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Class and Resistance Among African-American Women
in the Jim Crow South:
A Comparative Literary Study of *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*

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Dedication

To my parents, whose sacrifices built the person I am today.

To every woman who quietly resisted the shadows of oppression, broke the heavy barriers of silence, and carved a path of dignity for those to come.

— Maroua

For my beloved family, whose unconditional love, endless patience, and unwavering belief have been the guiding anchor of my life.

To all the resilient women who stood strong in the face of adversity, proving that quiet strength can dismantle the most formidable barriers.

— Aicha

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This dissertation is about women who were not thanked, not credited, and not remembered for a very long time. Writing it felt, in a small way, like an act of repair.

Abstract

This dissertation explores how social class shaped the resistance strategies of African American women in the Jim Crow South (1877–1964). By comparing Kathryn Stockett’s novel *The Help* (2009) and Margot Lee Shetterly’s biographical history *Hidden Figures* (2016), the study aims to demonstrate how class disparities within the segregated South determined the strategic possibilities and limitations of Black women’s agency and activism. Drawing on intersectionality, the matrix of domination, everyday resistance, and epistemic injustice, the argument is that class position was a key factor in determining whether resistance took the form of covert infrapolitics or direct institutional engagement. Domestic workers in *The Help*, facing high economic vulnerability, relied on hidden transcripts and everyday sabotage to navigate exploitation. In contrast, the professional mathematicians in *Hidden Figures* used their educational qualifications and organizational leverage to demand desegregation and professional recognition. Furthermore, the analysis highlights how Stockett’s white-authored narrative tends to reproduce white-savior tropes, whereas Shetterly’s Black-authored biography actively reclaims Black women’s epistemic authority. Ultimately, this study highlights the necessity of a class-conscious Black feminist literary criticism, demonstrating that class is a key determinant in how Black women’s historical agency is both exercised and represented.

Keywords: African American women, intersectionality, Jane Crow, Jim Crow, social class.

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

Abbreviation	Full Form
EEO	Equal Employment Opportunity
FHA	Federal Housing Administration
IBM	International Business Machines Corporation
ISA	Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser)
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NACA	National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics
NACW	National Association of Colored Women
NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
RSA	Repressive State Apparatus (Althusser)

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

General Introduction

1. Background of the Study

The American South between the late nineteenth century and the mid-1960s was defined by a rigid legal system of racial separation known as Jim Crow. As historian Woodward (1955) demonstrated, this system was not an ancient or natural arrangement; it was a politically manufactured structure that became fully codified only in the 1890s. Under this regime, African Americans were legally segregated in schools, hospitals, restaurants, and public transportation. The law treated them as second-class citizens, and any attempt to challenge the racial boundary was met with institutional punishment and extrajudicial violence.

For Black women specifically, the situation during the Jim Crow era (1877–1964) was even more complex. As hooks bell (1981, pp. 1–3) argued in her foundational work *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, African American women carried a "double burden" of racial and gender oppression. This double burden placed them at the bottom of the American social hierarchy, subjected to both the racism of white society and the sexism of patriarchal structures. hooks documented this compound form of oppression, insisting that racism and sexism cannot be understood in isolation when experienced simultaneously by Black women.

Collins (2000, pp. 18–19), in her landmark work *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, extended this theoretical ground by developing the concept of the "matrix of domination" — the idea that race, gender, and class are interlocking systems of oppression that reinforce and modify each other at every point. Collins's work established that Black women occupy a unique standpoint from which they can articulate forms of oppression that remain invisible to those who experience only one axis of discrimination. Smith (1977, pp. 168–170), another foundational Black feminist voice, pushed this argument in her landmark 1977 essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," where she insisted that literary criticism of Black women's writing must attend to the specific material conditions of their lives, rather than applying frameworks developed solely from white or male experience.

However, popular cultural representations tend to flatten the experiences of all Black

women during this period into a single narrative. In mainstream media and popular fiction, the dominant image is often restricted to the working-class domestic worker. While historical consensus indicates that the vast majority of Black women in the early twentieth-century South were employed in domestic labor under exploitative conditions, this popular representation overlooks those who occupied different class positions. There were also highly educated Black women — such as the mathematicians who worked at the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA) and NASA — living under the same Jim Crow laws. Both domestic workers and federal professionals faced systemic racism, but their strategies for navigating and resisting this oppression were shaped by fundamentally different class positions.

Consequently, this dissertation conducts a comparative study of two primary texts: Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help* (2009) and Margot Lee Shetterly's biographical history *Hidden Figures* (2016). By analyzing these works in parallel, this study examines how class variations shaped the strategic possibilities and limitations of Black women's agency under segregation.

2. Statement of the Argument

This study argues that an African American woman's social class was the primary structural determinant shaping her capacity for resistance under Jim Crow. While race and gender defined their shared marginalization, their economic class structured the specific resistance strategies available to them.

Specifically, working-class domestic workers, such as the characters represented in *The Help*, lacked formal contracts or independent wealth. They were forced to rely on covert resistance and everyday sabotage, which Scott (1985) terms *infrapolitics*, because open defiance risked blacklisting and immediate financial ruin. In contrast, the NASA mathematicians in *Hidden Figures* possessed civil service contracts, university degrees, and mission-critical technical skills, which allowed them to leverage formal institutional channels and collective upskilling. Thus, class did not determine whether these women resisted, but rather how they were structurally enabled to do so.

