Fear and Learning in Truth or Consequence

Neoliberalism, Colonialism, and
the Lineage of the Frontier at
Spaceport America

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The Spaceport Operations Center (SOC) at Spaceport America. Photo: Taylor R. Genovese

I race south down I-25 from Albuquerque towards Truth or Consequences as the sun slowly begins to peak over the eastern mountains. The clock on my car dash glows menacingly and the colon that separates the hour and minute blinks scornfully at me: 6:15am. I sip slowly and deeply from my cup of coffee while shifting my gaze quickly between the empty highway and the kaleidoscope of colors produced by another sunrise in the high desert of New Mexico.

Sunrise on I-25. Photo: Taylor R. Genovese

One may raise the question — and, honestly, it is a fair inquiry — why would anyone travel to Truth or Consequences, of all places, especially for fieldwork? Is there really a wealth of ethnographic data about outer space in a sleepy town of 6,000, known only for its hot springs and the fact that the town voted to name itself after a radio program in 1950?

A billboard on the way into Truth or Consequences. Photo: nbcnews.com

Prior to 2011, this was certainly true. However, on October 18, 2011—20 miles (32 km) outside of Truth or Consequences—[Spaceport America](http://SpaceportAmerica.com) was officially declared as open, changing a sleepy New Mexican town into a gateway to the world's first purpose-built spaceport. A billboard erected outside of town attempts to entice travelers hurtling towards Las Cruces or El Paso with a simple binary question:

Your Invitation to Space is at exit 79
☐ **TRUE** ☐ **FALSE**

The billboard answers its own question with New Mexico's latest ad campaign slogan:

Truth or Consequences is New Mexico TRUE

Today, I begrudgingly cave to advertising and snap on my turn signal at exit 79, heeding my "invitation to space," despite the fact that the spaceport has yet to be used to send any human outside of the Earth's atmosphere. I wind my way through the historical downtown district of Truth or Consequences until I reach my destination.

The Spaceport America visitor's center. Photo: Taylor R. Genovese

The juxtaposition between old Spanish adobe and a sign advertising the visitor's center for a spaceport is fairly jarring. However, this is all part of the meticulous marketing plan for Spaceport America: a coalescing of old and new; an *attempt* at creating a positive lineage from settler-colonists moving across the western frontier and Spaceport America moving upward into the cosmic frontier. But more on that later...

I walk into the historic adobe building and am greeted with more contrasting design choices: a science-fiction inspired door fixed into old-growth wood beams. I proceed through the door into a foyer full of science exhibits catered towards children. All of the employees wear blue flight jumpsuits.

This place reminds me more of an Apple store than the first stop one takes before arriving at a spaceport. Strategically placed merchandise—t-shirts, sweatshirts, polos, magnets, keychains, beer koozies—are spread across the room. There is an abundance of missing sizes—an illusion of scarcity; I know they must have enormous quantities in the back.

The employee at the register beckons for me to approach. She asks me to register, motioning to the four iPad minis bolted to the small counter.

"It says there's no connection, but don't worry, it will transfer to this computer," she says, tapping her PC.

I nod.

The entrance to the Spaceport America visitor's center. Photo: Taylor R. Genovese

A long legal disclaimer spills forth from the screen before me. I use my finger to slide my signature onto the screen and tap “accept.”

Error: No connection found.

A fitting sentiment. What is more welcoming and exciting than a comprehensive legal disclaimer? Visiting a fully operational spaceport should evoke feelings of wonder and exhilaration, not feelings that are usually reserved for meeting with a divorce attorney.

I board the branded shuttle with branded televisions to begin the 20 mile (32 km) journey to the spaceport. As we jolt forward, chugging out of town and into the beige desert, the tour guide—also in a blue flight jumpsuit—begins to tell us about New Mexican history as well as the history of the spaceport. He begins by saying that Virgin Galactic’s spaceflights are “not just joyrides for billionaires” and proceeds to pop a DVD into the television mounted to the front of the shuttle. A commercial for Virgin Galactic and Spaceport America begins to play. With hopeful rhetoric, interviews with CEOs, and action-movie imagery, the commercial ends with:

“These visionaries [the CEOs of NewSpace corporations] are conquering the final frontier and beginning the democratization of space!”

