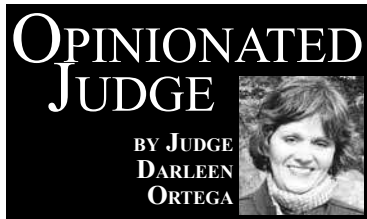


Arts &
ENTERTAINMENT

A Hunger for Films about 'Hidden Figures'



I am often struck by the narrow range of stories that see the light of day in American films and popular media. The films we have had up to now about the American space program, for example, depict rooms full of white men and, in general, what few films we have depicting black women rarely center on their experience and certainly don't involve their contributions to American history or scientific exploration. Contrary to the excuse offered by Kevin Costner in a recent MSNBC interview, the stories we are missing on screen are *not* necessarily found in history books, nor can their absence from popular media be explained by the view that, really, "how many stories can you tell?"

The black women whose mathematical skills powered the American space program in the 1960s would still be unknown to most of us were it not for a recent book by Margot Lee Shetterly, which became the basis for the new film "Hidden Figures." The film focuses on three of the many women whose lives are explored in Shetterly's book, and provides a long-neglected window into their particular stories and the larger context for the women who worked as "computers" in the space program in the mid-20th century.

It is about time we learned these stories, and I do mean to urge everyone to see this film, which gives a flavor of the contributions of such women and the barriers they faced to build their careers. I hope, however, that we will avoid what appears to be a widespread temptation to minimize those barriers and to over-applaud Hollywood for giving us one film in which accomplished and intelligent women of color are the central focus. This is at best a start, and by no means a perfect one; our hunger for such stories should not divert us from pushing for a broader range of narratives and for those stories to be told with less pandering to the dominant culture.

The three real-life women at the center of the film, engagingly played by Taraji P. Henson, Octa-



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A scene from the film 'Hidden Figures' depicts black employees at NASA during the 1960s when the workforce was segregated by race.

via Spencer, and Janelle Monáe, are among a large number of black women who were employed as human "computers" before machines could do that work. Women with the right skills were thought to be more likely to approach the task of mathematical calculation with the necessary dogged attention to detail -- but in the segregated South, black women did the work in a separate section of NASA, with separate bathrooms and cafeterias.

The film devotes some attention to the realities of life under segregation. Henson's character, Katherine Johnson, has to run half a mile in heels in all weather just to get to the nearest "colored" ladies room to relieve herself; her

male colleagues undermine her and take credit for her work, and install a separate "colored" coffee pot for her, the only person of color in her unit. Spencer's character, Dorothy Vaughn, supervises a department for years without the benefit of the title or pay that goes along with it, and she and her sons are kicked out of the local public library for not confining themselves to the poorly-stocked colored section. Monáe's character, Mary Jackson, has to petition the city to allow her to take the courses she needs to pursue an engineering degree because they are only taught in an all-white school. The level of specificity depicted here is more than we usually see.

Yet in many ways the struggles are smoothed over, suggesting the filmmakers' likely unconscious desire to spare viewers too much discomfort. The women live in nice homes and have wardrobes, hair, and make-up that is too art-directed to be realistic (a common Hollywood problem), suggesting that their lives, though separate from white folks, are basically otherwise equal. They vigorously call out racism with a clarity that was much more dangerous and unlikely in 1962, with consequences no worse than being ignored. And the impact of their words on white people is overplayed, as when Johnson blows up at her office colleagues about her long treks to the ladies

room, and is met with stunned and chastened silence from her entire department. Her white male supervisor then marches down to the colored restroom and knocks down its signage.

I'm confident that scenes like that just didn't happen. Johnson's white supervisor never tore down any Jim Crow signs. Her most obstructionist male colleague did not suddenly experience a change of heart and begin bringing her coffee. Vaughn's nemesis likewise did not suddenly begin treating her with respect. Somehow Johnson, Vaughn, and Jackson and women like them survived despite the impediments of racism and white supremacy, but it cannot have been primarily because of changes of heart in their white counterparts. That is not how racism and white supremacy manifest, and as much as I appreciated the pieces of their story that were told in "Hidden Figures," I left longing for a more insightful and honest rendition of how oppressed people manage to endure slights that don't have an end date, how they manage to pull out their best work over and over again when no one supports them and no one applauds or even sees it. I'm still looking for the film that more honestly grapples with how it is that such figures remain hidden. This film brings important bits to light, but still leaves them partially obscured.

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