3. Research Questions

The following research questions guide the present investigation:

1. How do *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* represent the intersection of race, gender, and social class in shaping the daily experiences of African American women during the Jim Crow era?
2. In what ways does social class determine the specific resistance strategies adopted by working-class domestic workers in *The Help* as compared to middle-class professionals in *Hidden Figures*?
3. How does race intersect with the narrative strategies employed by each author in representing Black women's resistance?

4. Literature Review

Existing scholarship has examined various aspects of both *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, particularly following their commercial success and subsequent film adaptations. However, most studies have focused on race or gender in isolation, rarely placing the two narratives in direct comparative relation to examine the structural impact of social class.

In the case of *Hidden Figures*, Febrianti, Setyowati, and Widisanti (2019) analyzed the struggles of the female characters through the lens of liberal feminism, demonstrating how they navigated professional and educational segregation. While their analysis highlighted the gendered obstacles at NASA, it did not investigate how the characters' middle-class status enabled their specific methods of resistance. Similarly, Purasih (2023) cataloged instances of racial discrimination in the narrative framework of the Space Race, though without connecting these barriers to the characters' economic class. Additionally, Zahra and Rasiah (2023) explored non-verbal communication of racism within the workspace, but did not link this hostility to class dynamics.

Scholarship on *The Help* has focused primarily on the politics of authorship and representation. Because Kathryn Stockett is a white woman writing from the perspective of Black domestic workers, critics have scrutinized the text's representational authority. Murphy and Harris (2018) examined the White Savior trope within the novel, arguing that such narratives center a white protagonist's moral growth, thereby reducing the Black characters to passive subjects who require external mediation to achieve a voice. This critique is supported by Vera and Gordon (2003), who argue that these narratives serve primarily to validate white audiences' moral positioning rather

than center Black agency.

While foundational works by Crenshaw (1989), Collins (2000), and hooks bell (1981) establish the intersection of race, gender, and class, literature specifically comparing these two texts remains limited. Most comparative analyses focus on the cinematic representations of race rather than the written texts. This study addresses this gap by comparing the biographical narrative of Shetterly with the fictional representation of Stockett, focusing on how class structures the available options for resistance.

5. Aims of the Study

This study pursues two interconnected objectives. The primary objective is to demonstrate, through close textual analysis, that social class determines the forms of resistance available to African American women under Jim Crow. By placing the domestic workers of *The Help* and the professionals of *Hidden Figures* in analytical relation, the study isolates class as the variable producing their distinct methods of resistance. The secondary objective is to examine how authorial background and narrative form (biography vs. fiction) shape the representation of Black women's agency, analyzing the implications of Stockett's white-authored fiction compared to Shetterly's Black-authored historical recovery.

6. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in two areas. First, it contributes to the ongoing theoretical conversation about intersectionality by demonstrating the specific analytical weight of class as a structural determinant of resistance, rather than treating class as simply one among several equivalent variables. Existing intersectional analyses acknowledge class as a component of the matrix of domination but rarely examine how, in a specific historical context, it shapes what kinds of resistance are structurally survivable and which are not.

Second, the comparison of a fictional text by a white author and a non-fictional text by a Black author contributes to the ongoing academic and public conversation about representational authority — the question of who has the right and the capacity to tell whose story. This question has renewed urgency in contemporary literary and cultural studies, and the two texts examined here offer an unusually productive case study precisely because they tell ostensibly similar stories from

fundamentally different authorial positions.

7. Research Methodology

This dissertation employs a qualitative comparative literary analysis. The primary texts — Stockett's *The Help* (2009) and Shetterly's *Hidden Figures* (2016) — are analyzed by placing selected scenes, dialogues, and narrative choices in direct relation. The sampling is purposive, selecting textual units that highlight the relationship between class and resistance.

The analytical process is conducted in two stages. The first stage involves identifying key textual units in each text where class position influences the protagonist's resistance. The second stage involves comparative close reading, analyzing how class accounts for differences in their strategies. The theoretical framework integrates intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), the matrix of domination (Collins, 2000), everyday resistance (Scott, 1985), and epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) to evaluate how these structural forces operate simultaneously in the texts.

8. Structure of the Study

The dissertation comprises two chapters, framed by this introduction and a general conclusion.

Chapter One constructs the theoretical and historical framework. It outlines the historical context of Jim Crow, its mechanisms of control (including the role of white allies and opposition), and the double burden of "Jane Crow" (Murray & Eastwood, 1965). The chapter also reviews the strategy of dissemblance (Hine, 1989), the history of Black women's writing (addressing the representation of Black communities by white writers), and the core theoretical concepts: intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), the matrix of domination (Collins, 2000), everyday resistance (Scott, 1985), Gramscian hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 1971), and epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007).

Chapter Two applies this framework to *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* through comparative close reading. It compares the spatial politics of the kitchen and the laboratory, the material conditions of labor, the double burden, and the survivability of resistance strategies. Finally, it analyzes how the authorial positions of Stockett and Shetterly shape the representational politics of each text.

