

# 1960s Southern United States

- Seen Through Female Portrayals in Hollywood Movies



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# Abstract

There has been made many movies about the civil rights era and the state of the US in the 1960s, however, most movies focus mainly on male characters while female representations are left to the supporting roles and the bit parts. This thesis sets out to analyze how female characters are depicted in movies set in this time period. The movies which are being analyzed are *Hidden Figures* (Melfi, 2016), *Selma* (DuVernay, 2014) and *Mississippi Burning* (Parker, 1988). This thesis employs a wide selection of theories and contextualized concepts to explore the matter: new historicism, racism, feminism, intersectionality and black feminist theory, as well as the underlying concepts of female stereotypes and the white savior narrative. The analyses show that there is a significant increase in the number of black female characters from the older movie *Mississippi Burning* to the newer movies *Selma* and *Hidden Figures*. The African American women depicted in *Selma* and *Hidden Figures* are also more multifaceted and less stereotypical than those depicted in *Mississippi Burning*. However, *Hidden Figures* still reinforces patriarchal and white-focused structures and *Selma* still reinforces patriarchal societal constructions, and neither of them are perfect representations of black feminism nor intersectionality, just like *Mississippi Burning* is not either. The thesis concludes that there has been made a lot of progress in regard to black female representations in Hollywood movies set in the Southern United States in the 1960s, but patriarchal and white-focused structures are not entirely gone.

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# Introduction

The 1960s was a very important decade in the United States of America's history in regard to segregation, racism and the civil rights movement. Arguably two of the most important African American heroes of all time dominated this decade: Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Since the formal end of the civil rights movement in 1968 as well as the killings of both civil rights activists ("Civil Rights Movement Timeline.", 2017), there has been made and released countless Hollywood movies focusing on segregation, racism and the civil rights era in the United States, as well as the lives of both King and Malcolm X. Noticeably, there seems to be much less focus on the women existing within this same decade. Even one of the most famous civil rights activists Rosa Parks does not have any Hollywood biographical drama films made about her. The closest she gets is with the two television movies *Boycott* (Johnson, 2001) and *The Rosa Parks Story* (Dash, 2002). This unbalance between how much and in what way males and females are portrayed in movies set in the 1960s United States laid the foundation for this master's thesis and these considerations formed the basis for the following thesis statement:

This study intends to examine the ways in which Hollywood movies depict historical events and factual characters of 1960s Southern United States, specifically focusing on female characters. Segregation, the civil rights movement and racism showcased in the movies will be viewed through the portrayal of women. The examination will be based on three exemplary Hollywood movies about the American South in the 1960s: *Hidden Figures* (Melfi, 2016), *Selma* (DuVernay, 2014) and *Mississippi Burning* (Parker, 1988). These movies have been chosen because of their popularity (Box Office Mojo "Hidden Figures", Box Office Mojo "Selma" and Box Office Mojo "Mississippi Burning"), Oscar nominations and wins ("The 89th Academy Awards | 2017.", "The 87th Academy Awards | 2015." and "The 61st Academy Awards | 1989.") and release dates, spanning nearly 30 years, giving an indication of the changes in how Hollywood movies depict the 1960s and female characters within such movies throughout the last three decades.

In order to explicate the above thesis statement, this study will employ and contextualize the following theories and concepts: new historicism, racism, feminism, intersectionality and black feminist theory. New historicism will clarify the relationship between fiction and history and culture, the concept of racism will be put into an American context, as will feminism, intersectionality will show the

complex matter of underprivileged identities at several levels and black feminism will put feminism as a whole into an African American perspective. These theories have been chosen because, when put together, they are essential tools to decipher how female characters are portrayed in the chosen movies. In addition to these theories, the underlying concepts of female stereotypes and the white savior narrative are clarified, as these terms are also very important for the analyses.

Each movie will be examined individually, focusing on two main points: historical and cultural features represented in the films as well as intersectionality and feminism showcased in the films. Following the individual analyses, a comparative analysis will also be made to show the similarities and the differences between the movies and what these similarities and differences show in regard to the thesis statement.

# Theories

## New Historicism

New historicism is a literary theory, and it is highly relevant for this thesis, as the movies that are being analyzed are treated like pieces of literature because they can be interpreted and analyzed just like written works. New historicism concerns itself with the relationship between fiction and factual history, consequently being very relevant for analyzing *Hidden Figures*, *Selma* and *Mississippi Burning*, as all three films deal explicitly with real events.

New historicism was developed in the 1980s and took off in the 1990s. The theory seeks to understand history through literature and literature through history and cultural context. New historicism is a new take on historicism in the sense that it is a revived way of understanding literature through the social, cultural and historical environment that it was produced in. New historicism came after and as an alternative to the popular literary theory new criticism, where a text is seen as an independent entity and closed off from any context. New historicism sees literature not as a text written by a single or a few individuals, but rather as the final product of a specific cultural moment. New historicism also focuses on the textuality of history; the fact that history is rebuilt and fictionalized when retold and reconstructed. Furthermore, power relations are important to new historicism when it comes to these retellings. The power relations and struggles that are always ongoing in any specific cultural moment determine how history is retold and it is this aspect of fictionalization of history that new historicism is invested in (Veese, 2013, p. xi).

It is literary historian Stephen Greenblatt who coined the term “new historicism”. Greenblatt describes new historicism as a practice rather than a doctrine: “I shall try if not to define the new historicism, at least to situate it as a practice — a practice rather than a doctrine, since as far as I can tell (and I should be the one to know) it’s no doctrine at all” (Greenblatt, 2013, p. 1). By describing new historicism as a practice rather than a doctrine, new historicism is set apart from Marxism, which it has previously been connected strongly to and seen as an extension of. It is especially the fact that Marxism sees class as the ultimate power structure and disregards other structures of power and privilege, such as race or gender, and the fact that Marxism sees capitalism as a destructive philosophical principle rather than an intricate social and economic development, which sets new historicism and Marxism apart (p. 3-5).

New historicism is also set apart from traditional formalism. New historicism sees traditional formalism as empty and redundant and argues that literary analysis cannot simply see literature as foreground and history as background, rather the two are intertwined in a much more profound way than what traditional formalism would have you believe. Greenblatt offers an example of a case where the lines between literature and history are so blurred that one cannot use traditional formalists terms to describe it: in 1976 a convict named Gary Gilmore was released from prison only to rob and kill two men a few months later. It was not Gilmore's return to crime that made him famous, rather it was that fact that when he was convicted, he demanded to be and was executed, despite many objections from different unions and associations (p. 10). Because Gilmore's case became a huge story in the media, journalist and author Norman Mailer combined interviews and documents, records of court proceedings, and personal papers such as private messages between Gilmore and his girlfriend to create a book based on Gilmore's life. Some of the materials used for and in the book were in the public domain, but a lot of them were not. Some of the documents were purchased, and then the purchases themselves become part of the materials that were modified by Mailer into a book called *The Executioner's Song*, categorized as a "true life novel", which went on to do very well and even had a TV series made after it. While Mailer was working on the book, he was contacted by a convicted killer Jack H. Abbott, who gave him information about prison life. Mailer was very satisfied with the letters from Abbott, which he thought were both detailed and informative as well as literary sound. Abbott's letters turned into another book titled *In the Belly of the Beast*. This book also did well and secure a parole for Abbott. Shortly after Abbott was released, he came into an altercation with a waiter at an all-night restaurant because he thought the waiter was challenging him. The waiter died after Abbott struck him in the heart with a knife and Abbott was once again convicted of killing. These events went on to be made into a play, again gaining favorable reviews (p. 11). It is with this example of literature and history, the fictitious and the real that Greenblatt argues that formalism and its terms do not suffice:

"Literary criticism has a familiar set of terms for the relationship between a work of art and the historical events to which it refers: we speak of allusion, symbolization, allegorization, representation, and above all mimesis. Each of these terms has a rich history and is virtually indispensable, and yet they all seem curiously inadequate to the cultural phenomenon which Mailer's book and Abbott's and the television series and the play constitute. And their inadequacy extends to aspects not only of contemporary culture but of the culture of the past." (p. 11)



The terms normally used for describing the link between literature and history are not enough, in the abovementioned case. The way in which the literature affected the lives of the people involved and the way the people affected the literature cannot be separated. In the beforementioned case the interconnectivity is obvious, however, even in less obvious cases the interconnections are still there, waiting to be discovered (p. 12).

## Racism in the USA

It is relevant to look at racism in the USA because this thesis concerns itself with movies that are set in the civil rights era of the 1950's and 1960's. This time period is highly focused on racial inequality and when looking at female representations in *Hidden Figures*, *Selma* and *Mississippi Burning*, the way in which race plays a part in these representations is important. Even though the bigger focus will be on intersectionality and black feminism and how racial inequality mixes with sex-based discrimination, a general understanding of racism is beneficial. Furthermore, the focus is specifically on racism in the US, as it is in this context the three movies are set.

The history of racism in the United States of America is a complex one. This is because the US is a comparatively new country and because the country in many ways was built on slavery. When Europeans came to North America to settle there in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, African slaves came with them (Shah and Adolphe, 2019). The number of African slaves brought to British North America and the US increased drastically in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as well as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, before being abolished in 1865 by the 13th Amendment. As is known, this amendment did not bring racial equality to the US. A century later the civil rights movement was in full bloom, fighting for the same racial equality, showing that racial injustice could not be beat overnight. Actually, racial equality is still being fought for today. While there are many other places in the world where racial discrimination is in force, it is North America's particular history which makes the case unique (Tourse et al., 2018, p. 26).

Because of the United States' history, racism is both a deeply cultural and heavily structural phenomenon in the US. The United States is built on systemic and institutional racism, that works to benefit certain people and exploit others. From exploitation of Native Americans to African slaves to Mexicans and Chinese people, this issue runs deep in the United States. Today there is less individual racism than previously, but there is still plenty of institutional racism. The institutional kind of racism a lot is less obvious than the individual kind:

“Racism is both overt and covert. It takes two, closely related forms: individual whites acting against individual blacks, and acts by the total white community against the black community. We call these individual racism and institutional racism. The first consists of overt acts by individuals, which cause death, injury or the violent destruction of property. This type can be recorded by television cameras; it can frequently be observed in the process of commission. The second type is less overt, far more subtle, less identifiable in terms of specific individuals committing the acts. But it is no less destructive of human life. The second type originates in

the operation of established and respected forces in the society, and thus receives far less public condemnation than the first type.” (Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967, p. 4)

This way of differentiating between individual and institutional racism shows how the institutional kind is almost invisible and, in that way, becomes dangerous, as it is not easy to point out, specify and subsequently change. Furthermore, Carmichael and Hamilton were the first to coin the term “institutional racism” back in 1967, and many of the issues they are focusing on in their book are still prevalent today, more than half a century later, showing just how deep systemic racism runs in North America and just how difficult it is to change.

## Feminism in the USA

An extensive look at feminism in the United States of America is highly relevant for this thesis as its main objective is to look at and analyze female representations in the three chosen movies. As was the case with looking at racism, the focus on feminism is specifically within a North American context, as it is here the three movies are set.

