

Aliens in Theory



This course is about how theory can help us understand extraterrestrial life and how SETI (search for extraterrestrial intelligence) and cosmology are implicated in doing theory. Thinking about SETI, which is now at the core of astronomical study, has appeared in intriguing moments of theory. For example, Kant wrote at several instances on what he thought life on other planets was like. Kant thought that aliens might be more rational than humans, and would provide a “critical” outside observational point of view on human progress towards transcendental reason. Thoughts on planets and the ubiquity or transience of life in the cosmos appear in Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger, among many others. As space exploration reaches a new stage in the coming decades, the time is right to develop a more astute and rigorous set of theoretical inquiries into the extraterrestrial. Since this is a lively and under-researched topic, there will be opportunity to think about developing essays toward publication.

The course will be organized around some primary theoretical concepts and questions regarding SETI. We will examine theories of semiotics, with an eye towards how to communicate with an unknown addressee across long temporal scales. We will also look at attempts to think of semiotics in 10,000 year time frames, with the example of how to signify dangerous nuclear waste sites.

Another frame of inquiry will be to examine theories of otherness and care to consider how these might or might not apply to alien life. Theorists we might read include Levinas, Bernhard Waldenfels, Kristeva, xenofeminists, and Indigenous cosmologists. We will also examine some work in science fiction genre theory, and perhaps a few literary examples of contact narratives.

Finally, we will study concepts of planet and planetarity in theory in the work of Heidegger, Arendt, Derrida, Kelly Oliver, Gaia theory (Lovelock and Latour), Dipesh Chakrabarty, among others.