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# Vindicating Career Women through the Recent Feminist Biopic: An Analysis of *Hidden Figures* (2016) and *On the Basis of Sex* (2018)

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## **Abstract**

Women have always been misinterpreted in films and this is partially due to the androcentric nature of the film industry. Even movies which recount the real story of a female character, such as the female biopic, tend to depict the female protagonist in a rather negative way. However, new ways of presenting biographical movies with female characters as their protagonists emerged owing to the influence of the different feminist movements. One example is the feminist biopic, which reverses the conventions of representation of the female biopic and turns them into positive and empowering images of women. *Hidden Figures* (Melfi 2016) and *On the Basis of Sex* (Leder 2018) are cases of feminist biopics since they present the stories of four outstanding women who managed to become known and respected in the fields of science and law, fields which are predominantly male. These two biopics focus on the achievements the female protagonists made in their places of work showing how they managed to overcome the gender stereotypes and prejudices which were placed upon them. Thus, the aim of this dissertation is to prove that *Hidden Figures* and *On the Basis of Sex* give visibility to career women. To do so, the scenes and dialogues from the two movies will be considered, demonstrating that these biopics do help to celebrate the image of the professional woman in the context in which the two movies are set.

Keywords: *Hidden Figures*, *On the Basis of Sex*, career women, feminist biopic, visibility

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## INTRODUCTION

The period of the 1960s in the United States was marked by a time of social upheaval and demonstrations which demanded social changes and the transformation of society to a fairer one. As a consequence of this social turmoil, during the late 1960s almost 1970s, the second wave of feminism, also known as The Women's Liberation Movement, appeared. During the second wave, women claimed more control over their lives and over their bodies, to be treated in the same way as men, to stop gender-based violence, to have more chances in politics, as well fair consideration in the professional world (Smith 2013, 6). Being this such a convulsive time in history, many women became aware of the need to eliminate all the patriarchal ideas and constructions that had been existing for many centuries. The reason why the period of the 1960s opens this paper lies in the fact that the two cultural products which are going to be analysed, *Hidden Figures* (2016), directed by Theodore Melfi, and *On the Basis of Sex* (2018), by Mimi Leder, are set in this specific period of time. Furthermore, since they are both biographical movies, or biopics, the struggles that women had to face in that time are present in both films.

Another relevant matter is the role of Black women in the second wave of feminism. As stated by Sue Thornham (2006, 27), "black women were active in the formation of the first radical feminist groups.". However, despite being present from the very beginning, these figures were soon forgotten since the second wave of feminism was regarded as a movement belonging to white women from the middle-classes (Roth 2003, 46) in which "black women were not welcome" (Breines 2002, 1095). One of the main reasons why Black women were not considered was because their experiences were different from those of white women. Black women had to face "the double burden of race and gender" (Thornham 2006, 27) and feminist theory "predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender" (Crenshaw 1989, 140). As a result, Kimberly Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality*, which was used to reflect the interconnection between race and gender among other identity variables such as age, sexual orientation, or nationality (Crenshaw 1991, 1246). Even before the coinage of the term, the third wave of feminism had already contemplated intersectionality. In fact, the activists of the third wave criticised the lack of intersectional consideration of the Women's Liberation Movement.

A discipline which arose from the second wave of feminism was that of Women's Studies. This new field of study and the focus on women's experiences, in line with Victoria

Robinson (1997, 3), “was broadly defined as the recognition and analysis of women’s oppression, and therefore as how to end their subordination in patriarchal and capitalist societies.” Women’s Studies became an academic field of study “intimately connected to social change” (Robinson 1997, 3) as its main goal was to change society.

