

This thesis — composed of an artefact and exegesis — explores how female astronaut characters are configured, framed and mobilized in contemporary science fictional space narratives.

Despite a growing number of female protagonists in science fiction stories in general — both on screen and on the page — close analyses of narratives set in space, which tend to dominate a lot of mainstream popular science fiction media, reveal that conservative gender roles continue to be reinforced and recycled when the astronaut is a woman. Through examining several science fiction space stories featuring female astronaut protagonists across a variety of media — including film, television, prose, and verse — this thesis observes patterns in the roles that women play in space narratives. It also considers how gender discrimination in the space industry might help us understand these fictional patterns as comprising part of a larger cultural problem concerning the way that society conceptualizes women in relation to outer space (or fails to do so). A significant cultural motif discovered through this research, which has not previously been interrogated in the contemporary science fiction canon, is that female characters who travel to space for professional reasons tend to have dead children. I identify and analyse two tropes around astronaut mother characters, which I call “cosmic careers, dead children” and “distant mother, dead child”. Examining these fictional tropes in light of non-fictional cases of misogyny and sexism in the space industry suggests that there persists some kind of incompatibility between women, particularly mothers, and space travel in the public imagination, and the purpose of this thesis is to theorise why.

The artefact that accompanies this exegesis is a science fiction novel in verse, featuring a female astronaut protagonist, who realises she is pregnant while on board a space vessel on a colonisation mission to Mars. The form of verse science fiction is significant, since both poetry and science fiction have historically been genres in which women have been objectified by the male gaze and male commentary. This science fiction verse novel reclaims space for women in a literary, cultural and political sense. This artefact expands space for women in science fiction literature, so that more progressive female astronaut characters can follow.

This thesis affirms that it is important to continue to interrogate the ways that women are configured in science fiction narratives, even when stories may appear to be progressive. It argues that we must endeavour to imagine new visions of the future for fictional women, mothers and families in space, if we are to improve prospects for women on Earth in the present.