

Susan Farrell
College of Charleston
Department of English
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American Fascism and *Mother Night*

It's fairly well-known that Vonnegut modeled the character of Howard W. Campbell, Jr., the Nazi propagandist from *Mother Night*, on the real-life figure of William Joyce, known during World War II as Lord Haw-Haw. In this guise, Joyce broadcast anti-Semitic and pro-German rants over the radio to British citizens. Born in the U.S. to Irish parents, William Joyce moved back to Ireland when he was three, where his Catholic family remained loyal to Britain and staunchly anti-Republican. When his family moved to England after the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, Joyce became deeply involved in fascist politics. He moved to Berlin at the outbreak of war, where he soon obtained a job working for German radio's English service. During the war years, he also worked to help recruit British prisoners-of-war into a unit called the British Free Corps. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, of course, readers discover that Howard W. Campbell, Jr. visits American prisoners in the German POW camp in an attempt to enlist them into a unit of his own invention, The Free American Corps, which is supposed to fight only on the Russian front. While Campbell

escapes to New York after the war, the real-life William Joyce was captured near the end of the war and executed for treason in England in January of 1946. In a 1971 interview with Laurie Clancy, Vonnegut said that *Mother Night* was an attempt to imagine what an American Lord Haw-Haw would have been like.

What might be less well-known, however, is just how widespread the traitorous propaganda business was. William Joyce wasn't a solitary phenomenon. There were numerous English-speaking Nazi broadcasters, and historians believe the Lord Haw Haw nickname might originally have applied to someone else, possibly German journalist Wolf Mittler, who spoke flawless English, having an Irish mother. While Joyce is the figure most associated with the name today, during the early 1940s it was applied to a number of different propagandist announcers, and at times, the nickname seemed to be used generically, to apply to any English-speaking Nazi radio broadcaster. To confuse matters even more, there **were** actual American Lord Haw Haws as well, most notably Fred Kaltenbach, known by the very similar nickname of Lord Hee Haw. The son of German immigrants, Kaltenbach was born and raised in Iowa. He became a Nazi sympathizer while studying for his doctorate at the University of Berlin in the early 1930's. After returning to Iowa to work as a teacher in 1935, Kaltenbach established a club for boys called The Militant Order of Spartan Knights, which was based on the Hitler Youth movement.

Fired from his teaching job, Kaltenbach returned to Germany, married a German national, and worked as a radio propaganda broadcaster for the Nazis in the early 1940s. British media dubbed him with the nickname of Lord Hee Haw, perhaps because he adopted a homey persona, offering advice, and beginning each episode of his program with the phrase, "Greetings to my old friend, Harry in Iowa." In *Mother Night*, then, Vonnegut is not simply inventing a whimsical but extraordinary and fantastical figure in the person of Howard W. Campbell, Jr. He is exploring the very real, historical phenomenon of the rise of American fascism in the 1930s and 40s.

To bolster this view, I'd like to turn to some other historical underpinnings of the novel that have not yet been explored. What is also not widely known is that the other buffoonish American fascists depicted in *Mother Night*, including the eugenics-obsessed former dentist, the Reverend Doctor Lionel J.D. Jones; August Krapptauer, Jones' ancient bodyguard and a former officer in the German-American *Bund*; Father Patrick Keeley, the 73-year-old anti-Semitic defrocked priest; and Robert Sterling Wilson, Jones' chauffeur, known as the "The Black Fuehrer of Harlem" (75), have ties to real-world figures as well, just as Howard W. Campbell, Jr. himself does.

Let's begin with Reverend Jones. In the novel, Jones is the publisher of *The White Christian Minuteman*, in the words of Campbell himself, a "scabrous,

illiterate, anti-Semitic, anti-Negro, anti-Catholic hate sheet” (59), which eventually secures financing from the Third Reich in Germany as a propaganda tool. Born in Haverhill, Massachusetts in 1889 and raised as a Methodist in a family of dentists, Jones had attended dental school at the University of Pittsburgh, but was expelled in 1910 because of his widely broadcast beliefs that “the teeth of Jews and Negroes proved beyond question that both groups were degenerate” (64). Although Jones’ hate-filled views lie dormant during his two happy marriages to much older women, they rise to the surface when his wives die. Arrested as a war criminal in 1942, Jones serves prison time, but is released as a wealthy man due to the success of an embalming fluid and gum stimulating substance for false teeth he had invented years earlier. It is Jones’ paper, *The White Christian Minuteman*, that exposes the whereabouts of Howard W. Campbell, Jr., whom Jones admires profusely as a fellow Nazi, persecuted by the U.S. government.

