

Imaginative Cosmos: The Impact of Colonial Heritage in Radio Astronomy and the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence

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Astronomers conducting searches for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI) have long been interested in the history of “first contact” between foreign civilizations as a proxy for extraterrestrial contact and have often employed frontier metaphors and colonial analogies in their pursuit of extraterrestrials. This article shows this language was more than mere rhetoric; drawing from the history of Orientalism and the US frontier, this article investigates SETI’s physical and disciplinary homes, ultimately arguing that, even when attempting to convey universality, SETI scientist’s pursuit of the alien was shaped by cultural power structures such as gender and colonialism.