Due to the influence of the second wave of feminism, a new discipline emerged from film studies (Hollinger 2012, 9), which was feminist film studies. Then, on the grounds of feminist film studies, feminist film theory appeared, which started from the premise that the whole film industry was highly patriarchal and androcentric. This can be perceived, for instance, in the way male and female characters are presented in movies. Sandra Lipsitz Bem (1993, 41) believes that androcentrism is a far more practical concept than patriarchy and she defines it as “the privileging of male experience and the ‘otherizing’ of female experience; that is, males and male experience are treated as a neutral standard or norm [...], and females and female experience are treated as a sex-specific deviation from that allegedly universal standard.” Thus, since the film industry was highly androcentric “women were portrayed as passive sex objects or fixed in stereotypes” (Smelik 2016, 1) as it was the way men viewed women at that time. As a reaction, feminist film studies “began to shape [its] analyses of how film texts work to instill patriarchal ideology in female viewers” (Hollinger 2012, 9). Moreover, one of the main goals of feminist film theory was to understand and later criticise the stereotypical representations of women in movies (Smelik 2016, 1). Thanks to feminist film studies, new approaches to the way cinema was studied and perceived emerged as well as the creation of new forms of cinema, which asked “for a new focus on experience, body, and affect” (Smelik 2016, 4). One of the key theories which appeared was that of Laura Mulvey about the male gaze, proposed in 1975. In her theory, Mulvey explained how “women are forced to identify with a passive object to be looked at, while men’s to-be-looked-at-ness is compensated for by their activity in the film’s narrative” (Oliver 2017, 451). Hence, feminist film scholars needed to find ways to go against the patriarchal norms which had been rooted in the film industry for a very long time.

Keeping this in mind, the main objective of this paper is to prove that *Hidden Figures* (Melfi 2016) and *On the Basis of Sex* (Leder 2018) give visibility to career women. Both movies are set in a period of change and social transformation, and it was during this era when people began to be aware of how patriarchal the society was and how important it was to raise consciousness to end all inequalities. In order to carry out a detailed analysis of the biopics, specific dialogues and scenes will be taken from the two films and examined in the light of

Women's Studies, feminist film theory, and intersectionality studies. By focusing first on the genre of the biopic, specifically the female biopic, and then on the two biopics, the actual discussion will be made to stress the importance of professional women. That being so, the contention of this dissertation is to explore how *Hidden Figures* and *On the Basis of Sex* contribute to giving visibility to career women who lived in periods in which it was not expected for a woman to be an engineer, a mathematician, or a lawyer. Additionally, these biopics offer the possibility for their female protagonists to become role models for young girls of future generations. The audience will perceive the way in which these women, despite the difficulties they encountered, managed to succeed in the professional community and become pioneering career women.

### **THE FEMALE BIOPIC AND THE FEMINIST BIOPIC**

The biopic, among film critics, has always been “the most hated of all film genres” (Cartmell and Polasek 2020, 1). This genre, as its name indicates, narrates the story of a well-known figure which had an impact on the world's history. In spite of its little popularity amidst film reviewers, “a very high number of Oscars have gone to actors and actresses engaged in biopic performances in recent years” (Pérez-Simón 2014, 50). This means that the movies belonging to this genre may not be of such low quality and may actually be useful to prove how the advances and achievements made by the protagonists had a great influence on society.

Nonetheless, as Karen Hollinger expresses (2012, 158), the “main character [of the biopic] has overwhelmingly been male, and the biopic has been characterized as one of the most male-oriented film forms.” This issue might be the result of the patriarchal system which has been interiorised in the film industry, leaving little space for what is known as “the female biopic”. The problem with some of this type of biopics is that rather than making a film which includes positive portrayals of women, the majority of female biopics often presented the sequence of the movie as a “downward trajectory, with female subjects victimized by their own ambition, or limitations placed on them” (Bingham 2013, 237). The reason why most female biopics displayed their protagonists as sufferers was because “a victim, whatever her profession, made a better subject than a survivor with a durable career and a non-traumatic personal life” (Bingham 1999, 5). Related to this is the fact that, in many biopics, “women are defined primarily by their gender, rather than their distinctive gift” (Custen, quoted in Polaschek 2013, 44). Hence, biopics, or movies on the whole, which presented the female protagonist as a weak individual rather than a strong and capable human being made even more noticeable the

patriarchal norms and attitudes ingrained in society as well as the androcentric nature of the film industry. Moreover, although people's perceptions of women have changed, portraying the female character according to certain fixed gender stereotypes does not help to do away with the remaining beliefs linked to them.

