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A Review of 'Space Oddities: Women in Outer Space and Popular Film and Culture 1960-2000'. Author: Marie Lathers

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REVIEW

In the late nineteen fifties, pioneering aerospace physician W. Randolph Lovelace decided to test female pilots as astronaut candidates. His reasoning was practical: women are lighter, consume less oxygen, are less prone to heart-attacks, and, he believed, would be more tolerant of the isolation and close confinement of a space capsule. After their first initiative, "Women In Space Earliest", had collided with Air Force public relations, he and his collaborator Donald Flickinger, Air Force General and NASA advisor, instigated the Women In Space Program (WISP)[i], with private financial support and at least the hope of official recognition; possibly that dainty acronym helped WISP to sneak under the radar. Thirteen of nineteen hand-picked, highly motivated female professional pilots passed the initial medicals without reservation. Four of the thirteen went on to score higher than any of the successful male candidates, in the same rigorous and gruelling battery of physical and psychological tests, and under more demanding conditions. Yet none of these women, as of course we know, made it onto NASA's team, let alone into space. The first US woman in space was Sally Ride, in 1983, as a "mission specialist". The first US female shuttle *pilot* (and the role of pilot is highly significant) was Eileen Collins in 1995.

I come to Marie Lathers's study of the highly equivocal place of women in the Space Race as a science fiction writer with feminist opinions, not as an academic feminist, nor (far from it!) as an expert on real world space exploration. Yet my background and viewpoint may be appropriate, since science fiction occupies the borderland between culture and technoscience, and Lathers's investigation is focused on exactly this borderland: the cultural ether where fictions, official and unofficial, about space exploration, are and were created.

In the opening chapters of her study, *Space Oddities*, Marie Lathers gathers together all the strands in the history-on-record of the so-called "Mercury Thirteen"—the collective name awarded by the media to those thirteen "lost" female astronauts of the Project Mercury era — laying bare the extraordinary extent of male unease in this area, including contortions that even grounded female space-flight chimpanzees. A wider examination of US popular culture in the Space Age provides a curiously apposite commentary. The figure of the "astronaut's wife"— imprisoned by her husband's hugely significant role, doomed to perform ideal domesticity in a vacuum— has been studied before, notably in Thomas Wolfe's sardonic semi-documentary account of the Apollo program, *The Right Stuff* (on which Lathers draws heavily, though her conclusions are not always the same). Less familiar, especially to UK readers, will be the shadow-play inversion of excluded womanhood, provided in a bizarre US television sitcom, *I Dream Of Jeannie* —in which a (male) US astronaut cohabits, (chastely!) in the Cape Canaveral Space Center's domestic compound, with a (female, blonde, English-speaking) djinn, whose magical power over the male realm of Outer Space brings female chaos into Mission Control.

The "scientific fact" that women were better equipped for life in space was female folklore of the early Space Age: I remember hearing it from my mother —who remained an ardent fan of the Apollo program, despite the lack of female astronauts. The story behind the rumour makes fascinating and uncomfortable reading. Details of the WISP tests, published for the first time in 2009, show that the women genuinely equalled or out-performed the men, particularly, ironically, in their ability to endure for many hours in a sensory deprivation tank—the extreme of exclusion. The women also tended to have far more flying hours, but none of them had graduated from military jet test pilot school, as women were not accepted for that training. All held the required college degrees. John Glenn and Scott Carpenter did not; but rules could be bent for men. The WISP initiative depended on the patronage of Jackie Cochran, the most acclaimed female pilot of her generation —at 52, ineligible as a candidate for age and health reasons. Her immensely rich husband funded the project, but his wife's vanity was too deeply engaged. (As Marie Lathers comments, in her chapter notes, "individual women who wish to appear exceptional sometimes impede women as a group"). Acting, it is presumed, out of jealousy when she found she was not personally in the limelight, Cochran tactlessly raised issues about the testing with a high-ranking official. NASA, made aware of what was happening, responded that "there was no requirement for female astronaut training": in August 1961 WISP was summarily disbanded. The Mercury Thirteen's hopes were finally dashed in 1962, when hearings in the House of Representatives —to determine whether NASA was practicing gender discrimination— were closed, before the women could give their testimony, and after John Glenn had famously given his opinion that the social order, though perhaps it's a shame, requires women to stay at home. In fact, according to Lathers, those hearings were a sham, and nothing said in support or opposition would have made any difference. A succinct memo from Vice President Lyndon Johnson (Let's stop this now!) had closed the case, some months earlier.

