



‘For better or for worse, there is history, there is the book and then there's the movie’: Foregrounding and Marginalizing African American Women in the Film *Hidden Figures* (2016)

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the representation of gender and race in the biographical drama film *Hidden Figures* (2016), directed by Theodore Melfi. The film is based on Margot Lee Shetterly's nonfiction book of the same title, which spotlights previously hidden figures in US history: the black female mathematicians who worked in the early US space program. The movie was released to critical acclaim and embraced by audiences as empowering African American girls. At the same time, the film was criticized for including a 'white savior' scene in which the black female protagonists are marginalized.

After providing background information on Shetterly's book and the film's critical reception, this paper conducts a close formal analysis of a pivotal sequence in the film, which is compared to the events told in the nonfiction book. To shed light on the power structures that the film sequence projects, the results of this analysis are, subsequently, related to critical theoretical approaches to Hollywood cinema, as well as to Sara Ahmed's concept of 'affective economies.' In conclusion, we argue that Hollywood filmmakers' expectations about the desires of 'mainstream' audiences work to perpetuate the repression of previously repressed herstory on the 'silver screen.'

Keywords: affect, film, gender, race

Zusammenfassung

Diese Arbeit unterzieht die Repräsentation afroamerikanischer Frauen in der Filmbiografie *Hidden Figures* (2016) einer kritischen Untersuchung. Der Film, unter der Regie Theodore Melfis, basiert auf Margot Lee Shetterlys Sachbuch desselben Titels, das versteckte Figuren der US-Geschichte ins Rampenlicht rückt: die afroamerikanischen Mathematikerinnen, die in den ersten Jahrzehnten der amerikanischen Raumfahrt Pionierinnenarbeit leisteten. Der Film wurde von der Kritik gepriesen und als Beitrag zur Ermächtigung afroamerikanischer Mädchen gefeiert. Kritisiert wurde zugleich, dass die Protagonistinnen in einer Schlüsselszene des Films von einer fiktiven weißen, männlichen Figur verdrängt werden, von deren wohlwollender Unterstützung sie abhängen.

Auf zusammenfassende Informationen zu Shetterlys Buch sowie zur Rezeption des Films folgen eine formale Analyse dieser Schlüsselszene und ein Vergleich mit der biografischen Darstellung im Sachbuch. Vor dem Hintergrund kritischer theoretischer Zugänge zum Hollywood-Kino sowie unter Bezug auf Sara Ahmeds Konzept 'affektiver Ökonomien' werden die Ergebnisse dieser Analyse in Hinblick auf die von der Filmszene projizierten Machtverhältnisse interpretiert. Abschließend argumentieren wir, dass Hollywoods Erwartungen bezüglich der Wünsche des 'Mainstreams' zu einer fortgesetzten Unterdrückung der unterdrückten Geschichte afroamerikanischer Frauen auf der Leinwand beitragen.

Schlüsselwörter: Affekt, Film, *gender*, *race*

Introduction

This paper will investigate aspects of the representation of gender and race in the biographical drama film *Hidden Figures* (2016), directed by Theodore Melfi. Based on Margot Lee Shetterly's best-selling 2016 nonfiction book of the same title, the movie portrays the long invisibilized African American women in the early decades of the US space program. The film adaptation was released to great critical acclaim and outperformed expectations at the box office.¹ By contrast, the movie has been criticized by writers in online media such as VICE and HuffPost for 'whitewashing' history by rewriting the biographies of the black women portrayed. This criticism especially targets what has been described as a 'white savior scene' at the center of the film, in which the white supervisor (played by Kevin Costner) smashes the 'COLORED

LADIES ROOM' sign and thereby brings racial segregation at NASA to a dramatic end.²

In a first step, this paper will provide background information on Shetterly's book as well as on the film's critical reception. Against the background of the claims that the film includes a 'white savior scene,' this investigation will, in a second step, explore formal features of the film's central 'bathroom sequence' and compare this to the events recounted in Shetterly's book. Aiming to critically examine the differences between the nonfiction book and the movie with regard to the portrayal of African American women, the results of this analysis will be interpreted, in a third step, in terms of critical positions in film theory on the representation of gender and race in Hollywood cinema. This interpretation will be contrasted with both Melfi's and Shetterly's responses to the criticism of the changes made in the film adaptation. Finally, this paper will turn to Sara Ahmed's concept of 'affective economies' in order to theorize Hollywood filmmakers' assumptions about 'mainstream' audiences' desires.

'There Is History, There Is the Book ...'

Shetterly's group biography *Hidden Figures* tells the *Untold Story* of the black female mathematicians who worked at NASA, and NASA's predecessor NACA (the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics), from the 1940s through the 1960s. In 1943, when calculations were still done by hand, the first African American women started working as 'computers' at the segregated West Area Computing section at the Langley Research Center in Virginia. Racial segregation ended in 1958 when the NACA was transformed into NASA. The work of these African American women made an essential contribution to the success of the US space program. Most notably, mathematician Katherine Johnson (1918-2020) calculated the trajectory for the 1961 space flight of Alan Shepard, the first American in space. Likewise, in 1962, John Glenn requested that Johnson verify the numbers when NASA first used electronic computers to calculate his orbit around Earth.³

Until very recently, however, these African American women's lives and achievements were neglected – they remained 'in the shadows,' as Shetterly writes in the prologue to her book.⁴ For Shetterly, their omission from the standard histories of the US space program makes the very existence of these black female computers counterintuitive: 'To a first-time author with no background as a historian, the stakes involved in writing about a topic that was virtually absent from the history books felt

high. I'm sensitive to the cognitive dissonance conjured by the phrase "black female mathematicians at NASA," – that is, 'in a profession seen as universally white and male.'⁵ The prologue pays special attention to the women's intersectional social identity, implying intersecting oppressions: while the 'white women who made up the majority of Langley's computing workforce over the years have hardly been recognized for their contribution to the agency's long-term success,' the black women have been 'most hidden.'⁶

In order to 'prove their existence and their talent in a way that meant they would never again be lost to history,'⁷ Shetterly started work on her book in 2010, conducting three years of research into an 'unseen' history.⁸ Investigating the lives and achievements of the African American women at NASA, the book aims for more than 'just putting them on the record':⁹ 'What I wanted was for them to have the grand, sweeping narrative that they deserved, the kind of American history that belongs to the Wright Brothers and the astronauts [...]. Not at the margins, but at the very center, the protagonists of the drama.'¹⁰ *Hidden Figures* sets out to tell the exceptional 'story of broad success of women overall, and African-American women specifically,' at the 'time of Jim Crow segregation, during a time when women frequently weren't even allowed to have credit cards in their own names.' However, 'to make it a story as opposed to a history textbook, you have to choose the people with the most compelling stories.'¹¹ The book not only tells Johnson's story, but also those of Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, and Christine Darden, who started working at the Langley Research Center at different points in the history of the space program.

