Discussion Questions

By Emily C. Bloom (Mellon Public Humanities Fellow, Sarah Lawrence and Wartburg)

1. Do you have any memories of the space race? What were your perceptions at the time? Do you remember where you were when John Glenn orbited the earth or Neil Armstrong stepped on the moon?

2. Who are the “girl computers” and how did they find employment at NASA? What role did they play in putting a man in space?

3. Hidden Figures tells the story of the space race alongside the story of the civil rights movement. For many Black Americans, the technological progress that space flight represented was deeply undermined by social inequalities in a segregated America. How could America move forward into the future when it was still tethered to the most harmful parts of its past? How do the characters in Hidden Figures experience the space race differently as Black women than their white co-workers?

4. In 1970, the jazz poet Gil Scott-Heron wrote a poem called “Whitey on the Moon” with the lyrics:

   I can’t pay no doctor bill.
   (but Whitey’s on the moon)
   Ten years from now I’ll be payin’ still.
   (while Whitey’s on the moon)

5. In Chapter 23 of Hidden Figures, we learn about similar criticism of government expenditures on the space race. What critiques does the book include about NASA spending? Is it possible to imagine achieving a better balance between investment in technological innovation and investment in social justice?

The author of Hidden Figures, Margot Lee Shetterly, grew up in Hampton, Virginia near Langley Air Force Base and knew the women she came to write about in her book. Why have these women not previously been part of the historical narrative? What does Shetterly mean by the title, Hidden Figures? Can you think of examples from your own community of women (or men) who played important and unsung roles in American history and whose stories have not previously been told?

To join the Wartburg Book Club, RSVP to Emily Bloom by June 31st

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