

Responses to Previous Issues

**Response to Kimberly Ball's
UFO-Abduction Narratives and the
Technology of Tradition**
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Although "alien abduction" is identified on the web-site of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research (<http://www.contemporarylegend.org>) as one of its areas of interest, the topic does not actually figure prominently in the society's publications. Ball's paper provides an opportunity to examine two questions. First, what is the relationship between the alien abduction narratives (AAN) in Ball's sample and the texts typically studied by urban legend (UL) scholars? Secondly, what light can UL scholarship throw on AAN?

To begin with the first question, we note that most UL texts do not deal with the paranormal. However, this need not mean there is a sharp distinction to be drawn between AAN and UL, since there is one widespread UL, the Vanishing Hitchhiker (VH), which does have supernatural or paranormal content, making it the most appropriate UL to compare with Ball's texts. However, other differences may be noted. The AAN are all first person narratives, whereas VH texts, like other ULs, are usually third person narratives. Furthermore, most VH texts are relatively short, around 200-300 words, and many have structural features in common. For example, the revelation

that the passenger in the vehicle is a ghost comes relatively late. In contrast, the AAN vary considerably in length and have no obvious common structure. This difference is important since the character of VH and UL texts arises from a process of honing that takes place in the frequent retelling that goes on as the stories are repeated by different people. The fact that any given UL text is the result of re-telling by different people is what particularly interests social psychologists. Conversely each AAN is a unique personal testimony without any signs of honing.

Despite these differences, we believe that UL scholarship does have some relevance to an understanding of AAN. It is widely acknowledged that ULs may have a number of different meanings and functions for those who tell them and hear them. Ball's paper generally makes a persuasive case for the AAN being seen as expressing anxieties about modern technologies for the transmission of information. However, some of the texts in her sample contain little evidence to support such an interpretation. For example, one of the texts Ball cites, Raziell (2009), is simply an account of observing a possible UFO with no reference to abduction. The texts vary considerably in the narrator's degree of conviction that abduction actually took place. Some are straightforward assertions that the narrator was abducted but others are much more tentative. Spacemushrooms (2009), for instance, merely describes a dream and comments that "the imagination is a very seemingly infinite thing". Similarly, Magicwords55 (2009) expresses uncertainty in the words "if it really was a abduction and Im not

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confusing a dream with reality” (original spelling and grammar retained). Zeeboe (2011) goes further. He rationalizes childhood memories of being abducted, saying “I honestly don’t think I was abducted. I think it was all based off the power of suggestion”.¹

Given the variation in her sample texts, we would argue that it is inappropriate to look only at one possible function of the narratives. While scholars may treat a collection of unique texts that display numerous similarities in content and structure as a “legend,” there appears to be much greater variation between the AAN texts than UL texts, and it is therefore harder to justify treating them as a coherent group of texts in which each narrative has a presumed equivalent function. So while some AAN might well be related to anxieties about “digital information technology and mass media”, others make no mention of it at all. Even within those narratives that do draw attention to such technologies it is possible to interpret the usage of such terms as the best explanatory model the individual has to explain their experience – this does not in itself indicate the technology mentioned is the source of anxiety in the narrative.

ULs seem to circulate amongst many different types of groups and communities, and those who listen to, or tell, ULs need not necessarily believe the stories. In contrast, AAN texts are predominantly communicated to self-selected groups which contain many participants who are clearly inclined to believe in the reality of alien abduction. Yet despite their differences, there are still a number of possible points of fruitful comparison. Because VH narratives,

like other ULs, may sometimes be met with some audience scepticism, many contain elements that appear to function as authenticity convincers by providing ways of heading off disbelief. For example, when the vehicle driver meets the hitchhiker (ghost) he frequently has a companion, thus dealing in advance with the potential explanation that the experience described was an individual succumbing to a hallucination. Similarly, the ghost frequently leaves behind some physical evidence of their presence, such as an item of clothing. AANs might be examined to find whether similar convincer techniques are employed. We note, for example, that the narrators and those who comment on them sometimes offer credentials of believability, such as being a college professor or having served in the military.

There are other features of the AAN texts which also may be fruitfully analysed. For instance, some appear to be attempts at interpreting dreams. Many experiences appear to originate in childhood memories, while other narrators refer to personal problems in their lives, which appear to pre-date their key AA experience. None of these features appear to be particularly favourable to Ball’s central thesis. A fuller analysis might lead to a broader view of how these AAN function. For instance, if we were to consider AAN as attempts to understand anomalous or disturbing experiences rather than as expressions of anxieties about contemporary life, we might want to consider that many AAN function as external attributions of internally sourced anomalous experiences such as dream states, or reconstructed memories based on post event suggestions by other

people. Viewed in this way, references within AAN to modern communications technologies may be seen in a somewhat different light. Hence a modern person may have recourse to implicate aliens as the source of their experience whereas a mediaeval peasant might use religious terminology such as demonic possession for their explanations of events. In both cases such individuals make use of powerful non-human external agents as the source of their experience. The inhumanness of such beings reinforces the inexplicable aspects of the recalled incident as the agendas or plans of such beings are ultimately unknowable to normal humans. Within such narrative accounts we would expect to find reference to the most current societal explanatory models available to such individuals, so in modern narratives we will find allusion to 21st century science and technology which grounds the narrative in the knowledge available to us, this is supplemented by futuristic or fringe science beliefs to cover areas of the narrative that are beyond explanation by present day technology. This amalgamation of contemporary knowledge with speculation on powerful non-human beings as an explanation of anomalous experience can equally be applied to the demon and fairy-lore which Ball notes at the start of her paper.

In Ball's argument, the key distinction between these early supernatural based narratives and AAN "is the aliens' use of highly advanced technology" but we consider this distinction can be attributed to temporal differences within a continuum of societal knowledge and ideas available to individuals who have had an anomalous experience and

use that knowledge to explain their experience. The referencing of advanced technology in AAN is therefore less an indication of an individual's anxieties about such technologies but in its potential explanatory power for that individual.

Notes

- 1 All the cited narratives are from Ball's list of sources.