Hidden Figures was published on 6 September 2016 by William Morrow. It topped *The New York Times* Nonfiction Best Sellers list for six weeks and won several prizes, including an NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work. A *Young Readers' Edition* was published in 2016, and a picture book edition (co-written by Winifred Conkling and illustrated by Laura Freeman) was released in 2018. The 2016 film adaptation boosted interest in the book, which was also issued in a movie tie-in edition.¹²

'... And Then There's the Movie'

Producer Donna Gigliotti acquired the film rights through Levantine Films when Shetterly was still working on the book.¹³ The book was adapted as a biographical drama film, co-written by Melfi and Allison Schroeder, and directed by Melfi. Shetterly joined the project as an executive producer. *Hidden Figures* was released by

Fox 2000 Pictures in 2016. It succeeded at the box office and received considerable critical acclaim, including nominations for three Academy Awards and two Golden Globes.¹⁴ It won a Screen Actors Guild Award and two MTV Movie Awards (including Best Fight Against the System), as well as accolades that specifically honor the depiction of African Americans and women in film: four awards by the African American Film Critics Association, three BET Awards, a Black Film Critics Award, a Black Reel Award, two NAACP Image Awards, and four Women Film Critics Circle Awards (including Best Movie About Women).¹⁵ Review-aggregation website Rotten Tomatoes records a 93% approval rating among critics and a 93% audience approval score among over 58,000 ratings. Its Critics Consensus condenses 313 reviews: ‘In heartwarming, crowd-pleasing fashion, *Hidden Figures* celebrates overlooked – and crucial – contributions from a pivotal moment in American history.’¹⁶

In many parts of the US, and also outside, charity screenings were crowd-funded or funded by local communities, government organizations, educational institutions, nonprofits, companies, and individuals (including members of the film’s cast and crew, as well as First Lady Michelle Obama), often with the express purpose of inspiring girls to seek careers in science and technology.¹⁷ Some writers have suggested a ‘*Hidden Figures* Effect’¹⁸ similar to the ‘Scully Effect’ – the alleged effect of Gillian Anderson as cool, smart medical doctor/FBI agent Dana Scully in the TV series *The X-Files*, inspiring young women to pursue STEM careers.¹⁹ The notion of such an effect has been prominent in media-related feminist research such as that of actress and activist Geena Davis (‘If she can see it, she can be it’).²⁰ In relation to *Hidden Figures*, this notion has been inflected in terms of race. Educators and grassroots activists alike have addressed the film’s potential to provide role models for black girls interested in STEM, and the film has frequently been associated with #BlackGirlMagic.²¹ The film’s alleged positive effect on female and black audiences has also been underscored by the production company.²²

At the same time, a much less enthusiastic strand of reception has challenged the representation of race in the film. Soon after the release, African American writers Dexter Thomas and Zeba Blay, of online magazines VICE and HuffPost, accused the movie of ‘whitewashing’ history, specifically addressing the addition of a fictitious ‘white savior’ in a prominent scene of the movie.²³ These claims have since proliferated both in established channels and in the ‘blogosphere,’²⁴ and have also been made in scholarship. Research that relates the film to the ‘white savior’ trope includes Miriam Lieway et al.’s 2017 review ‘*Hidden Figures*: Calculated Responses to Sexism and Racism in 1960s America’ as well as the 2018 article ‘(Un)Learning Hollywood’s Civil

Rights Movement: a Scholar's Critique' by African American studies scholar Tiyi M. Morris.²⁵ Taking its starting point in the criticism of the film's 'white savior scene'²⁶ that replaces black women's emancipatory agency with a 'narrative that spotlighted a White, fictional man at the center of the activism,'²⁷ the following section aims to analyze the formal features of two scenes, which will be referred to as the film's 'bathroom sequence.'

Center Stage

This is the context of that sequence: On being transferred from the West Area Computing Section to the previously all-white Space Task Group, Katherine Johnson²⁸ (portrayed in the film by Taraji P. Henson) finds herself in a building with no segregated bathrooms. The first scene depicts Johnson returning to her desk from a bathroom break, drenched after running back and forth in the rain between Space Task Group and the West Area. Irritated by her absence, the white supervisor, Al Harrison (played by Kevin Costner), interrogates her. Johnson loses her poise and vents her frustration, the camera zooming in on her from medium shot to medium close-up, highlighting her agitation by focusing on her facial expressions: 'There is no bathroom. There are no colored bathrooms in this building, or any building outside the West Campus, which is half a mile away. Did you know that?'²⁹ Low music starts as if to accentuate the growing awareness on Harrison's part.³⁰ In reaction shots, Harrison and his secretary Ruth (Kimberly Quinn) appear commiserative as Johnson continues to speak: 'I have to walk to Timbuktu just to relieve myself! And I can't use one of the handy bikes. Picture that, Mr. Harrison. My uniform ...' The scene culminates in an eighteen-second shot of Johnson: '... skirt below my knees, my heels. And a simple string of pearls. Well, I don't own pearls. Lord knows you don't pay coloreds enough to afford pearls! And I work like a dog day and night, living off a coffee from a pot none of you want to touch!' Henson's character is shouting, turning around to the dumbstruck group of white male co-workers. She dominates both the acoustic and the visual space of the frame: with her patterned dress and red lipstick, she visually stands apart from the uniform group of white males in the background (all in white shirts and black neckties), who are at long-shot distance and out of focus. In the following reestablishing shot of the office space and reaction shots of the co-workers, no word is spoken. Johnson regains composure: 'So, excuse me if I have to go to the restroom a few times a day.' She exits and the music stops. Harrison walks to the left, turns

around, gives his staff a reproachful look, and peels off the label which reads 'COLORED' from the small pot next to the coffee dispenser.

Much of that scene is mirrored (and inverted in terms of gender and race) in the following scene, placed at the center of the film, which takes place in the West Computing Group building. Observed by a growing group of black women at one end of the corridor, and a group of white men (together with Harrison's secretary Ruth) at the other end, Harrison is swinging a crowbar at the 'COLORED LADIES ROOM' sign. As Johnson squeezes through to the front of the group, music starts (measured strings and chorus).³¹ The scene climaxes in a ten-second deep-focus shot of Harrison and the group of African American women. The cinematography, *mise en scène*, and sound of this shot add to the audiovisual prominence, and dramatic power, of Costner's character. Movement, lighting, and color combine to enable Costner's character to create the 'dominant contrast,' that is, the area of the film image which is visually most salient:³² his energetic movement differs from the women's immobility, and his white shirt stands out brightly against the darker blues and greens of the women's dresses. What is more, gaze functions as a 'deictic' element of the image: the African American women are invariably looking at Harrison, thus pointing *to* him, and pointing him *out*.³³ The *mise en scène* lends additional significance to the male character, who is placed in the midground, in front of the group of black women, who are relegated to the background – in film, elements and characters in the fore- and background are often used to 'comment on' the central figure.³⁴ Photographed at a slight angle, this composition results in a symmetrically bisected frame: while the women share the (densely textured) right half of the frame, Harrison has the left half for himself. A larger amount of space within a frame conventionally signifies the power of dominant characters and/or characters' dramatic importance.³⁵ Likewise, the 'acoustic space' (the area over which the voice can be heard) as well as the 'linguistic space' (the amount of talk) are unevenly distributed in this shot:³⁶ throughout the shot, indeed throughout the entire scene, only Harrison speaks: 'There you have it. No more colored restrooms.' Costner's character's monologue stretches over the following shots: 'No more white restrooms. Just plain old toilets. Go wherever you damn well please. Preferably closer to your desk.' Harrison picks up the sign and pushes through the group of whites. A reaction shot shows Johnson warmly smiling, which is emphasized by her bright red lipstick. The camera follows Harrison, who turns to say, 'Here at NASA, we all pee the same color.' He leaves, followed by his secretary. The scene ends with a shot of the black women watching Harrison walk away.