CHAPTER ONE

Historical and Theoretical Framework

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Chapter One: Historical and Theoretical Framework

Introduction

To examine the intersection of class and resistance in African American women's lives during the Jim Crow era (1877–1964), it is necessary to establish both the historical conditions of their oppression and the theoretical frameworks that render their agency legible. This chapter first analyzes the socio-legal architecture of Jim Crow as a system of spatial control, economic exploitation, and racial terror. It then examines the gendered dimensions of this system through Pauli Murray's concept of Jane Crow, alongside the theoretical lenses of intersectionality, the matrix of domination, and everyday resistance. Finally, the chapter traces the development of Black feminist literary criticism and contextualizes the primary texts, *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, within these historical and theoretical structures.

1.1 The Jim Crow System: An Architecture of Racial Control

The Jim Crow system was not merely a collection of prejudices, but a highly coordinated, state-sanctioned infrastructure designed to maintain racial hierarchy and economic exploitation in the Southern United States. To understand the conditions under which African American women navigated their daily lives, it is essential to trace how this system emerged from the ruins of Reconstruction, how it was codified into law through federal and state jurisprudence, and how it operated as a pervasive architecture of spatial division, economic dependency, and racialized violence.

1.1.1 From Reconstruction to Jim Crow

Following the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865, the Reconstruction era initiated a brief period of potential systemic transformation. The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery, African American men temporarily secured franchise, and Black representatives were elected to local and state offices. For a brief duration, this era suggested the possibility of democratic progress (Woodward, 1955).

However, this period of reform was short-lived, as Southern white legislatures systematically enacted restrictive codes to return former slaves to a state of near-bondage. By the

late 1870s, the withdrawal of federal troops marked the collapse of Reconstruction, allowing the Southern white ruling class to reassert political hegemony and establish a system of legally enforced, racialized domination.

Woodward (1955) argued that Jim Crow was not a deeply rooted Southern tradition going back centuries, but rather a deliberate political invention. In his historical analysis, Woodward (1955) demonstrated that Southern politicians constructed the system in the 1890s as a strategy to prevent poor white and Black farmers from uniting against the wealthy landowning elite. By centering race as the primary social division, the ruling class successfully fractured potential class alliances among the working poor.

Here, *Jim Crow* names the system of legally enforced racial segregation that governed the Southern United States from the 1890s until the mid-1960s. As Woodward (1955, p. 7) demonstrated in the “strange career” of Jim Crow, the name itself derived from a nineteenth-century minstrel character, and the system was a political construction rather than a natural social arrangement. It functioned as an interlocking grid of spatial control, economic exploitation, and a sustained climate of racial terror, with a specific birth date and a specific political purpose that had nothing to do with a natural social order.

1.1.2 *Plessy v. Ferguson* and the Illusion of Equality

The legal framework for Jim Crow was formally cemented in 1896 with the Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Homer Plessy, whose racial categorization under Louisiana law contrasted with his white appearance, systematically challenged the state’s Separate Car Act by occupying a whites-only railcar. His subsequent arrest led to the Supreme Court ruling that established the “separate but equal” doctrine, legitimizing state-enforced segregation for the next six decades (“*Plessy v. Ferguson*”, 1896).

As Woodward (1955) demonstrates, the “separate but equal” doctrine produced radically unequal outcomes in practice. The “separate” dimension was enforced through legal penalties, police action, and the ever-present threat of extrajudicial violence. The “equal” dimension was consistently undermined by the deliberate underfunding of African American schools, hospitals, and public infrastructure (Woodward, 1955, p. 149). The *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling (1896) thus gave Southern states constitutional cover to construct two entirely different systems of public life on the same territory.

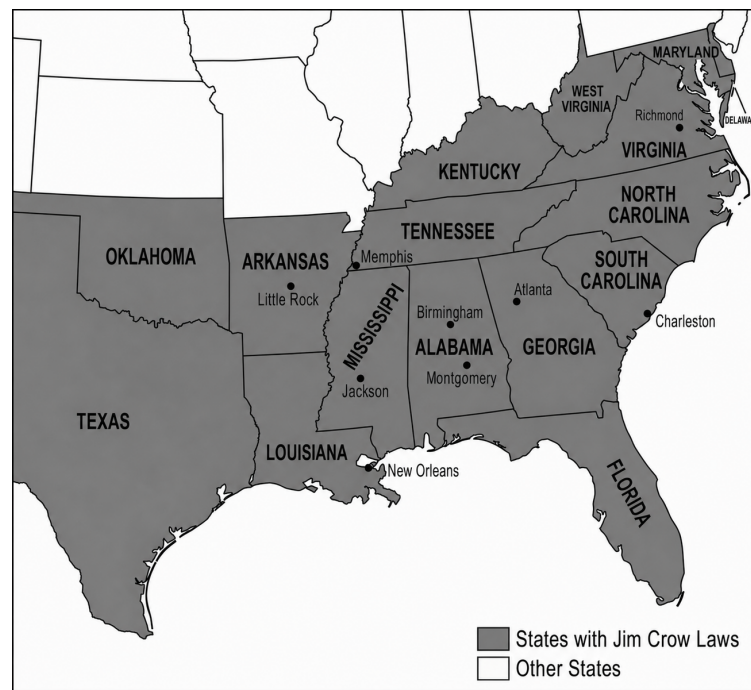


Figure 1.1
States with Jim Crow Segregation Laws (c. 1900–1965)

Note. Map compiled by the authors; historical legislation data sourced from the Gutterman Family Center for Holocaust and Human Rights Education, Florida Atlantic University.

