

The Anthropology of Outer Space
Professor Lisa Messeri
Fall 2017

Office: 10 Sachem St. rm 308
Office Hours: Tuesday 2-4 and by appointment
Email: lisa.messeri@yale.edu

Course Description

What do you see when you look up at the night sky? Some see the future of humankind; others see an empty void. There are those who see the homes of gods while others are certain of extraterrestrials. In this class, we will explore how outer space, at different times and for different people, acts as a mirror that reflects back aspirations and anxieties of those studying and pondering the universe. By studying outer space we will in fact be studying ourselves.

We will spend the semester discussing, writing, and thinking about outer space like anthropologists. We will learn how to produce sophisticated cultural readings of the cosmos and find the value of thinking in multiple ways (scientifically, socially, philosophically, etc.) about outer space, appreciating how no single way of understanding is the one "right" way.

To tackle this adventuresome endeavor (boldly going where few have gone before), we will use ideas in anthropology and aligned disciplines to examine the extraterrestrial. Our challenge is to read social science texts alongside scientific, popular, and fictional accounts of space science and exploration. This journey will open our eyes to how cultural ideas infuse science and technology, adding richness to the study of both social and scientific phenomena.

Learning Objectives

This class will challenge you to think in new ways about something that you have spent your whole life gazing up at. By semester end, you will be able to

- Describe the human understanding of the universe as a physical-and-imagined space that changes through time and from person to person.
- Explain the basic categories anthropologists use to think about the world.
- Connect anthropological thinking to the study of scientific and technical concepts.
- Critically analyze scientific writing, news stories, fiction, and other media in order to tease out how social concepts shape understandings of outer space.
- Respect diverse ways, both scientific and non-scientific, of knowing the cosmos.
- Recognize that science reflects and saturates our social worlds.



Assessments

More details on these assignments will be provided in separate write-ups.

Reading Reactions x 4 (20%)

For each of the four units, you will choose one session (sign up in advance) to write a reflective essay on that day's readings. These essays are not summaries, but rather you will construct a mini-argument based on your reaction to the readings.

~500 words

Mid-Term Ethnographic Essay: Observing at the Observatory (25%)

Not only is anthropology about closely observing texts, it is also about observing people in real, physical places. Head over to Yale's Leitner Family Observatory and Planetarium for a public viewing night with a mission of observing the observers. While at the observatory, take notes on what you see and hear, focusing especially on the other visitors and the people working there. Talk to at least one stranger (anthropology is hard!) and ask them why they came to this event and solicit their views of outer space (ask any questions you think might get at a meaningful response). Write up your observations in a reflective piece.

1,000-1,250 words

Due October 13

Final Exploration (40%)

This is where it all comes together. The critical analysis cultivated during the first two assignments, the close attention you brought to the observatory, and the thematic, higher-level connections you made in the podcasts. You will apply all of these skills to investigate a topic of your own choosing. Write a researched argument that relates at least one of the anthropological categories we discussed in class to a topic of outer space that interests you. Use the anthropological concept to guide your analysis and unpack the social and cultural aspects of your outer space topic.

2,500-3,000 words

Proposal, due 11-10

Sources and Outline, due 11-17

Presentations, 11-27 & 12-4

Final Paper, due exam week

Participation (15%)

Participation is vital to the success and fun of this class. Offering your thoughts and attentive listening to and responding to your classmates are key to productive conversations. I expect you to attend every session. If you know you will be absent please let me know ahead of time. Likewise, if you are sick please just send me a short email, no need to go into detail.

Participation can take many forms: attendance, participating in discussion, and attending office hours.

I prefer the classroom to be a laptop-free zone. However, sometimes, laptops or tablets are the best way to access readings and notes. If you choose to bring a laptop to class you must turn off wireless. I would also invite you to take notes by hand. This has been proven to be a more effective way of retaining information. The many studies of laptop use in classrooms, all showing negative effects, was summarized in this New Yorker article written by a CS professor at Dartmouth (<http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/the-case-for-banning-laptops-in-the-classroom>).