Feminism is usually split up into three periods called waves. Traditionally, each wave becomes more and more comprehensive in both its issues and its adherents, however, there is disagreement about the actual magnitude of progression from one wave to the next and the use of the wave metaphor in general: “The script of feminist history— that each wave overwhelms and exceeds its predecessor — lends itself all too easily to whiggish interpretations of ever more radical, all-encompassing, and ideologically sophisticated movements” (Hewitt, 2010, p. 4). Hewitt’s argument is backed up by a slew of other writers in the book *No Permanent Waves* (2010), consisting of different essays analyzing the way in which feminism, with a focus on the US, is looked back upon. As mentioned, feminism is traditionally seen as waves that come and go and by using the wave metaphor, feminism is implied to have more relevance and momentum at certain times over others, as well as each wave having its own agenda and focus, completely different and separate from the others (Hewitt, 2010, p. 5). It is precisely this viewpoint that is being challenged in the book. Certain things have been downplayed, forgotten or omitted from feminist history and this is the culprit of the narrowness that feminism suffers under today, and it is not an accurate representation of feminist history: “feminist ideas are “in the air” even when people are not actively listening.” (p. 8). Even fellow feminist writer Sara M. Evans, whose work, *Tidal Wave* (2003), is critiqued by Hewitt, seems to agree, at least to a certain extent, with Hewitt’s view of feminist history in her response paper: “*No Permanent Waves* (...) points to an emerging scholarship on feminism in the United States after 1960 that reveals a story that is enormously diverse in terms of race, class, generation, and region.” (Evans, 2013, p. 9) These examples show that feminist scholars, at varying degrees, believe that feminism as a whole is more complex than what is traditionally or popularly believed. Furthermore, both Hewitt and Evans agree that it is important for modern feminists to know the complexity of feminist history at a broader scale:

“Until we recognize the breadth and depth of woman’s rights activism in previous eras, many contemporary feminists will continue to teeter atop the fragile legacy of a nineteenth century movement dominated by white, middle-class women focused on the single issue of

enfranchisement. Far broader landscapes and richer legacies are available to support and to caution us.” (Hewitt, 2010, p. 33)

“In the twenty-first century, no one can imagine that the struggle for a more democratic future will be simple. Feminism, especially, as it advocates for the rights of half of humanity, will always be a complex of ideas and actions fraught with immense differences. These books [Nancy Hewitt’s *No Permanent Waves* (2010) and Christine Stansell’s *The Feminist Promise* (2010)], products of four decades of scholarship, make it clear that the legacies of the past are also multifaceted and that there is more to be learned. Perhaps they also signal the possibility that historical amnesia is not inevitable.” (Evans, 2013, p. 513)

By studying feminist history in more depth, one is able to uncover the vast complexity that is bound to exist in a movement as large as feminism. However, as old habits die hard, it is difficult to discuss feminism without mentioning the waves, and this thesis will concern itself with the first, second and third wave of feminism, but making sure to expand each wave to look at them in depth.

### **First-wave Feminism**

First-wave feminism in the US is conventionally confined to the time period between the Seneca Falls Woman’s Rights Convention in New York in 1848 and the introduction of the Nineteenth Amendment granting American women the right to vote in 1920, and the focus being the battle for (white, heterosexual, middleclass) women’s suffrage (Hewitt, 2010, p. 3). According to Hewitt, this confinement is misleading because women’s rights activists were present well before 1848 and focused on an array of things besides women’s suffrage, such as racial justice, labor rights, divorce, religious authority, domestic abuse, the plight of prostitutes, and sexual freedom (p. 5). The reason for the description of first-wave feminism as we know it today comes down to advocates of women’s suffrage in the late 1800s, as well as the feminists emerging in the 1960s who described themselves as second-wave feminists (p. 15-16). By the Seneca Falls Woman’s Rights Convention being the first women’s rights convention in the US and women’s suffrage being one of the biggest political achievements happening in the early days of feminism in the US, this area of first-wave feminism has overshadowed many other important aspects and made these two events the starting and ending points for first-wave feminism. However, not everyone has simply accepted this version of events:

“This version of the woman’s rights movement has not been immune to critique. Scholars of African American, immigrant, and working-class women (...) have highlighted the exclusion of poor, black, and immigrant women from the political organizations and the agendas of more well-to-do activists and their inclusion in community-based efforts, often alongside men, to advance their own economic, social, and political interests. These challenges have tarnished the images of several pioneer figures and have added a few women of color to the pantheon of feminist foremothers. But they have generally left intact the standard chronology and the focus on suffrage as the primary goal of the early women’s movement.” (p. 16)

This suggests that the way the feminist movement in the US is presented is inaccurate and the critique therefore lies on the depiction of the first-wave and not on the first-wave in and of itself. The suggested way to change the depiction of first-wave feminism is to look at the African American, American Indian, Mexican American, immigrants and white working-class women participating in the movement during the early times, looking at international events such as the Mexican-American War, revolutions in Europe and the abolition of slavery in the West Indies as well as looking at feminism at the local, state and national level (p. 16) The idea is that by looking beyond Seneca Falls, New York and not limiting first-wave feminism to a single starting place a more nuanced picture is painted (p. 21). An example of this can be seen in Mexico in 1821 where women, whether single or married, had the right to inherit, loan, pawn, sue etc., something their US peers did not have at the time. Although Mexican women faced other problems, this shows how the fight for women’s rights did not simply start in the US in 1848 (p. 22). Furthermore, the introduction of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 meant that all US women technically gained the right to vote, however, on one hand a slew of technicalities meant that many women were not actually able to vote even after 1920, while on the other hand women had been able to vote in a dozen states and hundreds of towns, cities, and school districts years before, as early as the late 1860s and early 1870s (p. 26). An example of this can be found in Richmond, Virginia in 1867 where African American women voted alongside men: “Black delegates to the 1867 state constitutional convention, for instance, were selected at a mass meeting held at the four thousand seat African Baptist Church. A standing vote allowed all those present, including women, to participate” (p. 30).

However, many of the women that voted, or attempted to vote, in various elections before 1920 faced many problems. In the late 1800s, thousands of women attempted to vote, but only dozens were able to, and even those who managed to cast their votes sometimes had their votes subtracted for

fraud (p. 28). Also, the women who voted were both black and white, but rarely did the two groups vote together. Asian American, Mexican American, and American Indian women were also often denied the rights accorded native-born white women in states where women were allowed to vote (p. 30). Another example of the complexity of early women's rights in the US is that "Arizona granted the vote to women in 1912 but denied it to most people of Mexican descent, women or men. In neighboring New Mexico, Mexican Americans could vote, but not women, whatever their race." (p. 30). As can be understood, women's rights varied greatly from state to state and the question of race, class and even education had a big part to play in who could vote and who could not. These problems were especially dominant in the South where hostility to women's rights were paralleling the hostility held against African American rights (p. 30). The hostility towards both women and African Americans in the South also split up the feminist movement:

"African American women also demanded the vote in other arenas, including black Baptist and Methodist churches, local voluntary associations, and labor unions. Meanwhile white women in Virginia founded an array of civic associations, including suffrage organizations. Excluded from these groups, most black women remained silent during Virginia's campaign to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment for fear of reinforcing antisuffragists' attempts to equate women's suffrage and black enfranchisement." (p. 30-31)

The split between white, middleclass women and black women is what is often highlighted when talking about first-wave feminism, nevertheless, it is important to note that not all first-wave white feminists were only invested in their own interests, just like the fact that not all black women who were involved with African American rights were against feminism. Furthermore, black feminism is often seen as growing out of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, still, black feminism can also be traced back to suffrage campaigns in the century before (p. 33). Black women, and men, were also not the only underprivileged race. For instance, Chinese women and men also did not get voting rights in 1920 as they could not obtain citizenship, and therefore were not able to vote, until the annulment of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 (p. 32).

In conclusion, the scope of first-wave feminism as existing between 1848 and 1920 and concerning itself with women's suffrage is too narrow (p. 33). There was the existence of women fighting for and getting the right to vote at the cost of other women or minorities, and a big divide between white, middleclass feminists and black women and other underprivileged groups, but there were also

several women working for political, economic, educational, and occupational reforms (p. 33). Early feminism was much bigger than what it is traditionally described to be and “no single trajectory or chronology, such as that from Seneca Falls to suffrage, can capture these multifaceted developments.” (p. 33).

### **Second-wave Feminism**

The second chapter of *No Permanent Waves* picks up where the first chapter left off: at the end of first-wave feminism in the US and the beginning of the second. Second-wave feminism is traditionally set as beginning in the US in the 1960s with sexual and reproductive rights, family and work life as being the main topics of discussing. The second-wave is also often seen as more fast paced and radical than the first (Evans, 2003, p. 1). This notion is likewise highlighted in feminist historian Ruth Rosen’s *The World Split Open* (2000):

“Each generation of women activists leaves an unfinished agenda for the next generation. First Wave suffragists fought for women’s citizenship [and] created international organizations dedicated to universal disarmament, but left many customs and beliefs unchallenged. (...) Second Wave feminists questioned nearly everything, transformed much of American culture, expanded ideas of democracy (...), and catapulted women’s issues onto a global stage.” (p. 344)

Both Evans and Rosen, and other scholars of the same era and standpoint, are being critiqued in *No Permanent Waves* for too narrow a viewpoint of feminism in general and second-wave feminism in relation to first-wave feminism in particular (Thompson, 2010, p. 39). Furthermore, the critique also centers around highlighting second-wave feminism as feminism that “is white-led, marginalizes the activism and worldviews of women of color, focuses mainly on the United States, and treats sexism as the ultimate oppression.” (p. 39). This feministic viewpoint is described as hegemonic and overlooks race and class relations in the context of feminism, and is more focused on the (privileged) individual than the community at large with the main goal being women being equal with men, without much consideration for the internal structure of feminism or equality among women themselves. Contributor to *No Permanent Waves*, Becky Thompson, who is focusing particularly on second-wave feminism, suggests referring to second-wave feminism as modern feminism or multiracial feminism and by that going beyond the common use of the wave metaphor and also highlighting the racial aspects that went on during the 1960s to 90s. This way women of color and actively antiracist women



can get more of a centerstage, the internal structures of feminism can be brought to the forefront and interlinked discriminations can be emphasized (p. 40).

Second-wave feminism is normally said to begin around 1963 with Betty Friedan's feministic book *The Feminine Mystique*, as well as the 1966 founding of the National Organization for Women in the US, with Betty Friedan being one of the founders. There was an increase in middle-class white women demanding more rights in the previously mentioned areas of life such as the workplace and the home (Thompson, 2010, p. 39-40). While all this was indeed part of second-wave feminism, many aspects have been omitted. There were many mixed-race women's rights group, where the sole focus was not on the white, middleclass woman, groups of female racial minorities forming committees in already existing civil rights organizations as well as feminist organizations with focus solely on the struggles of non-white women (p. 40). By including these facts when talking about second-wave feminism, the common belief that women of color feminists only arose as a reaction to white feminists is discredited and a more nuanced timeline is formed, one where women of color feminists do not emerge significantly later than white feminists (p. 41).

One of the main differences between the dominant white feminist groups and the women of color feminist groups, such as Third World Women's Alliance, National Black Feminist Organization, Women of All Red Nations, Asian Sisters and Hijas de Cuauhtemoc, is that the latter often developed from and worked with male and female nationalist organizations (p. 42). Here the discussions would often be on race specific feminist issues such as stereotypes, discrimination at work, female roles in the home and beauty standards. A groundbreaking definition of feminism was actually articulated during the second-wave by Barbara Smith, a black feminist who attended National Black Feminist Organization meetings: "feminism is the political theory and practice to free all women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women, as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement." (1982, p. 49).

Another aspect of second-wave feminism that is seldomly discussed is the actively antiracist and militant white feminists, who emerged in the 1970s. As these women did not merely work with other women, but also underprivileged men, they are often not given much consideration in relation to feminism, nonetheless they were a part of the movement (Thompson, 2010, p. 44). Amongst these women a substantial number of them were Jewish or lesbians and in that they related to other women with at least one aspect of their identity belonging to a minority – other than being women (p. 45). These feminists were opposed to the typical white, middleclass feminist who did not involve herself

with racial issues and they did not see the 1970s as a highpoint in feminist history, rather they saw it as a bad period because of the multiple ways discrimination was flourishing and the need to focus on these other aspects of inequality rather than feminist issues (p. 45). These different views on the feminist timeline is taken into the 1980s and 1990s as well: “Ironically, the very period [1983 to 1991] that white feminist historians typically treat as a period of decline within the movement is the period of mass mobilization among antiracist women — both straight and lesbian.” (p. 47). The fact that the same period is seen as stagnant by one group of people and active by another, lends itself to be explored more carefully. Another aspect that can be inspected further is the terms used to describe the antiracist white feminists: antiracist, militant, antipatriarchal or radical amongst others (p. 49). The connotations of the different terms play a role in how the feminists are viewed. “Antiracist” has better connotations compared to “militant”, for instance. Furthermore, the use of the label “radical feminist” is commonly only applied to antiracist white feminists of the late 1960s and early 1970s and shows the racial divide that is being put on feminists of that time as well as the aversion of the term: “To my mind, a nuanced and accurate telling of second wave feminism is one that shows why and how the term “radical” was itself contested. (...) [understand] that white feminists of the “daring to be bad period” (from 1967 to 1975) do not have exclusive rights to the term.” (Thompson, 2010, p. 49). It becomes clear that the way people at large look back on and talk about second-wave feminism becomes essential to how it is seen and redistributed to the next person.

