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# out of this world

SAVANNAH MANDEL SPENDS A LOT OF TIME PONDERING THE HUMAN CONNECTION TO OUTER SPACE.

Words James Shackell

Imagine selecting a group of humans for the first mission to colonise some distant planet. They're probably highly trained and intelligent. They have IQs off the charts. They've been studying and working and training all their lives for this moment. But now imagine they reach the planet, settle down and start having children. Those kids are still born into the shadow of glory – they're probably quite bright themselves, and they've been raised on stories of green grass and blue skies and something called a 'burrito'. But then those kids start having kids. Suddenly you've got a third generation in space, whose grandparents abandoned Earth to explore the cosmos. They might not be as smart, or skilled, or as talented as previous generations, and they've never even seen this magical blue dot that everyone keeps talking about. Earth means nothing to them. Space is all they know.

"This is a problem from one of my favourite science-fiction novels," Savannah Mandel says. "With space colonisation, it's not just one generation down the road, but three, or four, or five... Those people will be so far removed from Earth. They're not connected to their ancestors any more than we are now. That's when things start to get dangerous." You won't see this kind of socio-ethical stuff in many Virgin Galactic tourism brochures, but it's Savannah's full-time job. She's one of a tiny group of anthropologists who specialise in outer space. Not so much the rockets and shuttles and divert-power-to-the-auxiliary-thrusters side of things, but how human beings relate to space, how we might actually live there, and what that might look like.

"There are space anthropologists who have researched the possibility of extraterrestrials," Savannah says, "but I like to focus on ethics, isolation and cohesion. In other words, how a healthy society would exist in outer space." Space anthropology isn't an entirely new field – social scientists have been geeking out about space since the 1970s – but it is pretty niche. If only because anthropologists usually have to go out and, you know, observe the things they're studying. And that's tough with space colonisation. "That's why I'm trying to do research in Antarctica," Savannah says. "You have this really realistic, isolated, analogue site there. Like, the Mars Society is great, but they're kind of playing pretend out in the desert. In Antarctica, if you go outside, you die."

Savannah was raised in South Florida on a steady diet of science fiction, devouring old copies of *Discover*, *Smithsonian* and *Scientific American*. Her family travelled the world and visited archaeological sites. She wasn't great at maths, but the dream was always to research the social side of space. There were setbacks, of course. In 2016, while studying at the University of Florida, Savannah told her anthropology professor about her plans. "She said, you can't research that," Savannah remembers. "How are you going to do field work? So I gave up on the idea." But then the stars aligned: Savannah travelled to London for her master's degree, where she bumped into three social anthropologists with their own intergalactic focus. "I was saying how it was such a bummer I couldn't research space, and they basically said, 'Why not? There are three of us here who do it.' And I was like, no fucking way!"

To get field experience, Savannah started emailing every space organisation she could think of, before finally landing a research gig at Spaceport America, the world's first purpose-built commercial spaceport, way out in the Jornada del Muerto desert, New Mexico. Suddenly she was rubbing shoulders with the VP of Blue Origin (Jeff Bezos's private spaceflight company) and seeing the future of interstellar travel up close. "When I was at Spaceport America, commercial space travel was really exploding," she says. "A lot of people ask me what space government is going to look like, and I'm like, ummm, a corporate government? Think about it. Whoever owns those space settlements gets to make the rules. If Jeff Bezos puts a colony on Mars, Amazon will control it. My view of space is that it'll be driven by capitalism."

Savannah's predictions about space colonisation are either bleakly cynical or, perhaps, pretty damn spot-on. It'll be competitive, exploitative, unequal and violent – basically like every other human colonial movement in history. It'll also be driven by money. And that's a problem for us terrestrial plebs back on Earth. "Suppose everyone has access to resources on the Moon," she says. "That's great in theory. But the people who actually get there and mine it in the first place, they're going to be the super-wealthy or heads of government, or people working for them, so the wealthy will just get wealthier. And if someone breaks a Moon Treaty up there, if someone wants to explode a nuke on the Moon, who's going to stop them?"

"I would prefer to leave space alone, honestly," Savannah admits. "There are so many bigger issues on Earth. Visions of progress are often wrapped up in space exploration. When we think of ourselves in space, we think of our species moving forward. But I have to remind myself that, no, staying here and working on ourselves is moving forward, too."

So do space anthropologists get paid? Well, yes and no. Savannah can get research grants, like any other professor, but actual paying jobs are like moon dust. Only half of the corporate types at Spaceport America saw value in space anthropology, and even they struggled to think about it in commercial terms. "I have a friend who's the Chief Economist at NASA," Savannah says. "His job is to literally look at economics in space. But that's a one-of-a-kind position. He's the only one. If a space company did decide to hire an anthropologist, it's not like they'd need seven of us."

But Savannah insists there is value in anthropology. Huge value. Not just statistics and surveys and interviews, but in asking questions that no one has even thought of yet. Looking at space in an entirely different way: not as something to explore or exploit, but as a new environment for human potential. "So much of our psychology as Earthlings is tied to our dreams of outer space," she says. "Pretty much my whole life, the International Space Station has been in orbit. We've used stars to guide us since the dawn of time. And for me to think of us *not* being in space is bittersweet. I'd look up into the night sky and think, 'We're not there anymore.' ❄️