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University of Southampton

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Department of Film

Wives, Mothers, Friends, Activists: Multidimensional Portrayals of Black Women in Contemporary American Films

by

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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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University of Southampton

Abstract

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This thesis examines the representation of Black women in contemporary American cinema, through an analysis of the films *The Help* (Tate Taylor, 2011), *Hidden Figures* (Theodore Melfi, 2016), *Widows* (Steve McQueen, 2018), *American Son* (Kenny Leon, 2019), *Black or White* (Mike Binder, 2014), and *Miss Virginia* (R.J. Daniel Hanna, 2019). The socio-cultural context in which these films are produced, and set is used as a lens through which to understand these films' portrayal of Black women in the realms of marriage, motherhood, friendship, professional work, agency and advocacy.

This research contributes to ongoing debates in film studies and cultural discourse about the representation of minorities, particularly Black women. The thesis argues that these films both reinforce and subvert stereotypes. These are films where Black women navigate traditional roles as wives and mothers, and are often depicted as nurturing and resilient, while simultaneously being portrayed as independent and assertive professionals. This juxtaposition highlights a critical tension in the portrayal of Black womanhood, where more nuanced and progressive portrayals coexist with the persistence of stereotypical narratives. The analysis challenges binary perceptions of filmic portrayals of Black women as either wholly progressive or regressive, thus advocating for a more nuanced understanding that acknowledges the complexities and contradictions in these cinematic representations.

The aim of this study is to address the significance of a more balanced and nuanced portrayal of Black women in cinema, without resorting to traditional stereotypes. It emphasises the importance of cinematic representations in shaping societal attitudes and advocates for continued progress in portraying Black women in ways that truly reflect the variety of their experiences and identities.

Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	3
Table of Figures.....	5
Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship.....	8
Acknowledgements.....	9
Chapter 1 General Introduction	11
1.1 Material and Methodology.....	13
1.2 Dissecting Stereotypes of Black women in Film	22
1.3 Post-racial Era in Cinema	31
1.4 Revisiting the Past: Historical Contexts in Contemporary Cinema	34
1.5 Black Women's Romantic Relationships in Film	38
1.6 Black Women's Friendships in Film	45
1.7 Intersecting Identities and the Complex Layers in Black Women's Representation.....	48
1.8 Chapter Outline	50
Chapter 2 Serving and Resisting: <i>The Help</i> and <i>Hidden Figures</i>	53
2.1 Introduction	53
2.2 Service Roles in <i>The Help</i> and <i>Hidden Figures</i>	57
2.3 <i>The Help</i> and <i>Hidden Figures</i> as Historical and White Saviour Films.....	63
2.4 Empowering Through Friendships in <i>The Help</i> and <i>Hidden Figures</i>	72
2.5 Narratives of Resilience and Resistance in <i>The Help</i> and <i>Hidden Figures</i>	85
2.6 Navigating Racial Representations: Dualities and Contradictions in <i>The Help</i> and <i>Hidden Figures</i>	92
2.7 Conclusion	99
Chapter 3 Confronting Systemic Challenges: Nuanced Portrayal in White Contemporary Settings (<i>Widows</i> / <i>American Son</i>)	101

Table of Contents

3.1	Introduction	101
3.2	Deconstructing the Myth of a Post-Racial America	106
3.3	The Representation of the Black Experience in <i>Widows</i> and <i>American Son</i>	112
3.4	The Pain of Black Women in <i>Widows</i> and <i>American Son</i>	118
3.5	Interracial Marriage and Its Impact on Black Women in <i>Widows</i> and <i>American Son</i>	125
3.6	Various Types of Racist and Sexist Stereotypes That Black Women Encounter	131
3.7	Veronica and Kendra as Strong Black Women.....	138
3.8	Conclusion	144
Chapter 4 Motherhood, Advocacy and the Personal as Political: A Comparative Analysis of <i>Black or White</i> and <i>Miss Virginia</i>		146
4.1	Introduction	146
4.2	Contrasting Realities: Navigating the Black and White Worlds in <i>Black or White</i> and <i>Miss Virginia</i>	155
4.3	The Nuances of Black Relationships and Their Role in Empowering Black Women.	163
4.4	Empowerment and Vulnerability: The Diverse Role of Black Motherhood.....	167
4.5	Overcoming Opposition: Virginia and Rowena's Transformative Journeys in Challenging Prejudices and Perspectives.....	178
4.6	Conclusion:	188
Chapter 5 General Conclusion.....		189
Appendix A Film Corpus (Obama Era Onwards)		199
List of Filmography		201
Bibliography		204

Table of Figures

Table of Figures

Figure 1	Aibileen and Minny's joy.....	60
Figure 2	Katherine working for long hours.	62
Figure 3	Harrison destroying the coloured lady room sign.....	67
Figure 4	Skeeter saying goodbye to Aibileen and Minny.	70
Figure 5	Celia and Minny.	76
Figure 6	Aibileen and Mae Mobley laughing.	77
Figure 7	Aibileen crying after leaving Mae Mobley.....	78
Figure 8	Mae Mobley is sad after Aibileen's departure.	78
Figure 9	Mary, Katherine, and Dorothy driving back home.	80
Figure 10	Dorothy and her female colleagues heading to the white unit.	81
Figure 11	Dorothy, Katherine, and Mary meeting Colonel Jim Johnson	82
Figure 12	Dorothy, Katherine, and Mary meeting John Glenn.....	82
Figure 13	Aibileen and Minny laughing.	83
Figure 14	Aibileen and Minny narrating their stories.	84
Figure 15	Hilly and Elizabeth confronting Aibileen.	86
Figure 16	Aibileen confronting Hilly.....	86
Figure 17	Mary in the courtroom.	89
Figure 18	Katherine breaking her silence.....	90
Figure 19	Dorothy, Mary and Katherine driving to work in a police escort.	93
Figure 20	Katherine Running to the Black unit.	94

Table of Figures

Figure 21	A white worker running to the Black unit.	95
Figure 22	Aibileen using the coloured bathroom.....	97
Figure 23	Aibileen holding Mae Mobley after using a separate bathroom.....	97
Figure 24	Veronica's son killed by police.	108
Figure 25	Kendra and Scott knowing the death of their son.....	110
Figure 26	Kendra in a police station.....	113
Figure 27	Veronica and Harry in bed.	114
Figure 28	Veronica imagining Harry after his death.....	114
Figure 29	Kendra and Scott confrontation.....	120
Figure 30	Scott debating with Kendra.....	120
Figure 31	Kendra debating with Scott.....	120
Figure 32	Kendra narrating her nightmare.	121
Figure 33	Veronica crying after killing Harry.....	123
Figure 34	Kendra and Stokes confrontation.	128
Figure 35	Jamal threatening Veronica.	129
Figure 36	Kendra VS Larkin	132
Figure 37	Linda, Veronica, and Alice.....	136
Figure 38	Veronica crying.	140
Figure 39	The widows planning the heist.	141
Figure 40	Elliot's neighbourhood.	155
Figure 41	Rowena's neighbourhood.	155
Figure 42	Virginia's neighbourhood.....	158

Table of Figures

Figure 43	Virginia visiting the Congress building.	158
Figure 44	Reggie threatening Elliot.	160
Figure 45	Rowena with her family in the courtroom.	164
Figure 46	Elliot with his lawyers in the courtroom.	165
Figure 47	Virginia with members of her community protesting.	166
Figure 48	Rowena in a meeting with her lawyers.	168
Figure 49	Rowena VS Elliot	169
Figure 50	Rowena supporting her son Reggie.	170
Figure 51	Rowena with Eloise.	171
Figure 52	Rowena and Elliot	173
Figure 53	Virginia with her son James.	174
Figure 54	Virginia's speech.	175
Figure 55	Virginia's moment of sadness.	176
Figure 56	Shondae supporting Virginia.	178
Figure 57	Elliot and Rick.	179
Figure 58	Rowena showing her pride.	183
Figure 59	Elliot leaving Eloise with Rowena.	184
Figure 60	Virginia and her friends arrested by the police.	185
Figure 61	Cliff Williams with Virginia	186
Figure 62	Virginia opposed by Garnett.	187

Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: Lynda Lamraoui

Title of thesis: Wives, Mothers, Friends, Activists: Multidimensional Portrayals of Black Women in Contemporary American Films

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission.

Signature:

Date: 20/05/2025

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Chapter 1 General Introduction

In her groundbreaking Emmy acceptance speech in 2015, the Black American actress and producer, Viola Davis, declared, “The only thing that separates women of color from anyone else is opportunity. You cannot win an Emmy for roles that are simply not there. So, here’s to all the [...] people who have redefined what it means to be beautiful, to be sexy, to be a leading woman, to be Black.” Davis stood on the stage not only to accept an award for Outstanding Lead Actress for her role as lawyer Annalise Kiting in the ABC drama series *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014), but also to highlight a critical issue in the American film industry: a lack of complex, substantive roles for Black women. These words not only capture the difficulties faced by Black actresses in Hollywood but also serve as a source of inspiration, highlighting the tenacity and grace with which these women navigate an industry marked with systemic barriers. Davis is an acclaimed actress and a symbol of strength and perseverance for Black women. In *Hollywood Black: The Stars, The Films, The Filmmakers* (2019), the American film historian and author Donald Bogle classifies Davis as one of the Black actresses who rose to prominence after being around the film industry for a long time. When analysing her cinematic achievements, Bogle argues that Davis’ earlier roles in some of her films, like *Knight and Day* (James Mangold, 2010) and *Eat Pray Love* (Ryan Murphy, 2010), are deceptive due to the lack of opportunity to expose her capacities in such limited roles, which she has highlighted in her Emmy speech (Bogle 2019, p. 236). Eventually, Davis moved to another level of stardom in her TV series *How to Get Away with Murder*. Bogle defines her role as an exception in Black women’s representations in Hollywood; he states, ‘She played a multidimensional and often ruthless attorney and law professor who was also sexual and often glamorous. Those were traits that darker African American women, since the early years of Hollywood, did not possess in most films’ (Bogle, 2019, p. 236).

I use Davis’ insight as a starting point to investigate how the role of the ‘Strong Black Woman’ (SBW) in contemporary American cinema is presented as a progressive image of Black womanhood, but that it remains, as Melissa Harris-Perry argues, a restrictive stereotype because it ignores Black women’s vulnerability and complexity (Harris-Perry, 2013, p. 185). This thesis seeks to explore the complexity of Black female representation in contemporary American cinema in a selection of six films from the 2010s: *The Help* (Tate Taylor, 2011), *Hidden Figures* (Theodore Melfi, 2016), *Widows* (Steve McQueen, 2018),

American Son (Kenny Leon, 2019), *Black or White* (Mike Binder, 2014), and *Miss Virginia* (R.J. Daniel Hanna, 2019). In these films, Black female characters are portrayed as complex characters, embodying strength while also navigating traditional female roles of friendship, marriage, motherhood, and activism.

These overarching themes are crucial in exploring the multifaceted representation of Black women on screen. As such, this thesis investigates the films' portrayal of Black women's relationships with each other as shown in various contexts, both private and professional. I examine the support systems, solidarity, and shared experiences that shape these friendships, which are frequently set against the backdrop of shared struggles and triumphs. Furthermore, I investigate the absence of female friendships and its impact on the portrayal of Black women. Through the second theme, marriage, I focus on the cinematic representation of Black women's romantic relationships, particularly interracial marriage. My analysis seeks to understand how these relationships are navigated within the societal framework, addressing issues such as cultural differences, societal acceptance, and the challenges faced by Black women in interracial marriages. The third theme my thesis examines is Black motherhood and its various representations. My analysis investigates how films depict the joys, struggles, and complexities of motherhood in the Black community, including societal expectations and Black mothers' personal journeys. The last analysed theme is Black women's activism and advocacy. My films position Black women at the centre of the narrative and voice their experiences and their roles as agents of change. Thus, this analysis will look at how Black women's activism is portrayed, their leadership roles in society and family, and how their efforts have contributed to broader societal changes. Through exploring these themes, this thesis investigates the representation and stereotypes of Black women and how the selected contemporary films simultaneously perpetuate and reject certain stereotypes found in these examined themes. Moreover, this study addresses the ways my case study films portray issues of race, gender, and class depending on their varied settings, narratives, and genres.

This thesis, then, argues that the portrayal of Black women in these roles is a site of both progressive representation and subtle reinforcement of long-standing stereotypes, indicating an ongoing transformation in the cinematic narrative landscape. This complex interplay of challenging and reinforcing stereotypes of Black women in the selected films demonstrates its significance to the fields of film studies, Black feminist studies, and cultural discourse. At its core, my thesis provides an in-depth analysis of contemporary cinematic

representations, moving beyond a binary perspective of positive or negative portrayals to investigate the nuances and complexities in how Black women are portrayed. This analysis is particularly timely because it addresses a current and evolving landscape of film representation, offering insights into how contemporary films navigate the legacy of stereotypical portrayals while attempting to forge new, complex paths. Furthermore, by focusing on films that differ in genre, narrative, and approach, this thesis highlights a variety of Black women's experiences as depicted in cinema, contributing to a more complete understanding of their portrayal in a contemporary context. Additionally, the implications of this research extend beyond academia, with the potential to influence filmmakers, critics, and audiences in their engagement with and interpretation of media representations of race and gender. Finally, in this thesis, I contribute to the ongoing discussion about race, representation, and gender in media by providing valuable perspectives for more informed and critical cinematic content consumption and production.

1.1 Material and Methodology

In my thesis, I choose to examine the representation of Black women in contemporary American cinema through the films *The Help*, *Hidden Figures*, *Widows*, *American Son*, *Black or White*, and *Miss Virginia*, for several reasons. These films foreground the complex identities of Black women, placing them at the centre of their narratives and presenting a range of themes, settings, and genres that allow for a nuanced examination of both the perpetuation and subversion of stereotypes. This approach is part of a larger body of films produced during and after the Obama era, highlighting its socio-cultural and cinematic trends, increased representation of Black women in films, and alignment with social conversations and movements like Black Lives Matter. During this time, the American film industry began to produce films that responded to the demand for more authentic, diverse depictions of Black women's lives. This period also reflects evolving social expectations about diversity and inclusion in media, setting a backdrop for how these films are interpreted and received (Bogle, 2016; Turner and Nilsen, 2019). By situating the films within this socio-political climate, my thesis demonstrates how each film engages with contemporary discussions about identity and agency. Furthermore, these films are selected based on specific criteria to ensure they reflect broader trends in contemporary Black American cinema while also allowing for a nuanced analysis of representation. First, they feature central Black female characters who encounter a variety of social, professional, or

familial challenges, aligning with the previously highlighted contemporary themes. Second, the examined films cover a wide range of genres and narrative styles, from historical drama to thriller and biographical drama, providing insights into how these factors influence Black women's roles. Finally, they were chosen because they had not previously been studied as a group, allowing this thesis to provide new comparative insights into the portrayals of Black women in a variety of cinematic settings.

By selecting these films based on their thematic diversity, narrative complexity, and focus on Black female protagonists, this thesis highlights how they collectively represent a cross-section of Black American cinema. They are drawn from a larger corpus outlined in the appendix (on page 199), which includes films spanning genres and themes about Black American life from the Obama era onwards. This framework establishes the case studies selected within a larger body of work that examines the changing cinematic portrayal of Black women, allowing the thesis to identify patterns, progress, and ongoing challenges in Black female representation in cinema. Thus, this thesis contributes to broader discussions about race, gender, and empowerment by examining how contemporary cinema depicts Black women's experiences as well as the conflict between progressive and regressive portrayals in mainstream film.

I acknowledge that independent films and earlier works by African American filmmakers, such as *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash, 1991), *The Watermelon Woman* (Cheryl Dunye, 1997), and *The Color Purple* (Steven Spielberg, 1985), offer valuable, alternative portrayals of Black female experiences. However, this thesis specifically examines mainstream films from the Obama era onwards, a period chosen deliberately due to its heightened visibility of nuanced portrayals of Black women, influenced by evolving sociopolitical contexts and Hollywood industry shifts. Including earlier, independent works by African American filmmakers, while crucial to the broader history of Black cinema, would introduce distinct aesthetic and social perspectives that may diverge from this study's focus on recent trends in mainstream depictions of Black women. Although pioneering filmmakers like Spike Lee and Julie Dash have provided invaluable portrayals that challenge stereotypes and expand Black American representation on screen, this thesis aims to explore how mainstream films—those with broad commercial reach—have approached the Black female experience in contemporary settings and how representations of Black women's identities contribute to ongoing conversations around race, gender, and empowerment.

Chapter 1

For analytical depth, the thesis divides the films into three comparative sections. The first part examines *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*; both are set in the 1960s and deal with the struggles and triumphs of Black women in the historical context of the Jim Crow era. *The Help* is set in Mississippi in the early 1960s and centres on the experiences of Black maids, Aibileen and Minny, working for white families during the Civil Rights era. Meanwhile, *Hidden Figures*, set in the early 1960s, focuses on the professional lives of Black female mathematicians, Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary, at NASA during the Space Race. The comparison of these two films allows for understanding how Black women navigated both domestic and professional spaces in a society racially segregated by law. Another element that makes this comparison complex is narrative and genre differences. While *The Help* is a drama focused on personal stories and relationships, *Hidden Figures* is a biographical drama with elements of the historical genre. Thus, comparing these approaches reveals how different narrative styles influence how Black women's experiences are portrayed and received.

In addition to the variety of the narrative structure between *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, they both challenge stereotypes of Black women in different ways. *The Help* confronts stereotypes about domestic work, whereas *Hidden Figures* deconstructs stereotypes about intellectual ability and professional competence. They provide a more comprehensive understanding of the stereotypes that Black women face and the way they defy them. However, *The Help* has been criticised for perpetuating the 'Mammy' stereotype (Cureton, 2020) and the 'White Saviour' trope (Hughey, 2014). As I will detail, both images have dominated the portrayal of Black characters, particularly women. Moreover, *Hidden Figures* has created debates around its historical accuracy and emphasis on certain narratives over others (Barnes, 2016). Likewise, *The Help* is more concerned with overt racism and the dynamics of the employer-employee relationship, whereas *Hidden Figures* addresses institutional racism and sexism in a professional and academic setting. As a result, analysing these films together allows for a discussion about the various forms of racism and sexism that Black women faced in the 60s in the South of the US.

The second part of the thesis examines the films *Widows* and *American Son*. It is significant to analyse these films together because they both offer insightful, yet distinct, perspectives on contemporary issues affecting Black women, particularly in white urban settings, which serves as a backdrop for exploring current societal issues. *Widows* is a heist thriller set in Chicago and addresses themes of crime, politics, and socioeconomic struggles, whereas

American Son is a drama set in a police station in Florida and focuses on the anxieties and tensions between law enforcement and the African American community. Both films are about Black women who are facing exceptional challenges. The protagonists in *Widows* are women from different ethnicities who come together to execute a heist, deviating from traditional genre conventions by focusing on a Black woman, Veronica, a decision praised for its subversion of genre and racial stereotypes (Kizu, 2018). Similarly, *American Son* is about Kendra, a Black mother's desperate search for her missing son. Thus, these films feature 'strong Black' female leads who navigate their white-dominated settings with resilience, agency, and emotional depth. This representation allows for an examination of how these factors shape Black women's identities and experiences. Likewise, both films present interracial marriage as a central theme, but in different ways. *Widows* incorporates an interracial relationship into its larger story of crime and politics, whereas *American Son* focuses on the dynamics of an interracial relationship in the context of a family crisis. This contrast offers a wide range of perspectives for understanding the difficulties and complexities encountered in these interracial relationships. Therefore, these films reflect ongoing societal tensions and issues of the 'post-racial' era, such as police brutality, racial injustices, and interracial relationships, through the lens of Black female characters.

The third part of my analysis focuses on the films *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia*. These narratives delve into the complexities of family relationships in the context of racial issues. *Black or White* is a drama that explores the custody battle over a mixed-race girl between her white grandfather and Black grandmother Rowena, highlighting the challenges of racial identity and family bonds. In contrast, *Miss Virginia* is a biographical drama about Virginia Walden Ford, an African American mother who fought for a better education for her son, highlighting the struggles and resistance of the Black family. While *Black or White* focuses on racial identity and prejudice in the context of a family, *Miss Virginia* addresses the broader issue of educational inequality and its impact on Black communities. This contrast provides a thorough examination of how race and education intersect in various aspects of life as well as a representation of Black women in leadership roles. As such, *Miss Virginia* depicts a Black woman leading an educational reform movement, demonstrating strength, leadership, and activism. Likewise, *Black or White* depicts a Black woman fighting for the welfare of her granddaughter in a family setting. Both roles demonstrate the various ways in which Black women can serve as leaders and advocates of change in their communities and families.

Research on the politics of representation frequently emphasises textual analysis as an approach for critically analysing films as complex texts and exposing the layers of meaning that are encoded in both their artistic and narrative components (hooks, 2009). Textual analysis is a method that academics like Bogle, bell hooks, and Manthia Diawara have used to articulate critical analyses of the representation of Black people on screen. In my thesis, I primarily rely on David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's *Film Art: An Introduction* (2019), which provides a comprehensive overview of how films are made, how they function as art, and how they can be interpreted. I use textual analysis to demonstrate how Black women are portrayed in terms of their agency, complexity, and the roles they are given in the film's story by analysing the narrative structure and character development. This method allows me to evidence the ways they are portrayed as fully recognised characters while also at times and in ways that are limited to stereotypical roles. Moreover, as Bordwell and Thompson emphasise the importance of visual style in shaping the meaning of a film, I investigate how my films' cinematography, colour, framing, and lighting choices contribute to the portrayal of Black women. Drawing on Boyce Gillespie's (2016) insights, I consider how Blackness functions as an aesthetic category that shapes both form and content, influencing the way Black female characters are visually constructed. The analysis of sound, including dialogue, music, and other sound effects, further clarifies how Black women's voices are represented, revealing how these audiovisual elements either empower them, perpetuate stereotypes, or, at times, do both within these characters.

Beyond these visual elements, my analysis also engages with focalisation and narrative economy as important storytelling techniques that shape these representations.

Focalisation, as defined by Gerard Genette in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (1980), is the perspective from which the story is told; it determines whose subjectivity is privileged in the film and how Black women's experiences are framed. Whether a film uses internal focalisation, which allows viewers to see a Black female character's thoughts and emotions, or external focalisation, which places her as the object of another character's gaze, has a significant impact on how agency and identity are constructed. Similarly, narrative economy, or the efficiency with which story elements are distributed and developed (Bordwell, 1985; Thompson, 1999), influences how much space Black women are given within the film's narrative. Are they central protagonists whose character arcs are fully explored, or are they relegated to supporting roles that primarily serve the development of others?

Another method that I will follow in my thesis is a comparative analysis of the selected films. In 'New Cinema History and the Comparative Mode: Reflections on Comparing Historical Cinema Culture' (2016), Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers argue that comparing films can reveal how different environments influence cinema, allowing for a deeper understanding of the cultural, social, and historical contexts of films (2016, p. 17). Moreover, they argue that this method is useful in broadening the scope and diversity of cinema and promoting interdisciplinary and collaborative research while also opening up opportunities for data sharing, networking, and distribution (Biltereyst and Meers, 2016, p. 17). However, they state that comparative analysis has some pitfalls. As a result, comparative analysis can be difficult and time-consuming because it requires finding and integrating data from various sources, contexts, and scales, as well as dealing with data quality, availability, and comparability issues (2016, p. 18). Likewise, comparative analysis can be unfair and ethnocentric, as it may reflect the researchers' assumptions, values, and perspectives, or it favours certain cinema cultures over others, or it ignores power relations and inequalities between them (2016, p. 18). Various scholars, critics, and filmmakers have used comparative film analysis to deepen our understanding of cinema. Bordwell (1979), for example, has used comparative analysis extensively in his work, particularly in studying narrative structures and styles across different national cinemas. Laura Mulvey (1975) has also used comparative analysis to investigate how gender is portrayed in films from various eras and genres. Meanwhile, scholars studying the politics of racial representation on screen have made extensive use of this cinematic method. hooks (1981, 1992, 2009), for example, has used comparative film analysis to investigate how race, gender, and class are depicted in American cinema. Diawara (1993) investigated how films from various cultures and times depict racial identities and politics through comparative analysis. In his study on the history of African American cinema, Bogle (2016, 2019) examined how Black Americans have been portrayed in Hollywood films, comparing these portrayals across different eras.

In my thesis, I follow these critics and apply a comparative analysis by effectively examining and contrasting various elements from my films. Even with a limited number of films, this method allows for a nuanced exploration of various cinematic approaches to depicting Black female experiences. This approach facilitates deeper insights into how race, gender, and class are portrayed in various cinematic frameworks by juxtaposing films with different narrative structures, genres, and historical or contemporary settings. While acknowledging the limitations imposed by a small number of films, the deliberate inclusion of various

genres broadens the scope of my analysis. This variety enables the study to explore a wide range of representational strategies, from biographical and dramatic narratives to the dynamics of thriller genres. Furthermore, while the films chosen primarily align with a "white liberal" ideological framework, which may limit the diversity of perspectives, this homogeneity operates as a consistent baseline for comparison. By examining how each film conforms to or deviates from white liberal ideologies, the research critically evaluates the impact of such narratives on character development and thematic exploration. Additionally, the films' thematic diversity balances the ideological similarity by highlighting how shared ideological foundations manifest differently across societal roles and settings.

Building on this methodological structure, the analysis is divided into three thematic categories that reflect the films' historical and social contexts as well as their narrative dynamics. These categories enable a systematic examination of the intersections of race, gender, and class as depicted in various cinematic narratives. The first category focuses on white/Black interactions in historical settings, looking into films such as *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*. This section explores how the historical context of these narratives, along with the period of their production and release, shapes the representation of Black women. The second category shifts to predominantly contemporary white environments, analysing *Widows* and *American Son* to assess how these settings influence the portrayal of Black women. Finally, the third category examines *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia*, which highlight contemporary Black/white relationships within predominantly Black environments.

In addition, my thesis considers external factors like the historical and cultural context of the films. According to Biltereyst and Meers, contextual analysis and comparative analysis are complementary and interrelated. As such, contextual analysis is useful in identifying and explaining the specificities and complexities of cinema cultures, as well as avoiding generalisations or simplifications based on comparison (2016, p. 15). This broader analysis helps in understanding how the time period in which my thesis' films were made, as well as the cultural backdrop, adds additional layers of meaning to their portrayal of Black women. My analysis additionally involves delving into the films' themes and underlying ideologies to reveal how race, gender, and social class are addressed in these films featuring Black women and how these themes impact their representation. Therefore, following the Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw and other key Black women scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins and hooks, this thesis takes an intersectional approach to analysing the representation of Black women on screen. The term 'intersectionality' was first coined by

Crenshaw in 1989 as a theory and analytic tool, which I will discuss in depth in the literature review. In my thesis, I follow an intersectional analysis to show how the overlapping identities of race, gender, and class shape the portrayal of the protagonists. As a result, in addition to examining the intersection of these identities, I will analyse how they also coincide with historical and societal contexts as shown in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*. Furthermore, my analysis will demonstrate how *Widows* and *American Son* emphasise intersectionality by linking it to socioeconomic status in the context of crime and politics, while both *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia* connect their protagonists' identities to motherhood, family dynamics, educational inequalities, and activism.

In addition to taking an intersectional approach to analysing my films, this thesis examines how the female characters in my case study films embody critical race theory (CRT) concepts. I heavily rely on this theory because of the way the films address and represent race and intersectionality issues, either explicitly or implicitly, particularly through their Black female characters. As I will explain shortly, CRT investigates how race and racism intersect with other social categories and power structures, frequently criticising how the law and legal institutions perpetuate racial inequalities (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). These films that embody CRT do more than just present Black characters or address racial themes; they critically engage with the complex dynamics of race, power, and society. As a result, they align with CRT's concepts by addressing broader themes such as racial tensions, political corruption, crime, police brutality, racial profiling, family dynamics, and educational inequality, while portraying their characters as complex and active agents navigating and resisting oppressive systems.

According to Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic in *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (2017), during the late 1970s and early 1980s, legal scholars, primarily Derrick Bell, began to critically examine how the law and legal institutions perpetuate systemic racial inequalities and that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s had stagnated and, more dangerously, rolled back. Delgado and Stefancic define the theory as 'a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power' (2017, p. 2). Scholars of CRT have established many principles, one of which is that racism is endemic and an ordinary and daily fact of American life (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 7). It is also difficult to recognise, address, or eradicate because it is presented in covert forms, such as 'microaggressions.' The latter have been defined as 'bodily actions or words that are subtle yet intended or sometimes unintended to hurt the individual or group being targeted'

(Chavella T. Pittman, 2012). According to Delgado and Stefancic, this ordinary racism manifests itself in the form of 'colour-blindness,' the belief that racism has been virtually eradicated. As a result, critical race scholars seek to demonstrate the futility of colour-blindness by proving that some laws are purposely constructed to conceal racism (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 7). As such, I examine how all the case study films address the persistence of racism in their narratives by demonstrating the microaggressions that the Black female characters experience.

The second tenet of CRT is 'the social construction of race.' Delgado and Stefancic state that racism is a product of social thoughts and relations that is not inherent or fixed and does not correspond to any biological or genetic reality (2017, p. 8). Furthermore, they claim that race is a category that society creates and manipulates as required. According to them, 'differential racialisation,' which emphasises how stereotypes and popular images of people of colour change over time, is evidence of race being a social construct (2017, p. 8). The third principle of CRT is the notion of 'a unique voice of colour.'¹ It is the belief that people of colour are more competent to speak and engage in conversations about race and racism due to their different histories and experiences with oppression. This tenet serves to correct dominant groups' social constructions of race and allows minorities to communicate with their counterparts about facts that whites are unlikely to know or notice (2017, p. 9). The methodology used to achieve this is the incorporation of 'counter-storytelling.' This method involves using stories told by people of colour to counter the narratives of the dominant group (2017, p. 42). Delgado and Stefancic explain that oppressed groups have always known instinctively that stories are an essential tool for their own survival and liberation. Critically, this implies that the majority group of society has long crafted the narrative, and that now, as minority groups tell their authentic stories, there could be a redistribution of power and radical racial reforms (2017, p. 43). Therefore, I analyse how in my films, the protagonists use the counter-storytelling method to rewrite stereotypes of Black women

¹ As a non-Black female scholar, I approach the study of Black women's portrayal in cinema with both an awareness of my own positionality and a commitment to feminist principles that advocate for equality and representation. Recognising the limitations and biases inherent in my perspective, I endeavour to engage with this subject matter respectfully and conscientiously. My analysis is informed by feminist theories that emphasise the importance of intersectionality and the unique experiences of Black women. This work is not only an academic pursuit but also a part of a broader commitment to understanding and addressing systemic inequalities in media representation. By acknowledging my positionality, I aim to contribute to this discourse in a manner that is both critically engaged and sensitive to the complexities of racial and gender dynamics.

and to express the oppression they endure as a form of resistance and activism. The last tenet of CRT is 'interest convergence,' which implies that white elites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for Blacks only if such advances also benefit white self-interest. Such achievements are more likely to be symbolic than substantive, and they are viewed as proof of society's commitment to racial equality (2017, p. 7). In my thesis, I examine how the films emphasise how white characters embody the idea of interest convergence to strengthen their position and avoid racial assumptions.

Having established close textual analysis, comparative analysis, contextual analysis, intersectional analysis, and CRT as the primary methods for my research across all the chapters, this study will effectively dissect and contrast the narrative structures, cinematography, character development, and thematic elements of the selected films. This approach is instrumental in uncovering the layers of representation and potential stereotype reinforcement or subversion within these narratives, particularly within the contexts of motherhood, friendship, marriage, and activism. Drawing on this methodological foundation, this analysis demonstrates that these recent film narratives offer a complex interplay of challenging and reinforcing stereotypes of Black women. While these films aim to portray Black women in roles that deviate from traditional cinematic stereotypes by highlighting their agency, resilience, and multidimensional characters, they also inadvertently perpetuate some traditional stereotypes. Thus, my thesis argues that the portrayal of Black women in these films reflects an ongoing evolution of onscreen representation, providing both progressive narratives and subtle reinforcement of conventional stereotypes.

1.2 Dissecting Stereotypes of Black women in Film

The representation of Black women in film has long been a subject of debate, with scholarly discussions emphasising the persistence of stereotypical depictions that often confine Black women to a narrow set of characteristics and roles (Bogle, 2016; Collins, 2000; Diawara, 1993; hooks, 1992; Mask, 2012). In order to examine this portrayal, it is first necessary to define what a stereotype is. The denotation meaning of stereotype is 'a fixed idea or image that many people have of a particular type of person or thing, but which is often not true in reality and may cause hurt and offence' (Oxford Dictionary, 2019). However, its cultural meaning has been defined by the cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall as a simplistic, exaggerated, and fixed representation that serves to categorise and differentiate groups in a way that supports and justifies inequalities in power and status (Hall, 1997).

Expanding on this, films have had a significant impact on my understanding of stereotypes by highlighting how media representations shape and reinforce societal perceptions of marginalised groups. They demonstrate that stereotypes are more than just inaccurate depictions; as Richard Dyer argues, they serve deeper ideological functions by "fixing" certain groups in place to maintain dominant power structures (1993, p. 12). This is consistent with Robert Stam and Ella Shohat's critique in "Stereotypes, Realism, and the Struggle Over Representation," which emphasises how media frequently reduces ethnic and racial minorities to binary portrayals—characters being either wholly good or bad (2014, p. 201). Such oversimplifications ignore the complexities of individual identities, perpetuating systemic inequalities rather than challenging them. The films bring this issue into focus by revealing both the on-screen representations and the underlying ideologies they reflect. For example, Stam and Shohat's analysis demonstrates how the repetition of reductive images distorts marginalised experiences while also reinforcing the societal structures that marginalise them. In my thesis, I argue that representational analysis must move beyond simplistic labels like progressive or regressive portrayals. Instead, it should focus on the various ways in which identity is constructed and contested. This approach is critically informed by the works of Dyer, Stam, and Shohat, which provide a framework for interrogating how contemporary cinema's depictions of Black women have evolved, moving towards more nuanced and multidimensional portrayals.

Drawing from this theoretical groundwork, it is critical to investigate how these ideological functions manifest themselves in the representation of Black women in American cinema. While Dyer, Stam, and Shohat provide a framework for understanding the broader implications of stereotypes, scholars such as Collins investigate the historical persistence of specific stereotypes that have shaped perceptions of Black women. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000), Collins argues that while Black characters have been present in American cinema since its inception, African American writers, directors, and even actors were largely absent from early filmmaking; as a result, Black characters were generally reduced to stereotypes or what she defines as 'controlling images' (2000, p. 70). The 'Mammy' was the dominant characterisation of Black womanhood during the early rise of film, most famously personified by Hattie McDaniel's character in *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939). Collins defines the 'Mammy' as loyal, nurturing, and self-sacrificing domestic servants to justify the mistreatment and subjugation of African Americans by falsely claiming that they

enjoyed serving white families (2000, p. 72). Collins argues that in the 1970s, Blaxploitation films recycled another equally damaging stereotype: the 'Jezebel' trope, which depicts Black women as sexually insatiable and animalistic in their desires to explain the sexual abuse of Black women (2000, p. 72). A good example of this stereotype is the character of Foxy played by Pam Grier in the 1974 film *Foxy Brown*. The 'Sapphire,' also known as the Angry Black Woman, is the third prominent stereotype of Black women. According to Collins, the 'Sapphire' image depicts Black women as irrational, irritable, and frequently emasculating to their male partners (2000, p. 82).

This historical context of Black representation is crucial to my contemporary analysis, as it reveals the enduring legacy of stereotypes and their evolution in film. Early portrayals of Black women, such as the 'Mammy,' 'Jezebel,' and 'Sapphire' images, were shaped to serve the ideological goals of dominant cultures, reinforcing societal hierarchies and power dynamics (Bogle, 2016; Collins, 2000; Dyer, 1993). These reductive depictions dehumanised Black women, limiting their representation to rigid, one-dimensional roles. Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (2016) offers a foundational understanding of these stereotypes, tracing their origins in early cinema and examining their functions. He discusses McDaniel's limitations in *Gone with the Wind*, pointing out that her character, 'Mammy,' is confined to servitude and lacks personal depth or relationships with other Black characters. This portrayal was criticised by some members of the Black community, particularly the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, who claimed that McDaniel's roles reinforced harmful stereotypes and hindered African American representation in Hollywood. Despite criticism, Bogle defends McDaniel and acknowledges the difficulties that Black actors face in Hollywood, where restricted roles frequently force them to navigate between conforming to stereotypes and identifying their characters with dignity (2016, p. 77).

While Bogle's analysis provides a crucial foundation for understanding the persistence of these stereotypes, Ed Guerrero's *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (1993) extends this critique by situating Black representation within Hollywood's broader ideological and economic structures. Rather than viewing these stereotypes as merely residual elements of an earlier cinematic era, Guerrero argues that they are actively maintained and adapted to serve shifting industry interests. His work highlights how these tropes function beyond individual roles, reinforcing systemic racial hierarchies by shaping public perceptions of Black identity. This is particularly evident in his discussion of Black

stereotypes, where he demonstrates how these figures are not only dehumanising but also serve as tools of social control (p. 65). Furthermore, Guerrero's critique of Blaxploitation cinema aligns with Collins' argument regarding the 'Jezebel' stereotype, as he demonstrates that while films like *Foxy Brown* appeared to offer strong, independent Black female leads, they ultimately reinforced hypersexualised and commodified images of Black women for mainstream consumption (1993, p. 69). By linking these depictions to Hollywood's profit-driven motives, Guerrero provides a framework for understanding how Black representation is shaped by both race and economics. His work is also instrumental in examining the Hollywood blockbuster era, where increased Black visibility did not necessarily translate to meaningful representation. Films like *The Color Purple* (1985), while commercially successful and seemingly empowering, often remained constrained by Hollywood's reluctance to move beyond entrenched stereotypes, either marginalising Black female characters within white-centred narratives or confining them to roles that continued to align with long-standing tropes (1993, p. 68).

This historical lens is essential for identifying how such stereotypes have transformed or endured in contemporary films such as *The Help*, *Hidden Figures*, *Widows*, *American Son*, *Black or White*, and *Miss Virginia*. By embedding my analysis in these frameworks, I demonstrate how stereotypes that once defined Black representation continue to shape modern portrayals, albeit in more subtle or reconfigured forms. Furthermore, this grounding allows for a deeper critique of whether contemporary depictions genuinely challenge these stereotypes or simply repurpose them within new narratives. In my thesis, I argue that contemporary films featuring Black women must be analysed in relation to this longer history, as they cannot be fully understood in isolation. Bridging historical context with contemporary analysis highlights the importance of examining both continuity and change in the representation of Black women in cinema.

In response to this harmful representation, the 'SBW' stereotype emerged as a challenging portrayal and an embodiment of 'respectability politics.' This concept, as articulated by scholars such as Collins (2000) and Racquel Gates (2018, p. 66), describes how marginalised groups adopt idealised behaviours to counter stereotypes, seeking societal respect by conforming to dominant norms. For Black women, this often means being depicted as exceptionally resilient, morally upright, and emotionally self-sufficient, qualities that, while seemingly empowering, also impose limitations. In *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, Harris-Perry (2013) illustrates how the 'SBW' image reinforces

expectations that Black women must always be strong, thus invalidating their need for vulnerability and support (p. 184). Similarly, Collins critiques this stereotype as a “burden of strength” that flattens Black women’s emotional complexity (2000, p. 77). However, while the SBW type is often positioned as a positive counter to negative stereotypes, scholars like Stam and Shohat (2014) caution that an overemphasis on positive representation risks producing sanitised, one-dimensional images that erase the complexity of real Black experiences (p. 198).

Gates pushes this critique further by arguing that even negative portrayals can offer meaningful insights into the complexities of Black life. In *Double Negative*, she suggests that problematic or subversive depictions, those that do not conform to ‘respectability politics,’ should not be entirely dismissed, as they can reveal deeper cultural critiques (2018, p. 57). This framework is particularly useful in my analysis because it explains how Black women in film are often navigating multiple, sometimes contradictory, representational tropes at once. For instance, in *The Help*, Aibileen and Minny embody not just the ‘SBW’ image but also the ‘Mammy’ figure, illustrating how these stereotypes can overlap within a single character. *Hidden Figures* presents another variation, positioning its protagonists as ‘SBW’ by highlighting their intellectual strength and professional competence. However, in doing so, the film largely adheres to ‘respectability politics,’ emphasising their exceptionalism while downplaying their personal struggles and emotional vulnerabilities. By examining these films through the lenses of ‘SBW,’ ‘respectability politics,’ and Gates’ ‘double negative,’ my research reveals how Black female representation is rarely straightforward; rather, it is shaped by a dynamic interplay of reinforcement and subversion, complicating simplistic notions of positive or negative imagery.

This negotiation between stereotype and agency is further developed in Mia Mask’s *Contemporary Black American Cinema: Race, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies* (2012), which interrogates how contemporary Black performances shift between defying and perpetuating established cinematic tropes. Mask’s analysis of Black women’s representation aligns with the critiques of Gates, Collins, and Harris-Perry, as she argues that mainstream cinema often reconfigures stereotypes rather than eliminating them altogether. Mask critiques how films that conform to industry expectations by centring palatable, hard-working Black women who remain within white-dominated spaces, rather than allowing for narratives that fully explore Black women’s emotional and psychological interiority (p. 110). However, Mask also highlights films that actively resist these conventions, particularly within

independent Black cinema. She examines how filmmakers such as Ava DuVernay, Julie Dash, and Cheryl Dunye create complex, layered portrayals of Black womanhood that break away from traditional Hollywood formulas (2012, p. 236). In addition to these counter-narratives, Mask critiques the way Black women's performances in commercial films often remain constrained by the racialised logic of Hollywood. She examines how even celebrated performances exist within a framework that privileges narratives of Black suffering. Although these performances display immense emotional depth, they also reinforce the industry's preference for stories that depict Black women's endurance rather than their joy, pleasure, or ordinary experiences. As such, the issue is not merely the presence of stereotypes but the structural conditions that determine which stories about Black women are told and rewarded in Hollywood (2012, p. 160).

Film representations of Black women have long shifted between empowerment and constraint, often reducing them to rigid stereotypes that fail to capture their full complexity. Scholars such as Collins (2000), hooks (2009), Harris-Perry (2013), and Mask (2012) argue for more nuanced cinematic portrayals, challenging stereotypes that minimise Black women's experiences. Collins emphasises that while representation can empower, it often reinforces narrow expectations, limiting how Black women's agency and interiority are depicted (2000, p. 78). Similarly, hooks critiques mainstream media for restricting Black women to roles that prioritise resilience over emotional depth, calling for portrayals that engage with vulnerability, joy, and personal evolution (2009, p. 173). Harris-Perry extends this critique to the political realm, demonstrating how entrenched media images influence public perception and policy, shaping real-world opportunities and constraints (2013, p. 186). These critiques collectively underscore the ideological stakes of cinematic representation, whether films simply reproduce dominant racial and gendered ideologies or contribute to more expansive and authentic narratives. Calls for multidimensionality in Black women's representation align with broader discussions in film studies about stereotype, realism, and complexity. According to Dyer (1993, p. 15), stereotypes are ideological constructs that carry assumptions about power and identity rather than false images. While some stereotypes can be reappropriated or subverted, they often serve to fix social categories in place. This underscores the need for more layered portrayals that move beyond simplistic binaries of positive and negative representation, as argued by Stam and Shohat (2014, p. 198), who critique the reliance on positive images as a corrective to stereotypes, stating that it risks creating idealised figures that lack depth and nuance. Similarly, Gillespie in *Film Blackness*:

American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film critiques mainstream cinema's tendency to reinforce narrow, 'respectable' images of Blackness and challenges the demand for singular, 'authentic' portrayals, arguing that this limits Black cinema's artistic and interpretive potential. Like Stam and Shohat, he warns that prioritising palatable representations limits complexity, reducing Black identity to fixed cultural expectations and industry constraints (2016, p. 74).

These theoretical insights are crucial for understanding the ideological work of my case studies. Each film negotiates existing stereotypes by presenting Black female protagonists who embody multiple, sometimes contradictory, stereotypes. By engaging with these films through the frameworks of stereotype, multidimensionality, and ideological critique, my research examines how Black women's representation remains a site of negotiation between resistance, reinforcement, realism, and trope. Understanding these complexities is essential to moving beyond fixed frameworks and toward a cinematic landscape that recognises the full range of Black women's experiences.

The significance of offering multidimensional portrayals of Black women in the films examined in my thesis extends beyond highlighting the ongoing progress of cinematic depictions of Black women to spectatorship. While these films offer Black female viewers moments of resistance, activism, and empowerment, the question of who the primary audience is, remains crucial. In hooks' essay 'Oppositional Gaze' (1992, p. 121), she explores how Black women critically engage with media, resisting dominant narratives that marginalise them. This aligns with Jacqueline Bobo's *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995), which highlights how Black female audiences actively interpret and respond to cinematic depictions. Thus, while my thesis does not focus on reception theory in a formal sense, it acknowledges that the implicit audience for these films is complex. Black women may see themselves reflected in acts of defiance, agency, and resilience, but the presence of a wider, predominantly white audience cannot be overlooked. These films, therefore, operate within a dual framework: they provide space for Black women to recognise and affirm their identities while simultaneously existing within a broader industry shaped by mainstream, and often white, expectations of representation.

The discussion on prevalent stereotypes of Black women in film naturally extends to the portrayal of Black motherhood, which is central to my thesis. The significance of Black mothers in these films is not merely a matter of representation but is crucial to

understanding how Black womanhood, power, and agency are framed within cinematic narratives. Black motherhood has long been shaped by harmful stereotypes, such as 'Black matriarchy' and 'single Black motherhood.' The Black 'matriarchy' stereotype has been thoroughly examined, revealing complex intersections of race, gender, and societal roles. Scholars such as Collins (2000) have critically examined this image, highlighting how it is frequently portrayed as a symbol of resilience and familial leadership, while also being a trope embedded with negative connotations of domineering and emasculating characteristics (2000, p. 75). Accordingly, from the dominant group perspective, in this case the white U.S. society, 'the matriarch symbolises the bad Black mothers' who are unable to properly supervise their children and supposedly emasculate their lovers and husbands (Collins, 2000, p. 75). In *Sister Citizen* (2013), Harris-Perry summarises the social and political events that shaped the portrayal of Black motherhood in America. First, she claims that the Moynihan Report of 1965, titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, reinforced the shamefulness of Black women's reproduction. She argues that in this report, Black women are described as domineering matriarchs whose mothering results in 'greater pathology for their children and widespread failure for their communities' (2013, p. 114). The second political incident where 'Black mothers were cast as carriers of a malignancy' (2013, p. 114) as well is the incorrect narrative of the 'welfare queens' that the Reagan administration publicly shamed Black mothers in the 1980s. Harris-Perry explains that 'Abuse of the social safety net by welfare-dependent Black mothers was conveniently blamed for the nation's difficult economic circumstances' (2013, p. 114). Therefore, these Black mothers were portrayed as lazy, dishonest, and irresponsible recipients of government assistance rather than deserving recipients, which has created shame among Black women (2013, p. 114). These stereotypes, as discussed by Harris-Perry, shape societal perceptions of Black motherhood in a limiting, often negative manner.

