this government shit hits the fan. Eddy said he was planning to buy *invisible land*. It was chitchat while he drank instant iced tea at the table.

But Junior was really unraveling. He'd seen the saucers in the desert himself; he'd seen them spin into underground bases. He implied unspeakable dangers. At the kitchen table, he drew diagrams, charts and graphs, and quick loops and loops of the spinning. But to some extent these were the same stories and the same kinds of drawings I knew from ordinary, very sane people who were into UFOs—city employees who entered data in clean white offices, busy mothers, short-order cooks, secretaries, and tech workers—people who had no mental illness. The UPS man, hearing about my interest in UFO stories, stood on the porch and described seeing a UFO as a kid. “Man, it just took off, just like that.” Talking about this was part of a discursive world, and it did not mean one lived outside the ordinary boundaries of quotidian, practical life.

But then Junior said *they* stole his leg because he knew too much. *It's a warning*. Next, he said, they would take his life. He became aware of sinister electronic codes. These were tones that would kill whoever heard the right combination. He beeped the lethal sequences into his phone and pager, thinking he could kill the sinister listener on the other end by

remote control. We could overhear the poor guy Junior had called, yelling, “Hello? Hello?” to the sound of the pushbutton beeps, and when the beeps didn’t kill the guy, Junior grumbled, *Jeez, nothing works anymore*.

My housemate and I hastily drove Junior to his brother’s house across town. It was his only family. We explained to the sister-in-law what had happened and advised her to get Junior some help. We thought we’d done what we could for Junior, telling his family about his spiraling down, figuring they’d find a way to save him. But a couple of days later he stolidly walked the five miles back to our house, in the hot southern sun, on his one leg. The stump was bloody and sore over the prosthetic. There was obviously nowhere left for him to go.

But what makes me remember Junior forever is this: he brought me a gift when he returned. It was a filthy, single nylon leg cut off from a pair of panty hose. He said it would help make a powerful tea; herbs brewed inside this stocking would cure you of anything and give you perfect health. *Cures everything*, he promised.

We stood outside the house with its still unfinished work. I accepted the single magic stocking that unfurled and flapped in the slight breeze like a tiny shadow of a perfect leg as he limped off on his missing one; and I do in fact remember him by it. I remember him limping and fretting about *them* and the powers that be, and wonder at the other, missing life—the potential, the phantom life, what was once supposed to be but had never existed. . . . And there are plot fragments here that ache like phantom limbs, the resonating of something that lives on in the imagination, whether or not it once was really there.

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Intricate hidden structures, traumatic abductions, and immobilizing powers are the ground tropes for uncanny conspiracy theories. But what makes a conspiracy a “theory?” When it comes to the powers that be, any conspiracy you find is always incomplete, always still a theory.

Something is wrong, but no one knows what. No one talks about power as class in these stories, nor national foundation of slavery and genocide at the base of American colonization; but disturbing free-floating after-images of enslavement and colonization remain, flashes of historical abductions gathering in distorted forms, in discourses from people with no direct birthright to those traumatic histories. Uncanny conspiracies find cracks in the order of things, then wedge themselves into those cracks and shape them 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 ire. Or that you are an alien yourself, or a hybrid. Or that you have a child out there somewhere who was tracked and 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. There are signs that won't close in on 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 they see us; they know where we are at every minute of every day.

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

These accounts of the body's inhuman invasion and the earth's unnatural violation open into more stories, conspiracy theories, perhaps, which also unfold around omniscience and defilement.

In 1996, a few months before the group suicide of the religion known as Heaven's Gate, which took the Hale-Bopp comet as a sign of the impending end of the world, people across the country were calling late-night uncanny talk radio, saying 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.

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." *They* were outed on his show in the voices of 4:00 a.m. insomniacs bursting with elaborate theories of the universe and signs of the world's destruction. *They* know the earth is whispering its last breath under radiation and piles of trash.

Look around. Listen, the callers said, hearing their voices go out across a nation. You know they are hoarding secret piles of bubonic plague to spread on the population. It's time to prepare. The frogs are deformed,

born without legs, or with extra legs that are withered and useless. There are uncanny limbs that show what's going to vanish. They are crawling now from the cleanest headwaters. The pelicans are dying because the fish they eat are poison. 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. The invasion is sneaking in the borders of the earth and penetrating the margins of the body with clinical ease. And they are building themselves mansions and resorts underground where they will be safe and hiding the truth from us.

Fern was my friend in Hillview who got the feeling *there was more going on*. She started to *make connections*. She had been getting restless and wary as more and more things she knew were becoming incorporated by them. She emailed me:

Dear Susan,

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. . . . The thugs in this world who push us tax-slaves around and make laws that only apply to us—not to them. . . . 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. 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.” . . . The ones who aren’t fooled by it have places prepared for them in “collection centers” and new prisons all over. . . . This is scary stuff, are you sure you want to go any further?

There are plot fragments here that leave trails, the ghosts of peripherally glimpsed effects of power, desire, and fear. It was hard to know

whether they illuminated dangers no one wanted to see, or whether, in all their intensified distortions, they made those dangers easier to ignore.

NOTES

Acknowledgment: This chapter is adapted from my book, *The Resonance of Unseen Things: Poetics, Power, Captivity and UFOs in the American Uncanny* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

- 1 Hillview is a fictional name for the town where I met UFO experiencers. I have changed the names and at times the identifying details of people I knew from the Hillview UFO Experiencers Support Group and in its parent group, the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON). MUFON is an international organization whose mission is to make UFOs a credible topic of scientific investigation, and Hillview has an active chapter. There were some intellectual and strategic differences between the two local groups in Hillview (though people often participated in both), but the Experiencers Support Group was my primary ethnographic home base in the overlapping Hillview UFO worlds. I did fieldwork in these groups, though primarily in the support group, for a total of two years; and I maintained friendships with a few members for many years afterward.
- 2 I first went to Rachel in 1997. I do not use a false name for the town of Rachel (nor for the owners of the café there) as I do for Hillview and its citizens, because Rachel is already public, a well-known destination for UFO tourism.
- 3 Although the US government finally admitted its existence in 2013, Area 51 in the 1990s was, literally, an enormous open secret: four million acres of unacknowledged bomb range (Patton 1998). In the 1990s and early 2000s, as uncanny stories of the government hiding UFOs were accumulating and thickening in the air, Area 51 was just beginning to grow notorious beyond the world of conspiracy talk. There were regular organized protests at the base demanding the release of information. But before the era of social media, the scale of the mass-organized attempt to “Storm Area 51” that began on Facebook in the summer of 2019—and then the rapid transformation of that joyful fury into a Burning Man-type music festival called Alienstock—would have been impossible and inconceivable.