



# Hidden Figures: NASA's Pioneering Women

By Nsenga K. Burton, PhD

Unless you've been hiding under a rock, you know that the already-celebrated film *Hidden Figures* is coming to a theater near you as it reaches its nationwide release Friday. Based on a book by the same name, *Hidden Figures* is a historical drama set in 1960s Hampton, Virginia, that chronicles the personal and professional lives of three African-American female mathematicians who defied the odds and overcame many societal obstacles to help NASA put an astronaut into orbit around the Earth.

Deemed an important film by critics and audiences because it brings the largely untold story of three dynamic black female scientists to the big screen, *Hidden Figures* is also well done from a stylistic and narrative perspective. By keeping the stories of the black female leads primary, the film sidesteps the Hollywood trope of privileging the white character's story in order to satisfy white audiences. Although the white characters are important, they do not overshadow

or diminish the importance of the stories of Katherine Johnson (played by Taraji P. Henson), Mary Jackson (Janelle Monáe), and Dorothy Vaughan (Octavia Spencer).

*Hidden Figures* has also received a major advertising push from 20th Century Fox, which is unusual in Hollywood for a film with three black female leads. Historically black organizations have made viewing the film a social and civic occasion, with sororities, fraternities, and the like sponsoring screenings in cities across the nation. Fox has also sponsored screenings for high school students in New York City and Los Angeles. It's clear that there's a movement to make *Hidden Figures* more than a film, but does it deliver?

In a nutshell, yes. Directed by Theodore Melfi, who also co-wrote the screenplay, *Hidden Figures* documents the pervasiveness of institutional racism and how the mistreatment of targeted groups becomes normalized. The irony of an organization like NASA, which is committed to pushing boundaries and literally exploring the universe, limiting the career trajectories of women in general and black women in this story is preposterous.



Melfi does a solid job of showing the absurdity of Jim Crow laws through the characters, including Al Harrison (played by Kevin Costner), Paul Stafford (Jim Parsons), and Vivian Mitchell (Kirsten Dunst). Harrison is the department head who is too

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 NYC Department of Environmental Protection Contract No. NR-38  
 Bid Date: February 8, 2017

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If you are interested in bidding on this project, please contact Skanska's Outreach Coordinator: [Julia.Omanoff@skanska.com](mailto:Julia.Omanoff@skanska.com)

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**Enhanced Station Initiative Program Package 2 Project**  
 MTA New York City Transit Contract No. A-36622B  
 Bid Date: January 24, 2017

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- Enhance the customer experience at each station
- Make the stations cleaner, brighter, and easier to navigate
- Improve the aesthetics of the stations
- Facilitate increased ridership on the New York City Transit System
- Bring the stations to a state of good repair
- Expedite the delivery of the work

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If you are interested in bidding on this project, please contact Skanska's Outreach Coordinator: [Julia.Omanoff@skanska.com](mailto:Julia.Omanoff@skanska.com)

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Interested firms please contact John Papagiannakis at Skanska Koch Inc., [john.papagiannakis@skanska.com](mailto:john.papagiannakis@skanska.com)

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