These common stereotypes not only influence societal perceptions of Black motherhood, but they are also reinforced by cinematic narratives that reflect and justify larger socioeconomic and political ideologies. Nicole Rousseau's *Social Rhetoric and the Construction of Black Motherhood* (2013) expands on this by investigating how media representations of Black mothers are strategically used to sustain these narratives, aligning them with key political and economic shifts in American history: the period preceding welfare reform (1990-1995), the period of welfare reform (1996-2007), and the current so-called 'post-racial' period (2008-2011) (Rousseau, 2013, p. 457). During the period preceding

welfare reform (1990-1995), Rousseau claims that films of the 'hood genre' like *Jungle Fever* (Spike Lee, 1991) present Black motherhood within the theme of survival, where Black children try to survive the fate of bad Black mothers, by 'bad sometimes meaning poor, inferior, or deficient, and at other times meaning evil, awful, or wicked' (2013, p. 461). After that, and during the welfare reform period (1996-2007), films portrayed images of desperate Black mothers (2013, p. 462). The theme of desperation presents Black mothers seeking rescue from poverty, loneliness, work, and other responsibilities through bad behaviours like prostitution or stealing (2013, p. 463). Rousseau illustrates this motif through the film *Mad Money* (Callie Khouri, 2008) and argues that it depicts a Black mother who, in her efforts to save her family from poverty and suffering, makes poor and irresponsible choices that lead to gaining money but also prison. The last theme is absent Black mothers in the current so-called 'post-racial' period (2008-2011), either by death, abandonment, or her role as a Black mother is diminished and replaced by a white parent as in the film *The Blind Side* (John Lee Hancock, 2009) (Rousseau, 2013, p. 465). Rousseau argues that this theme can be portrayed differently in other films where Black mothers replace white mothers in caring for white children, as seen in *The Help*. Rousseau criticises this substitution because it frequently silences Black women and reduces them to caring only for white families and children while others care for their own children (2013, p. 466).

The portrayal of Black 'matriarchy' in recent cinema, as examined in my thesis, is a complex mix of empowerment, resilience, and stereotypical constraints. I use these representations to argue that while Black mothers are frequently depicted as pillars of their families and communities, this framing can both celebrate their strength and reinforce challenging expectations. In analysing *American Son*, *Black or White*, and *Miss Virginia*, the roles of Black characters as mothers are largely highlighted within their own families, children, and communities, both reinforcing and rejecting the stereotype. Therefore, their analysis challenges the societal constructs and filmic themes discussed by Rousseau. Despite situating each theme (survival, desperation, and absence) in a particular political period, Rousseau argues that they are recurrent in every era (2013, p. 462). As such, in my films, the portrayal of the survival from a bad Black mother is not present, which subverts this stereotype of Black motherhood. Moreover, the theme of desperation, which is presented in her article as a negative image, is portrayed positively in *American Son*, *Black or White*, and *Miss Virginia* by showing Black mothers desperate to save their children from racial bias, drugs, and institutional inequalities. More importantly, this desperation in my films is

achieved through countering the traditional narratives, advocacy, and determination and not illegal acts like Rousseau argues (2013, p. 462). However, the theme of desperation in *Widows* aligns with Rousseau's definition, as the film depicts Veronica's desperate attempt to escape her loneliness by engaging in a heist. When it comes to the other two films, Black motherhood is not the focal point of the narrative due to the films' genres and stories, which make Black mothers absent, as Rousseau explains. For example, *The Help* offers the opposite image of the Black 'matriarchy,' which is the 'Mammy' figure (motherhood within white families) and the image of Black mothers caring for white children. Also, in *Hidden Figures*, the portrayal of the Black women as pioneers in NASA overshadows their roles as good Black mothers. Consequently, I argue that this film reinforces the negative portrayal of the 'matriarchy' image: Black women being neglectful of their families because of their work outside their houses (Collins, 2000, p. 75). Collectively, the films analysed in my thesis demonstrate a diverse and shifting approach to the representation of Black motherhood, both reinforcing and deconstructing prevalent stereotypes.

1.3 Post-racial Era in Cinema

The portrayal of Black women in my selected films must be understood within the broader context of the so-called 'post-racial' era, a term that gained prominence following Barack Obama's 2008 election. While this period was characterised by declarations that America had moved beyond race, my analysis demonstrates that these films actively challenge this notion through their Black female protagonists, revealing the persistence of racial inequality. Therefore, this thesis' films, released between 2011 and 2019, serve as cultural texts that disrupt 'post-racial' narratives by exposing structural racism and racialised violence.

Catherine Squires, in *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-First Century* (2014), critiques the idea that Obama's presidency signified racial progress, arguing instead that the 'post-racial' label obscures ongoing systemic inequalities. She highlights how media representations reinforce this illusion while simultaneously perpetuating harmful racial stereotypes. Similarly, Michael C. Dawson and Lawrence D. Bobo (2009, pp. 247-249) challenge the 'post-racial' myth, pointing to the rise in racist attacks against Obama as evidence that racial prejudice had not disappeared but had instead adapted to new socio-political conditions. Both critiques suggest that 'post-racialism' is not an indication of racial progress but rather a rhetorical strategy that allows racism to persist under the guise of neutrality. By situating my films within this framework, I argue that *Widows* and *American*

Son actively resist 'post-racial' discourse by foregrounding the racialised experiences of Black women. These films expose the violence, surveillance, and systemic barriers that continue to shape Black life, demonstrating that the racial order remains firmly intact despite claims to the contrary.

Several social scientists like Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Sarah E. Turner, and Sarah Nilsen argue that to understand the 'post-racial' period, it is critical to analyse the dominant racial ideology of 'colour-blindness.' In *The Myth of Colorblindness: Race and Ethnicity in American Cinema* (2019), Turner and Nilsen define colourblind racism as 'a contemporary set of beliefs that posit that racism is a thing of the past and that race and racism do not and should not play an important role in current social and economic realities' (2019, p. 5). Similarly, the sociologist Bonilla-Silva, in his work *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (2018) defines colourblind racism as an ideology that allows Americans to be racist without sounding racist by the belief that 'pretending that we don't see race will end racism' (2018, p. 7). As a result, colourblind racism evolved into a consistent strategy used by the media to celebrate an image of a multicultural society while ignoring systemic and institutionalised racism affecting minority groups. In film studies, the concept of a 'post-racial' era and its ideology of 'colour-blindness' have been the subject of extensive scholarly debate, particularly in how contemporary cinema navigates race and racial issues. In my thesis, I discuss the existence of this ideology as well as how the characters of Scott in *American Son* and Elliot in *Black or White* interact with Black characters following a colourblind approach. Omotayo O. Banjo, in her book chapter *The Paradox of Post-racialism: Black Hollywood's Voice in Post-racial Discourse* (2019),² argues that the film industry is full of paradoxes. Accordingly, since Obama's election, films' tendency to a naturalisation and normalisation of interracial friendships between Blacks and whites may blind us to forms of modern racism and impact racial minorities in the United States (2019, p. 89). Banjo's argument is consistent with my analysis of the cooperation between Black and white characters in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, where the existence of such relationships dominated the narratives and resulted in a failure to explicitly address the

² *The Myth of Colorblindness: Race and Ethnicity in American Cinema* is a book edited by Sarah E. Turner and Sarah Nilsen, published in 2019. It examines how contemporary Hollywood films depict race and ethnicity and how they often promote the notion that race is no longer an important factor in society. The book argues that this idea, known as colour-blindness, is a myth that ignores the reality of racial oppression and inequality. The book is divided into 13 chapters, each written by a different scholar, and analyses various films and genres. I referenced Omotayo O. Banjo's chapter, which summarises how colour-blindness intersects with gender, politics, and the film industry.

racial issues that Black characters face. The other paradox that Banjo (2019, p. 90) discusses is progress in the entertainment industry. She contends that while African Americans appear to be making progress in politics and entertainment, which may give the impression that race relations are improving, racial inequality persists in communities across America. As such, in my analysis, I demonstrate the ways *American Son*, *Widows*, *Black or White*, and *Miss Virginia* highlight and respond to these issues.

In mainstream cinema, the early 2000s were marked by high expectations for African American actors, yet the benefits of this shift were largely gendered. Camille R. Michaels (2018), in *African Americans in Film: Issues of Race in Hollywood*, highlights how the expansion of genres, including hip-hop, inner-city dramas, comedies, and biographical films, created new opportunities for Black actors, making them increasingly visible stars. However, as Michaels points out, these roles primarily benefitted Black men, while Black women remained marginalised, with limited strong roles available to them (2018, p. 87). Meanwhile, Bogle (2019), in *Hollywood Black: The Stars, The Films, The Filmmakers*, argues that although Black actresses had long faced industry-wide exclusion, the 2000s began to mark a slow shift toward more serious recognition. He cites *Dreamgirls* (Bill Condon, 2006) as a key film addressing the struggles of Black women within a racially and sexually oppressive society, and he identifies Taraji P. Henson, Viola Davis, and Octavia Spencer as actresses who eventually broke through Hollywood's barriers (Bogle, 2019, p. 231). Bogle and Michaels' observations provide a crucial foundation for my argument. While the early 2000s offered some improvements for Black actresses, it was in the 2010s that more substantial changes emerged, as seen in the films I analyse. My selected films, starring actresses such as Viola Davis, Octavia Spencer, Taraji P. Henson, Kerry Washington, Janelle Monáe, and Uzo Aduba, represent a significant shift toward more complex, empowered Black female protagonists. Unlike earlier decades, where Black women were either sidelined or confined to stereotypical roles, these films actively challenge the 'post-racial' illusion by exposing ongoing racial and gender-based struggles. Thus, my analysis examines how these films disrupt traditional cinematic representations of Black women, reflecting a broader transformation in Hollywood's engagement with race and gender in the 'post-racial' era.

However, while Michaels (2018) and Bogle (2019) acknowledge the increasing recognition of Black women's roles, they also critically assess the extent to which these shifts move beyond long-standing stereotypes. Michaels states that nowadays, Black people are represented as ordinary and everyday people after being portrayed as slaves, criminals, and mammies for

many decades, yet he raises the question: 'Is progress measured by the extent to which films accurately represent black culture, or is it measured by the extent to which films are colour-blind?' (2018, pp. 90-91). Therefore, making films specifically about African Americans or making films about people who could be from any race keeps the question about the progress of Black people's representations ongoing. From his part, Bogle also emphasises the ambiguity around the progression of portraying Blacks in Hollywood and believes that it still needs more time for audiences to see images of Blacks free from the traditional stereotypes. He comments that: 'These films and the critical and audience reception were optimistic signs for the future, though one would not want to assume that the familiar issues and images of the past had vanished. Time would only tell if this was an interlude in film industry' (Bogle, 2019, p. 243). While there are some films that break away from traditional stereotypes, offering more multifaceted and empowering portrayals, there is still a tendency for films to perpetuate certain stereotypes. Therefore, my thesis argues that the selected films have a dual tendency to challenge and reinforce stereotypes of Black women, implying that progress in their portrayal is complex and nuanced, marked by contradictions and ongoing challenges.

The discussion around the concept of 'post-racial' America, as well as the ideology of colourblind racism, provides the foundation for analysing the films selected for this thesis. Although these films are set in diverse eras and contexts, they collectively offer insights into the ongoing debate about race and the illusion of a 'post-racial' society. While films set in the past may appear to engage with or even promote a vision of racial harmony or colour-blindness, this notion is often presented as aspirational rather than realistic, with contemporary cinema still deeply entrenched in the legacies of racial issues. However, where my study contributes to this discourse is in its specific focus on how these films, particularly those centring on Black women, not only address the myth of 'post-racialism' but also actively subvert it. By foregrounding Black women's experiences as central figures in these critiques, my analysis expands the discussion, highlighting how these films challenge both the myth of colour-blindness and the limited ways Black women have historically been represented in the larger narrative of racial progress.

1.4 Revisiting the Past: Historical Contexts in Contemporary Cinema

Because *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* are set in the early 1960s, my thesis critically engages with research on historical films and examines how the cultural and political climate of that

era shapes the portrayal of Black women. In *Framing Blackness*, Guerrero argues that cinematic representation evolves in response to shifting political and cultural conditions (1993, p. 12). This is particularly relevant to the wave of American films set in the past that emerged in the 21st century, including *Selma* (Ava DuVernay, 2014), *Twelve Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013), *The Help*, and *Hidden Figures*. Scholars such as Bogle (2016) suggest that race has reemerged as a central cinematic theme following the election of the first Black president, Barack Obama, in 2009. Bogle notes that 'filmmakers appeared to have a heightened awareness that the turbulent history that had preceded Obama needed re-telling' (2016, p. 464). Some scholars have praised historical films for their impact on understanding the past and specifically race. In *History on Film/Film on History* (2006), Robert A. Rosenstone argues that historical films should constitute an important part of the discourse about the past and should be taken as instruments for such purposes. Through his work, Rosenstone emphasises that narrating history on screen is worth watching since it represents a complex history as much as in books. He argues (2006, p. 02) that historical films have a positive contribution to people's understanding of the past, especially stories that have changed the course of important historical events, such as the film *Glory* (Edward Zwick, 1989).

In my thesis, the two historical-set films give Black women a voice to narrate their own stories as maids or as NASA mathematicians, which ultimately positions these films as important in terms of strongly re-examining the past. However, critics of the film *The Help* often highlight its problematic simplification of complex racial dynamics and romanticisation of the era as well as overshadowing the experiences of the Black female characters (Bogle, 2016; George Nelson, 2011). Also, despite being praised for highlighting untold stories of Black women, critics like Veronica Wells in her article, 'On the Problematic and Unnecessary White Saviors in *Hidden Figures*' (2017), argue that the film unnecessarily centres white male characters in a story about three brilliant Black women. As such, despite the film narrating important untold historical events, the inclusion of these elements has contributed to the problematic representation of Black women.

Despite the popularity of historical films since the beginning of the 20th century and the positive impact they can have on people, Rosenstone states that some of these films create debates about whether the film accurately depicts historical events. He highlights *The Birth of a Nation* (David W. Griffith, 1915) as a particularly controversial example, noting that its overtly racist portrayals of African Americans reflect the dominant historical interpretations

of its time (2006, p. 13). Although he rejects its racist imagery, he recognises that historical films employ music, visual storytelling, and character-driven narratives to connect viewers to the past and evoke both suffering and victory (p. 16). More broadly, Rosenstone critiques the tendency of historical films to centre on individuals who achieve progress despite oppression, often shaping history into a structured narrative with a clear resolution (2006, p. 39). This framework is evident in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, which depict Black women navigating racism and sexism within historical contexts. Although these films emphasise the determination of their protagonists, they also follow Hollywood's tendency to individualise struggle and at times minimise the larger structural factors at work. Such stories, as Rosenstone points out, provide optimistic endings that indicate change, yet they risk simplifying the complexities of historical progress and Black women's agency on screen.

Rosenstone (2006, p. 37) highlights how historical films often employ fictionalised characters and events to heighten drama, a practice that critics argue frequently results in the inclusion of white saviour figures who overshadow Black characters' agency and experiences. This aligns with James Snead's (1994, p. 142) analysis in *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood From the Dark Side*, where he critiques Hollywood's long-standing tendency to reduce Black characters to symbolic roles that exist primarily to serve white protagonists' development. Snead argues that this pattern reinforces a racial hierarchy in which Black presence is narratively justified only through its utility to white-led stories. This trope is particularly evident in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, where white characters like Skeeter and Harrison are positioned as moral agents who facilitate or enable Black women's progress. However, as I will demonstrate in my analysis of *Widows*, *American Son*, *Black or White*, and *Miss Virginia*, some films challenge this dynamic by portraying Black protagonists with greater complexity, thereby diminishing the saviour role traditionally assigned to white characters.

Building on this critique, Hughey (2014) critiques the persistence of 'the white saviour' trope in *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption*, arguing that Hollywood frequently disguises these narratives as progressive depictions of race relations while ultimately reinforcing racialised power structures. He challenges the necessity of such characters, questioning whether they serve the narrative or merely cater to audience expectations. Hughey defines 'the white saviour' genre as one in which a white character rescues a non-white character from an undesirable fate, noting that this trope is so pervasive it shapes not only filmic representations but also broader societal understandings of interracial relationships (2014, p. 02). Crucially, Hughey situates these narratives within a

broader ideological framework, arguing that stories of white benevolence function as a response to historical accusations of racism and inequality. He suggests (2014, p. 07) that while these films present an explicit message of racial reconciliation, their underlying logic reinforces white paternalism by portraying Black characters as passive recipients of white moral awakening, as argued by Snead (1994).

Through his analysis of multiple white saviour films, Hughey identifies key mechanisms at work in these narratives. He observes that the white protagonist often begins as ignorant, prejudiced, or self-interested but undergoes a transformation upon recognising Black suffering. This pattern is evident in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, where white characters like Skeeter and Harrison transition from detached observers to central figures in Black women's struggles. Hughey's concept of "crossing borders" (2014, p. 29) is particularly relevant here, as these films depict whiteness as universally accepted, suggesting that racial barriers dissolve when white individuals decide to intervene. My analysis builds on Hughey's critique by examining how these films centre white characters' moral growth at the expense of Black women's perspectives. While *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* claim to celebrate Black resilience, they do so through a lens that prioritises white validation, ultimately limiting the agency of their Black protagonists.

Nicole Fleetwood's *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (2011) expands this critique by examining how Black women's representations are shaped by dominant visual narratives that render them either hyper-visible or invisible. She argues that Black women's images are often constrained within stereotypical frameworks that limit their agency and subjectivity (p. 10). This perspective is crucial to my analysis, as it not only deepens Hughey's discussion of 'the white saviour' trope but also highlights the broader structural forces that shape how Black women's stories are presented on screen. Even when Black women are central characters, as in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, their narratives are frequently filtered through a white-centric lens, reinforcing the idea that their success or recognition depends on white intervention.

While Fleetwood's analysis is often applied to mainstream historical narratives, I extend her framework to examine how films like *Widows* and *American Son* both challenge and reinforce these visual constraints. In *Widows*, Veronica embodies a complex, self-determined Black female protagonist, yet the film still places her in a visual and narrative framework that aligns her power with her proximity to her deceased white husband.

Similarly, in *American Son*, Kendra is hyper-visible in moments of emotional distress, yet her voice is systematically diminished within the film's confined, white-dominated setting. By incorporating Fleetwood's concept of "troubled" visuality, my analysis moves beyond existing critiques of 'the white saviour' trope to interrogate how visual culture conditions Black women's representations across genres. While some films challenge the traditional white saviour narrative by offering more complex Black protagonists, they often remain bound by visual and narrative structures that reinforce white validation as a measure of progress. My thesis, therefore, examines how these films negotiate, rather than fully escape, the racialised visual tropes that Fleetwood identifies, revealing the ongoing tensions in Black women's cinematic representation.

1.5 Black Women's Romantic Relationships in Film

The preceding discussions above have revealed that, in order to understand Black women's representation in films, it is necessary to examine the various stereotypes associated with them, as well as the effect of the social, political, and cultural context in which they operate. To add layers to this study, it is also important to understand how Black women's relationships with both white and Black men are portrayed in films. When analysing the representation of the Black experience in films, many scholars conclude that the portrayal of relationships between Black women and men has been controversial. Scholars, including Bogle (2016), hooks (1981; 1992), and Diawara (1993), discuss how Hollywood has created conflicts in Black society by portraying Black men as aggressive and rapists. Consequently, many images of Black women suffering from violence and moral abuse from their Black men are largely consumed in Hollywood films (hooks, 1992). From this perspective, Diawara, in his work *Black American Cinema* (1993), argues that Hollywood, from the beginning, defined the side it wanted to take in representing Blacks and that *The Birth of a Nation* is an earlier example of how Hollywood chooses to portray Black people, especially men³. This portrayal of Black men as criminals is also perpetuated in media. In the article, 'African American Men

³ *The Birth of a Nation* not only established the framework for Hollywood's racial politics, but it also actively promoted white supremacist ideology. The film portrays Black men, portrayed by white actors in Blackface, as dangerous, hypersexual criminals who threaten white women and social order, justifying racial violence as a necessary response. This portrayal legitimised the rise of the Ku Klux Klan by portraying them as heroic defenders of white civilisation. See Norman K. Denzin's *Reading Race: Hollywood and the Cinema of Racial Violence* (2002), which investigates this legacy, claiming that cinematic depictions of Black men as criminals, rapists, or threats to white society have persisted throughout Hollywood's history, shaping both public perception and policy.

as "Criminal and Dangerous": Implications of Media Portrayals of Crime on the "Criminalization" of African American Men' (2003), Mary Beth Oliver contends that the association of African American men with danger and criminality originates from a variety of factors, including a long history of oppression and stereotyping. Likewise, this article implies that the way media portrays race, and crime plays a significant role in stereotyping Black men as violent and dangerous (p. 03).

I consider the study about the criminalisation of Black men important to my thesis because of the issue of blaming Black women for the criminality of their Black children and men. According to Collins (2000), the 'super-strong Black mother' image, which emerged initially from Black communities' valuation of Black mothers' intensive efforts to raise their children and shield them from the dangers of living with racism and poverty, now determines the terms of good mothering for Black women: be strong and solely responsible (p. 174). This idea is reinforced by the modern emphasis on individual responsibility as a solution to structural problems. In this context, Black mothers face extraordinary challenges in protecting their children from the dangers of institutionalised racism as well as from being blamed for their children's legal issues. As a result, as hooks argues in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), these societal expectations and stereotypes have an emotional and psychological impact on Black women. Accordingly, the themes of blaming Black mothers and the resulting pain are prevalent in the films I examine, particularly in *Widows* and *American Son*. Both films depict the anguish of Black women who have lost sons as a result of police brutality. They also feature Black and white characters who blame these women for their sons' legal problems. Furthermore, I investigate how Veronica and Kendra experience emotional difficulties as a result of societal pressures and assumptions, which aligns with Collins and hooks' arguments. However, in the other films, *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia*, even though they depict urban settings where Black men engage in crimes and drugs, their Black female protagonists are not blamed. Rather, these narratives challenge this persistent and common practice by presenting Black women as active members of their families and communities who actively contribute to changing the attitudes of Black men and participating in their moral growth. As a result, in my thesis, I argue that both *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia* provide complex representations of Blackness, not only by rejecting stereotypes of Black manhood but also by emphasising the role of these Black women in that, which ultimately advances their representation.

Chapter 1

My thesis critically examines how Black women's romance in film either reinforces or challenges stereotypes, analysing love relationships across diverse genres and narratives. I argue that it is extremely important to comprehend how these representations have changed or remained constant over time. This analysis is part of a larger conversation about filmic representation and its societal implications, and it contributes to a more complete understanding of the variety of Black women's experiences and narratives in cinema. When considering the romantic lives of Black women and men in cinema, it is clear that they have been marginalised or stereotyped. Diawara claims that Black romance has been destroyed in the motion picture because of the objectification of the Black female body and the characterisation of Black men as sex criminals (1993, p. 16). This conception has also been developed in hooks' *Black Looks* (1992), where she explains that some Black men are portrayed as not having feelings of love or compassion for their Black women since they tend to appropriate the harsh white male's attitude towards Black women, which creates struggles in the Black family (p. 93). Also, hooks explains that the images of Blackness presented in films are often distorted and modified to create stories of primitivism for commercial purposes. She illustrates this point by the fact of using Blackness as erotic, where images of Black people are used to offer sexual pleasure in Hollywood, while this does not apply to white people. As such, she says, 'When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power over in intimate relations with the Other' (hooks, 1992, p. 23). In my thesis, I analyse how the portrayal of Black couples and marriage in *The Help* is influenced by earlier stereotypes of these types of relationships. Aibileen is only shown in relation to her white masters, with little information about her being a widower or a single mother. Likewise, Minny's relationship with her husband reinforces the recurring stereotypes of Black men and love. Even though her husband is not seen in the film, he is portrayed as a violent man and Minny as a victim of their marriage.

According to Diawara, the emergence of Black filmmakers in the late 1990s, like Spike Lee, brought a shift in how Black romance was portrayed by providing more complex and realistic representations. In contemporary cinema, the representation of Black romance has evolved and moved from stereotypes to presenting Black love stories as universal. This has been argued by Simone Drake in her article 'The Marketability of Black Joy: After "I Do" in Black Romance Film' (2019), which examines Malcolm D. Lee's film *The Best Man Holiday* (2013).

Drake argues that this film is a useful case study for how popular cultural narratives of Blackness respond to popular public sphere narratives of unmarried Black women, criminalised Black men, and misbehaving Black children, giving 'meaning to Black joy in the twenty-first century' (2019, p. 165). In my analysis of *Hidden Figures*, this change is evident where, despite the film's primary focus on the contributions of three Black women in the "space race," it allows for Black love stories to be a backdrop narrative. In contrast, *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia* depict Black women as single women, reinforcing the stereotypes about unmarried Black women. However, I argue that this portrayal is nuanced by the depiction of strength, vulnerability, agency, and emotional complexity in the familial and social relationships that reflect broader societal attitudes towards Black womanhood representation. Therefore, this portrayal is crucial in understanding the multifaceted identity of Black women, as well as for promoting a more nuanced and inclusive representation in film.

Unlike these films that centre on Black romance, *Widows* and *American Son* depict Black women in predominantly white environments, framing their romantic lives through interracial relationships. Interracial unions have long been sites of legal and social contention in the U.S., historically criminalised and condemned to uphold white supremacy. As Peter Wallenstein (2004) details in *Tell the Court I Love My Wife: Race, Marriage, and Law-An American History*, anti-miscegenation laws, dating back to the colonial era, were designed to preserve racial purity and reinforce the racial hierarchy (p. 3). These laws not only prohibited marriage but, in many cases, criminalised interracial sex, despite the widespread sexual exploitation of Black women under slavery, which produced generations of mixed-race children who remained legally classified as Black under the "one-drop rule." The 1967 Supreme Court decision *Loving v. Virginia* overturned these laws, marking a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights movement (Wallenstein, 2004, p. 8). However, the deep-rooted stigmas surrounding interracial relationships persist, shaping contemporary representations of Black women's romantic lives in film.

This significant historical event has its cinematic interpretation in *Loving* (Jeff Nichols, 2016), which narrates the love story of a Black woman and a white man as they fight to abolish anti-miscegenation laws. However, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, 1967) is considered one of the earliest films depicting an interracial relationship, released just months after the Supreme Court ruling. Few films have explored interracial romance in depth, with notable examples including *Jungle Fever* (Spike Lee, 1991), *Monster's Ball* (Marc

Forster, 2001), *Guess Who* (Kevin Rodney Sullivan, 2005), and *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017). Media scholars often critique these films for either perpetuating racial stereotypes or glossing over the complexities of race and power in such relationships. Dyer's *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (1997) interrogates these dynamics through his concept of "the sexual reproductive economy of race," which examines how heterosexuality both reinforces and threatens whiteness. He argues that white society resists interracial relationships to maintain white purity, as whiteness is secured through white offspring and destabilised by mixed-race children (1997, p. 121). This anxiety is subtly present in the films I analyse, where white male characters attempt to preserve their children's half-white identities. In *Widows* and *American Son*, Harry and Scott both claim their sons belong solely to their "worlds," erasing their Black identities. Similarly, in *Black or White*, Elliot, a white grandfather, denies his biracial granddaughter's Black heritage. These narratives also intersect with the "buddy film" genre, which traditionally pairs white and Black men in interracial partnerships that reinforce white dominance while superficially celebrating racial harmony. Often, the Black character is positioned as a moral guide, reaffirming the white protagonist's authority (Ames, 2015; Artz, 1998; Guerrero, 1993). In films like *Widows* and *American Son*, however, the dynamic shifts, as Black women navigate relationships with white male figures who assert control over their children's racial identities. This subversion complicates the traditional buddy film framework, foregrounding Black women's resistance and their role in shaping their children's racial consciousness. Consequently, my analysis focuses on how these films challenge dominant narratives by positioning Black women as central figures in maintaining Black identity within interracial family structures.

Sociological debates on interracial romance have also examined its reception within Black communities. Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), argues that such relationships are often rejected due to the historical 'legacy of Black women's sexual abuse by white men and the unresolved tensions this creates' (p. 162). Likewise, she claims that African American communities accuse Black women who marry white men of 'selling out the race' (2000, p. 162). In my thesis, I explore how Veronica and Kendra navigate these prejudices, highlighting the expectation that Black women bear responsibility for their interracial relationships and their consequences. Despite the legal and social rejection of interracial relationships, films like the ones I mentioned earlier depict interracial romance. However, their portrayal of these relationships creates controversial debates among viewers. In *Fade to Black and White: Interracial Images in Popular Culture* (2009), Erica Chito Childs classifies the portrayal

of interracial relationships in film in three framed arguments: (1) interracial relationships as deviant; (2) empowering whiteness; and (3) perpetuating racist attitudes within a colour-blind framework (p. 06). First, according to Childs, the deviation of interracial relationships is a frequent portrayal in films that present these relationships diverging from societal norms and reinforcing racial boundaries. She states that such relationships are portrayed outside the realm of 'normal' and as implicitly problematic. This portrayal not only reflects but also reinforces racial segregation in personal relationships (2009, p. 87). Moreover, Childs explains how the representation of the abnormality of interracial relationships is reinforced in films. She argues that this is achieved by their invisibility, either by their absence, ignorance, or misrepresentation (2009, p. 178). Also, Childs argues that films present the interracial relationship as a symbol of 'downward spiral,' which she argues is 'Another way they are rendered deviant is by portraying the relationships as taboo' (2009, p. 179); this is mainly through adding comedy, mockery, tragedy, and suspense to the real plotline, like seen in the films *Boiler Room* (Ben Younger, 2000) and *Mystery Men* (Kinka Usher, 1999). In this way, I am interested in how *Widows* and *American Son* portray their interracial relationships in tense settings such as a heist and a police station, and how, like Childs' argument, these films regard interracial relationships as deviant and problematic.

The second way that popular culture portrays interracial relationships, according to Childs, is by protecting and empowering whiteness. Her argument is consistent with Dyer and Snead's concepts of defending whiteness and reinforcing racial hierarchies, as well as hooks' claim that 'the culture most movies are making when it comes to race, both in mainstream cinema and independent work, is one that still upholds, either covertly or overtly, white supremacy' (2009, p. 94). This perspective, as presented in Childs' work, emphasises how media portrayals of interracial relationships frequently centre and prioritise whiteness. This can take many forms, including narrative focus, character development, and the framing of conflicts and resolutions within these relationships (2009, p. 08). In her analysis of *Monster's Ball*, Childs contends that by consistently placing whiteness at the centre of these narratives, films and other popular media, albeit subtly, reinforce the idea of white supremacy. This depiction maintains whiteness as the standard or norm against which all other racial identities are measured and frequently uncovered. As a result, interracial relationships in media may end up perpetuating the very racial hierarchies that they appear to challenge (2009, p. 179). In both *Widows* and *American Son*, I examine how Veronica and Kendra are portrayed away from their Black communities and families and how both narratives

emphasise whiteness, either through cinematography techniques (setting, light...) or through the story itself. As such, Childs argues that 'the relationship between a white man and a woman of color is acceptable as long as the white man saves her world or the woman comes to his world, either symbolically through a transformation [...] or geographically, by moving into his house or into his entire world' (2009, pp. 87-88). Furthermore, I examine the physical and psychological effects of Veronica and Kendra's transition from the Black world to the white one in order to highlight the consequences for Black women's emotional state.

According to Childs, the third frame, perpetuation of implicit racism, serves to assert that America has become colourblind (2009, p. 09). She demonstrates how popular media narratives can reinforce racial biases while ignoring or downplaying the importance of race. Childs explains that this is achieved through denying that race matters or by presenting non-white people as the problem of this relationship, which eventually protects whiteness (2009, p. 10). Therefore, she argues that by depicting interracial relationships in a colourblind manner, these narratives fail to address the complex racial dynamics and instead contribute to the perpetuation of existing racial inequalities (2009, p. 122). Like Childs, hooks' analysis of *Exotica* (Atom Egoyan, 1995) reveals that 'interracial liaison is normalized, as are all the border crossings in the film' (2009, p. 37). Thus, she criticises films for ignoring real issues of interracial relationships, or what Childs describes as a 'colourblind fashion.' To conclude, Childs' analysis highlights the subtle ways in which media perpetuates racial hierarchies, even in stories that appear progressive or inclusive on the surface. Therefore, 'A new image, the one we have yet to see in film, is the desiring Black woman who prevails, who triumphs, not desexualized, not alone, who is together in every sense of the word' (hooks, 2009, p. 301). Analysing the white male characters in *Widows* and *American Son*, particularly in *American Son* because the interracial relationship is depicted in the present rather than in flashbacks as in *Widows*, reveals that both Harry and Scott take a colourblind approach to their interracial relationships and blame their Black women for the failure of their marriages. Through this, I argue that the two films I am analysing depict failed interracial relationships, which aligns with Childs' argument about how films portray interracial romance as deviant, problematic, and upholding of whiteness. However, since my films focus on the struggles and pain Black women experience in these relationships, my thesis argues that their portrayal serves to expose the illusion of colour-blindness and 'post-racial' narratives. More importantly, these films reveal the subtle ways Black women's identities are shaped and constrained within the framework of interracial marriage.

1.6 Black Women's Friendships in Film

Building on the previous discussion of the controversial portrayal of Black romance and interracial relationships, examining female friendships is crucial for deepening the study of how Black women's experiences are represented. US popular cinema has always marginalised female friendship. Among the scholars who have criticised the lack of such subgenres in Hollywood is Yvonne Tasker, who states in her book *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (1998) that, 'Across the majority of its genres, popular American cinema has marginalised representations of female friendship, more often favouring glamorous stars seen to exist in spectacular isolation, supportive figures who exist almost exclusively in relation to the hero, or women set in competition with each other' (p. 139). Another feminist film critic who shares the same point of view as Tasker is Karen Hollinger, whose work *In the Company of Women* (1998) is considered among the first comprehensive studies of female friendships as represented in films, with a rich discussion about the varieties of portrayals of women from different social, political, and ethnic groups. Hollinger considers female friendship films as a cinematic failure regarding the representations of minority groups. Likewise, Hollinger begins her book with a short history of how this genre started to appear on screen: 'The female friendship film is more accurately described as a recently developed subgenre of the women's film' (p. 02). Thus, she argues that the origins of the women's film go back to the sentimental melodramas of the 1930s and 1940s and gives examples of some productions of that time, such as *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937) and *Gaslight* (George Cukor, 1944).

However, Hollinger argues that Black women have been excluded from such cinematic productions since they only deal with white characters and address white audiences. This did not change until the 1980s with the release of the controversial film *The Color Purple* (1985), which Hollinger praises for presenting valuable characteristics of empowering female friendships against racist and patriarchal domination. Moreover, Hollinger implicitly blames Black male directors for the marginalisation of Black women, stating that 'the portrayal of women of color on the screen remains particularly susceptible to neglect or distortion because those minority directors who have emerged in both mainstream and independent cinema are overwhelmingly male' (p. 179). My thesis intriguingly intersects with her argument, which highlights an important aspect of my analysis: the impact of directorial perspective on the representation of Black women because the six films under examination

are directed by men. Despite the advances made in portraying complex, multifaceted Black female characters in films, the quote suggests an ongoing problem: the lack of female directors, particularly women of colour, in the film industry. This male dominance in directing roles can result in a nuanced disparity in how women of colour are depicted, potentially perpetuating stereotypes or failing to capture the breadth of female experiences. My thesis investigates how these films overcome and are constrained by these industry dynamics, providing a rich exploration of the portrayals created under predominantly male direction and their implications for the representation of Black women.

In her book, Hollinger categorises female friendship films into two types: 'Interracial' and 'Intra-racial' films (1998, p. 180). She suggests that interracial female friendships, particularly those between Black and white women, are rare in both independent and Hollywood cinema, pointing to examples such as *Passion Fish* (John Sayles, 1992) and *The Watermelon Woman* (Cheryl Dunye, 1997). Hollinger further argues that when these friendships do appear, race issues are often overlooked. In support of this, Tasker points out that Black women in relationships with white women are frequently portrayed in Hollywood films as marginal characters who play nurturing roles. As she states, 'Friendships between Black and white women, whether eroticized or not, are haunted by a history of representation in which Black women are marginalized characters, primarily constructed as carers in relation to white women' (1998, p. 156). Recent scholarship has also explored this dynamic in the context of the 'Magical Negro' trope, which often appears in interracial relationships. Hughey's article, 'Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism: The Odyssey of Magical Negroes and White Saviors' (2012), further investigates this trope, describing the 'Magical Negro' as a mystical Black character who helps redeem a lost or broken White character, often by acting as a servant or guide. Hughey writes, 'In brief, the Magical Negro is a paranormal or godlike Black character who transforms the life of a lost and broken White character. In these films, the Black character usually masquerading as uneducated and lower class – makes it his or her mission to redeem the White character and help re-establish White moral purity and normality' (p. 756). Despite the insights from Hollinger and Tasker, whose works date back to 1998, I argue that the rarity of interracial female friendship films has not significantly changed, with recent films continuing to overlook this representation.

This type of female friendship is examined in my thesis, primarily through *The Help*, which depicts a friendship between Aibileen and Skeeter, Minny and Celia. As a result, in addition to their portrayal as Mammies, they also represent the 'Magical Negro' trope. Furthermore,

the character of Veronica in *Widows* contradicts the historical marginalisation of Black women within interracial female friendships. The film depicts her as the leader and decision maker of a group of women of various ethnicities gathered to execute a heist. It is worth noting that in my analysis, I look at how Veronica faces prejudice and scepticism from both male and female characters about her ability to lead a heist as a Black woman, thus emphasising that the female relations illustrated in the film are not a friendship but instead a temporary cooperation. However, this type of female friendship is completely absent from the narratives of the other films, reinforcing previous arguments that interracial female friendships are uncommon in American cinema (Tasker, 1998; Hollinger, 1998).

The second type of female friendship representation is intra-racial films, which represent friendships among Black women supporting each other. Hollinger argues that this type also is rare and explains that 'the idea of minority women uniting in bonds of friendship seems to be so potentially challenging to the existing social structure, where women of color are positioned as the most disempowered group, that its cinematic expression has been suppressed' (1998, p. 180). Eventually, Hollinger claims that the film *The Color Purple* has paved the way for such representations, and many of its elements, such as Black solidarity and sisterhood, have been developed in the contemporary period. In her discussion about 'Black Women's Relationships with One Another' (2000), Collins argues that Black female friendship is historically used to construct individual and collective voices, occurring 'in the comfort of daily conversations, through serious conversation and humor, African American women as sisters and friends affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist' (p. 102). Her words highlight the social and emotional dynamics in Black women's relationships, which also reinforce the notion that friendships offer Black women a safe space to express their emotions, reduce their alertness, and create sister bonds.

The ability of Black female friendships to empower Black women has also been discussed by hooks in *Black Looks* (1992). She states that Black women come to 'a place of political awareness that allowed us to openly acknowledge it as part of their process of coming to consciousness and go on to critically affirm one another' (p.42). Through this quote, hooks describes Black women's shared experiences and understanding as a result of their unique position in society, where they face racial and gender discrimination. This shared understanding enables them to openly acknowledge and discuss these experiences, which is a crucial phase in becoming aware of one's social and political realities. Also, hooks emphasises the significance of validation and mutual support in these friendships. Black

women can find strength, solidarity, and a sense of community by acknowledging and affirming each other's experiences. This mutual affirmation, aside from providing emotional support, validates each other's experiences and realities in the face of societal denial and erasure. Therefore, hooks affirms the importance of Black women's friendships as spaces of resistance, validation, and consciousness-raising in the fight against systemic oppression (1992, p.43). In my thesis, I examine the various ways female friendships among Black women are represented, owing to the diversity of the narratives I am analysing. However, I consider how the lack of this social empowering practice in *Widows* and *American Son*, due to their predominantly white settings, has a negative impact, leading to a portrayal of Black women having emotional issues, but more importantly, a sense of alienation.

Collins' analysis of Black female friendships shows that Black writers and filmmakers in America emphasise three key themes that shape these representations. The first theme is the difficulty Black women have in affirming one another as a result of a society that discriminates against them as a group (2000, p. 104). Collins cites *Just Another Girl in the I.R.T.* (Leslie Harris, 1992) as an example of a mother's inability to help her daughter understand Black womanhood. My analysis of *The Help* is based on this theme, as the two Black maids are portrayed as being unable to help each other due to the story that makes them submissive. In contrast, the second theme is the ability of these relationships to support and advance Black women, as seen in the film *Waiting to Exhale* (Forest Whitaker, 1995), in which four women support and grow with each other (Collins, 2000, p.104). In my thesis, this is best illustrated by the friendship between the three Black women in *Hidden Figures*. The third theme Collins (2000, p. 105) identifies as influencing the representation of Black women's friendships is control and repression. She states that some Black women with power, whether through motherhood, work, or position, can oppress other Black women, as seen in the film *Alma's Rainbow* (Ayoka Chenzira, 1994). This last theme is an important concept in my analysis of the films *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia* where Rowena and Virginia endure opposition from Black women.

1.7 Intersecting Identities and the Complex Layers in Black Women's Representation

As previously stated, my thesis prioritises the concept of intersectionality to examine the representation of Black women, which is shaped by the interplay of the Black female

protagonist's race, gender, and class. Each of the films examined in my thesis provides a unique context and set of circumstances for its characters. Understanding how intersectionality manifests itself in these narratives offers nuanced ways in which identity shapes experiences, particularly in the context of Black women's portrayal. Therefore, in order to understand the representation of gender, it is also necessary to be read through intersections of race and class.

In exploring the concept of intersectionality, scholars like Crenshaw and Collins offer slightly various perspectives on intersectionality that enrich our understanding of how overlapping identities impact experiences of oppression and privilege. Crenshaw, the coiner of the term, has primarily focused on legal studies and critical race theory. In her work, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color' (1991), thinking through the limitations and distortions of 'single axis' approaches to discrimination, Crenshaw argues that theories of discrimination that fail to account for multiple marginalisations 'relegated the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling' (p. 1242). She applied the metaphor of an intersection to describe how Black women are oppressed in ways that are similar to white women's and Black men's oppressions, in doubled ways that combine the effects of sexism and racism, and in distinct ways that emerge from colliding oppressions. While Crenshaw introduced the term, Collins expanded the concept within the context of sociology and feminism. Her work, *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), investigates how intersectionality operates in various domains of power and is critical for understanding Black women's experiences. Collins provides a broader sociological perspective, focusing on how oppressive systems interact and impact the lived experiences of Black women. Moreover, she introduces the idea of the "matrix of domination" to describe the social organisation of Black women's lives 'in which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained' (2000, p. 228) to highlight the necessity of recognising the intersecting structural dimensions of lived oppression.

In her more recent work, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (2019), Collins provides a set of analytical tools for those seeking to develop intersectionality's ability to explain social inequality in ways that facilitate social change (p. 13). Experience, community, and solidarity are investigated as pillars of an intersectional approach that is concerned with changing the social world rather than simply describing it. Collins brings intersectionality into dialogue with the traditions of Black feminist thought and American pragmatism, drawing three lessons: first, 'the substance of experience matters in relation to diagnosing social problems

and in figuring out ways to address them' (p. 186); second, 'a more sophisticated construct of community might influence intersectionality's interpretive communities and how such communities might facilitate intersectionality's creative social action' (p. 186); and third, 'intersectionality's ideas come from people's self-reflexive experiences within the intersecting power relations of their social world' (p. 188). These tools and concepts are used to investigate how race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, ethnicity, ability, age, religion, and other similar categories intersect to produce unique experiences of privilege and oppression. They are intended to promote social change by drawing attention to and challenging these intersecting systems of inequality (p. 280). In my thesis, I rely heavily on intersectionality to demonstrate how the overlapping racial, gender, and class identities of the female protagonists shape their representation. Therefore, by emphasising these multiple factors that affect the representation of Black women, I argue that the portrayal of Black women in the examined films is both progressive and implicitly conservative of traditional stereotypes.

1.8 Chapter Outline

My thesis' chapters provide an in-depth exploration of the representation of Black female characters in the contemporary American films: *The Help*, *Hidden Figures*, *Widows*, *American Son*, *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia*. As I suggested earlier, the analysis of these films is important because they depict Black women in a variety of genres, including dramas, biographical dramas, heist thrillers, and historical to contemporary settings. However, the importance of these films lies primarily in emphasising the centrality of Black female characters within the narrative of each film. With each chapter dedicated to two films, I examine how each film, in its own unique way, critically analyses the dual tendency of perpetuating and challenging stereotypes in the portrayal of Black women.

In my second chapter, 'Serving and Resisting: *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*,' I examine how these films navigate the difficult terrain of racial and gender stereotypes. While both films strive to highlight Black women's experiences and resilience against the backdrop of significant historical eras in America, I argue that they also provoke critical discussions about stereotypes and 'the white saviour' narrative. *The Help*, set during the Civil Rights era, delves into the lives of Black maids in the South, juxtaposing their struggles with the actions of a white protagonist who assists in telling their stories, raising questions about 'the white saviour' complex. Similarly, *Hidden Figures* depicts the untold stories of Black female

mathematicians at NASA during the Space Race, emphasising their professional triumphs as well as the power of friendship as a source of empowerment, but also reinforcing 'the white saviour' trope. Both films present a paradox in their depictions of historical realities and racial dynamics. While *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* contribute significantly to the representation of Black women in historical contexts and highlight the strength found in communal bonds, I argue that these films additionally illustrate the contentious way in which Hollywood approaches race relations in historical films, particularly in the realm of 'the white saviour' narrative and the negotiation of 'post-racial' ideologies.

The third chapter, 'Confronting Systemic Challenges: Nuanced Portrayal in White Contemporary Settings (*Widows*/*American Son*),' explores how these two films are critical cinematic texts that deconstruct the notion of a 'post-racial' America by depicting the complex realities of Black women navigating interracial relationships and societal expectations. By highlighting the nuanced and often painful experiences of Black female protagonists, these films challenge the optimistic narratives of racial harmony. Also, this chapter argues that by challenging these societal issues through the lens of Black women, these films allow for a more diverse and realistic depiction of Black women's experiences and identities which contributes to their evolving representation in film. *Widows* presents a narrative that intertwines crime, politics, and personal struggle, focusing on how its Black female protagonist navigates a world riddled with racial and gender prejudices. In contrast, *American Son* offers a more intimate exploration of these themes through the lens of a single interracial family in crisis, specifically emphasising the mother's perspective and her experiences with racial prejudice and maternal fear. Both films, in their specific ways, highlight the often-unseen emotional anguish that Black women face in a society that frequently fails to acknowledge their struggles in interracial marriages and a supposedly 'post-racial' context. Hence, in this chapter, I argue that these narratives provide a critical reflection on contemporary American social environment, where racial tensions and disparities persist beneath the illusion of racial equality.

