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For All Mankind: Gendered Representations of the Astronaut in Contemporary US Television

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ABSTRACT

This article examines shifts in representations of masculinity in the figure of the astronaut by analyzing the Apple TV+ series *For All Mankind* (2019–present). Representations of astronauts have been an important cornerstone of US science fiction television. In recent years, the traditional twentieth-century image of the astronaut has been destabilized by broader cultural developments, both in fiction and real life. *For All Mankind* exemplifies this shift in the image of the gendered figure of the astronaut. The alternative history science fiction series sheds light on the relationship between white masculinity and the cultural production of outer space travel. In *For All Mankind*, the astronaut becomes a negotiating ground for the rearticulation of masculinity while enabling a revisionist, imagined US history.

KEYWORDS

Television series, space travel, masculinity, outer space, gender roles, alternate history fiction

Introduction: The Changing Face (and Little Else) of the Space Race

The cultural figure of the astronaut has been and continues to be one of the defining keystones of American popular culture. Starting in the late 1950s, and becoming more prominent throughout the Cold War and the Space Race era, the predominantly white male image of the astronaut persisted and became a key element in the construction of US national identity. With the end of the Space Race, discourses

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around space exploration and the figure of the astronaut received less attention. As we are witnessing currently a renewed interest in space exploration, both in reality and in the cultural imaginary, a new wave of representations of the space-faring human has emerged across various media, especially within the last decade, destabilizing conventional masculine representations of the astronaut (Keeler 128).

For All Mankind (2019–present) is a prominent example of a recent influx of television shows centering on astronauts and spaceflight representing the renewed interest in revived space exploration narratives in television and film. Netflix's *Away* (2020), National Geographic's *Mars* (2016–2018), Syfy's *The Ark* (2023–present) and *Ascension* (2014), and Apple TV+'s *Constellation* (2024) provide further examples of this phenomenon. In the alternative history universe of *For All Mankind*, the Soviet Union manages to outpace the United States in the race to land humans on the Moon. The pilot episode begins with the image of the disappointment and collective trauma of US television viewers as they watch the fictionalized version of the (real) cosmonaut Alexei Leonov planting the Soviet flag on the Moon and saying: "I take this step for my country, for my people, and for the Marxist-Leninist way of life, knowing that today is but one small step on a journey that someday will take us all to the stars" ("Red Moon" 00:05:27–06:21). The series focuses on the United States' efforts to defeat the Soviet Union in the race to establish a settlement on the Moon and later on Mars. The alternative history of *For All Mankind* is predicated on another early moment in the show's first season when the Soviet Union catches the United States off guard when the (fictional) Soviet cosmonaut Anastasia Belikova (Rita Khrabrovitsky) becomes the first woman to set foot on the Moon. This makes the US public and the government rethink the male-dominated image of the US astronaut, prompting NASA to inaugurate an all-female astronaut class. In reality, NASA's first female astronaut and the first US-American woman in outer space, Sally Ride, traveled into Low Earth Orbit only in 1983, twenty years after the spaceflight of Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova (Uri). *For All Mankind* depicts an alternative US (and Western) history of the 1960s to 1990s. Civil rights and social emancipation movements advance faster and more successfully, achieving early victories in legislative fights against gender and race-based inequalities. These social changes are catalyzed by the popular and inspiring image of the women in outer space in the program. Representational wins – such as including people of color and women in the selection process for astronauts, as well as for women holding executive positions at NASA and elsewhere within the US government – are indicators of a symbiotic techno-social progress. This includes the widespread use of electric cars by the 1990s and the deployment of Helium-3, a Moon-mined resource, as fuel for advanced nuclear fusion reactors. In the world of the series, these developments are made possible by the continued Space Race (and Cold War) between

the United States and the Soviet Union, with a sustained emphasis on human spaceflight as well as lunar, and eventually interplanetary, colonization. In *For All Mankind*, the public's trust in technology and science persists, resulting in social and technological progress.

This article argues that *For All Mankind*'s revisionist space narrative simultaneously challenges and reinscribes astronauts' traditional masculinity, using the crisis of white male relevance as a vehicle for renegotiating US national identity in the twenty-first century. While the series appears to progressively diversify the astronaut corps, it ultimately reanimates colonial space-faring myths by centering the emotional and existential struggles of its white male protagonists – Ed Baldwin (Joel Kinnaman) and Gordo Stevens (Michael Dorman) – as the primary perspectives through which to understand social change. Rather than simply replacing old masculinities with new ones, the show reveals how white masculinity adapts and persists even within ostensibly progressive narratives of inclusion.

The series depicts an alternative Cold War history beginning in the 1960s and extending into the early 2000s through its fourth season. Throughout this reimagined timeline, the sentiments behind two popular slogans from opposing political sides from recent US history merge: "Make America Great Again" and "Trust the Science." Together, these slogans create an imaginary history of the United States that is both "great again" and simultaneously grounded in a trust in science and technology. *For All Mankind*'s engagement with contemporary political anxieties through alternative history aligns with its creator's broader body of work. The show's main creator, Ronald D. Moore, is known for using science fiction to comment on present-day politics; his work on *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–2009) has been the focus of many scholarly articles that explore his reinterpretation of the politics of the post-9/11 War on Terror portraying various tensions related to race, gender, and reproductive biopolitics (Kustritz; Hellstrand). *For All Mankind* represents a step further in his efforts to use science fiction as explicit commentary on contemporary US culture and politics by deploying the genre to represent alternative history. In recent years, streaming platforms have seen a surge of alternative history series such as *Loki* (2021–2023), *Watchmen* (2019), *The Man in the High Castle* (2015–2019), and *Bandersnatch* (2018), which provide revisionist perspectives on aspects of Western history (Osur 157). This interest in alternative history parallels a general trend towards creating contemporary television shows with nostalgic elements (Niemeyer and Wentz 129) that offer reinterpretations of the twentieth century and, more specifically, Cold War history such as *Chernobyl* (2019), *Stranger Things* (2016–present), and *The Americans* (2013–2018) (Knewitz). The astronaut figure in *For All Mankind* also reflects a broader societal sentiment in contemporary US society associated with the slogan "Make America Great Again," i.e., longing for a supposedly