The *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling was only overturned in 1954 with *Brown v. Board of Education*, but even that legal victory did not end the actual practice of segregation overnight. Both primary texts are set inside this transitional period — after *Brown* had theoretically declared segregation unconstitutional, but before the actual dismantling of the system in everyday life.

1.1.3 The Physical Geography of Racism

The spatial reality of Jim Crow was manifested in concrete physical structures and signs rather than merely existing as an abstract ideology. Racial hierarchies were permanently inscribed into the Southern landscape through segregated signage at restaurant entrances, water fountains, and waiting rooms, reinforcing subordination in daily life (Woodward, 1955). Figure 1.1 maps the geographical reach of this legislated racial order across the Southern states, demonstrating how segregation was institutionalized at a territorial scale that encompassed transportation, schools, hospitals, and everyday public spaces across more than a dozen states.

The psychological impact of these spatial markers was significant. Du Bois (1903, p. 3) described this cumulative psychological cost as “double consciousness” — the constant experience of perceiving oneself through the eyes of a hostile social order. The concept of “Sundown Towns”

extended this geography of exclusion even further. Loewen (n.d.) documented that thousands of towns across the South and Midwest operated as formally or informally all-white communities, excluding African Americans through posted ordinances, unwritten threats, or the expectation of racial violence after dark. This system of spatial control constituted, according to Loewen (n.d.), a comprehensive architecture of racialized territorial division.

1.1.4 Economic Chains: Sharecropping, Debt Peonage, and Convict Leasing

The signs and spaces were only the visible layer of Jim Crow. Underneath them, three specific economic mechanisms kept African Americans trapped in poverty with almost no exit. Carlton-LaNey (2011) identifies all three: sharecropping, debt peonage, and convict leasing. Sharecropping allowed Black farmers to work on white-owned land, splitting the harvest at the end of each season, while the landowner kept the accounts — a system that ensured croppers almost always ended the year deeper in debt than they started (Carlton-LaNey, 2011). Debt peonage laws in Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and other states then legally required that indebted person to keep working for the creditor until the debt was settled — a moment that was continuously delayed. Convict leasing completed the system: local courts, which routinely convicted Black men on invented or trivial charges, supplied businesses and landowners with a stream of unpaid forced labor, with no wages, no legal protection, and catastrophic mortality rates (Carlton-LaNey, 2011).

This economic stranglehold rested on a foundation of physical terror. Carlton-LaNey (2011) documents how lynching tended to increase precisely when African Americans competed economically or politically with whites. The 1892 Memphis lynching of Tom Moss occurred because his grocery store was drawing customers away from a white competitor. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who investigated and published the economic motives behind dozens of lynching cases, was forced to flee Memphis after her newspaper office was burned to the ground for printing those findings. Sexual violence functioned alongside lynching as a parallel tool of terror aimed specifically at Black women. Historian Hine (1989) described African American women as “sexual hostages” under the Jim Crow system — routinely vulnerable to assault by white men with virtually no legal recourse, and frequently blamed for their own victimization in the very courts that were supposed to protect them. Hine (1989) underscores that this system of sexual violence was a structural tool designed to enforce Black women’s subordination.

1.1.5 The Climate of Terror: Lynching, Race Riots, and the Control of Space

Beyond individual acts of violence, Jim Crow constructed a broader climate of terror designed to prevent collective action. Carlton-LaNey (2011) traces how the practice of lynching was widely accepted as a legitimate tool of social control in the early twentieth century. It was not the act of fringe criminals operating outside the law. Prominent community members — lawyers, merchants, bankers — participated openly, and newspaper coverage often praised what was described as an orderly execution (Carlton-LaNey, 2011). This normalization of extrajudicial violence reveals how deeply the ideology of racial hierarchy had penetrated public culture during this period.

Race riots extended the geography of terror beyond individual acts. The Wilmington, North Carolina, massacre of 1898 and the Atlanta riots of 1906 both followed the same pattern: a false or exaggerated allegation of Black men's transgression against white women, followed by mass violence in which African American neighborhoods were burned and residents murdered — destruction that was consistently attributed in the white press to "Black provocation" (Carlton-LaNey, 2011). The summer of 1919 — named the "Red Summer" by the poet James Weldon Johnson — saw race riots in more than thirty American cities. In Elaine, Arkansas, Black sharecroppers organizing a labor union were massacred by white mobs after a confrontation in which a law enforcement officer was shot (Carlton-LaNey, 2011). Sixty-seven Black men were sentenced to prison; no white person was charged (Carlton-LaNey, 2011). Carlton-LaNey (2011) notes that the incident began because Black workers dared to demand a fair accounting of their share from the harvest.

