

Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace

By Jodi Dean

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In a provocative analysis of public culture and popular concerns, Jodi Dean examines how serious UFO-logists and their pop-culture counterparts tap into fears, phobias, and conspiracy theories with a deep past and a vivid present in American society. Aliens, the author shows, provide cultural icons through which to access the new conditions of democratic politics at the millennium. Because of the technological complexity of our age, political choices and decisions have become virtually meaningless, practically impossible. How do we judge what is real, believable, trustworthy, or authoritative? When the truth is out there, but we can trust no one, Dean argues, paranoia is indeed the most sensible response. Aliens have invaded the United States. No longer confined to science fiction and tabloids, aliens appear in the New York Times, Washington Post, and Wall Street Journal, at candy counters (in chocolate-covered flying saucers and Martian melon-flavored lollipops), and on Internet web sites. Aliens are at the center of a faculty battle at Harvard. They have been used to market AT&T cellular phones, Milky Way candy bars, Kodak film, Diet Coke, Stove-Top Stuffing, skateboard accessories, and abduction insurance. A Gallup poll reports that 27 percent of Americans believe space aliens have visited Earth. A Time/CNN poll finds 80 percent of its respondents believe the U.S. government is covering up knowledge of the existence of aliens. What does the widespread American belief in extraterrestrials say about the public sphere? How common are our assumptions about what is real? Is there any such thing as "common" sense? Aliens, the author shows, provide cultural icons through which to access the new conditions of democratic politics at the millennium. Because of the technological complexity of our age, political choices and decisions have become virtually meaningless, practically impossible. How do we judge what is real, believable, trustworthy, or authoritative? When the truth is out there, but we can trust no one, Dean argues, paranoia is indeed the most sensible response.

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Editorial Review

Review
"Do words like 'truth' and 'authority' mean anything when no one agrees how, much less whom, to believe? Writing spry, acerbic prose . . . Dean guides her readers soberly through strange terrain in which rationality itself gets upended: in view of radiation experiments on developmentally disabled patients and the Tuskegee syphilis experiments, is it more sensible to credit a government in cahoots with alien beings, or not to? . . . Dean compellingly traces our national loss of faith in formerly attractive notions like outer space and the 'Final Frontier.' . . . No reader will leave this intriguing book without pondering the unavoidable question she raises: 'What happens to our everyday approaches to truth when reality isn't?'"?Publishers Weekly

"Dean presents a scholarly analysis of America's fascination with aliens, alien abduction, conspiracy theories, and the like. . . . She is especially interested in discovering the connections between New Age beliefs and our social and political lives and the ways people judge what is real, authoritative, and trustworthy. . . . This study will help scholars understand the dynamics of democratic politics as the millennium approaches."?Library Journal

"Dean draws a parallel between the passivity of U.F.O. abductees and the passivity of an American citizenry sprawled before the television set, and she sees a further parallel between the abductees' fruitless quest to establish the truth of their experiences and the difficulty of telling fact from fiction on the Internet. . . . Seeking the truth, and yet unable to rely on anyone's help in finding it, we are cast into a murky haze of paranoia and conspiracy theorizing."?New York Times Book Review

"Dean's Aliens in America leads its reader on a lively odyssey through the epistemological brier patch of UFO research, alien abduction narratives, and their attendant conspiracy theories. . . . A slice of fin-de millennium cultural life. . . . No one looking for a literate, insightful, and comprehensive overview of post-Roswell UFO lore will come away from Aliens in America disappointed. Dean, a professor of political science with a voracious appetite for pop marginalia, covers all of the bases: the documented secret and not-so-secret government efforts to discredit early UFO witnesses; the rise of the alien-abductee movement . . . It's all here, cross-stitched and woven into the surrounding historical context with the assuredness we've learned to expect from the best works of cultural studies and with an acceptably low dosage of the theoryspeak we've learned to fear from the worst."?Village Voice

"Dean states provocatively that the growth of information technology (the Internet, telecommunications networks) has so radically increased the dissemination of knowledge and inflated the notion of 'public' that rumors and opinion fly with such speed it is often hard to determine what is authentic and what is fraudulent. . . . Although Aliens In America is largely an academic text, it is accessible for the lay reader, who may find Dean's evidence entertaining and illuminating, if not completely persuasive."?Booklist