The proposed way to get a more nuanced picture of second-wave feminism is to acknowledge the expansive history of the era and the roots it has in the civil rights movement, the New Left, and the Black power movement, and look at multiracial feminism as the true essence of feminism, and not simply as another category of feminism (p. 53). Thinking along these lines, it is important to look beyond hegemonic feminism as the primary, or even only, feminism. The traditional view of second-wave feminism, and its motivations and accomplishments, is real and valuable, but far too narrow and does not give a realistic representation of the second-wave. By challenging the status quo, it is possible to change what is being viewed as the truth and stop repetitions from making this truth undisputable (p. 54).

### **Third-wave Feminism**

Conventionally, the third-wave of feminism started in the 1990s and was more radical than ever before. Third-wave feminism is often seen as noticeably different from and even opposed to second-wave feminism, and as the feminist wave with the most inclusivity and diversity: “according to this

historical narrative, if second wave feminism was the preserve of white, middle-class women, third wave feminism marked a new phase in which feminists of color and questions of race and gender were now included.” (Fernandes, 2010, p. 100). The third-wave concerned itself with systematic challenges that affected women’s lives, especially in regards to race, sexuality and class (p. 98). However, these characteristics are not exclusive to third-wave feminism, as mentioned in the previous section about second-wave feminism, although the impact and extensiveness that these characteristics have on third-wave feminism are distinctly different. Once again, the wave-model can be criticized for being too reductive, and the third-wave is traditionally seen solely as an expansion of the second-wave, without analyzing or even knowing about the deviations and differences that existed within the two previous waves (p. 102). Furthermore, intersectionality is at the core of third-wave feminism and it is what the third-wave is best known for, but there is more to the third-wave than that (p. 99). With that being said, intersectionality is a huge part of third-wave feminism, and arguably the most important part. Therefore, intersectionality will be discussed in more detail in its own chapter, with focus on Kimberlé Crenshaw’s groundbreaking paper “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” from 1989.

Another important aspect of third-wave feminism, other than intersectionality, is that of social structures in a patriarchal society. Even with the work done by previous feminists and feminist waves, the societal structures and culture in the United States were built by those in power: white men. A culture imbedded in a long patriarchal history is difficult to change. It is not enough to simply make counterarguments or counterpositions, as this still creates a binary structure: oppressed and oppressor, slave and master, male and female. It makes people locked in positions and identities that are much too narrow for useful representations of real people’s experiences. The notions of race and gender have become more complex, and the lines are in many instances blurred or switching and by such people’s experiences are more complex, and the solutions must therefore also be more complex. One way to do this is by the thorough use of intersectionality (p. 108-110). Another way is to create a “living memory” of the histories of U.S. feminism which is described as follows:

“[A living memory] would potentially be more powerful but also more challenging than the current alternative. In one sense, such a living memory would enable successive generations of feminists to realize that nonlinear understandings of history (breaking from evolutionary conceptions of temporality) in fact necessitate periodic and tactical returns to earlier political/intellectual strategies and visions. (...) A move from the wave model of feminism to a history rooted

in living memory is not simply a symbolic strategy for honoring the contributions of previous generations of feminists. Rather it is a question of remembering that successive generations of feminism can never move beyond past histories through a simplistic attempt at creating a clear temporal break from the past.” (p. 112)

A living memory is here to be understood as a way to look at current feminist issues with the knowledge of previous feminist issues in the back of one’s mind. It is not just to acknowledge former feminist writers and thinkers who may have been forgotten, but to draw on a vast number of experiences and knowledge to give a refined and advanced understanding. This living memory also distances itself from the idea that each new feminist wave is at odds with the previous one. Instead of seeing each wave as a disruption of the chain of feministic thought, feminism is seen as one unity that does not ebb and flow, but is rather a continual process that builds on top of itself and interacts with both feminist history and contemporary feministic thoughts and issues.

## Intersectionality

When dwelling deeper into the topic of feminism, the theory of intersectionality cannot be ignored. Intersectionality is highly relevant for this thesis as it shows how different disadvantages within the identity of a single person or a community work in a structural way. Since this thesis is focused on feminism it is especially relevant to see how an underprivileged gender is showcased when it is in combination with other underprivileged areas, such as race.

It was Kimberlé Crenshaw who in 1989 became the first person to coin the term “intersectionality” with her revolutionary paper “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”. Crenshaw has a background in law and in her paper, she finds that the law, as well as literary theories and politics, are dominated by the fact that feminism concerns itself with white women and anti-racism concerns itself with black men, and she finds that discrimination is limited to the “experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group” (p. 140).

With this in mind, Crenshaw sets up the argument that discrimination is not properly understood and showcased, because this tendency to favor the more privileged in subordinate groups undermines the struggle of the other members. Furthermore, Crenshaw argues that the “fix” for this situation is not merely to start including black women in both groups, but reestablishing the categories with intersectionality in mind, as the combination of subordinated race and gender creates different challenges than those only belonging to one subordinate group experiences (p. 140). As an example, Crenshaw brings up a court order dismissing black women’s lawsuits on the fact that discrimination must be either regarding race or sex, but not both. If the claims cannot be universally applied to all women or all blacks, they are dismissed (p. 141). Another example is a case where a black woman has managed to file a lawsuit for discrimination against specifically black women. However, this case is also dismissed because there are not enough black women within the company that is being sued to lay ground for statistics that can showcase upfront discrimination (p. 146). Another case shows black women winning a lawsuit and be awarded compensation, but black men get nothing despite evidence of broad racial discrimination (p. 148). Crenshaw argues that this makes “many people within the Black community view the specific articulation of Black women's interests as dangerously divisive.” (p. 148). The fact that a win for black women can mean a loss for black men creates disunion and makes every individual fight for their own opportunities for advancement rather than collectively challenging established antidiscrimination doctrine (p. 145). The lawsuits mentioned above showcase the need for intersectionality. In some cases, black women are not able to represent solely

black women, in other cases they are not able to represent either blacks or women distinctively (p. 149). But both experiences are applicable and valid and “Black women can experience discrimination in any number of ways (...) Black women's experiences are much broader than the general categories that discrimination discourse provides.” (p. 149).

Furthermore, Crenshaw argues that antidiscrimination doctrine does not consider the notion of privilege at all, only disadvantage is incorporated into the doctrine, because privilege is implicit. Antidiscrimination doctrine is only for “those who are privileged *but for* their racial or sexual characteristics” (p. 151). The doctrine works only for people who are otherwise not affected by discrimination and therefore becomes extremely narrow and exclusive. As an example of how antidiscrimination doctrine does not consider privilege, Crenshaw gives the example of white women being the implicit standard for feminism: men are viewed as powerful while women are viewed as passive and this belief must be dismantled. However, black men are not seen as powerful and black women are not seen as passive, and therefore do not fit into this narrative (p. 155). The issue of chastity is another big difference between white women and black women in feminist discourse. While white virtue and issues of rape are of concern to broad feminism, black virtue is not because it is seen as either unattainable because black women are not seen as virtuous, or black women’s virtue becomes so important and protected that it becomes enslaving and actually reinforces patriarchal dominance (p. 158).

Finally, Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality also focuses on the difficulty for black women to obtain and spend social capital on either black women’s issues or broader racial issues, because focusing on one might exclude or come in conflict with the other (p. 161). Focusing on black people’s challenges might reinforce gender inequality among black men and black women, while focusing on black women’s challenges might estrange black women from black men and creating further strain on an already subordinate group of people (p. 162).

Crenshaw’s paper was the first to talk in depth about the concept of intersectionality and call it as such, and in the following years it paved the way for several other black feminist writers, like Patricia Hill Collins who in 1990 wrote about intersectionality:

“viewing relations of domination for Black women for any given socio-historical context as being structured via a system of interlocking race, class, and gender oppression [which] expands the focus of analysis from merely describing the similarities and differences distinguishing

these systems of oppression and focuses greater attention on how they interconnect. Assuming that each system needs the others in order to function creates a distinct theoretical stance that stimulates the rethinking of basic social science concepts.” (p. 222)

Here it is argued that it is in the intersection between different underprivileged identities within the same individual that intersectionality exists. By being aware of this, a specific theoretical stance can be obtained which helps with analyzing difficult social and feminist issues. The understanding and application of intersectionality aids to do away with conformist understanding of inequality as something homogenized and simple and puts the focus on the complexity of identities within the same individual. Furthermore, intersectionality can also be used as a theoretical tool for analysis of structural inequality at a larger scale (Fernandes, 2010, p. 103). However, because of intersectionality’s popularity and the narrowness of the wave-metaphor, intersectionality has a tendency to become reductive. Intersectionality becomes a simplistic paradigm which can be glossed over too easily and thereby loses its complexity which is at the heart of intersectionality (p. 104). Intersectionality can even become static and mechanistic:

“within the wave model of feminism, intersectionality often has the appearance of a somewhat static model of identity (...) dominant narratives now depict intersectionality as a mechanistic tool that stands in for difference and inclusion. (...) intersectionality is neither a static formulation nor a signifier of a homogeneous field of third wave feminism; intersectionality is a method/theory that expresses one aspect of the mode of differential consciousness (...) This mechanistic approach misses both the rich diversity and the deep political implications of the writings that are now in danger of becoming homogenized by the narrative “third wave feminism as intersectionality.”” (p. 105-106)

When third-wave feminism is reduced to intersectionality, and intersectionality is reduced to a simple formula, the whole principle of intersectionality is gone, and it becomes hazardous to use intersectionality as a tool for analysis because it has lost its core of complexity and nuance. A broad understanding of the different aspects of intersectionality - historical, theoretical and political - is needed so that the theory is not reduced to a cliché, and a deeper understanding of third-wave feminism is also needed so that the third-wave is not reduced to a single theory (p. 107).

## Black Feminism

The theory of black feminism is especially important to this thesis, as this thesis focuses on the portrayal of female characters in movies set in 1960s America, with their main topics being the civil rights movement, segregation, African Americans and racism. Portrayals of African American female characters cannot simply be analyzed through feminist theory, the analysis needs the added layers of intersectionality and black feminism.

Just like feminism as a broad term is a continual process, the subcategory of black feminism is too. As mentioned earlier, black feminism has been a part of the broader feminist scope from the beginning and has evolved and changed since then. The diversity of black feminism “is often oversimplified in an effort to provide a single, coherent picture of black women activists.” (Taylor, 2010, p. 61). There are many different aspects of black feminism and many ways in which black feminists have chosen to approach the topic over the years.

African American writer bell hooks is a prominent scholar in the field of black feminism. Her book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* from 1981 is a classic piece of work within the field and in many ways alludes to intersectionality. In her book, hooks states that no one bothers to “discuss the way in which sexism operates both independently of and simultaneously with racism” (p. 7) and black women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are dealing with both struggles, but racism is seen as the greater evil and sexism is thus ignored. These simultaneous struggles date back to slavery where black women had the lowest statuses and therefore had the worst conditions (p. 17).

In Africa in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was seen as the norm that African women had to do manual labor as well as handling the domestic tasks, these were both seen as a part of a woman's duty (p. 16). This culture of women doing both housework and physical labor was new to the white slave-owners and was quickly implemented, thus many female slaves did both and in the process became masculinized, as hard labor was not seen as a woman's job in America (p. 21-22). However, the masculinization did not come with any of the perks or privileges that is usually attributed to being a man. Rape was a common experience for the female slaves, but the male slaves were spared “the humiliation of homosexual rape and other forms of sexual assaults” (p. 24). These circumstances meant that black female slaves were lesser than both all whites as well as black male slaves and therefore were at the very bottom of the food chain (p. 25). Even free black women were not much better off, as myths about black female sexuality affected both slaves and free black women alike. Black women were caricatured as either Jezebels, overtly sexual and promiscuous, or Mammies, completely desexualized. Many female abolitionists also worked simultaneously against slavery and



against sexual oppression specifically perpetrated against black women (Taylor, 2010, p. 62). These stereotypical views of black women ultimately stretched into contemporary times and hooks criticizes fellow female scholars for failing to acknowledge the impact that the history of slavery has on present-day black females and how they are viewed by contemporary black males and all whites (hooks, 1981, p. 52). Even hooks' book title *Ain't I a Woman* is taken from a speech by freed slave, abolitionist and liberal reformer Sojourner Truth in 1851, and thereby hooks pays homage to a pioneering black feminist (Taylor, 2010, p. 62). Truth was challenging the mainstream way of thinking about women and feminism at the time, and she was working to bring focus on black women. Another prominent black woman at the time was Harriet Tubman. Like Truth, Tubman was born a slave, but managed to escape and spent her later years focusing on abolitionist, feminist and other political issues (p. 63). After first having freed many slaves and then afterwards having actively served for the Union Army during the Civil War, Tubman was involved with women's organizations, and was especially interested in suffrage. Tubman also worked to better the lives of the poor and the elderly, and in this way was very active in not only abolitionist or feminist movements, but in humanitarian movements in general (p. 64).

