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Kurt Vonnegut and the Space Aliens

It was an early fall night along Route 3 just south of Lincoln, New Hampshire, in 1961, when Barney and Betty Hill, returning to their home in Portsmouth following a delayed honeymoon trip to Niagra Falls, saw blinking lights and a strangely moving object dart across the night sky. A few miles down the road, after rounding a curve, the couple was startled by a flattened, circular, disc-shaped vessel, hovering about 80 feet above them in their direct path. Frightened, but wanting a closer look, they exited the car. Barney used his binoculars to focus in on the craft, observing a group of humanoid figures through the double row of rectangular windows along the vessel's rim. As the saucer seemed to move toward them, Barney and Betty returned quickly to their car and raced down the highway, accompanied by a series of buzzing noises and vibrations that seemed to penetrate their vehicle. They arrived home in Portsmouth just as dawn was breaking, unable to explain the two hours longer it took them to reach home than even a slow drive from Lincoln could have accounted for.

In the weeks, months, and years that followed, Barney and Betty Hill would undertake a journey to try to understand what happened to them that September night. They would be interviewed by investigators working with the Air Force's Project Blue Book, a secretive 18-year U.S. government/military investigation into reported UFO sightings; they would consult with self-proclaimed UFO experts; they would undergo hypnosis. It was under hypnosis that both Hills recovered memories of having been abducted and experimented on by the aliens. Understanding the oddity of their experiences and not wanting their friends and neighbors to

question their mental stability, the Hills did not seek media attention. Yet, eventually, media attention found them.

The Hills' abduction tale was first made public to a wide audience in a five-part story published on the front pages of the *Boston Traveler*, beginning on October 25, 1965. Written without the Hills' permission, the story was based on a secret tape recording made at a UFO conference. The day after Part 1 was published, United Press International picked up the story, which drew wide-spread attention and led to the publication of a popular 1966 book about the case by John G. Fuller, called *The Interrupted Journey*, excerpts of which were published in *Look* magazine in October of 1966. The Hill case is generally considered the first credible, widely publicized alien abduction story in the U.S.

By 1965, Kurt Vonnegut had been living in Cape Cod with his family for nearly fifteen years. Although he had just moved to Iowa to teach in the Writer's Workshop a few weeks before the *Boston Traveler* story broke, it is almost certain he would have heard about the case. It was a story that offered the interest of regional proximity, Portsmouth being only a little over a hundred miles away from the Cape; it was broken by a big Boston newspaper that Vonnegut might well have been accustomed to reading; but it was also picked up by national sources such as *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *Playboy* magazines, and even by the *New York Times*. This is also the period of Vonnegut's most intense work on *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He had just published *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* in early 1965, and would travel to Germany and Eastern Europe on a Guggenheim fellowship to conduct research for his Dresden book in 1967. In this paper I argue that Vonnegut drew on this well-known tale of alien abduction and others like it in his creation of Billy Pilgrim's Tralfamadorian kidnapping. I'm interested in understanding the individual

psychology of alien abduction tales as well as the larger symbolic and cultural impulses that propelled such stories. I believe examining the phenomenon of alien abduction might help us understand the novel more fully.

In many ways, the alien abduction story that Billy Pilgrim tells in *Slaughterhouse-Five* fits the classic characteristics of such tales as the Hill's. Common features of described abduction experiences include capture by aliens, subsequent examination, communication with the aliens, often accomplished telepathically, a guided tour of the UFO, trips to other worlds, and the receipt of important messages for humanity. Also, alien abduction tales commonly contain various reproductive features—collection of sperm or ova, sexual activity, hybrid embryos and babies, among other things (Holden and French 2002). Billy's story, of course, superficially resembles these tales—he is abducted at night, in his pajamas, his “blue and ivory feet” bare. The majority of alien abduction tales do take place at night, with abductees often being woken from sleep. In fact, many medical researchers believe that these experiences are related to sleep paralysis, “a dissociative state in which an individual, upon going to sleep or waking up, is unable to move.” Such a state involves brain activity similar to being awake, but the muscles remain in REM atony. Sleep paralysis is often accompanied by “frightening, and often fantastic, hallucinations and delusions” (Siddiqui 144).