White Male Savior

VICE News' Dexter Thomas concludes, 'It's a brilliant, dramatic scene. It also never happened.'³⁷ The character portrayed by Kevin Costner is fictitious and has been added into the story by the screenwriters. There is no such scene in Shetterly's book, which is based on historical documents and interviews:

From the very beginning, Katherine felt completely at home at Langley. Nothing about the culture of the laboratory or her new office rattled her – not even the persistent racial segregation. At the beginning, in fact, she didn't even realize the bathrooms were segregated. [...] Though bathrooms for the black employees were clearly marked, most of the bathrooms – the ones implicitly designated for white employees – were unmarked. As far as Katherine was concerned, there was no reason why she shouldn't use those as well. It would be a couple of years before she was confronted with the whole rigmarole of separate bathrooms. By then, she simply refused to change her habits – refused to so much as enter the Colored bathrooms. And that was that. No one ever said another word to her about it.³⁸

'I just went on in the white one,' Johnson confirmed in her 2017 interview with Thomas.³⁹ Inconsequential though her refusal may seem, the passage in Shetterly's book characterizes Johnson in terms of confidence, agency, and self-determination. Moreover, the emphatic repetition of the word 'refused' links Johnson's refusal to comply with segregation to the much more momentous acts of defiance of two other African American women: those of 'Claudette Colvin and Rosa Parks [...] refusing to yield their seats in the "white" section of the bus.'⁴⁰

In comparison with the passage in the book, the film scene shifts this emancipatory agency from the black woman to the white man:⁴¹ in the movie, Johnson passively watches (and listens to) Harrison taking action on her behalf. As the analysis of the 'sign scene' above shows, this is especially expressed through formal means. Shetterly's book explicitly sets out to portray the African American women at Langley '[n]ot at the margins, but at the very center, the protagonists of the drama.'⁴² The scene uses photography, movement, spatial arrangement, and sound to marginalize the African American women. Silent, immobile, and inactive, they form a backdrop to the white man's heroic actions. While, in the first scene of the bathroom sequence, center stage is given to Johnson to vent her helpless frustration (again, this does not

correspond to the book), it is the white man who, in the second scene, takes center stage to rescue the black woman from her distress.

The bathroom sequence in the film adaptation of *Hidden Figures* thus fulfills many criteria of the cinematic ‘white savior trope’ outlined in Matthew W. Hughey’s detailed study of *The White Savior Film* (2014) – a film genre that has tended to make ‘characters of color little more than background props for the heroic action of the central white protagonist.’⁴³ Delineating a genealogy of the white savior figure, Hughey identifies notions such as those of the ‘noble savage,’ ‘manifest destiny,’ ‘white man’s burden,’ and ‘great white hope’ as ‘previous iterations of the complex relationship between the tropes of the white savior and the dysfunctional and dark “other” in need of saving’ as the white savior’s negative.⁴⁴ This history resonates in a widespread present-day white savior trope that has ‘saturated our contemporary logic’ and is effective across political boundaries and discourses.⁴⁵ On the silver screen, the recurring motif of the white savior has been central to films such as *Dances with Wolves* (1990), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *Amistad* (1997), *Finding Forrester* (2000), *The Last Samurai* (2003), *Gran Torino* (2008), *Avatar* (2009), *The Blind Side* (2009), and *The Help* (2011).⁴⁶ These are films which ‘showcase strong, kind, and messianic white characters assisting nonwhite, down-on-their-luck characters,’ ‘helping people of color who cannot or will not help themselves’ by ‘going the extra mile across the color line.’⁴⁷ In *Hidden Figures*, it is the extra half mile across the color line, from Space Task Group to ‘Timbuktu,’ that Harrison goes when his ‘savior mentalities kick in’⁴⁸. The bathroom sequence spotlights typical character traits of the white savior figure, which conflates whiteness with a meritocratic ‘ethic of hard work, delay of gratification, and a mindset wholly focused on the individual triumph over obstacles,’ as well as a distinct proclivity for rationality.⁴⁹ Whereas Johnson is characterized by her strong work ethic and undeterred pragmatism in many parts of the film, the sequence in question pits her helplessness and frustration against Harrison’s troubleshooting skills, the white-nonwhite interaction following a racially stereotyped logic of ‘helper-helpless’⁵⁰. In this sequence, as in many white savior films, the ‘white do-gooder’ is juxtaposed with racist, or at least uncaring, white characters;⁵¹ positioned between the helpless nonwhites and the bad whites, Costner’s character can emerge as a white savior.⁵² Furthermore, Hughey highlights a recurring motif of the grateful ‘other’ in reviews of white savior films: for Hughey, critics tend to foreground the gratitude of people of color, thereby interpreting ‘the most miniscule of white actions as monumental, antiracist endeavors.’⁵³ The sign scene, which similarly envisions ‘whites as the valued and active agents to which nonwhites are bound as objects,’ stages such a ‘moral

economy of nonwhite gratitude toward the white benefactor⁵⁴: most especially, when, following an over-the-shoulder shot (from the black women's perspective) of Harrison leaving with the smashed bathroom sign in his hand, a reaction shot captures Johnson's affectionate smile.

The film's bathroom sequence thus rewrites history in a way which Hughey describes as typical of white savior films. While the label 'based on a true story' ('based on true events' in the case of *Hidden Figures*) frequently associates the white savior trope with the authority of history, these films 'subtly rewrite historical events so that white colonizers, paternalistic controllers, and meddling interlopers seem necessary, relevant, and moral,' overwriting a history of white domination with 'sentimental tales of one person's heroic and well-intentioned actions.'⁵⁵ For Hughey, such rewriting of history, and biography, displaces a concern for societal inequality in favor of 'sentimentalism' (especially, the white character's 'heart-warming [...] care across the color line'), which he links to Hollywood success.⁵⁶ Based on his investigation of the production, distribution, and consumption of white savior cinema, Hughey concludes: 'Producers, critics, and audiences often present these films as straightforward and impartial narratives about heroic characters, intercultural friendships, and the humanistic struggle to overcome daunting odds (usually "based on a true story," to boot).'⁵⁷ However, by means of routinizing the idea of the white benefactor, the white savior trope 'retains white dominance through subtle forms of color-blind racial paternalism while castigating overt and ugly forms of white supremacy.'⁵⁸ Thus, the motif of the white savior is ideologically effective precisely because it seems non-political.

