

The African American Perspective on the 1969 Moon Landing

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Reflecting back on the space race of the 1960's, a history channel article from 2010 states: "Astronauts came to be seen as the ultimate American heroes, and earth-bound men and women seemed to enjoy living vicariously through them."<sup>1</sup> As a society, when we think back to sending astronauts to walk on the moon, arguably one of the greatest accomplishments of the United States and even humanity itself, it is generally with a triumphant and nostalgic mindset. However, at the time of this accomplishment, there were many Americans who were not in support of this endeavor, especially African Americans. In this paper, I will disprove the assertion made in the article entitled "The Space Race" about America's positive attitude towards space exploration by bringing to light the anti-space exploration opinions of African Americans in the 1960's. This paper will show why many African Americans at the time of the 1969 moon landing did not enjoy "living vicariously" through these so-called "heroes" and were not thrilled by the idea of the U.S. sending astronauts to the moon.

First, it is important to address why the U.S. invested billions of dollars into landing on the moon in the first place, and why some saw this as a good investment. During World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union were allies because both countries had a shared interest in defeating Germany and the Nazi party, led by Adolf Hitler.<sup>2</sup> However, after the war ended, the two countries dissolved the alliance because they had conflicting views on how Europe should be put back together after the war and the style of governance European countries should adopt.<sup>3</sup> The United States wanted Europe to adopt its "first-world" government, which was based on democracy and self-governance, while the Soviet Union wanted Europe to adopt its "second-

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<sup>1</sup> "The Space Race," *HISTORY* (c. 2019), February 22, 2010, <https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/space-race>.

<sup>2</sup> Class Lecture 4/1/19

<sup>3</sup> Robert A. Divine Et Al. "The Onset of the Cold War," in *America: Past and Present*, ed. Dickson Musslewhite (Boston: Pearson Education Inc., 2013), 666.

world” model of communism.<sup>4</sup> The U.S. was unwilling to financially assist Russia because of this disagreement “and thus deepened the growing antagonism between the Soviet Union and the United States.”<sup>5</sup> It was important for the U.S., which viewed itself as a defender of democracy, to be more powerful than the Soviet Union because many Americans feared the spread of communism around the world in what is known as the “second Red Scare” that occurred after World War II.<sup>6</sup> The rivalry between the U.S. and the Soviet Union increased when the U.S. developed the atomic bomb. Once Russia discovered the bomb, the two countries began an arms race, competing to develop the most powerful weapon in order to be seen as the strongest country in the world.<sup>7</sup> In 1957 the competition continued, but this time it was the Soviet Union who developed the technological advance. The Soviets shocked the U.S., and the world, by successfully launching the first satellite, *Sputnik*, into orbit.<sup>8</sup> The U.S. felt threatened by the impressive technology Russia possessed, and the country went into a state of panic that Russia had a rocket capable of reaching the U.S.<sup>9</sup> The next year the U.S. answered by launching a more sophisticated satellite into orbit called *Explorer*, but the U.S. was eager to do more to secure its position as the most powerful and technologically sophisticated country on the planet.<sup>10</sup>

In 1962, President John F. Kennedy announced in a speech at Rice University that the U.S. would put a man on the moon within a decade’s time, and thus win the space race and prove the U.S.’s superiority over the Soviet Union once and for all.<sup>11</sup> When the U.S. accomplished this goal in 1969, this symbolic victory was celebrated by the nation at large. However, there is

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<sup>4</sup> Class Lecture 4/1/19, Divine, “The Onset of the Cold War,” 666.

<sup>5</sup> Divine, “The Onset of the Cold War,” 667.

<sup>6</sup> Class Lecture 4/3/19

<sup>7</sup> Divine, “The Onset of the Cold War,” 668.

<sup>8</sup> Divine, “Affluence and Anxiety,” 694.

<sup>9</sup> Divine, “Affluence and Anxiety,” 694.

<sup>10</sup> Divine, “Affluence and Anxiety,” 695.

<sup>11</sup> John F. Kennedy, “Moon Speech” (speech, Rice University, Sept. 12, 1962), <https://er.jsc.nasa.gov/seh/ricetalk.htm>.

another side to this story of the moon landing that is less talked about in history books: the strong opposition to the moon landing among African Americans.

African Americans lacked basic civil rights in the 1960's, and lived as second-class citizens in their own country due to a long history of segregation and racism supported by many white Americans.<sup>12</sup> Political, social, and economic barriers held up by centuries of systemic racism caused poverty, which occurred at a disproportionate rate among African Americans.<sup>13</sup> In the 1950's, African Americans were left out of the trend of suburbanization, and the associated economic boom, as many white Americans moved into a new style of housing called "Levittowns," but refused to integrate their neighborhoods.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, President Kennedy did not fulfill his commitment to desegregate the South due to the political risks involved, and Vice President Lyndon Johnson's attempt to make improvements for African Americans with the Commission on Equal Employment Opportunities did not have much of an impact either.<sup>15</sup> Poverty was at its worst in Northern cities, "where more than half of the nation's African Americans lived in poverty."<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it is clear why the fact that the U.S. Government spent over \$24 billion dollars<sup>17</sup> on space exploration troubled many African Americans; with so many financial and economic problems facing the African American community here on Earth, such a large investment in space was an outrage.

