

"Space [and] Race: A 'Sister Nell' Effect on Black Americans 'Space Orientation?"

Joshua D. Ambrosius, University of Dayton, Dayton, OH

Gil Scott-Heron derided "Whitey on the Moon" in 1970, noting numerous policy problems on earth – from a lack of affordable healthcare and housing to inflation and crime – that required more attention than putting white astronauts on the moon. During the tumultuous summer of 2020, following the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and the murder of George Floyd on May 25, astronaut Victor Glover responded to a critic on Twitter who asked, "Can't we just do space?" by responding: "Actually no. Remember who is doing space. People are. As we address extreme weather and pandemic disease, we will understand and overcome racism and bigotry so we can safely and together do space." As of 2024, just 5% of astronauts who have been to space are black – while up to 14% of the total US population identifies as black. Given these anecdotes and the clear underrepresentation of black astronauts, this study uses General Social Survey data from the 1970s until today to ask: are there differences in support for space exploration by race in the US? If so, what explains any differences? After establishing that persistent lower levels of support for space do exist among black Americans, the study explores various hypotheses to explain this lack of support: education levels, politics/ideology, religion, attitudes toward science, and support for alternative government spending to address social inequities. Finally, in light of the findings, the paper asks how we can encourage a black constituency for space exploration – arguing that we can, as Glover suggests, fix problems on earth AND prepare for a future in space.