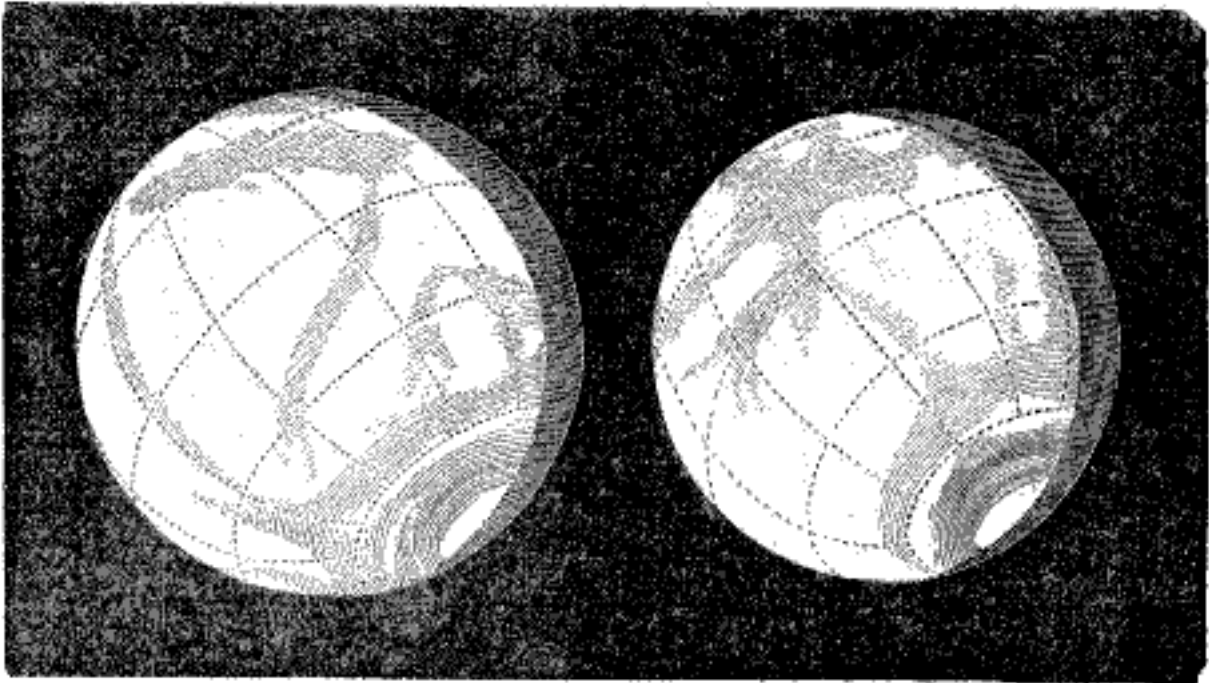
I want you to be present in class. Think about what you need to do to achieve that goal.

Grading

Each assignment will be graded out of 100 points:

- 93-100 A
- 90-92 A-
- 87-89 B+
- 83-86 B
- 80-82 B-
- etc...

A weighted average will be taken to determine your final grade.



Course Schedule

Unit 1: Culture and Cosmos, or What does anthropology have to do with outer space?

Wednesday, August 30 – Welcome!

No reading.

Friday, September 1 & Monday, September 4

Class does not meet, Professor at conference & Labor Day

Wednesday, September 6 – Understanding Culture

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, pp. 3-30.

Sewell, Jr., William H., 1999. "The Concept(s) of Culture," in *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, edited by Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 35-61.

Sagan, Carl. 1997. "Aberrations of Life." In *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space*, pp. 8-19

Monday, September 11 – Strange Rituals and Familiar Planets

Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1922. "The Subject, Method, and Scope of this Inquiry," in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. New York: Dutton, pp. 1-25.

Miner, Horace. 1956. "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema." *American Anthropologist*. 58(3): 503-507

Sagan, Carl. 1997. "You Are Here." In *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space*, pp. 1-7

Wednesday, September 13 – Myth and Non-Western Cosmologies

Joseph Campbell, Joseph and Bill Moyers. 1991. "Myth and the Modern World." In *The Power of Myth*, pp. 1-43

Young, M. Jane. 1987. "'Pity the Indians of Outer Space': Native American Views of the Space Program." *Western Folklore* 46(4): 269-279.

Monday, September 18 – Identity I: Space. Race.

Visweswera, Kamala. 1998. "Race and the Culture of Anthropology." *American Anthropologist* 100(1): 70-83.

Väätänen, Päivi. 2009. "Sun Ra: Myth, Science, and Science Fiction." *Fafnir: Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research*. 1(4): 39-49.

La Ferla, Ruth. 2016. "Afrofuturism: The Next Generation." *New York Times*.

https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/12/fashion/afrofuturism-the-next-generation.html?_r=1

Wednesday, September 20 – Identity II: Gender and Outer Space's Glass Ceiling

Ortner, Sherry. 1974. "Is male is to female as culture is to nature?" In Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds. *Women, Culture, and Society*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 67-87.

Maher, Neil. 2017. "Heavenly Bodies: 'Manned Spaceflight' and the Women's Movement." In *Apollo in the Age of Aquarius*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 137-182.

Unit 2: Old and New Space, or How does the exploration of other worlds change how we see our own world?

Monday, September 25 – Nationalism and the Space Race

Benedict Anderson. 1983. "Introduction." In *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso, pp. 1-7.