For African American women, this climate of terror operated with a specific gendered dimension. Hine (1989) documents how sexual violence against Black women by white men was systematically ignored by law enforcement and the courts. African American girls who became pregnant as a result of rape were often sent to reform schools for "wayward" behavior, effectively punishing them for their own victimization. This pattern — which simultaneously sexualized and criminalized Black female bodies — was part of the broader ideological apparatus that maintained racial hierarchy and undermined Black women's right to bodily autonomy (Hine, 1989).

1.1.6 White Allies and Black Resistance: A Contested History

The history of Jim Crow is not solely a history of racial violence perpetrated without opposition. A minority of white Americans, concentrated primarily in Northern states and in religious abolitionist networks, actively opposed the system. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1909, was a multiracial organization from its inception, counting white progressives such as Oswald Garrison Villard and Mary White Ovington among its founders alongside Black leaders including W.E.B. Du Bois (Morris, 1984). These white allies provided legal resources, published exposés of lynching, and lobbied Congress for federal anti-lynching legislation — though that legislation was blocked by Southern Democrats for decades (Morris, 1984).

Some white voices within the South itself also dissented, at considerable personal risk. Lillian Smith, a white Georgia author, published *Strange Fruit* in 1944, a novel openly critical of the racial and sexual codes of the Jim Crow South. Juliette Hampton Morgan, a white librarian in Montgomery, Alabama, wrote letters to local newspapers supporting the 1955 bus boycott and was ultimately forced to resign her position under social pressure (Carlton-LaNey, 2011). These cases of white dissent within the system illustrate that the racial ideology of Jim Crow was neither universal nor unchallenged even within the white Southern community, though the structural power of that ideology remained largely intact until the legislative interventions of the mid-1960s.

1.2 Gendering Segregation: The Transition from Jim Crow to Jane Crow

The racial architecture of Jim Crow bore down on African American women with particular force. Beyond the racial violence and economic exploitation that defined the system for all Black Americans, Black women navigated an additional, gendered layer of subordination that operated both within white society and within the Black community itself. This section examines that gendered dimension through the work of Pauli Murray, before turning to the theoretical frameworks — intersectionality, the matrix of domination, and dissemblance — that allow its full complexity to be analyzed.

1.2.1 Pauli Murray and the Theoretical Formulation of Jane Crow

While the history of Jim Crow is well documented, the specific ways in which this racial caste system subordinated Black women requires separate analytical attention. Pauli Murray's conceptual interventions are essential to understanding this intersection of racial and gender-based oppression.

As a pioneering civil rights attorney, legal scholar, and activist, Murray observed that Black women were subjected to a form of discrimination distinct from the experience of Black men. This dual subordination operated both within white society and, frequently, within the Black community itself (Murray & Eastwood, 1965).

In this dissertation, *Gender* refers to the socially constructed system of roles, expectations, and meanings assigned to individuals based on their sex. For Black women during the Jim Crow era, gender operated as an intersecting system of constraint. They were expected to perform domestic labor, project emotional deference, and maintain sexual availability, yet they received no legal protection from the violence and exploitation to which these expectations exposed them (hooks bell, 1981).

The compound effect of racial and gendered constraint is the specific condition that Murray (1970/2005, p. 202) named *Jane Crow*, writing that Black women “have endured their double burden with remarkable strength and fortitude” while carrying “a disproportionate share of responsibility” within a community already subjected to systematic racial exclusion.

Murray (1970/2005, p. 202) further documented the structural economic reality underlying this double burden, noting that by the mid-1960s, “more than one-third of all nonwhite working women are employed as private household workers” — a statistical concentration at the lowest rung of the employment ladder that reflected the intersection of racial and gender discrimination operating as a unified system. This structural condition provides the historical foundation for the comparative framework this dissertation applies to the two primary texts.

1.2.2 The Double Burden: Race, Gender, and the Weight of Both

In her foundational text *Ain't I a Woman*, hooks bell (1981) argued that the mainstream white feminist movement had historically ignored the specific experiences of Black women. Scholars such as Davis (1981) and Collins (2000) similarly documented how white feminist advocacy

centered the concerns of middle-class white women while marginalizing the racialized and class-based struggles of Black women (hooks bell, 1981). Consequently, Black women were pressured to defer their racial grievances in favor of gender solidarity.

hooks bell (1981) traced this exclusion back to chattel slavery, arguing that the systematic dehumanization of enslaved women — characterized by sexual vulnerability, forced labor, and the denial of maternal rights — established patterns of oppression that persisted in modernized forms after emancipation. The double burden that Shaw (1996) documents in her study of Black professional women during the Jim Crow era — who balanced domestic duties, professional labor, and community leadership — represents a continuation of this legacy. Shaw (1996) demonstrates that these professionals were not merely navigating separate categories of bias, but were negotiating a highly structured system designed to restrict Black women's advancement.

1.2.3 Dissemblance: The Art of Strategic Invisibility

To survive the strictures of Jane Crow, African American women developed a highly sophisticated psychological and behavioral strategy. Historian Hine (1989) conceptualized this response as “dissemblance” — the behaviors and attitudes that Black women adopted to shield “the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.” On the surface, a woman might project compliance, deference, or contentment. Beneath this mask, however, she was actively protecting her inner self and preserving a private sense of identity that the dominant order sought to obliterate. Hine (1989) emphasizes that dissemblance was not a passive acceptance of subordination, but an active, strategic defense mechanism refined over generations to navigate extreme vulnerability.