better era of US history. This crisis of identity is expressed by the series' male astronauts' lament that being an astronaut is "not what it used to be." Beyond providing a glimpse into the imaginary "great" era of the United States, *For All Mankind* gives the (US) viewer the ability to take pleasure in rereading and re-imagining their history, a history represented with fewer problems and less conflict, with more unity and social harmony as compared to its non-fictional counterpart. The show utilizes "deepfake" video and audio material depicting past US presidents and historical figures, including a "recording" of a phone call between Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, in an effort to present a convincing image of an alternative Cold War timeline, one not limited to spaceflight but also in other political and social aspects of the time.

To demonstrate its argument concerning the show's representations and positioning of masculinities, this article proceeds through three interrelated analytical sections. First, I examine how *For All Mankind* positions Ed Baldwin and Gordo Stevens as figures of white masculine crisis, analyzing how their characterizations embody the tensions between settler colonial ideology and versions of contemporary masculinity while simultaneously exploring the disembodiment and corporeal anxieties inherent in spaceflight. Second, I examine the series' fundamental status as a narrative about US-American suburbia, demonstrating how domestic spaces and nuclear family structures become the primary sites where masculine relevance is negotiated and where the show's nostalgic vision of national identity coheres. Finally, I analyze how the series' ostensibly progressive representation of women and people of color ultimately reinforces individualist narratives that depoliticize collective struggle, while the emotional interiority and existential crises of white male astronauts remain narratively privileged. Through close textual analysis across these three dimensionalities – embodiment and colonial masculinity, suburban domesticity, and the tension between collective and individual progress – I reveal how *For All Mankind*'s revisionist history maintains white male centrality even as it superficially diversifies the identities of the astronaut corps.

Two of the central male characters of *For All Mankind* are Edward Baldwin, one of NASA's early astronauts, and his closest friend, Gordon "Gordo" Stevens. They represent the masculine, traditional twentieth-century image of the astronaut archetype – yet their narrative dominance in a diversified space program reveals the show's deeper ideological tensions. In the context of the series' broader engagement with nostalgia and historical revisionism, Ed and Gordo become focal points for exploring contemporary anxieties about the role and relevance of masculinity and how such anxieties are managed through narratives that appear progressive while maintaining white male centrality. The show's first three seasons predominantly focus on the stories of Ed and Gordo, encapsulating their conflicts and crises as the series attempts to define the relevancy of twenty-first century American masculinity.

The Astronaut: Crux of Crises of Masculinity and Empire

The cultural portrayal of the astronaut in the twentieth-century United States reflects a deeply embedded narrative of national identity and idealized masculinity. According to Dario Llinares, the astronaut counts among the most prevalent symbols of twentieth-century US national identity and is closely tied to the construction of an idealized middle-class suburban masculinity. In *The Astronaut: Cultural Mythology and Idealized Masculinity*, Llinares argues that during the Cold War era, the image of the astronaut was first mostly constructed via the intense coverage of *Life* magazine and, later, through Hollywood cinema which mediated an image of an idealized "breadwinner" family man, reconstituting the rules of the renewed colonial relationship between man and nature. This image reinforced the dichotomies of public-versus-private and human-versus-nature as mediated through the portrayal of the US space-farer – in the real world and in fiction (36).

The figure of the astronaut serves as a contested symbol of masculinity, evolving from a technocratic ideal to a site of cultural renegotiation around gender and race. Llinares points to an emphasis on technical control and mastery in representations of the astronaut and the shift of the astronaut's characterization from an active pilot to a more passive *passenger*, who, to some extent, becomes mere payload inside the spaceship: "[T]he astronaut is passive, yielding, objectified, vulnerable and disembodied by the technology around him" (140). The militarized ideal of the skilled fighter pilot coupled with the fetishization of technical expertise constructs a dominant form of idealized masculinity – one in which manhood is inextricably tied to technological mastery. Nevertheless, the astronaut witnesses a destabilization of this patriarchal configuration:

> Space flight, from the training to the journey itself, essentially removes the body as a reference point for masculine experience. When one considers the journey into space, the astronaut is strapped in, unable to move, while all piloting and guidance are controlled remotely from the ground. The entry into zero gravity is another stage in the disembodiment with weightlessness nullifying strength and the pressure suit facilitating all "normal" bodily functions. The very definition of an astronaut at this point was an "experienced zombie" who would lie there and do nothing while his rectally inserted biomedical sensor relayed the fact that he was still alive. (Llinares 141)