However, by virtue of the many influential studies such as the one carried out by Laura Mulvey in the 1970s, a great number of filmmakers and feminist film scholars have tried to find new forms "to overcome the sexual and social coding of 'woman' and develop new forms of identification" (Chich 2015, 121). One of the ways to present counter-cinematic forms was through feminist biopics, "which consciously reverse the traditional strategies of the classical form of the genre by deliberately applying a feminist point of view" (Polaschek 2013, 2). Therefore, feminist biopics do not present the female protagonist as a victim or as someone whose emotional stability is more relevant for the film than her achievements. Rather, they depict the main character as a qualified and successful individual in spite of the hardships and prejudices she faces. Another way in which the feminist biopic was used to go against the conventions established in Hollywood films was by replacing the "woman-as-image" (McCabe 2004, 29) convention established in the film industry for an autonomous woman who was eager to fight for her rights, who set a precedent for women to never give up on their dreams, and who left a mark on history.

Among the different female biopics which have been released during the years, most of them have focused on female "entertainers, queens, or headliners (women noted for making the news either in good or bad ways)" (Hollinger 2012, 162). Outside these traditional types of biopics, there is the recent film, released in 2018, *On the Basis of Sex*, directed by Mimi Leder, one of the two movies used in this dissertation. This movie narrates the story of the famous Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, "the passionate legal advocate for ending gender discrimination" (Grierson 2019, n.p.). In the biopic, it is shown how not only did Justice Ginsburg fight against gender inequalities in court but also in other spheres of life.

Another issue which needs to be addressed is the lack of female or feminist biopics which deal with histories of Black women since "women and racial/ethnic minorities remain underrepresented in Hollywood, far below their proportion of the US population" (Erigha 2015, 78). Once again, the majority of existing biopics which present the lives of Black women take as their protagonists' women artists. Nevertheless, in 2016, *Hidden Figures*, the other movie which will be analysed later on in this paper, came to life. This film tackles the lives of three



exceptional Black women, Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson, and Dorothy Vaughan, who did something inconceivable during the decade of the 1960s in America. They became key figures, who were unknown for many people before the release of the movie, during the Space Race. One of the relevant aspects of this biopic is that these three women were neither artists, entertainers, nor queens, they were scientists, engineers, and mathematicians, positions which, still now, are seen as belonging to men.

To all this, it is worth mentioning that the so-called fourth wave of feminism is taking place at the moment. The fourth wave, which “emerged in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, between 2001 and 2013” (Silvestre, López, and Royo 2021, 418), stands out for its “reliance and usage of technology and social media to connect and reach populations across cultural and national borders” (Looft 2017, 3) in order to denounce violence against women and finding common experiences among social media users. Thus, the importance of the feminist biopic is now more relevant than ever as, although films are not social media per se, they are part of the media. Since media “plays an integral role in reinforcing and policing patriarchal norms and practices” (Vickery and Everbach 2018, 8), why not using different platforms, which are key in the fourth wave of feminism, to reverse the misrepresentations that have been spread about women by inserting figures of real women who went against the established norms and perceptions of females at the time. By doing so, as it has already been said, contemporary women could find in them a figure and role model to look up to in order to continue fighting for rights and full equality.

Therefore, the importance of considering *Hidden Figures* and *On the Basis of Sex* is that they portray real women in unexpected professional environments during the era they lived in as both movies are set in times when the society was still deeply marked by fixed and traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Then, it could also be argued that these films can be labelled as feminist biopics as they do not present the protagonist as victims but as heroines with upward and successful careers. In other words, the conventions of the female biopic are reversed in these two movies becoming feminist biopics. Hence, by changing the features of the female biopic, feminist biopics are able to present more realistic portrayals and the difficult situations of career women. Consequently, these female protagonists can become role models for both contemporary professional women but also for career women in future generations.

**PIONEER CAREER WOMEN: *HIDDEN FIGURES* (MELFI 2016) AND *ON THE BASIS OF SEX* (LEDER 2018)**

The image of the professional woman has changed drastically throughout history. One event which gave way to women to enter the labour market was that of the World War II. As stated by Joanne Meyerowitz (2005, 382), “during World War II, women entered the labor force in unprecedented numbers, and some of them defied the gender norms by taking jobs in heavy industry traditionally held by men.” Nonetheless, after World War II was over, “women encountered a resurgence of gender ideals that limited them to home, marriage, and motherhood” (Meyerowitz 2005, 382) and such gender roles “tend[ed] to benefit men and disadvantage women” (Kowalski and Scheitle 2020, 672). Owing to the social upheaval of the time and the late second wave of feminism, “significant changes in women’s patterns of employment” (Cady 2009, 349) occurred. All these issues can be seen in *Hidden Figures* and *On the Basis of Sex*, which also portray how the female protagonists still had to endure certain hardships due to their gender, or even their skin colour.