1.3 Intersectionality as a Critical Framework: Racial, Gendered, and Class Vectors

While Murray's concept of Jane Crow (Murray & Eastwood, 1965) identifies the double burden facing Black women, it requires a more precise analytical vocabulary to be applied to literary analysis. The theoretical frameworks developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins provide that vocabulary, each building on the other to describe how race, gender, and class operate not as separate variables but as a single, interlocking system of domination.

1.3.1 Kimberlé Crenshaw and the Multidimensional Matrix of Subjugation

Historically, academic analyses of racism and sexism treated these as separate categories. Early studies of racial discrimination, including those under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, examined race-based or sex-based bias as independent variables, ignoring their simultaneous operation (Crenshaw, 1989). Consequently, the experiences of Black women were obscured. A Black woman facing discrimination was not covered by racial discrimination law, which was designed with Black men in mind, nor by sex discrimination law, which assumed a white female subject. Positioned at the intersection of both categories, she remained unprotected by either.

Legal scholar Crenshaw (1989) conceptualized this problem as intersectionality, arguing that oppressive systems do not merely accumulate but multiply. This intersectional dynamic produces a qualitatively distinct experience of marginalization for those positioned at the crossroads of multiple systems.

Within this framework, race is conceptualized not as a biological reality but as a historically constructed social classification that structures access to power, privilege, and institutional opportunities (Rudnick, Smith, & Rubin, 2005). Under Jim Crow, racial classification dictated legal status, physical safety, and socio-economic mobility. For Black women, as Crenshaw (1989) demonstrates, racial and gender discrimination operated simultaneously, reinforcing the subject's marginalization in a way that makes isolating one from the other impossible.

1.3.2 Collins and the Matrix of Domination

Collins (2000) expanded Crenshaw's framework in her book *Black Feminist Thought*. Where Crenshaw focused on legal and analytical categories, Collins built a more sociological model. She argued that the various systems of oppression — race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality — do not operate independently. They are interlocked inside what she called the “matrix of domination.” Each person sits at a specific location inside this matrix, and their experience of power and powerlessness depends on all of their identity markers simultaneously, rather than operating in isolation.

Collins (2000) also insisted that class must be taken equally seriously as an axis of oppression alongside race and gender. In this dissertation, *Class* denotes an individual's position within the social hierarchy of economic resources, educational credentials, and labor relations.

Here, class is understood in Collins's sense as one of the primary axes of the matrix of domination — not merely a matter of income but a structural position that determines what resources, protections, and resistances are available to a person. It is the factor that most immediately shapes a person's daily survival strategy. As Shaw (1996) documented in her historical study of Black professional women during the Jim Crow era, educated Black women developed what she calls "socially responsible individualism" — a strategy of personal achievement tied to collective uplift. These professional women had to navigate, simultaneously, the demands of their careers, the expectations of the white-dominated public sphere, and the needs of the Black community, all while managing their own households (Shaw, 1996). This class-structured difference in available strategies maps directly onto the comparative framework that this dissertation applies to the two primary texts.

1.4 Marxist and Neo-Marxist Literary Theory

Intersectionality and the matrix of domination describe the lived social experience of Black women under Jim Crow. To analyze how that experience is mediated and represented in literature, however, a complementary set of theoretical tools is needed. Marxist and neo-Marxist literary theory offers precisely that: a framework for understanding how economic and class structures shape what stories are told, how they are told, and whose voice is granted authority in the telling.

1.4.1 Base, Superstructure, and the Novel

Intersectionality is not the only theoretical lens this dissertation uses. To understand how class shapes resistance — and how literature represents that relationship — it is also necessary to turn to Marxist and neo-Marxist literary theory. As Eagleton (1976) argues, purely cultural approaches often overlook the material economic conditions that make certain kinds of experience possible and others impossible.

Marx (1859) established the foundational distinction between the economic "base" and the cultural "superstructure" (Eagleton, 1976). The base includes the actual material conditions of a society — who owns the land and factories, how labor is organized, who controls capital. The superstructure includes everything built on top of that: laws, religions, educational systems, artistic traditions, and literature. For Marxist critics, literature is not a neutral space floating above history but is produced by and in response to specific economic arrangements, either reinforcing

or challenging the class structures of its time (Eagleton, 1976).

1.4.2 Gramsci and the Manufacture of Racial Consent

Gramsci (1971) developed Marxist theory further by introducing the concept of hegemony — the idea that the dominant class maintains power not primarily through force but through cultural consent. In his *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci, 1971), Gramsci distinguished between two modes of domination: coercion, which relies on force and the threat of punishment, and consent, which works by convincing subordinate groups that the existing social order is natural, reasonable, and in everyone's best interest. Gramsci (1971) stated that consent is far more efficient than coercion, as it requires fewer policing resources and produces a population that internalizes its own subordination as legitimate.

