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GSXS 311

17 April 2024

An Intersectional Analysis of *Hidden Figures* and Max Gordon's "The Way Forward"

As a woman with Asian heritage, who is currently pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in Computer Science, a field largely dominated by White men. I am intrigued by the ways in which these parts of my identity intersect—I wonder how they will affect me in my current and future workplaces. Could this contribute to struggles I may have in ways that cannot be fully understood by my Asian male or White female peers. The film, *Hidden Figures*, is based on the real-life women who came before me in the STEM industry who were affected by their identities, like me, as women of colour. The film takes place at a segregated NASA in 1961 during the Space Race against Russia—their goal: to send the first man to space. It explores the lives of three women of colour, Computers, who started in the all African American "West Computer Group," but moved upward in the company vastly dominated by White men. Katherine G. Johnson was the first African American woman assigned to the Space Task Group, Dorothy Vaughan became NASA's first African American supervisor, and, finally, Mary Jackson became NASA's first African American engineer. This film shows the constant racism, sexism, and exclusion these Black women faced during their lives and their pursuits climbing the ladder at NASA. Max Gordon in his article "The Way Forward," outlines how his identity as a Black gay man has created an intersectional experience that is unique to him and the particular

identities he holds. Gordon will use his experience to indicate the importance of intersectional ideas, and in expressing yourself as every part of one's identity. As such, both the film and the article will be used to highlight that both racism and sexism affect women of colour, but additionally they intersect to produce a unique form of oppression, not comparable to either sexism or racism on their own. Thus, without the understanding of the intersection of this unique oppression, meaningful progress will not be made, and instead marginalization will remain too common. While the film focuses on the ways discrimination affects the lives of the women it focuses on, Gordon's article will be used in parallel to dissect the causes of the events that take place. First, identifying the ways in which each facet of the women in *Hidden Figures*' identities contribute to the discrimination they face, whether it is sexism from Black men or racism from White women. Then, analyzing the ways White men and the societal structures oppress Black women on the intersection of their racial and gender identities and the ways this intersectional oppression is unique to itself, and often greater than the sum of its parts. Finally, explaining how these culminate in the importance of an intersectional view, as without it, women, people of colour, LGBTQ+ people, or any other marginalized persons life will not be fully accepted.

When first introduced to the world of *Hidden Figures*, it highlights the way NASA is organized to undervalue both Black and white women. Every woman is limited to being a Computer, despite being talented enough to be in a higher position. As Katherine attempts to work with the Space Task Group, she constantly faces obstacles due to her gender, from the men that run the company. As she tries to keep her calculations up to date with the ever-changing numbers and details, she requests to attend briefings and is told "There is no protocol for women to attend briefings" (p.83). Her name is also excluded from a report she wrote, being told,

“Computers don’t author reports” (p.77), but as a woman who is not allowed any higher career, the underlying issue is her gender, not the career she chose. It is evident that many of the White men hold misogyny for the women, who are attempting to share the workspace with them.

However, a similar sentiment comes from the Black men in their lives too. Jim Johnson is first seen in a church filled with Black men and women, during the sermon, the pastor says, “Change is coming” (p. 36) referring to the desire to achieve racial equality. Jim “bows his head in recognition” (36), but when Jim and Katherine first meet, he says “Aeronautics. Pretty heady stuff. They let women handle that kind of-” (p. 37), expressing doubt at the fact that a woman could do such challenging work at NASA. Even though this Black man experiences racial discrimination and acknowledges the need for change, he perpetuates gender discrimination.

Gordon relates that he feels people often categorize progress, saying “This is a movement about fighting racism. Once we achieve racial equality, then we can talk about homophobia”. This describes why Jim says this, he has not considered that the marginalization of women is related to the racial marginalization he goes through, so he allows his own sexist beliefs to go unchecked. When Gordon saw Black Panther, and while he was excited for the representation opportunities it held for Black people, he knew his identity as a gay man would not be represented. He states this experience is a confusing one, “you are enjoying yourself on one level, but another part of you can’t relax, can’t surrender completely to the experience, because clearly something feels wrong”. Something Katherine must relate to, being with other Black people at church “Here they stand proud, here they’re revered.” (36) and yet she still faces sexism. Gordon identifies this phenomenon through a quote by Kimberly Crenshaw “the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women”. Suggesting that this is a common tendency of those who are unaware

that they perpetuate sexism within anti-racism spaces. The result is the same women fighting for racial equality with them, are being kept down.

