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IAF SPACE EDUCATION AND OUTREACH SYMPOSIUM (E1)
Space Culture: New Processes of Public Engagement in Space through Culture and Art (9)

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PROSE AT PERIHELION: POETRY AS A MEDIUM FOR SPACE ACCESSIBILITY, VISIBILITY, AND INCLUSIVITY

Abstract

On October 14, 2024, the Europa Clipper space probe was launched into space with U.S. poet laureate Ada Limón's "In Praise of Mystery: A Poem for Europa" etched into the spacecraft's vault plate. Nearly 2.6 million people submitted their names to be included with the poem on a microchip accompanying Limón's original work as part of NASA's "Message in a Bottle" campaign. The Europa Clipper will travel 1.8 billion miles to reach its final destination among Jupiter's Galilean moons, but the far-reaching effects of Limón's poem extend well beyond physical distances in outer space: Her work, and the work of countless other poets, highlight the humanistic perspective of space exploration. Poetry, a resilient medium for experiencing emotion and understanding the world around us, makes accessing the seemingly overwhelming complexity of space visible and inclusive.

Historically, women and other minorities have struggled to break into technical careers because of systemic obstacles. Creative writing has allowed for individuals of all backgrounds and educations to participate in STEM, regardless of technical ability. Our research explores the ways in which poetry has shaped the emerging field of humanistic science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (H-STEM) by allowing for people of diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives to engage in their own unique versions of space exploration and outreach. H-STEM, defined as "blending the study of STEM with interest in, and concern for, human affairs, welfare, values, or culture," has redefined the ways in which students, educators, and industry professionals gain experience and acquire skills for successful, enduring technical careers.

Through the multi-disciplinary lens of H-STEM, this research aims to compare the experiences of poets writing about space, analyze the integration of H-STEM into collaborations between poets and scientists, and synthesize these findings to understand the ways in which poetry about space has impacted accessibility to more deeply understand and appreciate scientific knowledge. Part of the study will be a methodological examination of texts that document not only the collaborative works of scientists and poets, but their perceptions of working together, like in Dark Matter: Poems of Space edited by Maurice Riordan and Jocelyn Bell Burnell. By analyzing what is gained and what might be lost when creative writers and scientists collaborate, this paper will highlight the ways in which integrating H-STEM allows for improved conceptual and practical engagement in space exploration beyond traditional technical means and conventional STEM education.