In my fourth chapter, 'Motherhood, Advocacy and the Personal as Political: A Comparative Analysis of *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia*,' I examine these films as offering contemporary representations of Black women in film, portraying them experiencing complex themes of racial identity, community dynamics, and empowerment. The two films deviate from stereotypical portrayals of Black women, highlighting their multifaceted nature and capacity as change agents in their communities. *Black or White* delves into themes of racial tension,

family dynamics, and custody battles, providing a nuanced perspective on race and family intersections. In contrast, *Miss Virginia* focuses on the empowering story of a Black mother's fight against systemic educational barriers, emphasising her role as a community leader and change advocate. While these narratives adopt different approaches, they both challenge post-racialist notions and stereotypes by depicting Black women as complex individuals who are deeply embedded in and essential to their communities. Thus, this chapter argues that these films contribute to a broader and progressive representation of Black women in cinema by portraying them as multifaceted characters and pivotal change-makers. However, my chapter also invites a critical examination of how far these portrayals go in challenging existing stereotypes and narrative limitations in the context of Hollywood's engagement with race and empowerment.

In conclusion, I show that the films *The Help*, *Hidden Figures*, *Widows*, *American Son*, *Black or White*, and *Miss Virginia* collectively present a complex and nuanced depiction of Black women. While they each reinforce certain stereotypes to varying degrees, these films also significantly contribute to challenging and redefining these same stereotypes. They provide a multifaceted representation of Black women through their diverse narratives and character portrayals, highlighting their struggles, resilience, and agency. This interplay between reinforcing and challenging stereotypes not only reflects the changing landscape of cinematic representation, but it also highlights the ongoing debate about how Black women are portrayed in contemporary cinema. As such, these films serve as critical texts for investigating the intersection of race, gender, and media representation, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of stereotype formation and disruption on screen.

Chapter 2 **Serving and Resisting: *The Help* and *Hidden Figures***

2.1 **Introduction**

The Help (2011), directed by Tate Taylor and based on Kathryn Stockett's 2009 novel of the same name, is a drama set in early 1960s Jackson, Mississippi, at the height of the Civil Rights movement. The film provides a poignant yet complex exploration of the lives of African American maids working in white households. The narrative revolves around three main characters: Aibileen Clark (Viola Davis), Minny Jackson (Octavia Spencer), and Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan (Emma Stone). Aibileen, portrayed as wise and nurturing, has dedicated her life to raising white children, while Minny, known for her sharp wit and exceptional cooking skills, struggles against systemic oppression and domestic abuse. Skeeter, a young white college graduate aspiring to be a writer, is disturbed by the racial injustices she witnesses and decides to write a book about the harsh realities that African American maids face. Skeeter's project entails persuading Aibileen, Minny, and eventually other maids to share their stories, despite the significant risks involved due to the pervasive racial discrimination and segregation laws of the time. The resulting book is a powerful testament to their experiences, combining personal stories with larger sociopolitical themes. By juxtaposing the maids' individual struggles for dignity and respect with the larger context of the Civil Rights movement, the film aims to capture the intersection of personal and political challenges during this turbulent time.

The second film analysed in this chapter is *Hidden Figures* (2016), directed by Theodore Melfi and based on Margot Lee Shetterly's nonfiction book. Set in the early 1960s, the film tells the true stories of three pioneering African American women at NASA who made significant contributions to the United States space program. The story follows mathematician Katherine Johnson (Taraji P. Henson), engineer Mary Jackson (Janelle Monáe), and mathematician-computer scientist Dorothy Vaughan (Octavia Spencer). These women were integral to landmark achievements such as John Glenn's historic orbit around Earth and the Apollo 11 mission to the Moon. The film effectively portrays the difficulties they faced in a

Chapter 2

segregated and male-dominated workplace, highlighting the systemic racial and gender discrimination that persisted even at the highest levels of scientific innovation. Despite these challenges, the characters show remarkable intelligence, perseverance, and resilience, redefining societal expectations of race and gender in both their professional and personal lives. The film situates their individual journeys in the larger context of social and institutional change, serving as both an inspirational narrative and a critique of structural inequality.

Many scholars have criticised Hollywood's portrayal of African Americans, including Donald Bogle, who, as previously discussed in the general introduction, asserts that, while representations of African Americans have evolved over time, they continue to be contentious (2016, p. 30). Moreover, Bogle argues that the election of Barack Obama as the first Black president marked a turning point in Hollywood's racial representations. This period saw race re-emerge as a central theme, particularly in historical narratives that sought to reinterpret Black history's complex legacies (p. 463), resulting in films such as *Selma* (Ava DuVernay, 2014), *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013), *The Help*, and *Hidden Figures*. The Obama era's emphasis on a 'post-racial' America complicates my case study films. Both *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* are produced during a cultural moment shaped by the symbolic significance of Obama's presidency, which some viewed as proof of racial progress. However, this 'post-racial' narrative frequently obscured ongoing systemic inequalities, portraying race relations through a lens of reconciliation and individual triumph rather than structural critique.

As stated in the introduction, Robert A. Rosenstone's *History on Film/Film on History* (2006) emphasises the importance of historical films in shaping collective memory and public understanding of the past, particularly by shedding light on the histories of marginalised groups such as African Americans, women, and enslaved peoples. However, he highlights a key tension in the ways historical films frequently distort or romanticise the past by incorporating fictional elements that simplify or alter historical events for narrative and artistic purposes (2006, p. 37). This tension is evident in *The Help*, which Bogle criticises for its focus on Skeeter, 'the white saviour' figure whose story overshadows the Black maids'. Bogle shows that the Black characters' lives are primarily depicted through their interactions with white employers, leaving their personal experiences unexplored (2016, p. 465).

Chapter 2

Building on this critique, Matthew Hughey's analysis in *The White Savior Film* (2014) contextualises 'the white saviour' trope, which appears in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, as a mechanism for encouraging interracial cooperation while perpetuating racial inequalities. As detailed in the introduction, Hughey explores the trope's recurring themes, such as idealised white characters embarking on journeys of self-discovery and cultural enlightenment while positioned as the agents of change for non-white characters, who remain passive recipients of white intervention (pp. 14, 29). While Hughey examines this trope in multiple films, James Snead's *White Screens/Black Images* (1994) provides a broader critique of how white-centric narratives dominate cinematic depictions of history. Snead emphasises the erasure or marginalisation of Black agency in favour of narratives that prioritise white perspectives, highlighting how such portrayals perpetuate power imbalances. This racialised reinterpretation of history, as seen in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, minimises the contributions and agency of Black female characters while perpetuating stereotypes under the guise of racial harmony. Together, these scholars demonstrate how 'the white saviour' narrative reinforces racial hierarchies, even in narratives that intend to celebrate diversity and progress.

Expanding on these arguments, this chapter examines how *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* shed light on Black women's often overlooked and marginalised stories, demonstrating the role of historical films in amplifying the voices of those who have long been silenced. At the same time, the analysis explores how these films, like many others in the genre, present historical inaccuracies and prioritise 'white saviour' narratives, framing stories about Black women through a predominantly white lens. Nonetheless, the chapter highlights moments in which these films depict Black female characters engaging in acts of resistance and activism, demonstrating a complex duality: they reinforce traditional historical portrayals while also encouraging more progressive representations.

The dominance of whiteness in cinema has been criticised by many scholars, including bell hooks (1992), Richard Dyer (1997), and Ed Guerrero (1993). They argue that the film industry marginalises non-white identities by positioning whiteness as the normative standard. They highlight how this dominance results in the misrepresentation of Black individuals, particularly Black women, and reinforces racial stereotypes. To challenge these dominant narratives, hooks advocates for an "oppositional gaze," empowering marginalised viewers to

Chapter 2

critically engage with media and resist its exclusionary frameworks (p. 119). In this chapter, I look at how *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* portray Black women as strong, resilient figures who resist oppression while providing moments of empowerment. While these films operate within a cinematic framework shaped by white-dominated perspectives, they also provide opportunities for viewers to interact with the resistance hooks advocates for, challenging dominant conventions and cultivating spaces of empowerment.

As outlined in the introduction, this chapter will explore the role of interracial and intra-racial female friendships in the portrayal of Black women in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*. According to scholars such as Karen Hollinger (1998) and Yvonne Tasker (1998), interracial female friendships are uncommon in US popular cinema, and when they do appear, Black women are frequently relegated to secondary roles that centre on the white character's story. This dynamic resonates with patterns observed in "buddy films" genre, which often explores male partnerships as sites of mutual growth and equality (Ames, 2015; Artz, 1998; Guerrero, 1993), whereas interracial female friendships are frequently framed through a lens of inequality and subordination, reflecting racial and gender biases. Moreover, intra-racial female friendships are uncommon in American popular film (Hollinger, 1998, p. 180; Tasker, 1998, p. 156), but when they are depicted, they serve as spaces for validation, consciousness-raising, and resistance (Collins, 2000, p. 102; hooks, 1992, p. 42). In my analysis of *The Help*, I will look at how interracial female friendships, particularly those between Skeeter and the maids, are framed in ways that reinforce 'white saviour' and 'Magical Negro' tropes, as Hughey describes (2012, p. 756). While intra-racial friendships in both films create spaces that challenge the stereotypical portrayal of Black families as dysfunctional, instead emphasising Black women's solidarity as an effective social practice.

Drawing from these discussions, my analysis explores the duality in the portrayals of Black women in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*: how do these films simultaneously challenge and reinforce stereotypes? While progressive in some respects, both films perpetuate certain historical tropes, reflecting the tension at the core of my argument. I argue that these portrayals represent a significant yet contradictory step forward in the cinematic representation of Black women. A comparative analysis of the two films offers valuable insight into how contemporary cinema engages with and, at times, oversimplifies complex racial and historical issues. Both films focus on the experiences of Black women, offering a

valuable opportunity to investigate the intersection of race and gender in cinematic narratives. Furthermore, the films, set in significant periods, reinterpret pivotal moments in American history, allowing for a critical examination of their approach to social and racial issues. Finally, *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* stand out for their portrayals of African American women's experiences, which combine historical context with personal drama while addressing and complicating issues of race, gender, and social inequality.

This chapter begins by considering the significance of Black women's roles in both films. In *The Help*, Black women are primarily portrayed as maids serving white families, as opposed to the educated, professional roles they play in *Hidden Figures*. This comparison highlights how characters in racial narratives are frequently limited to serving roles, regardless of their status. The second section explores how both films, set in historical contexts, apply 'the white saviour' trope. This analysis examines how such narratives can undermine the depth and autonomy of Black female characters, frequently reducing them to supporting roles in their own stories. The chapter then delves into how these films portray friendship. It compares the empowering effects of intra-racial friendships among Black women to the problematic 'Magical Negro' trope that appears in interracial friendships. This section examines how these relationships contribute to or detract from the films' thematic depth. The following section is a critical examination of how Black female characters in both films navigate and resist oppression and discrimination. This discussion focusses on moments of agency and strength, and how they relate to broader understandings of racial and gender dynamics. The final section discusses the contradictions in the films' depictions of race and narrative elements, examining how these paradoxes reflect the films' struggles with racial and gender stereotypes. This nuanced discussion considers how the films alternate between reinforcing and challenging established tropes. Finally, this chapter aims to provide an in-depth examination of how *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* grapple with the complexities of racial and gender representation in cinema.

2.2 Service Roles in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*

This section examines the portrayal of Black women in servitude roles in *The Help*, where they are depicted primarily as obedient maids despite their attempts to challenge their circumstances by sharing their experiences. Additionally, while *Hidden Figures* presents a

Chapter 2

more progressive narrative than other historical films, it still portrays Black women in service to white individuals. I will argue that, despite differences in educational status, both films ultimately confine their Black protagonists to roles centred on serving others.

Nicole Fleetwood's *Troubling Vision* (2011) examines how visual culture limits Black representation, reinforcing narratives of subservience even when films claim to challenge racial hierarchies. *The Help*, for example, transforms Black women's struggles into entertainment, using humour to soften its critique of racism. Dyer's work *On Stereotypes* (1993) further illuminates how repetition normalises limiting depictions, making servitude appear as an inherent trait rather than a historical imposition. While Bogle (2016, p. 464) criticises *The Help* as a film that prioritises comedic relief over genuine progress, Fleetwood and Dyer's frameworks reveal how such portrayals reinforce rather than disrupt the visual economy of Black subjugation. In fact, Even Skeeter, who is portrayed as 'the white saviour' of the Black maids, reinforces racial hierarchies. When Skeeter's mother expresses concern about her lack of romantic relationships early in the film, she responds sarcastically, "I want to be with girls as much as you want to be with Jameso"—a remark that highlights her awareness of prevailing social norms. Skeeter's statement reinforces rather than challenges racial boundaries by associating the taboo of same-sex relationships with the impossibility of her mother being with a Black male servant.

Furthermore, the film's narrative economy—the structuring of dramatic and comedic elements—reduces the weight of Black suffering through humour. Minny, despite having an abusive husband, financial insecurity, and an unjust dismissal, is consistently portrayed as a comedic figure. Her character exemplifies what Dyer (1993, p. 12) describes as the repetitive function of stereotypes: reducing Blackness to fixed, recognisable traits that prioritise entertainment over complexity. Her difficulties are presented in the film as moments of humour rather than serious critique, making her struggles feel secondary to her role as comic relief. The infamous chocolate pie scene exemplifies this problematic framing. After being falsely accused and fired by her former employer, Hilly, Minny revenges by secretly baking and feeding her own excrement. While intended as a subversive act of resistance, this moment is ultimately staged for comedy rather than justice. Through focalisation—primarily aligning the audience's gaze with Minny's perspective—the film invites viewers to celebrate her mischievous triumph rather than critically engage with the systemic racism that forced

Chapter 2

her to commit such an act. The use of close-ups on Minny's subtle smile and Celia Foote's shifting expressions of shock and amusement guides audience reaction, ensuring that the scene is humorous rather than disturbing.

The Help ultimately downplays its Black characters' struggles by embedding them within comedic tropes, reinforcing the rigid frameworks that prioritise white spectatorship. Minny's suffering is frequently filtered through humour, ensuring that she is entertaining rather than disruptive. However, while Bogle's criticism of the film's reliance on comedy is insightful, Minny's portrayal is not entirely reductive. The chocolate pie scene, for instance, does more than just introduce her as a source of amusement; it also emphasises her resilience and subversive defiance. The film's use of a static camera and medium shot, which evenly frames Minny and Celia within the same space, implies a growing sense of trust and mutual recognition between the two. While humour is an important part of Minny's character, it does not obscure her intelligence or awareness of the racial hierarchies that control her life. Rather than serving solely as comic relief, Minny demonstrates agency within the constraints placed on her. Despite this, the film is primarily complicit in reinforcing stereotypes through its narrative, with Minny's humour softening the critique of systemic racism and making her defiance more appealing to mainstream audiences.

The Help portrays its Black maid characters as complex figures who cross racial boundaries by sharing their experiences with Skeeter and confronting white society. Their decision to tell their stories, despite the constraints of the 1960s, is consistent with the concept of counter-storytelling in CRT, which asserts that Black people can challenge dominant narratives by articulating their lived experiences (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 42). However, the film highlights their hesitation and fear. Aibileen initially refuses to participate, claiming that Mae Mobley will be the last white child she raises, but eventually agrees because she has nothing to lose after her son's death. Similarly, Minny refuses Skeeter's request until she faces dismissal from Hilly's house and secures a job with Celia, an outsider in white society. The other maids join Skeeter's project only after Aibileen and Minny's influence, reinforcing the precarious nature of their resistance. Underscoring the persistent risks they encounter, the maids refuse to use their real names in Skeeter's book, despite their courage. When Skeeter struggles to find more contributors, Minny even suggests inventing maids and stories, signalling that exposing the systemic injustices they endure is

Chapter 2

more important than strict factual accuracy. Moreover, Aibileen and Minny's relief at receiving money following the book's publication is captured in a medium shot with warm lighting, visually reinforcing their sense of solidarity and temporary validation (Figure 1). Close-ups further highlight the range of emotions they experience: relief, satisfaction, and accomplishment, but also apprehension about the future. Their initial hesitation to share their stories reflects the real risks of speaking out in a racist society, while their subsequent joy represents not only financial relief but also a deeper sense of recognition and empowerment. However, the film undermines this apparent progress by revealing that, with the exception of Aibileen, who is fired and retires as planned, the maids remain in their roles as domestics. This lack of significant change calls into question the importance of their accomplishment. Therefore, I argue that *The Help* reinforces old stereotypes of Black female servitude by disguising them under a narrative of interracial cooperation.



Figure 1 Aibileen and Minny's joy.

Unlike the house servant roles in *The Help*, *Hidden Figures* depicts Black women as NASA professionals, indicating a significant shift in their on-screen representation. The film follows three Black women—Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary—as they overcome racial and gender barriers in a historically segregated workplace. Despite being separated from their white colleagues, their contributions are critical, with two of them achieving positions that white women had previously not attained. Katherine is portrayed as a mathematical genius whose calculations enabled John Glenn to become the first American to orbit the Earth. Dorothy, a skilled human computer, unofficially supervises a segregated unit before learning IBM technology and securing a leadership role. Mary aspires to be an engineer and becomes NASA's first Black female engineer, embodying endurance in the face of institutional barriers. This transformation in Black women's cinematic representation aligns with broader scholarly discussions about the historical constraints imposed on Black actresses in

Chapter 2

Hollywood. Mia Mask (2012) investigates how Black women in film have historically been limited to roles that reinforce subservience or hypersexuality, making *Hidden Figures* a significant departure from these norms. The film's protagonists are given agency, intelligence, and professional ambition, which are all uncommon for Black female characters in mainstream cinema. Similarly, Bogle (2016, p. 450) praises Taraji P. Henson's versatility, noting that while she was a well-known face in Hollywood, her previous roles did not fully highlight her abilities. However, her performance as Katherine in *Hidden Figures* provides her with the narrative space to lead the film and demonstrate her range, reinforcing the significance of casting Black actresses in complex, multidimensional roles.

Despite their prestigious titles, the film presents Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary frequently facing systemic discrimination, with lower wages and longer work hours than their white counterparts. Their professional accomplishments do not liberate them from racialised labour but rather redefine the terms of their service. Dorothy, for example, has worked as a supervisor for over a year without receiving official recognition or compensation. When NASA encounters technical difficulties with its new IBM machines, Dorothy takes the initiative to solve the problem—an opportunity that would have been readily granted to a white male colleague but one she must seize for herself. This dynamic demonstrates how, even within a progressive narrative, Black women continue to be placed in positions where they must repeatedly prove their worth while being denied full institutional support. I argue that *Hidden Figures* celebrates Black female intellect and perseverance while also revealing the persistent inequalities that force these women to navigate spaces that continue to prioritise white advancement over genuine inclusion.



Figure 2 Katherine working for long hours.

Katherine faces similar challenges, working longer hours than her white colleagues and often being the last to leave the office (Figure 2). Her white male colleague, Stafford, refuses to credit her work by removing her name from the reports she writes, effectively eliminating her contributions. Mrs. Mitchell's remark upon Katherine's assignment— "We've never had a coloured in here before, Katherine. Don't embarrass me"—further underscores the pressure placed on her to justify her presence in a space historically reserved for white men. Katherine's job security remains unstable, as she is fired and then recalled, with no real control over her employment. This deliberate oversight represented in the film reflects the institution's racial and gender biases, reinforcing the notion that Black women's work is only valuable when it is hidden. Similarly, the film depicts Mary as an accomplished mathematician and engineer capable of detecting a critical design flaw in NASA's heat shield. Though her team leader encourages her to apply for an official engineering position, she faces immediate opposition from Mrs. Mitchell, rigid educational barriers, and even scepticism from her own husband. The barriers these women are depicted facing demonstrate that, despite their intelligence and ambition, their success is still dependent on navigating a system designed to exclude them.

Consequently, Unlike the portrayal of women in *Hidden Figures*, the Black maids in *The Help* are denied educational and economic opportunities, forcing them into domestic servitude. Their labour is not a choice but rather a requirement for survival. Aibileen, for example, accepts that she will be a maid for the rest of her life, as have previous generations of women in her family. With no education and a child to support, she sees no alternative. Likewise, Minny sacrifices her own well-being to provide a better future for her children, reinforcing the structural inequalities that allow white families to maintain economic and

social dominance over their Black employees. I argue that both films depict Black women serving white interests, albeit in different ways. While *Hidden Figures* presents a more optimistic vision of advancement, it still portrays Black female success as conditional upon their ability to serve white institutions. The contrast between the two films demonstrates how racial and economic hierarchies persist across social classes. What *Hidden Figures* promotes as a hopeful narrative of inclusion ultimately reinforces the idea that Black women's advancement is still dependent on their ability to accommodate white power structures, perpetuating a subtler form of servitude disguised as progress.

This analysis has shown that *The Help* confines its Black female characters to roles of servitude and obedience, despite their attempts to assert agency by sharing their experiences. While *Hidden Figures* presents a more progressive narrative, it still frames its Black protagonists in positions of service, though within a professional setting. The key difference lies in their educational status rather than a fundamental shift in representation. As a result, both films reinforce stereotypes of Black women as subordinate figures, whether in domestic or intellectual spaces, while centring white characters who diminish their contributions to progress.

2.3 *The Help and Hidden Figures as Historical and White Saviour Films*

In this section, the analysis situates both films in the historical film genre, examining how they challenge the tradition of portraying Black women as secondary characters by emphasising their historical contributions. Their critical and commercial success demonstrates the viability of stories featuring Black women, which may encourage filmmakers to invest in more diverse narratives and casting choices. However, despite these advancements, both films rely on 'the white saviour' trope and oversimplify racial dynamics, highlighting the persistent need for more nuanced and authentic representations of Black women in historical cinema.

In his book about historical films, Rosenstone (2006, p. 33) emphasises the importance of historical films in engaging with past events and discusses the genre's rapid growth in contemporary cinema. Since the early 2000s, numerous films have depicted historical events or real-life stories, such as *Selma* (2014), which documents the 1965 voting rights marches,

Chapter 2

and *The Best of Enemies* (2019, Robin Bissel), which is based on civil rights activist Ann Atwater. Similarly, *Hidden Figures* and *The Help* are based on historical events—*Hidden Figures* highlights the overlooked contributions of three African American women at NASA, while *The Help* depicts the experiences of Black domestic workers in the segregated South. Though *The Help* is adapted from a fictional novel, its depiction of racial segregation, including Jim Crow laws and the assassination of Medgar Evers⁴, is grounded in historical fact. By bringing these stories to the big screen, both films confirm Rosenstone's argument about historical cinema's ability to highlight marginalised histories.

However, historical films frequently create debates about their accuracy (Rosenstone, 2006, p. 15). *Hidden Figures*, for example, has been criticised for altering historical details, such as exaggerating bathroom segregation and introducing fictional white characters who undercut the achievements of the Black women at the heart of the story. More broadly, Rosenstone (2006, p. 39) contends that historical films tend to focus on individuals who have achieved extraordinary success in the face of systemic oppression. This pattern is evident in both films, which concentrate on exceptional Black women who in, *Hidden Figures*, contribute to national progress through their expertise in mathematics and engineering, while Aibileen and Minny in *The Help* shape the lives of the white children they raise and support white households.

Both films also adhere to Rosenstone's observation that historical narratives are often structured with a clear beginning, middle, and end, suggesting a linear progression of history. *The Help* follows this structure by first depicting the realities of Black domestic workers in Mississippi, then introducing Skeeter's book project as a catalyst for change and finally concluding with an implication of progress as the maids' voices are heard. However, this resolution is only superficial, as the Black maids continue to work in servitude, with the exception of Aibileen, who retires due to age rather than a newfound opportunity. Similarly, *Hidden Figures* has a structured narrative arc that begins with the women's first assignments in a white-dominated space, details the challenges they face, and ends on a seemingly

⁴ Medgar Evers was a prominent leader in the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi, who fought against racial discrimination and injustice. He was assassinated on June 12, 1963, by a white supremacist named Byron De La Beckwith. His death sparked national outrage and inspired many other activists to continue his legacy. He is widely regarded as a martyr and a hero for the cause of racial equality.

triumphant note as they secure permanent positions at NASA. These narratives position Black women as historical figures, emphasising their resilience, intelligence, and societal contributions.

While *Hidden Figures* and *The Help* centre Black women's experiences, their progressive potential is undermined by the presence of 'white saviour' figures. The inclusion of fictional white characters in historical narratives is a common filmmaking strategy, as Rosenstone (2006, p. 37) notes, yet Hughey (2014, p. 18) critiques this as a Hollywood trope that serves 'post-racial' ideologies by reinforcing white benevolence. In *Hidden Figures*, Harrison emerges as a protective figure, shielding Katherine from racism and advocating for her inclusion in the Space Task Group. In contrast, Paul Stafford and Vivian Mitchell embody racist and sexist opposition, but neither of these characters existed in reality. Similarly, in *The Help*, Skeeter is portrayed as an enlightened white figure who encourages Black maids to share their stories, juxtaposed against the overtly racist Hilly Holbrook. Hughey (2014, p. 48) argues that the binary of good and bad white characters is central to 'the white saviour' trope, ensuring that the saviour's moral heroism stands in stark contrast to more explicitly racist figures. This contrast emphasises the supposed exceptionalism of 'the white saviour' while minimising the agency of Black characters. This pattern has historical roots, where Guerrero (1993, p. 12) discusses how Hollywood frequently frames Blackness in ways that maintain white centrality, reinforcing the notion that racial progress is dependent on white intervention rather than Black self-determination. Likewise, Snead (1994, p. 142) criticises Hollywood's tendency to portray Black characters as static and reactionary, serving primarily to affirm white characters' moral growth. I argue that in both *Hidden Figures* and *The Help*, Black women, despite their intelligence and resilience, remain in positions where their success relies on white approval.

Furthermore, Hughey (2014, p. 29) identifies the trope of the suffering 'white saviour' as a key feature of the role, which reinforces racial hierarchies by humanising white characters at the expense of Black ones. This journey is critical in making them more relatable and sympathetic to audiences, elevating them to a moral high ground. Their willingness to go through adversity for the benefit of Black characters distinguishes them from overtly racist whites, positioning them as heroic figures rather than participants in systemic oppression. However, according to Fleetwood in *Troubling Vision* (2011, p. 112) and Gillespie in *Film*

Chapter 2

Blackness (2016, pp. 74-75), such depictions serve as a form of visual containment, limiting the scope of Black representation by incorporating Black struggle into narratives that ultimately serve white redemption. These scholars' analysis highlights how dominant visual culture frequently neutralises the political potential of Black representation by incorporating it into frameworks that prioritise white spectatorship. By embedding Black women's struggles within a framework that prioritises white redemption, *Hidden Figures* and *The Help* fail to offer a radical reimagining of racial narratives. Instead, they follow an approach that reassures mainstream audiences by framing racial progress as an interpersonal rather than structural issue. As a result, while these films highlight Black women's stories, they also reinforce long-standing cinematic tropes that maintain white centrality in racial justice narratives.

This dynamic is particularly evident in *Hidden Figures*, where the film's narrative arc revolves around a white authority figure recognising and validating a Black woman's contributions. The character of Harrison exemplifies this process, as his transformation from an initially indifferent supervisor to a supportive ally reinforces the trope of the compassionate white figure who promotes racial equality. At the beginning of the film, Mrs. Mitchell warns Katherine not to speak to Harrison, describing him as severe and tough, noting that he has fired many employees before hiring her. Ruth, Harrison's assistant, reinforces this characterisation by explicitly telling Katherine, "Mr. Harrison won't be warm to you, don't expect it." These early warnings establish Harrison's authority and create an initial power dynamic in which Katherine is cast as an outsider in the white-dominated workplace. However, as the story progresses, Harrison's attitude towards Katherine changes. After witnessing her exceptional abilities and the difficulties she faces as a Black woman in a segregated workplace, he begins to show her more respect and support. His growing understanding of her struggles leads to his decision to allow her access to previously all-male, all-white classified meetings. Her sexist colleague Paul Stafford objected to this moment, saying, "There is no protocol for women attending." Stafford's remark highlights Katherine's entrenched institutional barriers, whereas Harrison's defiance of this unspoken rule illustrates his growing willingness to challenge systemic discrimination. The key to understanding Harrison's shift lies in the strategic way Katherine uses her speech and demeanour to assert her worth and remind him of his authority. Throughout the film,

Chapter 2

Stafford actively opposes Katherine's proposals for tasks that would advance her position. In one scene, she directly challenges Harrison, reminding him that as the boss, he has the authority to override Stafford's objections. Her assertiveness in this situation is critical—it not only establishes Harrison as a figure of authority within the department, but also subtly reinforces his role as a potential ally. By appealing to his authority, she ensures that he takes responsibility for facilitating her professional development. Another element that enhances Katherine's determination is the actor Taraji P. Henson's portrayal of the character. Henson conveys a quiet but firm confidence throughout the performance, particularly in scenes where she makes her case to Harrison or defends her work. The nuanced delivery of these lines—especially when she reminds Harrison of his position—further demonstrates her growing influence, which is an essential aspect of her success in navigating these oppressive environments.



Figure 3 Harrison destroying the coloured lady room sign.

One of the most defining moments that establishes Harrison as the film's 'white saviour' occurs when he demolishes the "Coloured Ladies Room" sign upon learning that Katherine must take a forty-minute round trip just to use the designated Black women's restroom. The scene begins with a purposeful tracking shot that emphasises Harrison's determination. This dynamic camera movement adds urgency to the moment and visually reinforces his resolve. As Harrison enters the bathroom and begins breaking down the sign, the camera shifts to low-angle shots, making him appear larger and more authoritative. These shots emphasise the significance of his actions, positioning him as a symbol of power and change. His declaration, "No more colored restrooms, no more white restrooms. Here at NASA, we all pee the same color." presents his act as a moment of institutional transformation. However, the framing of the scene reinforces his role as a saviour: Harrison is frequently isolated in the

Chapter 2

composition, emphasising his individual agency, whereas Katherine is frequently positioned among her Black colleagues, demonstrating the collective impact of his actions on the marginalised women at NASA (Figure 3). Close-up shots play a crucial role in capturing the emotional weight of the moment, particularly through Katherine's reaction. Her expression conveys a complex mix of shock and relief, signalling both the gravity of the situation and the exhaustion of enduring systemic racism. However, the film's focalisation and the scene's visual language remain predominantly aligned with Harrison—his perspective drives the narrative, while Katherine's reaction is largely responsive, reinforcing 'the white saviour' trope. Additionally, Harrison's use of force—physically dismantling the sign—becomes a cinematic symbol for justice and law. However, the film portrays his aggression as righteous, whereas any similar defiance by a Black character would most likely be interpreted as disorderly or unacceptable. This contrast subtly reinforces the stereotype that only a white figure has the authority to effect change through such means.

The film expands on 'the white saviour' motif with another symbolic gesture: Harrison removes the "coloured" label from the coffee pot that white men in the department have designated for Katherine—a quiet but insidious form of workplace microaggression. This seemingly minor act reinforces the notion that he is the only one capable of dismantling institutional prejudice. Similarly, Mary's path is influenced by a white mentor who encourages her to apply to be an engineer. When her supervisor urges her to "imagine herself as a white male," Mary responds sharply, "I wouldn't need to. I would already be an engineer."—emphasises both her self-awareness and the obstacles posed by racial and gender discrimination. While this moment shifts the focus to Mary's agency, the larger narrative remains centred on white characters as catalysts for Black progress. Through these scenes, *Hidden Figures* not only highlights the struggles of Black women at NASA, but it also perpetuates 'the white saviour' trope by portraying progress as dependent on white intervention. The film's framing and character dynamics subtly reinforce the idea that racial justice, even when earned by Black individuals, eventually requires validation and action from white figures.

Similarly, 'the white saviour' trope is central to *The Help*, particularly Skeeter's portrayal as a progressive outsider who helps Black maids in sharing their stories. However, the film complicates this trope by portraying Skeeter as flawed and, at times, self-serving. Her

Chapter 2

personal struggles—being bullied as a child, failing to conform to Southern white femininity, and feeling isolated from her social circle—are used to frame her activism as both a defiance of her own oppression and a redemptive journey. While this characterisation adds depth to her role, it also shifts the narrative focus away from Black resistance and towards Skeeter's personal awakening, reinforcing the common cinematic pattern of white protagonists acting as primary change agents. Moreover, the film uses narrative economy by condensing Skeeter's story into a single transformation: her rejection of racist Southern society coincides with her success as a writer. Her discovery of Hilly's home sanitation initiative serves as a turning moment, motivating her to act. However, her decision to assist the Black maids is not entirely selfless—it is in line with her professional goals. By writing the book, Skeeter not only exposes racism but also liberates herself from the confines of her conservative upbringing. This dual motivation distorts the distinction between self-sacrifice and self-interest, complicating her role as a saviour figure.

The film's focalisation is largely aligned with Skeeter, as her perspective frames the narrative. The audience sees racial injustice through her eyes, risking marginalising Black women's voices in a story about their struggles. Bogle (2016, p. 464) claims that the film "dramatized the experience of a young white Southern woman [...] who, having left home to study in school, returns to her community and is stunned by the indignities and insults the Black domestic workers endure." This positioning limits the film's ability to fully centre Aibileen and Minny's agency because their voices are mediated by Skeeter's authorship. Skeeter's characterisation as a 'white saviour' is complicated by her self-interest and moral ambiguity. Throughout the film, she is frequently described and portrayed as selfish. Stuart, her boyfriend, accuses her of being dishonest by concealing the book project. More importantly, she eventually leaves Jackson for New York after the book's success, abandoning Aibileen and Minny to face the consequences. When Hilly discovers Skeeter's involvement, she threatens revenge on the maids, but Skeeter's response is to escape rather than confront the danger she has helped create (Figure 4). These moments call into question the traditional 'white saviour' figure, who is frequently portrayed as unwaveringly noble and selfless.

Chapter 2



Figure 4 Skeeter saying goodbye to Aibileen and Minny.

The film also contrasts Skeeter's rejection by white society with her acceptance by the Black maids, particularly through her relationship with Constantine, their maid. Constantine, who acts as a 'Magical Negro' figure (Hughey, 2012, p. 756), boosts Skeeter's confidence and self-esteem. This dynamic reinforces a problematic pattern in which Black characters exist primarily to help white protagonists discover themselves. Constantine's encouragement helps Skeeter embrace her uniqueness, eventually empowering her to play the role of a saviour. However, this mentorship dynamic raises the question of whether Skeeter's activism is truly about racial justice or if it is a way for her to validate her own differences from the white women around her. Besides, Skeeter's moral superiority is contrasted with the outright racism of characters such as Hilly, though her actions are not always moral. She deceives Hilly by publicly humiliating her rather than directly opposing her, as evidenced by her tricking Jackson residents into throwing toilets on Hilly's garden. This act, while disguised as comedic justice, reveals Skeeter's manipulative nature. Her refusal to openly challenge Hilly's beliefs implies that her rebellion is ultimately about personal victory rather than dismantling systemic racism. By portraying Skeeter as flawed and self-interested, *The Help* departs from the traditional 'white saviour' type, which depicts white characters as purely benevolent figures. However, despite this complexity, the film still privileges her perspective, reinforcing the idea that racial progress is driven by white intervention. While Aibileen and Minny actively tell their own stories, their narratives are secondary to Skeeter's personal and professional development. I argue that the film's emphasis on Skeeter's struggles, her rejection by white society, her loneliness, and her moral dilemmas evokes sympathy from the audience while shifting emotional engagement away from the Black women who face the most hardship. Therefore, while *The Help* attempts to present a more nuanced interpretation of 'the white saviour' trope by portraying Skeeter as flawed and ambiguous, it

Chapter 2

still prioritises her transformation over the lived experiences of the Black women she claims to assist. By doing so, the film reinforces the limitations of cross-racial cooperation during the Civil Rights era, exposing the pervasive narrative pattern in which white protagonists are positioned as the primary agents of change, even in stories about Black resistance.

Despite the negative connotations associated with 'the white saviour' figure, Hughey (2014, p. 52) identifies one of its defining characteristics as perseverance. He claims that 'the white saviour' is frequently portrayed as a hard-working individual whose self-discipline leads to social advancement. This figure is presented as someone who sacrifices personal gratification in order to achieve a higher goal, ultimately triumphing over adversity. This framework contextualises the portrayal of Harrison's motivations in *Hidden Figures*. His decision to assist Katherine is not purely generosity but rather an intentional choice to ensure NASA's victory in the Space Race. Recognising that racial discrimination restricts productivity, Harrison removes structural barriers—not to address systemic racism, but to ensure NASA enhances Katherine's efficiency. His intervention is thus framed as pragmatic rather than moral, but the film demonstrates it as an act of heroism, reinforcing 'the white saviour' trope by crediting him with reducing segregation within NASA. Following a similar narrative structure, *The Help* constructs Skeeter as a hard-working and ambitious woman who defies both social and racial conventions in pursuit of her dream of becoming a journalist. Her struggle is initially defined by her professional ambitions, as she persistently negotiates with her editor for the opportunity to write about the Black maids' experiences. She then takes personal risks by engaging with Aibileen and Minny, putting her social standing as a white woman in Jackson at risk, in order to persuade them to contribute to her book. While Skeeter's actions are portrayed as courageous, they also reinforce 'the white saviour' stereotype. Her journey is positioned as central to the film's narrative, effectively framing Black domestic workers' liberation as a result of her individual perseverance. The emphasis on hard work as a distinguishing feature of 'white saviour' figures serves a larger ideological purpose. Scenes in both films depicting Harrison and Skeeter's efforts prompt the audience to admire their determination while downplaying the agency of the Black characters they supposedly assist. As a result, in each case, the narrative constructs 'white saviour' figures as the driving forces of change, portraying them as indispensable to Black

liberation while undervaluing the agency of those who have directly experienced racial injustice.

Both films credit their 'white saviour' characters with significant historical accomplishments while depicting Black women as powerless to shape their own destinies and grateful for white intervention. Scenes that emphasise Black characters' inability to overcome their difficulties without white assistance reinforce 'the white saviour' trope, placing these stories within a familiar Hollywood framework of white heroism. These films obscure Black women's agency by transforming real-life stories of racial inequality and oppression into tales of individual white triumph. However, as the following section will demonstrate, the Black female characters form strong bonds of solidarity, helping one another resist stereotypes and challenge systemic prejudice.

2.4 Empowering Through Friendships in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*

In this section, I will examine the importance of Black women's friendships in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, arguing that these relationships provide emotional resilience in the face of systemic oppression. Furthermore, these chosen familial bonds provide a counter-narrative to Hollywood's longstanding depiction of Black families as dysfunctional, unstable, or incomplete, reinforcing stories that focus on Black characters' relationships with white society rather than delving into their personal lives. As Bogle points out, 'Nor is there enough exploration of their lives away from their white employers' (2016, p. 465), implying that Black characters are frequently defined by their service rather than their humanity. Manthia Diawara expands on this critique, claiming that Hollywood struggles to present Black life independently, stating, 'There are no simple stories about Black people loving each other, hating each other, or enjoying their private possessions without reference to the white world' (1993, p. 4).

Both *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* exemplify this tendency by focusing on the protagonists' interactions with white society rather than their personal lives. For instance, Minny's husband is a faceless figure in *The Help*, only referred to as an abusive and violent Black man, reinforcing the stereotype of Black male aggression without providing any meaningful character exploration. Similarly, Aibileen's backstory is reduced to a brief mention of her

son's death, with no reference to her husband or the complexities of being a single mother. Thus, the lack of fully realised Black family structures maintains the narrative focused on the maids' interactions with Skeeter and the white families they serve. *Hidden Figures* follows a familiar pattern; while it gives the protagonist Katherine a romantic subplot with a Black National Guard officer, it largely ignores the main characters' personal lives in favour of focusing on their struggles within NASA's predominantly white and male environment. These decisions reflect Hollywood's broader resistance to exploring Black characters' independent narratives, reinforcing the belief that their lives only become narratively significant when they intersect with white institutions (Dyer, 1993; Gillespie, 2016; Guerrero, 1993; Snead, 1994).

In *Black Looks*, hooks refers to the instability of the Black family and classifies it as a reproduced image that is often consumed in Hollywood films. She argues that this is due to the gender imbalance that the Black society suffers from, where Black women consider Black men as monsters who seek to appropriate the white men's attitude towards them (1992, p. 108). As previously discussed, hooks claims that this conflict between Black men and women is reflected in cinema and supports her opinion by mentioning some Black female roles directed by whites that highlight their dissatisfaction with their servitude to whiteness and evoke issues of race, gender, and identity. However, she confesses that as a Black critic, she found it difficult to face the truth that there is a progressive representation of Blackness in some white independent works. She argues that: 'There are black images in work by white filmmakers like Jim Jarmusch and John Sayles that are more radical than black images in Spike's work. But that's largely because when they use a black subject, they're not called upon to be funny' (hooks, 2009, p. 225). Sharon Willis further critiques the marginalisation of Black women in both white and Black directed cinema. In her book *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film* (1997), she refers to the marginalisation of Black women in African American films under the masculinist privilege and the 'new Black male-authored cinema,' which contributes to the split of the Black family on one side and stresses the hegemony of the white society on the other side since this position of Black women is advantageous for the white dominant culture. Thus, she declares that 'While recent male-authored African American films may marginalize women as a by-product of the intensity with which the films pursue an oedipal plot, the limitations of their capacity to represent

Chapter 2

Black women, their tendency to represent them as symptoms, is itself a structural problem and one that gets in the way of a more systemic analysis. Consequently, the symptomatic quality of their competing narratives and the displacements they effect fit rather neatly with certain of the dominant culture's representational agendas' (1997, p. 162). Hence, according to Willis, this structural issue is consistent with dominant cultural agendas that benefit from the ongoing suppression of Black women's narratives.

The stark contrast between Black and white families in *The Help* reflects the film's reinforcement of racial stereotypes. While white families are portrayed as stable, supportive, and resilient despite their personal struggles, Black families are characterised by instability, hardship, and the absence of male figures. This distinction aligns with long-standing Hollywood tropes that glorify white domestic life while depicting Black families as fractured and dysfunctional. In the film, white characters benefit from strong familial bonds that provide emotional and financial stability. For example, Hilly, despite her cruelty, is portrayed as a devoted mother—an opinion shared even by the Black maids. Also, Celia, who was initially an outsider, finds unwavering support from her husband as she attempts to integrate into Jackson's social circles. Similarly, Skeeter's family, despite their disagreements, unites in solidarity to support her mother during cancer treatment. These depictions reinforce the notion of white family unity and resilience, portraying white domestic spaces as sources of strength and stability.

In contrast, Black families in *The Help* are defined by struggle, loss, and economic struggle. Most notably, they are depicted as fatherless and led by women, reinforcing the trope of Black 'matriarchy'—a stereotype that suggests Black women are forced into positions of leadership within their households due to absent or insufficient Black men (Collins, 2000, p. 75). For example, Aibileen is depicted as a single mother who raised her son Treelore alone before losing him. His death has left her isolated and consumed by grief, which she describes as a "bitter seed" growing within her. Minny, as well, has an abusive marriage with a violent, alcoholic husband. Her financial difficulties force her to pull her daughter out of school so she can work as a maid, perpetuating the cycle of servitude that has defined generations of Black women. Even Yule Mae, Hilly's new maid, is forced to take desperate measures: she steals from her boss not out of greed but as a last resort to send her children to college. Instead of being portrayed as a mother working for her children's future, she is swiftly

Chapter 2

criminalised, reinforcing the harmful link between Blackness and criminality (Alexander, 2012; Diawara, 1993; Fleetwood, 2011). By portraying Black households as fractured and struggling, *The Help* reinforces a narrow view of Black family life while presenting white families as stable and supportive. Through focusing on Black female-headed households, the film simplifies their experiences, reducing them to a story of hardship and victimisation. This contrast not only ignores the larger systemic forces that shape Black familial challenges, but it also implies that Black families lack the stability and unity found in their white counterparts.

Not only does *The Help* present Black instability, but *Hidden Figures* also depicts its Black female protagonists as facing opposition at work and in their own homes. Katherine is introduced as a widowed mother of three who must navigate both parental responsibilities on her own. When she first meets Colonel Jim, he dismisses the idea of female mathematicians, doubting their ability to handle difficult, demanding work. This scene emphasises the sexism she faces, which is similarly mirrored in Mary's experience when she decides to become an engineer. Levi, her husband, opposes her ambition not only because of her gender but also because of their shared racial identity, stating, "A female engineer! We are Negros baby, they are no such things, understand it [...] you can't apply for freedom, freedom is never granted to the oppressed, it is got to be demanded, taken." His words reflect a historical scepticism about institutional change, increasing the obstacles these women must overcome.

I argue that the film's depiction of domestic resistance adds another layer to its portrayal of Black women's struggles, implying that their journey is complicated by the dual forces of gender and racial oppression. This is consistent with Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality, as well as Patricia Hill Collins' (2000, 2019) investigation into how overlapping power systems shape Black women's experiences. Crucially, the film portrays these women as defiant and self-sufficient in their personal battles, challenging their husbands' perspectives without the need for outside intervention. Their strength develops from within and from their strong friendships, reinforcing a narrative of Black female empowerment. However, while *Hidden Figures* emphasises their resilience, it eventually reverts to a familiar trope by portraying white characters as instrumental in their fight against institutional racism. Despite their individual strength, these women are unable to

Chapter 2

directly confront the larger structures of white supremacy without the assistance of white allies. This recurring narrative reinforces the problematic notion that Black progress is dependent on white action, subtly reflecting themes of gratitude to whiteness.

As a result, examining how the Black family is portrayed in these films aims to demonstrate that this portrayal reinforces certain stereotypes about Black women. This is illustrated through portraying Aibileen and Minny as mothers who care for white children rather than their own children, as well as emphasising that Black women in *Hidden Figures* are more focused on their positions at NASA than with raising their children, all of which point to the image of 'absent Black mothers.' According to Rousseau in her article 'Social Rhetoric and the Construction of Black Motherhood' (2013), Black mothers in films are portrayed as absent either because of their work outside their houses or because they are caring for white children, which is evident in both narratives examined in this chapter. However, both films highlight how Black women respond by forming strong female friendships between them and sometimes even with their white bosses. Therefore, I will focus on these relations and the impact they have on empowering Black women against racism and oppression they endure in any white environment.



Figure 5 Celia and Minny.

The Help exemplifies the dynamics of interracial friendships by focusing its narrative on the relationships between Black maids and their white employers, reinforcing racial hierarchy. The film depicts several factors that cause white women to form close bonds with their Black maids, including their own alienation from white society. Celia, for example, is a white woman who faces social rejection because of her lower-class background and unconventional behaviour. Unlike the other white women, she speaks informally, wears revealing clothing, and defies the strict social codes of Southern white womanhood. This exclusion stimulates a close friendship with her Black maid, Minny, as they confide in and

Chapter 2

support each other through personal difficulties (Figure 5). What is particularly surprising about their relation is Celia's use of the phrase "if I were you", a rare expression in conversations between Black and white women in the segregated South. Despite the film's attempt to portray their friendship as mutual, it eventually falls into the 'Magical Negro' trope. Minny's primary role in the story is to support Celia, guiding her through her grief following multiple miscarriages, offering advice when she is ignored by other white women, and even teaching her how to be a proper Southern housewife. I argue that rather than presenting Minny as a fully realised character with her own ambitions and complexities, the film portrays her as a source of strength and wisdom for Celia, reinforcing a long-standing cinematic pattern in which Black characters exist to serve white emotional growth.