In earlier films such as *The Right Stuff* (1983) and *Armageddon* (1998), these contradictions, and the various ensuing crises of masculinity, are examined through the figure of the astronaut. In contemporary film and television, the depictions of astronauts have been increasingly focused on their negotiating of contemporary tensions related to gender and race. Through its inherent destabilization of constructs related to the embodied forms of gender tied to strength and ability, the figure of the astronaut – on and off screen – inhabits discussion around the cultural tensions linked to existing heteropatriarchal and racist formations that have emerged since

the mid-twentieth century. Films such as *Ad Astra* (2019) and *First Man* (2018), and series such as *The Astronaut Wives Club* (2015), *Away* (2020), *Mars* (2016–2018), and the 2018 remake of *Lost in Space* show the astronaut at the intersection of multiple debates around gender and race. *For All Mankind*, however, stands out as the one tackling a palette of issues related to twenty-first-century political instabilities through a revisionist narrative of the previous century. The show's portrayal of the astronaut sets the ground upon which popular – and predominantly US-American – cultural debates occur. At its most visible level, the show tells the story of women and people of color who have been historically excluded from spaceflight – joining the ranks of the astronauts earlier and in greater numbers than in actual history. Through this media representation, it imagines a more just United States in terms of gender and racial (in)equalities. Nevertheless, this progressive surface narrative obscures a contradictory image of the masculine astronaut, who navigates and negotiates his new role within reconfigured social structures. What is striking is that even within a storyline where women appear to take the lead, it is men's attempts to rearticulate their identity and relevancy that ultimately take center stage. Through the conflict-ridden and crisis-laden portrayals of Ed's and Gordo's masculinities, *For All Mankind* strives to reposition the US explorer figure on the final frontier, offering broader representations that still perpetuate the same masculine ideology, albeit occasionally detached from its traditional white male embodiment and performed by women and people of color.

In his analysis of the image of the astronaut, Llinares reacts to Jack Halberstam's argument about masculinity's hegemonic power. As Halberstam argues in *Female Masculinity*:

> If what we call "dominant masculinity" appears to be a naturalized relation between maleness and power, then it makes little sense to examine men for the contours of that masculinity's social construction. Masculinity . . . becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body. (2)

According to Llinares, the understanding of masculinity for men is a corporeal experience of the self, this is an understanding that is central to the configuration of his identity: "Representations of an 'essential' interrelationship between male identity and the male body links modes of idealization across historical or contextual shifts" (45). Although the "essential" link between the male body and masculinity is central to the construction of the traditional astronaut figure, an important instrument in shaping US heteronormative national identity and idealized masculinity, current representations of the astronaut serve a different purpose. In times of culture wars, the astronaut becomes a site for negotiating a masculinity in crisis.

The novel images of spaceflight on screen correlate with Halberstam's argument about the disembodiment of masculinity. The post-Cold War and – more crucially –

the post-9/11 astronaut figure is no longer necessarily embodied. Instead, colonial masculinity strives for universalization, becoming rearticulated through its performance by subjects of diverse races and genders. *For All Mankind*'s revived image of the astronaut and its depiction of spaceflight-driven alternative historical politics seek to decouple the Western view of the final frontier, as well as its brave explorer, from the male body, if not from masculine archetypes. It also celebrates the inclusion of previously marginalized groups in this process while selectively dismantling some hegemonic gender and race structures. Whereas the traditional astronaut figure symbolized masculine potency, strength, and bravery, *For All Mankind* positions the male astronaut as its focal point for illustrating challenges to the patriarchal and racist structures of the status quo. The Space Race era's monolithic image of the astronaut was closely tied to the construction of a dominant national identity and the heteronormative nuclear family. Today, however, the figure is fundamentally contradictory: First, it serves as a vessel for narratives to depict a crisis of masculinity; second, and more crucially, it operates within a framework where Western moral values of colonial expansion and imperialism are both universalized and diversified.

In the postcolonial era, the language, imagery, and representations of colonialism partially sublimed into or were recuperated within the imaginary of outer space (Kerslake 23; Kilgore 168), finding a new haven: "Space offered the prospect of a renewed form of settler colonization, this time into a zone safely free from human difference" (Redfield 792). In this reinvented and reimagined colonial domain, disembodied masculinities operate as a bastion for Western morality, imperial expansion, and conquest. They also safeguard the anthropocentric values of humanism, where space exploration affirms the hegemonic conception of "mankind" (Ganser et al. 283).

For All Mankind's early episodes characterize male astronauts as reckless, almost childish adventure-seekers. Significant emphasis is also placed on their disregard for both their own safety, and that of others, through scenes, for example, of them racing their sports cars on public roads. The series starts with the premise that the United States needs to be put "back on track," as the United States' decision not to land the Apollo 10 mission results in the Soviet Union becoming the first country to land humans on the Moon. The failure also makes the astronauts, including Ed and Gordo, question the "culture of safety" at NASA, claiming that the calculated agenda of scientists and engineers has stopped them from "being on the bleeding edge of things" ("Red Moon" 00:21:11–21:49). Ed, disgruntled by the Soviets gaining the advantage in the Space Race, tells a journalist: "We don't have guts at NASA anymore, since the fire. The Apollo 1 fire . . . Good men die in test planes all the time. But we don't change the whole culture of flight tests 'cause good men die . . . We

stopped taking risks at NASA" ("Red Moon" 00:22:07–23:40). The dissatisfaction of the original, all-male class of the Mercury astronauts with NASA not only signals a crisis within a masculinity defined by risk-hungry characteristics, but the depiction of the "safety first" culture as a failure also speaks to a broader crisis in US national identity. "American exceptionalism" legitimizes the taking of risks, even to the point of endangering one's life – and almost needless to say, those of subaltern others – in defiance of established rules in order to combat dangers framed as external and originating from the Other. This "trailblazer" narrative, which is appropriated from US settler colonialism, strives to find its home in outer space. For Ed and like-minded characters in *For All Mankind*, the reality of the Soviets becoming the frontrunners in space exploration implies a deeper crisis in US identity: Once they stop being "the greatest," they surrender, and "that's why [the US] lost the Moon" ("Red Moon" 00:22:07–23:40). This image of the US empire in the twenty-first century resembles how *For All Mankind* portrays the failure of NASA to fulfill John F. Kennedy's promise of making the United States the first country to land humans on the Moon; the patriotic message is that, in the face of setbacks, "we pick ourselves up and go back to work" ("He Built the Saturn V" 00:43:38–52).