Siddiqi, Asif. 2010. "Competing Technologies, National(ist) Narratives, and Universal Claims: Toward a Global History of Space Exploration." *Technology and Culture* 51(2): 425-443.

Wednesday, September 27 – Globalization and Seeing the Earth from Space

Oliver, Kelly. 2015. "The Big Picture: Philosophy after the Apollo Missions." In *Earth & World: Philosophy after the Apollo Missions*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 1-44.

Monday, October 2 – Exploration and Empire Beyond the Moon I: The New Space Industry

Valentine, David. 2012. "Exit Strategy: Profit, Cosmology, and the Future of Humans in Space." *Anthropological Quarterly* 85(4): 1045-1068

Zubrin, Robert. 1994. "Significance of the Martian Frontier." <http://www.nss.org/settlement/mars/zubrin-frontier.html>

Messeri, Lisa. 2017. "We Need to Stop Talking About Space as a Frontier." *Slate*
http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2017/03/why_we_need_to_stop_talking_about_space_as_a_frontier.html

Wednesday, October 4 – Exploration and Empire Beyond the Moon II: Scientific Exploration

Dittmer, Jason. 2007. "Colonialism and Place Creation in Mars Pathfinder Media Coverage." *Geographical Review* 97(1): 112-130.

Vertesi, Janet. 2015. "'Surviving Politically' and the Martian Picturesque." In *Seeing Like a Rover: How Robots, Teams, and Images Craft Knowledge of Mars*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 215-238.

Monday, October 9 – Provincializing NASA

Redfield, Peter. 2002. "Half Life of Empire in Outer Space." *Social Studies of Science* 32(5/6): 791-825.

Serpell, Namwali. 2017. "The Zambian 'Afronaut' Who Wanted to Join the Space Race." *The New Yorker*.
<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-zambian-afronaut-who-wanted-to-join-the-space-race>

Wednesday, October 11 – Exoplanet Astronomy and Postnationalism?

Messeri, Lisa. "Inhabiting Other Earths." In *Placing Outer Space: An Earthly Ethnography of Other Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 149-187.

"Scientific and Philosophical Implications of Detecting Other Earths" pg. 3-5.

Unit 3: Outer Space and Human "Nature", or What does space tell us about what it means to be human?

Monday, October 16 – Why We Explore Space and the Question of Human Nature

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man." In *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, pp. 33-54.

Arendt, Hannah. 1963. "The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man." Reprinted in *The New Atlantis*.
<http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-conquest-of-space-and-the-stature-of-man>

Monday, October 23 – Utopia and Dystopia

LeGuin, Ursula K. 1994. *The Dispossessed*. New York: Harper Collins.

Wednesday, October 25

No Class – Professor out of town

Monday, October 30 – Halloween Special: Wonder and Fear

Listen to *Radiolab*, Space, Season 2 Episode 5

Markley, Robert. "Wells's *War of the Worlds*: Apocalyptic Disintegration," and "*The War of the Worlds* and the Panic of 1938." In *Dying Planet*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 122-127, 203-208

Wells, H.G., *War of the Worlds*, excerpts

Wednesday, November 1

No Readings – Class today will be preparing for the final paper

Unit 4: Speculative Imaginations of Others and Selves, or What is the meaning of life beyond Earth?

Monday, November 6 – The Concept of the Other

Backe, Emma. 2015. "Aliens Among Us." Posted on *The Geek Anthropologist*.

<https://thegeekanthropologist.com/2015/03/20/extraterrestrial-anthropology/>

Collins, Samuel. 2008 "Close Encounters of the Anthropological Kind." In *All Tomorrow's Cultures: Anthropological Engagements with the Future*. New York: Berghahn Books, pp. 63-74.

Wednesday, November 8 – Encountering the Alien

Lepselter, Susan. 2012. "The resonance of captivity." *Hau* 2(2): 84-104

Monday, November 13 – Language, Culture, and Meaning

Screening, *Arrival*

Duranti, Alessandro. "Linguistic Anthropology: Language as a non-neutral medium." In *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociolinguistics*. Ed. Raj Mesthrie.

Wednesday, November 15 – Cultural Relativism and Earth as Alien

Helmeich, Stefan. 2012. "Extraterrestrial Relativism." *Anthropological Quarterly* 85(4): 1125-1140.

Course Conclusion

Monday, November 27 – Student Presentations

Wednesday, November 29 – No Class, Professor at Conference

Monday, December 4 – Student Presentations

Wednesday, December 6 – Communicating Culture

Samuels, David. 2005. "Alien Tongues." In *E.T. Cultures: Anthropology in Outerspaces*. Ed. Debbora Battaglia. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 94-129.