Figure 6 Aibileen and Mae Mobley laughing.

As part of the discussion around the 'Magical Negro' characters in *The Help*, Aibileen's role as a maid stands for the nurturing relationship with white children (Figure 6). Her bond with Mae Mobley, in contrast to the neglect the child experiences from her own mother, Elizabeth, highlights the deep emotional connections often formed between Black caregivers and the white families they serve. Aibileen not only provides physical care but also fosters values of kindness and racial equality, repeatedly affirming her worth with the phrase, "You is kind, you is smart, you is important." Her decision to teach these lessons reflects her awareness that children absorb the values of the society around them, and she aims to cultivate empathy and fairness in Mae Mobley from an early age. However, by the end of the film, Elizabeth fires Aibileen after contributing to the book exposing the realities of Black maids in Jackson. This pivotal moment is framed using cinematic techniques that underscore Aibileen's dignity and resilience (Figure 7, Figure 8). The film employs low angle shots to depict her as a figure of quiet strength in the face of injustice. As she walks through the house for the final time, the camera moves with her, reinforcing the sense of transition and

Chapter 2

departure. When she and Mae Mobley share their last moment together, close-ups capture their faces in detail, emphasising the emotional weight of their separation. Aibileen's expression conveys sadness, regret, and quiet determination, while Mae Mobley's reflects innocence and confusion, highlighting the depth of their bond and the pain of their forced goodbye. The composition of the scene further reinforces Aibileen's transformation. The interior of the house is filmed in low lighting and confined spaces, symbolising the restrictions she has endured. In contrast, as she steps outside, she is surrounded by natural light, and the open space suggests the possibility of newfound freedom. This visual transition is accompanied by Mary J. Blige's "*The Living Proof*," a song that speaks to resilience and the long struggle for equality. The lyrics and melody reinforce the idea that Aibileen's journey, while marked by hardship, is part of a larger fight for justice, one that continues beyond her own experience. The use of a high angle wide shot as she walks down the street not only marks her departure but also positions her as a symbolic figure of perseverance, suggesting that while her personal chapter in the story has ended, the broader struggle for racial justice endures. In this scene, *The Help* not only captures the emotional gravity of Aibileen's departure but also highlights the deep and complex relationships formed between the maids and the children they care for, as well as the painful realities of segregation and racial injustice. Thus, I argue that Aibileen's departure represents more than just her physical leaving; it represents her personal growth and her decision to leave an oppressive system, marking a poignant moment of both loss and empowerment.



Figure 7 Aibileen crying after leaving Mae Mobley.



Figure 8 Mae Mobley is sad after Aibileen's departure.

Chapter 2

The theme of maids leaving the children they care for is frequently portrayed in *The Help*. For example, Constantine leaves Skeeter's family after teaching her many precious life lessons and dies soon after that because of being away from the white family and Skeeter in particular, as a way of emphasising the Black's dependency on whiteness. In contrast, Minny chooses to stay with Celia and gains a place within this family as their servant for her whole life. Therefore, these Black women stand for the 'Magical Negro' character, especially since Hughey argues that these characters always redeem their white counterparts and then disappear by the film's end, either by walking off into the sunset or mysteriously disappearing in the shadows (Hughey, 2012, p. 758). Therefore, I argue that 'Magical Negro' characters played by the Black domestics in *The Help* are contemporary narratives depicting anti-racist relationships which seem progressive and suggest a 'post-racial' era; however, they enhance the white supremacist messages and reproduce racist discourses of Black servitude and stereotypes.

The interracial relations depicted in *The Help*, which imply progressive white-Black relationships, are not introduced in *Hidden Figures*, where the Black women have no friendships with their white female colleagues. I argue that the absence of such relationships is replaced by the strong bonds between Black women, which I will analyse shortly. By doing so, the film avoids promoting interracial cooperation and friendships to appear progressive and instead brings more realistic social dynamics of the era through the friendships among Black women. The white women in *Hidden Figures*, primarily Mrs Mitchell and Ruth, believe they are more capable than the Black women and are at conflict with one another. For example, their relations are characterised by tension, antagonism and deliberate efforts to maintain racial hierarchies. A good example of the way this relation is interpreted is when Ruth, Harrison's assistant, makes a shoulder shrug when Katherine asks her about the bathroom location. This scene clearly depicts the indifference Katherine receives in the white department and highlights the white racial superiority. Similarly, Mrs Mitchell treats Dorothy and Mary as subordinates rather than equals; despite their effectively managing the computing and engineering departments, she only communicates through orders and assignments. As such, these interactions demonstrate how *Hidden Figures* does not depict racial harmony between Black and white women, nor does it imply that gender solidarity dominates racial discrimination. Instead, the film focuses on how white women in positions

Chapter 2

of relative power frequently maintained racial hierarchies by distancing themselves from Black women rather than forming alliances. In doing so, the film deviates from the common Hollywood tendency to frame progress through interracial friendships and instead presents a more critical view of workplace discrimination, emphasising Black women's resilience in navigating these obstacles.

The second type of female friendship explored in these films is the bond between Black women, which is referred to as intra-racial female friendships. I argue that contemporary Hollywood rarely prioritises these relationships, as most mainstream films centre on interracial dynamics or male-driven narratives. However, a few films do highlight the strength and complexity of friendships among Black women, including *Dreamgirls* (Bill Condon, 2006), *The Secret Life of Bees* (Gina Prince-Bythewood, 2008), *Girls Trip* (Malcolm D. Lee, 2017), *The Help*, and *Hidden Figures*. These films provide a counter-narrative to the historically dominant focus on white-female relationships, focussing on Black women's experiences, mutual support, and resilience.



Figure 9 Mary, Katherine, and Dorothy driving back home.

Hidden Figures goes deeper than merely telling a story of how three Black women overcome endless obstacles to accomplish their dreams; it explores a deep and supportive friendship between women who find ways to lift each other up in the face of adversity. The film's narrative economy ensures that their relationship is more than just a subplot; it is the driving force behind the story, shaping how they deal with discrimination and institutional resistance. Rather than portraying them as isolated individuals, the film repeatedly focuses on their shared experiences, capturing moments of solidarity that reinforce their collective strength. One key scene that underscores this dynamic is when Katherine, who has just been

Chapter 2

sent to the Space Task Group and feels uncomfortable, complains to Dorothy, saying, “Truth be told, Dorothy, I don’t even know if I can keep up in that room; I’ll be back with the computers within the week or out of a job entirely.” However, Dorothy answers her, “Oh please, you’re better with the numbers than anyone in that room, Katherine, and you know it. Just make that pencil move as fast as your mind does; you’ll be fine.” This conversation takes place in Dorothy's car as the women return home after a long day (Figure 9). Rather than isolating each woman's struggle, the scene depicts all three in a single shot, highlighting their unity. Their dialogue not only expresses frustration—particularly Dorothy's dissatisfaction at being denied a supervisory position—but also emphasises the relieving nature of their friendship. Even in times of exhaustion, they find comfort in each other's company, using humour to lighten the mood. Dorothy's authoritative personality, which Mary frequently mocks, becomes a recurring theme in their dynamic, demonstrating how laughter and mutual understanding can be used to resist the oppressive structures they face daily.



Figure 10 Dorothy and her female colleagues heading to the white unit.

Another scene showing Dorothy as a supportive friend is making the condition of taking her Black colleagues when she becomes a supervisor (Figure 10). The camera angle shows a line of Black women marching down a long hallway from the West Black unit to the East White unit. This image is particularly important on screen because it shows that what Black women have achieved at NASA is the work of a team and not individuals. Likewise, Katherine and Dorothy support and encourage Mary to realise her dream of becoming the first Black female engineer in NASA even when her husband stands against her. Also, Katherine has been encouraged by her female friends to have some space for love in her life. These

Chapter 2

examples highlight how the film focuses on reinforcing the strong bond between these female characters in professional and personal spheres.



Figure 11 Dorothy, Katherine, and Mary meeting Colonel Jim Johnson



Figure 12 Dorothy, Katherine, and Mary meeting John Glenn

Throughout the film, the three women are frequently framed together in full shots. This filming method helps in shining the spotlight on these women closely to show the extent of their cooperation and understanding. Moreover, through analysing the film's spatial arrangement of the characters, a notable pattern emerges: Katherine is consistently positioned between Mary and Dorothy, reinforcing her pivotal role in the trio. For instance, when they are driving, Katherine sits in the back middle seat while Dorothy is driving, and Mary is sitting next to her (Figure 9). Similarly, at a community gathering, Katherine stands between her two friends, who encourage her to speak with Colonel Jim Johnson (Figure 11). Even in professional settings, such as when astronaut John Glenn visits NASA, the three women stand together, separated from their white colleagues, with Katherine once again in the middle (Figure 12). Therefore, these recurring compositions suggest that Katherine is always supported by her friends, especially because her mission in the white department is much harder and challenging. Importantly, the visual focus on Katherine does not diminish the value of Dorothy and Mary; rather, it emphasises how their friendship facilitates each woman's success. Katherine's achievement in the white-dominated department is due not only to her individual brilliance but also to the strength and encouragement she receives from Dorothy and Mary. This dynamic is consistent with hooks' (1992, p. 42) and Patricia Hill Collins' (2000, p. 104) discussions of the empowering role of Black female friendships, which

Chapter 2

act as spaces of resistance and affirmation. As such, I argue that *Hidden Figures* goes beyond a simple story of adversity by highlighting both their struggles and their ability to laugh and lift one another, providing a more nuanced portrayal of Black womanhood.

Similarly, in *The Help*, Aibileen and Minny's friendship plays a crucial role in empowering both women as they navigate their hardships. Minny is described as strong and outspoken, despite enduring severe domestic abuse at the hands of her husband. Yet, even as she faces her own struggles, she remains a source of strength for Aibileen, who is grieving the sudden loss of her son while also caring for the neglected Mae Mobley. Early in the film, Aibileen explicitly acknowledges Minny's importance in her life, stating, "After that, I just didn't want to live no more, it took God and Minny to get me through it. Minny, my best friend, old lady like me lucky to have her." This moment of direct focalisation, in which Aibileen expresses her reliance on Minny, strengthens their emotional bond. Their friendship is further emphasised through repeated scenes of them together, a narrative strategy that illustrates their interdependence. One particularly significant scene takes place in Elizabeth's kitchen, where Aibileen and Minny prepare for a social gathering of Jackson's white women. The film uses a medium shot, placing them side by side as they discuss their exhaustion and frustration with their employers (Figure 13). However, their hushed tones and restrained body language highlight the oppressive environment in which they exist. I argue that this scene captures the paradox of their relationship: while their friendship provides emotional support, the systemic racism and economic exploitation they face limit their ability to effect meaningful change. As Collins (2000, p. 104) argues, Black women's empowerment is frequently constrained by intersecting structures of race, gender, and class oppression—an idea that the film visually reinforces.



Figure 13 Aibileen and Minny laughing.

Chapter 2

Although Aibileen and Minny frequently complain about their difficult lives under white employers, Minny's sharp wit and Aibileen's laughter elevate these scenes from pure drama to comedy. As I explained earlier, this portrayal deepens their characters, revealing resilience through humour. Moreover, rather than presenting them as victims, the film emphasises their ability to find strength in shared acts of defiance and camaraderie. Their closeness is made explicit by the secrets they share with one another. For example, Minny first tells Aibileen about her shocking act of revenge against Hilly, and she complains about her inability to find work afterwards. Aibileen, understanding the gravity of Minny's situation, supports her by recommending her to Celia, knowing that Hilly has no influence over Celia. This moment not only demonstrates Aibileen's loyalty, but it also emphasises how their friendship provides a form of survival, both emotionally and financially. A key scene that visually reinforces their bond is when Aibileen, Minny, and Skeeter meet to share stories at Aibileen's house (Figure 14). Minny is consistently positioned beside Aibileen, both of whom are facing Skeeter. This framing establishes a subtle tension between solidarity and separation. Close-up shots are used effectively in this scene to capture Aibileen and Minny's expressions: fleeting glances, shared smiles, or moments of quiet reflection, emphasising their deep, unspoken understanding. Likewise, through these close-ups, the film focuses on the Black maids' perspectives and shows the audience, especially Black, their emotions intimately, demonstrating how much they rely on each other for strength. The blocking of the scene illustrates these dynamics even more. Aibileen and Minny are frequently grouped together in the frame, symbolising their united front. In contrast, Skeeter is frequently positioned slightly apart, emphasising her status as an outsider—both as a listener to their stories and as someone whose privilege distinguishes her. This composition subtly suggests that, while Skeeter may help to raise their voices, the real core of the story is Aibileen and Minny's enduring friendship.



Figure 14 Aibileen and Minny narrating their stories.

In both films, the friendship and solidarity among the central female characters serve as a powerful illustration of Collins' intersectionality concept, which emphasises the importance of solidarity among women across various axes of identity, such as race, class, and gender (2019, p. 186). Their solidarity is based on their shared experiences with racial and gender discrimination, but it is also informed by their individual struggles and identities, reflecting the intersectionality of their experiences. Thus, I argue that many scenes in both films demonstrate that the strong friendship that binds these Black female characters is one of the factors that helped maintain Black society's unity and resilience. These relationships not only oppose the portrayal of Black families as dysfunctional, but they also empower these Black protagonists to resist and stand up to racism and sexism, as I will discuss shortly.

2.5 Narratives of Resilience and Resistance in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*

Most Blacks experienced racial intolerance, violent confrontations and microaggressions in the 1960s in the form of segregated washrooms, buses, coffee pots and both explicit and implicit use of racialised language (Bogle, 2016; Guerrero, 1993). In *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, the Black women respond to these racial discourses, especially with the growth of their sense of resistance. As such, I will show how both films present their Black female protagonists employing the counter-storytelling concept of CRT as a form of activism and resistance, allowing these characters to be more relatable to Black viewers who can construct an oppositional female gaze, as discussed by hooks (1992) and Bobo (1995).

Throughout the film, Aibileen is represented as a devoted woman; the place she possesses in her society helps her to convince other Black women to write down their stories. In fact, Aibileen, before even meeting Skeeter, was writing down her prayers since she has a powerful voice and an effective way of expressing what she and her society want to improve in their lives. When Aibileen decides to stand up against her white masters, she chooses language as a powerful weapon. Thus, the film chooses to use CRT's counter-storytelling concept through Aibileen's character, who teaches Mae Mobley how to love all people and not to judge them according to the colour of their skin, as a way of telling her own authentic story. By doing this, Aibileen hopes that the next generation of white people will be

Chapter 2

different, and racism will be eradicated or at least reduced. Likewise, she aims at teaching the baby girl values based on humanism and equality between all the human races. This 'post-racial' humanism, however, is different from the 'post-racism' criticised in this thesis. 'Post-racism,' as it is frequently questioned, implies that racism is no longer a structural issue and that society has progressed beyond racial divisions, a perspective that can lead to optimism and the erasure of ongoing disparities (Banjo, 2019; Bonilla-Silva, 2018). In contrast, Aibileen's approach acknowledges the existence of racism and seeks to dismantle it through education and moral development. Therefore, the film portrays this as a form of resistance rather than passive acceptance.

Aibileen's growing assertion of her own voice further underscores this transformation. At the beginning of the film, her language reflects her subjugation, stating, "I ended up saying alright, like I always do," which emphasises how her liberty was restricted for the fear of being fired. However, as the events progress, Aibileen begins to speak and confront white characters without fearing them. Her new voice gives her more confidence; she is transformed from being a victim to a victor. She declares, "Truth. It feels cool, like water washing over my sticky-hot body. Cooling a heat that's been burning me up all my life." Thus, Aibileen expresses her own satisfaction after telling the miserable life Black maids were living in Mississippi, which counters the existing stories told by other white characters.



Figure 15 Hilly and Elizabeth confronting Aibileen.



Figure 16 Aibileen confronting Hilly.

Before the last scene of the film (Figure 15, Figure 16), Aibileen asserts her dignity and agency in the face of the oppressive forces represented by Hilly and Elizabeth. As revenge,

Chapter 2

Hilly accuses Aibileen of stealing silver and pressures Elizabeth to fire her and imprison her, highlighting a sort of aggression that Aibileen is objectified to. In this scene, Aibileen returns from shopping and finds both women waiting for her in Elizabeth's living room. The camera captures a full shot of Hilly standing with her head raised and hands on her waist as a sign of power, control, and arrogance, while Elizabeth stands beside her with her head down and looking sad about what Hilly is about to do. Aibileen defends herself gently at first, but when she realises Hilly's goal is to put her in jail for something she did not do, Aibileen approaches Hilly and stands up face to face with her. When Aibileen confronts Hilly and Elizabeth, the camera frequently positions her at a slightly lower angle, implying vulnerability and subordination. However, Aibileen's firm stance and direct gaze, transform this into a position of strength. As such, the camera movements are minimal, allowing the audience to focus on the intensity of the dialogue and the actors' performances. The film captures this moment of transformation in close-up shots of Aibileen, highlighting her fear as well as confidence and sense of freedom. Aibileen's tone becomes stronger and louder, and she shouts at Hilly by saying, "All you do is scare and lie to try to get what you want. You a godless woman. Ain't you tired, Miss Hilly?" Eventually, Hilly's and Elizabeth's reactions are shown in close-ups, which are a mix of shock, dissatisfaction, and discomfort. These reaction shots are crucial in highlighting the shift in the film's focus and power dynamics as Aibileen turns to be a rebellious woman. Thus, Aibileen's "bitter seed" implanted in her heart by the death of her son changes her from a forgiving woman to a fighter against all the racism and oppression she has endured in Jackson. With her persistence, Aibileen turns to an independent person and wins the fight against herself and her white boss. At the end of the film, despite being fired, she does not feel sorry for herself because she has come over her dependency on whites.

In addition to recovering her dignity and agency from her white masters, the film highlights that Aibileen's devotion to her Black community elevates her to a position of prominence among her people. She becomes more respected and popular after the publication of the book since she has transmitted all that they were unable to say. In fact, they organised a ceremony to recognise her and to celebrate her achievement. Not only Aibileen, but also Minny, has crossed racial lines and reclaimed her power through her strong character with her masters. While working for Hilly, Minny challenges her by using Hilly's own bathroom

Chapter 2

and gets fired for that. She gets revenge on Hilly by preparing a special pie with an unpleasant ingredient which later is used as a weapon against Hilly, who tries to hide this secret from everyone. Moreover, by the end of the film, Minny has been treated very well by Celia and her husband, where she has been invited to join them for dinner and been served by Celia herself. Hence, this act is considered an achievement for Minny since Black servants are not allowed to eat or sit in the same place with their masters. Therefore, I argue that Aibileen and Minny manage to restore their identity and being; they feel freer than the whites who are locked in their feeling of superiority. Thus, Hilly and Elizabeth are in their own jail for a lifelong term by trying to convince people that they are not the white women of the maids' book.

Similarly, in *Hidden Figures*, many scenes demonstrate the inner power of the Black women and their use of counter-storytelling method as a form of resistance. For instance, Dorothy complains about not being promoted to a supervisor even though she is already doing the job. Thus, she walks to the white department with her head held high to ask for a promotion where everyone stares at her surprised by her bravery and confidence. Therefore, Dorothy's desire to be promoted symbolises her refusal to be exploited anymore by her white superiors. Moreover, when NASA brought new machines for calculations, Dorothy dares to enter a white library with her two sons and take a book which is not available in their segregated library to learn how to use this new system and justifies her act by mentioning that she pays taxes as whites do. After being escorted out by the security, she explains to her boys while sitting in the back of the bus that separate and equal are two different things and teaches them to be strong and to do what they believe is right as a way of self-empowerment. Thanks to Dorothy's courage, she fixes a problem in the machines, and she is offered the position of a supervisor which she accepts on the condition that she can take her female Black team. Despite the lack of training and opportunities for Black women compared to their white counterparts, and the questioning of their ability to contribute intellectually to the nation, Dorothy's leadership style and her readiness for new assignments allow her and her Black female team to succeed in positions where Black women are thought to be unequipped. Black women's agency in *Hidden Figures* has been discussed by Courtney L. Thompson's article: 'See what she becomes: Black women's resistance in *Hidden Figures*' (2020), where she analyses how Black women in the film

Chapter 2

challenge and resist white supremacy and patriarchy. Thompson argues that these women have endured difficult moments in NASA, but they have surpassed the expectations of others, especially whites. Also, Thompson claims that Black women in *Hidden Figures* work both individually and collaboratively to increase their chances to succeed, she says: 'These acts of resistance, as embodied in Black female mathematicians' fluid leadership styles, helped to form a cohesive and sustainable response to injustice and resulted in social gains that were deeply personal and widespread' (Thompson,2020, p.05).

Moreover, *Hidden Figures* emphasises the need to prove individual capacities in order to succeed in a white world through Mary's determination to be the first Black female engineer in NASA. However, when Mrs Mitchell knows about that, she goes to the coloured ladies' canteen where Katherine, Dorothy and Mary are having their lunch to directly confront Mary as a form of aggression. Mrs Mitchell scolds Mary for applying for such a position and discourages her by loudly saying, "You all should be thankful to have jobs at all." However, Mary, without standing or looking at Mitchell's face, replies with pride: "Every time we have a chance to get ahead, they move the finish lines." When Mary confronts Mitchell, she is shot from a lower angle, which elevates her in the frame and gives her a position of power and assertiveness. The film conveys Mary's emotions and determination in close-up shots. Her facial expressions express her frustration, bravery, and intelligence, while Mitchell's reaction shots emphasise her surprise. Thus, this scene emphasises Mary's courage and challenge to racial barriers in the workplace.

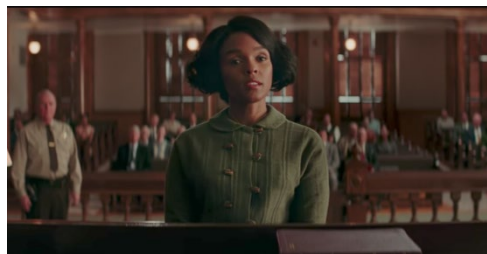


Figure 17 Mary in the courtroom.

Another challenge for Mary is confronting a white judge to obtain permission to attend white classes at a segregated school, a result of systemic racial and gender barriers. The film (Figure 17) captures Mary in a wide shot as she enters the courtroom and then in close-ups

Chapter 2

when she goes as closely as she can to the judge and confidently says to him, “I can’t change the colour of my skin, so I have no choice but to be the first, which I can’t do without you, sir [...] from all the cases you are going to hear today, which one is going to make you the first?” Through these powerful words, Mary wins her case to be the first Black female engineer at NASA. Finally, she manages to attend night classes, where her first entrance into the room is portrayed as disruptive to her white male colleagues and teacher, who is surprised and wonders how he can teach a woman, to which Mary spontaneously responds that it is the same as teaching a man. After that, Mary enquires as to where she can sit because she is aware that Black people are segregated and forced to sit in the back. After receiving no response, Mary chooses the first seat and completes her achievement as the first Black female to cross such cultural and political boundaries. Therefore, through these scenes, the film highlights Mary’s resistance and determination, a narrative that challenges traditional portrayals of Black women as submissive and secondary characters.



Figure 18 Katherine breaking her silence.

In addition to Mary and Dorothy, *Hidden Figures* presents Katherine suffering from racism and sexism in her new position, particularly through the segregated bathrooms. When her boss, Harrison, questions her prolonged daily absences of forty minutes, Katherine enters the room, standing in its centre with wet hair and soaked clothes from the rain outside when she goes to the coloured bathroom. The film captures Katherine’s moment of countering the narrative (Figure 18) as she faces Harrison and looks directly into his eyes, rigorously saying, “There is no bathroom for me here; I have to walk half a mile away just to relieve myself. With my uniform, skirt beneath my knees, my heels, and a simple string of pearls, I don’t own pearls; God knows you don’t pay coloured enough to afford pearls. And I work like a dog day and night, living off coffee from a pot none of you want to touch.” The camera moves closer to Katherine as she delivers her impassioned speech, creating a sense of intimacy and emphasising her frustration and desperation. The camera angles shift between

Chapter 2

Katherine and Harrison, as well as her colleagues' empathetic reactions, emphasising the power dynamics and intensity of the confrontation. These shots convey Katherine's frustration, exhaustion, and the humiliation she feels as a result of the constant discrimination, making her situation deeply personal and relatable to the audience. The scene is carefully composed to depict Katherine's isolation and the challenges she faces in a white-male workplace. Surrounded by her colleagues, she stands alone in her defiance, her presence underscoring both her courage and her sense of being 'othered.' After delivering her speech, a tense silence dominates the room for a few seconds before Katherine turns and leaves the white department without receiving a response. Therefore, based on the above-analysed scenes, I argue that the film emphasises Katherine, Dorothy and Mary's strong characters and their desire to resist discrimination, oppression, and inequality.

The portrayal of Black women's strength in both *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* intersects with the stereotype of the 'SBW.' In the introduction, I explained that according to Harris-Perry (2013, p. 184), this trope implies that Black women are innately capable of bearing great burdens, often at the expense of their own well-being and without adequate support from others. In *The Help*, characters like Aibileen and Minny are depicted as resilient, capable, and enduring in the face of racism and social injustice. Their strength is a central theme; they persevere despite the hardships they face as Black maids in the racially segregated South. However, this portrayal can be double-edged. On one hand, it highlights their resilience and the unjust circumstances they navigate. On the other hand, it risks aligning with the stereotype of the 'SBW.' In contrast, *Hidden Figures* presents a slightly different context. The characters of Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary are portrayed as brilliant, determined, and groundbreaking in their professional fields. Their strength is not just in enduring hardship but also in their intellectual prowess and their pioneering roles at NASA. While the film does highlight their resilience against gender and racial discrimination, it also focuses on their professional achievements and contributions to space exploration. This portrayal, while still intersecting with the 'SBW' stereotype, also expands it by highlighting their professional and intellectual capacities. However, by celebrating these women as extraordinary, these films risk suggesting that Black women must be exceptional to be valued, reinforcing the burden of 'respectability politics' that Racquel Gates (2018) critiques in *Double Negative*. The women's professional and domestic success is framed within a narrative of perseverance

and adherence to dominant social norms—modesty, hard work, and deference to authority—rather than outright defiance or radical resistance. Therefore, I argue that despite the visibility and recognition these characters bring to the experiences and contributions of Black women in both films, these portrayals, while empowering, may reinforce the idea that Black women are expected to endure hardship without complaint or vulnerability.

The resistance of Black female characters in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* is examined in this section through pivotal scenes that capture these women's courage and determination for change. As a result, I argue that these films deconstruct stereotypes of Black women and promote progressive narratives of Black women's empowerment who adopt the counter-storytelling method. However, as I previously demonstrated, the films reinforce negative stereotypes of Black families and Black women's strength and overshadow their experiences by focusing on the roles of 'white saviour' characters. Therefore, I argue that both films present an interplay between perpetuating and challenging stereotypes, creating a paradoxical mood when presenting race relations and dynamics, as I will examine in the following section.

2.6 Navigating Racial Representations: Dualities and Contradictions in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*

The portrayal of dualities and contradictions in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* reveals an underlying instability in how these films deal with race, particularly in their attempts to present a 'post-racial' narrative. This analysis will demonstrate that, while these films aim for transcending or moving beyond the constraints of racial narratives, they also grapple with the complexities and realities of racial issues, resulting in narrative ambivalence. In *The Paradox of Post-racialism: Black Hollywood's Voice in Post-racial Discourse* (2019), Omotayo O. Banjo examines the paradoxical nature of the film industry. She argues that contemporary films released after the election of the first Black president, Barack Obama, present contradictory narratives of racial equality, political and entertainment progress, while racial issues and implicit prejudice persist in American communities (pp. 89-90). Similarly, through

Chapter 2

an analysis of *Hidden Figures* and *The Help*, I argue that the films play on dualities such as entertainment and history, visibility and invisibility, character arc, and racial dynamics.



Figure 19 Dorothy, Mary and Katherine driving to work in a police escort.

The paradoxical blend of tones in *Hidden Figures* is particularly evident in several key scenes. One notable example is when the three women face car trouble on the side of the road and are approached by a police officer. Dorothy, calm and composed, says, “No crime in a broken-down car,” but her outspoken friend, Mary, pointedly adds, “No crime in being Negro, neither.” This exchange immediately establishes a tense yet sharp-witted dynamic, as Mary’s remark subtly challenges the racial prejudice embedded in such encounters. The tension continues when the officer, upon learning that the women work for NASA, hesitates and begins to say, “I had no idea they hire...” Before he can finish, Dorothy tactfully interjects, “There are a few women working in the space programme.” Her choice to emphasise gender rather than race strategically redirects the conversation, minimising the officer’s hidden racism by allowing him to frame his surprise as sexism instead. The scene then takes an unexpected turn as, instead of facing further scrutiny, the women receive a police escort to work (Figure 19), and Mary sarcastically says, “Three Negro women are chasing a white police officer down a highway in Hampton, Virginia, in 1961; that is a God-ordained miracle.” The shift in tone from tense to comedic is further reinforced by the upbeat Pharrell Williams soundtrack and the high-speed ride, during which Mary’s reckless driving unsettles both Katherine and Dorothy.

Another scene of mixing risk and humour, tension and release, which adds to the film’s serious-comic momentum, is the repeated sight of Katherine racing from the Space Task Group on the white East side of NASA’s campus to the coloured restroom on the West side, half a mile away, with her skirt and high heels as she carries stacks of documents which keep falling from her (Figure 20). The camera dynamically follows Katherine as she moves

Chapter 2

between the buildings, with tracking shots capturing her physical journey, emphasising the absurdity and difficulty of her situation. This movement creates a sense of urgency as well as frustration. Furthermore, the use of long shots highlights the physical distance Katherine must travel, visually focusing on the extent of her segregation and discrimination. Wide-angle shots also show the vastness of the NASA campus, which contrasts with Katherine's isolation and the difficulties she faces within this enormous space. However, the editing creates a rhythmic pacing as Katherine is shown making the long journey repeatedly. The absurdity of her situation is highlighted by the repeated action, which adds a touch of humour to the scene. The scene moves quickly, reflecting Katherine's speed and the frequent interruptions to her work. Furthermore, the use of music and sound in this sequence adds to its humorous tone through the cheerful music of Pharrell's "Running," which contrasts with the gravity of the situation, creating an ironic atmosphere that emphasises the delusion of the segregation laws of the era.



Figure 20 Katherine Running to the Black unit.

By the end of the film, a striking parallel emerges as Katherine's repeated sequence of running from one unit to another is mirrored—but this time, by a white character (Figure 21). After Katherine stops working in the white department, on the day of launching Friendship 7, her boss, Harrison, needs her calculations again to secure the mission. Thus, he sends a white worker from his team to search for Katherine. The film portrays, in a long shot, the white worker racing across NASA's East and West sides, struggling to carry stacks of documents while Pharrell's energetic soundtrack plays. Once Katherine verifies the crucial calculations, she and the white worker rush back to the control room, the same fast-paced music playing as she now holds the very documents that will push NASA forward in the Space Race. However, when they arrive, the film makes a significant visual and narrative

Chapter 2

shift. As they enter the mission control room, the white worker moves seamlessly inside, while the door swings shut in Katherine's face, abruptly cutting the music. This sudden silence highlights the racial divide that persists, despite her invaluable contributions. Katherine, visibly dissatisfied, hesitates before turning to leave, only for Harrison to reopen the door and invite her in, creating yet another saviour moment for his character. Therefore, I argue that this mirrored scene is more than just a visual callback; it captures the film's tension between empowering Black female protagonists and adhering to conventional storytelling devices that limit their agency.



Figure 21 A white worker running to the Black unit.

As previously discussed, *Hidden Figures'* tendency to mix contradictory elements in one singular scene does not affect the narrative only but even the visibility of its Black characters. As such, Katherine is portrayed as visible at her workplace due to her race and gender, while also being invisible for the same reasons. For example, when she first arrives in the white department, everyone stares at her because she is the only Black woman in the room, making her extremely visible. However, a few seconds later, Harrison arrives without noticing Katherine and asks his assistant if the new 'human computer' has arrived; then he is told to look behind him, which makes Katherine visible for him now. Another scene which turns Katherine from an object to a subject is when she attends a confidential meeting with only white men. At the beginning she is shown invisible and unwelcomed in the room, but as soon as she is empowered to speak, she becomes clearly visible and beneficial. The camera's framing reinforces this transition, shifting from wide shots that render her marginal to close-ups that affirm her presence. Katherine's ambiguous position reflects larger patterns of racialised visibility. Fleetwood (2011) investigates this in *Troubling Vision*, arguing that representations of Black people in visual culture are frequently characterised by a tension between hyper-visibility and erasure. Thus, Katherine, despite receiving moments of recognition, remains within a framework that prioritises white perspectives. Unlike her, the

Chapter 2

film's other Black female characters are largely invisible, with their contributions to NASA's success downplayed or overlooked.

Contradictions in the film are not limited to individual scenes but also extend to the characterisation of Dorothy. From the beginning of the film, she is portrayed as an authoritative woman with a leadership style and a sense of moral uprightness. However, in the public library scene, she allows herself to steal a book as a peaceful way of answering the segregating laws and shouts at the white officer who puts his hands on her sons, saying, "Get your hands off my boys; don't touch them." Also, before getting inside the library, Dorothy notices a group of Black men protesting peacefully; she then hurries her sons by saying, "Don't pay attention to all that; we are not part of that trouble. Go on." Dorothy's actions create an apparent contradiction. While she refuses to acknowledge the protestors' activism—labelling their lawful demonstration as "trouble"—she herself engages in an act of civil disobedience by stealing the book and openly resisting the officer. This contradiction raises questions about the film's portrayal of resistance: why does Dorothy distance herself from direct activism while engaging in her own, more subtle acts of defiance? In her article, Thompson (2020, p. 05) argues that Black people have diverse ways of asking for their rights and defending their humanity. Thus, some are advocating their civil and human rights in the street, like these men and Levi; others with more educational backgrounds, like the women of *Hidden Figures*, are challenging racial and gender beliefs in their workplaces.

Another paradox in *Hidden Figures* is its attempt to promote a progressive narrative about race relations while simultaneously retaining elements that reinforce traditional racial hierarchies. The film positions itself as a corrective to historical omissions, bringing visibility to the lives and achievements of Black women who have long been overlooked. It highlights their contributions to NASA despite the systemic racism and sexism they endured, portraying them as complex individuals who actively resist oppression and pursue their ambitions. Moreover, the film concentrates on Black female friendship and demonstrates its importance to resist and survive. I argue that showing this side of Black life on screen is indispensable because it highlights the strong bonds existing among them and how their solidarity and unity help them resist and achieve social changes.

Chapter 2

Despite these progressive elements, some narratives that I will discuss create contradictions. First, the inclusion of ‘white saviours’ and the focus on their journey to help, rescue and save Black people diminishes the role of the Black women and reinforces the continued servitude and gratitude for whites. Second, the existence of overtly racist white antagonists, who use racialised language and stand as obstacles in front of the Black women, conveys the persistence of racial bias. The third, and perhaps most significant contradiction, is the inclusion of fictionalised events in a story based on real historical figures. The bathroom scene, which amplifies Harrison’s role as a saviour, is a notable example of this. In reality, no such dramatic confrontation took place, nor did a white male supervisor tear down a segregation sign to symbolically grant equality. The creation of Harrison—a composite character—exemplifies the film’s broader tendency to frame racial progress as dependent on the moral awakening of white figures. It is important to acknowledge that *Hidden Figures* is not a documentary; it is a mainstream feature film that adheres to narrative conventions designed for mass appeal. Therefore, the invention of Harrison’s saviour moment reflects the film’s effort to reconcile America’s racial past with a more palatable, redemptive vision of history. By assigning a crucial act of defiance to a white character, *Hidden Figures* softens its critique of systemic racism, making the struggle for civil rights more digestible for mainstream audiences. This choice does not negate the film’s significance in bringing Black women’s contributions to light, but it does highlight the limitations of Hollywood’s approach to telling these stories.

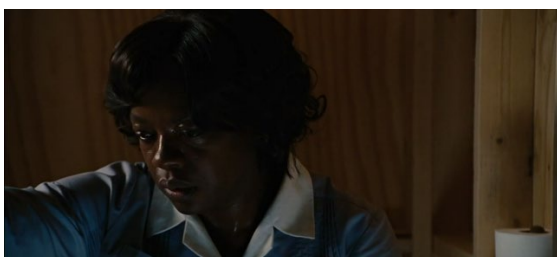


Figure 22 Aibileen using the coloured bathroom.



Figure 23 Aibileen holding Mae Mobley after using a separate bathroom.

Correspondingly, contradictions and playing on different dualities exist also in *The Help*. Many scenes in the film exemplify the paradoxical and contradictory nature of race relations at that time. For instance, after the white women agree with Hilly to install a separate

Chapter 2

bathroom for their maids, Aibileen ironically says, “I use my coloured bathroom from now on, and then I go on and Clorox the white bathroom again really good.” Through Aibileen’s answer, we understand that it is perfectly acceptable for a Black woman to clean up after a white family, but it is unacceptable for her to use the same facilities as them. Also, sarcastically, the white women are served by their Black maids, who are not allowed to touch the food they have prepared with their own hands after serving it to their masters. In a scene that gathers most of the white women of Jackson in Elizabeth’s house, Hilly, while playing cards, refuses to use the bathroom because she is afraid Aibileen is using it as well. After insisting on her, Hilly says that these Black women carry different diseases, and she launches the home health sanitation initiative to protect their children from them. However, white children in this story are looked after by their Black nannies, who take care of them and of all their needs, from feeding and cleaning to tenderness. Another scene proving the contradiction in which the white women are living is when Elizabeth waits for Aibileen outside her new separate bathroom to take care of Mae Mobley. Elizabeth stands with arrogance, well-dressed, away from the bathroom, warning her daughter of using or touching it. Whereas Aibileen is captured by the camera inside her new bathroom from bottom to top, with sweat dripping from her forehead with the noise of flies (Figure 22, Figure 23). Just after Aibileen gets out from the bathroom, Mae Mobley kisses and hugs her by saying, “You are my real mama, Aibee.” Hence, I argue that this scene demonstrates the controversial way Black maids in *The Help* are treated by the white female characters, commenting on the film’s instability about presenting Black-white dynamics. Yet, it also illustrates the craziness of US race relations, with its long history of Black nannies and white babies.

Like *Hidden Figures*, *The Help* also presents a paradoxical narrative that is both progressive and problematic. As such, the film highlights the racial injustices faced by Black maids, demonstrating their struggles and the humiliations they face. Moreover, characters such as Aibileen and Minny are portrayed as strong and nuanced individuals who defy certain stereotypes about Black women. Their act of telling their stories to Skeeter, a white woman, is a form of resistance and assertion of their dignity. However, the film falls into ‘the white saviour’ trope, with Skeeter, a white woman, portrayed as the catalyst for change and the one who gives the Black maids a voice, overshadowing their agency. Similarly, the film

simplifies the harsh realities of the era, offering a more palatable version of history that focuses on interpersonal relationships rather than the systemic nature of racial oppression. As a result, certain stereotypes, such as the 'Mammy' figure and 'SBW,' are perpetuated in the film's portrayal of Black female characters. Consequently, *The Help* presents a dualistic narrative that can be viewed progressive while also incorporating problematic aspects that can undermine its progressive intentions.

Through the analysis of *Hidden Figures* and *The Help*, I argue that this technique of using dual elements and presenting contradictory events and characters has given the films an ambivalent atmosphere. The mixing of humour and tension, the visibility and invisibility of some characters, and the different ways of presenting their personalities and attitudes towards freedom suggest that both films are unstable about the way to present race in an industry promoting 'post-racial' portrayals. Hence, this mood of paradox and contradiction establishes a complex interplay between acknowledging racial disparities and aspiring to a narrative of racial transcendence.

2.7 Conclusion

In concluding this chapter, I recognise the intricate interplay between progressive representation and subtle reinforcement of traditional stereotypes of Black women in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*. Both films depict Black women serving white people, but their portrayals differ significantly due to different educational levels. *The Help* focuses on Black maids in domestic roles, whereas *Hidden Figures* focuses on educated Black women in NASA, emphasising how education influences character dynamics and societal roles. These films also serve as historical narratives with elements of the 'white saviour' trope, which diminishes the autonomy and significance of Black female characters. However, it is in the depiction of friendships where these films reveal their complexity. Intra-racial friendships among Black women are portrayed as sources of empowerment and resilience, while interracial friendships often fall into the trope of the 'Magical Negro,' positioning Black women as instrumental in the transformation of white characters. The films also highlight Black women's resistance and opposition to oppression and discrimination, displaying their agency and strength. This portrayal, however, is not free from contradictions. The narrative elements and racial dynamics in both films are paradoxical, emphasising the struggle

Chapter 2

between agency and stereotyping. By examining these nuances, I argue that *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* navigate the delicate balance of reinforcing and challenging entrenched racial stereotypes covered in new forms that are difficult to recognise due to the great effort made to make such narratives sound anti-racist. Moreover, I argue that these films enhance the belief that sufficient progress has been made in portraying Black people on screen, which is, as I argue, not the case yet.

Chapter 3 Confronting Systemic Challenges: Nuanced Portrayal in White Contemporary Settings (*Widows* / *American Son*)

3.1 Introduction

Widows is a 2018 heist thriller film directed by the British director Steve McQueen set in contemporary Chicago, based on the 1983 British television series of the same name. The film revolves around four women from different ethnicities who get to know each other through chaos caused by the loss of their husbands, who died on a heist together. Viola Davis plays Veronica Rawlings, a Black woman who is grieving the death of her son and whose emotional state is impacted by the discovery of her husband's death. Her white husband, Harry Rawlings, played by Liam Neeson, is a criminal who fakes his death in a heist gone wrong and leaves a debt of two million dollars behind him to his wife, who gets threatened by the crime boss Jamal Manning, who needs the money to support his campaign for alderman of a South Side ward in Chicago. The robbery which caused Harry's death also caused the death of three other men who work with him, Carlos, Florek and Jimmy. Veronica decides to carry out a heist detailed in a notebook left by her husband with a plan to steal five million dollars from Tom Mulligan, the previous alderman and the father of Jack, Jamal's competitor in the campaign. Veronica recruits two widows of Harry's gang: Alice, played by Elizabeth Debicki, a Polish immigrant in the USA who is lost after the death of her husband and forced by her mother to become a prostitute; and Linda, a Mexican woman played by Michelle Rodriguez, a former owner of a clothing store lost due to her husband's secret gambling. Also, Linda recruits her babysitter Belle, played by Cynthia Erivo, to be their driver. The women successfully execute the heist despite the obstacles they encounter. Eventually, Linda retrieves her store, Alice opens her own business, and Belle helps her friend who has debts and moves away. Veronica donates her money to build a school library named after her son Marcus.

In contrast to *Widows*' thriller atmosphere, *American Son* is a 2019 drama film directed by Kenny Leon and based on Christopher Demos-Brown's Broadway play of the same name.

Chapter 3

The events of the film take place in a Miami police station on a stormy night as Kendra Ellis Connor, played by Kerry Washington, and her husband, FBI agent Scott Connor, played by Steven Pasquale, wait for a report on their missing mixed-race son, Jamal. Paul Larkin, the police officer played by Jeremy Jordan, is unable to give her any update because of protocol and his lack of urgency and care. After a long wait, Larkin informs them that Jamal and two other Black men were stopped by police and that his car has a provocative bumper sticker that reads, "shoot cops with your phone whenever they make a bust." This revelation leads to a long debate between Kendra and Scott, in which they confront their turbulent marriage and their experiences raising a biracial son in a privileged community. Kendra repeatedly mentions Jamal's feeling of depression and isolation as one of the few Black kids at his school (referring to himself as "the face of the race"), while Scott claims Jamal should not have presented himself as a "gangster." The film ends when the parents learn that police accidentally killed their son. Both are devastated by the news, and Scott, who suffers from heart disease, says, "I can't breathe."⁵

Cinema's influence as a medium for addressing social issues and advancing the representation of underrepresented communities has been discussed by bell hooks in *Reel to Real: Race, Class, and Sex at the Movies*; she argues that because films are so accessible, they provide 'diverse audiences' with a 'common starting point' to address issues of race, gender, and class. In her work, hooks also discusses 'cinema's capacity to create new awareness, to transform culture right before our very eyes,' particularly because films shape and transform our view of the world (2009, pp. 02-09). The ability of films to respond to changing socio-political situations has been mentioned in Donald Bogle's interview with Valerie Russ in 2019:

I do think that film responds to what is happening in social movements. Five years ago, most of my white students, and some of the black students I teach at NYU, thought we were in a 'post-racial' society. They couldn't see why it was important

⁵This phrase was spoken by Eric Garner in 2014 as he was placed in a chokehold by a New York Police Department officer during an arrest for allegedly selling untaxed cigarettes. Garner repeated the phrase eleven times before losing consciousness and later dying. The incident, captured on video, sparked national outrage and became a defining moment in the Black Lives Matter movement, symbolizing police brutality and systemic racism. Since then, "I can't breathe" has been widely used in protests and social justice advocacy, reinforcing demands for police reform and racial justice.

Chapter 3

to write their black characters with a sense of their particular culture. Now today's students have come of age in [the] age of Black Lives Matter and police shootings. They are looking at what films can do and should do. ... We are in a kind of renaissance in a way (Bogle, 2019).

In this quote, Bogle reflects his conviction that cinema has grown as a responsive medium that reflects societal changes and movements. His choice of the term 'renaissance' implies that he sees this as a time of renewed interest and progress in film representations of Black culture and experiences. This connection between visual culture and real-life issues is often seen in recent films, with many Hollywood films responding to the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM). In the book chapter 'Living in *Zootopia*: Tracking the Neoliberal Subject in a Colorblind World,' Sarah Nilsen mentions that in 2013, the movement began with a social media hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter, after George Zimmerman's acquittal in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin in 2012. Following the deaths of Michael Brown in Missouri and Eric Garner in New York in 2014, the movement gained national traction. Since then, it has grown into a global movement, particularly following the death of George Floyd⁶ at the hands of Minneapolis police (Nilsen, 2019, p. 62). Nilsen argues that this social movement is dedicated to combating racism and police brutality against African Americans. It also condemns unjust police killings of Black people and demands that society value Black people's lives as much as it values white people's lives (2019, p. 62). Moreover, Nilsen states that what has contributed to a growing public awareness of the BLM movement is the widespread availability of phones and internet, or 'digital connectivity,' which enabled the immediate upload and posting of videos of police abuse to a large public (2019, p. 62).

Because, as I mentioned earlier, cinema is influenced by societal and cultural movements (Bogle, 2019; hooks, 2009), especially in the so-called 'post-racial' era, the issue of police brutality, the BLM movement, and the role of social media in raising awareness have emerged as the most prominent themes in films about Black people in recent years. Among

⁶ George Floyd was an African American man whose death on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, at the hands of police officer Derek Chauvin sparked widespread protests and civil unrest. Chauvin, a white police officer, knelt on Floyd's neck for over nine minutes despite Floyd's repeated pleas that he could not breathe. The incident, captured on video, ignited global demonstrations against police brutality and systemic racism, significantly influencing discussions on racial justice, law enforcement reform, and civil rights in the 21st century. Floyd's death became a catalyst for the BLM movement, prompting legislative efforts and institutional reckoning with racial inequality.

