Jodi Dean. *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998. xii + 242 pp. $42.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-3463-1.

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As Jodi Dean indicates in *Aliens in America,* aliens are ubiquitous in contemporary American culture, appearing in mainstream newspapers as well as tabloids, in films and on television, in books and advertising, and on the Internet. Her book traces accounts of alien abduction and UFOs as well as "changes in the metaphor of outerspace that accompany the shift from outerspace to cyberspace" (p. 5) and draws parallels between America's space program and accounts of UFOs and alien abduction to examine the politics of such claims, arguing that they serve as a means of contesting the status quo (p. 6). She argues that "the aliens infiltrating American popular cultures provide icons through which to access the new conditions of democratic politics at the millennium" (p. 7) and that, "because of the pervasiveness of UFO belief and the ubiquity of alien imagery, ufology is an especially revealing window into current American paranoia and distrust" (p. 10).

Dean's argument hinges on the notion that "we have moved from consensus reality to virtual reality" (p. 8), and that, due to the proliferation of communications media such as the Internet, it has become increasingly difficult to determine what is the "truth." Thus, stories of alien abduction comprise part of an increasing "skepticism toward experts, authorities, and a technology that has made virtuality part of everyday life" (p. 8). Abductees and their supporters have access to means of communication that allow them to network and to challenge scientific dismissals of their experiences. As Dean notes, evidence, such as photographs, can be doctored. Dean sees "cultural patterns of suspicion, conspiracy, and mistrust" (p. 17) as pervasive in American culture, and suggests that examining ufology and abduction narratives, as well as the media that disperse them, can be used as a means to "theorize the conditions of contemporary democracy in a technological, globalized, corporatized, entertainment- and media-driven society" (p. 18). Thus, she aims to "complicate theories of American culture and politics" by revealing the ways in which UFO belief challenges mainstream, consensus reality.

The first chapter, "Fugitive Alien Truth," discusses the pursuit of "the truth" in UFO discourse, noting that the belief in alien abduction is shared

by many Americans. Dean argues that the alien embodies "fears of invasion, violation, mutation" and "serves as the ubiquitous reminder of uncertainty, doubt, suspicion, of the fugitivity of truth" (p. 31). She connects fears of the alien with millennium anxieties. The concern about the reality of UFOs was only heightened by attempts by the U.S. government and military to deny the existence of UFOs--such attempts suggested that they were only hiding a truth, that is "out there." The TV series *The X-Files* is a leitmotif of Dean's book, in that it is emblematic of the quest for an elusive but believed-in "truth." Countering official skepticism about UFO's, UFO researchers offered their own evidence, insisting on the credibility of witnesses and, thus, challenging "official notions of what counts as true, of whose words are credible" (p. 39). Dean describes the typical abduction experience as well as research tools, such as hypnosis, which are used to access the "truth" and to help the abductees cope with their experiences. UFO discourse aims at establishing legitimacy and credibility, Dean suggests, using the same scientific tools used to discredit it. At the same time, the stigmatization and marginalization of UFO research by the scientific community and the government grants it a "transgressive" quality that has affinities with both the recovery movement and with "racial, sexual, ethnic, and economic minorities" (p. 61), according to Dean, but I don't find this connection entirely convincing.

The second chapter, "Space Programs," examines the televisuality of the NASA space program, arguing that space travel, by the 1990's, has become mundane, as the focus shifts from the active "agency of the astronaut" to "the passivity of the audience" (p. 68). Dean examines the constructed image of astronauts projected by NASA and ways in which the space program's imperatives were shaped by a "theatrics of space" aimed at television viewers. She claims that the Internet encourages this passivity, as we can explore space without ever leaving our homes. Dean asks, "Why risk an unsafe and alien environment, when you can

blast off into cyberspace?" (pp. 68-69). This opposition strikes me as a bit too facile, but Dean provides a compelling analysis of televised images of the astronaut and makes a convincing case that the space "program was made to be watched" (p. 69). She analyzes the politics of the image of the straight, white, male astronaut, as well as the focus on the astronauts' families, who represent the constructed middle-class television audience, passively watching and reacting to the astronauts' experiences. The very publicity of the space program served as a contrast to Soviet secrecy and as "proof" of "the superiority of the American way" (p. 84). Eventually, however, the astronaut could not adequately represent the diversity of the American public, and as space travel became routinized, it ceased to compel the interest of viewers, as "cruising cyberspace, expanding cyberspace, is much more exciting than watching a rocket launch on television" (p. 97). Again, Dean posits cyberspace as a replacement of the official versions of events offered on television, but she fails to account for the fact that web access is still considerably less available to large numbers of the American public than television.

In the third chapter, "Virtually Credible," Dean elaborates on the increasing ordinariness of space travel in the minds of public, discussing Christa McAuliffe, the teacher-in-space who died in the Challenger disaster, as a feminization, and thus a domestication, of space. The disaster, however, challenged the credibility of the government and, Dean suggests, provided another reason to stay home, shifting from outerspace to cyberspace. She argues that McAuliffe's death "created a strong link in popular culture between ordinary women and the horrors of outerspace" (p. 101), thus furthering the popularity of the theme of alien abduction. In going public, particularly on television talk shows, abductees apparently take the place of astronauts in providing a televised spectacle of space. Dean again connects the abductees' insistence on the "truth" of their experiences with the decline in consensus reality, sug-

gesting that we cannot make judgments about the truth of others' experiences if we lack a common basis of shared knowledge. She argues that "we don't know what's real" and, as a result, "we lack ... the capacity to discern and distinguish, to use and deploy, to judge and evaluate the knowledges we need for ethical decisions and responsible political action" (p. 109). While the space program in the sixties and seventies celebrated technology and its promises of progress, Dean notes that abductees' descriptions of alien technology parallel our own distrust of a seemingly alien and unreliable technology. In fact, abductees report inexplicable technological glitches--malfunctioning security systems, power failures, equipment that turns itself on and off whether plugged in or not. Again, Dean notes the distrust of government in abductee narratives, several of which figure the government as either a conspirator with the aliens themselves or, at least, as concealers of a known truth. Abductee stories distill our sense of passivity, helplessness, uncertainty, and lack of control, what Dean describes as "the confused passivity accompanying the collapse of the real" (p. 123).

