**Terrestrial Bottoms:** The epistemology of victimhood in alien abduction narratives

The protagonists of our abduction narratives struggle with conflicting emotions regarding their disgust at the reality of their experience versus their desire to believe, that complicate their status as victims. This tension is compounded by the sadomasochistic imagery that evolves from abduction testimonies. Alien abduction brings to mind images of “brightly lit, clinical spaces,” and hi-tech penetrations—scenarios which depict the drama of dominance and submission heightened by the threat of the unknown alien.[[1]](#footnote-1) In “Good Subjects: Submitting to the Alien,” Bridget Brown postulates, “To believe one has been abducted by aliens is to be able to transform social captivity and limited possibility into a type of pleasure, albeit bounded.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Throughout *Communion,* Strieber maintains a confusing relationship with his abductors—one that turns increasingly sexual. The aliens exert complete control over their victims; their dominance is made absolute by their technological superiority. Their procedures often inflict pain upon the abductee, but the purpose is far from sexual; rather, the aliens often seem sterile but gendered: “I say *her*, but I don’t know why. To me this is a woman, perhaps because her movements are so graceful, perhaps because she has created states of sexual arousal in me[…] She was undeniably appealing to me. In some sense I thought I might love this being […]” Bridget Brown suggests in “Good Subjects: Submitting to the Alien:”

By attributing the desiring sexual gaze, and tendency toward kinkiness, to the alien, these male abductees can play outside the boundaries of procreative heterosexual sex, without implication or censure. So too can they play at transgressive desire and kinkiness, and assume the passive role fairly common in hetsex fantasy, shamelessly, guiltlessly, suggesting that this role, like their arousal, is quite literally thrust upon them.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The rhetoric of masochism in alien abduction narratives can be further deconstructed in early Puritan possession narratives. In his hallmark sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,* Rev. Edwards elevates the urgency and authority of his message by whetting the sadomasochistic appetite of his Puritan audience with images of eternal bondage, punishment, and submission: “God will be so far from pitying you when you cry to Him, that it is said he will only ‘laugh and mock.’” Shepherding his flock along a trajectory of shifting mentalities and diverse emotive sensations, Edwards texturizes the spiritual experience with an enhanced understanding of abjection. Throughout his sermon, Edwards takes his parishioners into different modes of sadistic dominance in order to contextualize their complete and utter submission to God: “We find it easy to tread on and crush a worm that we see crawling on the earth […] thus easy is it for God, when he pleases, to cast His enemies down to hell.”[[4]](#footnote-4) By exhibiting the helplessness with which a worm is at the whim of man, Edwards endeavors to translate the power and wrath of God into relatable terms. Man’s submission is not personalized, but rather summarized: “They belong to him; he has their souls in his possession, and under his dominion.” The shift in pronoun significantly places the listener into the role of an observer of tragedy, instead of a participant. Edwards preaches submission to religious authority by demonstrating the unnatural subversion of power: “Were it not for the sovereign pleasure of God, the earth would not bear you one moment; […] the creature is made subject to the bondage of your corruption, not willingly; the sun does not willingly shine upon you to give you light to serve sin and Satan; the earth does not willingly yield her increase to satisfy your lusts.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In this passage, man’s artificial authority is rejected; it is a cumbersome detriment to the natural universe. The range of emotional responses to such dynamic homilies are delineated in *A Faithful Narrative*: “[…] the assembly in general were, from time to time, in tears while the Word was preached; some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with joy and love, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbors.”[[6]](#footnote-6) By introducing this epistemology of suffering, the rhetoric of such religious narratives motivates an imagination that is distinctly concerned with rationalizing hedonic desires and voyeuristic guilt.

The tribulations of the tormented protagonists are articulated in a language that both objectifies and dramatizes misery. This is particularly evident in Cotton Mather’s testimony *A Brand Pluck’d out of the Burning*, where both the literal and literary observers are further removed from the victimized protagonist through sensory disjunctions that exist on several levels: “Her ears were altogether stopt unto all of our Noises, being wholly engrossed by the Invisible Assailants; insomuch that tho’ wee sometimes halloo’d extremely loud in her ears, yet shee heard nothing of it.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The sensory distancing between Mercy and the spectators of her torment heighten the intrusive presence of an external, voyeuristic gaze. Derived from witnessing scenes of misery, the alleviating pleasures of “virtuous sympathy” hold spectators in captive awe. The protagonists of these narratives often exhibit compelling emotions of pity that are ironically echoed their witnesses’ sympathies: “She often expressed an exceeding compassion and pitiful love, which she found in her heart towards persons in a Christless condition; which was sometimes so strong that as she was passing by such in the streets, or those that she feared were such, she would be overcome by the sight of them.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This phenomenon makes narratives of suffering morally and ethically significant.