Chapter 3

the most important productions on these themes are *Fruitvale Station* (Ryan Coogler, 2013), *The Hate U Give* (George Tillman Jr, 2018), *Widows* and *American Son*. Moreover, the cultural representations and responses to the BLM movement have been explored in the article 'No Medicine for Melancholy: Cinema of Loss and Mourning in the Era of #BlackLivesMatter' (2017) by Michele Prettyman Beverly. She examines the role of cinema in expressing themes of loss, mourning, and racial injustice in the context of the movement. Beverly contends that films released during the BLM movement raise awareness by making Black people's grief and injustice 'virtual, mobile, shareable, disseminated, posted, and messaged' (Beverly, 2017, p. 84). Following Beverly's argument, in this chapter, I analyse two notable films, *American Son* and *Widows*, which stand out as significant contributions to the ongoing dialogue in contemporary American society about racial dynamics, police brutality, and the theme of mourning, but particularly through the perspective of Black women. Thus, I explore the films' presentation of the often-unseen mental anguish that Black female characters experience in a supposed 'post-racial' narrative that frequently fails to acknowledge their struggles.

This chapter examines *American Son* and *Widows* as cinematic narratives portraying the complex realities of Black female protagonists navigating interracial relationships, societal expectations and racial tensions while challenging the context of 'post-racial' America. By doing so, I argue that these films contribute to a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by their Black female characters in what is often mistakenly perceived as a 'post-racial' America. As a result, the fact that these films deconstruct the oversimplified notion of a 'post-racial' society through the lens of Black women characters indicates a multidimensional and critical portrayal of Black women. This multidimensionality challenges historical stereotypes of Black women and reflects the complexities of their experiences, empowering and evolving their representation.

In this chapter, I choose to compare *Widows* and *American Son* because they contribute to our understanding of the evolving representation of Black women in contemporary cinema by emphasising both instances when they are empowered as well as when they are reduced to stereotypes. Each film portrays its protagonist with distinct personal backgrounds, which are shown in various contexts and settings. *Widows* is set in a crime and political drama setting, whereas *American Son* takes place in a more intimate, dramatic setting. The diversity

Chapter 3

of settings emphasises the range of experiences and challenges faced by Black women, moving away from stereotypical portrayals. Moreover, this diversity allows for the films to depict their lead characters with different personality characteristics and motivations. Thus, by comparing these portrayals, this chapter argues that these films offer a progressive representation of Black women in cinema.

Due to the difference in genres and specific narratives, the two films explore the intersection of race and gender in distinct manners. *Widows* incorporates this theme into a broader narrative of crime and politics, while *American Son* focuses on the personal and familial consequences of these intersections. Hence, when compared, they show how race and gender intersect differently depending on the context. Moreover, both films challenge the notion of 'post-racial' America by highlighting the ongoing racial issues that Black women face in these narratives. These films bring Black women's empowerment stories to the forefront, emphasising the importance of their perspectives in understanding contemporary racial dynamics in America. Therefore, by juxtaposing these narratives, this chapter examines the progress and shortcomings in the films' portrayal of their Black female protagonists in this era by demonstrating how various narratives and genres can either reinforce or challenge existing stereotypes and societal views.

This chapter analyses films that portray the experiences of Black women in a supposed 'post-racial' society, who are in interracial relationships and who have to confront systemic and societal racism. The first section explores how the films follow the trend of deconstructing 'post-racialism' by challenging the concept through their Black female protagonists. The films emphasise the illusion of the concept by highlighting the continuous racial dynamics, such as systemic racism and sexism, police brutality and the emergence of the BLM movement as a social and activist response in their narratives. The second section focuses on the Black experience by examining how the films depict the emotions, relationships, and interactions of their female protagonists. This analysis will lead my research to examine the emotional and mental pain that Black women experience in both films as a result of their embodiment in the white environment and the negation of the Black background. The fourth section examines how the two films depict interracial relationships in a contemporary context. It demonstrates the external conflicts about how society perceives such relationships, as well as the internal conflicts based on the couples' differing perspectives on

race and prejudice. Thus, this section argues that the representation of this type of relationship in these films is problematic. The fifth section discusses the various types of racial and gender confrontations that Veronica and Kendra encounter, highlighting the intersections of their race, gender, and class. The last section examines the ways the films oppose the one-dimensional portrayals of Black women by highlighting their strength along with their vulnerability that has been shown while discussing their struggles as mothers and interracial wives. Therefore, this chapter argues that both *Widows* and *American Son* deconstruct the notion of 'post-racialism' by emphasising the continued racial, gender and class prejudice that their Black female protagonists face. This chapter also argues that these Black women are portrayed as complex and multidimensional characters, a shift that counters stereotypes, reflects reality, and empowers through representation.

3.2 Deconstructing the Myth of a Post-Racial America

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the election of the first Black president, Barack Obama, in 2008, seemed to herald a new cultural and political era in American society that some saw as a 'post-racial' era. The sociologist Eduardo Bonilla Silva, in his book *Racism without Racists* (2018), explains that in American society, the concept of a 'post-racial' era refers to a hypothetical state in which racial divisions, inequalities, and prejudices are believed to have been largely overcome, leading to a society in which race no longer significantly impacts individuals' experiences and opportunities (2018, p. 12). However, Bonilla-Silva argues that the concept of a 'post-racial' era is highly debated and frequently criticised for oversimplifying or ignoring ongoing racial inequalities and systemic racism (2018, p. 13). In the same context, Sarah E. Turner and Nilsen, in their book *The Myth of Colorblindness* (2019), argue that many Americans had hoped that Obama's election would improve race relations and offer a culturally transformative time that many people considered to be 'post-racial' (2019, p. 4). However, the belief in a 'post-racial' era in which race no longer matters quickly disappeared in the face of persistent negative stereotypes and racial inequality of African Americans and other racial groups (Turner and Nilsen, 2019, p. 4). Therefore, with the rise of racialised police brutality in 2014 and the emergence of social movements such as the BLM in response to legal injustices against Black people, as

Chapter 3

well as the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the idea of a 'post-racial' America proved to be a cultural myth.

This chapter examines both films in the context of cultural shifts in and debates about a 'post-racial' America. Jason Smith argues in his article 'Between Colorblind and Colorconscious: Contemporary Hollywood Films and Struggles Over Racial Representation' (2013) that films are widely assumed to be influenced by political and cultural environments. He says: 'Hollywood films are reflections of the times in which they are made, whereby the racial representations that audiences see will adhere to the racial order of the given moment' (2013, p. 780). This assertion emphasises the dynamic interplay between film and society, implying that racial representations in cinema are active sites where dominant ideologies are reinforced, negotiated, or challenged. Scholars have conducted extensive research into the impact of American political culture on Hollywood. ED Guerrero (1993), for example, has investigated how Black representation in film frequently operates within a framework of containment, in which industry and audience expectations shape how Blackness is portrayed on screen. Similarly, Boyce Gillespie (2016) has investigated the tensions between racial visibility and Hollywood's tendency to dilute Black narratives in order to appeal to mainstream audiences. These perspectives align with Kathryn Cramer Brownell and Emilie Raymond's argument in 'Hollywood and Politics' (2019), which states that the film industry both shapes and is shaped by national and international political shifts. In the so-called 'post-racial' era, Hollywood attempted to engage with racial issues by casting Black actors in leading roles, but often within narratives that were appealing to a wider audience⁷. In this chapter, I explore how *Widows* and *American Son* respond to the cultural debate around this era by challenging it through the perspectives of their Black female protagonists.

In the second chapter, I argued that *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* are works that reflect the time in which they are set. *The Help* explores the lives of Black maids with their white employers as well as racial discrimination, segregation and the systemic racism faced by Black domestic workers during the Civil Rights Movement. Likewise, *Hidden Figures* captures

⁷ Some examples of contemporary American films that explore racial issues are my case study films from the second chapter, *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*; Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017); Spike Lee's *BlackKklansman* (2018); and Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018).

Chapter 3

the racial and gender dynamics existing in the 1960s by portraying the discrimination Black women face in their workplaces. While these films narrate stories from the past, they are influenced by present time concerns. This interplay between the past and the present is because the films were released during a time when racial and gender issues were ongoing and prominent during Obama's presidency (Bogle, 2016). Therefore, by revisiting the past, both films make connections between the historical and contemporary challenges faced by Black people, especially women.

In this chapter, the films under discussion reflect contemporary American society. *Widows* does not explicitly oppose 'post-racialism' because it reflects some of the era's political, cultural, and social elements, particularly diversity in representation. The film features actors from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. For instance, the cast includes two Black women, a Latina woman, a white woman, Black men, and white men. This representation reflects contemporary American society's multiculturalism and corresponds to Hollywood's growing demand for diversity and inclusion. Moreover, *Widows* examines the intersectionality of race and class by depicting characters from various socioeconomic backgrounds coming together for a common cause. The widows navigate complex power dynamics while challenging societal expectations and engaging in criminal activity. The film emphasises how race and class intersect and influence the characters' opportunities, experiences, and interactions throughout the narrative. Thus, the film might appear to represent 'post-racial' equality in this crime narrative, but, as the analysis will show, it presents a more complex story by emphasising the difficulties of being a Black woman and mother in America by highlighting police brutality.



Figure 24 Veronica's son killed by police.

In *Widows*, the reference to police violence is indirect and implicit through the death of Veronica's mixed-race son, Marcus, during a routine traffic stop. The film withholds the full

Chapter 3

context of this event until later in the narrative, using a flashback sequence (Figure 24) to expose the emotional core of Veronica's grief. This delayed disclosure not only intensifies the emotional impact but also reflects the film's narrative economy, as the trauma of Marcus's death informs Veronica's despair throughout the story. The flashback takes viewers back to the moment Marcus was killed, showing him driving a fancy red car while speaking on the phone with his father. The camera follows the approaching police officer with a slow, horizontal tracking shot, creating a sense of quiet tension. As the officer gets closer to Marcus, the camera lingers on the background: campaign posters for Obama's 2008 presidential campaign bearing the word 'Hope.' I argue that this visual juxtaposition is significant. Marcus' death clearly contradicts the 'post-racial' aspirations symbolised by Obama's campaign, emphasising the persistence of racial profiling and police violence. In her book chapter *The Paradox of Post-racialism: Black Hollywood's Voice in Post-racial Discourse* (2019), Omotayo O. Banjo categorises this tendency as one of the 'post-racial' era's paradoxes, arguing that while Black people appear to be making political progress, others are dying on the streets (2019, p. 90). Thus, the film's reference to Obama and the tragic death of Marcus is implicitly emphasising that the 'post-racial' politics that Hollywood tries to adopt is a myth because of the existing racial inequality and police brutality.

While *Widows* makes an implicit reference to police brutality, *American Son* explicitly addresses the issue and its consequences. The film challenges the concept of 'post-racialism' through the story of Kendra, a Black woman who faces racial prejudice as well as the difficulties faced by her missing son. In *American Son*, Jamal, Kendra's son, puts on his car a bumper sticker stating: "shoot cops with your phone whenever they make a bust," which he posted on his Instagram account as well. Through pointing at the impact of social media, the film reflects the era in which it is produced and shows how modern technology influences racial practices in societies. Although police violence is less predominant than at any other time in American history, the existence of phones, social media, and social movements such as BLM has brought that brutality to light. For example, the police accuse Jamal of inciting violence because of a sticker on his car that he posted on Instagram. Furthermore, the video of the traffic stop that Scott receives emphasises how most people become aware of the new approaches to discrimination that Blacks experience on the roads. In the film, the three

Chapter 3

men view this act as a provocation, but Kendra defends young Black men and explains that "filming cops is all what these kids have; it's their last line of defence."



Figure 25 Kendra and Scott knowing the death of their son.

In the last scene of *American Son*, the film makes a direct reference to police brutality following the revelation of Jamal's death (Figure 25). Scott is shown in severe pain and declares, "I can't breathe", a phrase linked to Black people who have been killed in the streets, particularly Eric Garner and George Floyd (refer to ⁵ and ⁶). This moment carries significant narrative and symbolic weight; Scott's use of this phrase functions on several levels. On a narrative level, it reflects his late realisation of the anguish his wife, Kendra, has been attempting to convey throughout the film—a pain rooted in the constant threat of police violence against their son because of his racial identity. The film uses this moment of shared grief to highlight the situation's racial irony: Scott, a white man who initially dismissed Kendra's concerns, must go through personal loss before realising the gravity of police brutality. On a broader, social level, the scene appears to be aimed at an implicit audience outside of the Black community. Scott's emotional reaction humanises the experience of police violence for viewers who might otherwise remain detached from the realities of racial profiling. Therefore, by focusing on a white character's grief, the film highlights systemic racism while appealing to a larger, predominantly non-Black audience to view police brutality as a societal, rather than a racial, issue. *American Son* criticises the complacency of those who see this violence as distant, urging collective recognition and action.

In *American Son*, Kendra's son is framed as a faceless Black teenager, as well as in *Widows*, where Veronica's son is only shown in a single shot for a few minutes in his death scene. I argue that the films avoid showing their faces to avoid associating racism with specific individuals in American society. As a result, both films connect to contemporary American

Chapter 3

society by emphasising racial and social issues as a response to the current state of injustice and inequality. Similarly, the films depict tensions between African Americans and American police. Veronica, for example, decides to plan a heist and commit illegal acts rather than inform the police after being threatened by Jamal, the Black politician. Furthermore, while waiting for news about her son, Kendra has been arguing with police officers all night. As a result, I claim that the films depict real-life experiences of Black people's distrust of American law enforcement, which originates from years of servitude, inequality, and victimhood (Michelle Alexander, 2012).

Another important way *Widows* and *American Son* demonstrate that the 'post-racial' era in America is a myth, as argued by Bonilla Silva (2018) and Turner and Nilsen (2019), is by emphasising political corruption, economic inequality, and societal divides in their narratives. *Widows*, for example, emphasises the influence of wealthy and powerful individuals on politics and the impact of their actions on marginalised communities through the subplot of the campaign for alderman of a South Side ward between the Black politician Jamal Manning and the white politician Jack Mulligan. Also, the film depicts the widows' economic struggles and their need to take dangerous actions to survive. Thus, *Widows* sheds light on the persistent economic disparities in American society, as well as the limited options available to marginalised communities.

Whereas *American Son*, although its primary focus is racial and gender prejudice, as well as police brutality, it also indirectly addresses political corruption and economic inequality in American society. In the film, the interactions between Kendra and the police officer highlight potential biases, misuse of power, and a lack of responsibility within law enforcement, as I will discuss in detail. These elements demonstrate larger systemic issues, which can be interpreted as a reflection of a corrupt system that negatively impacts marginalised communities. Furthermore, it appears from a discussion of Kendra's childhood memories with her husband that they come from different socioeconomic backgrounds. This fact contributes to their relationship's tensions and illustrates the differences in opportunities and resources that exist between social classes. As a result, this depiction implies that economic inequity can intersect with racial profiling and police violence.

In this section, I have examined the various elements that *American Son* and *Widows* use in their narratives and character arcs to contradict the concept of 'post-racial' American society and label it as a cultural and racial illusion. Both films emphasise the pervasive issues of police brutality, racial bias, and discrimination within law enforcement to highlight the failure to achieve a 'post-racial' society. Finally, the films' opposition to the era is significant because they highlight the stories of Black women's struggles, empowering their voices and portraying them as active characters in effecting change.

3.3 The Representation of the Black Experience in *Widows* and *American Son*

In this section, I will analyse how the films use specific cinematography techniques to convey the contradictory nature of their characters, particularly the Black female protagonists. In addition, I will discuss how these films portray Kendra and Veronica in a predominantly white environment, which ignores their racial background and risks establishing colour-blind casting.

The opening of *Widows* is distinguished by its use of cross-cutting, which interweaves three distinct narrative threads: an intimate moment between Veronica and Harry, a police chase as Harry and his crew flee after a robbery, and brief flashbacks of the men with their wives that provide a glimpse into their personal lives. The chase scene, set at night, is surrounded by darkness, signalling the ensuing chaos and tragedy. The sound of gunfire and shouting is quickly replaced by the calm, light, and peaceful atmosphere of Veronica's house. This shift introduces a sequence of three concise character-establishing scenes. The first presents Linda in her clothing store, captured through a wide panning shot that initially lingers on children playing outside before revealing her confrontation with Carlos, whom she accuses of stealing. The second focuses on Alice during breakfast with her abusive husband, who instructs her to cover her bruises with makeup, which are visible due to the close-up shot of her face. The third scene depicts Amanda preparing breakfast for her husband, Jimmy, who coldly dismisses her presence with a brief kiss on the cheek before leaving without a word.

The camera returns to the chase scene soon after, indicating the end of the chase by the explosion of the van and the deaths of the four men, which relieves the intensity of the

Chapter 3

scene and events. The sudden transition from the warmth and calm of Veronica and Harry's home to the cold, violent reality of the robbery underscores the dualities that define both the characters' lives and the city they inhabit. Through these juxtapositions, the film presents Veronica and Harry's clean, luxurious, and luminous home as a visual counterpoint to the darker, more chaotic spaces associated with the other characters, implicitly illustrating the societal divide that fuels the film's narrative conflict.



Figure 26 Kendra in a police station.

In contrast to *Widows*, which begins by introducing the various settings, characters, and events of the film, *American Son* begins with a cultural and political exploration of race, identity, and police brutality in America. The film is set in a police station in the early hours of the morning, with a wide shot focusing on Kendra, who is anxiously waiting for information about her missing son, Jamal. Kendra is shown in a wide shot sitting cross-legged on a sofa as the camera slowly zooms in on her face (Figure 26). At this point, quick and silent close-up flashbacks show Kendra screaming and irritated without revealing the reason or the person with whom she is arguing. The events of the film take place in a single location, the dark room of the police waiting room, which is surrounded by glass windows that reveal the heavy rain and thunder of a stormy morning. As a narrative device, the confined setting, rain, and time all contribute to create a powerful sense of tension and unease within the atmosphere. Therefore, confining all these dark emotions within a small space helps in emphasising the characters' emotional state and enhances feelings of insecurity and fear.

This opening scene immediately conveys the fear and vulnerability experienced by many Black mothers in a society where police violence is a persistent issue. In the article 'No Medicine for Melancholy' (2017), Beverly analyses the themes of fear and loss in films

Chapter 3

produced during the BLM era like, *Fruitvale Station*, and argues that cinematic production that emerged during this social movement produces complex relationships to mourning and the impact of police brutality on Black communities, particularly mothers (2017, p. 89). In *American Son*, besides exploring the themes discussed by Beverley, the setting references a history of racial discrimination and unequal treatment of African Americans by law enforcement. Thus, the opening scene reflects larger systemic issues of racial bias and discrimination in America. It emphasises the critical need for criminal justice change as well as the ongoing struggle to address police brutality. By focusing on Kendra's anxiety and the lack of empathy she receives from the police officer, the scene reveals the fundamental structural racism that affects Black people.



Figure 27 Veronica and Harry in bed.



Figure 28 Veronica imagining Harry after his death

As previously described, the very first scene of *American Son* demonstrates, using effective cinematography techniques, that the film is culturally and politically embedded. In the same way, *Widows*, through the setting, lighting, and imagery, reflects social and cultural references. The first scene between Veronica and Harry (Figure 27) is a close-up shot which focuses on the two characters who are surrounded by whiteness, from the walls of their bedroom to the bedding and furniture and even their dog 'Olivia.' Nicole Fleetwood's concept of "Excess Flesh," discussed in *Troubling Vision*, provides an important lens through which to examine the visual dynamics of Veronica's Blackness in intimate scenes with Harry. Fleetwood argues that Black bodies are frequently hyper-visible in visual culture, especially when contrasted with whiteness, which is portrayed as a neutral or dominant backdrop (2011, p. 106). In this context, the stark contrast between Veronica's dark skin and Harry's lighter skin is not just an aesthetic choice but also a narrative device that emphasises the racial dynamics of their relationship. The use of white in the scene heightens this contrast,

Chapter 3

positioning Veronica's body as both hyper-visible and vulnerable, while subtly evoking the societal power imbalances that exist outside of their private space.

This interplay of light and contrast extends beyond the bedroom, shaping the emotional atmosphere of Veronica's home as a whole. The stark whiteness of the walls and furniture, combined with the large glass windows overlooking the cold, blue lake, reflects her emotional isolation. In a night scene, after Harry's death, Veronica stands alone by the window, gazing at the dark sky while listening to Nina Simone's 'Wild is the Wind.'⁸ The camera captures her from behind, while her reflection in the glass creates the illusion of Harry embracing her (Figure 28). The music playing over this scene conveys a hopeless situation through the use of the instruments, the slow rhythm, Simone's warm voice, and the depressing lyrics that allude to separation and the need for care and love. The house thus becomes more than a physical setting; it serves as a visual and emotional representation of her grief and isolation—a theme the following section will explore in more depth.

The use of flashbacks and the emphasis on setting and visual narratives in both *American Son* and *Widows* have a significant impact on viewers' engagement with and understanding of the films and their respective cultural and social issues. In *American Son*, flashbacks are used to provide important backstory and context for the characters' relationships and experiences. As the film progresses, viewers witness past interactions and events that deepen their understanding of Kendra's emotions, conflicts, and motivations. For example, Kendra decides to confess to Scott that what she sees in her nightmares reflects her childhood sufferings. Kendra moves slowly to sit next to Scott, her eyes welling up with tears, and says, shakingly, that her mother had similar worries about her children, especially after her father abandoned them. Kendra tells Scott about growing up in the segregated South, seeing her mother waiting at the window for her children, as well as hearing police sirens and screams in their neighbourhood. The camera shows Scott speechless and confused, only arguing that he did not know about that and dismisses her experience even though he previously admits her hard upbringing. Thus, flashbacks allow the audience to

⁸ Nina Simone is an important African American singer and civil rights activist, and I will discuss the significance of her song within the film in the following paragraphs.

Chapter 3

empathise with Kendra's struggles and dilemmas on a more intimate level. Also, in *Widows*, flashbacks are used to reveal pivotal moments in the lives of the main characters, shedding light on their circumstances and the decisions that led them to their current difficulties. This engagement with the characters' histories enhances the viewers' devotion to the story by effectively using the narrative to foreground the complex situations of their protagonists.

I previously stated that *Widows* presents Veronica's grief, loss, and personal struggles through various cinematic techniques, one of which is the use of Simone's song. The choice of Simone, a prominent figure in the Civil Rights Movement, to represent Veronica's suffering is significant. Simone is noted for her sensuous voice and consciousness-raising lyrics about anti-Black discrimination and Africana womanist concerns. Many of her songs were composed in the context of Black suffering and rage, both politically and culturally. Mark Anthony Neal, in *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Culture* (1999), examines Simone's activism through music, arguing that: 'Simone was conscious of her potential to capture her audience and chose to be an activist as well as an artist' (Neal, 1999, p. 70). Also, he claims that her compositions also demonstrate an understanding of, and experience with, emotional and psychological themes such as love, stress, and resilience (Neal, P.74). In light of Simone's cultural and political musical background, I argue that the inclusion of her song in this scene does more than provide a melancholic soundtrack to Veronica's solitude; it serves as a cultural and political intervention, linking Veronica's personal pain to a broader historical narrative of Black women's emotional and social struggles. The visual composition of the scene reinforces this connection. Veronica is depicted in her sterile, predominantly white home—a space that visually isolates her from her Black identity. The overwhelming whiteness of the environment functions as a symbol of her disconnection from her cultural roots, suggesting her assimilation into a world that remains, at its core, unwelcoming. This portrayal aligns with Erica Chito Childs' argument in *Fade to Black and White* (2009) that 'the relationship between a white man and a woman of color is acceptable as long as the white man saves her world or the woman comes to his world, either symbolically through a transformation [...] or geographically, by moving into his house or into his entire world' (pp. 87-88). In Veronica's case, her immersion in Harry's world appears to have deprived her of her cultural grounding, leaving her emotionally disoriented in the aftermath of his death. However, the film reintroduces this lost connection through

Chapter 3

Simone's song as a remembrance of Veronica's Black roots; that alone can authentically transmit her thoughts to the audience to capture that moment of Veronica's pain and vulnerability.

Similarly, *American Son* examines Kendra's relationships with her estranged husband and her son, but it does not delve deeply into the history or dynamics of her Black family, which is a way to make this interracial relationship accepted, as argued by Childs (2009, p. 88). Rather, the story revolves around her emotional journey as a mother attempting to navigate a tense and racially charged situation. Therefore, both films ignore the impact of Black female friendships and support, depicting both protagonists navigating their racist and sexist societies alone. In the second chapter, I have pointed at this through focusing on Karen Hollinger's work on intra-racial friendships (1998) and its impact on empowering Black women. According to Hollinger, this type of female friendship is uncommon due to the persistent social structures (1998, p. 180). For example, in *The Help*, Aibileen and Minny's friendship is crucial in empowering Black women during Mississippi's racially segregated 1960s. Furthermore, in *Hidden Figures*, female friendship serves as a source of empowerment and resilience for Katherine, Mary, and Dorothy during a period of systemic racism and sexism. As a result, this type of relationship strengthens mutual support, promotes ambition and solidarity, and, most importantly, challenges persistent stereotypes.

Both hooks (1992) and Collins (2000) discuss the negative impact of Black women's lack of female friendships and how this affects their awareness and well-being. As such, in *American Son* and *Widows*, this empowering social practice is missing, which has had a significant impact on portraying these Black women emotionally suffering. The Black protagonists' ignorance or minimisation of their Black background in both films is a deliberate choice to comment on 'post-racial' ideals. Colour-blindness is one of the era's concepts, which suggests that ignoring racism allows Americans to be racist without sounding racist, as argued by Bonilla-Silva (2018, p. 7). Furthermore, casting Black women in unfamiliar environments is defined as colour-blind casting, which is a 'post-racial' ideal (Warner, 2015)⁹. Both films, however, challenge colour-blind casting and 'post-racial' concepts by

⁹ Colourblind casting is the practice of casting actors in roles without regard to their race, ethnicity, or skin colour. The aim is to place talent and performance above racial or cultural identity. However, scholars have

highlighting the racial and sexist prejudice that these women face in both stories within the context of colour-blindness.

In this section, I have looked at how the Black experience and lives are presented through specific cinematography choices in both films, such as flashbacks, setting, and lighting, which add depth and emotional connection to the narratives. I argue that by using this narrative technique, the films enrich their protagonists' complexities and emotional journeys while emphasising the films' social and racial contexts. However, despite the strengths of both films, the Black roots and family backgrounds of the Black female protagonists are slightly overlooked. Thus, I argue that the films appear to embrace colour-blind casting at first, but they actually oppose it by portraying and engaging with the Black women's race, which eventually challenges 'post-racialism.'

3.4 The Pain of Black Women in *Widows* and *American Son*.

The focus on the emotional pain of Black women in *American Son* and *Widows* provides a powerful commentary on contemporary culture while also reshaping and expanding the representation of Black women in cinema. Both films deal with issues that are relevant to modern socio-political challenges, such as police violence, racial profiling, and systemic discrimination, either directly or indirectly. The films add a personal dimension to broader societal issues by highlighting the emotional toll these issues take on Black women. Thus, narratives referring to Black women's pain and struggle enrich their representation. Many scholars (Bogle, 2016; Collins, 2000; Fleetwood, 2011; Gates, 2018; hooks, 1992; Mask, 2012) argue that the pain of Black women originates from the stereotypical images with which they have been associated, as well as societal views that oppress and marginalise them. Both films emphasise that the complexities of Veronica and Kendra's emotions are the result of social pressures and the difficult circumstances they face. Thus, in this section, I investigate how emotional pain manifests in the protagonists' lives in a narrative that depicts sexist and racist acts.

criticised this approach for ignoring the social and historical significance of race, potentially erasing marginalised groups' lived experiences and reinforcing the false notion of a 'post-racial' society.

Chapter 3

In *American Son*, the opening scene capturing Kendra in the police station's waiting room indicates that the film is not about her missing son; rather, it is about Kendra's struggle as a Black mother raising a Black son in a society that always assumes her failure and his criminality, even though that same society claims to be 'post-racial.' The film focuses on showing that Kendra struggles to fit herself and her son into the white world by repeatedly expressing her concerns about her son's awakening to his Black identity and a confrontation with the police. As a result of her fear and integration into the white society, the film highlights that Kendra has done everything right for her son. For instance, Kendra's distress about Scott's use of nonstandard phrases like "Alls" and "the whole another" emphasises his racial and social privilege as a white man. His linguistic decisions, while grammatically incorrect, have no social consequences for him because his whiteness gives him the presumption of intelligence and competence. Kendra, in contrast, has worked hard to ensure that her son speaks standard English, fully aware that as a Black boy, any deviation from linguistic norms will be encountered with harsher scrutiny. Her concern reflects a larger societal reality in which language is frequently used to reinforce racial stereotypes, with Black people being unfairly associated with a lack of education based solely on their speech.

In the confrontation scene (Figure 29), Kendra and Scott are shown in a wide shot facing each other while she says, "you know how I killed myself so that Jamal speaks proper English [...] as hard as I worked to make him fit in." I argue that Kendra's statement reflects the burden of assimilation to the standards of a white society, as well as her efforts to help her son navigate a society riddled with entrenched racial biases and expectations. Furthermore, Kendra's words express her anxiety and pain as a Black mother by reflecting her concerns about her son's struggles with identity and belonging. Therefore, the film emphasises that Kendra's pain is the result of the pressures of assimilation and her fear of a racially divided society.

Chapter 3



Figure 29 Kendra and Scott confrontation.

The narrative theme of the death of a Black son and the resulting pain experienced by Black mothers has been explored in literature, film, and media discourse, particularly in the context of racial violence and systemic oppression (Beverly, 2017). The topic has gained prominence in recent years because of the widely publicised deaths of Black people at the hands of police officers, as well as the following movements for justice and change, mainly the BLM. In both *American Son* and *Widows*, the death of a Black son is a central theme, but it is approached distinctly in each. I have been arguing that *American Son* portrays Kendra's fear and anxiety about her son from a society embedded with racial profiling and injustices. As a result, the film emphasises Kendra's anguish and emotional instability as she desperately seeks answers about her son's fate, demonstrating the impact that racial injustices can have on a parent's mental state. However, in *Widows*, there is a limited reference to the death of Veronica's son, Marcus. While Marcus's death is a pivotal event in the story, the film chooses to focus on the emotional aftermath on Veronica rather than the tragedy itself. By not explicitly showing the death, I argue that the film allows for a more in-depth examination of her character and her development throughout the story.

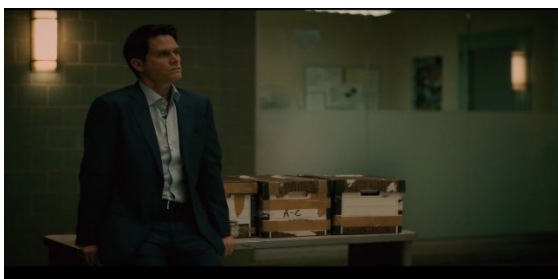


Figure 30 Scott debating with Kendra.

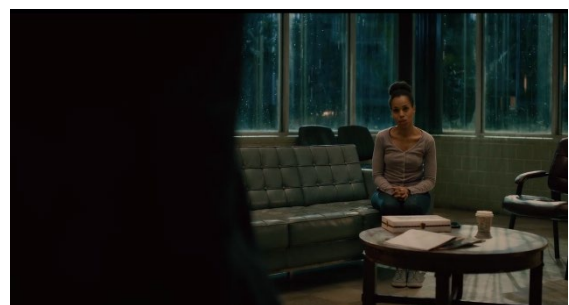


Figure 31 Kendra debating with Scott.

Chapter 3

Moreover, both films highlight the emotional and mental impact of this narrative on their female protagonists. In *American Son*, Kendra's sufferings as a Black mother in a white society are exemplified through her debate with her husband about her son's name while waiting for news about him. Kendra repeatedly expresses her feeling of being forced to adapt to the white society's norms. Scott claims that he did not force her to conform and that he allowed her to name their son Jamal, a typically Black name. In this debate, Scott's expression "I let you name him Jamal" is critical; it implies a type of colour-blind racism. In Critical Race Theory (CRT), 'interest convergence' suggests that white people tolerate racial advance for Blacks only when such advance also promotes their self-interest (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 07). Scott's declared acceptance of Jamal's name frames his character as a white man who avoids direct accusations of race. However, it shows some implicit racist behaviours which prove the contradiction in Scott's opinion about his son's name. In a medium shot (Figure 30), wearing a blue suit and leaning on a desk, Scott is shown mocking his son's name after Kendra says that 'Jamal' means beauty in Arabic. With a sarcastic voice and laugh, Scott says that Jamal's friends would address him as "Hey beauty let's play football or have a drink." Scott also chooses to call his son 'J', claiming that it is a "male bonding thing." Thus, in this scene, the film highlights both Scott's racism and sexism, which are implicit in his claim about male bonding that his wife cannot understand. I argue that Scott is portrayed as a white father who symbolises the larger societal divides between Black and white people, reflecting America's racial tensions and inequalities (Turner and Nilsen, 2019). His character embodies the complexities of racial privilege, implicit biases, and the difficulties of understanding experiences other than one's own racial identity.

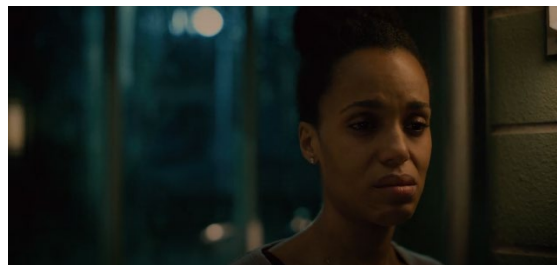


Figure 32 Kendra narrating her nightmare.

The long debates between Kendra and Scott are about Jamal's changes, such as choosing a unique dressing style, such as baggy trousers and cornrows, and making new Black friends,

Chapter 3

as a way for their son to express his Black cultural identity. As a result of this disagreement, Kendra reveals to Scott her tense emotional and mental state, which he could not see or feel during their long years of marriage. She uses counter-storytelling approach developed in CRT, which allows Black people to correct dominant beliefs about them by telling their own authentic stories and experiences (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p.42). In this scene (Figure 32), the camera cuts to a medium shot of Kendra as she stands and walks away from Scott, turns her back on him, and bursts into tears. Kendra is slowly filmed in a close-up shot as she begins to talk about the nightmares she has been having since the birth of her son. The flashback scene begins with Kendra lying on her bed next to Scott, who is deeply asleep. The camera focuses on Kendra from a high angle to emphasise her vulnerability and fragility. The scene is set in a dark mood, with a slight morning light entering through their bedroom window and the sound of a police car siren. The flashback scene ends with Kendra entering her son's room to ensure he is safely sleeping and staring at him with fear and anxiety.

Through a crosscutting between the flashback and the present scene, the film employs close-up shots of Kendra's face to demonstrate her pain and distress as she narrates her nightmare, while also capturing Scott's expression of disappointment in response to her disclosure. The frequent use of close-ups not only conveys the characters' emotions, gestures, and reactions but also connects them with the audience. This technique frames Kendra's uncertainty and emotional instability as the focal point. Consequently, I argue that the film emphasises this nightmare scene to reflect Kendra's anxiety and trauma because of racial tensions and police brutality experienced in a society marked by systemic racism and violence against young Black men. This issue has been addressed in Fleetwood's (2011) discussion about criminality and racial surveillance. Fleetwood underscores how the visual culture of Black criminality shapes public perceptions, depicting Black bodies as continuous threats. In *American Son*, Kendra's desperation is linked to her awareness that her son is part of a system that criminalises Black youth, making them vulnerable to police brutality. The nightmare sequence, then, is a manifestation of this racialised surveillance, reflecting the constant fear of criminalisation that Black mothers face.

The theme of Black mothers' desperation has been criticised by Nicole Rousseau in 'Social Rhetoric and the Construction of Black Motherhood.' She describes it as a negative portrayal frequently associated with escaping fate, family, loneliness, poverty, or work through illegal

Chapter 3

and immoral means (2013, p. 463). However, *American Son* defies this characterisation by portraying Kendra's desperation as a response to systemic racism rather than a moral failing. Furthermore, I argue that Kendra's framing with pain, anger, and a confrontational demeanour challenges 'respectability politics', which, as Gates (2018) explains, requires Black media representations to conform to positive, sanitised portrayals in order to be valued. Instead, the film portrays Black maternal struggle in a more complex and authentic way, shaped by the realities of racial injustice.

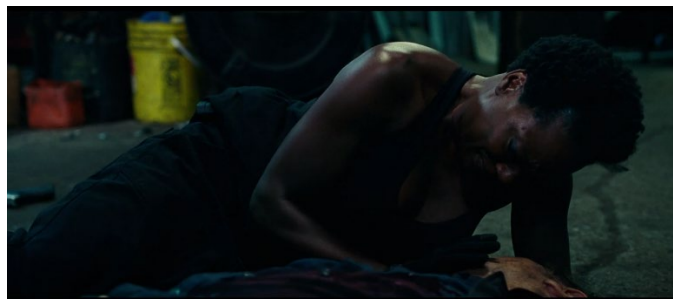


Figure 33 Veronica crying after killing Harry.

The powerful exploration of Black women's pain and resilience is also central in *Widows*, where Veronica is portrayed as both strong and vulnerable, navigating life's challenges while enduring her husband Harry's emotional and sexual exploitation. By the end of the film, it is revealed that Harry has faked his death to abandon Veronica and start a new life with his white mistress, Amanda, and their baby. Veronica discovers the truth when she visits Amanda, the only widow who refuses to participate in the heist. In fact, Olivia, Veronica's white dog, discovers Harry's presence in Amanda's house with her continuous barking and scratching at a door, mirroring its earlier reaction when smelling Harry's jacket in the garage. This parallel, combined with Veronica's discovery of Harry's distinctive flask (previously seen in the film's opening scene), confirms his survival and deception. Crucially, it informs her that he is aware of her heist plans. Hence, when she confronts him by the end of the heist, she seems prepared for him mentally and physically, as she is the one to shoot him while defending herself (Figure 33). Thus, this underlines the film's framing of Veronica as a multidimensional character: a victim of her husband and a society full of prejudice and biases, as well as a strong woman who confronts her fears and defends herself. Thus, this

Chapter 3

portrayal adds a nuance to her character and indicates a shift from one-dimensional and respectable representations toward more complex ones.

Another way the film explores Veronica's pain is by depicting her mourning of her son. In *Widows*, Veronica's grief over the loss of her son is presented with profound subtlety and depth, weaving a narrative that is both personal and reflective of broader societal issues. The film does not rely on overtly dramatic scenes to convey her grief; instead, it expresses her inner turmoil through Veronica's interactions, solitary moments, and the haunting silence that surrounds her. Her expressions, often marked by a distant gaze or a brief silence, speak strongly about her internal conflict. Viola Davis' performance significantly conveys the portrayal of Veronica's grief. Her facial expressions frequently display a blend of stoicism and underlying sorrow, reflecting a woman attempting to maintain composure while dealing with enormous loss (Figure 38). Through close-up shots, the film captures these nuances and allows the audience to empathise with her emotional state. This grief is exacerbated by the layers of her identity as a woman and a person of colour, as she deals with not only personal loss but also societal injustices that contributed to her son's fate. The cinematography and direction emphasise this aspect of her character even more, with lingering shots capturing her isolation and the palpable sense of a void left by her son's absence. Furthermore, the film's narrative structure intertwines her personal loss with her involvement in the heist, adding complexity to her character as she navigates her grief while pushed into a world of crime and survival. Thus, her involvement in an illegal world resulting from losing her son aligns with Rousseau's argument about films portraying Black mothers' desperation to escape loneliness through committing illegal acts (2013, p. 463). This multi-dimensional depiction of Veronica's character exemplifies the film's subversive nature as well as its commentary on loss, resilience, and the socioeconomic forces that shape individual destinies.

In this section, I have discussed how both films emphasise Veronica and Kendra's mental and emotional struggles. As I mentioned in the introduction to this section, many scholars argue that the pain of Black women originates from stereotypical portrayals. Thus, the films examined in this chapter implicitly relate their protagonists' struggles to the social and racial contexts in which their stories are set. Both films tackle the complexities of being a Black woman in a society plagued by societal and systemic racism. Furthermore, these films

associate the pain and suffering of their Black female protagonists with the difficulties they face in their interracial relationships, which I will discuss in more detail in the following section.

3.5 Interracial Marriage and Its Impact on Black Women in *Widows* and *American Son*.

The representation of interracial relationships in Hollywood films has been investigated by many scholars, as well as its cultural implications and the way it reflects and challenges dominant norms and attitudes about race and love. According to Richard Dyer (1997), the white society has a fear of interracial romance; he says, 'Inter-racial heterosexuality threatens the power of whiteness because it breaks the legitimization of whiteness with reference to the white body' (1997, p. 39). Dyer argues that despite this fear of interracial relationships, Hollywood films are frequently depicting such relationships. This depiction, however, is within the framework of whiteness, with white characters remaining central and characters of colour positioned in relation to them, which maintains white supremacy and the white gaze as dominant perspectives (1997, p. 39).

This argument is consistent with Childs' point of view that films portraying interracial relationships empower whiteness by focusing the narrative on white characters, which she analyses in her book *Fade to Black and White* (2009, p. 179). Furthermore, Childs claims that popular culture portrays this kind of relationship as deviant and problematic, as part of an increasing tendency to minimise the significance of racism (2009, p. 122). The portrayal that Childs is pointing at is colour-blindness, which Warner criticises for ignoring the complexities and challenges that interracial couples face due to racial and cultural differences. This approach, according to Warner, promotes a 'post-racial' society in which race is no longer a significant factor in relationships (2015, p. 35). Likewise, hooks in *Reel to Real*, argues that interracial relationships in Hollywood perpetuate racial stereotypes and reinforce existing power dynamics (2009, p. 37). Therefore, she emphasises the importance of authentic representation, urging filmmakers to create films that depict interracial relationships in nuanced and diverse ways by addressing the social and cultural barriers that such relationships face (2009, p. 121). As a result, these scholars argue that the representation of

interracial relationships in films reinforces racial hierarchies and perpetuates stereotypes¹⁰. In this section, I examine the representation of interracial relationships in *American Son* and *Widows*, emphasising how problematic these portrayals are, as these scholars argue. However, these films expand on the portrayal of interracial marriage by acknowledging racism as an important factor to the failure of these types of relationships.

American Son explores the complexities and challenges faced by an interracial couple in a racially charged society. Kendra and Scott have been separated for more than four months and are reunited again only to find their missing son. The way Scott's scenes are filmed demonstrates the extent of his manly arrogance and dominance. Most of the time, he is shown in medium shots, dressed in a blue suit with his hand in his pocket, prominently displaying his FBI badge, a symbol of his authority and alignment with institutional power, (Figure 30, Figure 29). Furthermore, the film depicts Scott moving around the room and tutoring Kendra about policing and raising a child while remaining calm until the final few minutes of the film. Hence, the depiction of their interactions and debates reveals that their marriage is destroyed by their disparate backgrounds, personalities, and beliefs. For example, when Kendra frames Jamal's shifting attitudes as part of his teenage self-discovery, Scott, in contrast, racially mocks his son's appearance, saying, "The last few times he stayed at my place, he looked like a gangster." Kendra is enraged by his words and claims that her son is different from his father, to which Scott says, "His world is my world, not yours." This debate not only reduces Jamal to a harmful stereotype but also centres Scott's white perspective by downplaying or ignoring his son's unique racial challenges and experiences as a person of colour. This dynamic reflects Dyer's (1997) and Childs' (2009) observation that whiteness is empowered in films depicting interracial relationships through the narrative or character development. As a result, having Scott emphasising his son's whiteness while ignoring his Black identity suggests a more complicated examination of how racial identities and experiences are navigated and understood within mixed-race families, particularly in societies where whiteness is frequently associated with privilege and power.

¹⁰ Only a few films in American mainstream cinema history have produced narratives of interracial relationships, including *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer, 1967), *Jungle Fever* (Spike Lee, 1991), *Monster's Ball* (Marc Forster, 2001), *Loving* (Jeff Nichols, 2016) and *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017).

Chapter 3

In *Widows*, the portrayal of Veronica and Harry's interracial marriage offers a nuanced exploration of intimacy, grief, and racial tension, contrasting with the more overtly confrontational depiction of race in *American Son*. For instance, in a flashback, Harry and Veronica share an intimate moment in bed. Soon, Veronica remembers the death of her son and shows her sadness, especially when Harry says, "Don't make me feel like my only regret is having a child with you." Veronica responds, "Maybe you should have had him with someone else. Then he would still be alive." Through this expression, the film shows that what is normally coded as a romantic scene—Veronica and Harry's love and connection—quickly changes to one of tension because of their racial difference and the death of their son. Likewise, the film positions Veronica's interracial relationship as one of the reasons for her emotional struggle, which I discussed in the previous section. Many scenes and events in the film emphasise this, as Veronica is frequently shown to be aware of the difficulties of integrating into different cultural and racial backgrounds as well as the challenges existing in a predominantly white environment. For example, her son's death, which is racially motivated, reinforces her understanding of the social and racial imbalance that surrounds interracial marriage and mixed-race children. Additionally, *Widows* frames Veronica and Harry's relationship primarily through memories and flashbacks rather than present-day interactions. This stylistic choice has been discussed by Childs (2009), where she claims that presenting such relationships in the past generates racial displacement. She argues, 'By placing the relationship in the past, the show [*Grey's Anatomy*] can claim to be racially progressive while not having to deal with actually presenting an interracial relationship.' (2009, p. 37). This temporal framing in *Widows* shifts the narrative's focus away from Veronica and Harry's relationship dynamics and towards the emotional and social consequences of their union. By reducing their romance to the past, I argue that the film avoids making interracial love the central conflict, instead focusing on Veronica's grief, betrayal, and survival.

Childs (2009), hooks (2009), and Warner (2015) have all discussed how interracial relationships are portrayed as deviant, problematic, and contentious. According to these critics, some films depicting such relationships avoid addressing racial dynamics and the difficulties that Black people face. For example, Childs claims that films such as *Boiler Room* (2000) and *Mystery Men* (1999) feature a white man's relationship with a Black woman, but

Chapter 3

race is not the focus; rather, this relationship is approached in a comic way (2009, p. 72). While these scholars' argument is well-reasoned considering the period and films they reference, the films I examine in this chapter exclusively examine the racial and social aspects of interracial marriage. Despite being set in a police station and heist plot, which, as Childs argues, makes these relationships more problematic (2009, p. 179), both *American Son* and *Widows* address the difficulties of interracial relationships faced by these Black women and acknowledge that these relationships have failed due to the couples' racial difference. Thus, the films present these relationships away from a colour-blind approach that scholars have criticised.