In the Jim Crow South, this dynamic was visible in the ideology of paternalism, which held that white families maintained a benevolent, caring relationship with their Black domestic workers (Collins, 2000). This paternalist fiction required Black workers to perform not only physical labor but emotional labor as well: they were expected to project gratitude, loyalty, and affection toward the families who exploited them. The theatrical economy of the Jim Crow household — the smiling maid, the loyal cook, the cheerful nursemaid — served a vital ideological function by normalizing domestic exploitation as a natural, harmonious relationship (Shaw, 1996).

1.4.3 Althusser: Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses

Althusser (1971) expanded on Gramsci's concept by providing a more systematic account of how ideology operates through institutions. Althusser (1971) distinguished between what he called Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). The RSA includes the police, the army, the courts, and the prison system — institutions that function primarily through force. The ISA includes schools, churches, the family, the media, and cultural institutions — institutions that function primarily through ideology, by shaping what people believe and what they understand as possible.

Althusser (1971) argued that both sets of apparatuses serve the same ultimate function: reproducing the conditions that make capitalism possible. In a racist capitalist system like the Jim Crow South, this means reproducing a pool of cheap, controllable Black labor. The RSA does this through outright coercion: the convict leasing system, debt peonage laws, and the threat of

lynching. The ISA does it more subtly: by teaching Black children in underfunded segregated schools that their ambitions must be modest; by circulating stereotypes — the Mammy figure, the Sapphire, the Jezebel — that encode the subordination of Black women as something produced by their own nature rather than by political design (Collins, 2000).

The church played an especially complex role in the African American context. Carlton-LaNey (2011) documents how Black churches became spaces of counter-ideology — places where an alternative understanding of humanity, dignity, and justice was preserved and transmitted. Scholars such as Morris (1984) have argued that this counter-ideological function illustrates how subordinate communities construct oppositional meaning and mobilize collective action within the structural gaps of a dominant system.

1.4.4 Class Struggle and the Literature of Resistance

Neo-Marxist critics like Eagleton (1976) argue that literature is always a site of class struggle — not just a mirror of it, but an active participant in it. A novel can either reproduce existing class relations or challenge them. It can make exploitation seem natural, or it can denaturalize it by showing how the system actually works and who benefits. This theoretical premise provides the foundation for the comparative analysis conducted in Chapter Two.

1.5 Resistance: Definitions, Forms, and Strategies

The historical conditions analyzed in the preceding sections — the violence of Jim Crow, the double burden of Jane Crow, and the ideological machinery of hegemony and state apparatuses — raise an essential question: how did African American women respond? This section examines the theoretical frameworks that allow resistance to be recognized and analyzed in its many forms, from hidden daily acts of noncompliance to organized collective action.

1.5.1 Everyday Resistance: Weapons of the Weak

Resistance under Jim Crow rarely looked like what the word usually suggests. An open protest, a public speech, a direct confrontation with a white employer — these responses were possible, but they were also extremely dangerous. This is why Scott (1985)'s concept of “everyday resistance” or “weapons of the weak” is so essential for this dissertation.

In this dissertation, *Resistance* encompasses the full range of strategies through which

subordinated people contest the conditions of their subordination. Following Scott (1985), resistance is understood to include not only open confrontation but also covert acts of noncompliance, subversion, and strategic self-definition. The dissertation argues that the form resistance takes is determined by the structural position of the resisting individual — particularly by their class position.

Scott (1985) developed his framework studying Malaysian peasant communities, but the logic applies, according to him, wherever survival depends on a power structure that cannot be openly challenged. He argues that everyday resistance includes foot-dragging, feigned ignorance, deliberate slowdowns, strategic incompetence, and hidden sabotage — the tools of people who cannot afford to fight in the open. These are what Scott (1985) calls the weapons of the weak: actions that inflict calculated defiance while maintaining the surface appearance of compliance.

1.5.2 Collective Resistance: The Women's Club Movement

Individual resistance, however ingenious, had clear limits. African American women also built organized, collective structures designed to fight Jim Crow on a larger scale. Carlton-LaNey (2011) documents the extraordinary work of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACW), founded in 1896. Far from being a mere social network, the Association functioned as a highly organized political vehicle. These women, as Carlton-LaNey (Carlton-LaNey, 2011, p. 54) argues, deployed sophisticated organizational and political strategies reminiscent of formal boardrooms and legislative staterooms to advocate for social change. They ran campaigns, published newspapers, organized professional associations for nurses and teachers, established reading rooms, and petitioned the federal government — all while being legally excluded from most of the institutions they were trying to change.

Collins (2000) describes two dimensions of this activism that were always running in parallel: the struggle for group survival and the struggle for institutional transformation. Group survival meant building parallel networks. African Americans created parallel schools, hospitals, banks, newspapers, and community organizations because the white-controlled versions refused to serve them. But building parallel institutions was never the final goal. The point was always to use those institutions as a base for attacking the structures that made the parallel system necessary (Collins, 2000). Ida B. Wells-Barnett's journalism campaign against lynching, Maggie Lena Walker's bank, Nannie Helen Burroughs's training school for women — these were acts of prepa-

ration for a much larger institutional fight (Collins, 2000).

