

## Negotiating Race and Gender: An Intersectional of Hidden Figures (2016)

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### ABSTRACT

*This article examines how race and gender intersect to shape the lived experiences of African American women in *Hidden Figures* (2016), focusing on the strategies of negotiation and resistance employed within institutional constraints. Using qualitative textual analysis, this study applies Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality Theory as the primary analytical framework, highlighting how systemic discrimination operates through organizational structures, social norms, and cultural expectations. The findings reveal that the female protagonists exercise agency through professional competence, intellectual problem-solving, and collective solidarity, which allow them to challenge exclusionary practices and assert visibility in a historically segregated workplace. By emphasizing the dynamics of negotiation and resistance, this study contributes to feminist, race, and cultural studies, demonstrating how intersectionality can illuminate both oppression and the strategies marginalized women employ to navigate and contest structural inequalities.*

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, Agency, Resistance, Hidden Figures, Race and Gender

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## INTRODUCTION

Film is not merely a form of entertainment but also a cultural text through which social realities, power relations, and historical inequalities are represented and negotiated. As a medium, cinema has the capacity to reflect dominant ideologies while simultaneously offering space for critique and resistance. One film that exemplifies this function is *Hidden Figures* (Melfi, 2016), which recounts the experiences of African American women mathematicians working at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) during the 1960s, a period characterized by institutionalized racial segregation and gender discrimination in the United States.

Set within the context of the Space Race, *Hidden Figures* portrays how race and gender intersect to shape the protagonists' professional and social experiences. The film depicts discriminatory workplace practices, spatial segregation, and limited access to authority, revealing that African American women face forms of oppression that cannot be adequately explained by race or gender alone. This complexity underscores the need for an analytical framework capable of addressing overlapping systems of power.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality provides such a framework by emphasizing that social identities such as race and gender operate as interlocking structures of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Intersectionality challenges single-axis analyses and highlights how marginalized individuals experience discrimination in distinct and compounded ways. Importantly, intersectionality also allows for the examination of agency, recognizing that marginalized subjects actively negotiate and respond to structural constraints rather than merely occupying positions of victimhood (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981).

While existing scholarship on *Hidden Figures* has largely focused on representation, historical recovery, and visibility of African American women in science, less attention has been paid to how film constructs women's agency and resistance within intersecting systems of race and gender. Therefore, this study examines *Hidden Figures* through an intersectional lens, focusing on how the protagonists negotiate institutional barriers and articulate resistance through professional competence, intellectual authority, and collective solidarity. By doing so, the study contributes to feminist, race, and cultural studies by demonstrating the relevance of intersectionality in understanding both systemic oppression and the agency of marginalized women.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs Kimberlé Crenshaw's Intersectionality Theory as the primary analytical framework to examine *Hidden Figures* (2016). Intersectionality posits that social identities such as race, gender, class, and other positionalities do not operate independently, rather, they intersect to produce unique forms of oppression and marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). In particular, Crenshaw emphasizes that analyses focusing on a single axis, race or gender, fail to capture the compounded discrimination experienced by marginalized groups. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding African American women in the 1960s NASA workplace, where segregation and gender bias interacted to shape both professional and personal experiences.

Beyond identifying structural oppression, intersectionality also allows for the exploration of agency and resistance within marginalized communities. Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act purposefully and make choices within constraining social structures (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981). Resistance, in turn, manifests when individuals challenge, negotiate, or subvert these constraints through strategies ranging from collective solidarity to intellectual and professional competence. In cinematic text,

these dynamics can be traced through narrative devices, character interactions, and dialogical exchanges, which reflect both overt and subtle forms of negotiation and defiance.

Applying intersectionality in this study enables a dual focus; first, to map the structural barriers shaped by overlapping systems of race and gender; second, to illuminate how the protagonists of *Hidden Figures* exercise agency and enact resistance within those barriers. This framework positions the film not only as a historical dramatization but also as a cultural text that foregrounds the interplay of oppression and empowerment among marginalized women.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis to examine how *Hidden Figures* (2016) represents the intersection of race and gender while articulating African American women's agency and resistance. Qualitative textual analysis is appropriate for cultural and film studies because it allows researchers to interpret narrative, visual, and dialogical elements to uncover social meanings embedded within a text (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). The primary data source of this study is the film *Hidden Figures*, which provides examples of institutional barriers, professional challenges, and strategies of negotiation and resistance enacted by African American women within NASA during the 1960s. To operationalize the theoretical concepts of intersectionality, agency, and resistance, the study focuses on selected scenes that depict systemic oppression or moments of professional assertion, dialogues that reveal negotiation, defiance, or collective solidarity, and narrative structures that frame the protagonists' experiences and highlight their strategies of resistance. The analysis follows a three-step procedure: first, relevant scenes, dialogues, and narrative element was interpreted through the lens of Crenshaw's intersectionality theory to understand how overlapping social identities shape both oppression and empowerment; second, each selected element was interpreted through the lens of Crenshaw's intersectionality theory to understand how overlapping social identities shape both oppression and empowerment; and third, the findings were concluded thematically to demonstrate the interplay of systemic discrimination, individual agency, and collective resistance within the film. This methodology ensures that the study's theoretical framework is applied rigorously to concrete textual evidence, providing a nuanced analysis of both intersectional oppression and the strategies of agency and resistance depicted in *Hidden Figures*.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Intersectional Oppression Within NASA