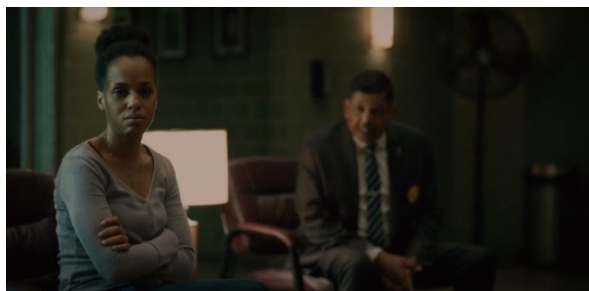


Figure 34 Kendra and Stokes confrontation.

By nearly the end of *American Son*, the Black Lieutenant Stokes appears in a tense debate with Kendra about being a Black person in American society (Figure 34). He argues that her husband cannot understand her pain or that of her son because he is not Black. Furthermore, based on his life experience in white society, Stokes assumes that Scott always talks about his interracial marriage in public to appear anti-racist and avoid people's assumptions about his racial beliefs. Also, Stokes says, "You married a white man, lady. You know, when you people do that, you're responsible for the consequences." Stokes' statement implies that interracial marriages are still rejected by the Black community and that they blame Black women for the consequences of these unions. In *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), Collins argues that Black society rejects and constrains interracial relationships because of the history of Black women being sexually abused by white men. Thus, Black society rejects interracial relationships and accuses Black women of 'selling out race' (2000, p. 162). Therefore, in *American Son*, Lieutenant Stokes explicitly blames Kendra for marrying a white man and asks her to bear the consequences of such romantic unions,

Chapter 3

emphasising, as I argue, the ongoing problematic perspective on interracial relationships that the film highlights within its narrative.



Figure 35 Jamal threatening Veronica.

The Black perspective on interracial marriage is also highlighted in *Widows* by the character of Jamal, the Black politician. In a scene (Figure 35) where Jamal confronts Veronica about a debt that her husband owed him before his death, he refers to Veronica and Harry's marriage as a "business arrangement." This implies that their marriage was motivated by financial and criminal reasons in addition to love. Jamal continues commenting on their relationship by saying, "You and Harry... You two don't exactly fit the profile, you know? Black and white, rich and poor, a little time on the clock. People don't understand that you could love someone who wasn't you." This suggests the existence of racial prejudice in their environment, where Black people's perceptions and attitudes towards interracial relationships are influenced by racial dynamics, as highlighted by Collins (2000). Through this scene, the film emphasises the persistence of racial prejudice, which challenges 'post-racial' concepts. Moreover, Jamal's reference to the difference between "rich and poor" reflects the socioeconomic disparities between Harry and Veronica. While the film depicts Harry as a successful criminal with access to wealth, Veronica is left to deal with the financial consequences of his criminal life after his death. Ultimately, establishing Jamal's character as a critic of Veronica and Harry's marriage in *Widows* reflects how Black women are blamed for marrying white men and the consequences of their interracial relationship.

Building on the analysis on how the characters in both films address interracial relationships, I argue that these films use the characters of Stokes and Jamal as a device to explore racial dynamics, socio-political issues, and to challenge 'post-racial' beliefs. Both films highlight how racial prejudice against interracial marriage persists, even when expressed by characters from the same marginalised communities. Furthermore, the portrayal of the characters in these films referring to a private topic within a political and systemic

Chapter 3

environment, despite these women's pain and grief, suggests that Veronica and Kendra are unable to escape societal judgement and expectations, which reinforces the argument that such films present interracial romance in tense settings to frame them as deviant and taboo (Childs, 2009, p. 179). However, by bringing racial dynamics and issues encountered in interracial relationships to the forefront, both films challenge traditional narratives of such films that portray these relationships in a colourblind manner (Warner, 2015).

The impact of society and racial bias on interracial relationships is central to the representation of the Black women's characters and their stories in both films. In *American Son*, Scott appears to have chosen a less stressful affair with a white woman, which adheres to social norms. When Kendra questions him about his new affair, he yells out a heartfelt, "I don't love her." Scott clearly means it, but it appears that the pressure of racial constructs and what is expected has an impact on their relationship, especially since he says he is tired of "having the same arguments over and over again." In *Widows* as well, Harry abandons Veronica for a white woman. When Veronica and Harry confront each other by the end of the film, Veronica, who is used to swallowing her pain and hiding her vulnerability, finally turns transparent. She accuses Harry of abandoning her to start a new life with his "white, happy family and son." Harry answers her, saying, "I couldn't save him, I couldn't save us, I had to save me." This expression not only reveals the guilt Harry suffers from because of the death of his son and the strain in his marriage to Veronica, but it also reflects his personal redemption, survival, and selfishness. Therefore, this expression emphasises the characters' emotional journey and the broader societal challenges they faced. It explores themes such as racial inequality, self-preservation, and the emotional impact that external factors can take on a relationship. Thus, unlike Childs (2009) hooks (2009) and Warner's (2015) contention that some films avoid addressing the racial issues that characterise interracial relationships, I argue that both films discussed in this chapter make exception and address the societal challenges that interracial couples face. However, by having both white men choose less controversial relationships with white women, these films emphasise the consequences of the social, systemic, and racial pressures that these characters face within their interracial marriage.

In this section, I have examined how the films explore deeply embedded racial biases and cultural conflicts, focusing on the external pressures that affect the relationship. Likewise,

they focus on the interracial couple's internal conflicts and personal growth, emphasising the impact of their interracial romantic unions. Both films confront the pervasive stereotypes of Black women by presenting them as complex individuals with agency, intelligence, and emotional depth, challenging the traditional narratives imposed on them.

3.6 Various Types of Racist and Sexist Stereotypes That Black Women Encounter

According to CRT, because of the microaggressions that Black people experience, racism becomes difficult to recognise and address (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 7). As I have been arguing, both *American Son* and *Widows* shed light on the sexist and racist practices perpetrated against their Black female protagonists in the form of microaggressions. In *American Son*, it is clear from the beginning of the film that there is tension between Kendra and the police officer, Larkin, who underestimates her. From their first scene together, Larkin's lack of urgency and care becomes obvious by suggesting absurd excuses for Jamal's disappearance, such as having a beach party with his friends. Also, Larkin's carelessness is evident as the camera captures him in medium shots moving around the room drinking coffee and eating donuts. Thus, Larkin's attitude enhances Kendra's concern and irritates her maternal instincts, especially since he refuses to begin investigations into Jamal's disappearance until Kendra insists. Larkin assumes several racist tropes about Jamal. He asks Kendra about his street name, the possibility of having an arrest record, and the existence of any fight scars on his body. What Larkin is implying about Jamal here questions Kendra's knowledge about her son, which simultaneously questions her motherhood. Larkin's character represents white culture's perception of Black mothers and blame for their children's legal problems, which Collins discusses in her work as the result of the expectations placed on Black mothers to extensively protect their children (2000, p. 174).

Chapter 3



Figure 36 Kendra VS Larkin

When Larkin begins questioning Kendra about her son, both are shown in a full shot facing each other, suggesting an equal confrontation (Figure 36). The film's choice to capture this moment in this manner is significant. The fact that a Black woman is represented on the same level as a white man demonstrates an advancement in the portrayal of Black womanhood. For example, in the second chapter's films, *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, Black women are depicted as characters whose achievements are overshadowed by their white saviours. In contrast, the films I will analyse in the fourth chapter, *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia*, portray Black women as strong characters who oppose racist white people and systems. This progressive portrayal of Black women is also evident in *American Son*. The film portrays Kendra as a strong woman struggling to prove herself within a white society.

In this confrontation scene (Figure 36), Larkin's questions become increasingly offensive and racist, asking if her son has distinguishing tattoos, scars, or gold teeth, a direct reference to the most common stereotypes about Black men and teenagers (Alexander, 2012), proving Larkin's implicit racial prejudice. Kendra, who tries to remain calm at first, is unable to resist his racist questions and reveals details as a mother who knows and loves her son. Kendra stands up and begins to defend her son, with close-up shots of her face emphasising her strength and determination to fight racial discrimination, using CRT's counter-storytelling method to correct Larkin's assumptions (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 42). Therefore, Kendra says, as Larkin tries to interrupt her, "Jamal's sign is Taurus with Virgo rising. He's bashful, looks away when he smiles. He plays the guitar, especially likes blues and rock, old 70s and 80s bands. I tried to turn him on to Funkadelic and DeBarge, but he's strictly mainstream classic stuff. Clapton. Van Halen. He throws a mean breaking ball, whatever that means. He's vegetarian, hates fried chicken, and he's afraid of clowns. He walks like a jock, but he can recite almost any Emily Dickinson poem." As a result, Kendra's approach

Chapter 3

contradicts Larkin's portrayal of her son as a faceless 'Black thug,' and his portrayal of her as a mother who lets her son run wild.

In her description of her son, Kendra is humanising Jamal by intentionally choosing her words, like referring to her son as "boy," even though he has just turned eighteen, and saying "tummy" when indicating the place of his birth scar. By revealing those images of Jamal, Kendra is highlighting the assumptions Larkin is making about her and her son, which reflect everyday stereotypes about Black mothers and their children. For instance, rap is not Jamal's favourite music; he does not play football, he hates fried chicken, and he is sensitive. Accordingly, Kendra's description of her son to Larkin attempts to demonstrate that her son is not a Black male stereotype (Alexander, 2012) and that as a biracial person, he belongs to both ethnicities and exists across both societies. The film constructs the character of Larkin as a racist and sexist white man to demonstrate that Black women, regardless of their educational and social status, are always subject to covert criticism and prejudice. In this context, Larkin uses his job as a police officer to justify his treatment of Kendra. Thus, *American Son* emphasises the idea that, in order to avoid direct accusations of racism, contemporary American society constructs social, professional, and political defences for its implicit racial bias (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 13). As a result, the film shows the seemingly subtle ways that racism works in contemporary society when the historical films, like *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, are able to be more upfront about overt racism because of the period they represent.

Through the numerous confrontations between Kendra and Larkin, the film highlights the reality that white people, who rarely identify themselves as racists, still view Black people as stereotypes due to persistent social constructions. Larkin's stereotyping of Kendra becomes evident when she leaves the room and another white man, Kendra's husband Scott, whom Larkin assumes to be Liaison Officer Lieutenant Stokes, walks into the waiting room. Larkin starts talking and interrupting Scott, "I am just trying to keep the natives at bay until the cavalry arrives, you know? Wait till you see this lady...she is totally out of control. I mean, I got kids too. Right? But she went from like zero to ghetto in nothing flat." At this point, Kendra enters the room and greets Scott, who says, "It is okay. Everything's going to be fine." He then presents himself as Jamal's father to Larkin, who appears confused by this information. Larkin initially finds empowerment in the whiteness of his male counterpart

Chapter 3

and immediately speaks rudely about Kendra in her absence. Given that Larkin implicitly patronises Kendra in her presence and explicitly demonises her character in her absence, the film is exposing the systemic racism and stereotyped assumptions about Black people. Furthermore, this scene implies that Larkin, as a white man, expects another white man to be as racist and disconnected from Black people as he is. Even Scott, who has been married to Kendra for many years, treats Larkin nicely instead of accusing him of describing Kendra as 'the natives.' Kendra, who has been suffering from Larkin's racist treatment since their first meeting, gets angry about her husband's reactions with him. However, Scott claims that he is trying to be civil. Therefore, as Larkin repeatedly asks Kendra to calm down, Scott is assuming that she is not being 'civil,' which suggests that Larkin is not the only person accusing Kendra and Jamal for their Blackness; Scott does as well. I argue that Kendra's emotional distress is often framed as irrational and aggressive, aligning with the discussions of how Black women's emotions are policed, dismissed, and portrayed in need of discipline (Fleetwood, 2011; Collins, 2000; hooks, 2009).

In *American Son*, Scott's dismissal of racial issues, believing they only exist when raised by his wife or son, reveals his limited understanding of race and highlights the deep racial tensions within their interracial family. Scott's accusation that Kendra is responsible for Jamal's racial awareness offers a powerful commentary on individual racial biases, the challenges of interracial relationships, and the complexities of racial identity in contemporary America. First, Scott's perception of Blackness, influenced by inherited cultural stereotypes, illustrates that racial prejudice can manifest even within families. Second, it implies that, despite their love, the different racial backgrounds present unique challenges. Their disagreement over Jamal's racial identity exemplifies the emotional and mental stress that societal racial dynamics can place on interracial relationships. Third, the film emphasises the multifaceted nature of racial identity in America through Scott's character (Alexander, 2012). Thus, the film highlights that the conflict that many mixed-race people face when forming their identity is between emphasising their Blackness as a source of pride and cultural connection and downplaying it to navigate a racially biased society. This double identity, as discussed in the concept of 'The Two Worlds of Black People,' introduced by W.E.B. DuBois in his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), refers to the theory of 'double consciousness'. In an oppressive society, 'double consciousness' describes the internal conflict experienced by

Chapter 3

subordinated or colonised groups, specifically African Americans. It is the sensation of having two identities, one defined by one's own heritage, culture, and self-perception, and the other by perceptions and treatment from a dominant society that views them through a racially prejudiced lens (1903, p. 08). In *American Son*, Jamal, as a mixed-race teenager, embodies this dual identity: one rooted in his Black heritage and the other shaped by a society that views him through a racially biased lens. Mixed-race individuals, particularly those with white cultural inheritance, often experience this double consciousness in a heightened form, confronting both privilege and marginalisation as explained by Kendra's narration of her son's struggles.

As discussed above, microaggressions are manifested through subtle comments or actions that reveal underlying racial biases and stereotypes. In *Widows*, these microaggressions are directed at Veronica and reflect the racial prejudice prevalent in the setting of the film. For instance, in the confrontation scene between Veronica and the Black politician Jamal (Figure 35), which I have analysed above, he addresses her as "nothing." Through this verbal aggression of Veronica, Jamal tries to diminish her as a person and to assert dominance over her in order that she complies with his demands. Veronica also faces racist and sexist discrimination when her husband's friend tells her, "This is not your world," after she asks for his help in the heist, emphasising DuBois's concept of 'The Two Worlds of Black People' (1903) that I discussed earlier. The male characters in the film, including her husband Harry, consistently dismiss Veronica. For instance, Harry keeps much of his criminal world hidden from Veronica, assuming that she cannot handle the truth about his world. This lack of transparency and the assumption of her vulnerability and inability to deal with the truth undervalues her emotional strength and resilience. This becomes evident when it is revealed that Harry faked his death and planned to abandon Veronica. When the two finally meet at the end of the film, Harry blames Veronica for executing the heist, saying, "It is meant to be simple...you are not supposed to be here." This line demonstrates a lack of confidence in her ability to deal with such situations. The scene is charged with betrayal, but it is also charged with Veronica's realisation of her own power and agency. This underestimation of her intelligence reinforces traditional gender roles that hold women back from dangerous or risky actions. Black women have historically been marginalised, their contributions minimised, and their abilities questioned (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2009). However, through

Chapter 3

Veronica's experience, the film exposes these racial and gender biases and reconstructs them by presenting a determined Black female character.

I have been arguing that *Widows* portrays Veronica away from her Black community, which causes her pain and struggles. In addition, the film also depicts her without interracial friendships, which deepens her alienation. However, the heist forced her to cooperate with other white women, thus creating a narrative of female cooperation. In American popular cinema, films portraying interracial female friendships are rare and if present they marginalise Black women to secondary characters as argued by Hollinger (1998) and Tasker (1998). Moreover, Hughey in his article 'Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism: The Odyssey of Magical Negroes and White Saviors' claims that films presenting these relationships frame Black characters within the role of the 'Magical Negro:' uneducated and lower-class Black character who transforms the life of a broken white character (2012, p. 756). My analysis of Veronica's character and her relationship with the other women contradicts the marginalisation of Black women; instead, she is portrayed as a leader and decision maker.



Figure 37 Linda, Veronica, and Alice.

The female characters in the film, despite their shared gender, have doubts about Veronica's leadership abilities and carry racial prejudices against her. During their first meeting in a spa centre (Figure 37), Linda seems surprised when Veronica introduces herself as Harry's wife, asking her how they met. This reaction underlines Linda's racial prejudice and microaggression, although she is from a marginalised racial group as well (a Latina woman). Moreover, the widows question Veronica's ability as a woman to lead a heist, manifesting both scepticism and hesitation. Throughout the planning of the operation, Linda and Alice refuse to trust Veronica's decisions considering her lack of experience in such activities. Likewise, the women believe that Veronica is unable to make sound decisions because of the

Chapter 3

pressure and emotional struggle she is experiencing. Another factor that the film focuses on to explain the two women's doubts about Veronica's leadership is their different socio-economic classes. The death of the women's husbands causes them to struggle financially, as Linda loses her store, and Alice meets wealthy men to make money. However, Veronica's status has never been affected; thus, when they first meet, Veronica imposes her privileged position by giving money to Linda and Alice to help them after their husbands died. As such, the widows see that Veronica is privileged and believe she is unable to fully understand their struggles and challenges, which makes them hesitant to fully trust her. The film presents them wondering if she understands their situation and if her motivations match theirs.

As a result of these numerous examples, the film sheds light on Veronica's complicated and intersected racial, gender, and class struggles in a white environment. However, it also highlights her strength in responding to these assumptions and portrays her at the centre of the story, unlike previous films about interracial female friendships (Hollinger, 1998; Tasker, 1998). Furthermore, the film portrays Veronica in the 'Magical Negro' role in a positive light. This is primarily accomplished by depicting the success of the heist and gaining money as a result of Veronica's leadership and assertiveness, which has saved Linda from debt and Alice from an immoral way of getting money. Furthermore, this role challenges traditional depictions of the 'Magical Negro' by portraying Veronica as an educated woman (a teacher) from the upper class, rather than the lower-class uneducated Black character, as Hughey mentioned in his analysis (2012, p. 756). Therefore, this trope, which is initially used to reduce Black women to secondary and marginalised roles, in *Widows* is a source of privilege that classifies Veronica as a saviour rather than a 'Magical Negro,' a representation that changes the dominant narrative.

Through this section, I have examined how both *American Son* and *Widows* present the existence of microaggressions in American society, providing a powerful exploration of racial and gender dynamics. These subtle but significant examples of discrimination highlight the complexities of being a Black woman in a white and male-dominated society. By bringing to light these stories, both films portray their protagonists as strong female leads who respond to racial and sexist prejudice, as I show in the next section.

3.7 Veronica and Kendra as Strong Black Women

In the second chapter of this thesis, I have examined how Black women in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* respond to gender and racial discrimination. I have argued that the presence of white saviours, whether male or female, empowers these women. Also, they rely on their female friendships to challenge dominant stereotypes and encourage each other. However, in the films examined in this chapter, Black women are not reliant on white saviours, nor are they in a Black environment where their friendships can reinforce them. As a result, Kendra and Veronica confront the sexist and racist practices they encounter through their own resilience, independence, and determination. As such, in this section, I will demonstrate how these female characters are portrayed as strong and resilient Black women, which initially reinforces the 'SBW' stereotype, but in fact, this portrayal expands and contradicts this trope by emphasising these women's pain and vulnerability, as I discussed in the previous section. I argue that the complexity in presenting these Black women, which this section will explore, subverts the one-dimensional stereotypes about them and presents their characters with depth and humanity, demonstrating that strength and vulnerability can coexist.

The image of the 'SBW' has been defined by Harris-Perry in her book, *Sister Citizen* (2013), as 'easily recognizable. She confronts all trials and tribulations. She is a source of unlimited support for her family. She is a motivated, hard-working breadwinner [...] she is sacrificial and smart' (Harris-Perry, 2013, p.185). Harris-Perry argues that though Black women conceived this idea, it became widely popular and successful in films by white/male filmmakers, proving that Black women and mainstream audiences in general prefer to see Black women supernaturally strong and as inspirational figures. However, Harris-Perry criticises this image for ignoring Black women's emotional and physical vulnerability (2013, p. 185). This image is a form of what Racquel Gates identifies as a 'respectable representation,' shaped by the 'politics of respectability.' According to Gates, these 'positive' portrayals of Black women prioritise and conform to dominant cultural values, often at the expense of more complex and authentic depictions (2018, p. 66). Moreover, Collins discusses this stereotype and classifies it as a 'burden of strength,' highlighting how it reduces Black women to figures of endurance and self-sacrifice (2000, p. 77). Crucially, Gates argues that even negative or problematic images of Black women are worth critical engagement because

they expose how stereotypes operate and reflect broader social anxieties about race, gender, and class (2018, p. 89). Building on this, scholars such as Collins (2000), Dyer (2002), Fleetwood (2011), Gates (2018), Gillespie (2016), Harris-Perry (2013), hooks (2009), Mask (2012), and Stam and Shohat (2014) call for multidimensional portrayals of Black women that represent their strength alongside their vulnerability.

In light of these discussions, I argue that, in both *Widows* and *American Son*, Veronica and Kendra are portrayed as Black women who embody aspects of the 'SBW' image—they are resilient, determined, and confront their racist and sexist environments. However, these films also subvert the stereotype by emphasising their vulnerability and pain, moving beyond the restrictive framework of 'respectability politics.' This portrayal is significant considering the chapter's aim of investigating the systemic and social challenges that Black women face in white society. Furthermore, by resisting 'respectability politics' and presenting complex characters, *Widows* and *American Son* challenge old, limiting stereotypes and produce richer, more inclusive representations.

The representation of Veronica and Kendra in both films as multifaceted characters is significant for engaging with the changing representation of Black women in media and film. Scholars like Collins (2000) and hooks (2009) address how negative stereotypes restrict how Black women's experiences are perceived and understood, in contrast to Gates' (2018) recognition of negative portrayals. By presenting their Black female protagonists as complex individuals who challenge the narratives of problematic portrayals, *American Son* and *Widows* depart from these singular representations. Moreover, Viola Davis and Kerry Washington's interpretation of these complex characters contributes to the complex representation of Black womanhood. Mia Mask, in her work *Divas on Screen: Black Women in American Film* (2009), emphasises the importance of Black actresses in bringing depth and nuance to the roles they perform. Mask delves into the complexities of Black female representation on screen, arguing that 'These women enable us to articulate a new, more nuanced critique of African American representation in popular culture' (2009, p. 09)¹¹. Similarly, in contemporary films, multidimensional characters like Veronica and Kendra

¹¹ Mask's work focuses on the performances of five prominent Black actresses: Dorothy Dandridge, Pam Grier, Whoopi Goldberg, Angela Bassett, and Halle Berry.

Chapter 3

transmit the various realities of Black womanhood, emphasising that Black women, like all individuals, experience a range of emotions, challenges, and triumphs. Most importantly, the complexity of these characters highlights the films' recognition of the multifaceted challenges that Black women face as a result of their gender and race. Both films emphasise the central role of Black women in these narratives by referring to contemporary issues such as systemic inequality, racial profiling, and police violence. As a result, these complex characters play a pivotal role in reshaping societal perceptions, promoting greater understanding, and significantly contributing to the evolving portrayal of Black women on screen.

In *Widows*, as I showed in the previous section, Veronica has been subjected to various forms of racial and gender discrimination throughout the film. However, she faces these microaggressions through her strong character, intelligence, and ability to overcome obstacles. The film depicts Veronica's first appearances as a silent character who is experiencing grief and recalling memories with her husband. This silence is broken by Veronica's deep scream in a stunning mirror close-up, allowing the actress to dominate the screen and express her pain (Figure 38). However, this liberation of emotion is brief, as Veronica returns to hide behind her mask of strength and inexpression and prepares to attend her husband's funeral. Therefore, the film depicts Veronica exhibiting emotional resilience despite significant personal tragedies, including the deaths of her husband Harry and her son. She mourns privately while remaining focused on finding solutions to her problems.

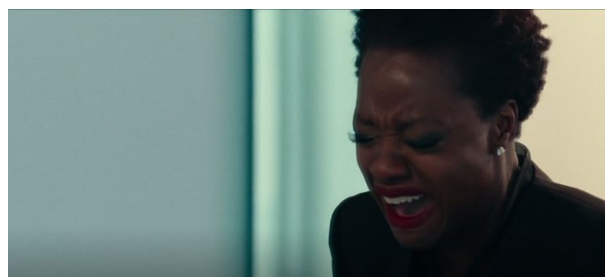


Figure 38 Veronica crying.

The leadership role that Veronica takes exemplifies her ability to make critical decisions and strategies while also reinforcing her strength as a leader. Veronica's interactions with her fellow widows demonstrate her dominance and assertiveness. A scene gathering the three

Chapter 3

women in their hideout illustrates this very clearly. Veronica and Linda are waiting for Alice, who is late, to plan the heist. While Veronica is explaining to Linda the importance of being on time, Alice arrives and is captured in a wide shot as she comes through the door wearing a party dress. Veronica and Linda are perplexed by Alice's appearance, which does not correspond to the atmosphere where they are. In this scene (Figure 39), the camera moves between the three women in a medium shot while planning for the big day. Despite facing scepticism from the widows, Veronica imposes herself as a leader and makes her voice heard. She takes responsibility to seek information, make connections, and find ways to fund the heist, demonstrating her ability to adapt and navigate challenges. For instance, when Alice suggests using Veronica's car, she refuses by saying that it is registered to Harry, so Alice proposes to buy a van, to which Veronica says, "Good progress." Moreover, Veronica rudely addresses Linda, who is confused about what to do, by responding to her, "by being smarter than you are now." I argue that the camera in this scene focuses on giving close-ups to Veronica's face to capture her firm expressions and reactions during moments of decision-making, and that through these shots, audiences connect with Veronica and understand her leadership responsibilities. Also, when Veronica is leading the group during the planning sessions, she is frequently framed in the centre of the shot. This central framing visually positions her as the focal point and emphasises her role as a leader. In addition to portraying Veronica as a strong woman, the film employs cinematographic techniques to convey her leadership style, ensuring that the audience is aware of her presence and impact as a leader. Using auditory and visual signals reinforces Veronica's authority and demonstrates her ability to effectively command and guide the group during the heist planning process.



Figure 39 The widows planning the heist.

Chapter 3

Veronica's leadership style strains her relationship with Alice, Linda, and Belle, a determined and resourceful Black single mother, whom she suspects her ability to be involved in the heist. From their first meeting in the garage where they plan the heist, Veronica refuses to recognise Belle's existence and ignores her while talking, which creates tension between the two. When Linda walks into the garage with Belle, Alice and Veronica are surprised, and Veronica quickly dismisses Belle's presence, saying, "This is not your place. Please ask her to leave." Belle stands still and puts her hands in her pockets in a defensive gesture, saying, "I am standing here; you can talk to me." Veronica claims she does not know her, but Belle firmly states, "You don't have to." In this scene, the film uses a series of medium over-the-shoulder shots as Veronica and Belle talk. Veronica agrees to collaborate with Belle after being persuaded by the other women, but she keeps their relationship tense and serious. The way the film presents Veronica and Belle's relationship illustrates Collins' viewpoint that some Black women with power oppress and control other Black women instead of empowering each other (2000, p. 105). Hence, this characterisation aligns with portraying Veronica embedded in the white setting and away from her Black background.

Despite this confrontation between Veronica and Belle, a car scene near the end of the film shows the two women looking at each other after the heist. This later scene is filmed in silent close-ups, indicating the ease in their relationship as it is their last meeting. In the film, Belle and Veronica's relationship is portrayed as one based on necessity, mutual respect, and evolving trust. Initially, their relationship is purely transactional: Veronica requires Belle's skills and street savvy, while Belle is drawn to the heist's financial potential. However, as the story progresses, their interaction deepens, indicating a growing understanding and respect for each other's strengths and weaknesses. This dynamic exemplifies the film's overall themes of female empowerment and solidarity in the face of adversity. Both characters, who come from diverse backgrounds and experiences, find common ground in their shared goal and the need to rely on one another for survival. Their relationship is not overly sentimentalised; rather, it is portrayed as a pragmatic alliance that gradually gains deeper meaning as they navigate the complexities and dangers of their endeavour. Thus, *Widows* depicts Belle and Veronica's relationship as a nuanced and evolving bond, reflecting the film's emphasis on female agency and collaboration in a male-dominated world. However, the film only shows this Black female empowerment for a few seconds to emphasise that

Chapter 3

Veronica's strength is an individual growth rather than a power derived from Black community unity, as shown in the films discussed in the second and fourth chapters. This portrayal also highlights Veronica's alienation from the Black society due to her interracial marriage and lack of friendships with other Black people.

The representation of Black women as multidimensional characters is evident in *American Son* as well. The film portrays Kendra as a Black woman who challenges the pervasive stereotypes about Black women and mothers in American society. As such, an examination of Kendra's interactions with the film's male characters reveals their racist and sexist attitudes toward her. As I show in analysing the following scenes, Kendra depends on her education and socioeconomic status to prove herself. Kendra's protective nature as a mother is a central aspect of her character. In the confrontation scene between Kendra and Larkin (Figure 36), she mentions that her son enjoys Emily Dickinson's poems. Instead of recognising or being impressed by Jamal's ability to cite Dickinson, Larkin's only response is to speak about himself and begin reciting a poem. However, Kendra interrupts him and corrects him that he is reciting a Charles Dickens' poem. Although Larkin denies he is wrong, this scene demonstrates Kendra's educational and cultural background. Another instance of Kendra's reliance on her education to establish equality is when she grows tired of Larkin's attitude toward her, saying, "You keep saying that 'I understand you, I share your concerns,' is that from some HR (Human Resources) training video or something? [...] I have a PhD in psychology, I teach at the university. Okay? So, I know when I am being managed."

Furthermore, Kendra uses this attitude even with her husband Scott, where she corrects his language several times and asks him to speak proper English. Therefore, Kendra's education and social background reinforce her ability to effectively express her thoughts, advocate for her son's rights, and refuse to be silenced. As a Black woman with educational and social privilege, Kendra has direct experiences of both explicit and implicit racial biases that exist in society and institutions. Her understanding of these prejudices enables her to confront Larkin and Scott when she believes her son's case is being handled unfairly.

In order to challenge existing stereotypes and microaggressions, the character of Kendra employs the CRT method of counter-storytelling as I illustrated in the previous sections. For instance, Kendra counters Larkin's assumptions about her son by sharing personal stories of her son and humanising him. Moreover, through narrating her difficult childhood memories

and her recent nightmares to Scott, she challenges his beliefs about Black women. Therefore, her portrayal changes from a woman who complicates race relations in her husband's eyes to a woman who battles her painful memories and current life challenges. Thus, the film implies that Kendra's current emotional state is the result of her Black childhood, and her disappointment in a failing interracial marriage that puts her son's life in danger. Accordingly, this suggests that the evolution of Kendra's character in the film is subject to the liberation of her thoughts. As a result, at the beginning of the film, Kendra is shown as a reproduction of the old stereotype of the 'Angry Black Woman' through her interactions with Larkin and Scott. However, when the film allows her character to impose her presence through counter-storytelling and centres her perspective, her portrayal progresses to a woman and a mother who cares about her son and is a victim of a sexist and racist society. Moreover, by highlighting her escape to an interracial relationship, the film reproduces 'the white saviour' myth in Scott by portraying his character inhabiting this saviour mode through a romantic relationship with Kendra. Yet, the myth is quickly negated this time due to Kendra's development of racial consciousness. Therefore, Kendra refuses to be silenced or dismissed by employing counter-storytelling, using her own voice and experiences to demand justice for her son while also shedding light on the realities of being a Black woman navigating a system marked with bias and discrimination.

In this section, I examined the portrayal of both Veronica and Kendra as complex characters. Both films emphasise their agency, intelligence, endurance, and ability to face obstacles. While they exhibit their strength, the films also reveal their vulnerability, emotional struggle, and moments of doubt, challenging the 'SBW' stereotype. I argue that this complexity in presenting these Black women subverts the one-dimensional feature of the 'SBW' trope. Thus, the two films present nuanced Black female characters, which contributes to the progressive portrayals of Black women in films.

3.8 Conclusion

My analysis of *Widows* and *American Son* reveals that both films are critical cinematic texts of 'post-racial' America. The importance of critiquing the concept through Black women in these films is significant, particularly in terms of Black women's representation. These films offer more nuanced, multifaceted characters who incorporate both strength and

Chapter 3

vulnerability while navigating the complexities of race, gender, and class, as opposed to the often one-dimensional portrayal of Black women in media. By placing Black women at the centre of these narratives, these films not only challenge the illusion of a 'post-racial' society, but they also shed light on the specific struggles and perspectives of Black women, which are frequently marginalised in mainstream discourse. This representation is critical because it depicts society in a more accurate and inclusive manner, fostering greater understanding and empathy. It also empowers Black women by highlighting their resilience and agency, moving beyond stereotypes to portray them as complete and complex individuals. As a result, I argue that the significance of these films lies in their ability to critique a flawed societal notion, 'post-racialism,' while also increasing the visibility and diversity of Black women's experiences in contemporary media.

Chapter 4 Motherhood, Advocacy and the Personal as Political: A Comparative Analysis of *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia*

4.1 Introduction

Miss Virginia is set in 2003 and based on the true story of Virginia Walden Ford (played by Uzo Aduba), an African American single mother who battles the established public school system in Washington, D.C., to offer her son a better education. The film depicts the lengths to which a Black mother will go to ensure her child's future while also confronting systemic biases along the way. Thus, her journey counters the stereotype of the passive or absent Black mother, instead presenting a strong, proactive figure who is deeply invested in her child's future. Meanwhile, *Black or White* delves into a custody battle over a biracial granddaughter (Eloise) between a white grandfather, Elliot Anderson, played by Kevin Costner, and an African American grandmother, Rowena Jefferson, played by Octavia Spencer. The film illuminates the racial tensions and stereotypes embedded within familial structures and legal systems. It also deconstructs stereotypes of Black families, men, and 'matriarchy' by emphasising the role of the Black female character as a change agent.

Black motherhood, with its complex variety of resiliency, love, strength, and vulnerability, is a common central theme in stories that address difficult racial issues. Scholars like Donald Bogle (2016), Patricia Hill-Collins (2000), and Mellissa Harris-Perry (2013) explore the complexities, challenges, and cultural significance of Black motherhood. They argue that historically, Black mothers have been portrayed with negative images. Among these images, the 'Mammy' figure, which represents the faithful and obedient domestic servant (Bogle, 2016, p. 09; Collins, 2000, p. 72; Harris-Perry, 2013, p. 29), the 'Matriarch' representing the mother figure in Black female-headed families, portrayed as a bad mother for not supervising her children due to working outside the home and emasculating her husband (Bogle, 2016, p. 196; Collins, 2000, p. 75; Harris-Perry, 2013, p. 114), and the 'Welfare Queen,' who is portrayed as a single mother happy to stay home and collect welfare, avoiding work and passing on her bad values to her children (Collins, 2000, p. 79; Harris-Perry, 2013, p. 114). These scholars criticise these persistent stereotypes for restricting and distorting knowledge of Black motherhood. Therefore, in this chapter, I will examine the way

Black or White (Mike Binder, 2014) and *Miss Virginia* (R.J. Daniel Hanna, 2019) portray Black motherhood. Both films depict their Black female characters as 'single mothers,' reinforcing patriarchal and welfare queen stereotypes. However, as I will demonstrate, the films also highlight their concern for their children and their fight for a better future for them by balancing motherhood and work without relying on public welfare, thus challenging these stereotypes.

The cinematic implication of these images has been discussed by Harris-Perry in her article 'Bad Black Mothers' (2009) analysing the film *Precious* (Lee Daniels, 2009). The film is an American drama about 16-year-old Claireece Precious Jones, who lives in New York City's Harlem neighbourhood with her unemployed mother, Mary, who has long abused her physically, sexually, and verbally. Precious has also been raped by her now-absent father, Carl, resulting in two pregnancies. Harris-Perry argues that the film depicts Mary as a violent, brutal Black mother and a 'Welfare Queen.' Through this filmic example, Harris-Perry argues that Black mothers are frequently portrayed negatively, as neglectful, overly aggressive, or reliant on welfare. These stereotypes are part of a larger societal narrative that devalues Black motherhood and womanhood. Harris-Perry claims that these depictions are not only inaccurate and unfair, but also politically and socially significant, as they influence public policy and shape societal attitudes towards Black women and their families. In the same context, Nicole Rousseau, in 'Social Rhetoric and the Construction of Black Motherhood' argues that films portray Black motherhood within three themes. The first is children surviving the fate of bad Black mothers like matriarchs and welfare queens (2013, p. 461). The second theme is desperation, where Black mothers are portrayed desperate to escape poverty, loneliness, and work through illegal acts (2013, p. 462). Whereas the third theme portrays Black mothers as completely absent because of death, abandonment, or replacement by a white mother (2013, p. 465).

I argue that these negative themes are deconstructed in the films I am analysing in this chapter. Instead, the Black mothers are portrayed as actively present in their children and families' lives. Moreover, it is true that these films depict Black mothers as desperate, but to save their children from drugs, rough streets and inequalities through activism and determination, a representation that confirms their portrayal as good and caring mothers and not as neglectful and aggressive. Therefore, the representation of Black motherhood in these analysed films aligns with these critics' arguments that Black mothers are a powerful symbol of resilience, nurturing, and advocacy. Collins, in particular, describes Black mothers'

unique position, emphasising how they frequently face multiple oppressions while paving the way for their children's empowerment (Collins, 2002, p. 194). Consequently, in this analysis, I will demonstrate how Black mothers play a positive role in their children's lives and in the overall narrative of the films.

In the book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), bell hooks criticises the portrayal of Black mothers in film and media. She discusses how negative portrayals of Black women can be used to justify oppression and maltreatment, arguing that these portrayals reflect larger societal issues and biases. Since both *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia* address themes of race, class, gender, and societal structures, this chapter follows an intersectional analysis. Scholars like Collins and Harris-Perry emphasise how the intersection of race, gender, and class shapes and influences Black motherhood's portrayal. Thus, understanding the difficulties Black mothers face depends on considering these multiple oppressive systems (Collins, 2000, p. 18; Harris-Perry, 2009).

The term intersectionality, as first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, was primarily understood as a framework for understanding how various aspects of an individual's identity (such as race, gender, and class) interact to produce unique experiences of oppression or privilege. However, in Crenshaw's article 'Why Intersectionality Can't Wait' (2015) she argues that 'Intersectionality is not just about identities, but about the institutions that use identity to exclude and privilege,' emphasising that intersectionality critically examines how institutions and systems perpetuate these dynamics. Crenshaw's quote highlights how institutions, whether legal, educational, economic, or cultural, frequently establish discriminatory practices. These practices may not be overtly discriminatory, but they can be implemented through seemingly neutral policies or norms that, in effect, favour some groups while excluding or marginalising others. This perspective necessitates a shift from viewing discrimination as the result of individual biases or actions to viewing it as a systemic issue. It encourages to recognise and address the deeper, often hidden, layers of societal structures that perpetuate inequality. It also implies that interventions to address inequality must be systemic and institutional, rather than focusing solely on changing individual attitudes or behaviours (Crenshaw, 2015). To summarise, Crenshaw's quote allows us to consider the structural and institutional dimensions of discrimination and privilege. It is a call to recognise and dismantle the complex, intersecting systems of power that have a wide range of effects on individuals and groups.

This chapter will follow an intersectional analysis because of the overlapping themes that both films address. In *Black or White*, the intersection of race and family dynamics is a central theme. The film explores racial tensions, custody battles, and the complexities of biracial identity within a family structure. Thus, an intersectional analysis will examine how race and family relationships coincide to shape the characters' experiences and perceptions. Whereas *Miss Virginia* investigates the intersections of race, class, and education. It depicts the battle of a low-income African American mother against a failing public school system. Following an intersectional approach allows to explore how Virginia's identity as a Black woman influences her experiences within the education system and shapes her advocacy for change. By applying intersectionality to these films, this chapter will examine how multiple aspects of identity and societal structures interact to shape the experiences and actions of Black female characters. This approach not only enriches the analysis, but it also aligns with Crenshaw's objective in developing the concept of intersectionality (2015).

In *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (2019), Collins discusses the significance of experience, community, and solidarity in intersectional critical social theory. She also evaluates the methodological approach to intersectional theorising. Collins emphasises the importance of individual and collective experiences in shaping one's understanding of the world, especially for those who are marginalised by multiple identities (2019, p. 186). As such, I analyse the varied lived experiences of the characters in *Black or White*, particularly concerning race and family dynamics, to highlight how personal and societal experiences of race have a significant impact on the characters' views and actions. Similarly, *Miss Virginia* depicts the experiences of a Black mother navigating a failing educational system, which reflects the broader experiences of many families in similar situations. My analysis focuses on how the film underscores how individual experiences of educational inequality and systemic failure become a catalyst for broader social change. The second tool that Collins discusses is the importance of community in developing a collective identity and shared understanding, particularly among marginalised groups (2019, p. 186). In *Black or White*, the concept of community is examined through the lens of a family caught between two racial and social worlds. The film tells the story of how community is defined and redefined, particularly when it intersects with issues of race and family. Whereas *Miss Virginia* exemplifies the strength of community mobilisation and collective action. Virginia's struggle, as well as her ability to unite a community around the cause of educational reform, demonstrate the importance of community solidarity and action in confronting institutional

inequalities as argued by Collins. The last framework examines the potential for solidarity in the fight against oppression, emphasising the importance of understanding and cooperation across multiple axes of identity (Collins, 2019, p. 186). The theme of solidarity in *Black or White* is explored through shared family bonds and mutual understanding, the film demonstrates how to overcome biases and achieve solidarity. Likewise, solidarity is a key theme in *Miss Virginia*, as the main protagonist works to build cooperation across different social groups in order to address systemic issues in the education system. As a result, in this chapter, I will argue how experience, community and solidarity are powerful forces for social change, especially in the representation of Black women.

Both *Miss Virginia* and *Black or White* present characters embodying a 'colour-blind' approach towards the various aspects of systemic racial issues in their narratives. *Black or White* investigates the complex dynamics of race, family, and custody. Likewise, the film highlights racial bias, the complexities of biracial identity, and the societal challenges of raising a biracial child in racially divided environments. Whereas *Miss Virginia*, addresses systemic issues in the American education system, particularly in underprivileged communities, in addition to the impact of socioeconomic status on educational access and the challenges that minority communities face in securing quality education for their children. In examining contemporary racial dynamics in the United States, particularly systemic racism, and its impact on various societal and institutional structures, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (2018) provides a provocative analysis of the "new" racism. Bonilla-Silva argues that, despite popular belief that America has moved beyond racial discrimination, particularly since the Civil Rights era, racism persists in a more subtle and systemic form. Also, he claims that unlike the overt racism of the Jim Crow era, this new colourblind racism is distinguished by an outward rejection of racist beliefs while maintaining racial advantages and inequalities (2018, pp. 02-03). Similarly, in *Between the World and Me* (2015), Ta-Nehisi Coates delves into the everyday forms of discrimination and racism that Black people face, describing them as a part of the Black experience in America (2015, p. 07). In this chapter, I will analyse white male characters in *Black or White* to show how the film portrays them as examples of using a colourblind approach to dealing with racial issues.

Bonilla-Silva identifies four key frames within which colourblind racism operates, abstract liberalism, naturalisation, cultural racism, and minimisation of racism (2018, p. 54). First,

abstract liberalism uses political and economic liberalism concepts such as equality, opportunity, and choice to explain and justify racial inequalities by appearing 'reasonable and even moral' (2018, p. 56). The second frame, naturalisation is explaining racial phenomena as natural situations, such as self-segregation as a personal choice rather than the result of historical and social forces (2018, p. 57). The third frame which is cultural racism consists of blaming minorities' socioeconomic status on cultural factors rather than structural factors (2018, p. 57). While the last frame, minimisation, is about believing and claiming that racism is no longer a significant factor affecting minorities' lives (2018, p. 57). Thus, Bonilla-Silva explains how these colourblind racist frames manifest in everyday conversations and attitudes, demonstrating the pervasive and subtle nature of modern racism (2018, p. 58). In analysing Elliot, the white character in *Black or White*, I will show how he adopts most of these frames when dealing with other Black characters. Most importantly, I will demonstrate how his character develops and confronts his racial bias through his interactions with the Black female protagonist Rowena and her family. As such, I argue that the way the film frames his character is not only to demonstrate his colour-blindness, but also to deconstruct it and highlight the role of Rowena in achieving this change.

According to Bonilla-Silva, colourblind racism perpetuates racial inequalities in a variety of societal sectors, including employment, education, and the legal system. Such a form of racism is dangerous because it allows the majority to deny the existence of racial issues, preventing efforts towards genuine racial equality (2018, p. 225). As I will show in my analysis, both films examined in this chapter deal with systemic issues, either a custody battle in *Black or White* or educational issues in *Miss Virginia*. Bonilla-Silva investigates how colourblind racism affects educational systems and results, he contends that this ideology perpetuates racial inequality in education by ignoring the systemic barriers that students of colour face. This includes disparities in school funding, access to advanced courses, and disciplinary practices that disproportionately affect minority students. As such, I will discuss how these themes are widely examined in *Miss Virginia* through her journey for an educational reform. The article 'Systemic Racism: Individuals and Interactions, Institutions and Society' (2021) by Mahzarin R. Banaji, Susan T. Fiske and Douglas S. Massey provides a thorough examination of how systemic racism is deeply embedded in various societal structures, including education. The authors discuss how racial segregation in housing leads to racial isolation, which affects Black Americans' educational opportunities. This leads to

disparities in access to quality education, resources, and networks, which has a negative impact on the wealth, health, and legal treatment of Black people (Banaji, Fiske and Massey, 2021, pp. 16-17). George Lipsitz's 'Possessive Investment in Whiteness' (1995) deepens this discussion by demonstrating that systemic racism is a structural phenomenon that actively maintains and reproduces white advantage. Lipsitz argues that white Americans have historically benefited from government policies, economic structures, and legal frameworks that favour them at the expense of people of colour. His analysis contextualises Banaji, Fiske, and Massey's discussion of racial segregation in housing by demonstrating how federal policies such as redlining, discriminatory lending, and exclusionary zoning have historically enabled white communities to accumulate wealth while systematically denying Black Americans economic mobility.

While Bonilla-Silva argues that systemic racism manifests itself in everyday interactions and beliefs (2018, p. 225), Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* argues that systemic racism has evolved rather than disappeared, manifesting itself in institutional practices (2012, p. 183). Moreover, Alexander's work focuses on the mass incarceration system as a form of racial control, comparing it to the Jim Crow laws and arguing that it disproportionately targets Black Americans while also perpetuating racial hierarchies under the guise of criminal justice (2012, p. 181). As a result, presenting images of Black people, particularly men as criminals and drug dealers, is a common stereotype in American films, as argued by Manthia Diawara (1993) and Norman K. Denzin (2002). In both films I will analyse, these images are present but challenged through the active roles of the Black female characters. Likewise, a prominent theme in *Black or White* is racial identity and belonging through the mixed-race granddaughter's story. Coates' work (2015) offers a significant exploration of the Black experience in America, addressing a variety of issues such as self-identity and belonging. He addresses the physicality of being Black in America, where one's body can be subjected to violence and investigation simply for being Black. Coates discusses the fear and vulnerability that accompany this reality, as well as how it affects the formation of a Black person's self-identity and belonging (2015, p. 60). Thus, I will examine how the film explores this theme while intersecting it with issues of racial bias, legal battle, and family dynamics.