Moving beyond the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, black feminism continued to grow and develop, this time into a more bourgeois stand: "overly concerned with the white gaze, liberal black feminists at the turn of the century struggled to craft a political agenda that would allow them to be included as voters acceptable to whites even as they resisted the harmful stereotypes that had become ubiquitous among white racists." (p. 65). The focus of black feminism now became mainly manners, dignity and uplifting of the black middle-class and black conservatives. This way of approaching feminism helped to elevate black women of the middle- and upper-class, but left a huge part of the demographic out of the equation. Moving further into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, black feminism was wrapped up in Jim Crow laws, set in place after the end of slavery:

"Despite the fact that the most celebrated leaders of the modern civil rights movement were men, African American women were leaders and foot soldiers at every stage and in every arena of the liberation struggle. In 1955, JoAnn Gibson Robinson and the Women's Political Council organized the Montgomery bus boycott, which catapulted Martin Luther King Jr. into the leadership of the "nonviolent" movement." (p. 66)

At the height of the civil rights movement, black feminism was mainly about advancing black people as a whole, and black women's issues were put on the back-burner. Black women were therefore largely underrepresented in the feminist movement, while also being oppressed by black nationalism, as this movement was somewhat a patriarchal and misogynistic one, seeking to get rid of racism, but also implementing more sexism (hooks, 1981, p. 195). People engaging in sexism within the movement were held accountable on an individual basis, but dealing with sexism and male chauvinism on a broader scale was not often done (Taylor, 2010, p. 66). However, even at this time black women did concern themselves with feminist issues, which for instance can be seen with the creation of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), which concerned itself with black women's issues in particular and had mostly black female members (p. 67). The NWRO, and other organizations like it, concentrated on welfare issues and how welfare issues and poverty affected black women. This focus was very different from the focus of broader, more mainstream feminism, which around this time was often focused on female sexuality and sex discrimination at the workplace (p. 68). This split between mainstream and black feminism led to black feminist issues largely being marginalized while at the same time being labeled divisive within the civil rights movement. This split was what founded the National Black Feminist Organization, which focused on the specific problems that black women faced. The NBFO members: "envisioned a multipurpose organization that would address an array of issues, ranging from employment and childcare concerns to sexuality, addiction, and black women's relations to each other and to the women's movement." (p. 69). NBFO members did care about the traditional feminist issues of employment and sexuality, but these were not the most important or exclusive issues. The NBFO lasted for nine years before disbanding, however, even after its dissolution it did inspire some of its members to put pressure on the National Organization for Women to focus more on black feminist issues (p. 70).

In the early eighties, when hooks wrote and published *Ain't I a Woman?*, she was caught in the middle of these two streams of activism and not fitting in properly in either one was hooks' motivation for writing her book and exploring this mainly unmapped territory: "I choose to re-appropriate the term "feminism," to focus on the fact that to be "feminist" in any authentic sense of the term is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination, and oppression." (hooks, 1981, p. 195). hooks also provided black feminism with a theoretical framework, to supplement the personal testimonies that had dominated black feminism since its beginning (Taylor, 2010, p. 71). The issue of theory versus practice within black feminism has been discussed since then and continues to be discussed today, as theory is sometimes seen as favoring Western analysis over

lived experiences expressed in narrative forms such as speeches, songs and creative writing etc. (p. 71-72). Around this same time, Kimberlé Crenshaw was also engaging in the discussing of theory to practice ratio: “Nowhere is this fusion of theory and practice more evident than in the area of black feminist jurisprudence. Black feminist legal scholars such as (...) Kimberlé Crenshaw (...) [are] committed to demystifying legal issues that are unique to black women.” (p. 72). The combination of the personal histories and the legal cases showcase the intersectionality and shows how laws, race, gender and class are all important aspects and none of them can be omitted or diminished.

“Overall, these and other academic black feminists have asserted the significance of black women’s experiences while developing new ways to debate and dissect the master narrative of Western knowledge and cultural practices. Anchoring in practice their analysis that racism, patriarchy, and material location drastically affect options and choices for black women, many academicians have been mindful that theory must be rooted in practice if it is to remain inclusive and nonelitist.” (p. 72)

Crenshaw and hooks laid the foundation for the way not just black feminism, but feminism at large is seen today, and the importance of maintaining a multifaceted look at and deeper understanding of social issues (p. 73). However, hooks also advises not to take the complexity of women’s issues too far, as then any woman could be a feminist no matter her political views. If all women’s expressions are seen as inherently feminist, just by the simple fact that they are expressed by women, then a sort of lifestyle feminism is created, and this does not always and automatically lead to growth and improvement: “Lifestyle feminists are a good example of how a woman’s agency does not always resist hegemonic norms or domination. In fact, attributing human agency exclusively within a feminist consciousness is an intellectual blunder because all forms of resistance are not politically progressive.” (p. 73). Here the determining factor is progression, so any expression of feminism that does not seek to progress can thereby not be seen as truly feminist, for example any expression that seeks to uphold the status quo cannot be seen as an articulation of feminism. In conclusion, feminism as a whole and here focusing on black feminism in particular is a complex subject, and it is important to look at the diversity to understand it in its entirety.

## Clarification of Underlying Concepts

To support the above theory, this thesis will clarify some underlying concepts, which are important for understanding Hollywood films. The first concept is female stereotypes, and the second concept is the white savior narrative. Both these notions are prevalent in Hollywood cinema and have a long history within the industry.

### **Female Stereotypes**

Female characters have a complex history of being presented as stereotypes in Hollywood movies rather than as intricate human subjects (Shimizu, 2016, p. 307). While white female characters are subject to stereotypical representations, it is especially roles occupied by women of color which are presented as blatant stereotypes, and the stereotypes are often more damaging than those for white female characters. White female characters are stereotypically presented as damsels in distress and love interests to male leads (p. 305). While this kind of stereotypical representation is subject to the male gaze, it is usually not loaded with the same volume of sexual shunning which is often the case for female characters of color. As mentioned by hooks (1981, p. 52), black women have for a long time been seen as either Jezebels or Mammies, either overly sexual or not sexual at all, and this way of thinking has spilled over into stereotypical representations in movies (Shimizu, 2016, p. 306). While there are other stereotypes for black female characters, such as the savage, the angry black woman or the independent black woman, sexuality almost always play a part (p. 314).

### **White Savior Narrative**

The white savior narrative is a cinematic trope where a white character is rescuing or helping a non-white character, often in a story centering around challenges for minorities. The focus is thus switched from the minorities to the white savior (Milazzo, 2019, p. 59). The white savior narrative intensifies the myth of white, colonial, Western dominance and depends on an exploitative relationship between the helper, the white savior, and the helped, the minority. Just like female characters in Hollywood films, the white savior narrative is also based on stereotypes. The white savior is always superior, and the minority is always inferior (p. 60). The minority is incapable of evolving on their own and relies on the white savior to step in and act almost as a god figure. However, it is not only the minority who “benefits” from this relationship, but also the white savior. This narrative often showcases the white savior as someone who is out of place within his own community, until he assumes the “burden” of

being the helper. By becoming this helper, the white savior gains a better, and often times more “moral”, identity. The white savior narrative ultimately tries to keep racist power structures intact – both in films and by extension in everyday life (p. 61).

# Analysis

## Analysis of *Hidden Figures*

*Hidden Figures* is an Oscar-nominated movie from 2016, directed by Theodore Melfi based on the non-fiction book *Hidden Figures* authored by Margot Lee Shetterly (2016). *Hidden Figures* is categorized as a biographical drama film and follows the work of three black female National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) workers and, to a lesser extent, their personal lives. The three main characters, Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson, are all modelled after historical figures of the same names and the movie has a foundation of historical accuracy, however, the movie includes several fictitious events or aspects of events as well as fictional supporting characters such as white female supervisor Vivian Mitchell and white male head engineer Paul Stafford (Loff, “Modern Figures: Frequently Asked Questions”, 2017). This mixture of non-fictional and fictional events and characters in the movie, as well as the historical happenings in the time around its release makes the movie a good candidate for a new historicism analysis. Furthermore, the three main characters being black women based on factual people makes the movie a good candidate for a feminist and intersectionality-based analysis.

### **Historical and Cultural Features in *Hidden Figures***

Octavia Spencer plays NASA mathematician and human computer Dorothy Vaughan, Taraji P. Henson plays NASA mathematician Katherine Johnson and Janelle Monáe plays NASA mathematician and aerospace engineer Mary Jackson. Dorothy Vaughan first came into contact with the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA), NASA’s predecessor, in 1943 when a bigger need for female mathematicians occurred because of the Second World War and the Cold War which occupied many men’s time (Malcom, 2020, p. 591). Similarly, Katherine Johnson was hired by NACA in 1952 and Mary Jackson was hired in 1951 and they both worked under Dorothy (Loff, “Mary W. Jackson Biography”, 2021). Although NACA was hiring black women, segregation was still in place and not only did the females not work among the males, the black females did not work among the white females. The workplace was divided into the West Area for the African American females, and the East Area for the Caucasian females. The segregation of the workers is also visible in the movie;

however, the timeline is slightly off as the segregation was formally abolished in 1958 when NACA became NASA, but the movie is set in 1961 (*Hidden Figures*, 2016, 00:03:05-00:03:08).



Figure 1: Still from *Hidden Figures* 00:03:05

This inaccuracy in the timeline is noticeable as many of the events depicted in the movie are factual, however, they transpired before 1961. Examples of this are Katherine Johnson's marriage to James A. "Jim" Johnson which took place in 1959, Mary Jackson's advanced engineering classes which she took in 1958 and Dorothy Vaughan's promotion to supervisor of the West Area which happened in 1949 (Loff, "Dorothy Vaughan Biography", 2017). The compressed timeline makes the movie line up with Katherine's calculations which she did in 1961 which helped send the first American into space, as well as her calculations which helped send the first American, John H. Glenn, Jr., into orbit around the Earth in 1962, which is the climax at the end of the movie (*Hidden Figures*, 2016, 01:55:16-01:55:41). The fact that the historical timeline has been compressed makes the events that take place in the movie seem more dramatic and furthermore makes the 1960s stand out.

The civil rights movement and Jim Crow laws were prominent and very divisive, and eventually abolished, in the 1960s and this historical context serves to situate the viewers in a time period known for these disputes, unlike starting the movie in i.e. 1943 when Dorothy was first hired, because this time period is more so linked to World War II. Other instances in the movie which help to tie the movie and its events with the 1960s and the events this decade is known for, are Martin Luther King Jr. being mentioned in church (00:32:47-00:32:50) as well as the Ku Klux Klan and King being shown

on television in Mary Jackson's home (01:10:05-01:10:40). These direct references to other historical figures and groups also help to solidify *Hidden Figures*' standing as a biographical drama film.



Figure 2: Still from *Hidden Figures* 01:10:31

Another such instance is when Mary Jackson had to go to court to gain access to an all-white school where she had to take classes to become an engineer (01:10:40-01:13:10). At court, Mary tells the judge: "no Negro woman in the state of Virginia has ever attended an all-white high school. It's unheard of." (01:12:03-01:12:07) and that the judge, and herself, would make history if she were granted access (01:12:12-01:12:40). This scene is historically inaccurate, as Mary had to get permission from the City of Hampton, but she did not have to go to court (Loff, "Mary W. Jackson Biography", 2021). However, the scene helps to put the spotlight on Jim Crow laws which mandated racial segregation in all public facilities, including public schools, in Virginia where the movie is set, and thereby further highlights the theme of racial segregation.

