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 adventurous 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 semesters 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](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

Monday, September 11 – Strange Rituals and Familiar Planets

Wednesday, September 13 – Myth and Non-Western Cosmologies

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

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

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

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

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

Monday, October 9 – Provincializing NASA

Wednesday, October 11 – Exoplanet Astronomy and Postnationalism?
“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

Monday, October 23 – Utopia and Dystopia

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
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

Wednesday, November 8 – Encountering the Alien

Monday, November 13 – Language, Culture, and Meaning
Screening, Arrival

Wednesday, November 15 – Cultural Relativism and Earth as Alien

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