

Astrobiology News May 2018: “Decolonizing” Mars

I hope the topic of this month’s news will be of interest to everyone! As humanity is on the verge of becoming interplanetary, there are many questions to consider, and how we *should* proceed is arguably even more important than how we *can* proceed. In thinking about placing a human presence on other worlds, how do we avoid repeating mistakes of the past, where colonization led to social inequity and injustice?

Next month, individuals at the intersection of astrobiology, anthropology, social justice, and space exploration will gather at the Library of Congress to discuss how to undo the legacy of colonialism and develop fresh ways of thinking about space exploration. On September 27th, there will be a follow-up public event examining what living on Earth can teach us about living on Mars. What follows is a summary of the three “beats” envisioned for that event. During the summer, I’ll provide more details to the CLP as they become available.

The first beat of the program will explore what having “The Right Stuff” means, and how that meaning is evolving. Drawing on Tom Wolfe’s¹ portrayal of the “cowboy astronaut” and frontier themes that have long guided principles of space exploration, this beat will examine how these narratives inform and influence modern ideas about who can explore space. The second beat will focus on how the history of exploration on Earth can inform our thinking about the Martian environment. The third beat will explore “Alternative Futurisms”, using science fiction as a springboard for imagining humanity’s future in space in ways that are radically different from the 19th century emphasis on manifest destiny.

During my son’s recent NYU graduation ceremony at Yankee Stadium, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau challenged graduates to become leaders who would step outside of their own “ideological bubbles” to listen to other perspectives and find common ground.² When thinking about how they will impact the future, Trudeau asked, “Do you want to win an argument, or do you want to change the world?” Indeed, as urgent as this message is for bridging cultural divides on our planet, it takes on an even greater urgency as we turn our collective attention to the so-called “final frontier”.

Until next month,

Grace

¹ Wolfe, Tom. *The Right Stuff*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979.

² The full address can be accessed through multiple youtube uploads.