"Aliens in America offers up some incisive pop-cultural analysis. Aliens, Ms. Dean suggests, once reflected the anxieties of the Cold War; now they represent broader concerns, from anxiety about unassimilated immigrants to angst about bearing children."?Chronicle of Higher Education

"Jodi Dean is an emerging scholar of the first rank. In Aliens in America she has deployed both a sophisticated political theoretical framework and a concern about what it means that so many American citizens are coming to believe the claims of aliens. Dean engages in a serious investigation of how popular

culture connects to shifts in the political assumptions of a mass public. This is vital and needed work, not just for the field of political theory, but more generally for public intellectuals."?Thomas L. Dumm, author of united states

"A fascinating and provocative book. Dean's major insight about the cultural and political importance of UFO/alien/space discourse and representation at the millennium is convincing and compelling."?Elayne Rapping, author of Media-tions: Forays into the Culture and Gender Wars

"Jodi Dean's Aliens in America is a rare find in the literature of the social sciences. It is entertaining and, at the same time, a politically perspicuous and textually acute reading. It treats, from another angle of vision, what Thomas Pynchon mapped in his Vineland: the more paranoid recesses of American culture. And her analysis of a variety of popular culture genres speaks effectively to the issue of the reliability of beliefs in relation to the functioning of democracy."?Michael Shapiro, University of Hawaii

"Aliens in America is a provocative book that grounds contemporary interest in the 'science fictional' in concrete social practice. Focusing on alien abduction narratives as symptomatic of a cultural crisis in notions of truth, evidence, and experience, Dean traces the breakdown of 'consensus reality' and tracks the emergence of 'sensible paranoia' as an appropriate response to the incoherence of our increasingly mediated, depoliticized, and 'abducted' lives."?Vivian Sobchack, author of Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film

Amazon.com Review
Is paranoia the defining feature of American life at the close of the 20th century? Jodi Dean thinks so, and she doesn't think we should be too worried about it. *Aliens in America* is her attempt to map the role of conspiracy theories in society, and although the book sometimes has problems negotiating the fine line between academic and popular discourse, it provides some fascinating insights. Dean suggests that paranoia is the only possible response to a fragmented culture. Multiplying TV channels and the publishing free-for-all of the Internet provide so many points of view, so many opportunities for contradictory meanings to coexist that "there isn't enough common reality to justify judgement." In the face of this info-maelstrom, conspiracy theorists and alien abductees are actively creating their own meanings, piecing together an ideology from the mass of unverifiable "facts." For Dean, these creative acts are powerful, positive engagements with the world as it has become, contrasting sharply with the attitudes of those who are trying to hang on to a vanished consensus. By bringing the apparatus of cultural theory to bear on this subject, Dean gives a provocative new interpretation of our premillennium tension. --*Simon Leake*

From Publishers Weekly
If you believe what you read on the Internet, aliens surround us these days?and 65% of the respondents in one poll agreed that the government had hidden a crashed UFO since 1947. But political scientist Dean (The Solidarity of Strangers) is less interested in the credibility of such stories than in their embodiment of a contemporary political culture (networked, televisual, cyber-linked) in which the problem is "that if the knowledge we need to make a judgment stems from shared experiences, what do we do when experiences are reconstituted so radically that we can't tell if we, or anyone else, actually has them or not?" Do words like "truth" and "authority" mean anything when no one agrees how, much less whom, to believe? Writing spry, acerbic prose that only rarely stumbles into jargon, Dean guides her readers soberly through strange terrain in which rationality itself gets upended: in view of radiation experiments on developmentally disabled patients and the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, is it more sensible to credit a government in cahoots with alien beings, or not to? While the book grows somewhat repetitive toward its conclusion, Dean compellingly traces our national loss of faith in formerly attractive notions like outer space and the "Final Frontier." The author offers no answers, but no reader will leave this intriguing book without pondering the unavoidable question she raises: "What happens to our everyday approaches to truth when reality isn't?"

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Elias Rosser:

Reading a guide tends to be new life style in this era globalization. With reading through you can get a lot of information that could give you benefit in your life. Along with book everyone in this world could share their idea. Publications can also inspire a lot of people. A lot of author can inspire all their reader with their story or even their experience. Not only the storyplot that share in the publications. But also they write about advantage about something that you need example. How to get the good score toefl, or how to teach children, there are many kinds of book that you can get now. The authors in this world always try to improve their expertise in writing, they also doing some exploration before they write on their book. One of them is this Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace.

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