

Where to *invest* next? An eco-critical cultural approach to Mars colonization

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Colonization is a term common to many disciplines, from political science to anthropology, from sociology to microbiology. In all of these cases it has evidence-based historical or scientific roots.

On the contrary, when this term is referred to the outer space, its use still draws from the realms of imagination, since no colonies exist as yet outside planet earth. Nevertheless, we believe that the realms of imagination play a fundamental role in Mars colonization.

Mars colonization started much earlier than most people think. Like any other colonization of the past, it began in the imagination and in narratives. The "discovery" of America, for example, and the subsequent settlement of Europeans in the trans-Atlantic wilderness, had actually been prepared through myths of various types (Atlantis, the garden of Eden, etc), folk tales, and story-telling. However, unlike the previous experiences we know from ancient and recent history, this particular type of colonization is taking longer and interests wider strata of society and culture throughout planet earth. For the first time in history we are witnessing a colonizing process happening in a globalized world, with a worldwide mass media coverage, and in the era of www. The fact that such process is not likely to involve a *colonizable* people, and probably not even a symbolic encounter with the Other, which happened in all previous cases, is not really relevant since the Other, though undoubtedly human, was rarely perceived as such even in older times: puritan literature from early America abounds in descriptions concerning devils, beasts, and monsters - not men or women - and the discussion about these creatures' possessing or not possessing a soul was virulent and lasted for decades. True, Martians have represented a propulsive force in the literary and filmic construction of the Martian project, in either sense (humans as the invaders or the invaded); however, from a merely scientific perspective, the debate about the plausibility of the existence of life on other planets, which was very lively in the

past centuries, can only continue if we reach an agreement on the definition of life. The fact that the only aliens we could reasonably expect to meet on Mars are extremophiles means that we do not have to worry about the possible drawbacks of colonization in terms of the encounter / struggle with the Other - that is, we do not have to worry about our responsibilities.

Or should we?