The white savior trope is not defined in terms of gender and white saviors have been impersonated by Michelle Pfeiffer (*Dangerous Minds*, 1995), Sandra Bullock (*The Blind Side*, 2009), and Emma Stone (*The Help*, 2011). In the bathroom sequence of *Hidden Figures*, on the other hand, as in many other films, the white savior is a white *male* savior. More generally, in *Hidden Figures*, white virtuousness is reserved for male characters.⁵⁹ When the Mercury Seven visit Langley, the staff line up to welcome them, blacks segregated from whites. Having greeted the white staff, the astronauts are steered away by Ruth, but John Glenn (Glen Powell), handsome, charming, and funny, insists on crossing the color line to also say hello to the black staff (Al Harrison: 'Ruth, it's fine'). This, too, has been added to the screenplay by the filmmakers. Moreover, the bathroom sequence blends the white savior motif with cinematic gender stereotypes. Although meanings of race are most prominent in this sequence, the African American woman's problem is placed at the intersection of race and gender:

race restrictions force Johnson to use the bathroom in the West Area; but she cannot use the bike to go there because of gender limits ('Picture that, Mr. Harrison. My uniform, skirt below my knees, my heels').⁶⁰ The sign scene, which concludes the bathroom sequence, does not resolve such restrictive femininity, but reproduces stereotyped gender roles. The acting in this scene appears conspicuously gendered. A shot from within the group of African American women shows Johnson in back-to-camera position and Harrison in the background: when Costner's character, sleeves rolled up, forcefully strikes again and the sign comes loose, Henson's character flinches, elbows to her waist, hands up. More generally, cinematic stereotypes of masculine activity and feminine passivity, which Richard Dyer discusses with regard to the genre of action film, would seem relevant to this action-laden scene as well: that is, that the 'body's contact with the world, its rush, its expansiveness, its physical stress and challenge' is presented as 'essentially male,' tied to 'male characters and male environments, suggesting it is really only appropriate to men.'⁶¹ For Dyer, this adds up to a cinematic reproduction of a 'white masculine structure of feeling' which is to do with 'freedom of movement, confidence in the body, engagement with the material world, that is coded as male (and straight and white, too) but to which all humans need access.'⁶² Whereas, in interviews, Johnson repeatedly stated that she had preserved such personal freedom of movement ('I just went on in the white one'), the film denies that freedom to the African American women depicted. The film, thus, rewrites Johnson's biography in a way that adjusts it to both racial and gender stereotypes. In the process, the movie overwrites a problematic chapter in US history, highlighting the virtue of the fictional white male hero instead of foregrounding the historical injustice of a white supremacist and misogynist society.

Dramatization and Efficiency

While the representation of gender in these scenes has not received critical attention, they have been accused of 'whitewashing' history. Melfi has responded to this criticism in terms of genre conventions: 'I say this all the time but the movie is not a documentary. [...] There are little liberties taken here and there to dramatize, but the crux of the story is true.'⁶³ 'Floyd Thompson, a white man, desegregated NASA. Period,' Melfi emphasizes in another interview.⁶⁴ Shetterly's nonfiction book records that, when the NACA transformed into NASA, a memo of Langley's assistant director Floyd Thompson 'quietly circulated': 'Effective this date, the West Area Computers Unit is dissolved.'⁶⁵ The depiction of such a low-key administrative measure would

have contributed little to the dramatic effect required by the genre conventions, and the film adaptation replaces the factual yet unspectacular memo with the fictional heroism of Costner's character, doing the right thing 'in a grand and dramatic gesture.'⁶⁶ In a different line of argument, Melfi invokes the notion of 'color-blindness' (in a way that mirrors Harrison's appeal to color-blindness in the film: 'Here at NASA, we all pee the same color'): 'There needs to be white people who do the right thing, there needs to be black people who do the right thing [...]. And someone does the right thing. And so who cares who does the right thing, as long as the right thing is achieved?'⁶⁷ A survey of the critical responses to the film shows that many do care. For *MadameNoire's* Veronica Wells, the white savior bathroom sequence goes against the very purpose of the movie, which sets out to showcase the African American women who had been marginalized by society: 'pushing these central characters, Black women, to the side in order to make space for White men is not only cliché and problematic,' but, for Wells, changes the very crux of the story, which is to do also with how 'Katherine Johnson stood up to segregation on her own.'⁶⁸ Addressing the differences between the book and the film, HuffPost's Zeba Blay raises the question of what it means for Hollywood representations of African Americans when black stories (which includes Shetterly's book) are told by white filmmakers. In his response, Melfi stresses his own color-blindness: '[...] I am at a place where I've lived my life colorless and I grew up in Brooklyn. I walked to school with people of all shapes, sizes, and colors, and that's how I've lived my life.'⁶⁹ For Hughey, the claim of color-blindness is itself ideological: he argues that, by means of 'discursive claims of being either postracial or color-blind,' the 'import and centrality of race (particularly meanings of white paternalism and contented black servitude) are often downplayed, made invisible, and even contested.' Hughey concludes that, 'given the globalization of Hollywood film,' such claims help to 'disavow the existence and effects of modern racism, which in turn allows the perpetuation of racial hierarchies and reconsolidation of white racial interests across the world.'⁷⁰ Melfi's appeal to color-blindness plays down the relevance of the concept of race (understood as a 'social fact'⁷¹) in present-day Hollywood cinema and fails to account for the changes introduced in the film, making them appear arbitrary.

With regard to the decisions made in the film adaptation, Shetterly, on the other hand, has argued that a story spanning several decades had to be condensed into a cinematic storyline covering just a few years: 'For better or for worse, there is history, there is the book and then there's the movie [...]. Timelines had to be conflated and [there were] composite characters [...].'⁷² The principle of 'narrative economy,' as a

standard in Hollywood cinema, calls for the efficient alignment of the cinematic presentation toward the goal of advancing the narrative.⁷³ In relation to the film adaptation of *Hidden Figures*, such narrative economy is at work in terms of streamlining the storytelling into one coherent dramatic development: especially, by presenting Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson as close friends in order to knit together their separate stories,⁷⁴ and by rendering Johnson the main character of the story. The notion of ‘composite characters’ is particularly relevant to the discussion of the film’s bathroom sequence. The book includes the account of Jackson, who, trying to find the colored bathrooms on the East Side, was humiliated and ‘reminded that she was a black girl whose piss wasn’t good enough for the white pot.’⁷⁵ It was Jackson who vented her ‘frustration and resentment, letting off steam as she ranted about the insult she had experienced on the East Side.’⁷⁶ The film adaptation, on the other hand, shifts a dramatized version of this incident from the story of Jackson (portrayed in the film by Janelle Monáe) to that of main character Johnson to set the stage for the sign scene.

However, while the fictional sign scene has been added prominently to the film, the film excludes episodes of black female self-empowerment that are prominent in the nonfiction book. In the fifth chapter of the book, a very different ‘sign drama’⁷⁷ unfolds. In the early years of employment of African American women at Langley, a white cardboard sign would indicate the segregated table in the West Area cafeteria. The women felt offended:

It was Miriam Mann who finally decided it was too much to take. “There’s my sign for today,” she would say upon entering the cafeteria, spying the placard designating their table in the back of the room. Not even five feet tall, her feet just grazing the floor when she sat down, Miriam Mann had a personality as outsized as she was tiny.

