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The Hidden Figure in *Hidden Figures*

“You think we can get to the moon?” asked Al Harrison, to which Katherine Johnson replied, “We’re already there, sir.” These lines are from the movie *Hidden Figures* released in 2017 about three African American women who worked in the computing department at NASA, based on a true story. Throughout the movie, these women work hard to overcome the racial prejudices of the white people with whom they work. The women, themselves, and their work remain hidden from their co-workers and from the world, but by the time the conversation between Harrison and Johnson occurs in the movie, a shift was occurring in the acceptance of these women as an important contribution to NASA. Katherine Johnson, one of the three women, emerges from the shadows of being unknown and hidden, and through three pivotal scenes where she faces racial prejudice without fear, she becomes a pivotal person in the history of NASA and America.

Thomas Jefferson writes in the Declaration of Independence, “...all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” (1082). If Jefferson and the founding fathers really believed in equality for all, then why did it take almost 200 years for the African American population to truly gain freedom? Of course, after the Emancipation Proclamation during Lincoln’s presidency, black Americans were free to live off the plantations, but they still were not seen as equals and did not share the same rights as white Americans. It would take almost one hundred years before JFK and Martin Luther King, Jr. set in motion the end of segregation

through the Civil Rights Movement. The changes did not happen overnight, and it would take years before America righted itself with the black American population. Even today, the issue of race still rears its ugly head, but Katherine Johnson was an important part of the change in America in the 1960s.

In the first scene, Johnson is working in the colored computers building but is given a new assignment from the supervisor due to her ability to solve analytical geometry. However, the white, male mathematicians meet her with resistance to this change. According to McCardy and Matusitz, “The idea of the long-established US ‘social norm’ deteriorating was a concern to her counterparts, who tried to re-establish the original social structure by forming invisible barriers from her existence” (9). In other words, they basically ignore her existence unless it is necessary to acknowledge her. There is no communication, no eye contact, and no collaborating on the project. Katherine is invisible to all of them, hidden in plain sight. Fannie Barrier Williams says, “The colored girl...is not known and hence not believed in; she belongs to a race that is best designated by the term ‘problem,’ and she lives beneath the shadow of that problem which envelops and obscures her” (qtd. in Giglotti et. al. 607). However, Katherine did not stay hidden for long because plot of the movie “holds that ‘new math’ calculations (calculations hidden inside the ‘old math’) had to be discovered to make space flight possible” (Giglotti et. al. 607). The hidden figure finds this ‘hidden math’ forcing her white colleagues to take notice.

The second scene is more of a combination of small bits in the movie that cover the same racist scenario, which is Katherine’s access, or lack thereof, to classified information and meetings. Her colleague, Paul Stafford, gives her mathematical reports to check with redacted information, and to bypass this limitation, Katherine holds up the paper to the light, allowing her to see the writing. She sits at her desk all day long and verifies the calculations of the men in the

room, more specifically Stafford. She does the work, and he gets the credit on every report she types. Katherine also cannot attend any of the briefings about the upcoming Friendship 7 mission involving Astronaut John Glenn. Mr. Harrison “indicated that he liked Katherine as an individual, but was obligated to impose those limitations on her because of her race and gender” (McCardy and Matusitz 13). Stafford looks at Katherine right outside the door of the classified briefing and says, “There is no protocol for women attending”—more specifically black women. She looks him in the eye and says, “There’s no protocol for a man circling the earth either, sir.” Katherine becomes tired of feeling inferior, so she “stood up to her superiors in order to be allowed to participate as a full member of the Space Task Group and attend Pentagon meetings. Katherine added her name to the technical briefings she had written, even though each time she was instructed to take her name off” (Giglotti et. al. 608). Katherine issues the challenge and NASA answers by giving her more clearance and access to the information she requires for the calculations.

The most powerful scene follows Katherine to the “colored restroom” in the colored building that is one-half of a mile away from her desk. On one occasion, she returns to her desk drenched in rain from head to toe, holding a pile of, now damp, redacted reports. Harrison questions her many absences during the day to which she reminds him that their building does not have a colored restroom. Katherine says to him, “I have to walk to Timbuktu just to relieve myself! And I can’t use one of the handy bikes.” Harrison marches to the colored building with a sledgehammer and knocks the ‘Colored Restroom’ sign from the wall. After he gives permission for the black, female computers to use whatever restroom they wanted, he states, “At NASA, we all pee the same color.” Whether this scene is historically accurate or not, Harrison sets the changes in motion by “seeing” the discrimination and removing the barrier, “the physical

representation of where the authority lies” and “a constant reminder that Blacks and women were not seen as equal” (McCardy and Matusitz 12). It is a barrier that Katherine saw as a kid, acknowledges as an adult, and breaks down for the future of her race, but especially for black females.

Hidden Figures, set in 1961, uncovers the hidden life and accomplishments of Katherine Johnson, whose life is probably unknown to most people until the movie. Gilgotti and colleagues write, “The subtle, strategic, and persistent ways Katherine...worked toward equal rights made their fight against racism...largely unseen but not any less powerful than other more visible activism at the time” (609). Katherine stands out from the other women, and she “ignored segregated bathrooms, challenged women’s exclusion from the editorial meetings of the Guidance and Control Branch, and focused on her work, all with a quiet confidence that secured respect from colleagues, even those who were initially skeptical of her talent” (Harmony 266). However, NASA notices Katherine. After her success with John Glenn’s space mission, NASA allows her to be a part of the computation team for the Apollo II mission to the moon that sent Neil Armstrong to the moon. It was on this mission that Armstrong is quoted as saying, “That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.” Little did he know, what a “giant leap for mankind that was.” However, even with these two successes for Katherine, it took years before she receives national recognition. In 2016, NASA dedicated the Katherine G. Johnson Computational Building to recognize her for her work in space travel. At 97 years old, Johnson receives the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Obama.

In conclusion, “racial hegemony is a phenomenon whereby one racial group acts in a superior or dominant manner towards other racial groups (McCardy and Matusitz 8). More specifically in American history, it is the phenomenon of white Americans acting superiorly to

black Americans. Moreover, hegemony includes “mechanisms through which dominant groups in society succeed in persuading subordinate groups to accept the formers’ moral, political, and cultural values” (qtd. in McCardy and Matusitz 8). Is this not a worse social phenomenon? It is one error for people to just act like they are superior, but it is a graver error for the “superior” people to persuade the “inferior” to accept that the way they are treated is normal and acceptable. The movie *Hidden Figures* is about that period in American history where racial hegemony was prevalent, but a change was coming because the “inferior” group no longer found it acceptable. The hidden figure, Katherine Johnson, in *Hidden Figures*, becomes the catalyst of change at NASA. She sets reform and acceptance in motion and opens the door for opportunities for women just like her.

Works Cited

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