It's a familiar story. Women attempting to enter a profession from which they have been barred have always faced the same barrage: naïve doubts about their professional competence, which turn out to be unaffected by evidence; specious concern for their peculiar feminine needs (we'd love to take on female

apprentices, if only we had a Ladies Toilet!); destructive intervention from prominent conservative women. Mendacious regrets —and finally, in the last resort, open hostility. The historical and cultural situation makes this particular struggle especially vivid. The Mercury Thirteen are poised between the post-war period, when, no longer needed in the workforce, women were being socially engineered back into the domestic sphere —and the US Cultural Revolution of the sixties, when the State was being compelled to consider gender discrimination as a valid topic of concern. And the Space Race was not just another male-ordered technical profession, it was a consuming mythology. In Marie Lathers's study, the failure of an early attempt to break into the astronaut profession is just a starting point. Her project is to investigate the "shadow woman"; the essential, repressed counterpart of the heroic male, who haunted the Space Race. Woman could not really be excluded from such a vital national enterprise: female astronauts were forbidden, but a ghostly female presence was everywhere. The plight of the sixties housewife, isolated in the home, robbed of her empowering homestead skills and transformed into a consumerist machine-minder, eerily mirrors the humiliating fate of the military test pilot, swaddled in machinery; brave pioneer reduced to a job a chimpanzee could easily perform (*A monkey's going to make the first flight*, was the famous "right stuff" jibe). Even in the elaborate costume of the early (male) astronauts, Lathers finds the bizarre shadow of a woman. The customised, form-fitting foundation garments for the Apollo astronauts were manufactured by ILC Dover, a company that also produced Playtex brassieres: some early anti-g force suits were indistinguishable from laced and strapped ladies' corsets.

Lathers's historical and cultural study becomes less interesting when she moves away from the Space Race to consider Space Women in film and television; female animals as spacefarers, and even Dian Fossey's work with gorillas. The analysis of two canonical and well-studied sci-fi movies (*Alien* 1978, *Barbarella*, 1968) seemed to add nothing new, and might have been improved by input from the women concerned (Sigourney Weaver and Jane Fonda). Jane Fonda's candid reflections on the Barbarella role are readily available. Sigourney Weaver's opinions on Ripley's sexuality may be more nuanced, but they are equally accessible. If her director is allowed to speak, and the actor is silenced, doesn't this amount to complicity with the objectifying misogyny that's being discussed? But personal testimony is not lacking elsewhere. Lathers identifies herself from the outset as a woman who has dreamed of Outer Space, who has longed to be part of that great adventure, who has immersed herself in the science behind space travel, and felt the same rebuff as the excluded women of the sixties. In her conclusion she recounts her dismay at encountering the anecdote about Hawking's "bet" with Kip Thorne (in Stephen Hawking's popular science blockbuster, *A Brief History Of Time,* 1988). If Black Holes don't exist, Hawking gets a subscription to *Private Eye*; if their existence is proven, Thorne gets a year's subscription to *Penthouse*). Every woman's path into the territory of science and technology is littered with booby-traps. Sally Ride's 1983 mission was a propaganda triumph. Back on earth, Ride still had to endure the usual, commonplace workspace denigration: "A woman is a COCK pit" (Lathers, 206). The surface is smoother than in 1960, but as the story of Kip Thorne's booby prize demonstrates, attitudes are slow to change. Are female astronauts still tokens, hired for propaganda? In the last decade of the Space Shuttle, NASA could display female mission specialists, female pilots, even female Afro-American astronauts! But Mae Jemison flew one mission, and left NASA in 1993,

(in her chapter notes, Lathers reports the casual opinion of an unnamed NASA employee: "Jemison was never meant to last"). Joan Higginbotham quit the program abruptly in 2007.

Today, the Shuttle's career is over. The entire future of NASA's human space flight program is uncertain, despite discussion of a manned mission to Mars, perhaps in mid-century (ominously, the unisex term "crewed" has rather fallen into abeyance in recent years). Whether or not Women in Space still have a fight on their hands, their prospects in the USA may be limited. I wonder will the female *taikonauts* to come have an easier ride?

ENDNOTE

[i] An account of the WISP testing can be found (accessed 24th August 11) at: http://advan.physiology.org/content/33/3/157.full.pdf+html