In contrast to how *For All Mankind* portrays its female characters, the series explores the crises of its male characters on a deeper level. Except for one of the main characters, Karen Baldwin (Shantel VanSanten) – who we see transitioning from an astronaut wife and homemaker to, at first, a bartender then a bar owner, and then, later still, to an entrepreneur and executive of a private spaceflight company – most of the female characters' storylines only tangentially explore the contradictions and dilemmas of their psychological complexity. Characters of color, such as Aleida Rosales (Coral Peña), an undocumented immigrant who later becomes a high-ranking engineer at NASA, and Will Tyler, a Black astronaut who comes out as gay in a live-streamed message from Mars, are mostly depicted through reductive narratives focused on identity markers rather than psychological depth, giving the impression that they are only present to illustrate diversity among the astronauts and engineers.

While renegotiating some traditional gender roles, the show employs certain more recent gender stereotypes in characterizing the astronauts and their partners. The show presents a common gendered astronaut trope at the beginning of the first season's fifth episode. The male members of the Apollo 15 crew propose an impromptu alteration of the landing site on the Moon during the mission, a decision opposed by Molly Cobb (Sonya Walger), the first US woman who walks on the Moon in the series. This dynamic reflects a recurrent motif in contemporary media, as seen in the films *Interstellar* (2014) and *Gravity* (2013), where a cautious and risk-averse female perspective contrasts with the risk-taking, impulsive, and daring be-

havior typically coded as masculine. In high-stakes scenarios such as space exploration, men are often characterized by reckless bravery that defies logic, akin to adventurers and explorers. Meanwhile, women are portrayed as scientists or engineers embodying calculated risk-aversion and responsibility. This enduring imagery positions men as adventurous test pilots and women as methodical scientists in speculative space exploration narratives, reflecting a broader pattern in post-2010s film and television (Brassett, Heine 765; Palmer 30).

The series, with its strong emphasis on the family lives of the astronauts, juxtaposes Ed's wife, Karen Baldwin, with Molly Cobb's husband, Wayne (Lenny Jacobson). Karen exhibits a composed and restrained demeanor, refraining from expressing emotions; she even claims she never dreams. In contrast, Molly's husband easily shares his most intimate feelings. Over time, as the friendship between Karen and Wayne evolves, Karen begins to undergo noticeable emotional changes, a transformation further intensified by the tragic loss of her son. Her dedication to her domestic role and commitment as a wife is repeatedly emphasized through her assertion that her daily rhythm aligns with her husband's activities on the Moon. However, Karen's interactions with Wayne reveal a complex emotional undercurrent. Karen's visit to Wayne's apartment – where she is confronted with his marijuana use and unsettling paintings of Molly depicted as dead on the Moon – elicits her visible discomfort and disapproval, revealing her deeper rejection of his lifestyle, coping mechanisms, and emotional vulnerability. This moment complicates Karen's self-image and raises questions about whether her simmering anger undermines the ideals she associates with her domestic role. This frustration later surfaces in her interactions with others, such as Tracy Stevens (Sarah Jones), an emancipated housewife turned astronaut, and suggests a form of internalized sexism and self-rationalization. While such traits might be realistic for a character like Karen, they come to dominate her portrayal in the narrative, only to be challenged later. Wayne's criticism of Karen's attempt to maintain control – "you can't control things with positive thought" ("Into the Abyss" 00:29:04–30:07) – functions as an intervention that destabilizes her role as a housewife.

In episode nine of the first season, Karen Baldwin highlights the implicit connection between spaceflight, societal and technological progress, and US-American identity through the experience of her marriage: "My parents were Irish immigrants. And Ed was very different than them. So American. You know, obsessed with cars and airplanes and rockets. All of the fantastic machines that were gonna whisk us off to a great big, beautiful tomorrow" ("Bent Bird" 00:27:05–35). Ed embodies two crucial aspects of the astronaut figure: his "Americanness," which contrasts with Karen and her family's heritage, and his focus on mobility and technology, which was supposed to lead everyone to a brighter future. However, that promised future

proves disappointing, signaling that the "better tomorrow" has never truly materialized. In the image of the astronaut, Ed represents the contemporary shortcomings of the US experience. Karen's cynicism about her marriage and the space program becomes clear in a rare moment of introspection when she admits: "I guess I just wanted to be a part of the adventure." Molly's husband Wayne responds: "Like he is the pilot, and you are his copilot," to which Karen then adds with resignation: "Yeah, only somehow, over the years, I became part of the ground crew" ("Bent Bird" 00:27:35–48). At this point, Karen acknowledges her transition from housewife and Ed's passive supporter to feeling detached from these roles. She continues: "I know things have to change. I don't even know what my life is anymore" ("Bent Bird" 00:28:00–08). Following the death of her son, Karen undergoes a significant transformation, emerging as a fully realized character. This marks a significant rupture with the traditional "housewife narrative" that had previously defined her character. Karen now feels an aversion toward the seemingly "perfect" and "content" housewives of the other astronauts she encounters. They evoke in her a sense of discomfort and alienation. She finds solace in the company of Wayne, with whom she shares an intimate moment of rebellion as they smoke marijuana. He symbolizes a form of masculinity that is less toxic and which serves as a counterpoint to the conventional suburban lifestyle, for example, by living in an apartment rather than a suburban home. His personal narrative of breaking free from societal constraints profoundly influences Karen, further catalyzing her character's development.