Perhaps the most important demonstrations of racial segregation in the movie are the repeated scenes of Katherine Johnson having to use the bathroom (*Hidden Figures*, 2016, 00:21:20-00:23:47, 00:57:30-00:58:37 and 01:00:03-01:04:32). These scenes are effective because they show Katherine having the same difficulty several times over and show how racial segregation worked in even the most ordinary of experiences. By seeing Katherine have the same experience several times, the viewer's attention is brought to the subject matter and its importance is emphasized. Similarly, by having such a fundamental thing as using the bathroom denied, it shows the harsh reality of living as



a black woman in the Southern United States in the 1960s. Katherine is working alongside her white male coworkers, but unlike them she has to run to get to use the restroom before her break ends, she has to drink coffee out of a pot with a label reading “colored” which none of her coworkers will touch and she is repeatedly ignored by her colleagues.



Figure 3: Still from *Hidden Figures* 00:22:39



Figure 4: Still from *Hidden Figures* 00:57:31



Figure 5: Still from *Hidden Figures* 01:00:38

The bathroom scenes are very much representative of what racial segregation looked like in the 1960s, however the scenes are not truly historically accurate in the specific instance of Katherine Johnson's experience ("What Matters - Katherine Johnson: NASA Pioneer and 'Computer.'", 2011). Johnson herself said that she "did not feel the segregation at NASA" which is the opposite image of what is shown in the movie ("What Matters", 11:15-11:47). However, there is some truth to the matter, as Johnson did use the whites-only bathroom available closest to her workspace and this was reported, but Johnson ignored the complaint and continued to use the bathroom and eventually the issue was simply dropped (Shetterly, 2016, p. 108). The last bathroom scene in *Hidden Figures* is the longest, the most detailed and the most significant. This scene shows Katherine not only having to run half a mile to and from the West Area where the only restroom for black women is, but also getting drenched because of the rainy weather (*Hidden Figures*, 2016, 01:00:03-01:04:32). However, it is not these dire circumstances concerning a simple bathroom break that make the scene stand out, it is Katherine's subsequent conversation with her supervisor Al Harrison. Harrison notices Katherine's absence at the workplace and is clearly displeased as he proclaims out loud in the presence of her coworkers: "Wow! Where is she?" (01:00:12-01:00:16). After Katherine returns, Harrison has gotten increasingly annoyed and asks her: "Where the hell have you been? Everywhere I look, you're not where I need you to be. It's not my imagination. Now where the hell do you go every day?" to which Katherine responds: "to the bathroom, sir" (01:01:14-01:01:26). Harrison is irritated; however, Katherine is also displeased with the situation and when he keeps pushing her to tell him why she takes such long breaks she informs him:

“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? 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... 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 of coffee from a pot none of you wanna touch! So, excuse me if I have to go to the restroom a few times a day.” (01:01:50-01:02:50)

It is clear that Katherine do not want to hear complaints about the length of her breaks, since the breaks are lengthy because of the discrimination at the workplace. This is reminiscent of the factual Katherine Johnson and her unwillingness to bow down to complaints based on a discriminatory system and this scene shows the small ways in which the Jim Crow laws were being challenged by black Americans.

The historical and cultural context surrounding the release date of *Hidden Figures*, 2016, is also an important aspect when analyzing the movie, and the beforementioned bathroom scene does not only showcase the time period it is situated in, but also the time period it is released in. Katherine leaves Harrison speechless, and she ends up leaving the room. Afterwards, Harrison picks up an iron rod and takes down the “Colored Ladies Room”-sign outside the West Area’s bathrooms (01:02:50-01:03:56).



Figure 6: Still from *Hidden Figures* 01:03:40

When he is done, he says: “There you have it. No more colored restrooms. No more white restrooms. Just plain old toilets. Go wherever you damn well please. Preferably closer to your desk.” (01:03:57-01:04:15). As he is walking away from the onlookers, consisting of all three main characters and the black female workers on one side and the white male workers on the other side, he turns around and says: “Here at NASA, we all pee the same color.” (01:04:22-01:04:26). This is a prime example of the white savior narrative. While historically Katherine Johnson stood up for herself, in the movie she has her white male superior standing up for her. Even in a movie from the 2010s focusing on the story of black female NASA workers this longstanding Hollywood tradition is still prevalent. Katherine does not have the strength nor exercises enough authority over her own being and her own personal, non-work-related challenges to do what her supervisor does. Furthermore, Harrison is portrayed as rather oblivious to the segregation and discrimination going on at NASA, but when he finds out, he is the one to build a bridge between the two groups. This undermines Katherine’s, and the two other main characters’, achievements in integrating into the non-black and non-female dominated workspaces.

The technological advances, such as human computers being replaced with machine computers (01:26:50-01:27:11), as well as the advances in spaceflights (01:23:56-01:25:57) seen in the movie are seen through the lens of today’s innovations. Machine computers are now ubiquitous in the USA and by the black female NASA workers using and operating the earliest computers, these workers are seen as trendsetters and trailblazers. Furthermore, by seeing the potential in the machine computers and actively learning to use them, the workers are also regarded as smart and very attentive to developments (Hodges, 2018, p. 12). The same thing goes for the innovations that especially Katherine Johnson was a part of when it comes to American space travel. These innovations are seen through today’s knowledge of the moon landing in 1969 operated by NASA (Dunbar, 2019) as well as more recent space developments, like the rise of the American aerospace manufacturer and space transportation services company SpaceX. Once again, the notion is that the black female NASA workers are pioneers and groundbreakers, because they are a part of the beginning stages of something that is immensely popular and profitable in today’s world.

### **Intersectionality and Feminism in *Hidden Figures***

The three main characters in *Hidden Figures*, and the movie as a whole, are good examples of the challenges of intersectionality and feminism. Katherine, Mary and Dorothy all experience the

overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination in the movie. The discrimination is mainly seen at the workplace. All three are treated as less than peers by their white coworkers, male and female.

Katherine Johnson has to work with classified documents which makes her job exceedingly difficult. The documents are classified by her white male coworker Paul Stafford (*Hidden Figures*, 2016, 00:20:25-00:21:00). Stafford is altering the documents because he wants it to be very difficult, if not impossible, for Katherine to check his calculations and thereby question his capability to do his job. Stafford lets Katherine know that his calculations have been checked by himself and two other of their white male coworkers and therefore Katherine is only providing a “dummy check” (00:40:07). The fact that Stafford and the two coworkers have been allowed to read the unaltered documents show the discrimination: Katherine must work harder to do the same work as she must hold the documents up to the light to read through the ink used to block out the classified information (00:40:15-00:40:23). However, it is not entirely clear if Stafford is discriminating against Katherine because of her intersectional identity as both a woman and an African American, or if he is discriminating against her because of only one of them. This is because Stafford does not seem to discriminate against the only other woman at the workplace: the secretary Ruth. As Ruth is a woman this might allude to the fact that it is mainly Katherine’s identity as black which is discriminated against. The fact that Stafford discriminates against Katherine because of her race is solidified in his behavior when Katherine drinks coffee. Katherine drinks coffee out of the coffee pot for white people, when she does this Stafford, along with the other white coworkers, stare at Katherine in disbelief (00:24:02-00:24:25). Also, when talking with their supervisor Harrison about Katherine gaining access to see the redacted material, Stafford is opposed to the idea as he is afraid that she is a Russian spy. Clearly this is ludicrous idea, because of Katherine’s race and these two events show that Stafford is discriminating against Katherine because of her identity as an African American. There is less evidence that Stafford is discriminating against Katherine because of her gender, but there is some. Stafford has very few dealings with the secretary Ruth, but he does not visibly treat her with contempt like he does Katherine. However, this is arguably because of Ruth’s lower standing. Stafford does not see Ruth as a threat to him because she is at a lower level in the work hierarchy than him. Stafford most likely sees this lower position as an appropriate position for a woman and therefore he does not need to dominate Ruth. Therefore, it is arguably Katherine’s intersectional identity as both an African American and a woman which lays the foundation for the discrimination.

Mary Jackson also experience discrimination based on both her identity as a woman and an African American. This is clear from her talk with engineer Karl Zielinski, who asks her why she is not an engineer. Mary tells Zielinski: “I am a Negro woman. I’m not gonna entertain the impossible.” (00:15:19-00:15:23). Zielinski then asks her: “If you were a white male, would you wish to be an engineer?” and Mary answers: “I wouldn’t have to. I’d already be one” (00:15:39-00:15:46). Because of the emphasis on both race and gender it is clear that the discrimination in Mary’s case is also because of her intersectional identity. Further evidence of this is also found in Zielinski’s identity. Zielinski is of a minority race, but of the majority gender. Zielinski has become an engineer. Mary is likewise of a minority race, but she is also of the minority gender. Mary has not been promoted to engineer. Therefore, it is possible to argue that it is simply Mary’s gender, and not both her gender and her race, that causes the discrimination against her. However, this theory is highly unlikely since Dorothy is being discriminated against because of her race. This indicates that it is exactly Mary’s intersectional identity as a woman and an African American which is the cause of the discrimination.

As mentioned, Dorothy Vaughan has a similar experience of discrimination based on an under-privileged intersectional identity as Mary. Dorothy is applying to become the supervisor of the West Area, however, she is told that there officially is no permanent position as a supervisor for the black women. This is clear discrimination as the East Area, where the white women work, already has a supervisor named Mrs. Mitchell (00:12:01-00:12:40). Dorothy is already doing all the work of a supervisor, but she is not being paid for the work like Mrs. Mitchell is. Dorothy does not get the same title or the same pay as Mrs. Mitchell even though they are doing the same work. Again, it would be possible to argue that it is Dorothy’s race, and not her race and her gender, which is the cause of the discrimination against her, but because of the discrimination against Mary based on her gender and not her race, this becomes extremely unlikely. Therefore, it is arguably Dorothy’s intersectional identity as a black female which causes the discrimination and prohibits her from getting the title of supervisor.

The case of Mrs. Mitchell and the contrast that appears between her and the three main characters, show the complexity of feminism and intersectionality in the 1960s. Mrs. Mitchell is clearly more privileged as can be seen from the clear example above, but it is also visible on a more subtle level. For example, Mrs. Mitchell refers to Dorothy Vaughan as “Dorothy” while Dorothy refers to Mrs. Mitchell as “Mrs. Mitchell” (01:33:47-01:33:51). This further emphasizes Mrs. Mitchell’s standing as supervisor, and thereby in a higher position than Dorothy, even though they do the same work. Mrs. Mitchell’s attitude towards Dorothy also shows the differences between white women’s

concerns and black women's concerns in the 1960s. Mrs. Mitchell is in many ways a typical character born out of second-wave feminism: she is white, an intellectual, she is a careerwoman and has taken on a leader role, by being supervisor, and in that way challenges traditional gender roles. However, she is not concerned with the rights of her fellow female coworkers, as is clear from one of her talks with Dorothy:

“You know, Dorothy. Despite what you may think... I have nothing against y'all.”

“I know. I know you probably believe that.” (01:34:49-01:35:02)



Figure 7: Still from *Hidden Figures* 01:35:01

This conversation takes place after Dorothy refuses the promotion to work with the new IBM computers unless her coworkers come with her. While Mrs. Mitchell might be sympathetic with Dorothy and her situation, she is not so sympathetic that she offers her any assistance or support or takes her side within the workplace. Mrs. Mitchell and Dorothy Vaughan arguably show the wide gap between white and black females and their circumstances during second wave feminism.

Besides the discrimination against the three main characters at their workplace at NASA, there are also examples of prejudice in the private sphere. When Katherine Johnson first talks to Jim Johnson, who later becomes her husband, they have a quarrel over Katherine's work (00:36:11-00:37:37). Jim is taken by surprise with Katherine's work because he does not associate that type of work with Katherine's gender: "That's pretty heady stuff (...) They let women handle that sort of thing?"