One person who voiced the concern of African American poverty in the 60's in relation to the space race was Gil Scott-Heron, a poet, musician, and civil rights activist.<sup>18</sup> In his poem

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<sup>12</sup> Divine, "The Turbulent Sixties," 714.

<sup>13</sup> Divine, "The Turbulent Sixties," 714.

<sup>14</sup> Class Lecture 4/3/19

<sup>15</sup> Divine, "The Turbulent Sixties," 714.

<sup>16</sup> Divine, "The Turbulent Sixties," 728.

<sup>17</sup> "Jersey City B.P.P. Tells It Like It Is," *Black Panther (San Francisco, California)*, 16 August 1969, 20.

<sup>18</sup> "Gil Scott-Heron Biography," *The Biography.com website*, (c. 2019), May 25, 2017

<https://www.biography.com/people/gil-scott-heron-5102017>.

‘Whitey on the Moon,’ Scott-Heron describes the poor living conditions in which he and his family were living in. Throughout the poem, Scott-Heron provides anecdotal evidence of poverty such as his inability to afford adequate housing, food, health care, and even a rat infestation, all while contrasting those hardships with the statement “with Whitey on the moon.”<sup>19</sup> One line reads “The man just upped my rent last night (‘cause Whitey’s on the moon),” demonstrating not only that the government couldn’t afford to assist his poor community because of its investment in space exploration, but the \$24 billion dollar expense for sending a man to the moon was actually causing costs to increase for citizens of the country who were already poor.<sup>20</sup>

The issue of the U.S. Government investing billions into the space program instead of investing that money domestically was also addressed in a 1969 newspaper article entitled “Jersey City B.P.P. Tells It Like It Is” from the official newspaper of the Black Panther Party. The Black Panther Party (B.P.P.) was a militant political party of African Americans who believed the most effective way to combat racial violence was through violent retaliation.<sup>21</sup> The hostile approach to achieving racial equality that the Black Panther Party was known for is displayed in the word choice in this article. For example, the author refers to government leaders as “pigs” throughout the entire piece.<sup>22</sup> On the subject of the tremendous cost of space exploration, the article reads, “no one on earth or anywhere else can convince the Black Panther Party that this kind of money, energy, resources, etc. shouldn’t have been spent right here, helping alleviate some of the problems that exist right here.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Alexis C. Madrigal, “Gil Scott-Heron's Poem, 'Whitey on the Moon,’” *The Atlantic* (c. 2019), May 28, 2011 <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/05/gil-scott-herons-poem-whitey-on-the-moon/239622/>.

<sup>20</sup> Madrigal.

<sup>21</sup> Divine, “The Turbulent Sixties,” 729.

<sup>22</sup> “Jersey City B.P.P. Tells It Like It Is,” 20.

<sup>23</sup> “Jersey City B.P.P. Tells It Like It Is,” 20.

Another reason many African Americans were not excited about the moon landing is that the U.S. Government prioritized and glorified the moon landing more than necessary in the minds of many. Some African Americans saw the hype for the moon landing as negative, because it caused the rest of the country to forget about more pressing problems like racism, poverty, and unequal opportunity.<sup>24</sup> Some African Americans thought the excessive hype by the government was intentional, too. In another Black Panther newspaper article called “The Moon Landing as Eldridge Sees It,” a “Black Panther leader...called the Apollo 11 moon shot today a ‘circus to distract people’s minds from the real problems, which are here on the ground.’”<sup>25</sup>

In the eyes of the U.S. Government, the moon landing was seen as more important than other significant events of the time. An example of this is with the assassination of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In “Jersey City B.P.P. Tells It Like It Is,” the author points out how just three days after an American astronaut set foot on the moon (July 21, 1969), it was declared a national holiday by the U.S. Government.<sup>26</sup> Conversely, Martin Luther King’s life was not honored to the same degree. The article complains that it had “been over 15 months and hundreds upon thousands of petitioned signatures since Dr. King’s murder, requesting to make Dr. King’s birthday-- a national holiday,” and there was still no success at that time.<sup>27</sup> This blatant favoritism by the government of the moon landing over Dr. King’s legacy, and the struggle of many blacks to achieve economic and social equality in the country made the press surrounding the moon landing negative instead of positive in the eyes of many African Americans.

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<sup>24</sup> Divine, “The Turbulent Sixties,” 714.