Gordo's experiences in the fifth episode of the first season further explore the theme of masculinity under threat. He is affronted when the military veteran husband (Edwin Hodge) of Danielle Poole (Krys Marshall), NASA's first Black astronaut, makes light of Gordo's decision not to serve in the Vietnam War. Gordo's sense of self is undermined by his lack of military service and spaceflight experience and further shaken when he is replaced by a female astronaut on the Apollo 15 mission. Much like Karen, Gordo's characterization emphasizes his failures in the traditional social roles; he perceives himself as being insufficient in fulfilling both the strong masculine role of the astronaut and the role of the suburban father.

Compared to the multiplicity of representations and the complexities of the astronauts' gender and racial identities, *For All Mankind* ultimately focuses on the crisis of the white American male. Molly says to Ed during their stay on the Moon: "Face it. We are egomaniacal narcissists. I bet Columbus was. And Magellan. And they had to be to do what they did. I say here's to selfish pricks. 'Cause we move the ball forward for mankind" ("Into the Abyss" 00:42:25–48). In the same episode, she crosses out the "man's" and "his" in her Moon mission patch, replacing both with "our." In Molly's references to Columbus and Magellan, which correspond with the failures in her and Ed's family lives, the justification for colonial exploration is

reimagined through disembodied masculinity channeled through the central character of a female astronaut. When she gender-neutralizes the pronoun on her mission patch but still chooses to use the word "mankind" to designate all humans, she implies that although the renewed narrative of space exploration and conquest shifts the white man from the center and partially replaces him with women, the axiomatic colonial values of "man" remain unchanged. Patriarchal masculinity is (pro)nominally rejected through her linguistic revision, but the colonial ideology embodied by figures such as Columbus and Magellan remains intact and is actively preserved.

The initial problematization and subsequent restoration of the status of the male colonial explorer are also aspects of Ed's storyline. Throughout the first three seasons, Ed repeatedly loses and regains his relevance as a top-performing astronaut. For example, Ed's passing on of his position as the Chief of the Astronaut Office to Molly is highlighted by an interesting detail: When he vacates his office, he is shown taking down a *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) film poster, which signals the transition to Molly stepping into his former role. This scene suggests a rearticulation of the image of the male explorer, negotiating his place in the renewed power structure. The significance of Ed's reverence of *Lawrence of Arabia* not only evokes a connection to "old-fashioned" masculinity but also underscores the colonial foundation of his character, as represented by his admiration of a particular filmic depiction of an imperial colonial officer. In the early episodes of season three, Ed's advanced age is emphasized. He is divorced, unhappy, and injects himself with steroids in order to stay in shape. Unable to find a job at NASA, he starts exploring opportunities in the private sector. Despite multiple challenges and pitfalls, Ed is narratively positioned as the hero who saves the day at the end of numerous events. The deprecated, but nevertheless still persistent, heroism of Ed is contrasted with the conflicted masculinity of the younger astronaut Danny Stevens (Casey W. Johnson). Danny's chaotic and destructive actions, such as deliberately causing the deaths of fellow astronauts on Mars, as well as his agitated and reactionary nature and immaturity illustrate a counterpoint in contemporary masculinities. Danny's destructive and, at times, misogynistic behavior symbolizes the struggles of the "new" hegemonic formation. In *For All Mankind*, no new generation of men seems to be up to the task of grabbing the (literal) flag from the older generation of astronauts. A viable new model of the masculine astronaut fails to emerge.

Another way in which *For All Mankind* explores the crisis of American masculinity and its entanglement with colonial mythology is through Gordo's psychological unraveling on the Moon. In the seventh episode of the first season, Ed, Gordo, and Danielle are stranded on the Moon, unable to return to Earth on their scheduled return mission. This situation causes psychological distress, especially for Gordo,

who embodies the self-destructive troubles of contemporary American masculinity. As his mental health deteriorates in the confinement of the base, he starts to take voluntary walks outside. These unscheduled "extravehicular activities," which he calls "apartment hunting" in reference to his soon-to-be ex-wife's search for an apartment back home, help him cope. During these walks, as he wanders through the uncharted territory of the Moon, he reminds himself that he is the first person ever to see these views. In one scene, while Gordo and Ed are out "apartment hunting" after a stressful situation at the base, Gordo complains about his lack of joy in his work as an astronaut:

> Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone. Pioneers. Going out into the wilderness and blazing a trail to where no man has gone before. That's why I like it out here. No man's gone here. No man. Just me. But that's not the job anymore. Not really. Now it's just homesteading. Build a cabin, plow the field. Put up fences to keep out the neighbors. I mean, look around you, Ed, we're on the edge of the known universe. The frontier starts right here. A whole universe just waiting to be explored, and what are we doing? Playing house. That's not what I signed up for. Not what I signed up for at all ("Hi Bob" 00:42:48–43:40).