At the same time, the integrity of trauma is corrupted by an effort to sensationalize distress in order to accommodate the presence of an external observer: “Reader, If thou hadst a Desire to have seen a Picture of Hell, it was visible in the doleful Circumstances of Mercy Short!”[[9]](#footnote-9) Abruptly disrupting the intimacy of his personal dialogue, Mather addresses a public audience—one that transcends both space and time. By harkening to an unknown “Reader,” Mather expands the sphere of shared experience from the private community of those who actually witnessed the possession of Mercy Short to encompass a wider literary public. The address continues: “Here was one lying in Outer Darkness, haunted with the Divel and his Angels, deprived of all common Comforts, tortured with most cruciating Fires, Wounded with a thousand Pains all over, and cured immediately, that the Pains of those Wounds might bee repeated.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Mercy’s suffering is systematically reinforced through her masochistic tendencies. We are only privy to a one-sided dialogue: “Indeed Wee could not hear what They said unto her […] But Wee could Hear Her Answers, and from her Answers Wee could usually gather the Tenour of Their Assaults.”[[11]](#footnote-11) This censorship has the effect of making Mercy’s utterances seem proactive, despite her passive identity as the victim: “Do, Burn mee then, if you will.” By vocalizing her willingness to endure the torments of her daemons, Mercy transcends the mantel of victimhood and becomes the ultimate submissive. Even Mather’s objective observation of the “horrible Threatnings of miseries which they would inflict upon her,” cannot escape the jurisdiction of Mercy’s masochistic imagination.

In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* Locke delineates the intimate dichotomy between pleasure and pain: “*Pain is often produced by the same Objects* and Ideas, *that produce Pleasure* in us.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Intentional by divine design, this symbiotic “Conjunction” functions on both spiritual and corporeal levels. On a purely organic level, pain operates as a mechanism “necessary to the preservation of life.” Particularly relevant to this discourse on religious experience is Locke’s philosophy of divine providence: “[…] that we finding imperfection, dissatisfaction, and want of complete happiness, in all the Enjoyments which the Creatures can afford us, might be led to seek it in the enjoyment of him, *with whom there is fullness of joy, and at whose right hand are pleasures for evermore.*”[[13]](#footnote-13) According to Locke’s theory, the distress of man’s abject existence instigates his search for eternal comfort. By reinforcing the authenticity of pain, Locke legitimizes the productive potential of suffering.

Locke’s treatise elevates the significance of the Body as an ultimate instrument for worship and divine communion. The gendered testimony of Sarah Edwards attempts to reconcile sexual desire with the Puritan ethos: “I seemed to myself perceive a glow of divine love come down from the heart of Christ in heaven, into my heart, in a constant stream, like a stream or pencil of sweet light.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The phallic imagery here is subtle yet consistent with the theme of alternatively demonic penetration endured by Mercy Short: “[…] they stuck innumerable pins into her. Many of those pins They did themselves pluck out again; and yet They left the Bloody Marks of them […] They thrust an hot Iron down her Throat.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Both Mercy Short and Sarah Edwards express their desires through masochistic imaginations. Mercy Short does so by portraying herself as the unwilling victim of corruptive forces: “They would then come and sitt upon her Breast, and pull open her Jaw.” Her guilt is absolved by her constant and convincing struggle. Sarah Edwards, on the other hand, exhibits a willing masochism in which she offers herself in devoted submission to God’s whim, “with respect to the kind and manner of death that I should die; having been made willing to die on the rack, or at the stake, or any other tormenting death, and, if it were God’s pleasure and for his glory, to die in horror.”[[16]](#footnote-16) This “language of resignation” ultimately consumes her as she subjects herself to the pain of death by starvation.

An examination of the relationship between pain and desire reinforce the moral and epistemic authority of an experience. The devoted Christian submissive expresses a zealous enthusiasm to emulate the Passion narrative and suffer for the sins of others. This willingness to do penance engenders a desire to punish others, and the threat of punishment “drives the wild excess of the sinner, who secretly wishes the same punishment upon himself.” As Edwards articulates in *A Divine and Supernatural Light,* “Conscience is a principle natural to men; and the work that it doth naturally, or of itself, is to give an apprehension of right and wrong; and to suggest to the mind the relation that there is between right and wrong, and a retribution.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The language of sadomasochism in Puritan literature allows for creative subversion of conventional roles. Rules regarding dominance and submission regulate and construct a framework that is then manipulated at the convenience of the self-victimizing protagonists. The construal of pain, whether directly experienced or witnessed, hijacks the traditional narratives and enhances the victim’s imaginative potential. These victims, abducted by demons, not only challenge sexual norms, but also the boundaries of belief.

In Chapter Ten, Barney expresses his secret impulse to prove and reify the incident in spite of his fear and overall desire to completely reject the entire experience:

BARNEY: […] It was the same type of power as I tried to describe, a force that was causing me to continue to come closer to it, even when I wanted to run away.

DOCTOR: A fascination in spite of your fear?

BARNEY: Well, fascination was there. I was amazed.

DOCTOR: All of this was a feeling in yourself. Wasn’t it? […] As if it were being produced from something stronger than yourself.

BARNEY: It was being produced by something stronger than me, outside of me, that I wasn’t creating this.