The West Computers watched their colleague remove the sign and banish it to the recesses of her purse, her small act of defiance inspiring both anxiety and a sense of empowerment.⁷⁸

The sign was reinstated ‘by an unseen hand’ and Mann removed it again: ‘Negro life in America was a never-ending series of negotiations: when to fight and when to concede. This, Miriam had decided, was one to fight.’⁷⁹ It was a fight that she would win:

At some point during the war, the COLORED COMPUTERS sign disappeared into Miriam Mann's purse and never came back. The separate office remained, as did the segregated bathrooms, but in the Battle of the West Area Cafeteria, the unseen hand had been forced to concede victory to its petite but relentless adversary. [...] Miriam Mann's insistence on sending the humiliating sign to oblivion gave her and the other women of West Computing just a little more room for dignity and the confidence that the laboratory might belong to them as well.⁸⁰

This is about 'defiance,' 'battle,' and 'victory,' 'empowerment,' 'confidence,' and 'dignity.' The episode disrupts gender stereotypes of women as passive, and it undermines racial stereotypes of the helpless nonwhite in need of a white benefactor. The very title of the chapter, 'Manifest Destiny,' subverts the implied notion of 'white racial paternalism'⁸¹, by reappropriating the slogan to describe the self-emancipation of the African American women. But while this 'sign drama' has not been included in the film adaptation, the movie dramatizes the anonymous bureaucratic act of desegregation (when 'the unseen hand that had been vanquished by Mann in the lunchroom in the early 1940s would take the next step and pry the aluminum COLORED GIRLS sign off Langley's bathroom doors'⁸²) in a way that shifts confidence, defiance, and victory from the black women toward the white man.

The film adaptation thus includes selective strategies that are not exhausted by the Hollywood principle of 'narrative economy': while 'narrative economy' implies a need for selection, it cannot explain the decisions that govern this selection. However, even though the screenwriters had to compress the 300 pages of Shetterly's book into two hours runtime, the author believes the adaptation to be effective – in Hollywood terms. Shetterly enthusiastically endorses the film in an interview: 'I loved it. I mean, really, honestly [...]. I was crying, I was laughing, I was just like, "What happens next? Does Glenn make it back home?"' For the author, 'They really did a big Hollywood rollicking adventure.'⁸³

Hollywood Expectations: Assumptions and Affect

An immersive experience of this kind is characteristic of Hollywood cinema across all genres.⁸⁴ For Dyer, however, there are limits to how much can be expected of cinema audiences in relation to the representation of gender and race before such immersion is interrupted. What Dyer argues regarding action movies also applies to the fictional white male hero in *Hidden Figures*: 'To see women strain against the world may be

inspirational but also at some psychic level unbelievable. Heroes of action who are other than male and white (and straight and able-bodied) are still going to feel exceptional for some time to come.⁸⁵ This is about deep-seated ‘assumptions [...] that are hard to shake’⁸⁶ and amounts to a different notion of authenticity: one that is related not so much to whether a story is *real* as to whether it is *realistic* in terms of audience assumptions. With regard to the film adaptation of *Hidden Figures*, this adds up to a paradoxical situation: while the film adapts the ‘exceptional’⁸⁷ untold story of the African American women at NASA, there are both race and gender ‘limits to how plausible or excessively exceptional one may find a representation.’⁸⁸ Adding a white male hero to take action would seem to be making concessions to (rather than challenge) the ‘common sense’ assumptions of Hollywood audiences as anticipated by the filmmakers – so that the movie walks a tightrope between historical accuracy and Hollywood realism, between portraying exceptionality and maintaining mainstream plausibility.

Dyer describes the immersive film experience of Hollywood cinema consumption as uncritical ‘surrender to pleasure.’⁸⁹ Similarly, Shetterly foregrounds her own emotional response and pleasure (‘I was crying, I was laughing’). More than just sustaining the illusion to which audiences abandon themselves, by means of avoiding representations that might strike them as ‘excessively exceptional,’ the changes made in the film adaptation of *Hidden Figures* have been interpreted as contributing to the film’s ‘heartwarming, crowd-pleasing fashion.’ Blay spotlights how the white savior ‘feel-good scene’ aims at ‘evoking a specific response from the audience’: ‘That’s the job of the filmmaker, after all – to manipulate, coax and coerce the viewer to feel something.’⁹⁰ This implies a notion of feelings as not purely individual but as something that can be managed. Such an approach is proposed by feminist, queer, and race studies scholar Sara Ahmed, who challenges ‘any assumption that emotions are a private matter.’⁹¹ Ahmed argues that emotions, like our deep-rooted assumptions about the world, are discursively shaped and, thus, not innocent of ideology. And, whereas the inclusion of the white savior sequence in the film adaptation of *Hidden Figures* cannot be sufficiently explained in terms of ‘narrative economy,’ Ahmed’s concept of ‘affective economy’ may be able to contribute to our understanding of it.

Ahmed uses the term ‘economy’ to suggest that affect is a social phenomenon, building on the idea in Marxian theory that commodities obtain a surplus value by means of economic exchange. For Ahmed, feelings become similarly attached (‘stuck’) to signs through discursive circulation: ‘Some signs, that is, increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective

they become, and the more they appear to “contain” affect.⁹² Such a sign is the ‘black man’ as an ‘object of fear’ (as in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*).⁹³ Ahmed highlights that we are usually unaware that the feelings that stick to these signs are shaped by a history that is very often a history of repression: ‘repression always leaves its trace in the present – hence “what sticks” is also bound up with the “absent presence” of historicity.’⁹⁴ In his study of the white savior film, Hughey delineates the history of racist thought and repression that has shaped the ‘sentimentalism’ attached to the (intensively circulated) figure of the white savior.⁹⁵ At the same time, Hughey shows that the white savior trope conceals this history by foregrounding meanings of color-blindness and across-the-color-line friendship, allowing white audiences to ‘feel good about whiteness’ without having to worry about racism.⁹⁶ The inclusion of a white male hero in the film adaptation of *Hidden Figures* would thus seem to address not only deep-seated assumptions with regard to gender and race, but also deep-rooted feelings that have come to ‘stick’ to the figure of the white savior. Because such emotions are historically shaped and socially circulated, Ahmed suggests that they work to bind together the individuals that share them: ‘In such affective economies, emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments.’⁹⁷ More precisely, emotions ‘align some subjects with some others and against other others.’⁹⁸ In relation to the example of the ‘black man,’ Ahmed argues that affect ‘does not bring the bodies together: it is not a shared feeling, but works to differentiate between white and black bodies,’ in that affect ‘opens up past histories that stick to the present [...] and allow the white body to be constructed as apart from the black body.’⁹⁹ Likewise, the emotions that stick to the complementary ‘tropes of the white savior and the dysfunctional and dark “other,”’¹⁰⁰ as outlined by Hughey, bind together some individuals (those audiences that experience the display of white paternalism as ‘heartwarming’) while simultaneously excluding ‘other others.’ Projecting a nonwhite ‘other,’ the white savior trope not only binds together white bodies, but also works to distinguish them from black bodies. This intensifies the paradoxical situation indicated above: to make the story of these previously marginalized black women’s lives and achievements ‘palatable to mainstream audiences’ (that is, ‘white-dominated Western’ audiences),¹⁰¹ *Hidden Figures* taps into the affective potential of the white savior trope, thereby ‘othering’ the black women portrayed as essentially different.¹⁰²

Nevertheless, Hollywood studios have grounds for their assumptions about the feelings of white audiences. Hughey’s empirical study of how audiences create meaning from white savior films indicates the influence of sociodemographic group

identities (such as racial and gender identities) on the interpretation of these films. He concludes that, while black women in the study were especially critical of the representation of race in these films, 'white participants – especially when in the context of focus groups marked by white racial homogeneity – were much more likely than others to embrace messages of white paternalism.'¹⁰³