The first issue which needs to be addressed is that *Hidden Figures* and *On the Basis of Sex* present a shift of some of the stereotypical gender roles. In spite of the incorporation of a great number of women into the labour world before and during the 1960s, it was still considered that men had to be the ones “earning money in their chosen profession” (Flynn 2014, 65) in order to provide for his family while “women play[ed] expressive roles, taking care of the home and emotional life of the family” (Flynn 2014, 65). In fact, in *On the Basis of Sex* (2018), there is a scene where the protagonist, Ruth, argues that “the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States Constitution says all people must be treated equally under the law. And yet, there are [...] many laws [...] that say, in effect, women stay at home, and men go to work” (Leder 2018, 51:14). By uttering these words, it is proven how, even laws, helped to perpetuate the gendered division of work and care work. Even so, in both biopics, the audience can perceive how the division of labour as well as some gender roles and stereotypes are sometimes inverted.

Focusing first on *On the Basis of Sex*, there are many instances in which Martin, Ruth’s husband, appears cooking (Leder 2018, 35:31), or taking care of the children while his wife is the one travelling for working purposes (Leder 2018, 47:21). In other words, he is presented doing what Ruth was expected to be doing. In addition to this, “traditional gender socialization would encourage women to display higher levels of communal behaviour (such as being affectionate or caring) to assume care-taking roles at home” (Thoman and Zelin 2020, 2). However, this is not the case for the female protagonist in *On the Basis of Sex*. In the biopic, there are several scenes where Martin is the one talking to the pair’s teenage daughter after having argued with Ruth (Leder 2018, 55:06), becoming the emotional figure of the pair. Thus,

instead of being the woman caring for their kids in an emotional sense, it is the man who takes that role, and he is also the one who appears, in most cases, taking care of the home.

In the case of *Hidden Figures*, it is important to highlight the figure of Katherine Johnson, a widowed single mother. Being aware of her situation, she states how she has to be “the mommy and the daddy” (Melfi 2016, 30:46) after saying that she is now working full-time (Melfi 2016, 30:40). This can be explained by the “changing family roles, behaviors, and functions” (Flynn 2014, 70) which took place between the 1960s and the 1970s. Flynn (2014, 70) also explains how all these transformations might have occurred due to the “effects of women’s paid work outside of the home.” A few decades before the 1960s, it would have been inconceivable that a single mother went to work and did not take care of her children as “single mothers [...] in early twentieth-century [...] were easily labelled bad” (Regan 2005, 357). Hence, all the female protagonists from both biopics help to prove how women are perfectly capable of working in full-time jobs, paying attention to their families, proving that they should not be restricted only to the household environment. These occurrences manifest the protagonists’ “success both in and out of the office” (Cruz 2017, n.p.). Moreover, Katherine Johnson shows beyond doubt that single mothers, mothers, and women in general, could support themselves financially without the help of anyone else.

It should also be considered that in order for the protagonists to become career women, they had to receive an education first. Both biopics depict the educational struggles the protagonists had to face in order to be able to have access to an education and how, in the end, they managed to thrive and become pioneering career women. Once again, because some people saw women as not being “seriously interested in learning” since many of them were thought to “go to university mainly to find a good husband” (Sutherland 1991, 150), their position in the educational field was full of prejudices. Ruth from *On the Basis of Sex* broke with all these misconceptions. On the one hand, she was already married and had a daughter when she began university. On top of that, she attended two of the most prestigious universities in the United States, Harvard and Columbia. Harvard Law School was a male dominated university up until the 1950s (Rhode 1989, 23), which is something that can also be perceived in the movie. When Ruth begins her degree, it is “only the sixth year” (Leder 2018, 06:20) women could attend Harvard Law School and that same year only nine women were part of the institution. However, women were still discriminated. As the biopic shows, women were never taken into consideration to answer a question and they were last one to be given an opportunity to do so (Leder 2018, 10:56) maybe because women were still regarded as less intelligent than

men (Inness 2007, 3). Nonetheless, Ruth transferred to Columbia where she also outdid herself and became first of her class (Leder 2016, 28:20) proving that women were as rational as men. Additionally, owing to her brilliant capacity, she was able to become one of the most recognised judges in the United States.