Looking past the obviously loaded words tied to the brutality of Western colonialism such as “conquering” and “frontier,” I found the word “democratization” an interesting choice considering the \$250,000 required as a lump-sum, up-front deposit in order to reserve a seat on Virgin Galactic’s SpaceShipTwo. It furthers the neoliberal, capitalist rhetoric of democracy for those that can afford it. Many proponents of commercial space companies say that \$250,000 is still less money than is spent on launching government-employed astronauts; therefore, space will be more democratized because more human beings will be able to reach space than when access is strictly controlled by governments. This is true; however, it is still only the mega-rich that are able to access our cosmos, leaving the 99% anchored to a slowly dying Earth, a planet profiteered and poisoned by the very people who are able to afford trips to space.

It is also important to remember that SpaceShipTwo is only capable of making sub-orbital flights—that is, reaching space but falling back down to Earth in a parabolic arc rather than orbiting the planet. In order to reach orbit—and the International Space Station—you currently have two options: contract with the Russian government for \$81 million per seat or NewSpace company SpaceX (starting in late-2017) for \$58 million per seat. While the \$23 million in savings is “cost-effective” for governments and the mega-rich, it is hardly what I would describe as democratizing.

The tour guide puts on another video for us to watch as we begin to pull into the spaceport. The massive LEED Gold certified terminal and hanger facility designed by Lord Norman Foster begins to loom on the horizon. This time, the video describes the region, especially *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro*—in English, The Royal Road of the Interior Land—the 1600 mile (2560 km) Spanish road that snaked its way up from Mexico City to San Juan Pueblo in New Mexico. The road served as the main trade route for the Spanish (and after 1821, the Mexicans) from 1598 until 1882. The video briefly discusses the Pueblo Revolt and Geronimo's uprising but breathlessly announces that the “territory was eventually *tamed*.”

Many NewSpace corporations—and even many space exploration advocates—do not think about the language that is used when they discuss outer space and humankind's possible expansion into the cosmos. The importance of language—and its role in the subjugation of the oppressed—is widely discussed, including on *Space + Anthropology* (see Michael Oman-Reagan's "Sexism in the Oxford Dictionary of English" and William Lempert's "Navajos on Mars"). While on the Spaceport America tour, the language was firmly couched in colonialist rhetoric; Indigenous peoples were either referenced using the stereotype of the "noble savage" (the perfect "Other," uncorrupted by "civilization") or as belligerents—thorns in the heel of Spanish, Mexican or American colonists—who needed to be brought to heel in order for progress and stability to reign.

The tour guide pushes a button on his remote in order for us to watch the last DVD before disembarking into the terminal and hanger facility. A campfire is shown on the television. The camera slowly follows the smoke up into the starry, night sky. Native American flute-and-drum music plays.

“The present has a way of hiding what is truly here,” says the voiceover, dripping with a stereotypical Indigenous platitude. “They spoke of a time when humans would once again travel back into space...”

The Spaceport America tour shuttle. Photo: Taylor R. Genovese

The “Genesis Sculpture” greets new arrivals in the center of a roundabout before reaching the terminal and hanger facility of Spaceport America. Photo: Taylor R. Genovese

I resist the temptation to roll my eyes while looking around the bus at my fellow tourists. They all seem to be eating this up.

“Spaceport America and Virgin Galactic will help that dream become a reality, much like the wandering of early humans throughout this land, using tools truly made in America.”

The screen shows arrowheads in the dirt while steady hands are knapping more projectile points. I grimace. The video presents Indigenous tool-making as part of a Western, settler-colonial, capitalist American tradition of ingenuity and excessive pulling-up of bootstraps thousands of years before the United States even existed.

“As we pass through the old frontier of storied land into the final frontier...” the video drones.

The shuttle seen in reflection of the terminal and hanger facility's windows. Photo: Taylor R. Genovese

I tune out, snapping some photos of the terminal and hanger facility as we gently glide to a rehearsed stop in sync with the video's final crescendo.

“Welcome to the next giant leap for humanity! Welcome...to Spaceport America!”

The shuttle driver hops out and makes his way to the building to make sure security knows of our presence while the tour guide strikes up a quick lecture

about the spaceport.

“This facility is prepared to handle rapid spaceflight. Spaceport America had to be sure that it could handle commercial flights multiple times a month, a week, even a day. That's what commercial space companies want: daily operations.”

For some reason I imagine the scene from *Gattaca*, a depressed Ethan Hawke staring mournfully up at the sky, watching multiple rockets launch every day while desperately wishing he could be aboard. I wonder if that kind of alienation could become a reality as outer space becomes more and more commodified, allowing the gap between rich and poor to manifest itself physically as the gap between Earth and space.