The most likely real-life model for Lionel Jones is William Dudley Pelley, an American fascist who admired Hitler, who founded the Silver Legion—also known as the Silver Shirts—in 1933, a white supremacist and anti-Semitic group based on Hitler’s Brownshirts, and who ran for President on the Christian Party ticket in 1936. While Pelley did not have a dental background, he nevertheless shares several characteristics with Lionel Jones in the novel.

Like Jones, Pelley was born to a Methodist family in Massachusetts. In the novel, Jones takes over The Little Rock School of Embalming when he marries the school's widowed owner, and he recharteres it as the Western Hemisphere University of the Bible, a school that "did all its business by mail" (66). The real life Pelley also mixed hate politics with religion, founding Galahad College outside of Asheville, North Carolina in 1930, where its students were intended to "learn a superior form of Christianity" while studying topics such as "Ethical History, Spiritual Eugenics . . . Cosmic Mathematics, and similar courses" (Ledeboer 128). While classes did actually meet on the Galahad campus, they were also available as correspondence courses, so Galahad was also, in some respects, a mail-order college. Also like Jones, Pelley published several rabidly racist and anti-Semitic newspapers and magazines, including, in the 1930s, the Silver Legion's weekly magazine, *Liberation*, and a weekly newspaper called *The Silver Ranger*. Pelley's Silver Legion adopted silver, Nazi-like uniforms, emblazoned with a scarlet capital letter L (perhaps the inspiration for the outlandish uniform Howard W. Campbell, Jr. invents for himself in *Slaughterhouse-Five*). At its peak, the group probably included 15,000 members nationwide. *Mother Night* not only satirizes this group through its depiction of The Iron Guard of the White Sons of the American Constitution, a fascist youth group that meets in Jones' basement, but the novel specifically

references Pelley's Silver Legion when Dr. Jones gives Campbell a silver-colored shirt to wear after he is beat up by a former American soldier, which Campbell tells readers "had once been part of the uniform of a defunct American Fascist movement called, straight-forwardly enough, "The Silver Shirts"" (159).

A magazine that Pelley began publishing in the early 1940's, *Roll Call*, eventually proved his undoing. Aimed at criticizing the government and President Roosevelt especially, the magazine drew the attention of the FBI when it claimed that the Pearl Harbor attacks were much more devastating than the government had admitted. Pelley was arrested for sedition and insurrection in 1942, just like Lionel Jones is in the novel. Interestingly, Pelley had moved his base of operations to Noblesville, Indiana by that time. Pelley's trial actually took place in the summer of 1942 in Indianapolis, Vonnegut's hometown, nearly guaranteeing that the writer would have been aware of it. Vonnegut at this time was still a student at Cornell University, though he would enlist in the U.S. Army in November of 1942, a few months before dropping out of Cornell. Lionel Jones in the novel is convicted and sentenced to fourteen years of prison, but is released after serving eight. Pelley, similarly, was convicted on 11 of 12 charges, sentenced to fifteen years in prison, and also served eight years before being paroled and released.

But the historical parallels don't stop there. Both August Krapptaur, the aged bodyguard who dies of a heart attack while carrying Resi Noth's luggage up the stairs to Campbell's New York City apartment, and Father Keeley, the anti-Semitic defrocked Catholic priest, are modeled after real-life figures as well. Krapptaur seems to be based on Edward James Smythe, a pro-fascist writer, publisher, and organizer who served as leader of the Protestant War Veterans Association in Washington D.C. Smythe was a defendant in the Great Sedition Trial of 1944, in which 33 defendants were indicted for supposedly advocating the overthrow of the U.S. government, though charges were later dismissed. He is also remembered for organizing a joint rally of the Ku Klux Klan and members of the German-American *Bund* (an actual organization of ethnic Germans living in the U.S. who openly supported Hitler), at a place called *Bund Camp Nordland*, a recreational camp located near Andover, New Jersey, on April 18, 1940. In the novel, Krapptaur's greatest lifetime achievement is said to have been arranging just such a joint meeting between the *Bund* and the Klan in New Jersey in 1940, where he declared that the Pope was a Jew.

Father Keeley, meanwhile, is most likely inspired by the real-life figure of Father Charles Coughlin, an extremely popular Catholic priest whose anti-Semitic radio broadcasts reached up to 40 million people at their height, and who, at one point, received more mail than anyone in the world (Jeansonne

362). Coughlin had initiated contact with both Mussolini and Hitler in 1933, and become rabidly anti-Semitic by the late 30's. His weekly magazine, *Social Justice*, even began serializing *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in 1938 (Jeansonne 368). In the novel, Father Keeley, like Coughlin himself, is from the Detroit area and his main target is Jews. Keeley, in fact, is chaplain of a Detroit gun club, secretly organized by agents of Nazi Germany, whose dream is to "shoot the Jews" (73). While the real-life Father Coughlin alarmed the Vatican, he was never defrocked as Keeley is in the novel. But both men avoided jail time, with Coughlin retaining his position as parish priest of the Shrine of the Little Flower in Detroit until his retirement in 1966.