As for *Hidden Figures*, the issue of education is more complex as not only were the protagonists women, but they were also African American. This made it even more difficult for them to access education since “many African Americans struggled against enormous hardship to establish and operate schools for the education of African American children” (Thomas and Jackson 2007, 359). As a kid, Katherine already attended a segregated primary school and such schools usually had limitations (Gordon 2005, 228). As a consequence of those restraints, she had to move to another school to enrol secondary education which could suit her educational needs as she was an exceptionally gifted child. Katherine later attended the West Virginia University Graduate School, where she was “the first Negro female student” (Melfi 2016, 37:00). In another instance, Mary Jackson wanted to become an engineer, but to do so she had to take a course which was carried out in a school for white people only (Melfi 2016, 1:10:54). Nevertheless, instead of giving up her dream, she goes in front of a judge to try and change the law which prohibited Black people to attend all white schools, and she was successful. This allowed her to become “NASA’s first black female engineer” (Cruz 2017, n.p.) and probably made it possible for other Black people to take on the same course and become engineers as well.

Another way in which these two biopics help to give visibility to the career women is through the professions of the female protagonists, which have always been considered to be male, even nowadays. As it has been mentioned, this was a true achievement for women and something which made it possible for the main characters to become pioneers in their professions. However, in spite of this accomplishment, as Zoe Irving argues (2008, 160), “women's participation in the public world of paid work has been largely undertaken within the confines of male structures and male norms” and this can be clearly seen in both movies. Paying attention to *Hidden Figures* first, the leading characters work at NASA as engineers and mathematicians. According to Daniel Sage (2009, 154), “by the mid 1960s [NASA] employed thousands of women” who “were often placed in key positions of responsibility.” In addition to this, “while all-male team of engineers performed the calculations for potential space travel, women mathematicians checked their work” (Deburge 2016, n.p.), something which implied great commitment from those women. However, not everyone was sure about women doing

such delicate jobs. For instance, when Katherine explains to Colonel Jim Johnson what her job consisted of, he responded by saying that he did not know that NASA allowed women to do such demanding tasks (Melfi 2016, 36:29). This is an indicator of the belief that people, mostly men, had about women being less skilful than men to do such complex calculations. Nonetheless, although women sometimes had relevant roles, “many women working for NASA during the 1960s and 1970s testify to pervasive disciplinary and self-disciplinary techniques that articulate normative gender binaries” (Sage 2009, 155). This shows how, although a great number of women worked at NASA, there were still gender prejudices in the agency. This issue can also be noticed in many films which have scientists as their protagonists, in which the majority are male. Consequently, “when girls are exposed to cultural representations that show science and engineering as masculine domains, they may develop gender schemas that lead them to label these occupations as masculine” (Steinke 2005, 36). In *Hidden Figures*, the representation of science as a male occupation is clear. For instance, when Katherine Johnson enters her new place of work for the first time, she is surrounded by male colleagues (Melfi 2016, 16:48) and she is mistaken by a cleaning lady (Melfi 2016, 16:50). The same happens with Mary Jackson, whose new colleagues are all male (Melfi 2016, 13:46). Then, it is important to consider this biopic because, although two of the protagonists worked in a predominantly male environment, they were able to succeed and achieve recognition despite the prejudices put upon them. As it has been said, Mary Jackson became the first Black female engineer to work at NASA and, in the case of Katherine, she was the one trusted by John Glenn to make the last calculations before the launching (Melfi 2016, 1:42:13), rather than all her male colleagues. Therefore, these women, in a context in which they were seen as inferior and they were made invisible, were able to stand out among all the men working at NASA.