<sup>25</sup> “The Moon Landing as Eldridge Sees It,” *Black Panther* (San Francisco, California,) August 2, 1969, 17.

<sup>26</sup> “Jersey City B.P.P. Tells It Like It Is,” 20.

<sup>27</sup> “Jersey City B.P.P. Tells It Like It Is,” 20.

African Americans were also not supportive of the U.S. in the space race because of employment discrimination based on race in NASA, the organization behind all space exploration in America. If African Americans did not feel welcome at NASA, the organization responsible for the moon landing, then it is only natural that they would not be supportive of the space race. On November 1, 1973 a newspaper article by Gregory Selby entitled “Opportunities For Young Blacks and Other Minorities in Nasa” was released. It claimed that “opportunities for minorities to receive on-the-job technical and clerical training in NASA [were] becoming bountiful and the future outlook [appeared] promising.”<sup>28</sup> However, just nine days later on November 10, 1973 another article came out in the newspaper reading “Space Program: Top Black Administrator Fired,” which tells a different story of African Americans’ experience with employment at NASA.<sup>29</sup> The article explains how Ruth Bates Harris, NASA’s “highest ranking black female official,” was fired “because of her questions about the space team’s racism.”<sup>30</sup> Despite the seemingly promising article posted nine days before about NASA’s alleged “improvements” in the area of employment equality, the November 10 article states “[NASA] staff prepared a one-inch thick report documenting NASA’s poor hiring record and the declining number of Blacks employed by the space agency.”<sup>31</sup> The article also points out how in 1973, only 5.2% of NASA employees were of minorities, a percentage far too low for NASA to make the claim that it was somehow making significant improvements in the area of racial discrimination.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> “Nasa! Nasa Who? or Opportunities For Young Blacks and Other Minorities in Nasa,” *Black Economy USA (Chicago, Illinois)*, 1 November 1973, 9.

<sup>29</sup> “Space Program Top Black Administrator Fired,” *Black Panther (San Francisco, California)*, 10 November 1973, 7.

<sup>30</sup> “Space Program Top Black Administrator Fired”, 7.

<sup>31</sup> “Space Program Top Black Administrator Fired”, 7.

<sup>32</sup> “Space Program Top Black Administrator Fired”, 7.

The Selby article seemed progressive at a glance, which contradicted the statements about employment discrimination in the article about Ruth Bates Harris. However, racial prejudice was still present in the language of the Selby article when talking about NASA's experience with recruiting black employees. The author places the blame for NASA's lack of black employees not on NASA, but on minorities themselves, and how there simply wasn't much interest among African Americans to work in NASA in the first place. The author reports a disappointingly "miniscule response from minorities" in the application process, and claims that African Americans were generally "hesitant to pursue technically-oriented employment and reluctant to pursue work situations which [were] more challenging than those presently involved in."<sup>33</sup> It is apparent that the author is making an excuse for the lack of African American employees in NASA and blaming it on alleged personal laziness. In reality, the low interest of blacks may very well have been directly caused by the school segregation of blacks and whites that was widespread across America, which gave African Americans far less educational opportunities by putting them into separate schools that were drastically unequal in terms of resources, staff, and facilities.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, the symbolism of the powerful white man who transcends the limits of our atmosphere was a frustrating reminder of the unfair advantage that white Americans have possessed over African Americans throughout American history.<sup>35</sup> While astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin would go down in history for their monumental accomplishments, the reality is that the opportunity to make history by being the first humans to land on the moon

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<sup>33</sup> ""Nasa! Nasa Who? Or Opportunities For Young Blacks and Other Minorities in Nasa," 9.

<sup>34</sup>Class Lecture 4/1/19

<sup>35</sup> America Past and Present, 371, 460-461, 521, 628.

was never an option for African Americans.<sup>36</sup> The chance to make human history was only for white men to take, which is a deep injustice.

In an article from *Ebony* magazine in 1969, the author questions what our astronauts have to represent now that we have entered the new frontier of space.<sup>37</sup> The article ponders the question: if we ever came across other intelligent life in our new reality of space exploration, what picture would we paint of humans and life back home in America, and would it be something to be proud of?<sup>38</sup> The author sarcastically plays out this scenario by saying, “We are from planet Earth. We have millions of people starving to death back at home so we thought we’d drop by to see how you are faring.”<sup>39</sup> Although this scenario is hypothetical, it carries real meaning. The African Americans who opposed the U.S. moon landing teach us that as we reach out further into new technological advances, the people who (quite literally) ground us *do* matter, and how we treat them affects the integrity of how we move forward as a technologically advancing society.

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<sup>36</sup> “Giant Leap for Mankind?,” *Ebony magazine*, October 1969, 58.

<sup>37</sup> “Giant Leap for Mankind?,” 58.

<sup>38</sup> “Giant Leap for Mankind?,” 58.

<sup>39</sup> “Giant Leap for Mankind?,” 58.

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