Other features line up as well. As we know, the aliens communicate telepathically with Billy. While we don't see a guided tour of the UFO, we do discover that Billy does not raise his eyes to the sky to see the flying saucer from Tralfamadore when he first leaves the house the night of his daughter's wedding, because he knows that “he would see it soon enough, inside and out” (75). And even though a physical examination is not described, we can assume one

occurs, since the first thing the Tralfamadorians tell Billy to do is to take off his clothes (83). In place of the operating table that most abductees claim to be fastened to, Billy is “strapped to a yellow Barca-Lounger” stolen from a Sears Roebuck warehouse (77). The cold operating room table with a bright overhead light, though, is evoked in the novel’s opening chapter, which offers an examination of Vonnegut’s writing practices analogous to the alien examination of human beings. Initially, Vonnegut imagines reminiscing with his old war buddy Bernard O’Hare in comfortable, nostalgic fashion, the two men seated in arm chairs in front of a cozy fire, sipping whiskey. Instead, Mary O’Hare sets the men up to talk at a kitchen table with a white porcelain top that reflects light from a two-hundred watt overhead bulb. Vonnegut describes this scene as an “operating room” (13), and readers discover as well that Mary is a trained nurse. The imagery in this scene is key to the novel—the glaring overhead light suggests that Mary will help the two men see their past more clearly; the operating table hints at the human toll—the death and injury—caused by war. And Mary, as a nurse, serves as Vonnegut’s assistant in the dissection of the Dresden bombing that will become the book itself.

Alien interest in human reproduction, another common feature of the abduction tales, plays a role in the novel as well since Billy is mated with Montana Wildhack, with whom he produces a child. Most abductees claim to have interacted not just once, but repeatedly with the aliens, and Billy’s experience is no different since he continually journeys between Ilium, Germany, and Tralfamadore after coming “unstuck in time.” Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Billy brings back an important message from his alien encounter which he communicates to his fellow Earthlings—in Christ-like fashion, he teaches a message of eternal life, that death is not final or a “terrible thing” (142), if only his listeners will understand and

believe what he tells them. This element of Billy's tale reflects current research that suggests alien abduction stories function as cultural myths. Abduction stories feature the elements of classic myth identified by thinkers such as Sir James Frazer and Joseph Campbell: a narrative form, heroic characters, special time and place, archetypal language, and, above all, transmission of "imminent transcendent messages" that attempt to symbolically explain "psychological, sociological, and cosmological crises" (Kelley-Romano 386).

But some of the specifics of the Hill case are especially interesting in relation to *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Barney Hill, for instance, was a World War II veteran who claimed that the aliens he first spotted through the windows of their craft wore crisp black uniforms and that one in particular stared at him threateningly, in a way that reminded him of a Nazi officer during the war (Friedman 108). One line of thought suggests that unprocessed war trauma might offer at least a partial explanation for Barney Hill's belief that he was abducted. Could Vonnegut have gotten the idea for Billy to transform his German POW experience into an alien kidnapping through some of the details about Barney Hill's own wartime background? As many critics have noted, the Tralfamadorians in the novel are compared to Nazi guards more than once—both repeat the "why you? Why anyone" line. The Germans at the delousing station at the first POW camp Billy is taken to are specifically compared to the Tralfamadorians who tell Billy to undress, and both are interested in Billy as a physical specimen. While in his alien fantasy, Billy's body is admired because the Tralfamadorians don't know any better, the German POW guard circles Billy's wrist with his thumb and forefinger and wonders what "sort of an army would send a weakling like that to the front" (83). Perhaps most importantly, though, both the Tralfamadorians and the Germans are unconcerned by death. Billy's mythic

tale of alien abduction serves the ultimate function of all myth—it offers comfort in the face of human mortality.

Alien encounter stories can also work to process racial difference. After all, these are tales of human beings encountering alien races. It makes sense that Billy Pilgrim, a World War Two veteran imprisoned by the Germans, would be at least subconsciously concerned with racial encounters since ethnic cleansing of a so-called inferior race was part of the Nazis' goal. And in the earlier Vonnegut novel, *Mother Night*, we explicitly witness the vitriolic racial discourse of Hitler's anti-Semitic propaganda campaign. Interestingly, the Hill case is relevant to *Slaughterhouse-Five* as well in that it includes a complicated racial element. Barney and Betty Hill were a mixed-race couple living in nearly all-white New Hampshire in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Barney was African American; Betty was white. Psychologists have speculated that the pressures and anxieties of this relationship might have been translated, following an initial strange sighting, Betty's lurid dreams in the weeks afterward, and hypnosis sessions that occurred several years later, into a fantasy of encounter with an alien race. Scholars who discuss the psychology of abduction stories have noted that these tales can be ways to symbolically examine ideas of racial otherness. Stephanie Kelley-Romano, in a 2006 study that examines 130 abduction stories, reports that most experiencers describe a class of alien beings known as "grays"—shadowy, small, grayish, humanoid figures with large heads and dark eyes—the classic alien.