Michael Sheresky, one of the two Hollywood talent agents who encouraged Melfi to take himself out of contention for a *Spider-Man* sequel to get involved in the 'far less obviously commercial' *Hidden Figures* project, said in an interview, 'The most important thing for this film was to have it be made in such a way, and released in such a way, that people actually see it.'¹⁰⁴ In their most simplistic form, Hollywood studios' assumptions about what 'mainstream' audiences desire persist in the 'Hollywood myth' that 'black films don't travel.'¹⁰⁵ In her essay on the 2018 superhero movie *Black Panther* (a predominantly black-cast live-action film based on the Marvel Comics character of the same name), Renée T. White observes that, 'In mainstream Hollywood, black-themed films are considered too financially risky. It comes as a surprise when they are critical and financial successes.'¹⁰⁶ In a note, the author refers to *Hidden Figures* as an example of such surprise successes. However, while *Black Panther* 'actively rejects the hegemony of whiteness,'¹⁰⁷ the bathroom sequence in *Hidden Figures* does not. Instead, the inclusion of this sequence in the film adaptation of Shetterly's book would seem to be guided by a strategy that seeks to make the film 'travel' (despite the 'black-themed' story) against the background of the critical and financial success of Hollywood white savior films in global markets.¹⁰⁸ For Lieway et al., the 'White (male) hero' is a key factor in the 'top-selling formula' for telling successful narratives in present-day popular culture, arguing that, in *Hidden Figures*, 'residual sexist and racist ideologies may have informed contemporary decisions.'¹⁰⁹ With regard to Hollywood representations of African American history, including the film adaptation of *Hidden Figures*, Tiyi M. Morris concludes: 'All of these films did well commercially, despite, or probably because of, their historical inaccuracies.'¹¹⁰ Obscuring black agency, these movies present white heroism and white experiences 'to make these stories palatable to white audiences.'¹¹¹

Among other features, it is the fact that *Black Panther* 'does not need a white savior' which makes the film a 'defining moment for black storytelling in Hollywood.'¹¹² For White, *Black Panther* thus achieves what Tommy L. Lott describes as a characteristic of Third Cinema: to provide alternative representations that diverge 'from studio films that rely primarily on an inversion of racial codes – a structural feature that positions black spectators to view themselves from a mainstream perspective.'¹¹³ In the

bathroom sequence of *Hidden Figures*, in contrast, the African American women do seem to be portrayed ‘through the racist frame imposed by studios on many mainstream films’¹¹⁴. The sequence reframes the black women, ‘from a mainstream perspective,’ in a way that not only fulfills ingrained assumptions about gender and race, but that, momentarily, renders them the ‘other’ in relation to projected Hollywood audiences who feel touched by the depiction of white paternalism.

Conclusion

Hidden Figures’ pivotal bathroom sequence articulates previously repressed identity in a way that, paradoxically, relies on emotions shaped by past repression. Marginalizing the film’s black female protagonists in favor of a white savior character in terms of photography, mise en scène, and sound, the film sequence not only makes concessions to audiences’ deep-seated assumptions and expectations with regard to gender and race, but also taps into a historically shaped affective potential that ‘sticks’ to the complementary figures of the white savior and the dysfunctional nonwhite. It thus perpetuates repression by marginalizing and ‘othering,’ once more, the African American women it depicts. Relating the changes made in the film adaptation to the imperative of making the film ‘in such a way [...] that people actually see it’¹¹⁵ as well as to Hollywood studios’ presumptions about the assumptions, expectations, and desires of ‘mainstream’ audiences, the case study of *Hidden Figures* has implications for the genre of biographical drama film. The intersection of the need for mass marketability and the need for sentimental storytelling and ‘feel good’ moments in Hollywood drama film demonstrates the problem of representing previously repressed identity on the screen, an issue that relates to how, in the deep structure of affect, past repression continues to be effective.

It is important to stress that this conclusion specifically relates to the movie’s bathroom sequence, which has been compared to the events recorded in Shetterly’s book. However, any comparison of the film adaptation with the book must take into account significant genre-specific differences between nonfiction writing and dramatized Hollywood fiction ‘based on true events.’ Both the book and the film use selective strategies to transform the material with which they work and create narratives that appeal to target audiences. Comparing the film to the book, therefore, runs the risk of reducing the film to a manipulative version of the truthful original, instead of considering both narratives in their own right and on their own terms. What is more, the focus on the movie’s bathroom sequence might result in pigeonholing the

movie as a ‘white savior film’ even though the movie has rendered the previously ‘unseen’ history of the African American women working in the early US space program visible for international Hollywood audiences. For Hollywood standards, the degree of agency and empowerment of the film’s black female protagonists is exceptional.¹¹⁶

Aside from the white savior trope, other cinematic tropes are also at work in the movie. Depicting how the African American women carve out a place for themselves during Jim Crow segregation, the film draws on a David and Goliath (or triumphant underdog) motif.¹¹⁷ The movie includes another dramatic sequence that is not part of the book: aiming to educate herself on IBM programming, Octavia Spencer’s character steals a book from the ‘white’ section of the public library, as she is not allowed to borrow it in the usual way. On their way home, sitting in the ‘colored’ section of the bus, she teaches her sons, ‘Separate and equal are two different things. Just because it’s the way doesn’t make it right. Understand?’ This sequence portrays the African American woman in terms of agency and self-empowerment in the face of a profoundly unjust system – in direct opposition to the way black female agency is subverted in the film’s bathroom sequence.

The contradictory representation of African American women (oscillating between black female agency and helpless dependence on white male benevolence) is reflected in the film’s reception, ranging from ‘heartwarming’ to ‘racist’¹¹⁸. However, it is important to note that the inclusion of the cinematic white savior trope has not prevented audiences from making the movie meaningful in ways that are at odds with the politics of white male saviorism. As outlined above, the film has been used (by grassroots activists and First Lady Michelle Obama alike) with the goal of empowering female and black audiences. Hughey emphasizes the active role of audiences in the context of white savior cinema: his study demonstrates that participants’ interpretations are conditioned both by the content of the films and by the participants’ sociodemographic positions, but that neither overdetermines audiences’ interpretations. Instead, Hughey’s study highlights the ‘power of symbolic interaction’ and ‘interpersonal influence’ to shape audience members’ meaning-making.¹¹⁹ The mixed response that *Hidden Figures* has received cannot, therefore, be solely attributed to the film’s representation of race and gender, nor to the interplay of sociodemographic characteristics (such as race and gender) of audiences with dominant meanings of the film, but must also derive from the effects of social interaction.

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¹⁸ Muller, Marissa G. 'The *Hidden Figures* Effect Is Real: How It's Inspiring Young Women to Seek Careers in Science and Technology.' *Glamour*, 20 January 2017, <https://www.glamour.com/story/hidden-figures-inspiring-young-women-science-and-technology>.

Date accessed: 13 June 2020. Hatch, Jenavieve. "'Hidden Figures' Is Already Inspiring More Girls To Go Into STEM.' *HuffPost*, 2 February 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/hidden-figures-is-already-inspiring-more-girls-to-go-into-stem_n_588f4d4be4b0176377956501. Date accessed: 13 June 2020.

¹⁹ See, for example: Norman, Abby. 'The Scully Effect: How "X-Files" Helped Mainstream Women In STEM Careers.' *all that's interesting*, 31 January 2015, <https://allthatsinteresting.com/scully-effect>. Date accessed: 13 June 2020.