The fourth chapter, "I Want to Believe," discusses the way abductees present their stories as "part of a more populist technoculture of globally networked PCs" (p. 132). Abductees interact in a networked culture of abduction researchers and other abductees, sharing their experiences and analyses in books, on television talk shows, and on the Internet. Dean draws a parallel between the "instability of reality in abduction" with cyberspace. She argues that debunkers of the Internet insist on a nonexistent "commonality of truth" (p. 137), in the same manner as those who debunk abduction stories do. The central question is "How can claims to truth be defended when reality is virtual?" (p. 140). Abductees counter this problem by providing details and amassing data. Dean links abductees' fear of and skepticism toward official explanations with conspiracy theory, which she suggests can be helpful "for coding politics in the virtual realities of the technoglobal informa-

tion age" (p. 144). Abduction narratives, the Internet, and conspiracy theory, Dean argues, share a view of truth that presumes "a notion of fundamental interconnectedness" (p. 146). The problem, she again suggests, is that we lack the "criteria" for uncovering the truth.

The final chapter, "The Familiarity of Strangeness," explores the ways in which alien abduction stories have become prevalent in our culture. Not only do they relate to "insecurities about technology, otherness, and the future," but they connect to "immigration anxieties" and fears of noncitizen aliens as well (p. 155). Dean argues that the alien represents a kind of "boundary-blurring," breaking down "formerly clear distinctions" (p. 156), a symbol of insecurity, which Dean characterizes as "the predominant sense of contemporary reality" (p. 166). Abduction stories suggest that one is not safe even in one's own home, thus representing common fears of strangeness in daily life. Dean particularly focuses on the theme of an alien breeding project, creating hybrid beings through the use of abducted women. Abduction stories testify to a fear that we are not safe anywhere, and the government cannot protect us, nor can we protect ourselves or our families. She argues that ufology is not indicative of ignorance, but rather a "pervasive skepticism. No one and nothing can be trusted. There is no overarching conception of reality" (p. 171). Even memories of abduction can't be trusted because they could be implanted by the aliens. Dean emphasizes that paranoia can be "a sensible response to real virtuality that is produced through excesses in the technologies of truth" (p. 171). Since a single truth is elusive, Dean argues that we "rely on networks of truth, on multiple sites of information" (p. 177). Despite the passivity of the abduction experience, which Dean links to our passivity in the face of multiplying technology and the instability of "reality," and since resistance is indeed futile, what agency and what control we have lies in communicating our

experiences and creating "networks of community" (p. 180).

While Dean draws compelling connections between televised images of astronauts, alien abduction, cyberspace, and virtual reality, her book, in a sense, participates in the very same concern with interconnectedness that she writes about. Her persistent emphasis on the instability of reality has a paranoid tinge to it, particularly as she refuses to state whether she believes in abduction or not. Instead she focuses on the subversive potential of abduction narratives, a potential I believe she overstates, describing them as an appropriate response to an age in which truth is tenuous and multiple. Thus she seems to side with abduction researchers in their dismissal of objective and expert opinion; Dean suggests that the scientific community fails to understand that there is no basis for an overarching, consensus reality.

There are a few other weaknesses. Dean confines her argument to the United States; one cannot help wondering if it is only in the U.S. that abduction narratives appear, and if not, how their general pattern may differ in other countries. Dean's book also has a very topical nature; in failing to gloss references to such personalities as Barney Frank and such events as Heaven's Gate, she limits the useful lifespan of her study. While such references are familiar to a contemporary reader, they may not be familiar to a reader five or ten years from now.

Another curious feature of the book is Dean's adoption of the very discourse she analyzes; the words "icon," "link" and "click on" appear repeatedly, and not necessarily in discussions of the World Wide Web itself. The use of such Internet-based language again limits the useful lifespan of the book (will we be clicking on links and icons ten years from now?) and again hints that Dean herself participates in the "virtual reality" she is analyzing. As she herself points out, her approach, "the notion that abduction provides a cultural expression of the confused passivity accompanying the collapse of the real" (p. 123), does not contradict the claims of abduction researchers. Dean's avoidance of taking a position on the truthfulness of abduction accounts seems disingenuous given her apparent promotion of the paranoid and "cyberian" mode of thinking she describes.

The book also suffers from a frequent reiteration of her main points; within each chapter and throughout the book as a whole, her ideas are frequently repeated more than developed. Nonetheless, Dean's support for her arguments is extensive, and she provides a very readable and compelling account of the typical pattern of abduction narratives and the cultural context in which they occur. She draws her examples of the ubiquitousness of alien images in our culture from a variety of media--books, web sites, television and film, and advertising--and her analysis of the fears such images and accounts arise from is very convincing, particularly the association of extraterrestial aliens with the noncitizen kind and her association of abduction fears with fears of technology. I also found the chapters on the "theatricality" and "televisuality" of the space program to be particularly persuasive; Dean effectively examines the image of the astronauts and the political context in which such images were produced. The book is richly detailed and a worthwhile read.

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