DOCTOR: I see. This power. [[18]](#footnote-18)

Betty too, is concerned with this mysterious desire to investigate the facts of their experience even though parts of it are evidently highly traumatizing and distressing. When strange lights begin to appear in the sky, she recalls passing a motel “somewhere between the Flume and Indian Head.” Again, we are presented with eerie images of secluded cabins, and “one cottage on the end that had a light on” with a man standing in the door. Betty consciously recognizes that her instinct is compelling her to subject herself to the danger of the unknown:

And I saw this and I thought, if I want to I can get out of this whole situation right now. All we have to do is drive in here, and this object will go away. And that will be the end of it. I mean, this is our escape from it, if I want this. And I was thinking this, and I didn’t say anything to Barney, I didn’t say anything. All I could think of was, I don’t know where we’re going, but I’m ready for it.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Here, Betty realizes her own agency and seems to be able to navigate her true experience more lucidly. Although she identifies as a victim of abduction, Betty seems captivated by the possibility of the strange and the unknown. Something about it translates to her as a positive hope, despite the somewhat traumatic experience of being seized and examined by aliens. Later, Betty is able to recall, through hypnosis, being given a book in an unintelligible language. She becomes attached to this alien artifact, protesting, “This is my proof. […] I won’t ever forget about it! You can take the book, but you can *never, never, never* make me forget! I’ll remember it if it is the last thing I do.” The visitor responds by explaining, “If you do remember, it would be better if you forgot it anyway.” During one particularly emotional session with Dr. Simon, Barney expresses conflicting desires to believe. When the doctor prompts him for an objective answer as to whether or not he was abducted, Barney has difficulty separating himself from the emotions evoked by belief:

BARNEY: I feel I was abducted.

DOCTOR: *Were* you abducted. Not “how do you feel.” *Were* you abducted?

BARNEY: Yes. I don’t want to believe I was abducted.

DOCTOR: But you are convinced you were?

BARNEY: I say “I feel” because this makes it comfortable for me to accept something I don’t want to accept, that has happened.[[20]](#footnote-20)

For the abductees, belief is as inevitable as the abduction was, and it is important for them to convey a sense of helplessness. The language of alien abduction is highly submissive—the word “abducted” occurs only in the passive sense; our protagonists relate the experience of *being* abducted. In the same way, the reader is expected to resist belief yet be captivated by the possibility that some aspects of the story are true. UFO narratives present a range of opportunities for belief. The legal jargon of “innocent until proven guilty” applies also to philosophy on extraterrestrial life. Because the universe is infinite, it becomes more difficult to harbor disbelief than it is to simply acknowledge the potential for truth within UFO narratives. As one participant at the 1992 MIT abduction observed about the lack of conclusive proof of the extraterrestriality of UFOs, “the absence of evidence is not *evidence of absence.*”[[21]](#footnote-21)

In *Communion: A True Story,* Strieber negotiates the (in)credibility of his narrative through his attachment to the image of a barn owl. Although he finds his experience highly traumatizing—going so far as to relate it to that of a rape victim—he nevertheless is desperately hopeful that what he experienced was real:

I awoke the morning of the twenty-seventh very much as usual, but grappling with a distinct sense of unease and a very improbable but intense memory of seeing a barn owl staring at me through the window sometime during the night. I remember how I felt in the gathering evening of the twenty-seventh, when I looked out onto the roof and saw that there were no owl tracks in the snow. I knew I had not seen an owl. I shuddered, suddenly cold […]. But I wanted desperately to believe in that owl. [[22]](#footnote-22)

As it turns out, Strieber comes to the conclusion that the image of the owl was an intentionally placed figment of his abductor’s imaginations. Therefore, the image of the owl—not the actuality of a barn owl—operates as point of credibility to his experience. Strieber relies on the community of contactees; he attempts to explain away the inconsistencies in his narrative by correlating them to the equally incredible experiences of others. In this way, the unbelievable aspects of his narrative are normalized. Strieber’s emotions are first and foremost that of anger and rage, but he—like Betty—is seduced by the intense sensations, emotions, and insights they feel emanate from their unique experience. As he clarifies, “it’s not a question of being a hero. It’s much more a question of not wanting to walk out before the end of the movie.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Ultimately, the desire to believe manipulates the language that enshrines the experience so that it can, as I have previously postulated, achieve the status of fact.

1. Bridget Brown, *They Know Us Better Than We Know Ourselves: The History and Politics of Alien Abduction,* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brown, *They Know Us Better Than We Know Ourselves: The History and Politics of Alien Abduction,* 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bridget Brown, “Good Subjects: Submitting to the Alien,” 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Edwards. Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. 585 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Edwards, Wrath, 589 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Edwards, A Faithful Narrative, 151 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mather, 262 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Edwards, Faithful Narrative, 196 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Mather, 267 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Mather, 267 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Mather, 262 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Locke, 129 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Locke, 130 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Sarah Edwards [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Mather, 264 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Sarah Edwards [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Edwards, 208 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Fuller, *The Interrupted Journey,* 238. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Fuller, *The Interrupted Journey,* 150 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Fuller, *The Interrupted Journey,* 281-282. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. C.D.B. Bryan, *Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind: Alien Abduction, UFOs, and the Conference at MIT* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Strieber, *Communion: A True Story,* 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Strieber, *Communion: A True Story,* 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)