Racism is also evident in the workplace of our main characters, while women are not allowed to be engineers, Black women are further separated from the White women, each segregated into their own group. When Katherine is accepted into the Space Task Group, she discovers there is no coloured bathroom nearby. This forces her to use much of her time at work, running to and from the bathroom, in a separate building, far from her desk. Additionally, one day she uses the coffee pot, the next day another coffee station appears “the smaller coffee pot is labeled: *Colored*. Katherine pours her coffee. Nothing. None made” (p. 45). Although she has made progress in her career, she is still forcibly segregated by the White men, who do not want to associate with her because she is Black. However, these actions are not exclusive to White men, but also arise within the way White women treat their Black counterparts. In one scene where Dorothy and Vivian Mitchell chat in the bathroom, Vivian says “Despite what you may think...I have nothin’ against ya’ll” (p. 99), Dorothy replies “I know you probably believe that” (99). Although they share in their gendered oppression within NASA, Dorothy points out that, because she is Black, Vivian is still hostile towards her and the rest of her computing group. To explain why a person like Vivian is so hostile to the Black women she works with, Gordon suggests that, Vivian, “having been told all [her] life that [she] is superior because of [her] skin color, refuses to speak to the other, which means they will never organize.” Again, Gordon quotes Crenshaw: “The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color.” Thus, the white women being discriminated against, because of their gender, are more

antagonistic toward black women than toward the white men causing their shared marginalization.

Though it is evident both sexism, and racism are prevalent in the lives of these Black women, discrimination is often viewed as one or the other. Gordon remembers a time he fell into this trap while writing his article about “the Black Capitalist,” a critic of his suggested “it was limited by ‘binaries’.” When examining why this happens, he says “I write this way because, to a certain degree, that is the world I inherited, this is how I was taught to see things. But the way forward means thinking in new, innovative ways.” He proposes the “way forward” is by identifying the intersectional discrimination people face. The discrimination Black women face compounds, evidenced by Mary and Katherine’s experiences. Mary attempts to become an engineer, when Vivian says, “NASA doesn’t commission females for the Engineer Trainin’ Program” (p. 52), Mary replies that she has all the same training, and requirements that most of the men working, currently have. Vivian tells her the requirements have changed, they now require her to take a course through Hampton high school, a segregated school. The obstacles she faces are unique to her struggles as a Black woman, forced to take a course to prove she is more qualified than any man, at a school that doesn’t accept her because she is Black. This is mirrored in the obstacles Katherine faces, told she should wear “A simple pearl necklace” (p. 20), but later she expresses “don’t get me started about the ‘simple pearl necklace’ I can’t afford. Lord knows you don’t pay ‘the coloreds’ enough for that” (p. 65). She is expected to conform to a women’s dress code but cannot possess this “simple” (p. 65) luxury because of the wage gap she experiences on a racially undervalued salary.

Gordon surmises people must avoid making one part of our identities more important than others, “a minor in ‘race’ to your ‘gay’ major” but rather, “insist, ‘I am everything first. And I refuse to wait any longer. When it comes to who I am, every part of me gets a seat at the table’.” Mary and Katherine make this insistence, identify the unique struggle they are facing at the intersection of their identities. When petitioning the court, Mary tells the judge “No Negro woman in the State of Virginia has ever attended an all White school” (p. 74), “And I, sir, plan on being an engineer at NASA” (p. 75). The judge overrules the racial exclusion, and allows her to attend the school, and start on her path to be an engineer. Katherine reveals the obstacles she faces to Al Harrison, the lack of available bathrooms, the exclusionary dress code, and the segregated coffee pot. As a result, Al gifts her pearls, allows her use of the coffee pot everyone else uses, and removes the colored washroom stating “No more colored restrooms. No more White restrooms” (p. 66), “Go wherever you damn well please” (p. 66). When Mary and Katherine express their identities as both Black and women and express the specific struggles they go through, obstacles are slowly overcome, and progress is made. This outlines the point that Gordon makes, “We need you to stand in your identity powerfully,” and to ourselves and our world through a nuanced and intersectional view, the world improves. Gordon adds something he learned with his experience with White gay men, “that you will never be fully empowered as a gay man until and unless you examine racism.” This specifies that an intersectional lens is the only way forward to create meaningful change in the world. Without examining how each identity is affected by the structures in place, many are left out of the progress. The lives of Mary and Katherine were not improved until those around them became aware of the obstacles they faced, obstacles resulting from their identities as African American and as Black. This sentiment

is beautifully concluded by Gordon “because an intersectional world is a compassionate world with room for all of us.”

Max Gordon’s article, and the film *Hidden Figures* when taken together highlight the ways women of colour experience sexism, racism and how this discrimination combines and accumulates to an intersectional discrimination. And how the world must be viewed through an intersectional lens to see meaningful progress for women, people of colour, women of colour, and anyone with any combination of marginalized identities. I hope as a woman of colour, that people continue to understand the importance of intersectional thinking, to continue to remove the barriers me and those like me, may face in the future.

Works Cited

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