Hidden Figures: The Hidden Stereotypes in A Successful Progressive Film

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Audience Analysis (117 words): The audience for my paper is women of color who have yet to see the film *Hidden Figures.* These young women varying from lower class to upper-middle class value fair and accurate representation of minorities in American media due to lack of characters who look like them on the big screens the entirety of their lives. They value female empowerment, and advocacy in both a professional and domestic situation. A cultural analysis of *Hidden Figures* would appeal to this audience because they recognize the importance and impact a progressive film could have but also would be willing to look past the surface and see degrading stereotypes of race and gender if brought attention to it.

The fight for civil rights is never over, particularly for African Americans in this era of George Floyd's death and subsequent civil rights movement. While racism is largely seen as an issue of 1960s America in the eyes of a predominantly white society, it's apparent that it's still a huge issue. If one wants to look for a place that it's apparent, they need not look further than their own tv screens. Movie producers, directors, and writers fail to write scripts or produce shows with characters of different races, genders, and class statuses. The lack of representation is especially disheartening to people of color who grew up never seeing a character who looked like them on screen. That is why the film *Hidden Figures* held promise ahead of its release in 2016. It featured a star-studded cast with strong black actresses, Taraji P. Henson, Octavia Spencer, and Janelle Monáe. It went to on be highly praised and boast various accolades such as, 3 nominations for Academy Awards, Outstanding Performance by a Cast in a Motion Picture from the Screen Actor Guild Awards, and Best Ensemble from both the National Board of Review and African American Film Critics Association (AAFCA). It dazzled audiences of various backgrounds and now is stream able on platforms such as Disney Plus making it readily

accessible to people all over the nation. With the success of the film, it may seem like a cultural analysis is unnecessary but over the duration of the film damaging stereotypes are noticeable.

Hidden Figures depicts the powerful true story of 3 African American women, Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson, and Dorothy Vaughan, who served as engineers and mathematicians for rocket launches at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Langley Research center in Virginia. During the years they served NASA they had to endure the oppressive work environment, not only because they were looked down upon for being women, but also because they were black. At the time of their service Jim Crow laws were still in place forcing the black women of the NASA computing units to use different bathrooms and eating spaces then their white counterparts; often having to walk miles away from their building just to use the bathroom. The movie follows the three titular women as they navigate advocating for themselves and others while working at NASA and against the harsh realities of 1960's America. The filmmakers who took their true stories and turned them into a feature film circulated among audience's the message of equality and acceptance and sought for the movie to circulate that society needs to do better. The film is so beloved, as it showcases women fighting what it means to be a woman in a workplace, and a person of color, it's no surprise that the film comes highly recommended to those who have not seen it. However, fellow women of color who haven't seen this film, need to watch the film with caution. It may be an amazing film, but it has flaws and is not as progressive as it claims. *Hidden Figures* despite being a celebrated fail to challenge dominating and damaging stereotypes having to do with women and marginalizes the black experience.

Though the film stands for female empowerment and advocacy, the film repeatedly used recycled and damaging tropes specifically used for women in films. The film overshadows

Katherine Johnson as she has success at work by reinforcing "formulaic clichés about the centrality of romantic relationships in women's lives and women's dependency on men in defining their identity and worth" (Lieway et al. 611). The apparent story becomes less about Katherine's ingenuity, brains, willpower, and strength and more about validating her as a woman because of a man. Watching the romance unfold alongside Katherine's work at NASA it's hard to focus on all the strides she is making in her department. By making the two storylines the rival plot lines for Katherine, she becomes less powerful in the eyes of the viewer as her success seems hardly acknowledged or touched. In fact, "in the movie every success at work is followed by a key moment in the romantic relationship" (Lieway et al. 611). This was no accident as director, Theodore Melfi, manipulated the timeline of actual events a few times to fit the vision and purpose he had for the film. "The sequence of Katherine's romantic narrative in the film is not true to historical events" and Melfi made "The decision to counter each scientific success with a glimpse into the relationship between Katherine and James" (Lieway et al. 611), further promoting the value of a woman's worth is nothing unless she has man. This is a very dangerous ideal for women to see in film because it ultimately makes them question their worth. Instead of empowering women, the film essentially puts women at risk in this regard. Another archetype common in movies with a target audience of women, used by *Hidden Figures,* is utilizing a focal point of 3 women and categorizing their personality based on their role in the friend group. There are not official sources on this phenomenon but it's noticeable in other films such as *Hocus Pocus* and *Mean Girls.* The archetype operates on a system where each woman serves as a stereotype such as "The Brains", known for being smart and still conventionally pretty in the eyes of viewers, "The Beauty", who is usually the youngest, dumbest, and made out to be the most attractive and often presented as having the slimmest and therefore best body type, and