But perhaps the most interesting of the real-life counterparts in *Mother Night* is the Harlem-based Sufi Abdul Hamid, the figure who seems to have inspired Vonnegut's portrait of the African American chauffeur, Robert Sterling Wilson, in the novel. The real-life Hamid began his career during the Depression years, as a labor organizer and religious mystic with a fondness for the occult, first in Chicago and later in New York. A colorful character who was "often seen on top of a step-ladder platform on 125th Street, the heart of Harlem's commercial district. . . resplendent in his black and crimson lined cape, green velvet blouse, black riding boots, and a white turban wrapped around his head," Hamid urged black onlookers not to spend their money at

white Harlem establishments that wouldn't hire them (McDowell 138). Hamid was openly anti-Semitic, even styling himself the "Black Hitler of Harlem," according to several sources. Hamid's anti-Semitic rhetoric was at least partly due to the fact that many of the businesses in Harlem during the Depression were Jewish-run, Harlem itself having been a largely Jewish enclave in the late 19th Century up through WWI, as German-Jewish merchants began to move uptown from the Lower East Side of New York for cheaper rents in the late 19th Century and were joined by an influx of immigrant Russian Jews in the early years of the 20th Century. Some of these businesses did indeed refuse to hire African American workers during the lean years of the Depression. Sufi Abdul Hamid is a fascinating figure, since he represents many of the complexities of race, ethnicity, and religion in New York during the years leading up to the war. While a vocal advocate for working-class African Americans, he was despised by the black bourgeoisie, both because of his outlandish dress and dabblings in the occult, as well as for alienating Jews, when middle-class African American and Jewish intellectuals were promoting unity between the two groups as "joint sufferers" in the U.S. (136).

There are numerous parallels between Hamid and Robert Sterling Wilson in *Mother Night*. Hamid, especially in the Jewish press, was specifically styled a "Black Hitler," while Robert Sterling Wilson in the novel is known as "The Black

Fuehrer of Harlem.” Wilson, like Hamid, dresses in a bizarre and eccentric costume. Campbell describes him as wearing “a black uniform with white piping, a Sam Browne belt, a nickel-plated whistle, a *Luftwaffe* hat without insignia, and black leather puttees” (88). And while Wilson’s concerns aren’t exactly the same as Hamid’s, they are both race men, with “no Uncle Tom” in them, as Campbell says about Wilson. While the fictional Wilson identifies completely with the Japanese, claiming to be “on the colored folks’ side” (89) of the war, and viewing the Nazis merely as convenient allies, Hamid also denied having sympathy for the Nazi Party, telling the poet Claude McKay in an interview that he “could not imagine cooperating with the Nazis . . . any more than with the Ku Klux Klan” (McDowell 140). Both men’s positions are complex and contradictory—Hamid spewed anti-Semitic rhetoric on the streets of Harlem, but claimed that his familiarity with Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* “made him aware of the evils of anti-Semitism” (McDowell 140). Meanwhile, the fictional Wilson identifies completely with the Japanese as fellow “colored folk” (89), all the while working for the virulently racist Dr. Lionel Jones and even warning his boss at one point that, “The colored people are gonna rise up in righteous wrath, and they’re gonna take over the world. White folks gonna finally lose!” (90). Nevertheless, Wilson wants to drop a hydrogen bomb on China, not believing that “Chinamen,” as he chauvistically styles them, are really colored

people.

While Vonnegut's work, with the exception of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, is still sometimes dismissed by literary critics as too simply written, too accessible and popular and cultish—particularly with young adults—and even too silly and cartoonish to be considered serious literature, what I hope this paper helps demonstrate is that, as Gregory Sumner argues in his excellent literary biography, *Unstuck in Time*, Vonnegut was a writer who had “a profound engagement with the national story” (Sumner 3). Or as Vonnegut himself said, “The function of an artist is to respond to his own time” (Noble 64). What might appear on the surface in *Mother Night*, and especially in its quartet of bumbling, cartoonish, aged American fascists, to be simply an over-the-top, comic romp, is rooted in real history and actual people. When confronted with real-life figures such as William Dudley Pelley, Edward James Smythe, Father Charles Coughlin, and Sufi Abdul Hamid, it is difficult to exaggerate the outlandishness of their beliefs and behavior. In some cases, truth may really be stranger than fiction.

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