(00:36:27-00:36:31). Katherine is unhappy with the prejudice displayed by Jim and tells him: “We’re proud to be doing our part for the country. So, yes. They let women do some things at NASA, Mr. Johnson.” (00:37:20-00:37:27). Although Jim Johnson later apologizes and he and Katherine ends up getting married, this conversation shows the prejudice which also exists in the community, outside of work. It shows African American women being underprivileged in both the workplace and at home, among other women and among other African Americans. Another similar example is between Mary and her husband, Levi Jackson. Levi is against Mary’s dream of becoming an engineer because he does not believe it is possible. Levi does not believe that Mary will be granted the job as engineer, even if she takes the classes that she needs. Furthermore, he criticizes Mary for being at work too much and not being home with their children enough (00:33:33-00:34:40).



Figure 8: Still from *Hidden Figures* 00:34:11

However, Levi does come around to Mary’s way of seeing things once she gets granted to go to the night classes at the all-white high school (01:29:40-01:30:54). Levi even tells her that: “You gonna make a fine engineer (...) And nobody dare stand in the way of Mary Jackson’s dreams. Myself included.” (01:30:21-01:30:34). As can be understood, Katherine’s and Mary’s private situations are very similar, and they have to fight both at their jobs and in their homes to be taken seriously and fight discrimination and prejudice.



## Analysis of *Selma*

Like *Hidden Figures*, *Selma* is another Oscar-nominated movie about the lives of African Americans in the American South during the 1960s. The movie is from 2014, it is directed by Ava DuVernay and it is categorized as a historical drama film. The movie follows Martin Luther King Jr. and his entourage in 1965, when they participate in the Selma to Montgomery voting rights marches in the state of Alabama. The marches came about as a response to killings of African Americans as well as obstructing African Americans from registering to vote which happened in the wake of The Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Bass, 2016, p. 537). Martin Luther King Jr. is the main character of the movie, and both his professional life as well as his personal life is explored in the movie. As was the case with *Hidden Figures*, *Selma* is based on historical figures and historical events, but the film does contain certain fictional aspects, such as the relationship between Reverend King and President Lyndon B. Johnson, which was friendlier than what is depicted in the movie according to MLK aide Andrew Young, who is also portrayed in the movie (McMurry, 2015). An instance of this historical inaccuracy is when President Johnson allows the FBI to wiretap King and his entourage - in fact it was U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy who authorized it (Garrow, 2018). The combination of non-fictional and fictional aspects in the movie, as well as the historical happenings in the time surrounding the movie's release makes the movie a good candidate for a new historicism analysis. Furthermore, the main characters being black men and the supporting characters being mainly black women makes for an interesting feminist analysis of the movie.

### **Historical and Cultural Features in *Selma***

David Oyelowo plays Martin Luther King, Jr., the main character in *Selma*. The movie starts out with King receiving the Nobel Peace Prize and giving his acceptance speech (*Selma*, 2014, 00:00:53-00:03:44). The scene then switches to a group of five young African American girls and one African American boy walking down a flight of stairs, while King's speech can still be heard as a voice-over (00:03:45-00:04:13). When the non-diegetic sound stops, the group members are talking for a short while before being hit by a bomb (00:04:14-00:05:51). Both events are historically accurate, but they did not happen at the same time, as shown in the movie: in real life King got the Nobel Peace Prize on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December 1964 ("The Nobel Peace Prize 1964."), while the church, where the group of youngsters was attending, was bombed on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 1963 (Parrott-Sheffer, 2009). The way the events are presented in the film makes them seem connected in a more profound way than

what they actually were. Linking the two events together in the way the movie does, showcases the progression and the oppression going on in 1960s America. While on one hand King is being awarded with a Nobel Prize for his efforts, innocent African American children are being brutally murdered. This is further highlighted by what Martin Luther King Jr. tells his wife Coretta when discussing his attire for the award ceremony: “Dressed like this while folks back home are... It’s not right” (00:01:46-00:01:53). While the scenes are not entirely truthful to the historical timeline, they showcase the wide gap between what has been achieved on a surface level and what has yet to be achieved in local African American communities in the US in the mid-1960s. Also, by showing the bombing of a church with young children being murdered instead of i.e., the murder of civil rights activist Jimmie Lee Jackson, whose death in February 1965 helped inspire the marches in March 1965, the contrast seems even more stark (Bass, 2016, p. 547). The single murder of an activist would arguably have a strong impact on the viewers of the movie, but by showing several murders of children simply doing their everyday activities, the impact is even stronger.

Another big historical aspect of *Selma* is the matter of voting rights. African American Annie Lee Cooper tries to register to vote and is told by the registrar that she is “stirring a fuss” and he threatens to contact her employer (00:05:52-00:07:21).



Figure 9: Still from *Selma* 00:07:18

Furthermore, he lets her know that her registration is only accepted when he says so and continues to ask her absurdly specific questions until he finds something that she does not know the answer to and thereafter declines her registration (00:07:25-00:08:30). Cooper and her experience with registering

to vote is factual in both the specific instance and as a showcasing of the general conditions for African Americans trying to register to vote in the South ("Annie L. Cooper Huff Obituary", 2010).

*Selma* also showcases the friction that existed within King's marriage. King and his wife experience friction because of Coretta's decision to meet up with and speak to Malcolm X without King's knowledge or approval (00:43:34-00:45:25), and because of a recording of King's alleged affair being sent to Coretta by the FBI (01:00:56-01:02:02). Again, these scenes are based on real events: Coretta did meet with Malcolm X in Selma and King and Malcolm X were famously of very different opinions on the topic of violence and resistance within the civil rights movement (Robinson, 2013, p. 54). However, King's extramarital affairs have been toned down in the movie. In the movie it is suggested that the FBI, who sent Coretta the tape, made up the recording of King's affair and sent it to Coretta to cause the breakdown of their marriage. However, they are unsuccessful. When Coretta plays the tapes for Martin, he denies it is him and Coretta believes him:

"That wasn't me. That isn't me, Corrie."

"I know. I know what you sound like." (01:01:45-01:02:02)

Yet, later Coretta asks King if he "loves any of the others" to which he says he does not (01:05:01-01:05:26), implying that King indeed does have extra marital affairs, but Coretta accepts this as he does not love his mistresses. This fits with several historical sources that prove that King did in fact engage in extramarital affairs and this did cause tension in the marriage (Frady, 2005, p. 67). The prop of a fake affair recording in *Selma* thereby works to take away the focus from King's shortcomings as a husband and Christian preacher and instead put the focus on the extent to which the FBI would go to discredit King as a civil rights activist and expose him as a communist. It also shows the little regard that is shown to Coretta. Whether real or fake, the recordings are meant to harm King's image and credibility, and whether Coretta suffers in the process is not considered. Coretta is being used to get to King, which is evident since the tapes are not distributed to the public, but rather sent to Coretta, arguably hoping Coretta will turn against her husband after hearing the tapes and help discredit him.

Another important aspect when analyzing *Selma* from a historical and cultural perspective, is the context surrounding the release date. *Selma* was released to a limited audience on December 25 in 2014 and had its wide opening on January 9 the following year ("Paramount Dates MLK Jr. Pic",

2014). By having its wide opening in 2015, 50 years after the Selma marches, the connection between the past and the present is strengthened. 50 years is a long enough time to where younger people, who have no or limited knowledge about the Selma marches, can gain knowledge about the past, but it is not such a long time that everyone who was alive or anticipated in the activities back then are dead and gone. Furthermore, *Selma* emphasizes its ability to give the viewers factual knowledge of the Selma marches by regularly inserting logged FBI notes as screen text.



Figure 10: Still from *Selma* 00:14:37



Figure 11: Still from *Selma* 00:17:37

These notes mention specific people, places and times that appear throughout the movie, as well as FBI's logo. The notes are slowly written across the screen while the non-diegetic sound of a typewriter is heard. The notes always end with the word "LOGGED", written in all caps. The reason for showing the notes is first and foremost to indicate just how close tabs the FBI kept on King, but the notes also work to make the movie seem more legitimate and biographical, without being so, and thereby indicating to the viewers that this movie is not just entertainment, but also educational content.

The movie soundtrack is also important when diving further into the context surrounding the release of *Selma*. *Selma*'s theme song "Glory" is performed by American rapper Common and American singer John Legend, the former also starring in the movie. The lyrics of the theme song do their part in bridging together the past and the present:

"That's why Rosa sat on the bus

That's why we walk through Ferguson with our hands up" (2014, 01:04-01:10)

The first line refers back to African American civil rights activist Rosa Parks and her refusal to give up her bus seat for a white passenger in late 1955 (Bredhoff, 1999, p. 207). The next line refers to the Ferguson unrest, which happened as a response to the fatal shooting of African American Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri in the summer of 2014 ("Documents Released in the Ferguson Case", 2014). By connecting Parks' protest from 1955 with the Ferguson protests from 2014, *Selma* is showing the civil rights movement in the light of present-day events. Both events are protesting the treatment of African Americans in the United States and the almost 60-year gap between the two incidents show the lack of progress that has taken place and highlights why the Selma marches, and the civil rights movement as a whole, are still very much relevant today.

### **Intersectionality and Feminism in *Selma***

Many of the important characters in *Selma* are male, however, there are several essential female characters also present. Even bit parts occupied by women or girls are of significant value, such as the five young girls in the church bombing scene. As has already been discussed, the scene shows the stark contrast between Martin Luther King Jr.'s achievements within the civil rights movement and the everyday life of African Americans in the South. But the young girls themselves also demonstrate

an important aspect of feminism and intersectionality: innocence. As discussed by Crenshaw, the matter of innocence and virtue is different for black women than it is for white women. Black women's sexuality is often highlighted, and problematized, much more than white women's sexuality. This is visible through the dialogue between three of the young African American girls:

“See, I asked my mama could she make my hair like Coretta Scott King had hers at the Washington March. But she said that was too grown.”

“Oh, I love her hair!”

“I heard she don't even put rollers in it. It's just like that. But I studied it. I know how she do it.”

(00:04:28-00:04:40)



Figure 12: Still from *Selma* 00:04:33

The first young girl's mom telling her that she cannot wear the hairstyle she wishes because it is “too grown” is a good example of the highlighted and problematized sexuality. Her mom more than likely wants to protect her and raise her appropriately, but while doing so her young daughter's virtue is taken to an extreme, where even a mere hairstyle is sexually suggestive. It is also clear from the dialogue that the girls are simply interested in hairdos, and that they do not view the topic in a sexually suggestive manner whatsoever. Innocence and virtue become such vital characteristics and are taken to such extremes that they are limiting the young girls from simply existing and being children. Even the slightest loss of virtue will have serious consequences for the girls and the scene highlights the notion that virtue only exists in two forms for African American females: totally and completely or

not at all. The issue of virtue maintains patriarchal structures within the African American community and thereby oppresses black women within a community that is already oppressed.

Other than the five young black girls, another important female character in the movie is Coretta Scott King. As mentioned earlier, Coretta endures a great deal, and she is often not given much thought. Not only does the FBI try to cause her enough agony and pain to the point where she turns on her husband, she also has to live in more or less constant fear for her husband's life as well as her own life and the lives of their children. With Martin Luther King Jr. as the front figure for the civil rights movement, there is no doubt about the pressure that is being placed on him, his sacrifices are very prominent. Coretta's sacrifices and the pressure she is under is more discreet and subtle, but still of great magnitude. For instance, it is not only tapes that Coretta receives, she also receives terrorizing phone calls, suggested to also be from the FBI, threatening the lives of her children and calling them racial slurs (00:17:47-0018:06).