lastly "The Humor", who is usually the oldest and presented as the least attractive due to the larger frame associated with these type of characters, and usually act as mom and comedic relief for the group. These categorizations are heavily lessened in a biographical film such as *Hidden Figures,* but it's clear this mold was used to create the personality and drive each of the characters held in the film. The film presents Katherine as "the brains", Mary as "the beauty", and Dorothy as "the humor". While the film does break away from their individual stereotypes to show how resilient these women were fighting for their rights, putting them in these groups in the first place does a disservice to women want to view the film. We as women are told from a young age to fit certain boxes that society deems appropriate for "sustainable living". The implications of this 3-person archetype perpetuate body shaming, misogyny, and terrible self-image for women everywhere. Due to this archetype, *Hidden Figures* promotes and presents, an oversexualized Mary Jackson, a woman who "needs a man" in Katherine Johnson, and forces Dorothy Vaughan to be the mother of the group who can't wear as much makeup or look prettier than younger two. It's rather demeaning to watch the director, writers, and producers handle women in this way. Just like the film does a disservice to these women, *Hidden Figures* inadvertently reinforces damaging African American stereotypes.

Just like the film does a disservice to these women, *Hidden Figures* inadvertently reinforces damaging African American stereotypes. One of the main goals of the film is identify where America was in the 1960s to show racial progress today. It's very clear however, we haven't gone far from racism and anti-black stereotypes being presented in film. The proponent of American films becoming more progressive and antiracist, even in 2020, are plagued by the "magical negro" format where powerful black leads are only written to serve a life changing purpose to "disheveled, uncultured, or broken white characters into competent people" (Hughey

543). This is evident in the character of Al Harrison, and his female counterpart in the film Mrs. Mitchell. Harrison's character was clearly written to serve "white guilt." The first mistake by the creators of the film was casting Kevin Costner, "a well-known star" who "steals focus from the female leads" (Hicks). It's clear "Costner is shoehorned into the story as the white male hero who lifts the women up" (Hicks). In the film, there's a scene where Harrison knocks down the colored bathroom sign and says, "Here at NASA we all pee in the same color." It was an inspiring moment, as the racial barriers were broken but a simple search will show this never happened and was added in by filmmakers. "In reality, Katherine took the risk of using the white women's bathroom. Unfortunately, her bold actions for equal rights were covered by a narrative that gave the credit to a white man" (Lieway et al. 609). The film time and time again added narratives to ease the guilt felt while watching a movie depicting abhorrent racism. The last thing producers want is to make white viewers so uncomfortable they won't buy the movie later as the consuming economic class of movies is predominantly white. The creators of *Hidden Figures* essentially put Katherine, Mary, and Dorothy "in subservient positions" to "empower normalized and hegemonic forms of whiteness" by only creating these powerful black roles to serve the white agenda of appearing educated and anti-racist therefore marginalizing the black experience they tried so desperately to uplift. (Hughey 543). The hypocrisy is apparent when the film calls out those who think they're antiracist by having Mrs. Mitchell remark to Dorothy that "Despite what you may think I have nothing against y'all" to which Dorothy responds with "I know you probably believe that."This is remarkable because the filmmakers thought they were producing a progressive film that has completely anti-racist sentiments, yet they make the same blunder of Mrs. Mitchell of subscribing to the fact that because they don't think they're racist, they aren't.

While the issues pointed out may seem vast, scary, and disappointing the film "is an engaging and important biographical film" (Lieway et al. 607).

While the film fails at not challenging some stereotypes, it still makes strides as a groundbreaking film. As women of color, we hardly have any movies where we truly feel represented and seen. *Hidden Figures,* while not perfect by any means, stills gives voice to 3 powerful black women even though they can be overshadowed at times. It's so important that we have this film to showcase how strong willed, educated, and hard-working women can be. Some of the stereotypes in the film were capitalized on purposefully to portray and make the audience feel like they were in the shoes of any one of the black women seen on screen. The white engineers and workers at NASA had to appear belligerent and view women as lesser to convey how it really was when actual events occurred. It may be heartbreaking to watch these women be consistently talked down to and taunted but it had to be this way to highlight how hard they had to fight for their rights. Katherine, Mary, and Dorothy were put in categorized boxes perpetuated by society, but within their categories they defied stereotypes of what it means to be "the brains", "the beauty", or "the humor". All 3 women are strong mothers and received some sort of college education. Katherine as "the brains" was unique because she was not afraid to stand up for herself in front of, and to, men who viewed her as less then human sometimes. Mary as "the beauty" did not fit the mold of a ditz as she had a bachelor's degree in mathematics and physical sciences. Lastly, Dorothy as "the humor" defied the expectations of her category for continually going against unjust orders in order to learn Formula Transition (FORTRAN) programming. For all the mishandled stereotypes, filmmakers still told an inspiring story with powerful message and amazing representation.

Fellow women of color should see this movie with more than entertainment in mind. They should have vigilance while viewing the movie and be willing to acknowledge the mistakes made by those who produced, wrote, and directed the film. *Hidden Figures* is a powerful and inspiring film that has representation previously missing from the big screen. Even with the representation for women of color, the film also fails to challenge the very stereotypes they sought out to depict and fight against. *Hidden Figures* remains a must a see, but all the components should remain recognized as it didn't accomplish the anti-racist and complete progressiveness it sought to capture.

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