

Book Review: Placing Outer Space: An Earthly Ethnography of Other Worlds by Lisa Messeri

blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2017/03/10/book-review-placing-outer-space-an-earthly-ethnography-of-other-worlds-by-lisa-messeri/

2017-3-10

In Placing Outer Space: An Earthly Ethnography of Other Worlds, Lisa Messeri offers a new ethnographic study of how planetary scientists, geologists and astronomers engage in processes of imaginative place-making to know and explore the spaces of the cosmos. With the book particularly underscoring how these practices are often shaped around colonialist discourses, Taylor R. Genovese praises Messeri's vivid, absorbing and seamlessly crafted narrative as an excellent addition to the anthropology of outer space.

Placing Outer Space: An Earthly Ethnography of Other Worlds. Lisa Messeri. Duke University Press. 2016.

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In her debut book, Lisa Messeri undertakes an ethnographic investigation of planetary scientists, geologists and astronomers in order to uncover the ways in which these professionals construct colourful worlds and places out of flat photographs and cold data. These place-making practices breathe meaning into the alien, making it easier for Earthly scientists to visualise their research. More importantly, it transposes a familiarity over the cosmic unfamiliar – or, as Messeri writes, for those working in space science, ‘to uncover the invisible is to learn how to see’ (38). Messeri expertly guides the reader through disparate environments from Silicon Valley laboratories to the deserts of the southwestern United States, seamlessly crafting her narrative from a creatively written emic ethnography to an etic analysis utilising both canon and contemporary theorists from anthropology, philosophy and science and technology studies.

Messeri claims that place-making within planetary science has become ‘central to daily work in the field’ (2). In order to foster this ‘planetary imagination’ – to construct a place out of an exoplanet that is unable to be seen by human eyes – those engaged in planetary science must draw from Earthly analogues in order to make the alien seem familiar and, more importantly, explorable. ‘Place’, Messeri claims, ‘is not just a passive canvas on which action occurs but an active way of knowing worlds’ (190). And those imagined worlds are not without their own politics.

Nowhere is this more starkly seen than at the [Mars Desert Research Station](#) (MDRS) in the state of Utah in the United States.

Nestled within the red cliffs and valleys of Utah, [The Mars Society](#) – a non-profit Mars exploration advocacy group – has built a performative, simulated Martian environment complete with a human habitat, greenhouse and observatory. While participants are at MDRS, they must simulate and perform as if they are actually on Mars,



including the donning of spacesuits when they leave the habitat. It was here that Messeri conducted some of her ethnographic fieldwork as a crew member on a simulated Mars mission. The Mars that is presented, however, is not the scientifically constructed Mars of the present. Instead, it is a human-occupied Mars of the future (59). This future imaginary of Mars is laced with colonial imagery and discourse that draw from US expansionist propaganda, such as Frederick Jackson Turner's [Frontier Thesis](#) and the Westward Expansion mantra of '[Manifest Destiny](#).'



Image Credit: Rabe Crater, Mars ([ESA/DLR/FU Berlin CC BY-SA 3.0 IGO](#))

Messeri rightfully critiques the employment of this colonialist rhetoric from space corporations and advocates by making the point that 'this narrative notably lacks natives and slavery, bigotry and disease, oppression and poverty. It is a powerful story because of its simplicity and because it cleanly juxtaposes alien Mars with the familiar frontier' (49). The consistent use of colonialist discourse in the sphere of space science makes anthropological approaches to research – such as those utilised in Messeri's book – so incredibly important.

Messeri then launches away from the simulated Martian dust of Utah into the realm of Martian mapmakers at [NASA Ames Research Center](#) in Silicon Valley, California. Here, mapmakers are constructing a Mars from photographs and other planetary data from NASA spacecraft orbiting and roving the planet. The mapmakers release their maps online for free, calling the process democratising. Messeri again cautions against the invocation of democracy paired with cartography as being tethered to western imperialism. Although the mapmakers do not explicitly link these concepts, Messeri believes that one cannot have a conversation about democracy and maps without also having a conversation about colonialism (80). Furthermore, Messeri argues that the 3D technology employed by the mapmakers engages with Baudrillardian conceptions of the [hyperreal](#), insofar as Martian maps precede the territory since humans have not yet set foot on the Red Planet (74).

Messeri skillfully crafts her argument for the importance of place-making within planetary science research for both exoplanet research and for our own conceptions of what the global means on Earth. Place indeed matters, especially when it is extrapolated into the *space* in outer space. It helps position scientists to better answer the age-old question concerning whether or not humans as a species – or Earthly environments – are alone in the universe. According to Messeri:

That knowing of the existence of other planets will make humans feel less alone is what distinguishes

the contemporary conversation on the plurality of worlds from previous iterations. It is also why place-making figures so prominently. We will only be less alone if we can connect with, imagine being on, and thus being in place on, these other worlds (195).

Escaping cosmic loneliness may be an integral part of place-making, but Messeri rightly tempers that romanticism by stressing the importance of colonial deconstruction within scientific research. Place-making is a tool: it can allow researchers to engage with the poetics of the cosmos by building worlds within an unrestricted scientific imagination. However, place-making within the cosmic imaginary can sometimes ignore the colonial discourse on which it is founded. Ignorance of, or an unwillingness to engage with, that part of the frontier narrative can lead planetary scientists to normalise the devastating brutality that is masked by the rose-tinted narratives of glory and untapped markets inherent within expansionist rhetoric.

Messeri's book is an excellent addition to both the increasing scholarship concerning the cosmos in science and technology studies and the resurgent field of outer space anthropology. Her thorough analysis of place-making practices by an often insulated community is accompanied by her vivid and absorbing ethnographic writing. *Placing Outer Space* is an excellent example of academic writing that is supremely beneficial and accessible to both the academy and the public. (And, aside from the excellent writing and scholarship, the book gives readers an extra surprise with a composite 3D cover image of Mars!)

Taylor R. Genovese is currently a graduate student in sociocultural anthropology at Northern Arizona University. His academic interests include the anthropology of outer space, social movements, futures, social imaginaries, anarchism, decolonisation and planetary/deep space analogues. You can find out more about him and his research at taylorgenovese.com. You can also follow him on Twitter [@trgenovese](https://twitter.com/trgenovese). [Read more by Taylor R. Genovese](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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