



Ethnographies of Outer Space

Methodological Opportunities and Experiments

Trento, 1-2 September 2022



**UNIVERSITÀ
DI TRENTO**

Department of
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An Anthropologist on Mars (1995) is a well-known book by the neurophysiologist Oliver Sacks. Contrary to what its title suggests, the book is neither about anthropology nor about the Red Planet. It is, in fact, a collection of seven essays on the paradoxical circumstances in which those affected by particular neurological conditions find themselves. Still, the juxtaposition of the words “anthropology” and “Mars” conveys a sense of inaccessibility that – for a long time – was familiar to the ethnographer approaching fields of inquiry related to space science and technology: rather like the protagonists in Sacks seven tales, the social sciences and the humanities were (often implicitly) deemed unfit to travel to such unimaginable lands, purportedly devoid of any sociality or humanness. Only in the early 2000s a number of seminal studies broke through the glass ceiling. Turning their gaze toward the skies, ethnographers showed how scientific and technological practices related to outer space cannot help but be imbued with the very terrestrial logics of power and knowledge-making.

Today we witness a flourishing of sociological, anthropological, historical, philosophical, and geographical studies on outer space. Time is ripe to reflect on how this multifaceted field has challenged and enriched different research practices and methodologies. On the one hand, space exploration is an inherently human enterprise, and as such it lends itself to social and anthropological inquiry. On the other hand, this domain presents unique features: the sites in which social action is articulated are at once remote, imagined, global and/or exquisitely local, manipulated through analogies, physically experienced, technologically mediated, out of reach, and collectively constructed. This intrinsically plural character presents a methodological challenge for the social sciences and the humanities. How to approach space within different theoretical and methodological frameworks? How does this field of inquiry engender interdisciplinary “contaminations”? How does it redefine the ethnographic encounter? Ultimately, this conference seeks to explore how the sense of impossibility, inaccessibility and paradox that has long been a hallmark of social studies of outer space is becoming fertile soil for novel, far-reaching and critically engaged earthly ethnographies.



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