*Hidden Figures* (2016) represents intersectional oppression as a systemic condition embedded within the institutional culture of NASA during the 1960s. The film illustrates how African American women mathematicians experience marginalization through the simultaneous operation of racial segregation and gender discrimination. Rather than portraying oppression as isolated incidents, the narrative constructs it as a normalized structure shaping everyday professional life. This depiction aligns with Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) argument that race and gender function as interlocking systems of power that produce unique and compounded forms of exclusion.

One of the clearest representations of institutionalized oppression appears when Katherine Johnson realizes that her workplace does not provide basic facilities for African American employees, which is a female bathroom, prompting her to state: "*There are no colored bathrooms in this building.*". This

statement highlights how segregation is materially embedded in organizational design, directly affecting Katherine's ability to perform her job efficiently. The absence of accessible facilities forces her to expend additional time and physical effort simply to meet basic needs, illustrating how racialized policies intersect with professional expectations. As a woman in a high-pressure scientific environment, Katherine is expected to maintain productivity, composure, and excellence, yet institutional barriers systematically undermine her capacity to do so. The line therefore encapsulates how oppression operates not only as symbolic exclusion but also as a practical constraint on labor and mobility.

Intersectional oppression is also evident in Dorothy Vaughan's professional experience. Despite functioning as the informal leader of the West Computing Group, her authority is denied through institutional refusal to grant formal recognition. This exclusion is explicitly articulated when Vivian Mitchell, a white female supervisor states: "*They're no assignin' a permanent supervisor for the colored group.*". The remark reveals how bureaucratic structures maintain racial and gender hierarchies by withholding titles, authority, and advancement from African American women. Dorothy's labor is accepted and relied upon, yet her leadership remains unacknowledged, reflecting a system that benefits from black women's competence while denying them institutional legitimacy. This form of marginalization exemplifies how intersectional oppression operates through administrative decisions rather than overt hostility, reinforcing inequality while maintaining an appearance of procedural neutrality.

Mary Jackson's struggle to pursue engineering education further demonstrates how oppression is sustained through legal and educational institutions. In the courtroom, a judge questions her ambition by asking: "*What would warrant a colored woman attendin' a white school?*". This line exposes deeply entrenched assumptions governing access to professional advancement. Mary's aspirations are framed as exceptional and in need of justification, revealing how African American women are positioned as outsiders within spaces of technical authority. The requirement that she articulate her worth reflects a broader expectation that marginalized individuals must continually prove their legitimacy within systems designed to exclude them. Here, race and gender intersect to limit access to knowledge, credentials, and social mobility.

Beyond these explicit dialogues, intersectional oppression in *Hidden Figures* is reinforced through patterns of skepticism, exclusion from decision-making spaces, and the normalization of unequal treatment. Katherine's calculations are frequently questioned, Dorothy's leadership is overlooked, and Mary's ambition's is legally constrained. These recurring experiences illustrate how oppression operates cumulatively, shaping professional identities and opportunities over time. The film thus demonstrates that African American women's marginalization at NASA cannot be reduced to either racial discrimination or sexism alone; rather, it emerges from the convergence of both within institutional structures.

Through its narrative emphasis on structural barriers, *Hidden Figures* presents intersectional oppression as a defining condition of the protagonists' working lives. By foregrounding segregation, denial of authority, and restricted access to education, the film underscores the necessity of intersectionality as an analytical framework for understanding how power operates within historically segregated institutions. This approach reveals not only the depth of systemic inequality but also the specific ways African American women are positioned at the margins of professional and social recognition.

### **Agency As Negotiation Within Intersectional Constraints**

While *Hidden Figures* foregrounds the systemic oppression faced by African American women at NASA, the film simultaneously emphasizes agency as an active and strategic response to intersecting

structures of race and gender. Rather than depicting the protagonists solely as victims of discrimination, the narrative presents them as subjects who consciously negotiate institutional limitations through intellectual competence, professional excellence, and calculated assertion. This portrayal aligns with intersectional feminist thought, which recognizes agency not as absolute freedom, but as action exercised within and against structural constraints (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000).

