

Hearing and Retelling Global Memories of Apollo for Popular Non-Fiction. D. Bednar¹ and T. N. Harrison²,¹Western University, ²Professional Martian LLC, Washington DC.

Introduction: In 2019, NASA and the world celebrated the 50th anniversary of the first successful Moon landing. In the five decades since the Apollo mission kicked off, its cultural impact, notably in the North American context, has been explored in hundreds of books and dozens of major films and documentaries. Specifically, the American context is by far the most studied in regard to interpretation of the experience that was Apollo 11.

The conventional narrative of a triumphant human landing as unifying moment amidst a globally unstable bipolar international order has been told and re-told [1]. Notably, though, the focus has largely been on the American context, and, with limited assessment of broader, or targeted, public sentiment beyond major public opinion polling agencies operating at the time [2]. Even from these sources the narrative has evolved over time, from a uniting venture of a war-weary administration and nation, to a controversial public expenditure heavily criticized by major figures in the civil rights movements and college aged Americans [1]. As the historical imagination, and retelling of Apollo 11 (and the rest of the program) continues to evolve, our project sought to explore the global experiences of Apollo 11 within context of the temporal and spatial realities of largely ignored locales in the mythos that is Apollo.

In this project, we aimed to carry out in-depth interviews with contacts who were living outside of the United States at the time. Our objective was to compose a brief, but diverse, ‘global folk history of Apollo’, with recognition that no significant sample representation was possible given the depth of stories we were interested in telling as well as the more than one billion people that may have watched the mission’s events.

Taking a personalized, and narrative, approach, we aimed to engage in the depth of Apollo memories rather than breadth, thus forfeiting any expectation that our work would be representative in any statistical sense. Instead, in a project aimed more at outreach and education than social scientific analysis of broad social perspectives, we aimed to tell specific experiences in the hopes that it will inspire readers to consider the extra-territorial impacts of historical events, and the global historical lineage of technological advancements, especially in space exploration.

Methods: Interviews were sought with individuals who experienced the landing from outside of the United States. The number of interviewees was capped at

eight, with the expectation that each interview would last about one hour and provide for a 5,000-10,000 word chapter in a popular book. Once initial contacts were made, considerations of gender and race were made in order to diversify the experiences represented.

Interviews were conducted in person and via skype, and the use of recording equipment was used, with the permission of interviewees, to improve fidelity of interoperation afterwards. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were semi-structured based on a flexible question framework that followed a basic temporal structure (life pre-landing, watching the landing, life post-landing) [3].

Interview recordings were then transcribed and text was reordered into more engaging narrative structures, with a writing style aimed at tweens, young adults, and popular adult audiences (notably a writing style foreign to the two authors). Draft texts were exchanged between authors for a period of 6 months. Each ‘final draft’ was then member-checked with the interviewee (and in some cases their children as well) before publication. This process included verification that the interpretation of the individual’s story was accurate and to the interviewee’s approval [4]. The draft chapters were then sent to the publishers for popular publication with Mango Books for release March 17, 2020.

Result: While not a study in any academic sense, the research process for this book provided noteworthy observations about the intersection of Apollo 11 with everyday lives in eight different, non-American, countries.

A majority of our interviewees reflected on ambivalence toward the broader Cold War and “Space Race” narrative. The only reflection on the Cold War of consideration in the interviews was the lack of access to information from the ‘other side’, depending on one’s location relative to the ‘Iron Curtain’ (a geopolitical construct which was never mentioned by name, but emerged in most of the discussions).

While all our interviewees reported awe and inspiration at the accomplishment, they also reflected upon competing discourses of skepticism versus excitement in the lead up to Apollo 11. Several reported family members with limited interest, or outright disinterest, in the events of the space age, as well as broader components of the community in which a person walking on the Moon was seen as ridiculous, impossible, or even sacrilegious.

A number of respondents, notable those from cultures with rich histories of astronomy or mathematics

(such as India and Iran) noted a historical connection between their culture and the Apollo program. What emerged was not only a spatially expanded perspective of what made Apollo possible (global ideas, and a workforce from around the world), but also the advancement of key mathematical and engineering ideas that evolved throughout the two millennia before the space age began. In this sense, Apollo was the creation of all humanity, from Golden Age Persian Mathematicians to Tsarist Russian school teachers who dabbled in rocketry.

Finally, a lasting narrative throughout the stories was the notion of inspiration in accomplishment and the communal nature of accomplishment (especially in contradiction to a competitive notion of accomplishment). Ultimately, in this limited set of Apollo 11 memories, the sort of ‘global folk history’ (as one of our respondents put it) that emerged is one of communal accomplishment in the face of a nearly impossible task. Since-constructed geopolitical narratives of the “Space Race” were noticeably omitted by our respondents. Timely for our current global challenge, the messages of inspiration put forward by those interviewed for the book were focused not on competition, but instead on creating a better world, here and now, for the generations to come.

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