²⁰ The 'Scully Effect' has been researched by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, see: 'The Scully Effect: I Want to Believe in STEM.' *Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media*,

https://seejane.org/research-informs-empowers/the-scully-effect-i-want-to-believe-in-stem/?itm_term=slider. Date accessed: 13 June 2020. In the NASA context, Mae Jemison, the first black

woman to travel into space, has cited television series *Star Trek's* Lieutenant Nyoto Uhura (played by Nichelle Nichols) as her role model. Nichols reports in a 2011 radio interview that Martin Luther King Jr. discouraged her from leaving the show after the first year, arguing that, 'For the first time, we are being seen the world over as we should be seen.' See: Jackson, Camille. 'The Legacy of Lt. Uhura:

Astronaut Mae Jemison on Race in Space.' *Duke Today*, 28 October 2013, <https://today.duke.edu/2013/10/maejemison>. Date accessed: 13 June 2020.

'Star Trek's Uhura Reflects on MLK Encounter.' *npr*, 17 January 2011,

<https://www.npr.org/transcripts/132942461?t=1586252414929>. Date accessed: 13 June 2020.

²¹ See, for example: Blickenstaff, Jacob Clark. 'Revealing Hidden Figures.' *NSTA Reports* 28:7 (2017), 18-19. Terrell, Kellee. '#BlackGirlMagic: This 13-Year-Old Raised Money For Over 800 People To See "Hidden Figures".' *NEWSTALK 1450*, <https://woldcnews.com/1585492/blackgirlmagic-this-13-year-old-raised-money-for-over-800-people-to-see-hidden-figures/>. Date accessed: 13 June 2020.

²² McNary, Dave. "'Hidden Figures" Set for Free Screenings in 14 Cities for Black History Month.' *Variety*, 14 February 2017, <https://variety.com/2017/film/news/hidden-figures-free-screenings-black-history-month-1201988170/>. Date accessed: 13 June 2020.

²³ Thomas, Dexter. 2017. Blay, Zeba. 2017.

²⁴ A poignant example is the spoof *White Savior: The Movie* trailer, featured in satire talk show *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, which parodies *Hidden Figures*. See: Late Night with Seth Meyers, 'White Savior: The Movie Trailer.' *YouTube*, 22 February 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_RTnuJvg6U. Date accessed: 20 June 2020.

²⁵ Lieway, Miriam et al. '*Hidden Figures*: Calculated Responses to Sexism and Racism in 1960s America.' *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 9:4 (2017), 607-613 (609, 612). Morris, Tiya M. '(Un)Learning Hollywood's Civil Rights Movement: a Scholar's Critique.' *Journal of African American Studies* 22:4 (2018), 407-419 (407-408, 417-418). See also, for example: Ventura, Patricia. 'Introduction: Race and Utopian Desire.' In: Ventura, Patricia and Edward K. Chan (eds.), *Race and Utopian Desire in American Literature and Society*. London: Pelgrave Macmillan, 2019, 1-19 (8).

²⁶ Blay, Zeba. 2017.

²⁷ Lieway, Miriam et al. 2017 (609).

²⁸ In the film, Katherine Goble gets married to Jim Johnson at a later point in time, whereas in real life they got married in 1959. For the sake of convenience, Taraji P. Henson's character is referred to as Katherine Johnson.

²⁹ Melfi, Theodore. *Hidden Figures*. Fox 2000 Pictures, 2016.

- ³⁰ Zimmer, Hans, Pharrell Williams and Benjamin Wallfisch. 'That's Just The Way Things Are.' *Hidden Figures: Original Score*. Columbia Records, 2017.
- ³¹ Zimmer, Hans, Pharrell Williams and Benjamin Wallfisch. 'Sign.' *Hidden Figures: Original Score*. Columbia Records, 2017.
- ³² Giannetti, Louis. *Understanding Movies*. Boston: Pearson, 2014 (61, 64).
- ³³ In linguistics, 'deictic' expressions, such as 'this' and 'that,' are linguistic forms used to 'point' to some aspect of a shared context. See: Yule, George. *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996 (9). In the study of multimodality, 'deixis' is used to refer to any sign that points to some aspect within the semiotic object: 'In an *image* the gaze of a depicted entity leads me to "follow" that gaze - "What's that cat looking at?".' See: Kress, Gunther. *Multimodality*. London: Routledge, 2010 (117).
- ³⁴ Giannetti, Louis. 2014 (11, 67-68).
- ³⁵ Idem (68, 71).
- ³⁶ For the terms 'acoustic space' and 'linguistic space,' see, for example: Verderber, Kathleen S., Rudolph F. Verderber and Deanna D. Sellnow. *Communicate!* Boston: Wadsworth, 2014 (102). Mahony, Pat. *Schools for the Boys?* London: Routledge, 2012 (28).
- ³⁷ Thomas, Dexter. 2017. Thomas points out 'another heartwarming scene that is also fiction': whereas, in the film, Costner's character lets Johnson enter Mission Control for John Glenn's launch, in real life, Katherine Johnson watched the transmission in her office.
- ³⁸ Shetterly, Margot Lee. 2016 (129).
- ³⁹ Thomas, Dexter. 2017.
- ⁴⁰ Shetterly, Margot Lee. 2016 (168).
- ⁴¹ See also: Lieway, Miriam et al. 2017 (609). Morris, Tiyi M. 2018 (417).
- ⁴² Shetterly, Margot Lee. 2016 (xviii).
- ⁴³ Hughey, Matthew W. *The White Savior Film*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014 (65).
- ⁴⁴ Idem (8-10).
- ⁴⁵ Idem (2, 11-12).
- ⁴⁶ Idem (8). More recently, a white savior controversy boiled up when *Green Book* (2018) topped Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) at the Oscars in 2019. See: 'Oscars 2019: Reaction To Best Picture Award For "Green Book".' *npr*, 25 February 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/25/697839287/oscars-2019-reaction-to-best-picture-award-for-green-book?t=1588151623707>. Date accessed: 15 June 2020.
- ⁴⁷ Hughey, Matthew W. 2014 (8, 15).
- ⁴⁸ Idem (57). 'Timbuktu,' the name of a 'town in central Mali, on the River Niger: terminus of a trans-Saharan caravan route; a great Muslim centre (14th–16th centuries),' metaphorically denotes 'any distant or outlandish place.' See: 'Timbuktu.' *Collins English Dictionary*, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/timbuktu>. Date accessed: 15 June 2020. From the perspective of postcolonial theory, this metaphor might be described as exemplifying Orientalism, establishing the sub-Saharan African town as the essentially 'other' place. See, for example: Mountz, Alison. 'The Other.' In: Gallaher, Carolyn et al. (eds.), *Key Concepts in Political Geography*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009, 328-338 (329). A critical analysis of the scene might home in on such suppressed meaning to argue that the use of the word (by film character Katherine Johnson) to refer to Langley's West Area, workplace of the black female mathematicians, amounts to 'othering' the place and the people from the vantage point of (almost all-white) Space Task Group. The film character's wording is purely fictional.
- ⁴⁹ Hughey, Matthew W. 2014 (52, 59).
- ⁵⁰ Idem (70).
- ⁵¹ Idem (47-48, 60).
- ⁵² Kevin Costner impersonated the white savior not only in *Dances with Wolves* (1990), but also in *The Bodyguard* (1992). When Costner was cast to play Al Harrison, therefore, his star persona was already laden with connotations of white male saviorism. For the question of how previous screen roles

contribute to the star image that film stars bring to new roles, see, for example: Dyer, Richard. *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. London: Routledge, 2004 (7).