Katherine Johnson's agency is most visibly articulated through her mastery of mathematical knowledge and her insistence on professional legitimacy. In several key moments, she challenges the informal exclusion that limits her access to decision-making spaces. When questioned about her calculations, Katherine responds with confidence grounded in expertise, asserting the validity of her work rather than deferring to male authority by stating "*I feel like I'm the best person to present my calculation, Mr. Harrison.*". Her agency operates through epistemic authority (the ability to claim knowledge as a legitimate source of power in a space where African American women are presumed intellectually inferior). By insisting on accuracy and correctness, Katherine negotiates her position within NASA's hierarchy without directly confronting institutional power, demonstrating agency as strategic engagement rather than overt rebellion.

Dorothy Vaughan's agency is constructed through foresight, self-education, and collective empowerment. Anticipating the technological shift represented by the introduction of the IBM computer, Dorothy recognizes that institutional change threatens to further marginalize African American women. Rather than waiting for institutional recognition, Dorothy equips herself and her team with new skills, transforming vulnerability into leverage. This form of agency extends beyond individual advancement, emphasizing collective survival and mobility. By teaching her colleagues, Dorothy resists the isolation often imposed by intersecting oppression and redefines leadership as communal rather than hierarchical.

Mary Jackson's agency is characterized by intentional ambition and long-term planning, rather than spontaneous resistance. In the narrative, she clearly articulates her goal by stating "*I've planned on being an engineer at NASA.*". This declaration is significant because it frames Mary's actions as the pursuit of a preexisting professional vision, not merely a response to discrimination. Her agency is rooted in self-definition: she identifies herself as an engineer before the institution formally recognizes her as one. When faced with legal and educational barriers, Mary does not abandon this plan, instead, she negotiates access through institutional channels, including the courtroom. Her persistence reflects agency as sustained commitment, demonstrating that ambition itself can function as resistance within restrictive systems.

### **Resistance As Individual And Collective Practice**

In *Hidden Figures* (2016), resistance emerges as a crucial response to intersectional oppression, operating alongside agency but remaining analytically distinct from it. While agency emphasizes purposeful action and negotiation within constraints, resistance refers to acts that actively challenge, disrupt, or reconfigure exclusionary structures, whether overtly or subtly. The film portrays resistance not as constant confrontation, but as situational, strategic, and often embedded within everyday professional practices. This depiction aligns with intersectional feminist thought, which recognizes resistance as multifaceted and context-dependent, particularly for marginalized women navigating powerful institutions (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000).

Katherine Johnson's resistance is primarily enacted through her refusal to accept informal exclusion as inevitable. Although she often works within institutional rules, certain moments mark a shift from negotiation to resistance. When Katherine confronts the absurdity of segregated facilities, such as the

coffee pot where her colleagues do not want the same coffee pot with her, the bathroom scene in which is located outside of the main building of NASA where Katherine must run for half a mile just to relieve herself, and the Pentagon briefing scene where she is excluded to attend, whereas the institution benefits from her calculations, she publicly articulates the injustice rather than silently enduring it. Her willingness to verbalize the structural irrationality of segregation challenges the normalization of discriminatory practices within NASA. This form of resistance does not take the shape of protest rebellion; instead, it exposes systemic inequality by naming it, forcing those in authority to acknowledge its consequences. Katherine's resistance thus operates through visibility, transforming what is treated as routine inconvenience into a recognized institutional failure.

Dorothy Vaughan's resistance is more explicitly collective in nature. While her agency is demonstrated through self-education and strategic preparation, her resistance lies in rejecting the logic of disposability imposed on African American workers. By ensuring that her entire team learns programming skills, Dorothy resists an institutional structure that seeks to render black women obsolete through technological change. Her insistence on collective advancement disrupts hierarchical norms that prioritize individual competition over communal survival. In doing so, Dorothy challenges the racialized division of labor that confines African American women to subordinate roles, asserting instead a model of resistance grounded in solidarity and shared knowledge.

Mary Jackson's resistance is most visible in her direct challenge to legal and educational barriers. Unlike Katherine and Dorothy, whose resistance unfolds largely within the workplace, Mary confronts the structural foundation of exclusion through the legal system. Her refusal to abandon her ambition, even when framed as inappropriate or exceptional, constitutes resistance to both racial segregation and gendered expectations regarding professional aspiration. By pursuing engineering education despite institutional opposition, Mary contests the boundaries that define who is permitted to occupy spaces of technical authority. Her resistance is thus transformative, as it seeks not merely inclusion but structural change in access to education.