Yet, in stories like Billy's, in which the abductees see the aliens as positive forces in the lives of humans, who can contribute to human beings' mental and spiritual development, there tend to be more species of aliens. Specifically, many abductees describe encounters with

Nordic aliens who are very white, have light blonde hair and blue eyes, who are motivated by goodness, are kind to humans, and are of superior intelligence to other alien forms.

Contrastingly, these abductees also describe frightening, reptilian-looking aliens who behave maliciously to humans. Kelley-Romano speculates that the grays “function to represent what humans will become if they rely too much on technology and continue to undervalue their emotional/creative natures” (398)—faceless, shapeless, non-individuals. Surely alien abduction tales do express Cold War anxieties and fears of technology: satellites and rockets being launched into space, the ominous development of nuclear weaponry, the technologizing of medicine and reproduction: UFO stories represent what Roger Luckhurst calls the “technological sublime.” There is a whole discourse on this topic that, unfortunately, I don’t have time to explore in this paper. But the Grays of typical abduction stories may also represent a fear of a loss of racial purity. These aliens are frequently described as an artificially created or modified race utilized by other alien races as servants. The sinister, reptilian aliens, meanwhile, according to Kelley-Romano, represent, “in a very transparent way, a discourse on race and the unknown other” (398). It is the Caucasian Nordics, bathed in beauty and white light in the stories of the overwhelmingly Caucasian abductees, who provide instruction on how humans can live in harmony and peace. In this way, Kelly-Romano argues, “although abductees explicitly articulate a motive of caring and extraterrestrial self-help, the implicit racial discourse is one of exclusion and hierarchy. Simultaneously, then, narrators can feel virtuous about their inclusiveness while continuing to discriminate on the basis of race” (399).

While the aliens in Billy Pilgrim's abduction story are neither Grays, Nordics, nor reptilian in form, instead being famously shaped like toilet plungers with hands at the top, nevertheless, Billy's tale also justifies and rationalizes his own racial passivity. Although he preaches comforting words about eternal life, Billy's Tralfamaforian fantasy tells him that he needn't work to bring about change in the racially unjust Ilium in 1967. The racial politics of 1944 Germany are specifically compared to the 1960's U.S. as Vonnegut describes Billy, in August of 1967, driving through a black ghetto in Ilium that has been partially destroyed by a race riot a month before. The inner-city desolation, in the face of urban renewal, "looked like Dresden after it was fire-bombed—like the surface of the moon" (59). When a black man taps on Billy's car window, wanting to talk about something, "Billy did the simplest thing. He drove on" (59). Urban renewal, the Vonnegut narrator writes, "was all right with Billy Pilgrim" (59). Passivity is often a feature of alien abduction stories, even the ones that follow the typical mythic hero's quest in which a sometimes unwilling but specially chosen individual travels to a location outside of ordinary time and place, overcomes obstacles, and finally returns to deliver a message that will save humanity. As Kelley-Romano points out, "in a very important way, these narratives disempower participants by attributing salvation to an outside force. The aliens will come tell the chosen hero/abductee what needs to be done and the role they should play. Therefore, the individual does not have to take responsibility for the consequences of that plan of action. The aliens made them do it, so to speak" (394). It makes sense that, then, that the passive Billy Pilgrim would process his Dresden experiences through an alien abduction tale—such cultural myths justify his own disinclination or inability to accept responsibility or to try to bring about change in the world.

Culturally, it is no accident that alien abduction tales gained popularity in the 1960s, during the height of the Cold War and at a time when race relations in America were being radically revised. Vonnegut's inclusion of alien abduction in his Dresden novel shows just how much this book is a product not only of his own World War Two experiences, but also of the time the book was written, a claim made by other scholars as well, notably Christina Jarvis, in her essay about the Vietnamization of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Perhaps the book's long-standing popularity can be attributed at least partly to its **own** coming "unstuck in time," as it manages to look back at history while also participating fully in late 1960's American culture, 25 years after the Dresden bombing had taken place. In this sense, I disagree with Josh Simpson who argues that Vonnegut uses science fiction in his novels to warn against dangerous ideas and distorted realities. Science fiction elements, such as alien abduction tales, cannot so easily be separated from "reality," I would argue—they are part of cultural "reality," intertwined within, shaped by, and shaping our sense of ourselves. As several recent scholars have argued, captivity narratives arise when different races come into contact and when racial anxiety is felt most keenly. Whether stories of white settlers being taken captive by Native Americans in the eighteenth century or stories of 1960s Americans being kidnapped by space aliens, such narratives reflect both fear of and desire for the racial, alien other.

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