Black or White and *Miss Virginia* serve as a lens for examining the representation of Black motherhood, offering both resonance and contrast in depicting the experiences of Black mothers in contemporary settings. These films are essential case studies in contemporary

cinema, presenting Black women as complex, multifaceted characters who confront societal challenges. Departing from traditional narratives, they provide a deeper exploration of Black women's lived experiences as they navigate race, family dynamics, and systemic inequalities. By portraying their protagonists with depth and nuance, these films challenge conventional stereotypes about Black mothers while highlighting themes of advocacy, struggle, resilience, and agency.

Furthermore, both films reflect the socioeconomic, racial, and political climate of their time. While motherhood remains central to their narratives, it intersects with broader racial and socioeconomic issues, making an intersectional Black feminist framework particularly relevant for analysis (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1990). Through this lens, the films position the personal struggles of Black mothers within larger societal and institutional contexts. This chapter underscores how *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia* emphasise the significance of Black motherhood within their communities. By focusing their narratives on Black mothers, these films foreground their experiences, decisions, and emotions, making them the driving force of the story. Consequently, this chapter differs from the others in this thesis: chapter two, which examines *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, focuses on Black female characters navigating predominantly white societies, while chapter three, which explores *Widows* and *American Son*, exclusively depicts Black women in white environments. In contrast, this chapter engages with the challenges Black women face within their own communities, addressing issues such as socioeconomic struggles, stereotypes of Black men, and life in inner cities. At the same time, they depict interactions with white characters without reducing Black women's achievements to white saviour narratives or subordinating them to a white-dominated setting.

While both *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia* address similar themes such as advocacy, Black women's intersected oppression, and resiliency, their narratives, settings, and character arcs are distinct. Rowena exemplifies the protective and assertive nature of a Black grandmother fighting for the well-being of her biracial granddaughter in the face of racial and familial tensions in *Black or White*. Whereas *Miss Virginia* depicts Virginia as a determined single mother who, when confronted with the weaknesses of the educational system, mobilises an entire community in pursuit of better opportunities for their children. The fact that these films explore different stories while both focusing on themes of Black motherhood and the challenges faced by Black women in contemporary settings is significant when considering the representation of Black women in cinema. This difference contributes to broadening the

narratives about Black women and highlights the variety of Black women's lives and struggles. Consequently, this allows the films to counter one-dimensional representations and provides a richer exploration of various themes such as custody battles, racial prejudice, and family dynamics in *Black or White*, and systemic educational inequalities, socio-economic issues, and advocacy in *Miss Virginia*. Thus, these films depart from the long tradition of depicting Black women as the stereotypes I mentioned earlier; they challenge the existing stereotypes of Black women's roles and promote the importance of having multiple voices for a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the larger conversation about Black women in film. Through these cinematic narratives, the primary aim of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the progressive representation of Black women/mothers in contemporary cinema. Given the traditional portrayals of Black women in films, *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia* are progressive in their deliberate and nuanced approach to representing Black women, differing from previous films in their portrayal of Black motherhood. They deconstruct limitations, challenge stereotypes, and contribute positively to the ongoing discourse about Black female representation.

This chapter is divided into several sections that explore the portrayal of Black motherhood, agency, and advocacy. The first section examines the juxtaposition of Black and white communities in both films to highlight socio-economic disparities. This section also highlights the pervasive stereotypes about Black communities and Black men, with a focus on how these Black female characters challenge them, which serves to enrich their portrayal as active agents. This will lead to the second section, which focuses on the way the films portray the role Black women play in their Black communities as well as how they are empowered because of their collective bonds. Likewise, this section analyses how the position of Black women in these narratives contributes to their empowerment as well as the advancement of their communities. The third section discusses the multiple functions that Black motherhood performs. The primary purpose of highlighting this variety is to show a multidimensional portrayal by emphasising the nuanced characterisation of Black motherhood in the films as both a source of strength and vulnerability. The last section of this chapter delves deeply into exploring the portrayal of Black mothers facing racial and gender biases from different characters in the films. By addressing these key themes, this chapter ensures an in-depth examination of the evolving cinematic landscape concerning Black women, emphasising both their strength and weakness, moving beyond reductive cinematic tropes. Thus, these films present Black female characters as multidimensional

figures as advocated by many Black feminist scholars (Collins, 2000; Fleetwood, 2011; Gates, 2018; Harris-Perry, 2013; hooks, 1992).

4.2 Contrasting Realities: Navigating the Black and White Worlds in *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia*.

The juxtaposition of the Black and white communities in *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia* is a central element in both films. This contrast is more than just a background aspect; it has a significant impact on the portrayal of its characters, particularly Black women. The contrasting worlds in these films serve as an image through which Black women's struggles, resiliency, and agency are emphasised. This section examines how the coexistence of these racialised worlds affects how Black women are portrayed, focusing on their roles as mothers, advocates, and significant members of their communities. Moreover, this section deconstructs stereotypes of Black women by highlighting their nuanced portrayals in both films.



Figure 40 Elliot's neighbourhood.



Figure 41 Rowena's neighbourhood.

Black or White depicts the white and Black communities as two completely different worlds that are contrasted by their stark differences in class, despite being both set in Los Angeles. According to Boyce Gillespie (2016), cinematic techniques that focus on racial identity, space, and cultural expression actively shape Blackness, rather than simply representing it thematically. *Black or White* employs this aesthetic approach to emphasise the intersection of race and class, demonstrating how spatial and economic divisions shape Black characters' experiences in the city. The scene in which Elliot travels from his house to Rowena's neighbourhood is a pivotal moment in the film, highlighting this aspect. The scene begins in Elliot's house and captures his affluent, predominantly white neighbourhood (Figure 40). The camera uses wide shots to capture the spaciousness and luxury of Elliot's surroundings. This includes his large, well-kept house as well as the manicured lawns in his neighbourhood. To

create a sense of warmth and comfort, this scene employs both bright and soft lighting techniques. It also visually represents Elliot's wealth, which provides security and stability. The film portrays Elliot's neighbourhood's colour scheme as neutral and muted, reflecting a clean and controlled environment. As Elliot drives his fancy car towards the Black community of South-Central Los Angeles, the lighting becomes harsher and more contrasting, emphasising the harsh realities and challenges that the residents face (Figure 41). This is also visible in indoor scenes, where the lighting is less uniform and more indicative of a lived-in, less maintained environment. Through a fast-tracking shot, the camera follows Elliot on his way and captures the congestion and crowdedness of the Black neighbourhood in contrast to the stability of his world. The camera uses closer, tighter framing with more movement to convey a sense of immediacy as many people are captured outside their houses listening to rap music, children playing, and a lot of cars and police appearing around. Thus, this journey from one neighbourhood to another is not only a physical transition but also a visual metaphor for the socio-economic and cultural divide between the characters. Moreover, according to the way this scene is depicted, the film references Black Urban cinema ¹² so that viewers immediately understand what kind of neighbourhood it is.

The depiction of class division is further emphasised in indoor scenes where the camera follows Elliot behind when he arrives at Rowena's house to capture that contrast. Inside the house, the film uses close-ups and medium shots to create a sense of intimacy and warmth. The framing is tighter compared to the spacious framing in Elliot's house, reflecting the difference in living spaces. The film shows the house crowded, noisy, small, and unorganised because of the number of people living in it. The camera captures Elliot in a tracking shot walking through Rowena's house to her garage in the back garden. As he enters inside the garage, Elliot looks around and says, "This is quite a setup, Rowena." The garage is portrayed in a wide shot, showing other people working in the background and Rowena sitting on a chair before she stands up when they begin arguing about Elliot's ability to raise Eloise independently. The depiction of racial disparities in the film continues when Elliot makes it clear that Eloise is leaving in the safest neighbourhood and going to the best school in Los Angeles, implicitly contrasting it with Rowena's dangerous neighbourhood, which is shown to be unkempt and made up of low-income housing. Thus, the film alludes to the ways in

¹² Urban films, a subgenre of films that frequently depict African American urban life, particularly in inner cities, for example *Boyz n the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991) and *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989). Such films have received extensive critical commentary and analysis since their inception, particularly in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Diawara, 1993; Denzin, 2002).

which Black neighbourhoods are portrayed in urban films as dangerous due to drugs and crime (Diawara, 1993; Denzin, 2002). Furthermore, Elliot's indirect mocking of Rowena's business and neighbourhood is a type of microaggression she experiences as a Black woman in American society, as explained in CRT (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 7).

By contrasting Rowena and her family's way of life to Elliot's, the film conveys some of the social consequences that racial discrimination has. Notably, the film contrasts Eloise's experience with that of her father, Reggie, and repeatedly shows how she benefits from Elliot's white privilege. After her mother's death, Eloise is raised by her grandfather, Elliot, in a predominantly white, affluent environment. Her upbringing is characterised by privilege, stability, and a degree of protection from racial and socioeconomic hardships. Reggie, however, comes from a less affluent family and has struggled with legal issues and addiction. His life experiences have been shaped by the difficulties and realities of being a Black man in a socioeconomically divided society (Alexander, 2012). The film examines how racial and socioeconomic backgrounds shape individual experiences and familial relationships through their contrasting lives.

Miss Virginia also creates a contrast between Black and white communities, this time in Washington, DC. The depiction of houses and neighbourhoods exemplifies the economic and racial disparities that exist in many parts of America. The first scene effectively establishes the neighbourhood setting, capturing the socioeconomic context in which the story unfolds (Figure 42). The scene typically employs a combination of wide shots and close-ups to capture both the larger environment and the personal, lived experience of its residents. On the one hand, the wide shots show the urban landscape of the neighbourhood, with its densely packed houses and bustling streets, conveying an immediate sense of community and activity. The colour palette is soft and earthy, reflecting the urban, working-class setting, and the lighting is predominantly natural, emphasising the environment's raw and authentic nature. On the other hand, the close-up shots emphasise details like old buildings, playing children, and everyday interactions, adding intimacy and immediacy. The scene ends with a close-up of Virginia as she walks into her son's school after they have called to express their concerns about him. This cinematography not only sets the physical stage for the film, but it also introduces the central themes of struggle, community resilience, and the pursuit of better opportunities in a subtle way. This first scene's visual storytelling sets the groundwork for Virginia's journey, positioning it firmly in a setting that is both challenging and full of potential. It depicts the characters' supportive but economically and socially challenging

environment. The film depicts its main character, Virginia, in a small, modest house with soft lighting from lamps that adds a sense of warmth and intimacy while also reflecting her financial difficulties. Virginia, like Rowena in *Black or White*, lives in a predominantly Black neighbourhood and works many jobs to survive and offer a better life for her son. As a result, this reflects how both films depict the financial disparities that exist in many parts of America during the early 2000s (Alexander, 2012, p.239; Banaji, Fiske, and Massey, 2021).



Figure 42 Virginia's neighbourhood.

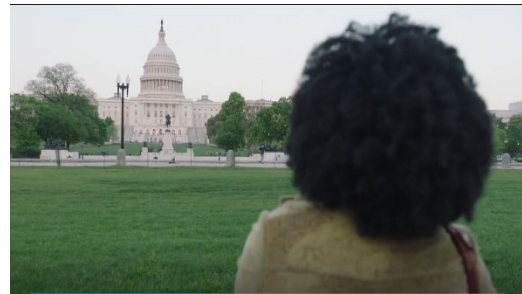


Figure 43 Virginia visiting the Congress building.

The stark contradiction between the poor Black neighbourhood and the more affluent white side of the city is also vividly depicted in *Miss Virginia*. For instance, when Virginia attends meetings or visits policymakers' offices, the mood changes to show illuminated, clean, and wide streets as well as modern, well-maintained buildings. An illustrative scene involves Virginia visiting the Congress building just as she decides to embark on her journey to obtain a scholarship for the children of her community. This scene (Figure 43) captures in wide shots the grandeur and imposing architecture of the Congress building, emphasising its enormity and luxury. This is in contrast to Virginia's neighbourhood's more modest, confined urban space. The wide shots not only show the size of the building but also the vast socio-political divide between Virginia's world and that of policymakers. Inside the building, the camera follows Virginia in an arc shot, making her appear smaller and more isolated, implying that she is an outsider in this environment, while she is portrayed as a central, controlling figure in her neighbourhood.

Moreover, the film points at America's economic and racial disparities by emphasising the existence of unequal educational opportunities (Banaji, Fiske, and Massey, 2021; Bonilla-Silva, 2018). This distinction is further exemplified through the depiction of Virginia's son's public school. The film portrays the school as under-resourced and overcrowded, reflecting the socioeconomic status of the neighbourhood. Furthermore, the school suffers from a less

disciplined atmosphere, as evidenced by the frequent fighting between the children, involving Virginia's son James. However, the private school Virginia wants to send her son to is distinguished by its modern facilities, clean and well-lit classrooms, and a wide range of resources. Because the school is in a better-maintained, more affluent part of town, the film depicts it in a safer environment with a more orderly and calmer atmosphere. The contrast between public and private schools in *Miss Virginia* serves as a visual metaphor for the larger social and economic inequalities addressed in the film. It emphasises the film and protagonist's perspective about the need for educational reform.

Both *Miss Virginia* and *Black or White* use the neighbourhoods' mise-en-scene to highlight larger themes about race, class, prejudice, and socioeconomic status. The depiction of the differences between Black and white characters' homes and neighbourhoods provides a layered understanding of the cultural dynamics that exist in American society. Highlighting Rowena and Virginia's experiences as Black mothers in a socioeconomically disadvantaged neighbourhood is consistent with intersectional theory, which contends that understanding the complexities of social issues necessitates an examination of the intersecting nature of social categorisations and their impact on individual experiences (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2019, p. 186). I argue that by highlighting these differences and struggles, these films not only present but also challenge them. Through depicting the lives of the characters in these settings, the films oppose societal norms and biases, prompting viewers to confront and reflect on their own thoughts. Also, by revealing these socio-economic difficulties, these films allow audiences to empathise with Black women's experiences, recognise their agency, and appreciate their resilience. This can result in more informed and empathetic viewers who are critical of stereotypical portrayals and appreciate nuanced narratives. Furthermore, this powerful depiction of their complexities highlights Black women's roles as change agents and the importance of transforming their representation in Hollywood from secondary characters to catalysts for societal reflection.

The reference to the disparities in American society, as well as the juxtaposition of the Black and white worlds in both films, challenges the notion of 'post-racial' America. Both films emphasise the persistence of some traditional images of Black people, such as the portrayal of Black men as irresponsible and criminals and of Black women as single mothers.

Throughout the history of American cinema, Black people have been subjected to numerous stereotypical images that reinforce harmful social narratives. One of the most persistent and damaging is the portrayal of the criminalised Black male, often depicted as a societal threat,

a drug dealer, and an irresponsible father¹³ (Bogle, 2016; Diawara, 1993; Lawrence and Butters Jr., 2016). Since *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia* attempt to address societal issues, they present a more nuanced portrayal of all their characters. Reggie, played by Andre Holland, the biological father of Eloise in *Black or White*, is depicted as a drug addict and irresponsible father who left his girlfriend pregnant and refused to take care of his daughter. For example, the film depicts Reggie in numerous scenes with some Black males consuming drugs in their neighbourhood. Furthermore, the scene (Figure 44) in which he confronts Elliot and threatens him with a knife emphasises Reggie's hopelessness and flaws, contributing to this character's problematic portrayal. This scene is set at night in Elliot's garden while he is drinking; Reggie appears and aggressively demands money. The use of shadows and limited light sources creates a tense and gloomy atmosphere, heightening the sense of danger and unpredictability. The darkness of the night also represents the characters' dark, turbulent emotions and the confusing situation. Through this representation, the film reinforces stereotypes of Black men that I have previously discussed. Nonetheless, the depiction of Reggie as a bad Black man while Rowena is depicted as a caring mother contradicts Rousseau's argument about Black children in films surviving the fate of bad Black mothers (2013, p. 461). This image exists in this story, but it has been transformed into a mother surviving the fate of a bad Black child whom she tries to save.



Figure 44 Reggie threatening Elliot.

However, the film portrays other Black male characters in a way that challenges Reggie's representation. For instance, Rowena's brother, Jeremiah, is portrayed as a successful lawyer who supports his sister during her custody battle. Also, the character of Duvan, Eloise's math tutor, is an intelligent Black man who has many degrees and skills. Therefore,

¹³ In The Negro Family: The Case for National Action 1965 report, Daniel Patrick Moynihan stated that the Black family structure, particularly the high rate of fatherlessness in Black households, was a major contributor to Black Americans' social and economic challenges. The report's emphasis on the absence of Black fathers in the family unit portrayed this as a pathological issue, impeding Black individuals' progress and perpetuating a cycle of poverty, crime, and instability.

through these two characters, the film is challenging the persistent negative images of Black men as well as emphasising the depth and complexity of Black experiences. Like *Black or White*, *Miss Virginia* includes depictions of gang-related violence, drug dealing, and other negative images of Black manhood. From the beginning of the film, it is shown that Virginia's neighbourhood is dominated by dangerous Black men who sell drugs and target young Black children. Because of his circumstances and environment, Virginia's son James becomes involved in some illegal activities. As a result, I contend that the film presents these scenes and images to bring attention to the failings of the inner-city educational system and to serve as a catalyst for Virginia's fight for better educational opportunities. Furthermore, in this film, flawed Black men are juxtaposed with other good Black men from her neighbourhood who support Virginia in her fight for a better future for the children in her community. Therefore, both films depict different characters from the Black community with varying experiences, resulting in a more nuanced and complex representation that enriches the narrative.

Negative portrayals of Black men in these films highlight larger societal, systemic, and racial issues in which they operate. Aside from the previous discussions about how these films may highlight the prevalence of such stereotypes in society and the complexities of Black life, such representations have broader sociocultural contexts. First, by demonstrating a significant transformation of bad characters, the films challenge and deconstruct initial stereotypes. For example, in both narratives, Black men who are portrayed negatively in the beginning demonstrate growth, redemption, and evolution by the end. Second, it is critical to emphasise that these Black men underwent this positive transformation and transitioned from negative to more nuanced characters with the support of their Black women, particularly their mothers. In *Black or White*, as I will explain in depth in the following sections, Rowena has played a key role in transforming her son from a drug addict and runaway father to a caring one who wants to provide love and care for his daughter. Similarly, Virginia's fight for better educational opportunities for Black children helps to save young Black men from the rough streets, which are the primary source of these stereotypes about Black men. As a result, I argue that by highlighting and then deconstructing stereotypes of Black men, as well as emphasising the role of Black women in achieving that, both films frame these women as agents of change within their families and communities, demonstrating the evolving representation of Black in contrast to the stereotypes that

portray them as lazy, absent, matriarchs, and welfare queens (Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry, 2013; Rousseau, 2013).

The portrayal of Black women in mainstream cinema as struggling 'Single mothers' is a recurring trope. Scholars like Harris-Perry (2013) and Collins (2000) argue that this stereotype, like any others, serves to marginalise Black women and deny the complexity of their experiences. Accordingly, Harris-Perry states that 'The picture I have painted so far is pretty dismal. crooked room, African American women are standing in a room skewed by stereotypes that deny their humanity and distort them into ugly caricatures of their true selves' (2013, p. 183). Thus, this humiliation reduces their chances of being recognised by the state, limits the effectiveness of advocating on their own behalf, and expands rage over them that leads to more victimisation (2013, p. 183). Similarly, Collins classifies this stereotype as a controlling image, which makes racism, sexism, and other forms of inequality appear normal (2000, p. 69). However, these critics acknowledge the strength and resilience of Black 'Single mothers' (Collins, 2000, p. 75; Harris-Perry, 2013, p. 184). Thus, the exploration of this image, which is supposed to be a negative portrayal, reveals significant insights about how Black motherhood is constructed in media, as argued by Gates (2018, p. 89). In the films examined in this chapter, Black women are portrayed as single mothers, but their characterisation is balanced. Following the one-dimensional historical representation of the single mother, this section examines how these films transform negative images of Black women based on myths into images of active and empowered women by portraying them as complex characters. In *Black or White*, Rowena is represented as a self-made woman who owns her own business, rejecting the welfare queen trope. Also, she is portrayed struggling with her son's drug addiction and personal issues while also being strongly protective of her granddaughter and fighting for her custody. Unlike *Black or White*, *Miss Virginia* explicitly addresses the stereotype of 'single mothers.' On the one hand, Virginia is portrayed as overcoming her economic difficulties to provide a better life for her son. On the other hand, she confronts the corrupted educational system that ignores children of her community. Both films, I argue, present these struggles not only to show these women's vulnerability but also their maternal love, endurance, and determination. As a result, as previously stated, Black feminist scholars advocate for a multidimensional representation of Black women in order to capture the diversity of their lives. Collins emphasises the importance of acknowledging Black women as empowered agents with diverse experiences, consequently challenging stereotypical narratives that are frequently

depicted in the media (2000, p. 78). Also, hooks emphasises the importance of portraying Black women in roles that reflect a broader range of emotional and personal depth, moving beyond the confines of simplistic portrayals (2009, p. 173). Hence, both films aim to emphasise that their protagonists are complex characters with flaws, passions, and fears, which reinforces the notion of nuanced depictions of Black women. Such portrayals can both challenge and broaden audiences' perceptions of Black womanhood.

This section has highlighted the various representations of Black and white worlds in *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia*. It has also argued that the films portray traditional stereotypes in order to deconstruct them. Depicting these disparities goes beyond simply providing context; it is critical to understanding the challenges, motivations, and strengths of Black maternal figures. These cinematic choices reinforce the narrative that Black motherhood is multifaceted and deeply influenced by larger societal structures, enriching the discourse on race, gender, and representation in film. Despite these struggles and difficulties, as will be demonstrated in the following section, the Black community in these narratives, particularly Black women, remains a force in the face of various racial and social obstacles.

4.3 The Nuances of Black Relationships and Their Role in Empowering Black Women.

In previous chapters of the thesis, I discussed how whiteness dominates the narratives of the films. In chapter two, I argued that both *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* place their Black female protagonists in relationships with their white counterparts because of their service roles (maids and mathematicians in a segregated division). Also, in the third chapter, the focus has been on highlighting the struggles that Black women in *Widows* and *American Son* face when they are involved in interracial marriages and navigating white urban settings. However, unlike these chapters, which engage with the white/Black contrast and interactions, this chapter focuses on films that address the issues and challenges confronting Black women/mothers in their families and communities while also commenting on their reactions with other white characters. Furthermore, this chapter differs from the others in that it examines films depicting Black families and communities in a positive light by highlighting their solidarity and unity, which contradicts the portrayal of dysfunctional Black families (hooks, 1992). Through this narrowed approach, this study offers a vision of Hollywood's portrayal of Black women struggling in their communities with social and

systemic issues more than the other chapters. Therefore, in this section, I will look at how both films highlight the complexities of Black relationships and their significance in empowering Black women onscreen.



Figure 45 Rowena with her family in the courtroom.

In the first section of the chapter, I mentioned the differences in presenting the Black and white worlds in both films. Many critics argue that this is due to traditional stereotypes of Black people. Among them are Bogle and Diawara, who claim that the Black community has historically been portrayed negatively in Hollywood films (Bogle, 2016; Diawara, 1993). Whereas other studies about contemporary cinema show that the portrayal of Black communities, sisterhood, and friendships has certainly evolved, shifting from stereotypical to more nuanced, authentic depictions (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2009). In *Black or White*, despite the issues that Rowena's family faces, such as Reggie's drug addiction and the custody battle, it is depicted as a loving and close-knit family. Rowena's household is also depicted in the film as bustling and full of familial ties, it is a place where people of various generations coexist and help one another. Additionally, Rowena repeatedly expresses her desire for Eloise to grow up with them in order to provide her with more love and a sense of family warmth. This strong family bond is more visible during the custody battle, when the courtroom fills with Rowena's family members to support her in her fight (Figure 45). However, Elliot is only shown alone with his friend, who is his lawyer at the same time (Figure 46). The film subverts the initial portrayal of each protagonist as defined by their community's economic power or lack thereof by emphasising Elliot's loneliness and juxtaposing it with Rowena's supportive family. It implies that, despite the societal power that comes with being a wealthy white man, Elliot lacks Rowena's emotional and familial wealth. Therefore, I argue that through showcasing Rowena's supportive family, the film challenges the historical narratives of Black families as fragmented and dysfunctional (hooks, 1992, p. 108) and positions Black women like Rowena as strong matriarchs who are essential to keeping the family unit together.



Figure 46 Elliot with his lawyers in the courtroom.

Similarly, the unity of the Black community and family is depicted in *Miss Virginia*. Although Virginia is portrayed as a single mother fighting for her son's future, the film emphasises how she relies on her community to demand educational reform. For instance, when Virginia starts her fight against the corrupted educational system, she organises meetings in her house and other community places to discuss this issue and to plan for collecting signatures for the petition. Many scenes in the film depict this community unity, one of which takes place in a modest home of one of the parents involved in Virginia's fight. The film uses close-ups to capture Virginia's emotional intensity and determination as she mobilises her community to gather signatures for a petition requesting a scholarship for their children. Other people are filmed in wider shots that reflect community involvement and spirit. Virginia's words are chosen to inspire and motivate, speaking directly to the community's shared experiences and struggles. For example, she uses phrases like "My son and your children can't wait, they need change now." Through this scene, the film depicts Virginia's growth from a concerned single mother to a community leader and activist. This gathering serves as a source of mutual encouragement and highlights the community's shared concerns and commitment to change. In addition, Virginia and members of her community organise a protest (Figure 47) to emphasise their physical presence and to powerfully dramatize the urgent need for school reform. Virginia also receives emotional support from her community, which serves as a pillar of strength for her and motivates other parents to join her in her battle. As a result, the film portrays Virginia as an active character who affects change in her community. Likewise, *Miss Virginia* emphasises education as a critical tool for empowerment. As depicted in the film, the Black community views education as a means of achieving better opportunities and breaking free from poverty and crime. Thus, by focusing on Virginia's determination, as well as the community support, the film highlights the

strength that exists in many Black communities, which frequently manifests itself in the face of adversity and systemic inequalities.



Figure 47 Virginia with members of her community protesting.

The portrayal of Black community support and unity in both films is critical. These films question stereotypes about the Black family, such as dysfunctionality and the lack of solidarity, which hooks emphasises in her works. hooks claims that this portrayal is a form of oppression and devaluation because it ignores the historical and contemporary realities of Black people's struggles and accomplishments in creating and maintaining loving and supportive relationships. She also disputes myths and stereotypes about Black families being dysfunctional, patriarchal, or matriarchal, and Black communities being violent, hopeless, or passive (hooks, 1992, p. 108). Moreover, both films demonstrate the importance of collective action and solidarity in confronting and navigating the challenges posed by intersecting oppression and privilege systems, which is an important aspect of Collins' discussion of the power of communal bonds and solidarity in social change (Collins, 2019, pp. 186-188). Thus, these films highlight the complexities of Black womanhood by placing them at the centre of their families and communities, as multifaceted women, adding depth and authenticity to their portrayal. The characters of Rowena and Virginia challenge stereotypes of Black women as passive and victims. Instead, with the support of their communities, they take charge, become changemakers, and confront racist and systemic inequities.

In the third chapter, I discussed the absence of the Black community's support. Both *Widows* and *American Son* depict their protagonists as being away from their Black environments because of their integration into white society. As a result, these films place a greater emphasis on individual experiences of Black women within white society than on Black community bonds. However, in the second chapter, I examine how *The Help* depicts solidarity as limited to two maids, Aibileen and Minny, due to their white-dominated

environment. Also, because of the film's context, their Black community operates within a framework of subservient roles. Furthermore, support and empowerment driven by friendships among the Black female protagonists in *Hidden Figures* is portrayed as a replacement for family opposition. In this chapter's contemporary films, both Black family and community provide unity and support against societal and racist challenges. Consequently, I argue that focusing on Black women's strength and resilience in *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia*, as well as the significant role of community and family in their lives, emphasises the importance of nuanced and culturally grounded narratives in the broader discourse on the changing representation of Black women in Hollywood.

4.4 Empowerment and Vulnerability: The Diverse Role of Black Motherhood

The representation of Black motherhood in Hollywood cinema has been influenced by the social, racial, and cultural circumstances of American society (Rousseau, 2013; Guerrero, 1993). My thesis expands on this analysis to demonstrate how American films of the twenty-first century depict Black motherhood in new and more complex ways. In the second chapter, both *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* portray their Black female protagonists as mothers. However, their responsibilities to white families, children, and white workplaces overshadow their mothering roles. In *The Help*, for example, Aibileen, who lost her son years ago, takes care of the little white girl Mae Mobley, and the film depicts her as being a better mother to the child than her neglectful white mother. Furthermore, Minny is obliged to work for white families and leave her children alone at home due to her abusive husband, who does not work to support his family. Thus, the film highlights how Black women in the 1960s had to prioritise caring for white women's children over their own. In *Hidden Figures*, the Black women Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary are also depicted as mothers, but the film's narrative is about their work in NASA's segregated division; the main purpose is to show these women at their workplace rather than at home, thus the portrayal of Black motherhood in this film is limited. Similarly, in chapter three, I argued that both *Widows* and *American Son* emphasise their Black women's struggle for identity and justice in contemporary America over their motherhood. Both films explore the emotional and personal aspects of Black motherhood, particularly grief, loss, fear, and the anxieties of raising Black children in a white hostile environment. In contrast, *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia* focus on highlighting the systemic and social barriers that Black mothers face in

providing a better life and education for their children with support from their Black communities. Furthermore, these films feature Black women in a variety of roles, ranging from mothers to activists and advocates. These multiple roles also contribute to their portrayal as a source of vulnerability and strength at the same time. As a result, in this section, I will discuss how these films address the various roles that Black mothers play in their families and communities and how this enriches the portrayal of Black women in films as nuanced and layered characters.



Figure 48 Rowena in a meeting with her lawyers.

Through the character of Rowena, *Black or White* illustrates the Black woman's varied struggles and perseverance. Her character is depicted as a mother as well as an advocate, embodying both vulnerability and strength. Rowena is depicted as an independent woman who cares for her children, siblings, and relatives. Despite not having a degree, she is portrayed in the film as a self-made woman who owns six businesses and three houses. Rowena's strength becomes more evident when she decides to fight for custody of her granddaughter, with the assistance of her well-qualified brother lawyer. Many scenes promote Rowena's leadership style, such as when she meets the group of lawyers hired by her brother for the case, with a medium shot showing Rowena sitting at the head of the table (Figure 48). This position indicates that she is the primary decision-maker, especially since the head of the table is the symbolic place of authority.

Furthermore, the film challenges 'respectable' portrayals by revealing Rowena's severe and hot-tempered personality, especially in her scenes with Elliot, which depict their fights and disagreements by capturing her facial expressions and body language. For instance, in their first scene together in Elliot's yard during his wife's funeral (Figure 49), the two discuss Eloise's future after the death of her grandmother. Rowena becomes enraged and accuses Elliot of depriving her of her granddaughter, her eyes widening and her voice becoming sharper, saying, "she's [Eloise] got a whole lot of family down there with me." Rowena stands in front of Elliot with her hand on her hip and her eyebrows raised, indicating that she

is confident and ready to act. In this scene, Rowena embodies CRT's counter-storytelling concept, which emphasises countering white narratives through the voices of people of colour (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 42). As a result, she expresses her love for Eloise in order to change Elliot's perception that Rowena and her family are neglectful of his granddaughter. Therefore, through these scenes, *Black or White* emphasises the strength of Rowena and comments on her leadership style, which has maintained the stability and unity of her family. Commenting on the power of Black women, Collins argues that 'in some cases Black women's centrality in Black family networks leads them to exert their political power through existing family structures without appearing to do so' (2000, p. 209). Collins is referring to the fact that Black women frequently play an important role in sustaining and supporting their families and communities, particularly in the face of oppression and discrimination. By doing so, they also exercise their political agency and influence, even if the dominant society does not recognise or acknowledge them. Collins argues that the family structures of Black women are a source of empowerment and resistance, as well as a site of cultural expression and identity formation.



Figure 49 Rowena VS Elliot

The portrayal of Rowena's outspoken personality is a recurring theme in the film. Several times during the custody battle, Rowena expresses her rage to the judge, who becomes irritated and threatens to eject Rowena if she stands and defends her son without the judge's permission. Moreover, despite knowing about her son's drug addiction and flaws, Rowena refuses to have others, particularly Elliot, accuse her son of his drug addiction or even abandoning his daughter. Rowena approaches her son Reggie in a completely unique way, believing that he is a victim who would benefit from being close to his daughter. However, when Reggie becomes aggressive, Rowena takes control in calming the situation, demonstrating her ability to handle and diffuse stressful family situations. Rowena's treatment of her brother Jeremiah and the rest of her family is another example of her

strength and severity. Despite being a famous and intelligent lawyer whom Elliot fears, Jeremiah avoids his sister's anger. For example, he appears unable to control her in court and accepts her decisions despite knowing he risks losing the custody case.

Through these scenes, I argue that the film focuses on demonstrating Rowena's strong character, which can be interpreted as embodying the stereotype of the 'SBW.' In previous chapters, I defined this trope and its negative use in depicting Black women in films as exceptionally resilient, selfless, and able to persevere in the face of adversity without showing vulnerability (Harris Perry, 2013, p. 185). This stereotype limits Black women's need to express vulnerability, obscuring the complexities of their experiences and identities and reducing them to one-dimensional representations. This trope is also used to justify societal and political failures. When Black women are perceived to be inherently strong and capable of handling more, there is less urgency to address systemic issues and social inequalities (Harris Perry, 2013, p. 185). This limiting portrayal of Black women is challenged in *Black or White* by adding depth to Rowena's character and demonstrating her complexity. Therefore, I will demonstrate how the film depicts her character's vulnerability in defying 'respectability politics' (Gates, 2016).



Figure 50 Rowena supporting her son Reggie.

Black or White portrays Rowena in a nuanced manner, avoiding the persistent one-dimensional representation of Black women in cinema. The film highlights Rowena's emotional fragility in several scenes, especially with her son Reggie. The primary source of Rowena's vulnerability is her son's drug addiction and behaviour. On the day of the court, Rowena finds her son with some friends smoking cigarettes outside their house and refuses to stand in front of the judge. When she confronts him, Reggie appears hesitant to take custody of Eloise and expresses his fear of raising her. In this scene (Figure 50), Rowena plays the mother who wants the best for her son. In a soft voice, she gently reminds him of her love and the value of his daughter in order to maintain the closeness of the entire family. Despite this emotional turmoil, Rowena speaks with conviction and emphasises the

importance of responsibility. The camera captures Rowena's face in close-ups, displaying a range of emotions from sorrow to authority. Similarly, her body language reflects this inner conflict, alternating between assertive gestures like pointing with her fingers and slapping him on the face and reflective gestures like slumped shoulders and an avoidant gaze. The film expertly emphasises Rowena's character's complex blend of vulnerability and strength in this scene, confirming her nuance. Furthermore, this scene reveals Rowena's role as an agent of change, influencing Reggie's decision to attend the custody and, ultimately, the course of the film's larger familial conflict. Most importantly, I argue that Rowena's desperate attempt to save Reggie from his self-destructive path exemplifies the difficulties that Black mothers frequently face in the U.S., particularly when it comes to protecting their children from societal dangers. The scene demonstrates the larger struggles of Black mothers attempting to save their children from systems that have been constructed against them, whether it is drugs, crime, or prejudice (Alexander Michelle, 2012). As a result, through this scene, the film not only highlights the pain, struggles, and obstacles of Black motherhood, but it also draws attention to larger systemic and racial issues that intersect with personal challenges.



Figure 51 Rowena with Eloise.

Rowena's scenes with her granddaughter Eloise further reinforce the complexity of the Black experience by emphasising her multifaceted portrayal. The custody battle for Eloise demonstrates Rowena's love and care for her granddaughter, especially since she constantly expresses her ability and willingness to provide love for her, implying that Eloise requires more love than Elliot provides her. By the middle of the film, Rowena and her family visit Elliot's house as part of the judge's advice on getting Eloise close to them. While everyone else is having fun outside, Rowena is having a private moment with Eloise in her room. Eloise shows her grandmother the drawings she makes for her Black family (Figure 51), indicating her desire to be part of that large family. Moreover, this interaction confirms Rowena's deep maternal love for her granddaughter. The film uses close-ups to show the tenderness and

intimacy existing in their relationship. For example, the camera focuses on the details, such as the warmth in Rowena's eyes, Eloise's trusting expression, and the soft touch of Eloise's hair. This final gesture is more than just a grandmother admiring her granddaughter; it is a subtle attempt to ensure that Eloise understands and values her Black identity. Because Eloise is raised by her white grandfather in a culturally different environment, this scene emphasises Rowena's influential role in shaping Eloise's understanding of her identity and heritage, highlighting the matriarchal strength in the family structure. Furthermore, the scenes involving Rowena and Eloise are distinguished by warm and soft lighting to convey a sense of comfort, safety, and warmth. The film depicts Rowena's love and protective nature as a positive portrayal of Black 'matriarchy,' contradicting the historical portrayals of Black mothers as 'Mammies,' 'Absent Black mothers,' and 'Bad Black mothers' (Rousseau, 2013, p. 457).

I have been arguing that *Black or White* emphasises Rowena's vulnerability to comment on the complex and nuanced portrayal of Black women. As a result, the film demonstrates that the scenes between Rowena and Elliot not only highlight the tension and their opposing views on Eloise's future but also capture Rowena's moments of emotional fragility.

Throughout the film, Rowena and Elliot's confrontations are marked by tension and disagreement. However, she frequently expresses her sympathy for him, particularly after the death of his wife. Rowena takes the initiative to hug Elliot at the funeral and says expressions like, 'give me some love' and 'your pain is my pain' to show her support. Furthermore, in the final scene in the courtroom, in low-key lighting emphasising the tension and seriousness of the situation, Elliot delivers a speech about the pain he feels over losing his daughter because of Reggie. He explains that he is not racist against Reggie, but his attitude towards him is rather a reflection of his feelings about Reggie's behaviour and lack of responsibility for both his daughter and granddaughter. By strategically using silence in this scene to emphasise its emotional impact, the camera slowly zooms in on Elliot as he speaks, heightening the moment and bringing the viewer into his emotional state. The lack of background music at key points in his speech emphasises the rawness and sincerity of his words. Moreover, the camera cuts to a reverse shot of Rowena's reactions, using close-ups to capture her emotional response. These shots are crucial in demonstrating how Elliot's words affect her, reflecting a mix of surprise, comprehension, and re-evaluation of her own stance. I argue that this scene is pivotal because it brings the film's central themes of race, family, and prejudice to the front. Elliot's speech, in which he confronts his own biases as

well as the complexities of race relations, serves as a moment of self-awareness and confession. More importantly, Rowena's reactions deepen the scene by conveying the impact of Elliot's words on her and possibly her understanding of the situation, but also by highlighting her emotional vulnerability, which adds depth to her character.



Figure 52 Rowena and Elliot

Another instance in the film where Rowena's emotional fragility is highlighted is when she discusses Reggie's drug addiction and his ability to be a good father with Elliot (Figure 52), which is another example of how she uses the counter-storytelling concept. In a tracking shot in Elliot's house, Rowena follows Elliot from the kitchen to the living room to persuade him to let Reggie meet his daughter. Rowena's continuing pursuit of Elliott throughout the house, despite his dismissiveness and resistance, reveals her desperation and vulnerability. She is getting out of her comfort zone, entering Elliot's house, a place typically associated with his power and authority, to plead her son's situation. The tone of her voice, which changes between assertiveness, pleading, and fear, reveals the complexities of her emotional state. This scene indicates her deep concern not only for the well-being of her granddaughter but also for her son's redemption and involvement in his daughter's life. I argue that through highlighting this emotional pain of Rowena in front of a white male character, the film emphasises that Black women, like all people, experience a range of emotions and are not merely symbols of strength (Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry, 2013; Gates, 2018). Moreover, since the narrative is about a society where racial biases persist, Rowena's emotional expression enables a more nuanced depiction of the pressures, self-doubts, and fears that may occur when navigating these complex social environments. Furthermore, by humanising Rowena's issues and making them more relatable, the film promotes empathy and understanding from viewers, contributing to a more authentic representation of Black womanhood. In conclusion, Rowena's explicit expression of vulnerability not only adds to the depth and complexity of her character, but it also serves as a significant criticism of the

difficulties Black women face in asserting their voice and rights, even in the most personal and intimate subjects of family and parenting (Collins, 2000).



Figure 53 Virginia with her son James.

The theme of depicting Black motherhood as a source of both strength and vulnerability is also explored in *Miss Virginia*. In this analysis, I will look at key scenes, dialogues, and interactions that highlight the film's balanced portrayal of Virginia's character. The film portrays a determined mother who goes to great lengths to ensure that her son receives a better education, framing him as her source of determination and resilience (Figure 53). The very first scenes of the film indicate this, where Virginia has been called to school because her son frequently misses class. When she arrives, the head teacher informs her that her son is dealing with some "corner boys"¹⁴. Following this accusation, Virginia immediately employs the counter-storytelling method by responding, "My son is not like that," and asking him to give her son a chance because he is intelligent. When the head teacher confirms that he is willing to concentrate only on students who wish to attend class, Virginia's expression changes to one of disappointment. Additionally, in a scene in James' class, the film highlights the primary reason Virginia chooses to transfer her son from school. The film depicts some of James' classmates assaulting a boy at school for answering a question correctly, then accusing James, who is eventually suspended and threatened to be sent to jail. Virginia, knowing the truth, takes her son out of that failing public school and enrolls him in a private school. However, this does not last long due to her financial difficulties, and Virginia eventually launches her campaign for public school scholarships. Also, the fact of opposing the whole educational system and politicians as well as fighting for other children in her community proves Virginia's strength, which is a key plot element that I will look at more closely in the following sections. Moreover, the film demonstrates Virginia as an agent of

¹⁴ The term "corner boys" describes Black boys who gather on inner-city street corners to sell drugs or commit other crimes (Simon and Burns, 2013). As a result, the movie subtly alludes to themes from the urban cinema genre (Diawara, 1993).

change by showing her taking the initiative to start collecting signatures for her petition in support of the scholarship program. She actively engages with other Black parents, organises community meetings, and does everything she can to mobilise support.



Figure 54 Virginia's speech.

One of the pivotal moments of the narrative that establishes Virginia's strength, resilience, and advocacy is her impassioned speech about the corrupted public schools, where she effectively uses the counter-storytelling concept. By the beginning of the film, Virginia discovers through reading a book about the educational system that the money directed to improve public schools is not used effectively because of special interests and political objectives, which encourages her to start her fight. The speech scene (Figure 54) takes place at a D.C. School District Town Hall Meeting, and Virginia, who attends as a supporter of the public school system due to her work as a cleaner there, becomes their first opponent. In a wide shot, the camera shows that most of the audience consists of Black parents worried about their children, teachers, and the Black Congresswoman Lorraine Towson. In the beginning of this scene, Virginia stutters, indicating her fear and lack of confidence in public speaking. However, as she speaks about her son's experience, her trembling voice becomes firm; her tone and emotional inflection highlight her passion and determination. The film balances the character's emotions and reason with this powerful delivery, emphasising her ability as a leader and a spokesperson for the cause. Virginia is framed as the focal point of the room, with close-ups capturing her expressive face, her centrality, and the importance of her message. To demonstrate Virginia's transforming influence, the camera cuts to audience reactions, particularly those opposed to her, teachers, and Lorraine, the congresswoman. Similarly, the film employs a deliberate pause in background noise during key moments of the speech to enhance its emotional and dramatic impact. This scene has significant implications for demonstrating Virginia's ability to present her concerns and criticism with intelligence, presenting her as more than a mother but as an informed advocate. Through this scene, I argue that the film breaks away from historical stereotypes of Black women that

deny them agency and voice. Therefore, by presenting Virginia as an advocate and public speaker, the film highlights her leadership skills and places a Black woman at the forefront of community activism. This portrayal is similar to that of Rowena in *Black or White*, who advocates for her family. Therefore, I argue that it is a portrayal that challenges narratives that marginalise Black women or show them only in supporting roles, albeit in different ways and narratives. This portrayal is nuanced by highlighting the female protagonists' emotional vulnerability, which adds layers and complexity to their characters as Black women and progressively contributes to the representation of Black women in films.



Figure 55 Virginia's moment of sadness.

The representation of Virginia's power and determination is balanced by highlighting her emotional struggles. Virginia's journey in the film represents many Black women's struggles, but it also serves as an exploration of the vulnerabilities that they face within societal constructs, especially when advocating for change (Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry, 2013; hooks, 1992). Virginia's main challenge in life is her financial difficulties, which have caused many of her problems, such as sending her son to a failing public school, working multiple jobs, and the fact that her son works illegally to make money. I previously mentioned that Virginia's son is her source of strength, but he is also the cause of her vulnerability as a mother, highlighted by her raw emotions and the pain of a mother who feels she is failing her child. The pivotal moment that clearly demonstrates the emotional complexity of Virginia's relationship with her son is when she is forced to withdraw him from a private school due to financial constraints. This scene begins near the entrance to James' school, where Virginia is shown sitting on the stairs crying and apologising to her son (Figure 55). The film continues to depict this moment of weakness in their home, as James' rage and sadness have a significant impact on Virginia. The scene is captured in soft lighting and silence, indicating Virginia and her son's feelings of uncertainty and sorrow. Still, Virginia goes to the meeting in D.C. School District Town Hall and gives a speech about the difficulties facing public schools, as I analysed in depth in the previous paragraph. As a result, I contend that the film

emphasises that this moment of vulnerability and apparent defeat sets the stage for Virginia's resolve and subsequent actions. It is the turning point that encourages her into her advocacy with renewed, yet desperate, determination. As a result, this scene demonstrates how vulnerability and strength combine to create Virginia's complex character, as opposed to the other one-dimensional representation of 'SBW,' which incorporates resilience at the expense of emotional vulnerability (Harris-Perry, 2013, 185).

Throughout the film, Virginia faces opposition from politicians, school board members, and even members of her own community. Her emotional reactions in these confrontations, where she is sometimes dismissed, expose her vulnerabilities within a larger societal and political framework. The film emphasises Virginia's internal sensitivity by showing her struggles with her own confidence. In many scenes, Virginia doubts her ability to effect change or feels overwhelmed about her son's future. For example, when Virginia begins her campaign in collaboration with Cliff Williams, the white Congressman, she is invited to a TV show where she is accused of being used by him to do his illegal work of stealing public money, referring to the 'Welfare Queen' trope (Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry, 2013). Due to this misinformation, Virginia has seemingly lost the trust and support of people around her and eventually stops her fight for the scholarship program. At her house, her refuge from external failures and internal despair, in a soft and dim lighting that creates an intimate and somewhat melancholy atmosphere, Virginia is shown in a wide shot lying on her bed in a chaotic state, crying, and feeling defeated and disappointed, in contrast to her typically strong and determined appearance (Figure 56). This period of loss comes to an end when Shondae, a mother from Virginia's community, comes up to offer support. Through Virginia's phrases to Shondae, like "I can't go out there," the film highlights her doubts, fears, and insecurities. However, Shondae provides empathy, understanding, and encouragement, reminding Virginia of her purpose and the significance of her struggle. Shondae's role in this scene is significant; she serves as a friend to Virginia even when her entire community opposes her, emphasising the importance of Black female friendships and solidarity in empowering and advancing Black women, as argued by hooks (1992, p. 42) and Collins (2000, p. 104, 2019, p. 188). Moreover, this scene is crucial because it illustrates Virginia's vulnerability as well as the enormity of her task, making her journey and eventual triumphs more impactful and complex. To sum up, in *Miss Virginia*, vulnerability is portrayed as a driving force that encourages Virginia to address systemic issues, rather than as an obstacle. The film suggests that vulnerability, when combined with determination, passion, and

support, can be a powerful catalyst for change. Therefore, the narrative of this film challenges traditional representations of Black women, presenting them not just as figures of strength but as complex individuals with fears, hopes, and vulnerabilities.