This monologue is a crucial moment that embodies the tensions between the militarist, settler colonialist ideology and contemporary American masculinity. The decline of the risk-taker military pilot as the model for astronauts and the idealization of bravery, curiosity, and pioneering qualities as inherently masculine are posited against the reality of the mundane spaceflight experience, at times putting the astronauts in a mere passenger or caretaker position. Gordo's gendered language juxtaposes his view of the traditional masculine risk-taker/explorer tasks of the astronaut with his idea of feminine-coded work of "homesteading" and "playing house." In this moment, the series lays bare the astronaut's symbolic status as a site of masculine crisis – where the mythology of frontier conquest is both mourned and reanimated – revealing how spaceflight narratives remain tethered to colonial fantasies even as they gesture toward progress.

Later in the aforementioned episode, Ed directs his son to "start acting like a man" during a video call, which encapsulates a recurring theme in his characters' interactions: relationships defined by rigid masculine hierarchies and emotional repression. This problematic, masculine-coded behavior extends to his relationships with both his son and Gordo. His simultaneous decision to ground his son and place Gordo under house arrest at the Moon base illustrates a form of toxic masculinity that harms those around him. Ed remains oblivious to Gordo's deteriorating mental state. Unlike Danielle, who becomes aware of Gordo's struggles, Ed believes that the confinement will help. Similarly, he perceives his punitive approach toward his son as a form of discipline, failing to see its harmful consequences. When Danielle voices concern about Gordo's health, Ed dismisses her by saying, "Gordo's

tough, he'll be fine," ("Hi Bob" 00:30:29–58) before launching into an account from his time in the Korean War. His story about surviving in a forest, confronting a colonel, and later indulging in whiskey at a hotel evokes the quintessentially masculine tropes of resilience and self-reliance. It also includes the gendered myth of whiskey-fueled emotional repression, a staple in representations of troubled male heroism. The anecdote not only reinforces Ed's adherence to models of conventional masculinity but also draws attention to the series' male-centered narrative. Danielle's immediate reference to her husband's struggles, too, centers a secondary male character rather than the main female characters. It also juxtaposes the psychological trauma experienced by her Black husband with Ed's wartime experiences and emphasizes the contrast between their trajectories. The war veteran archetype, a recurring motif exemplified by the male astronauts of the series, serves as a representation of dysfunctional masculinity in need of restoration (Theweleit 434).

Gordo undergoes a significant change when he is metaphorically and literally saved by the self-sacrificial efforts of a Black woman, forcing his masculine identity into wholesale crisis. Danielle jeopardizes her astronaut career by deliberately injuring herself to trigger a rescue mission back to Earth, with the aim of freeing Gordo from his psychological distress. This can be interpreted in two ways: a clever engagement with contemporary diversity dynamics, or deeper symbolic undertones that ultimately reinscribe traditional hierarchies. Danielle's self-sacrifice risks functioning less as a progressive intervention and more as a narrative device that upholds the labor of a Black woman in service of restoring broken white masculinity. Gordo's lament over not only his personal failures but also the broader decline of test and military pilots lies at the heart of the narrative of broken masculinity. It serves as a poignant commentary on the representation of male astronauts in film and television, showcasing the fragility behind the facade of heroism.

The relationship between Danielle and Ed reflects a clear contrast in their perspectives on space exploration. Ed frequently references his experience in the Korean War and exhibits a military mindset in his practice as an astronaut, and he emphasizes "our part" on the Moon, in opposition to the territory that "belongs" to the Soviets. His outlook aligns with a territorial approach, marked by a divided and competitive vision of lunar exploration. This mentality clashes with Danielle's disapproval of such division and hostility. Ed attempts to justify his perspective by asserting that "whoever plants the flag first, owns it . . . Ask the pilgrims," drawing a parallel between space exploration and settler colonialism. Danielle responds incisively, "And what if I ask the Indians," ("Hi Bob" 00:18:20–48) challenging Ed's conquest-based mindset and underscoring her stance towards transnational cooperation in space exploration.

This exchange exemplifies the series' broader narrative about the decline of patriarchal hegemony and the "problematic" dimensions of the American experience. *For All Mankind* invites its viewers to grieve in response to the decline of the familiar values associated with the "old" America. This grieving is experienced through the narrative of the decline of the male astronaut; it becomes the site where issues regarding the nuclear family, American identity rooted in settler colonialism, as well as structural racism and sexism are entangled. The male astronauts' personal struggles and fraught relationships to their work culminate into a narrative of a foiled American experience of masculinity, one rooted in the twenty-first century but psychically situated in the twentieth.

Outer Space and US-American Suburbia: Dual Peripheries

For All Mankind is, at heart, a series about US suburbia. Despite its space exploration premise, the show devotes substantial screen time to the domestic spaces of suburban single-family homes, where the series' central interpersonal conflicts and gender politics play out. The show revisits the 1960s' image of the astronaut, idealized as the breadwinner/family man of the US-American suburban nuclear family. The show's nostalgia lies not only in its revisionist account of the Space Race. It is also a homage to the history of television, especially of the 1960s and 1970s. The first human-piloted flights to the Moon were televised events with large audiences. Approximately 600 million people around the world watched Apollo 11's first Moon landing live (Hsu). According to Lynn Spigel (114), Kennedy's promise to land US astronauts on the Moon by the end of the 1960s also became US television's promise to its viewers. In the late 1950s, television networks were seeking new avenues for reinvention, as the family sitcoms of that decade had begun to feel outdated to viewers. This sense of obsolescence reflected a profound crisis related to the suburban American Dream's social and economic limitations. As Spigel argues, the Space Race provided the television networks with what they were looking for: a cultural space where suburban "anxieties about everyday life could be addressed, albeit through a series of displacements and distortions" (117), and where the fantasy and the reality of the new space-faring agenda of the United States merged. US television in the 1960s was eager to deliver a new future to its viewers. With the advent of the space program, it also rejoiced in the new futuristic prospect of the "final frontier." The already well-established connection between US suburbia and television ascended to outer space and to other fantastic locations in the 1960s, and "presented critical views of contemporary suburban life by using tropes of science fiction to make the familial strange" (122). Further, in the 1950s and 1960s, the distinct subgenre of science fiction literature described as "Galactic Suburbia" accommodated a critique of the post-war technological landscape of US suburban life, as