In a scene from the film “Gattaca,” Vincent (Ethan Hawke) watches a rocket launch from the spaceport Gattaca while working as a janitor there. Photo: Columbia Pictures

“This isn’t the government space age,” the tour guide continues. “This is the commercial space age. As a space corporation, you have two choices: cede the business and die...or innovate. There will be no more government hand-outs and that forces innovation.”

I knew that I would be confronted with the neoliberal, capitalist mythos eventually; the NewSpace mantra of “pull yourself up by the spaceboot-straps.” However, what the tour guide said is not entirely true, considering the New Mexico General Fund Plus Special Appropriation is slated to give Spaceport America \$2,262,000 in the 2017 budget. That means that 35% of the spaceport’s operating budget next year will be taxpayer money — “government hand-outs,” if you will. However, this is not a novel situation, corporate subsidies are an important tradition within the capitalist system.

“Movement of people and goods is a natural progression,” preaches the tour guide. “The goal of humanity is to make the world a smaller place. Space travel can do that. For example, take what happened at Benghazi. Imagine we could deploy a SEAL team on rocket planes anywhere in the world within minutes!”

I can barely take it. This is my first time visiting any NewSpace facility and—as an anthropologist—I want to remain a fly-on-the-wall for this initial visit. But the activist in me begins screaming and clawing its way up my throat. I was about to burst when a voice calls out from behind me.

“OK, but wouldn’t it be great if we all worked together in space? Shouldn’t space be without a military application?”

I breathe a sigh of relief as my activist personality begins to settle down. The tour guide begins with the double-speak that continues throughout the remainder of the tour.

“That’s the good thing about space,” he says, floundering slightly at the tourist’s audacity to challenge corporate policy. “It transcends politics. The good thing about space is it’s a Trump-free zone. A Hillary-free zone.”

The tour guide turns to the launching capabilities of the Boeing 747, especially as it pertains to Virgin Galactic's LauncherOne program which hopes to strap a rocket to one of the wings of a 747, fly up to around 50,000 feet, and release the rocket to be launched the rest of the way to space.

carrying missiles on both wings? What about bomb bay doors? There's a lot of volume inside of a 747! It carried the Space Shuttle on its back, it seems like a waste to only carry a single missile."

“You could
drop
drop
drop
What is that?
profit
profit
profit”

“But it’s not about spaceports. It’s not about spaceships. It’s about how can space better humanity?”

We finally disembark the shuttle and head to the visitor exhibits inside of the terminal and hanger facility. A large mural—titled *The Journey Upward*—is adorned on one of the walls.

The Journey Upward at the terminal and hanger facility at Spaceport America. Photo: Taylor R. Genovese

This mural served as a summation of the NewSpace worldview and ideology. A natural, inescapable, linear progression toward human beings spreading into the cosmos: from dinosaurs (?) to Anglo-looking Paleo Indians to settler-colonists to space migration. This romanticized “lineage of the frontier” is tied to the capitalist dream—and mythology—of untold profits and constantly expanding markets.

Of course, the capitalist mythology also likes to ignore the horrendous inequality and violence that tends to attach itself to the frontier mentality. When frontiers are seen as limitless, uninhabited and uncivilized, it encourages doctrines like slavery and Manifest Destiny. Yet NewSpace corporations seem to be overlooking the bigger picture and instead focus on the “glory of the frontier” as endless profit potential and romantic adventure.

Entrance to the exhibit area in the terminal and hanger facility. Photo: Taylor R. Genovese

As an anthropologist, I am trained to pay attention to the larger picture—to not get caught up in rose-tinted romanticism. As an anthropologist interested in outer space, this is especially important. Journeying into the cosmos is romantic. It is adventurous. It pulls at deep-seated desires to move, to explore—some have even said this is “human nature.” I’m not against human space migration; in fact, I want nothing more than slip the surly bonds of Earth.

However, if we do it without looking at the broader picture—without contemplating the entirety of the human experience—we are doomed to fail in the most atrocious ways. Likewise, if we do not embrace cooperation—and, more generally, respect for humanity—prior to departing for a harsh, unforgiving environment, the results could be tortuous, and even deadly.

As I walked back to my car at the end of the tour—at the risk of sounding naïve—I felt a drive to turn my fear and loathing into hope and compassion, for those are the underlying emotions that can propel human beings to inspire change and do amazing things.

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