Figure 13: Still from *Selma* 00:18:00

Since Coretta has womanly duties as a wife and a mother, she stays at the marital home with the children when King is out on the road. Consequently, she is the one answering the home phone, not her husband, and thereby she is the primary receiver of the threats that are made to the home by the FBI or anyone else who might have their home telephone number. This means that Coretta not only fears for her husband's safety when he is out, she also fears for her own and their children, since they are at home, by themselves and rather unprotected (01:02:13-01:04:07). These issues that Coretta faces truly show her disadvantaged position, which is integrated in her identity as an African

American woman. She is underprivileged in her identity as black, like her husband, but she has additional challenges that are unique to her because she is not only black, but a black *woman*. Coretta herself makes it clear that she wishes to have a more active role in the civil rights movement, but that she cannot because of her duties as a mother and wife, when she meets up with Malcolm X: “I want to do this kind of thing whenever possible. But I don’t get to do it enough to feel entirely comfortable (...) Sometimes I wish I were more out there in the trenches.” (00:41:10-00:41:31). Coretta is given very little opportunity to be an activist, even though she wants to. This is further highlighted by the fact that King becomes angry with Coretta when he finds out that she has spoken with Malcolm X. King tells Coretta that she sounds like she is “enamored” with Malcom X, implying that, perhaps subconsciously, she is not doing it for the people, but rather because she is feeling drawn to his opponent within the movement (00:43:34-00-00:45:25). King accusing Coretta of being controlled by her emotions, a characteristic traditionally attributed to women, show the settle ways in which intersectionality work – although he does apologize afterwards. If Coretta steps out and follows her own wants and visions, she may be creating division within the African American community at large, and certainly within her own home. In many ways, Coretta’s sacrifices and her anxieties are at the same level as her husband’s, but because she is a woman, she primarily works behind the scenes and this causes her struggles to go largely unnoticed, at least when compared to King’s. Simultaneously, it is King who sees Coretta behind the scenes the most and thereby he is probably the person who sees her sacrifices the most (01:32:29-01:33:30). In certain instances, King keeps her locked in an underprivileged position, but at the same time it is him who understands her the most.

Besides Coretta Scott King, there are two other female characters featured in *Selma* who showcase black feminism and intersectionality. The first is before mentioned Annie Lee Cooper. After trying multiple times to register to vote, Cooper joins King and other activists in a march to the registration office in Selma. When the group reaches the registration officer, they are told by sheriff Jim Clark that they are too many and will not be allowed inside. An altercation breaks out and Clark goes in to hit civil rights activist Jimmie Lee Jackson after he pushes Jackson’s grandfather to the ground. However, before Clark gets the chance to strike Jackson, Cooper hits him in the head (00:35:07-00:36:16). Her courage and valor as well as her physical resistance and opposition is all a great example of black feminism. Cooper, a black woman, standing up for a black man against a white man turns the power structure on its head and reverses the traditional gender roles of men being the protectors and women being the protected.





Figure 14: Still from *Selma* 00:35:48

However, in one of the scenes that shortly follows, the focus is back on the men. Everyone who participated in the march has been put in jail, the women in their cells and the men in separate cells. King precedes to tell his associate Ralph Abernathy:

“Look at these men. Beaten and broken down for generations. Deciding to demand more? What happens when a man stands up and says enough is enough? Look at Medgar. Murdered the man in his own driveway. Kids and wife right there inside the house. George and Herbert Lee, Lamar Smith. A man stands up, only to be struck down.” (00:38:23-00:38:52)

It is noteworthy that King mentions being beaten and broken down, standing up for oneself and being struck down because that is exactly what Cooper just experienced, but King is speaking about it from a male angle. Although King is arguably speaking in broader terms about the civil rights movement as a whole, the specific event that just transpired involved a black woman being beaten, broken down and struck down by standing up for what she believes to be right. This takes away from Cooper’s defiance and puts the focus back on King, it takes the focus away from the woman and puts it back on the man. This scene displaying black women and black feminism within the civil rights movement is thereby rather quickly replaced and the focus is put back on the men at the head of the movement.

The second female character who showcase black feminism and intersectionality is Diane Nash. Nash receives moderate screen time, but not many lines. Nash, being a civil rights activist, is almost always present when King and his associates are meeting, but she rarely speaks. Examples of this are

when the group is discussing how to handle the situation in Selma (00:29:10-00:32:37), discussing what issue within voting rights to focus on (00:56:27-00:58:27), deciding who should lead the first Selma march (01:10:10-01:10:35) and when the group meets after the first Selma march (01:19:25-01:19:49). Throughout all these meetings Nash is present, but does not have any lines. The only meeting where Nash speaks is after the second Selma march when she says “This is a movement of many, not of one. So any choice we make has to be right for many” (01:29:55-01:30:01). Here she voices her disapproval of King’s decision to turn around and not finish the second march, but she is only emphasizing a point that several of her male colleagues have already made. Other than Nash rarely speaking at the meetings, she is also one of the people who stay behind during the first Selma march and consequently takes care of the injured after the police altercation. Nash treats several people who have been beaten and abused by the police, again having no lines of dialogue (01:17:51-01:19:24).



Figure 15: Still from *Selma* 01:18:13

The portrayal of Diane Nash shows her as a highly replaceable character, and since she is one of the more prominent female characters in the movie this arguably reflects on women as a whole, to an extent. Nash speaks very little throughout the movie, and unlike other female characters such as Coretta Scott King or Annie Lee Cooper, she is not shown doing anything actively for the movement, except taking care of the injured. Nash’s position as a nurturer is very traditional to her gender and contrasts with Cooper’s actions which are much less conventional.

Finally, when looking at feminist aspects visible in *Selma*, the portrayal of Viola Liuzzo is important. Liuzzo is shown a total of six times in the movie and out of these six times she only speaks once, but her role is still very interesting and prominent because of the parallel portrayal of James Reeb. Both Liuzzo and Reeb are Caucasian civil rights activists and arrive for the second march after hearing about the brutalities that took place during the first march and being led by King's plea to the public for any and all clergy believing in equality to come to Selma (01:15:31-01:15:36 and 01:16:49-01:16:53). They are both seen coming from similar backgrounds, leaving their spouses at home, and going by themselves (01:20:42-01:20:58). When they arrive at Selma, Liuzzo speaks for the first and last time when she says: "Hi what's your name? (...) Hi, I'm Viola. Welcome to Selma. Yes, ma'am, I'm good. How are you?" (01:24:38-01:24:44), as she greets newcomers to the meeting place for people participating in the demonstrations.



Figure 16: Still from *Selma* 01:24:40

At the same time, Reeb is being interviewed by a journalist about his decision to come to Selma: "My name is James Reeb. I've come from Boston (...) I heard about the attack of innocent people who just want their rights, and I couldn't just stand by when Dr. King put out that call to clergy. I-I couldn't" (01:24:45-01:25:04). Again, Liuzzo's and Reeb's portrayals are very similar, not just in time spent onscreen, but also in content. This parallel portrayal continues when the two characters are seen during the second march, first Liuzzo and then Reeb (01:26:10-01:26:18). After the second march Reeb is attacked and killed by a group of Ku Klux Klan members (01:33:32-01:35:37). This scene is, like the first marching scene, a somewhat graphic scene and shows the gravity of the civil

rights movement. It is also the scene which breaks the parallel structure that has been built between Liuzzo and Reeb. Liuzzo was also killed by KKK members, but this has not been visualized in the movie. Instead, it is mentioned at the end of the movie, with an overlay of text across the screen, showing Liuzzo in the crowd listening to King speak as they have finally finished the marches and have arrived in Montgomery (01:58:25-01:58:38). The reason for only showing Reeb's murder and not Liuzzo's is arguably down to the fact that Reeb was killed during the Selma marches and Liuzzo was killed after, and the movie ends with King's speech in Montgomery. However, Liuzzo was killed only a few hours after the marches and King's speech concluded, and she was killed while helping marchers go from Montgomery back to Selma. By focusing on Reeb and his murder, the focus is once again on the men. Liuzzo's standing as a radical white feminist, radical in the sense that she actively pushes for the rights of black women and men alike, is not explored, at least not very much and not in comparison to Reeb. Ultimately, Reeb's story fits the timeline of the movie slightly better, but only slightly. Other events taking place in the movie have had their dates and times changed to fit the timeline, but Liuzzo's murder is not one of these instances. This means that Liuzzo remains a rather small character and ultimately only serves as a bit part in the movie, despite having the same potential for exploration as Reeb.

## Analysis of *Mississippi Burning*

Like the two previous movies, *Mississippi Burning* is another Academy Award-nominated movie about the state of the American South during the 1960s. The movie is directed by Alan Parker and is from 1988 and thereby considerably older than both *Hidden Figures* and *Selma*. *Mississippi Burning* is a historical crime thriller film and loosely follows the murders of civil rights activists James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner and the subsequent investigation in 1964. The two main characters are FBI agents Rupert Anderson, played by Gene Hackman and based on real-life FBI agent John Proctor, and Alan Ward, played by Willem Dafoe and based on real-life FBI agent Joseph Sullivan. Like the two previously analyzed movies, *Mississippi Burning* is also based on real events, nonetheless, many elements are fictionalized, such as the way in which the murders of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner are portrayed as well as many of the events surrounding the two main characters (King, 1988, p. 15). The movie was criticized when it was released for its fictionalization and the huge focus on the two white male characters, as well as the underrepresentation of black characters (Letofsky, 1990). This focus on white characters in a movie that is essentially about the civil rights movement makes for an interesting new historicism analysis and supplement to the previous analyses of more recent movies with a mainly black cast. Furthermore, the movie features very few women aside the supporting character Mrs. Pell played by Frances McDormand, and this makes for a curious feminist analysis of the movie.

### **Historical and Cultural Features in *Mississippi Burning***

The first scene in *Mississippi Burning* is the murder of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner. A church is burning to the ground and while this is happening the two Jewish and one black civil rights activists are being followed, and subsequently shot dead, by local law enforcement who are also Klansmen (*Mississippi Burning*, 1988, 00:01:17-00:08:09). This scene is based on real events as the black Mount Zion Methodist Church in Longdale, Mississippi was burned by Klansmen after Chaney and Schwerner spoke to the congregation about voting rights. After the church was burned, Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman returned to Longdale to look into the matter and were here arrested for speeding by the local law enforcement and Klansmen and then murdered and disposed of by said people (Cagin and Dray, 1988, p. 21). These events stretched over almost a month in real life, but are portrayed to take less than an hour in the movie. This lays the foundation for the minimal focus that the movie has on the actual murders, civil rights activists and African Americans.



Figure 17: Still from *Mississippi Burning* 00:05:27

The three activists are not seen onscreen again, not even when their bodies are found (01:31:11-01:33:04), and their backstories are only scarcely told. Instead, the focus is on the two white male FBI agents as well as the local white male cops and Klansmen. This focus makes the film a prime example of the white savior narrative.

Although there are many African American background characters in the movie, the large majority of them are just that, in the background, and do not have any lines. The few that do have lines are stereotypical characters with no complexity and they are only present to show the two main characters', and especially Ward's, zeal for solving the case. Most of the dialogue that these characters have is showcasing their reluctance to cooperate with Anderson and Ward and not knowing how to or being willing to help themselves. An example of this is when the two agents go to talk to a black man who has recently been assaulted, but he does not want to speak to them. Ward then tries to convince his mother that he needs to press charges:

"Mrs. Walker, I know this is difficult for you, but I really need your help. If you could just persuade your son to press charges then we could pick up the deputy at least, right away."

"He won't talk to no one. And it won't do no good anyway."

"I promise you, it will." (01:09:38-01:09:58)



Figure 18: Still from *Mississippi Burning* 01:09:52

Ward is portrayed as knowing what is best for Mrs. Walker, her son and the whole African American community in Mississippi. Furthermore, Mrs. Walker is portrayed as not knowing what is best for herself, her son or her community and needing Ward's guidance to better her own life as well as everyone else's. Ward is the savior who tries to take on Mrs. Walker's burden as well as that of the rest of the African American community. Mrs. Walker is reluctant to talk to him and her son even more so, because they are powerless against the Ku Klux Klan. Ward and Anderson, in their standings as educated, Caucasian and male, are the only ones who are a match for the KKK. Thus Mrs. Walker, and the rest of the African Americans, are inferior to not only the present dominating power, the Klan, but also the Klan's powerful opponent, the FBI. Although Ward is passionately trying to dismantle the Klan's stronghold on the town, and Anderson too – albeit not as passionately, their overthrowing of the power structure would only implement themselves, or other people like them, at the top dominating position – not the African Americans living there.

This power struggle between the FBI and the KKK is visible many times over throughout the movie, for instance when Ward is questioning Clinton Pell, the town's deputy sheriff and Klansman. Here Ward tells him:

“This is just an interview, sir. There's really no need to be so formal.”

“Well, if it's just an interview, I guess I don't have to stay here, do I? I got work to do. I guess you do too, don't you?”

“Yes, sir. And you can be sure that we’ll do it.”

