

First contact with aliens could end in colonization and genocide if we don't learn from history

July 20 2023, by David Delgado Shorter, Kim TallBear and William Lempert



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We're only halfway through 2023, and it feels already like the year of

alien contact.

In February, President Joe Biden [gave orders](#) to shoot down three unidentified aerial phenomena—NASA's title for UFOs. Then, the alleged [leaked footage](#) from a Navy pilot of a UFO, and then news of a [whistleblower's report](#) on a possible U.S. government cover-up about UFO research. Most recently, an independent analysis [published in June](#) suggests that UFOs might have been collected by a clandestine agency of the U.S. government.

If any actual evidence of extraterrestrial life emerges, whether from whistleblower testimony or an admission of a cover-up, humans would face a historic paradigm shift.

As members of an Indigenous studies working group who were asked to lend our disciplinary expertise to a workshop affiliated with the [Berkeley SETI Research Center](#), we have studied centuries of culture contacts and their outcomes from around the globe. Our collaborative preparations for the workshop drew from transdisciplinary research in Australia, New Zealand, Africa and across the Americas.

In its final form, our [group statement](#) illustrated the need for diverse perspectives on the ethics of listening for alien life and a broadening of [what defines "intelligence" and "life."](#) Based on our findings, we consider first contact less as an event and more as a long process that has already begun.

Who's in charge of first contact

The question of who is "in charge" of preparing for contact with alien life immediately comes to mind. The communities—and their interpretive lenses—most likely to engage in any contact scenario would be military, corporate and scientific.

By giving Americans the legal right to profit from [space tourism](#) and planetary resource extraction, the [Commercial Space Launch Competitiveness Act of 2015](#) could mean that corporations will be the first to find signs of extraterrestrial societies. Otherwise, while detecting unidentified aerial phenomena is usually a military matter, and NASA takes the lead on sending messages from Earth, most activities around extraterrestrial communications and evidence fall to a program called [SETI, or the search for extraterrestrial intelligence](#).

SETI is a collection of scientists with a [variety of research endeavors](#), including Breakthrough Listen, which listens for "[technosignatures](#)," or markers, like pollutants, of a designed technology.

SETI investigators are [virtually always STEM](#)—science, technology, engineering and math—scholars. Few in the social science and humanities fields have been afforded opportunities to contribute to concepts of and preparations for contact.

In a promising act of disciplinary inclusion, the [Berkeley SETI Research Center](#) in 2018 invited working groups—including our [Indigenous studies working group](#)—from outside STEM fields to craft perspective papers for SETI scientists to consider.

Ethics of listening

Neither Breakthrough Listen nor SETI's site features a current [statement of ethics](#) beyond a [commitment to transparency](#). Our working group was [not the first](#) to raise this issue. And while the [SETI Institute](#) and [certain research centers](#) have included ethics in their event programming, it seems relevant to ask who NASA and SETI answer to, and what ethical guidelines they're following for a potential first contact scenario.

[SETI's Post-Detection Hub](#)—another rare exception to SETI's STEM-

centrism—seems the most likely to develop a range of contact scenarios. The possible circumstances imagined include finding ET artifacts, detecting signals from thousands of light years away, dealing with linguistic incompatibility, finding microbial organisms in space or on other planets, and biological contamination of either their or our species. Whether the U.S. government or heads of military would heed these scenarios is another matter.

SETI-affiliated scholars [tend to reassure critics](#) that the intentions of those listening for technosignatures are benevolent, since "what harm could come from simply listening?" The chair emeritus of SETI Research, Jill Tarter, [defended listening](#) because any ET civilization would perceive our listening techniques as immature or elementary.

But our working group drew upon the history of colonial contacts [to show the dangers](#) of thinking that whole civilizations are comparatively advanced or intelligent. For example, when Christopher Columbus and other European explorers came to the Americas, those relationships were shaped by [the preconceived notion](#) that the "Indians" were less advanced due to [their lack of writing](#). This led to decades of [Indigenous servitude](#) in the Americas.

The working group statement also suggested that the act of listening is itself already within a ["phase of contact."](#) Like colonialism itself, contact might best be thought of as a series of events that starts with planning, rather than a singular event. Seen this way, isn't listening potentially without permission just another form of surveillance? To listen intently but indiscriminately seemed to our working group like a [type of eavesdropping](#).

It seems contradictory that we begin our relations with aliens by listening in without their permission while actively working to stop other countries from [listening to certain U.S. communications](#). If humans are

initially perceived as disrespectful or careless, ET contact could more likely lead to their colonization of us.

Histories of contact

Throughout histories of Western colonization, even in those few cases when contactees were intended to be protected, contact has led to brutal violence, pandemics, enslavement and genocide.

James Cook's 1768 voyage on the HMS Endeavor was initiated by the [Royal Society](#). This prestigious British academic society charged him with calculating the solar distance between the Earth and the sun by measuring the visible movement of Venus across the sun from Tahiti. The society strictly forbade him from any colonial engagements.

Though he achieved his scientific goals, Cook also [received orders](#) from the Crown to map and claim as much territory as possible on the return voyage. Cook's actions put into motion wide-scale colonization and Indigenous dispossession across Oceania, including the [violent conquests of Australia and New Zealand](#).

The Royal Society gave Cook a "[prime directive](#)" of doing no harm and to only conduct research that would broadly benefit humanity. However, explorers are rarely independent from their funders, and their explorations reflect the political contexts of their time.

As scholars attuned to both research ethics and histories of colonialism, we wrote about Cook in our working group statement to showcase why SETI might want to explicitly disentangle their intentions [from those of corporations, the military and the government](#).

Although separated by vast time and space, both Cook's voyage and SETI share key qualities, including their appeal to celestial science in the

service of all humanity. They also share a mismatch between their ethical protocols and the likely long-term impacts of their success.

The initial domino of a public ET message, or recovered bodies or ships, could initiate [cascading events](#), including military actions, corporate resource mining and perhaps even geopolitical reorganizing. The history of imperialism and colonialism on Earth illustrates that [not everyone benefits from colonization](#). No one can know for sure how engagement with extraterrestrials would go, though it's better to consider cautionary tales from Earth's own history sooner rather than later.

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