Something similar happens in *On the Basis of Sex* in which the protagonist is a lawyer. Law has always been “a field dominated by men” (Lucia 2005, 70), which is something that the biopic evidently portrays. Even in contemporary times, “the gap between men and women in law firms, legal academia, and the judiciary remains stark” possibly owing to “the powerful role of implicit gender stereotypes” (Levinson and Young 2010, 2). For instance, when Ruth tries to find a job in a law firm, she is rejected by all the companies she goes to due to the prejudices they hold against women (Leder 2018, 27:18). One of these stereotypical preconceptions is that “women are too emotional to be lawyers” (Leder 2018, 27:30). Nonetheless, female lawyers are subjected to a “double-bind” (Gregory 2003, 75) since “if they did not exhibit behaviour based on male models, they were branded as not tough enough

[...], but if they were perceived as tough and aggressive, they were regarded as impaired women who acted like men” (Gregory 2003, 75). Hence, this seems like an excuse to exclude women from the profession to keep it as a male one. Still, Ruth shows this tough attitude which makes her never give up and be persistent until she achieves her goal without caring about what other people might think of her. As a consequence of the stereotypical perceptions of female lawyers, cultural products tend not to portray “these women work[ing] as lawyers or display[ing] their vocational brilliance” (Sutherland and Swan 2007, 139). In this biopic, Ruth clearly shows the power she holds when she defends her client in court and how she masters diction (Leder 2018, 1:44:56), which lead her to win the case. This is the reality of most female lawyers who are more than stereotypes which do not suit them. Additionally, “female lawyer films [...] present career success at odds with domestic bliss” (Lucia 2005, 155), making it supposedly incompatible for a woman to have a family and a career as a lawyer. However, this biopic clearly proves that this is false and does not fit the reality. Ruth, the protagonist is perfectly capable of caring of her family, with the help of her husband, and working on the case which will make her become a relevant lawyer and, later on, a very prominent judge.

Finally, it also worth commenting on the issue of race which appears in both biopics but more explicitly on *Hidden Figures* as its protagonists are African American women. However, before focusing on the movies themselves, it is important to highlight the relevance of intersectionality in this part. As it was explained in the introduction, Kimberly Crenshaw coined the term between the late 1980s and early 1990s to demonstrate how “other dimensions of social structure/social identity [...] play a formative role in gender’s operation and meaning” (Shields 2008, 303). Although intersectionality focuses on various aspects of self-identity such as sexuality, nationality, or class (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 787), the main focus in this last part is on the relationship between gender and race. As a matter of fact, in *On the Basis of Sex*, there is a scene in which Ruth is believed to imply that “race and gender are the same” (Leder 2018, 1:17:25) as she was discussing some issue related to discrimination. Thus, even before the term was coined, some people were aware of the how gender and race had something in common, being this the prejudices both gender minorities and racial groups were subjected to.

In regard to how Black women have been portrayed in films, bell hooks (1992, 119) explains how neither her nor other Black women feel identified with the way movies present women of colour since “when Black women are present in film, their roles bear litter resemblance to the real lives of Black women” (Sutherland 2016, 3). This makes reference to

“the constant parade of negative stereotypical images of Black women” which “fails to produce a ‘truthful’ or realistic representation of Black women” (Young 2005, 180). Here lies the importance of making a feminist biopic as they present the reality of what the protagonists did back in the time in which they lived in, and such reality is free from stereotypes usually presented in films. Consequently, the African American protagonists can become a referent since through the biopic they prove that all the stereotypes and misconceptions attached to Black women are wrong. At the same time, though, the biopics help to show the struggles Black women they had to face to get a fairer treatment either in society in general or, in this case, in their places of work, something which is acutely presented in *Hidden Figures*.

The main aspect which is represented in *Hidden Figures* is that of racial segregation in the workplace. As Annelise Orleck claims (2005, 258), “black women’s work experiences have continued to be shaped by race as well as sex segregation of the labor force.” For instance, the biopic clearly shows how there is a space at the West Computing Room building at the NASA’s headquarters which is destined only to Black women. Outside one of the rooms there is a sign which reads “Colored Computers” (Melfi 2016, 10:33), and such room is located in the basement on the building. Conversely, when the audience is shown the building and room where the white computing room for women is, it can be perceived that it is much more sophisticated and high-class (Melfi 2016, 41:30). According to Peter Debruge (2016, n.p.), it was not “evident [...] that these ‘colored computers,’ as they were called by NASA, deserved to be afforded the same rights and treated with the same respect as their male colleagues,” implying that skin colour was more important than what these women could offer. However, as it seen in the movie, owing to the perseverance of the protagonists, they were able to pave the way for future Black and female employees at NASA after their successes.