well as of the role of women concerning domestic labor, which was going through a process of mechanization that could be described as the industrialization of home (Yaszek 8). Galactic Suburbia fiction shed light on how technological advancement might intensify, rather than eradicate, traditional gender roles (Church). According to Spigel, the outer space family dramas of the 1960s, such as *Lost in Space*, *Men into Space*, *My Favorite Martian*, and *I Dream of Jeannie* concealed a layer of critical reflection on suburban life inside fantastic narratives of space travel. *For All Mankind*, however, has a more complicated and contradictory relationship with its idea of the revisionist past and contemporary present. It promises the viewer a renewed, emancipated, or revolutionized imaginary world – an alternative historical setting in which certain long-desired societal changes are portrayed as having already occurred. Yet conversely, at its core, *For All Mankind* delivers a nuclear family drama in which heteronormative, traditional middle-class suburban values fight for their survival within the fantastic veneer of space travel and/or alternative history fiction.

The Fall of Collective Emancipation and the Rise of Individual Success

By depicting the inclusion of women and people of color in spaceflight in the 1960s and 1970s, *For All Mankind* presents the advancement of spaceflight and technology alongside the progress of the era's social movements. The show includes archival footage of actual historical events, such as the fight for gender equality by the proponents of the Equal Rights Amendment and other progressive struggles of the time. For example, episode three of season one, features a short, fast-paced montage of various images from the 1970s, including a brief glimpse of the Association of Communist Workers from the UK demonstrating with their banners. Images of the working class and women's rights movements are only deployed within the individual success stories of the characters as part of the aspirational narratives of their career advancements. Ellen Waverly (Jodi Balfour), whose story is shaped by her closeted sexual identity and who advances her career from being in the first class of female astronauts to becoming a Republican president of the United States, as well as the stories of Tracy and Karen, who both transition from astronaut-wives to an astronaut and to a successful businesswoman, respectively, exemplify *For All Mankind*'s central narrative of women's emancipation. Karen's emancipation story is closely linked to the loss of her son and her detachment from her role as a mother. Similarly, Tracy's narrative centers on her transformation from housewife to celebrity astronaut, representing emancipation through individual professional success rather than collective structural change. Other characters, such as Margo Madison (Wrenn Schmidt) and her protégée Aleida Rosales, also take advantage of changes at NASA. Margo's rise from engineer to NASA Director heavily draws on

tropes of capitalist individual success narratives. In the beginning, she is a mid-level NASA engineer and the protégée of a fictionalized version of the German rocket scientist Wernher Von Braun (Colm Feore), a former member of the Nazi regime who worked in weapons development in Nazi Germany before moving to the US to work for the US government. Margo ambitiously climbs the career ladder, becoming the first woman at mission control and eventually the director of NASA. Along the way, she appears to adopt traditionally masculine values, employing ruthless tactics such as blackmailing and other forms of corruption, methods portrayed as part of the status quo within NASA's internal power dynamics. The show implies that Margo's ambition to rise to the top at NASA is driven in part by the influence of her mentor, von Braun, and also by her father, a scientist who worked on the Manhattan Project. Her troubled relationships with her father and von Braun do not prevent her from taking career lessons from them. In the first season's sixth episode, which shapes Margo's narrative, von Braun gives her career advice during a heated and emotional discussion. He suggests privately using important information to help her career instead of leaking it to the press – which could benefit the public good. Margo follows his advice despite the ethical implications. The show largely overlooks the moral dilemma arising from blackmail and other questionable actions. Instead, it portrays Margo as a successful, career-driven woman who decides to play the game.

A similar progression is also present in the story of Aleida, who starts her journey as an undocumented immigrant crossing the Mexico-US border and later becomes a successful engineer at NASA. In both characters' stories, the challenges of their personal lives are set against their professional ambitions. For both characters, the presence of their fathers, or lack thereof, plays a crucial role in the development of their individual success stories (Ganser 156). The men of the "old order" remain present in *For All Mankind* as diminished, yet persistent, figures, not entirely superseded but rather partially sustained by women in positions of power who reproduce hegemonic structures even as they appear to challenge them. Instead of offering an alternative history, revised to include a more just society, the show decontextualizes the collective and social struggles of the real world 1960s and 1970s working-class and leftist movements. It uses their revolutionary image to amplify the individual achievements within a capitalist society, reducing emancipation to a matter of personal aspiration while downplaying collective potential. The show's focus on individual success stories of women – emphasizing personal emancipation as professional advancement within a seemingly homogeneous society that obscures class contradictions – constitutes a form of the idealized post-feminist businesswoman (Calkin 24). The individualist feminism of *For All Mankind* neither aims to destroy the specter of hegemonic masculinity nor challenges the gender binary.