⁵³ Idem (110).

⁵⁴ Ibidem.

⁵⁵ Idem (65, 66).

⁵⁶ Idem (66-68).

⁵⁷ Idem (8).

⁵⁸ Idem (171).

⁵⁹ Two fictional characters of the 'bad whites' category have been added into the story. There is head engineer Paul Stafford (played by Jim Parsons), overambitious and contemptuous. However, the character that is most obviously racially prejudiced is the white computers' supervisor Vivian Mitchell (Kirsten Dunst). There is an uncomfortable moment when she meets African American computer Dorothy Vaughan (Octavia Spencer) in the desegregated women's bathroom: 'You know, Dorothy ... despite what you may think, I have nothing against y'all.' Vaughan: 'I know. I know you probably believe that.'

⁶⁰ In an interview, co-screenwriter Allison Schroeder emphasizes the aspect of gender: 'It was just so appalling to me. There were bikes on campus that the guys could use, but the girls couldn't because they had skirts on.' See: Silman, Anna. 'Hidden Figures Shows How a Bathroom Break Can Change History.' *The Cut*, 6 January 2017, <https://www.thecut.com/2017/01/hidden-figures-shows-how-a-bathroom-break-can-change-history.html>. Date accessed: 20 June 2020.

⁶¹ Dyer, Richard. *Only Entertainment*. London: Routledge, 2002 (66).

⁶² Idem (66, 68).

⁶³ Pearlman, Robert Z. 2016b. In his characterization of the biopic genre, Dennis Bingham similarly suggests that, 'At the heart of the biopic is the urge to dramatize actuality.' See: Bingham, Dennis. 'The Lives and Times of the Biopic.' In: Rosenstone, Robert A. and Constantin Parvulescu (eds.), *A Companion to the Historical Film*. Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2013, 233-254 (253).

⁶⁴ Blay, Zeba. 2017.

⁶⁵ Shetterly, Margot Lee. 2016 (171).

⁶⁶ Blay, Zeba. 2017. Wells, Veronica. 'On The Problematic And Unnecessary White Saviors in Hidden Figures.' *MadameNoire*, 31 January 2017, <https://madamenoire.com/784290/on-the-problematic-and-unnecessary-white-saviors-in-hidden-figures/>. Date accessed: 20 June 2020.

⁶⁷ Thomas, Dexter. 2017.

⁶⁸ Wells, Veronica. 2017.

⁶⁹ Blay, Zeba. 2017.

⁷⁰ Hughey, Matthew W. 2014 (17).

⁷¹ Idem (4).

⁷² Pearlman, Robert Z. 2016b.

⁷³ Belton, John. *American Cinema, American Culture*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2018 (43-44).

⁷⁴ Pearlman, Robert Z. 2016b.

⁷⁵ Shetterly, Margot Lee. 2016 (108-109).

⁷⁶ Idem (109).

⁷⁷ Idem (44).

⁷⁸ Idem (43-44).

⁷⁹ Idem (44-45).

⁸⁰ Idem (48).

⁸¹ Hughey, Matthew W. 2014 (9).

⁸² Shetterly, Margot Lee. 2016 (169-170).

⁸³ Pearlman, Robert Z. 2016b.

⁸⁴ Dyer, Richard. 2002 (68).

⁸⁵ Idem (67).

⁸⁶ Ibidem.

⁸⁷ In an interview, Margot Lee Shetterly describes Katherine Johnson as ‘exceptional in every way.’ See: ‘Pioneering Black NASA Mathematician Katherine Johnson Dies at 101.’ *euronews*, 26 February 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/02/24/pioneering-black-nasa-mathematician-katherine-johnson-dies-at-101>. Date accessed: 21 June 2020.

⁸⁸ Dyer, Richard. 2002 (67).

⁸⁹ Idem (68).

⁹⁰ Blay, Zeba. 2017.

⁹¹ Ahmed, Sara. ‘Affective Economies.’ *Social Text* 22:2 (2004), 117-139 (117).

⁹² Idem (120, 122).

⁹³ Idem (126).

⁹⁴ Idem (120).

⁹⁵ Hughey, Matthew W. 2014 (2, 8-10, 67).

⁹⁶ Idem (17, 169).

⁹⁷ Ahmed, Sara. 2004 (119).

⁹⁸ Idem (117).

⁹⁹ Idem (126).

¹⁰⁰ Hughey, Matthew W. 2014 (8).

¹⁰¹ Idem (169, 172). With regard to audience demographics, the term ‘mainstream’ might be specified in terms of frequency: in 2017, whites made up 54% (23.5 million) of the frequent moviegoers (going to the movies once a month or more) in the US and Canada; African Americans made up 10% (4.5 million). See: ‘THEME Report 2017.’ *Motion Picture Association of America*, 2017, https://www.motionpictures.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/MPAA-THEME-Report-2017_Final.pdf. Date accessed: 24 June 2020.

¹⁰² See also: Lieway, Miriam et al. 2017 (612).

¹⁰³ Hughey, Matthew W. 2014 (158-159).

¹⁰⁴ Keegan, Rebecca. ‘Meet the Under-the-Radar Hollywood Power Duo Who Made *Hidden Figures* Possible.’ *VANITY FAIR*, 21 February 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/02/the-power-duo-who-made-hidden-figures-possible>. Date accessed: 29 June 2020.

¹⁰⁵ Anderson, Tre’vell. ‘Disproving the “Black Films Don’t Travel” Hollywood Myth.’ *Los Angeles Times*, 24 March 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-black-movies-global-audience-myth-20170324-story.html>. Date accessed: 24 June 2020.

¹⁰⁶ White, Renée T. ‘I Dream a World: *Black Panther* and the Re-Making of Blackness.’ *New Political Science* 40:2 (2018), 421-427 (421).

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁸ Hughey, Matthew W. 2014 (22, 67, 162).

¹⁰⁹ Lieway, Miriam et al. 2017 (612).

¹¹⁰ Morris, Tiyi M. 2018 (418).

¹¹¹ Idem (407-408).

¹¹² White, Renée T. 2018 (421).

¹¹³ Lott, Tommy L. ‘Aesthetics and Politics in Contemporary Black Film Theory.’ In: Allen, Richard, and Murray Smith (eds.), *Film Theory and Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 282-307 (291).

¹¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹¹⁵ Keegan, Rebecca. 2017.

¹¹⁶ The authors wish to thank Professor Jaap Kooijman of the University of Amsterdam for his critical feedback, which is reflected in this paragraph.

¹¹⁷ Beck, Bernhard. ‘Mrs. Miniver’s Girls: Plucky Girls in *Hidden Figures*, *The Zookeeper’s Wife*, *Their Finest*, and *Colossal*.’ *Multicultural Perspectives* 19:4 (2017), 223-226 (223).

¹¹⁸ Wells, Veronica. 2017.

¹¹⁹ Hughey, Matthew W. 2014 (158-159).