Another moment in which race segregation, and also gender segregation, can be perceived in the movie is when Katherine Johnson arrives at her new place of work with Vivian Mitchell, the supervisor of the female computers. Before entering the room, Mitchell warns Katherine that “they have never had a colored in here before” (Melfi 2016, 16:20) meaning that the mathematician is the first African American woman to work in the Space Task Group. This is a great achievement not only for her but also for the rest of the African American women who would work there years later thanks to Katherine Johnson. Nonetheless, once Katherine joined the team, she still had to endure discrimination. In line with Raymond F. Gregory (2003, 61),

[D]iscrimination against women of color arises, at least in part, from the values, beliefs, and expectations of business and professional leaders, a great majority of whom are white males. Unless a woman of colour can somehow fit herself into a mold firmly established in and created by a culture of white males, she is likely to be treated as an alien in the workplace.

Hence, since people of that time still had very patriarchal ideas rooted in their minds, and since the Jim Crow Laws were still in effect, it is not uncommon that Katherine did not receive a warm welcome, more specifically if the Black woman presented a threat to the male workers as she proved to be more intelligent than the rest of them. Still, even after Katherine's achievements, none of her male co-workers complimented or congratulated her. In regard to what Gregory stated, Katherine could perfectly become one more of the group in spite of her gender or her race, but still she was not accepted.

Another instance of discrimination is the one which Dorothy Vaughan suffered from her supervisor. In the biopic, Dorothy asks Vivian Mitchell to be promoted to the position of supervisor of the West computing group, which is formed only by Black women. Nevertheless, her requests are always denied. According to Dorothy's supervisor, "things are working just fine" (Melfi 2016, 12:30) without a manager for the coloured group. A possible explanation for this is that "an African American woman may be denied a promotion because her employer is biased against African American women" (Gregory 2003, 63). This quote reflects what Vivian Mitchell tells Dorothy about her having nothing against women of colour (Melfi 2016, 1:34:56). Yet, Dorothy responds that this is what Mitchell wants to believe and not what she really thinks (Melfi 2016, 1:35:02). Through situations like this one, it becomes clear that the prejudices against African American women are fuelled by the people's own perceptions towards them. However, Dorothy managed to get a promotion and she "became NASA's first African American manager" (Cruz 2017, n.p.). Therefore, if movies like *Hidden Figures*, which portray real life situations with which contemporary career women can identify themselves, are not produced in greater numbers, it is likely that films will continue presenting Black women, and women as a whole, subjected to stereotypes.

## CONCLUSION

Taking into consideration all the different aspects which have been discussed in this dissertation, it can be concluded that *Hidden Figures* and *On the Basis of Sex* help to give visibility to the figure of the career woman in different ways. The main characters were able to



make a name for themselves in the scientific and legal field, which have always been regarded as male areas. These women also opened the door for future female engineers, mathematicians, lawyers, and judges to be able to work in these same occupations without so many prejudices against them. This also help to do away with the preconception that women were less capable than men, which limited women to specific careers. Additionally, the fact that both films take the form of feminist biopics also help to perpetuate the importance of the advancements made by the protagonists, but also of every woman which have been fighting for equality in the labour sphere. Bearing in mind that the biopics tell a real story, professional women can identify themselves with the hardships the main characters had to face just because of their gender and, in the case of *Hidden Figures*, of their race too. It is also relevant that the biopics portray the achievements of the protagonists since women have been misrepresented in female biopics. Moreover, those accomplishments were what made the protagonists succeed in what they were doing because, although their capacity and capability were questioned multiple times, that did not stop them from continuing to work and proving their co-workers what they were capable of. Therefore, the protagonists of the biopics can serve as referents for contemporary and future career women as they prove that although they lived in a society marked by patriarchal and racist ideas, they still managed to become prominent figures in their professional fields in spite of the prejudice people had against their gender or their race.

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