Across these narratives, resistance in *Hidden Figures* is depicted as incremental rather than revolutionary, emphasizing sustainability over spectacle. The protagonists do not dismantle institutional power outright; instead, they weaken exclusions through persistence, exposure, and collective action. This portrayal challenges dominant representations of resistance that privilege dramatic defiance, offering instead a model grounded in endurance, strategy, and moral clarity.

Importantly, the film demonstrates that resistance is inseparable from intersectionality. The protagonists' actions are shaped by their simultaneous positioning as African American and females, requiring forms of resistance that minimize risk while maximizing impact. Their resistance is neither passive nor reckless; it is informed by an acute awareness of institutional consequences. Through this lens, *Hidden Figures* presents resistance as a necessary and adaptive practice, enabling marginalized women to contest inequality while navigating historically exclusionary systems.

By foregrounding individual and collective resistance, the film expands the intersectional framework beyond oppression and agency, illustrating how marginalized subjects actively challenge the structures that constrain them. This layered portrayal reinforces the importance of understanding resistance not as a singular act, but as an ongoing process embedded within everyday professional life.

Taken together, the findings suggest that *Hidden Figures* construct intersectional experience not as a linear movement from oppression to empowerment, but as a dynamic continuum in which oppression, agency, and resistance coexist and interact. Structural oppression establishes the conditions that limit

access, visibility, and authority for African American women within NASA; however, these constraints simultaneously generate spaces in which agency can be exercised through planning, expertise, and strategic compliance. Agency, in turn, creates the foundation for resistance, enabling the protagonists to challenge exclusionary practices without abandoning institutional engagement. Rather than treating resistance as a dramatic rupture, the film frames it as an extension of agency, one that becomes possible through sustained competence, collective solidarity, and moral clarity. This interplay complicates simplistic reading of progress and empowerment by demonstrating that marginalized women often advance not by escaping oppressive systems, but by reworking them from within. An intersectional lens is therefore essential for capturing how power operates relationally in the film, revealing that oppression does not eliminate agency, and agency does not negate the necessity of resistance.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined *Hidden Figures* (2016) through an intersectional framework to explore how African American women navigate oppression, exercise agency, and enact resistance within a historically segregated and gendered institutional context. By analyzing dialogue and narrative developments, the study demonstrates that the film represents marginalization not as a singular experience, but as a layered condition produced through the interaction of race, gender, and institutional power.

The findings reveal that intersectional oppression at NASA operates through normalized practices such as segregation, denial of authority, and restricted access to professional advancement. These structural constraints shape the protagonists' daily experiences, confirming Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) argument that single-axis analyses are insufficient for understanding the lived realities of marginalized women. Importantly, the film does not depict these women as passive victims of discrimination. Instead, it foregrounds agency as a form of strategic negotiation, expressed through intellectual competence, professional planning, and calculated engagement with institutional structures. Agency in *Hidden Figures* emerges as purposeful action within limitation rather than resistance outside the system.

Beyond negotiation, the film also highlights resistance as both an individual and collective practice. Katherine Johnson's refusal to normalize exclusion, Dorothy Vaughan's commitment to collective empowerment, and Mary Jackson's challenge to educational barriers illustrate how resistance can be subtle, sustained, and transformative. These acts do not dismantle institutional power instantly, but they destabilize exclusionary norms and expand access to professional and intellectual spaces. Such representations complicate dominant narratives of resistance by emphasizing endurance, foresight, and solidarity over overt confrontation.

The study contributes to feminist, race, and cultural studies by demonstrating the analytical value of intersectionality in film analysis, particularly in examining how marginalized women are represented as both constrained and capable within institutional systems. By foregrounding the interplay between oppression, agency, and resistance, *Hidden Figures* as a cultural text that not only critiques historical inequalities but also affirms the capacity of African American women to shape their professional futures within unequal structures. This intersectional reading underscores the importance of recognizing marginalized women not merely as subjects of history, but as active participants in transforming it.

## SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings of this study, future studies may expand this analysis by examining *Hidden Figures* in relation to other films that depict African American women in scientific or institutional settings, allowing for comparative insights into how intersectional agency and resistance are represented across cultural texts. Further research could also explore audience reception to assess how such representations shape contemporary understandings of race, gender, and professional legitimacy. Additionally, applying intersectional analysis to different genres or historical periods may reveal how narrative context influences the visibility and limits marginalized women's agency. Such approaches would deepen the understanding of intersectionality not only as a theoretical framework, but as a dynamic lens for analyzing evolving representations of power and resistance in popular culture.

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