Figure 56 Shondae supporting Virginia.

In this section, I explored how motherhood is depicted in films like *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia* as embodying both power and vulnerability. Such portrayal, I argue, provides a nuanced and multifaceted representation of Black women's experiences. The analysis proves that this complex representation challenges traditional stereotypes of 'Strong Black women,' 'Black Matriarchs,' 'Welfare Queens,' 'Absent and neglectful Black mothers' (Bogle, 2016; Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry, 2013; hooks, 1992). Meanwhile, it is also worth noting that these struggles are linked to larger systemic issues (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 08), whether it is racial bias in custody battles in *Black or White* or inadequacies in the public school system in *Miss Virginia*. As a result, portraying motherhood as a powerful force opposing these systems emphasises the societal barriers that Black women face and how their identities as Black women intersect with other societal and racial elements to shape their portrayals (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1989).

4.5 Overcoming Opposition: Virginia and Rowena's Transformative Journeys in Challenging Prejudices and Perspectives

In *Miss Virginia* and *Black or White*, the protagonists encounter and navigate significant opposition. Virginia faces challenges rooted in a rigid educational system and societal disparities, whereas Rowena confronts familial conflicts and racial prejudice in a custody battle. Through their resilience and determination, both characters not only face these adversities but also play pivotal roles in changing the perspectives of those around them. Their journeys, which are marked by confrontation and perseverance, serve as powerful narratives that highlight the importance of individual agency in challenging and reshaping

entrenched views and systems. This section delves into how, despite opposition, Virginia and Rowena promote significant changes in the attitudes and beliefs of the characters with whom they interact, highlighting the broader implications of their struggles and triumphs.

The character of Elliot in *Black or White* exhibits implicit prejudice and presumptions about Rowena and her family. The film positions him as a representation of the “colourblind racism” theorised by Bonilla-Silva in *Racism Without Racists* (2018). The film presents the central conflict in the dispute over who should have custody of Eloise. His refusal is partly due to both his grief over the loss of his daughter and his preconceived notions about the Black community that Eloise would be raised in. Elliot believes that he can offer a “better” or more “stable” environment than Rowena’s bigger, noisier home. Throughout the film, Elliot’s perspective on Black characters is repeatedly highlighted. For example, in an early kitchen scene (Figure 57), shot in a medium frame, Elliot has been informed by his white friend and lawyer, Rick, that Rowena intends to seek custody. The film captures Elliot’s moments of anger, disbelief, and confusion in close-up shots as he begins drinking excessively and sarcastically claims that Rowena’s family lacks legal knowledge. These moments show that Elliot exhibits subtle racial biases and stereotypes towards his granddaughter’s Black family members. Colourblind racism is frequently manifested by such unconscious biases, in which people hold and act on stereotypes while denying any racist intent (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 78). Moreover, his belief that Rowena and her family are ignorant of the law reflects a broader discourse of “cultural racism,” in which racial disparities are attributed to perceived cultural deficiencies rather than systemic inequalities (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 56).



Figure 57 Elliot and Rick

In contrast to Elliot’s personal and emotional reaction, Rick exhibits racial awareness against Eloise’s racial identity in a more professional and detached manner. He directly questions Elliot about wanting custody, asking, “Do you really plan on raising this girl? full-time? You know raising a little Black girl all by yourself?” However, Elliot denies the truth that Eloise is Black and argues that she is also half white. This scene is important because it not only

advances the narrative by establishing the custody battle, but it also expands the film's exploration of race, privilege, and family. Elliot's reaction, which is based on racial bias, complicates his character and encourages the audience to confront the complexities of American racial dynamics and awareness. By questioning Elliot's capacity to raise a Black girl, Rick is making a subtle reference to the stereotypes and implicit biases that exist in their society. He is implying that there are specific cultural, social, and environmental nuances involved with raising a Black girl that Elliot might be ignorant of or unprepared for. As a result, the film emphasises Bonilla-Silva's argument that, despite the formal end of segregation and overt racist policies, racism in America continues to exist but is rather implemented in a more subtle form, which he refers to as 'colour-blind racism' (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 03).

The film supports this through scenes that highlight these disparities, such as when Elliot struggles to comb Eloise's hair and wonders how often he should do so. Hence, Rick expresses awareness of the unique difficulties of raising a Black girl in such a setting, particularly for a white man like Elliot. Rick also shows understanding of the social challenges of being Black in America, such as daily microaggressions and future issues with self-identity and belonging. This discussion of future racial challenges Eloise may face alludes to the ongoing challenges Black people face in asserting their identities in a society structured by racial disparities, as discussed by Bonilla-Silva (2018) and Coates (2015). In contrast to Rick, Elliot's response shows a kind of colourblind perspective. Although it is true that Eloise is of mixed race, Elliot's insistence on highlighting her white side could be perceived as an effort to minimise or deny the societal challenges associated with her Black identity that Bonilla-Silva labels as 'minimisation of racism' (2018, p. 57). This could be due to either a desire to protect her from racism or to deny the complexity of racial issues. This conversation about Eloise's identity serves as evidence of larger discussions about race, identity, and how society perceives Black people. Through presenting distinct viewpoints of white people, the film highlights the complexities and difficulties associated with navigating race in America, particularly for people of mixed race (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Coates, 2015).

There is a parallel between Elliot's perspective on his granddaughter's biracial identity and Scott's in *American Son*, as I showed in the third chapter. Elliot and Scott both express denial or a lack of understanding of the challenges and identity issues that their biracial family members face. Scott, like Elliot, refuses to acknowledge his son's struggles in white society, claiming that "his world is my world." As I mentioned earlier, Elliot and his friend Rick

highlight the potential challenges that Eloise may face as a Black girl. In *American Son*, the film portrays the Black son as a teenager (eighteen years old) in order to portray the difficulties that biracial children face. These struggles are highlighted by Kendra, who openly informs her husband about their son's issues with being 'the face of race' in school, lack of friendships, personal struggles with identity, and, most importantly, racial presumptions that led to his death. I argue that these films are mainly part of a cinematic dialogue about the societal difficulties of being a Black person in America. When these films are viewed in relation to each other, *American Son* can be seen as responding to and expanding upon the themes introduced in *Black or White*.

In *Black or White*, the denial of Eloise's Black identity and the anticipated racial challenges she may encounter as a Black girl in America by Elliot is contrasted by Rowena's racial awareness of this issue. This is illustrated by Rowena's insistence on custody because she believes that growing up in a Black family will provide Eloise with the understanding and strength that she needs to navigate a racially divided society. Also, in the confrontation scene between Rowena and Reggie that I previously analysed (Figure 50), she reminds her son of Eloise's place within their family and how fighting for her now will enhance her strength as she grows. Moreover, the film highlights this awareness of racial difference through contrasting the Black and white environments. This juxtaposition between Elliot's affluent neighbourhood and Rowena's community-orientated neighbourhood symbolises the different worlds Eloise belongs to, which exemplifies Rowena's belief that Eloise should be exposed to and knowledgeable about her mixed identity. By doing so, the film affirms the role of family in highlighting Black identity through Rowena's character, demonstrating the Black woman's active and symbolic role in achieving change as discussed by several Black feminist scholars (hooks, 1992; Collins, 2000, p. 78; Harris-Perry, 2013). Through this portrayal, I argue that the film deconstructs stereotypes of laziness, silence, and failure associated with Black women by giving Rowena's character agency and voice.

Over the course of the film, Rowena confronts Elliot and asks him to recognise Eloise's Black heritage and the potential love she could find there. Additionally, through his frequent interactions with Rowena's family, Elliot observes their warmth, love, and support for one another, which contradicts his stereotypes of the Black family. Moreover, the richness of the Black family environment contrasts with his own life, which has been marked by loneliness and isolation since the death of his wife and daughter, subtly emphasising the importance of Eloise's connection to her Black family for emotional support and a sense of belonging.

Hence, Rowena's interactions with Elliot reveal the depth of her character as a loving grandmother and an advocate for her granddaughter's Black identity. Another factor that contributes to Elliot's change is the fact that Rowena acknowledges her son's drug addiction while simultaneously raising questions about Elliot's own alcohol problems. The focus of Rowena and Elliot's scenes is always on Eloise and Reggie. One pivotal scene occurs when Reggie takes Eloise to their house without Elliot's permission, which enrages him. The film captures Elliot and Reggie's fight in a full shot in Rowena's neighbourhood next to her house, where she intervenes to calm the situation. In a moment of vulnerability and honesty, Rowena admits to Elliot that her son struggles with drugs and that "he is in pain," but she confirms that he is working hard to be a good father. When Elliot denies this, Rowena asserts that he needs to work on his alcoholism as well. Thus, the film presents this scene to challenge the myth that addiction issues are exclusive to Black communities. In *The New Jim Crow* (2012), Alexander discusses the issue of addiction and its impact on people of all races, not just the Black community. However, she emphasises that the 'War on Drugs' and the resulting widespread imprisonment and accusations have disproportionately impacted African American communities only (2012, p. 100). Thus, Rowena's assertiveness, genuine concern for Eloise, and willingness to work across differences with Elliot motivate him to start identifying and overcoming his own prejudice.

The courtroom scenes in *Black or White* serve as a powerful site for exposing the persistence of racial bias, revealing the deep-seated tensions and misunderstandings between Elliot, Rowena, and her family. These scenes highlight a stark contrast between Elliot's isolated and individual approach to raising Eloise and Rowena's extended family's collective approach. As I previously mentioned, Collins (2000) and hooks (1992) argue that the Black family's source of power against racial prejudice and discrimination is the community support that distinguishes them. Despite this collective power, Rowena and her family face several implicit gender and racial biases. For example, Elliot and his lawyer focus on Reggie's flaws in order to portray him as a bad Black man and father, frequently highlighting his drug addiction and denying the possibility that he could be changed. However, because Rowena and her brother are aware and conscious of white assumptions, they work hard to counter their misconceptions. A clear example of this is when Jeremiah, Rowena's brother and lawyer, addresses Reggie as "perfect stereotype; you corroborate everything the white community thinks." Moreover, when questioned about his ability to raise a Black child because of his drinking problems, Elliot becomes defensive, implying that race should be

irrelevant. While this may appear to be a call for colour-blindness, it is more indicative of his inability to recognise the unique challenges and experiences Eloise may face as a Black person in America.

What is also crucial about the courtroom scenes is the existence of a Black female judge. Given Rowena's and the judge's shared gender and racial identities, viewers may anticipate agreement in favour of Rowena's side. However, the judge defies this expectation; she has even opposed Rowena because of her frequent interventions. Likewise, when the judge learns of Rowena's successful business career, she shows a mixture of surprise and appreciation, which makes Rowena prouder and exhibits a sense of accomplishment. This moment is typically framed by a close-up focus on Rowena's expressions and posture (Figure 58): her straightened position, a slight lift of the chin, raised eyebrows, and a composed, yet slightly self-satisfied smile. While the camera briefly cuts to Rowena, capturing her pride, it cuts to a reverse shot to show the judge's surprise at Rowena's effective contribution to her society through close-ups of exchanged glances. This moment reveals the judge's implicit assumptions towards Rowena, which suggests inherited systemic bias. I argue that the film's choice of a Black female judge demonstrates how complicated race relations can be. This also underscores that shared racial identity does not ensure understanding, and biases can manifest in a variety of ways, regardless of one's own racial or ethnic background. The film's depiction of Rowena's interaction with the Black female judge is consistent with Collins' argument that some Black women in positions of power oppress and control other Black women (2000, p. 105). Most importantly, the portrayal of the judge serves as a counter-narrative to some racial stereotypes. The film subtly challenges mainstream narratives that may stereotype Black women in more limited or negative roles by portraying her as a figure of authority, fairness, and intelligence (Bogle, 2016; Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry, 2013; hooks, 1992).

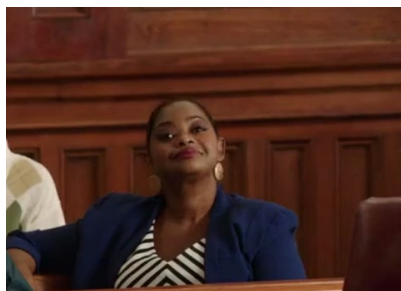


Figure 58 Rowena showing her pride.



Figure 59 Elliot leaving Eloise with Rowena

The final scene (Figure 59) between Rowena and Elliot emphasises the ease in the tension between race and family dynamics in the narrative. Despite obtaining full custody of Eloise, Elliot decides to leave her with Rowena and her family for a few weeks in order to treat his drinking problem, or what he refers to as “learning how to breathe.” Since he initially struggles with the idea of his biracial granddaughter being raised by her Black family, his decision to leave Eloise with Rowena symbolises a resolution of this tension and a recognition of the significance of Eloise's connection to her Black heritage. Moreover, Elliot's character demonstrates growth in this moment of self-awareness and going beyond racial bias, displaying his love for Eloise by prioritising her well-being over his desire to keep her solely under his care. It is essential to note that through their relationship, the film aims to highlight the complex discussions taking place in modern America about race, family, and identity (Alexander, 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Coates, 2015). This can also be seen as a positive step towards Hollywood acknowledging the importance of Black women's contributions to narrative and societal advancement (Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry, 2013).

Examining the various forms of racial prejudice and its intersection with gender in *Black or White* reveals that it operates on an individual level. In *Miss Virginia*, however, the protagonist encounters discrimination and prejudice because of systemic biases. This distinction between individual bias and systemic bias is critical for understanding how racism manifests itself at various levels. According to Bonilla-Silva, systemic bias refers to the institutional structures that create and sustain racial inequalities, even in the absence of individual racist intentions, whereas individual bias refers to personal prejudice and discriminatory attitudes that people may hold, and which can result in acts of discrimination on a personal level (2018, p. 225). In *Miss Virginia*, the fact that Virginia must fight for better educational opportunities for her son and other Black children in her community demonstrates the systemic racism that exists in Black schools. As she begins her advocacy work, Virginia's and other Black parents' concerns are frequently dismissed by policymakers

and the school board, implying an underlying racial bias. However, the person who most opposes Virginia and undermines her cause is Lorraine Townsend, the Black congresswoman. She is portrayed as being more concerned with gaining political advantage and preserving the status quo than with genuinely addressing the systemic issues with the education system that Virginia has highlighted. The portrayal of Lorraine in the film is similar to the argument I made above about Black female interactions in which one oppresses and controls the other (Collins, 2000, p. 105). As such, Lorraine uses an arrogant tone with Virginia during their confrontations, underestimating her determination. Moreover, Lorraine believes she is more knowledgeable about how the system works, so she frequently dismisses Virginia's efforts. In order to highlight existing societal nuances, the film depicts Lorraine as a figure of opposition to Virginia and a white male, Cliff Williams, the congressman, as a supportive one. Because of his empathy for Black children and his position in the political system, Williams is portrayed as a character who supports Virginia and opposes Lorraine.



Figure 60 Virginia and her friends arrested by the police.

A key scene that demonstrates Williams' alliance with Virginia is the voting scene near the end of the film. Virginia and her supporters were arrested for protesting near the White House on the day of the election. The film shows in a medium shot Virginia's anxious face as she watches the meeting live from the police station (Figure 60), intercutting with shots of the board members to capture the emotional gravity of the moment. Likewise, Lorraine's antagonist role is highlighted in this scene with a medium shot that captures her arrogant expression as she votes against the program. Whereas the decisive moment when Williams votes, the camera takes his affirmative gesture in a close-up. This scene is a powerful narrative device that contrasts Lorraine's opposition and Williams' support. Also, through the tension and release of the voting process, it mirrors Virginia's own journey. The role of Congressman Williams at first appears to fit into the stereotype of a 'white saviour,' a narrative device that I discussed in detail in the general introduction. This trope presents a

white character saving Black characters from their problems, often in a way that overshadows their agency (Hughey, 2014, p. 14). While Congressman Williams has been helpful in advancing the cause of educational vouchers, he is not the primary agent of change. Instead, Virginia and her community members are portrayed as the driving force behind the movement in the film. Her character is depicted as strong, determined, and deeply involved in her community's fight for educational equity. Thus, Williams' role, while important and supportive, is more of a collaborator to Virginia's fight than a saviour (Figure 61). This dynamic allows the film to stay focused on Virginia's leadership and agency, avoiding falling into the 'white saviour' narrative. Unlike this nuanced portrayal, 'the white saviour's Skeeter and Harrison in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* adhere to the traditional white saviour narratives, with these white characters playing a more central role in the storytelling of the Black women's experiences, as I showed in the second chapter.



Figure 61 Cliff Williams with Virginia

In addition to prejudice from the political system, Virginia faces opposition from some Black men in her neighbourhood. Throughout the film, it is revealed that Garnett Brown, a Black man from her neighbourhood, is a criminal and drug dealer who targets young children, including Virginia's son. As with the portrayal of the urban life setting in *Black or White* that I discussed in the first section, *Miss Virginia* explicitly depicts themes of violence and crime that are representative of the narratives of Black urban films (Diawara, 1993; Denzin, 2002, p. 119). One of the film's pivotal scenes (Figure 62) that exposes these themes is when Virginia walks around her neighbourhood collecting signatures and is suddenly stopped by Garnett, who immediately burns the collected signatures. The camera focuses in close-ups on Virginia's face, capturing her shock and pain as she realises that her efforts have turned to ashes. The camera then shifts to Garnett in a medium shot, revealing his aggressive demeanour and dismissive expression, suggesting he understands that the paper represents the collective voice of the community. The act of burning the signed petitions is a powerful metaphor for Virginia's systemic and personal prejudice. This destructive act serves as a

visual and narrative climax, bringing the audience to a harsh realisation of the opposition she faces.

The depiction of Black men in films as drug dealers or gang leaders is a long-standing stereotype that frequently reduces complex characters to one-dimensional stereotypes (Bogle, 2016; Diawara, 1993; Denzin, 2002). The inclusion of this narrative in *Miss Virginia* risks perpetuating this stereotype, which can be harmful in its oversimplification and misrepresentation of Black men and their experiences. However, the presence of this character is also interpreted as a commentary on systemic racism. It emphasises the limited options and oppressive social conditions that can lead to criminal activity. Issues such as inadequate education, poverty, and lack of employment opportunities create environments in which illegal activities can appear to be viable options in many communities affected by systemic racism (Alexander, 2012, p. 45). As a result, Garnett's character serves as a commentary on the harsh realities faced by those living in underprivileged areas, as well as the systemic failures that contribute to these decisions.

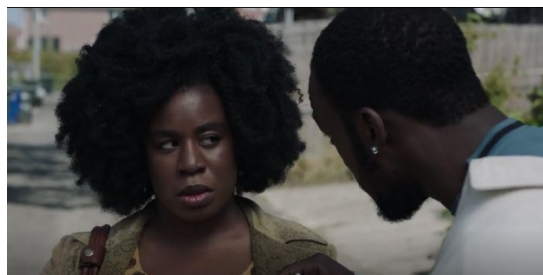


Figure 62 Virginia opposed by Garnett.

In both *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia*, Rowena and Virginia are portrayed as strong Black mothers who navigate the intertwined challenges of race and gender in different narratives. Virginia faces systemic difficulties by battling political and educational systems. In contrast, Rowena confronts more interpersonal difficulties that centre on personal prejudices and family dynamics. These films, while different in narrative, serve as reflections on the varied experiences of Black women in America, highlighting the unique difficulties that arise when racial and gender dynamics intersect. They give viewers a lens through which to comprehend and identify with these experiences. I argue that depicting the intersection of race and gender that Black women experience is extremely important in the larger context of changing representations of Black women in Hollywood films. First, these films challenge the historical one-dimensional representations of Black women and present them as complex individuals with multifaceted lives by highlighting the intersected challenges they face. The

centrality of Black women in these narratives and their role as agents of change represent a transition from narratives of victimhood to empowerment. Second, these representations challenge embedded biases and preconceptions by evoking empathy and understanding for the real-life struggles faced by Black women. Additionally, both films highlight larger societal and systemic problems that are the causes of the difficulties Black women face on a personal level. Thirdly, by bringing these issues to the forefront, these films can encourage conversations about gender, race, societal structures, and prejudice. They have the power to affect perceptions and create societal change. Finally, I contend that these representations have significance that goes beyond simple representation. These films contribute to a wider cultural dialogue by questioning Hollywood conventions, reshaping narratives, and promoting inclusive, sympathetic, and accurate perspectives.

4.6 Conclusion:

This chapter has examined the representation of Black women in *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia* as multidimensional characters navigating unique racial and gender barriers. The emphasis in the first section has been on the paradoxical presentation of both the Black and white worlds. In doing so, both films offer narratives about contemporary American society. Thus, this representation adds depth to our understanding of how Hollywood depicts the lives and challenges of Black women. The second section builds on the first one in terms of highlighting the Black experience. It examines the strength of Black unity and bonds as well as the part played by Black women in maintaining and strengthening this relationship. The third section delves deeply into the role of motherhood as a source of both vulnerability and strength. This depiction contrasts with the one-dimensional portrayal of Black women by adding nuance and depth to the characters. The last section explores the ways that racial prejudice and gender bias are intertwined. This section also highlights the role Black women play in opposition and shifting perspectives. I argue that focusing on these elements serves a dual purpose; it not only challenges traditional stereotypes of Black women, but it also reflects broader socio-cultural shifts towards inclusivity, equity, and justice. These films contribute to a richer, more diverse cinematic representation by introducing nuanced, multi-dimensional Black female characters.

Chapter 5 General Conclusion

This thesis has examined the representation of Black female characters in six contemporary American films: *The Help* (Tate Taylor, 2011), *Hidden Figures* (Theodore Melfi, 2016), *Widows* (Steve McQueen, 2018), *American Son* (Kenny Leon, 2019), *Black or White* (Mike Binder, 2014), and *Miss Virginia* (R.J. Daniel Hanna, 2019). In my engagement with the scholarly debate on the portrayal of Black women in cinema, I have focused on the dynamic interplay between perpetuating and challenging stereotypes about Black women, a duality that appears repeatedly in my case study films. My research, which has involved intersectional analysis and CRT's counter-storytelling concept from sociology, law, and feminism scholars such as Patricia Hill-Collins (2000, 2019), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 2015), and bell hooks (1992, 2009), has contributed to a better understanding of the critical importance of promoting a more balanced and nuanced depiction of Black women on screen, particularly through situating my films in their social historical context. My work not only aligns with the perspectives of Black feminist scholars such as Collins, hooks, Mellissa Harris-Perry, Nicole Fleetwood, Racquel Gates, and Mia Mask, but it also introduces new considerations about Black women's representation as a site of both progressive representation and subtle reinforcement of enduring stereotypes, emphasising the need for an ongoing transformation in the cinematic narrative landscape.

Throughout my chapters, I have examined the representation of Black female characters in my case study films through the lens of the themes of friendship, marriage, motherhood, and activism. The exploration of the theme of female friendship as it relates to the representation of Black women in films such as *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* is a significant finding. Drawing on Collins (2000, p. 102) and hooks' (1992, p. 42) arguments on the power of female friendships to empower Black women, I have considered this theme central to the narrative and character development, serving as a counterpoint to historical cinematic depictions of Black women, which frequently isolated them or framed them in competitive or antagonistic relationships. In *Hidden Figures*, the friendship between the main characters serves as more than just a backdrop for the story. It focuses on Black women's collective strength and support system, highlighting their intellectual camaraderie and emotional bond as they navigate the challenges of working in an intersecting racially and gender-segregated

environment. Similarly, in *The Help*, the friendships of the Black maids go beyond mere cooperation, forming a network of mutual support and resilience in the face of injustice. These depictions deconstruct the stereotype of Black women as independent fighters, instead emphasising the communal and collaborative aspects of their resistance and survival. Furthermore, these cinematic depictions of Black women's friendship contribute to a better understanding of their characters' social dynamics. They provide a perspective on the significance of communal bonds in providing emotional support and fostering collective action. Such portrayals are critical in challenging the narrative in mainstream media that frequently marginalises or ignores the complexities of Black women's relationships. By emphasising these friendships, the films I have examined in this thesis not only enrich character development but also provide a more nuanced and realistic portrayal of Black women's lives and overlapping identities and experiences. The emphasis on friendship in this thesis is thus more than just a thematic choice; it is also an essential element in reshaping the representation of Black women in cinema, providing a more diverse and authentic depiction of their lives and relationships.

However, the portrayal of interracial female friendships in my case study films questions their progressive nature. Scholars such as Karen Hollinger (1998, p. 180) and Yvonne Tasker (1998, p. 139) argue that Black women are often marginalised and stereotyped in films about interracial female friendships. Similarly, Matthew Hughey (2012, p. 756) claims that this relationship corresponds to the 'Magical Negro' trope, in which a Black character saves a broken white character. This representation is common in films such as *The Help*, *Widows*, and *Black or White*, in which Black female characters are portrayed in roles that support this trope, reducing them to service roles and perpetuating stereotypes. Moreover, I have drawn on Hollinger and Tasker's definition of female friendships as 'rare' and 'uncommon' to examine the lack of intra-racial friendships in films such as *Widows*, *American Son*, *Miss Virginia*, and *Black or White*, which has emerged as a critical factor influencing Black women's portrayal in these films. This absence has a significant impact on the narrative landscape and portrayal of Black women's experiences in these films. In *Widows*, the female protagonist's lack of deep, supportive friendships emphasises her isolation and individual struggle in a crime-ridden, male-dominated environment. This portrayal departs from the communal solidarity often associated with Black women as

Chapter 5

discussed by hooks and Collins, instead demonstrating a story of individual resilience and autonomy. Likewise, *American Son* depicts a similarly isolating journey for its central Black female character, focusing on the individual struggle of a mother dealing with systemic issues affecting her son, devoid of a supportive network of friends.

Nevertheless, the absence of personal friendship in *Miss Virginia* and *Black or White* is replaced with community support. This thematic shift has a significant impact on the representation of Black women in these films. Drawing on hooks' (1992, p. 108) argument that the Black community and family are portrayed as dysfunctional and isolated, as well as Collins' (2000, p. 188) affirmation of the strength of the Black community in the face of negative portrayals, this thesis has demonstrated that a more complex and realistic representation of Black women is one that acknowledges both their strengths and vulnerabilities. For example, in *Miss Virginia*, the protagonist, while lacking close, personal friendships, obtains strength and support from a larger community network; her journey is marked by the mobilisation of community members and collaboration with diverse groups for a common cause. This depiction goes beyond the traditional narrative of individual struggle, demonstrating the power of collective action and the role of community as a substitute for personal friendships. Similarly, *Black or White* depicts a story in which the central Black female character navigates complex family and legal dynamics with the help of a larger community rather than close friends. These two films investigate how community ties can provide a form of support that replaces traditional friendship structures, providing a unique perspective on the relationships on which Black women build and rely. The depiction of these community dynamics in these films emphasises collaboration and collective strength, highlighting a different aspect of Black women's support systems.

The second theme that I have explored in this thesis is marriage, which is critical to understanding how these films address the complexities of Black women's overlapping identities and experiences. My survey of key scholars on Black romance, including Manthia Diawara (1993, p. 16), hooks (1992, p. 93), and Collins (2000, p. 174), has revealed that the portrayal of these types of relationships has typically been problematic. I have examined how, for Diawara, films portray Black men as sex criminals and violent towards Black women. Therefore, for hooks, Black female bodies in films are only used to provide sexual pleasure or are entirely depicted as single women, reinforcing stereotypical portrayals, as

argued by Collins. This portrayal is apparent in *The Help*, where marriage is portrayed as a societal expectation, with Black women's roles frequently constrained within this framework, reflecting societal norms of the 1960s era. This portrayal highlights Black women's limited agency in their personal lives, which contrasts with their strength and resilience in other areas. *Hidden Figures* takes a more progressive approach, depicting marriage as a partnership that supports Black women's personal and professional aspirations, demonstrating a balance between traditional roles and individual objectives. However, in *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia*, marriage is presented less centrally with these characters portrayed as single women. Thus, these films focus more on the protagonists' roles as mothers and activists, subtly implying that broader societal concerns and family dynamics can sometimes take priority over personal relationships.

When it comes to *Widows* and *American Son*, marriage is presented in the form of interracial relationships. My analysis of this theme delves into the complexities and challenges that Black women face in interracial relationships, revealing underlying societal and racial dynamics. I have argued that the representation of this theme in these two films challenges the traditional portrayal of interracial relationships as ignoring the complexities that Black women face. In my analysis, I have surveyed key scholars who have discussed the problematic depiction of interracial marriage, such as Richard Dyer (1997, p. 121), who argues that white society opposes heterosexual relationships between whites and Blacks in order to maintain white purity through white offspring. Then, for Erica Chito Childs (2009, p. 06), films portray these relationships as deviant, reinforcing whiteness hegemony and perpetuating racial attitudes through colourblind depictions. While Collins (2000, p. 162) argues that, from the Black community's perspective, interracial relationships are refused because of the long history of white men sexually violating Black women. In *Widows*, interracial marriage is depicted as more than just a backdrop; it has a significant impact on Veronica's character development and actions. Thus, this film expands on interracial relationships' representations by emphasising the unique challenges and societal judgements that Black women face in such unions. Meanwhile, *American Son* offers a more direct and intense examination of an interracial marriage. The film delves into the complexities of identity, race, and perception in marriage, depicting Kendra's experience as filled with tension, misunderstandings, and emotional turmoil. It emphasises the influence of

Chapter 5

external societal pressures and racial prejudices on marriage dynamics, demonstrating how these factors may complicate and shape the relationship. Therefore, both films, in their depictions of interracial marriages, make significant contributions to the conversation about Black women's representation in cinema. They provide insight into how these women navigate their intersecting identities in the context of their relationships and the larger societal framework. By delving into the complexities of interracial marriage, *Widows* and *American Son* highlight the multifaceted experiences of Black women, going beyond simplistic narratives to depict the depth and complexity of their lives. This thematic focus aligns with the calls of scholars such as hooks, Childs, Fleetwood, Gates, and Collins for a more nuanced and comprehensive portrayal of Black women in film, where their experiences in interracial marriages are more than just a plot device but carefully incorporated into the overall narrative of personal growth, struggle, and resilience.

The third theme that this thesis has examined is motherhood. This examination has demonstrated how motherhood is not only a personal journey but also a lens through which the societal roles, challenges, and strengths of Black women are portrayed and connected. In analysing motherhood in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, a notable finding is that the portrayal of this theme is either absent or mothers' roles are significantly restricted by their work as maids or at NASA. I have relied on Collins' (2000, p. 75) and Haris-Perry's (2013, p. 114) definitions of Black 'matriarchy' and Nicole Rousseau's (2013, p. 457) exploration of negative themes of Black mothers in films to analyse the portrayal of Black mothers in the examined films. Consequently, I have found that the focus in *The Help* is on Black women working as maids in white households and mothering white women's children at the expense of spending time with their own. Their roles as mothers are frequently overshadowed by their responsibilities to the children they care for on the job, highlighting a conflict between their professional obligations and personal maternal instincts. Additionally, in *Hidden Figures*, the theme of motherhood is present but not as the primary focus. The film depicts Black women making significant contributions to NASA, and while they are portrayed as mothers, their roles in this regard are somewhat limited by the demands of their groundbreaking work. This story highlights the difficulties they face in balancing their professional goals with their roles as mothers. Thus, both films' portrayals of motherhood emphasise the constraints and sacrifices that these Black female characters face during that time. Their maternal roles are

frequently secondary to their societal roles, such as maids in *The Help* and mathematicians and engineers in *Hidden Figures*. As I have demonstrated in my analysis, these portrayals reinforce Collins, Harris-Perry, and Rousseau's discussions about the stereotype of Black 'matriarchy' as one of neglect, abandonment, and replacement.

Unlike the negative portrayal of motherhood in *Hidden Figures* and *The Help*, in the other four films, the depiction of motherhood is complex and nuanced. Collins' perspective on motherhood as a political and social act, particularly among Black women, that goes beyond personal responsibility to include activism and resistance, has contributed to deepening my understanding of these films' portrayals. As such, in *Widows*, I have shown how motherhood is explicitly connected to themes of loss, survival, and empowerment, with the protagonist's maternal role heavily influencing her motivations and actions. Likewise, *American Son* is about a Black mother navigating a crisis with her son, delving into the fears, anxieties, and societal pressures that Black mothers face in the 'post-racial' American society. In *Black or White*, this theme delves into the complexities of custody battles and racial tensions, focusing on a Black mother's struggle to protect her son and granddaughter in a racially divided community. Finally, *Miss Virginia* depicts motherhood as a motivating factor for activism, emphasising the lengths a mother will go to ensure a better future for her child. Collectively, these films contribute to a nuanced portrayal of Black motherhood that goes beyond traditional stereotypes of neglectful and aggressive Black mothers that are frequently seen in cinema, as discussed by Collins, Rousseau, and Harris-Perry. They reveal Black women's multifaceted experiences as mothers, navigating a range of challenges and triumphs. This thematic exploration emphasises the resilience, diversity, and complexities of Black motherhood, providing a more complete and authentic portrayal of Black women's experiences. The portrayal of motherhood in these films is about more than just the maternal role; it is also connected to broader implications for understanding the social, racial, and emotional landscapes in which Black women live and operate.

The last theme I have analysed in my thesis is activism, which is deeply embedded into the narrative of each film, portraying Black women not only as passive characters but as active agents of change in their respective contexts. This, then, is consistent with Collins' (2000, p. 78) view on Black women's role as change agents in their communities. Collins' research into how Black women have historically led social movements provided a theoretical foundation

for analysing the activism depicted in these films. When used alongside CRT's concept of counter-storytelling, as discussed by Delgado and Stefancic (2017, p. 42), I have demonstrated how these films challenge stereotypes and present more nuanced and diverse representations of Black women. For instance, in *The Help*, activism is portrayed through the courageous acts of Black maids who choose to share their stories, challenging 1960s societal norms. Their actions, while not overtly political, are a form of resistance and empowerment within the confines of their social environment. While *Hidden Figures* depicts professional perseverance and excellence in the face of racial and gender barriers at NASA. The protagonists' determination to succeed and break down barriers in a highly segregated space serves as a subtle but powerful form of activism, redefining Black women's roles and capabilities during the Space Race era. However, *Widows* shifts the focus to a more direct form of activism, with the main character committing a heist to symbolise her rebellion against the corrupt systems that have marginalised and exploited her. Meanwhile, *American Son* depicts a more personal form of activism, with the central character's unwavering pursuit of justice and answers about her son's involvement in a police incident, highlighting the racial tensions and biases prevalent in contemporary American society. Moreover, in *Black or White*, activism is depicted through the legal and emotional struggles of a Black woman battling for custody of her granddaughter, highlighting the difficulties of navigating a racially divided society. Finally, *Miss Virginia* overtly exemplifies the theme of activism, with the protagonist's fight for educational reform in Washington, D.C., demonstrating the strength of a mother's determination to provide a better future for her child. As a result, these films demonstrate the various forms of activism that Black women engage in, ranging from subtle acts of resistance to overt political movements. They highlight Black women's resilience, strength, and agency, challenging traditional stereotypes and demonstrating the diverse roles they play as activists in their communities and beyond. This thematic exploration emphasises the importance of recognising and celebrating Black women's activism, both in cinematic portrayals and in larger societal contexts.

In each of my chapters, I have discussed how these overarching themes of friendship, marriage, motherhood, and activism are frequently interconnected; they reveal various aspects of Black women's experiences, influencing their portrayal in these films in complicated and multifaceted ways. Following intersectional theory, I have explored how

the overlapping identities of the Black female characters in the case study films shape their portrayal. For example, friendship and activism intersect to emphasise community support and collective action. These themes emphasise the importance of solidarity among Black women, portraying them as agents of change in their communities. This portrayal can be empowering, as it goes beyond individualistic narratives to highlight the strength of unity. In contrast, themes of marriage and motherhood often intersect to examine Black women's personal and familial dynamics. These themes can either reinforce or challenge traditional roles by portraying Black women as complex individuals navigating diverse and often difficult situations. The interplay of these domestic themes with activism adds layers, demonstrating how personal experiences inform and influence larger societal issues. The overall representation of Black women in these films varies according to these thematic elements. Each of the films analysed in this thesis both reinforces and challenges stereotypical depictions of Black women. As a result, each film offers a nuanced portrayal, breaking away from stereotypical depictions and providing a better understanding of the complexities of Black women's lives. These portrayals frequently focus on their resilience, multifaceted identities, and the complexities of their experiences. However, these films also reinforce stereotypes, particularly if the portrayal lacks depth or falls into a common narrative trope. Consequently, these thematic elements have a significant impact on how Black women are portrayed in cinema. When presented with depth and sensitivity, they can provide a rich, multifaceted representation that challenges one-dimensional stereotypes. However, without thoughtful consideration, these themes risk simplifying or categorising Black women's experiences, perpetuating existing stereotypes. The aim, as advocated by the Black feminist scholars, is to explore these themes in a nuanced and thoughtful manner, resulting in a depiction of Black women that is as diverse and multidimensional as reality.

The detailed examination of the portrayal of Black women in my films is extremely important, especially in light of Black women's politics in 'post-racial' America. These films, which emerged during a period commonly referred to as 'post-racial,' provide a critical lens through which to examine the nuanced complexities of Black women's experiences in a society that declares itself free of racial prejudices. The significance of this study lies in its ability to dissect and challenge the notion of a 'post-racial' America, which has been criticised for oversimplifying and obscuring ongoing racial dynamics (Bonilla-Silva, 2013;

Turner and Nilsen, 2019). Each film navigates and critiques the multifaceted experiences of Black women in its own unique way, from their struggles with historical stereotypes and societal expectations to their triumphs in breaking down barriers and redefining their identities. *The Help* confronts the enduring legacy of servitude and racial segregation, whereas *Hidden Figures* recognises the often-overlooked contributions of Black women to pivotal historical events. *Widows* and *American Son* explore the contemporary realities of interracial relationships and police brutality, while *Black or White* and *Miss Virginia* address the complexities of a custody legal battle and the fight for educational equity, respectively. These cinematic portrayals are critical in revealing the intersecting layers of race, gender, and class, as well as challenging the oversimplified narrative of a 'post-racial' era. They not only reflect the lived experiences of many Black women but also serve as a platform for broader discussions about racial politics in contemporary America. As a result, studying these films is more than just an academic exercise; it is an essential tool for comprehending and critiquing the societal constructs and narratives that shape Black women's experiences in contemporary America.

I have limited my analysis to only six films, aiming to provide a focused and in-depth examination of the representation and stereotypes of Black women in a particular category of films. These films were chosen because they cover a wide range of genres, from historical drama to contemporary thriller, and together they provide a diverse, yet cohesive picture of how Black women have been portrayed in recent cinema. Each film provides distinct narrative contexts and character dynamics, allowing for a thorough examination of the relationship between reinforcing and challenging stereotypes. However, my argument opens up additional films for critical examination because the emphasis on mainstream American films may not adequately represent the diversity of Black women's experiences as depicted in independent or international cinema. Likewise, future research could broaden the scope by including a more diverse range of films, especially those directed or written by Black women, to provide a more complete understanding of representation. For example, *Belle* (2014), directed by the Black female director Amma Asante, is a British period drama based on the true story of Dido Elizabeth Belle, a biracial woman raised in the 18th-century English aristocracy. The film examines race, gender, and class issues from a historical perspective. Another example is *Clemency* (2019), also directed by a Black female director, Chinonye

Chukwu, which centres on a Black female prison warden, exploring the emotional toll of her profession. It offers a unique perspective on the intersections of race, gender, and the criminal justice system. Furthermore, while this thesis has investigated the interplay between reinforcing and challenging stereotypes, further studies could benefit from a more in-depth examination of audience reception and the impact of these portrayals on viewers' perceptions and attitudes. Investigating the role of new media on streaming platforms, such as *Homecoming: A Film by Beyoncé* (2019), in shaping these portrayals and their reception might provide useful insights. Another limitation is the changing nature of film studies and societal perceptions of race and gender, which means that interpretations may shift over time, making it difficult to reach definitive, long-term conclusions.

To conclude this PhD thesis on the representation of Black women in the films *The Help*, *Hidden Figures*, *Widows*, *American Son*, *Black or White*, and *Miss Virginia*, I will return to Viola Davis, where I began (on page 11). Davis' call for greater opportunity and recognition for Black women resonates deeply with the findings of this thesis — that while some progress has been made, the representation of Black women in film remains shaped by both persistent stereotypes and emerging narratives of complexity and empowerment. Her performances, particularly in *The Help* and *Widows*, highlight this dualism. Her roles in these films frequently explore the complexities of Black womanhood, from the quiet strength and dignity in *The Help* to the empowered and multidimensional lead in *Widows*. Her career trajectory mirrors the evolution of how Black women are portrayed in Hollywood. Davis has been vocal about the need for more authentic and diverse roles for Black actresses, challenging the industry's limitations and advocating for change. Her critique of stereotypical roles and advocacy for more substantive opportunities for Black actresses are closely aligned with the aims of my thesis. Then, this thesis argues for the critical importance of nuanced and balanced depictions of Black women on screen, as demonstrated by Davis' career. Her transformative characters not only enrich the film industry, but they also challenge societal stereotypes, paving the way for a more inclusive and authentic cinematic landscape.

Appendix A Film Corpus (Obama Era Onwards)

The films listed below are part of a larger corpus from which the thesis' case studies have been drawn. This corpus includes films released during and after the Obama era (2008 onwards) that address issues of race, class, social justice, and identity. The selected works span various genres and narrative styles, offering insights into the cultural and political landscape of their time while providing a rich foundation for analysing marginalised voices, social inequalities, and representations of race, power, and resistance in contemporary cinema.

Films Exploring Racial and Social Justice Themes:

Harriet. (2019). United States: Universal Pictures.

If Beale Street Could Talk. (2018). United States: Annapurna Pictures.

Just Mercy. (2019). United States: Warner Bros. Pictures.

Queen & Slim. (2019). United States: Universal Pictures.

Selma. (2014). United States, United Kingdom, France: Paramount Pictures, 20th Century Fox, Pathé Distribution.

The Best of Enemies. (2019). United states: STXfilms.

The Butler. (2013). United States: The Weinstein Company.

The Hate U Give. (2018). United States: 20th Century Fox.

Twelve Years a Slave. (2013). United States and Canada: Fox Searchlight Pictures.

Films Addressing Education, Family, and Socioeconomic Struggles:

Fences. (2016). United States: Paramount Pictures.

Fruitvale Station. (2013). United States: The Weinstein Company.

Precious. (2009). United States: Lionsgate.

Appendix A

Films Exploring Family, Identity, and Belonging:

Get out. (2017). United States: Universal Pictures.

Girls Trip. (2017). United States: Universal Pictures.

Loving. (2016). United States: Focus Features.

Passing. (2021). United States: Netflix.

Respect. (2021). United States: United Artists Releasing.

The Blind Side. (2009). United States: Warner Bros. Pictures.

The Woman King. (2022). United States: Sony Pictures Releasing.

Us. (2019). United States: Universal Pictures.

List of Filmography

Alma's Rainbow. (1994). United States.

American Son. (2019). United States: Netflix.

Belle. (2014). United Kingdom: Fox Searchlight Pictures.

Black or White. (2014). United States: Sunlight Productions.

Black Panther. (2018). United States: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

Blackkklansman. (2018). United States: Focus Features.

Boiler Room. (2000). United States: New Line Cinema.

Boyz N the Hood. (1991). United States: Columbia Pictures.

Chicago. (2002). United States: Miramax Films.

Clemency. (2019). United States: Neon.

Daughters of the Dust. (1991). United States: Kino International.

Do the Right Thing. (1989). United States: Universal Pictures.

Dream Girls. (2006). United States: DreamWorks Pictures and Paramount Pictures.

Eat Pray Love. (2010). United States: Sony Pictures Releasing.

Exotica. (1995). Canada: Alliance Communications Corporation.

Foxy Brown. (1974). United States: American International Pictures.

Fruitvale Station. (2013). United States: The Weinstein Company.

Gaslight. (1944). United States: Loew's, Inc.

Get out. (2017). United States: Universal Pictures.

Girls Trip. (2017). United States: Universal Pictures.

List of Filmography

Glory. (1989). United States: Tri-Star Pictures.

Gone with the Wind. (1939). United States: Loew's Inc.

Guess Who. (2005). United States: Sony Pictures Releasing, 20th Century Fox (International).

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner. (1967). United States: Columbia Pictures.

Hidden Figures. (2016). United States: 20th Century Fox.

Homecoming: A Film by Beyoncé. (2019). United States: Netflix.

How to Get Away with Murder, (2014). [TV Series] ABC Studios.

Jungle Fever. (1991). United States: Universal Pictures.

Just Another Girl on the IRT. (1992). United States: Miramax Films.

Knight and Day. (2010). United States: 20th Century Fox.

Loving. (2016). United States: Focus Features.

Mad Money. (2008). United States: Overture Films.

Miss Virginia. (2019). United States: Vertical Entertainment.

Mississippi Burning. (1988). United States: Orion Pictures.

Monster's Ball. (2001). United States: Lions Gate Films.

Mystery Men. (1999). United States: Universal Pictures.

Passion Fish. (1992). United States: Miramax Films.

Precious. (2009). United States: Lionsgate.

Selma. (2014). United States, United Kingdom, France: Paramount Pictures, 20th Century Fox, Pathé Distribution.

Stella Davis. (1937). United States: Samuel Goldwyn Productions.

List of Filmography

The Amos 'n Andy Show, (1929). [Radio Show] WMAQ 670 AM Chicago NBC Radio CBS Radio and Television.

The Best Man Holiday. (2013). United states: Universal Pictures.

The Best of Enemies. (2019). United states: STXfilms.

The Birth of a Nation. (1915). United States: Epoch Producing Co.

The Blind Side. (2009). United States: Warner Bros. Pictures.

The Color Purple. (1985). United States: Warner Bros.

The Hate U Give. (2018). United States: 20th Century Fox.

The Help. (2011). United States: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.

The Long Walk Home. (1990). United States: Miramax Films.

The Secret Life of Bees. (2008). United States: Fox Searchlight Pictures.

The Watermelon Woman. (1997). United States: First Run Features.

To Kill a Mockingbird. (1962). United States: Universal Pictures.

Twelve Years a Slave. (2013). United States and Canada: Fox Searchlight Pictures.

Waiting to Exhale. (1995). United States: 20th Century Fox.

Widows. (2018). United Kingdom, United States: 20th Century Fox.

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