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"Gestures of Cosmic Relation and the Search for Another Earth"

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Astronomers searching for an Earth-like planet elsewhere in our galaxy imagine the significance of such a discovery. They tell each other a story about pointing to the star around which such an exoplanet exists and knowing with certainty that there is a world upon which humans could comfortably live. The story, told in white papers, at scientific conferences, and to broader publics, features a mother astronomer explaining to her children the potential worlds that await them in the cosmos. This essay uses this myth as a starting point to examine relationships between humans, outer space, Earth, and environment as astronomers stretch the concept of habitability beyond Earth and across the universe. The gesture of pointing embodies a tension, one that both pushes the analytic gaze outward while also pulling it back to Earth. This double movement frames analyses of contemporary understandings of Earth's place in the universe, of the mother astronomer as symbolic of both the progress of women's standing in science as well as a problematic rearticulation of women as close to nature, and of other social configurations the exoplanet imagination extends beyond Earth. Terrestrial entanglements spread through the galaxy, simultaneously decentering Earth as uniquely meaningful and holding up our planet as the ultimate destination. Outer space, far from being removed from Earthly matters, offers a different scale and perspective for examining technocultural relations. (Text from author's abstract)

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