“Good luck.” (01:11:25-01:11:44)



Figure 19: Still from *Mississippi Burning* 01:11:23

The power battle is very clear in this scene, as the FBI knows Pell is involved in the disappearance of the civil rights workers, and Pell knows that they know, however, they cannot prove it. Pell challenges Ward to do his “work” and Ward takes up the challenge and lets him know that he will do it. This dialogue is very different in power structure to the dialogue between Ward and Mrs. Walker and showcases the white savior narrative at work. Ward is multifaceted. He is kind, patient and charming with Mrs. Walker, and forward and authoritative with deputy Pell. Mrs. Walker is reduced to a stereotype. She is timid and powerless. This way of portraying white and black characters respectively leaves out all the work that African American men and women were actively doing to better themselves and their own communities in the Southern states and generally in the USA.

### **Intersectionality and Feminism in *Mississippi Burning***

Mrs. Walker is one of very few black female characters in *Mississippi Burning* and almost the only one with any lines. She is a mother and a wife, and she dutifully follows her husband. When Mrs. Walker is speaking to agent Ward, her husband comes out and tells Ward: “Leave [our son] alone. Maybe then, they’ll let us alone”. Afterwards he nods at Mrs. Walker, telling her to follow him inside,



away from Ward and Anderson and she does just that (01:09:59-01:10:10). Mrs. Walker is thus not only subordinate to the FBI agents, but she is also subordinate to her husband; what he says she follows. This shows Mrs. Walker's feminist and intersectional struggles – she is first speaking, although reluctantly, to the FBI, but when her husband tells her not to, she abides by his order. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the character of Mrs. Walker is a stereotype. She is almost a Mammy-like figure. Although Mrs. Walker is not depicted as a character wherein sexuality plays any big role, her standing as somewhat of a Mammy stereotype can be seen when she is compared to Clinton Pell's wife Mrs. Pell. In many ways Mrs. Walker and Mrs. Pell are alike. They are both women, both married and both are subordinate to their husbands. However, only one of them becomes a love interest to one of the FBI agents. It would be very odd if Mrs. Walker were to become the love interest of agent Ward, however, Mrs. Pell becomes the love interest of agent Anderson, and this is not unusual at all (00:46:51-00:51:25).



Figure 20: Still from *Mississippi Burning* 00:51:04

This comparison between Mrs. Walker and Mrs. Pell highlights Mrs. Walker's missing sexuality and her one-dimensional character. Sexuality is so far removed from Mrs. Walker that if it were to be added to her simplistic character, it would be incredibly striking and conspicuous for the audience. Mrs. Pell, however, can easily show her romantic and sexual sides without it standing out. Even her having an emotional affair with Anderson is not seen as contemptible by anyone, except her husband,

but he is so despicable towards her (01:32:49-01:33:54), and many other people, that her transgression seems only logical. Furthermore, the affair becomes almost a given as Mrs. Pell, despite being married to a Klan member and not standing up for the people being beaten and murdered in her town, is portrayed as a nice person, and therefore not fitting well with Mr. Pell (00:55:38-00:56:32). However, Mrs. Pell's ability to be a character that showcases romance and sexuality does not mean that she is not a stereotype. Mrs. Pell fits well within the stereotype of the damsel in distress. Mrs. Walker is relying on agent Ward to save her son, herself and her community and likewise Mrs. Pell is relying on agent Anderson to save her. Both of the men also save both of the women in the end.



Figure 21: Still from *Mississippi Burning* 01:59:45

Ward saves Mrs. Walker and the community at large by solving the murders of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner and by putting several Klan members behind bars (01:55:01-01:56:42). Anderson saves Mrs. Pell also by solving the murders and putting several Klan members, including her husband, in prison, but more importantly he saves her by showing her love and kindness and decency which she did not receive from her husband (01:58:45-02:00:20). After having his good influence in her life for a short period of time, Mrs. Pell is a new woman and able to restart her life on her own terms.

## Comparative Analysis

When looking at the above analyses, there are many comparisons between the three movies that can be made. While all three movies generally engage with the same themes, they do so in different ways and when comparing the movies, certain similarities and contrasts stand out.

Firstly, *Hidden Figures* and *Selma* have many similarities. They both feature a mainly black cast and focus on the stories of historic African Americans. The themes of segregation and racism are present in them both, but *Hidden Figures* show these themes on a more individual level, whereas *Selma* takes these same themes and showcase them on a broader, more national level. This is apparent since *Hidden Figures* gives insight into how segregation and racism affect the lives of the three main characters on a personal level, without them being directly immersed in these topics, aside from their identities including being black and this inadvertently makes them involved. *Selma*, on the other hand, tackles segregation and racism directly; these topics affect the main character and the supporting characters inadvertently through their identities, but it is also a part of their work and something they directly submerge themselves in. This comparison shows how engaging with segregation and racism happens both explicitly and implicitly. Furthermore, *Hidden Figures* features many more female characters than *Selma* and is more feminist and shows more intersectionality. This fact also plays a part in how the themes of racism and segregation are portrayed.



Figure 22: Still from *Hidden Figures* 01:07:37



Figure 23: Still from *Selma* 00:26:47

*Hidden Figures* is female-focused and deals with racism in the private sphere and in the women's individual lives. *Selma* is male-focused and deals with racism in the public sphere, in the state of Alabama and in the whole nation. This contrast subtly intensifies the notion and societal structure of women controlling the home and tackling domestic problems while men control the world at large. Furthermore, this is supported by the fact that women generally take on background and domestic roles in *Selma*, while some men, such as Katherine Johnson's supervisor, take on an authoritative role in *Hidden Figures*. This is reinforced by the movies' similarities in other areas: the fact that the movies were released close in time, *Selma* in 2014 and *Hidden Figures* in 2016, and both gained critical acclaim. The movies' main difference is the focus on either gender and how racism is subsequently depicted differently.

When comparing both *Hidden Figures* and *Selma* to *Mississippi Burning*, at first glance the former two seem quite different from the latter. However, *Hidden Figures* does have many similarities with *Mississippi Burning*. Most noticeable is the depiction of the white savior narrative. While *Mississippi Burning* relies on the white savior narrative to a greater extent than *Hidden Figures*, it is prevalent in both. This again highlights the struggles of intersectionality and black feminism. While *Selma* has no notion of the white savior narrative, it has moved beyond it, the white savior narrative is very much present in *Hidden Figures*. The black female character of Katherine Johnson in *Hidden Figures* is still in need of a savior and someone who stands up for her because she cannot truly stand up for herself. She does not just rely on a man to stand up for her because of her identity as a woman, but she relies on a white man to stand up for her because of her identity as a black woman.



Figure 24: Still from *Hidden Figures* 01:21:51



Figure 25: Still from *Mississippi Burning* 01:09:21

This is comparable to how the African American Mississippians need Ward and Anderson to save them and stand up for them in *Mississippi Burning*. The fact that there is still usage of the white savior narrative in *Hidden Figures* from 2016 in the same way that there is usage of the white savior narrative in *Mississippi Burning* from 1988 shows the particular difficulty of intersectionality. As mentioned, the biggest difference between *Hidden Figures* and *Selma* is the fact that *Hidden Figures* focuses on females while *Selma* focuses on males. Since *Selma* is able to forego any white savior

narrative, Martin Luther King Jr. does not wait for assistance from President Johnson, rather Johnson needs King's help, it is arguably the matter of gender which holds *Hidden Figures* back.

## Discussion

With a thesis such as this one, which focuses on female representations within films with themes of segregation and racism, there are many movies to potentially choose from. The reason why *Hidden Figures*, *Selma* and *Mississippi Burning* have been chosen is not just because of their similarities in themes, but also because of their similarities in setting, popularity and accolades. All three movies are set in the 1960s: *Hidden Figures* in 1961, *Selma* in 1965 and *Mississippi Burning* in 1964. Furthermore, they are all set in the Southern United States: *Hidden Figures* in Virginia, *Selma* in Alabama and *Mississippi Burning* in Mississippi. All three films are Hollywood movies starring renowned actors and actresses and distributed by some of the world's biggest production companies: 20th Century Fox, Paramount Pictures and Orion Pictures. All three movies have been nominated for Academy Awards for Best Picture: *Hidden Figures* in 2017, *Selma* in 2015 and *Mississippi Burning* in 1989. Additionally, *Hidden Figures* was also nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Supporting Actress, *Selma* won Best Original Song and *Mississippi Burning* was nominated for Best Actor, Best Supporting Actress, Best Director, Best Sound, Best Film Editing and won Best Cinematography. All three movies are thereby highly accoladed. It is because of these similarities that the three movies have been chosen for this thesis; they show a specific theme in North American history at a particular time in history and they are widely distributed and legitimized through their critical acclaims. This lays the foundation for making a thorough analysis to answer the thesis statement.

With that being said, there are of course many other ways this thesis could have been structured. For example, the themes of segregation and racism depicted in historical movies and the way in which female characters are portrayed in said movies could also be analyzed by comparing Hollywood movies to indie movies. This would show the similarities and the differences between how Hollywood movies and indie movies handle the same themes and portrayals. The reason why this thesis did not use this approach is because the datasets would be too large for a thesis of this size. To give a comprehensive analysis, several Hollywood movies as well as several indie movies would have to be included and analyzed in detail. However, for a bigger project this approach could provide a different and interesting perspective to the themes and portrayals.

As mentioned, this thesis could have been done in many different ways, the above example is just one out of many alternative approaches. The thesis ultimately settled on the approach that it did because renowned Hollywood movies have a big impact on society and culture because they have the ability to reach a vast number of people. Furthermore, focusing on historical movies means that the

analyzed movies are not just sources of entertainment, but also sources of information. This factual layer adds an extra dimension to the movies and arguably make them very relevant for analysis because people can gain historic knowledge through their entertainment. This is particularly important because this phenomenon of gaining knowledge through entertainment can both be a starting point for the viewers to gain more factual information about the events depicted in the movies, but it can also lead to misinformation as historical films still fall under the category of fiction and are not documentaries.



## Conclusion

This study set out to examine the ways in which Hollywood movies depict historical events and factual characters of 1960s Southern United States, specifically focusing on female characters in *Hidden Figures*, *Selma* and *Mississippi Burning*. In order to do so, the thesis has focused on racism and sexism and how these two phenomena work in combination as intersectionality and black feminism. Furthermore, this thesis has made use of new historicism theory to understand the intricate relationship between history and fiction and how this plays a part in the female representations.

All three movies try to present themselves as serious historical films, with a lot of factual information. This is done through a variety of ways such as basing characters on factual people, basing events on factual incidents as well as showing factual images from real life. All of this help the movies to legitimize themselves and make them seem more factual than what they actually are, as none of them are perfectly accurate representations of history. Additionally, this legitimization helps the movies' female characters seem more legitimate and thereby reinforces whatever societal structure each movie presents.

In conclusion, *Hidden Figures*, *Selma* and *Mississippi Burning* are all movies that showcase segregation, the civil rights movement and racism through the portrayal of female characters, but they do this in different ways and to very different extents. *Hidden Figures* and *Selma* were released at approximately the same time whereas *Mississippi Burning* is considerably older. The change that can be seen from *Mississippi Burning* to *Selma* and *Hidden Figures* is first and foremost a bigger focus on black characters, both male and female. The black characters in the newer movies are now the main characters and not just extras or bit parts like in *Mississippi Burning*. This added screen time and focus make the black characters more nuanced because their stories are now given the time and focus to be developed. Furthermore, *Selma* and *Hidden Figures* rely a lot less on stereotypes than *Mississippi Burning* does. The African American female characters in *Hidden Figures*, such as Johnson, Vaughan and Jackson, and in *Selma*, such as Coretta Scott King, are all multifaceted and their intersectional struggles are shown. This contrast with *Mississippi Burning* and the depiction of Mrs. Walker which relies on the Mammy stereotype. However, this is not to say that *Hidden Figures* and *Selma* are flawless representations of black feminism and intersectionality. *Hidden Figures* still relies on the white savior narrative and in that way reinforces patriarchal and white-focused structures. *Selma* does not reinforce white dominance, however, through the subordinating of many of the female characters it does reinforce patriarchal structures. While the two newer movies are more nuanced in

their portrayal of black female characters set in the Southern United States during the 1960s, they are not perfect, but they have definitely come a long way compared to *Mississippi Burning*.

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