As Mari Ruti writes, through neoliberal ideals of relentless self-improvement and cheerful conformity, gender stereotyping remerges under the guise of empowerment, with women themselves sometimes reclaiming the very stereotypes they once resisted:

> If we take gender stereotyping as a sign of heteropatriarchy's strong grip on our culture, it seems like things are actually sliding backward in our so-called postfeminist world in the sense that women, who a few decades ago tended to complain about gender stereotypes, are now sometimes on the front lines of arguing for their resurrection. (Ruti 94)

In *For All Mankind*, this idea seems to apply to stereotypes of both women and men. The 1960s American masculine image of the astronaut is partially resurrected to become a disembodied tool of capitalist domination that allows crisis-ridden white masculinity to be rehabilitated and recuperated. In the show's universe, the ideological formations of the structural positions of gender and race in US society are not fundamentally threatened, only slightly altered to accommodate an appearance of diversity. The new – but aged – astronauts strive to conserve vestiges of the twentieth-century US astronaut in themselves. As summarized by the fictionalized version of NASA's Chief of Astronaut Office, Deke Slayton (Chris Bauer), when he addresses the fictional queer astronaut Ellen Waverly: "I always knew you had a bit of John Glenn in you. I mean, yeah, you were quiet, a little hard on yourself, but when you walk into a room, people pay attention. When you speak, people listen" ("A City Upon a Hill" 00:28:30–50). In actual history, John Glenn, one of the original Mercury Seven astronauts and the first US-American to orbit Earth, had a troubling record of sexism and was initially against the inclusion of women in space travel, a stance he openly expressed during his speech at the US House Space Committee in 1962:

> I think this gets back to the way our social order is organized, really. It is just a fact. The men go off and fight the wars and fly the airplanes and come back and help design and build and test them. The fact that women are not in this field is a fact of our social order. (qtd. in Neufeld ch. 9)

This statement reveals the deeply entrenched gender assumptions of the era. By integrating Glenn's real-world views, *For All Mankind* signals how contemporary portrayals of diversity are haunted by historically exclusionary discourses. The persistence of these legacies complicates the show's attempt to present a progressive narrative. While new figures arise to challenge old norms, the shadow of mid-century masculinity remains firmly rooted within the institutional framework of space exploration.

This tension is exemplified in the final episode of the first season. Ellen, who has just ordered a stubborn Ed to step down as commander of the Moon base, addresses the nation as its sole occupant. Before the broadcast, she recalls the actual as-

tronaut Gene Cernan's remark: "[He] once told me that in space, even a girl can toss a football like Joe Namath" ("A City Upon a Hill" 00:58:58–59:16). This moment underscores a subtle yet persistent acknowledgment of traditional gender dynamics in a context that only partially seeks diversity. This sentiment reflects the broader cultural shift depicted, a nostalgic farewell to outdated models of masculinity, which are gradually being refined and reaffirmed rather than entirely dismantled. This dynamic is stressed in Ellen's eulogy for Deke Slayton, during which she praises him, despite his homophobic behavior towards her, and characterizes him as a product of a bygone era, subtly problematizing his traditional masculine-coded values. The timing of this speech, delivered during the season finale, further amplifies its thematic weight. While embodying a shift in the gender representation of the astronaut, Ellen's defense of space exploration derives its core beliefs from US space exploration myths. It is emblematic of settler colonial ideology, framing space exploration as an endeavor that necessitates sacrifices. This mirrors historical narratives such as the westward expansion of US settlers and the crossings of the Atlantic Ocean. Her justification draws attention to the deeply ingrained connections between US space exploration and colonialist rhetoric.

Ultimately, the conclusion of Ellen's speech aligns seamlessly with the motifs explored in scholarship on the intersections of suburban ideology and outer space narratives in television, as it is broadcast on television screens with the entire families of the astronauts gathered around. The portrayal of space travel as a vehicle for hope and progress reinforces the idea that societal advancement is intrinsically tied to space exploration, a recurring theme throughout the series that inextricably links social emancipation to space-faring ambitions. Ellen's white, queer femininity becomes a symbol of progress, partially discarding the problematic values associated with traditional masculinity – marked by a funeral for the "old-fashioned" Deke Slayton and her assumption of command at the Moon base from Ed. At the same time, however, she inherits, reinforces, and revitalizes the disembodied colonial explorer traits of the astronaut archetype.

Conclusion: From the Earth to the Moon and Back

The present-day figure of the astronaut represents a nexus for negotiations of contemporary masculinities and their crises as well as the grounding for the rearticulation and reinvention of US national identity. Among recent series with outer space narratives, *For All Mankind* emerges as a paradigmatic example of late 2010s and early 2020s streaming shows in its negotiation of the tensions surrounding the rearticulation of outdated (white) masculinities. Astronaut characters such as Ed Baldwin become vessels of many political and cultural debates related to US identities, embodying the contemporary US-American white man's attempt at conserving

his relevance and hegemony via the heteropatriarchal social formation. Space travel's inherent threats to the human body as well as its strong relationship to the construction of American identity in the twentieth century form the conditions for the astronaut figure to re-emerge as a cultural image that is contested and yet survives. Against the backdrop of renewed interest in space exploration and exploitation today, *For All Mankind* revitalizes the astronaut figure – not as a straightforward analogue of its previous status but as a multifaceted site of cultural crisis, masculine anxiety, and national reinvention. In doing so, the show reanimates the colonial myths of twentieth-century spaceflight, subtly reinforcing the ideological scaffolding it seeks to revise. Through a revisionist look back at Western history, *For All Mankind* partially exorcises "problematic" aspects of the dominant national narratives of twentieth-century US space travel. A new image of the astronaut appears with an identity that is more diverse, albeit integrally accompanied by the disembodied ghost of the traditional white male figure from the original mid-twentieth century iteration.

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