The class dimension of this organized resistance deserves attention. Wells-Barnett was an educated journalist. Walker was a businesswoman. These were professional women operating with credentials and resources. Their collective resistance was structured by their class position, just as the individual hidden resistance of domestic workers was structured by theirs. The difference in available strategies runs through every level of African American women's history. The "West Area Computers" at NACA/NASA Langley Research Center were the direct institutional heirs of this club women's tradition: their class position — defined by higher education and federal employment — gave them access to institutional mechanisms of resistance that were unavailable to their domestic-worker contemporaries.

1.5.3 The Strong Black Woman: Ideology as Burden

Before leaving the question of resistance, it is necessary to address a pervasive cultural image that complicates the picture at every turn: the figure of the "strong Black woman." Collins (2000) traces this image as one of the controlling images that the dominant culture uses to manage Black women's identity — alongside the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Sapphire. These images function, in Collins's analysis, not as neutral stereotypes but as ideological tools that naturalize the exploitation of Black women's labor and emotional resources by representing their endurance as an inherent characteristic rather than a historical product of structural violence (Collins, 2000).

On one level, the strong Black woman image has served a real function. It encoded the genuine historical resilience of African American women who survived conditions that, as the history documented in this chapter makes clear, were designed to destroy them. It gave Black women a frame for understanding their own endurance, and it provided a source of community pride. But Black feminist scholars have consistently pointed out that this image also functions as a form of ideology that extracts labor and emotional sacrifice from Black women while offering nothing in return (Collins, 2000). As Collins (2000) argues, if a Black woman is represented as inherently strong — if suffering does not break her because she is somehow built differently — then there is no obligation to protect her from suffering in the first place. The strong Black woman image is therefore one of the mechanisms through which the exploitation of Black women's labor and endurance has been normalized and rendered invisible.

1.6 Black American Literature: A Black Feminist Perspective

The frameworks of intersectionality, neo-Marxist criticism, and resistance theory provide the analytical tools for reading the primary texts. But to apply them specifically to Black women's writing, a final theoretical layer is needed: the tradition of Black feminist literary criticism, which developed its own methods for reading texts produced by and about African American women. This section traces that tradition from its oral roots through the formal critical apparatus built in the 1970s and 1980s, before turning to the two specific authors whose work this dissertation examines.

1.6.1 The Long Road to a Written Voice

For most of American history, Black women were not supposed to have stories worth telling. John Hope Franklin (cited in Carlton-LaNey, 2011) documents that during slavery, African Americans were legally forbidden from learning to read or write in most Southern states. The act of literacy was treated as a direct threat to the social order, because a person who can read can also read the law — and a person who can write can bear witness to their own suffering.

The result was not silence but an extraordinarily rich oral tradition (Carlton-LaNey, 2011). Grandmothers passed stories to granddaughters. Preachers kept community history alive from the pulpit. Folk songs encoded memories that could not be written down safely. As Carlton-LaNey (2011) documents, this oral tradition was a form of cultural resistance under conditions of extreme surveillance and punishment.

The Black church was not simply a religious institution during this period. Carlton-LaNey (2011) demonstrates that it served as the most important intellectual and cultural center available to African American communities under segregation — the space where the oral tradition was formalized, where young people learned to speak publicly, and where the community interpreted its own history on its own terms.

1.6.2 White Writers and the Black Community: Representation from Outside

The emergence of Black women's writing does not occur in isolation. Throughout American literary history, white authors have also written about African American life, raising important questions about representation, authority, and the politics of authorship. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stowe, 1852) brought

the realities of slavery to a wide white readership. However, literary critics have long argued that its portrayal of Black characters was filtered through a paternalistic white perspective, reducing complex individuals to racial archetypes (Baldwin, 1949; Riss, 1994). In the twentieth century, white authors such as William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (Styron, 1967) generated significant controversy when they attempted to inhabit the first-person voice of Black historical figures. Black critics, including those in John Henrik Clarke's edited volume *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (Clarke, 1968), argued that white imaginative empathy cannot substitute for lived experience as an epistemological ground for authentic Black representation.

This debate is directly relevant to the two primary texts examined in this dissertation and will be addressed in detail in the comparative analysis in Chapter Two.

1.6.3 The Great Migration and the Literature of Departure

Between roughly 1910 and 1970, approximately six million African Americans migrated from the rural South to the cities of the North, Midwest, and West (Wilkerson, 2010). This movement — known as the Great Migration — was a major demographic shift driven by the conditions of Jim Crow. Families relocated to escape the threat of racial terror, the economic confinement of sharecropping, and the deliberate underfunding of Black schools (Wilkerson, 2010). As Carlton-LaNey (2011) notes, for many Black women who could not participate in formal organizations, migration itself was a fundamental act of resistance against the Southern racial caste system.

This demographic shift catalyzed a parallel cultural and literary renaissance in urban centers. Publications like the *Chicago Defender* actively encouraged migration through editorials and letters from Southern migrants, framing relocation as both a material escape and an act of self-determination (Wilkerson, 2010). The poetry, fiction, and journalism that emerged from this migration directly reflected the struggles of navigating urban racism while escaping Southern feudalism, establishing a foundation for modern Black literary production.

1.6.4 The Harlem Renaissance and the Emergence of Black Women's Writing

By the 1920s, African American artists, musicians, and writers began producing work that reached national audiences, largely centered in New York's Harlem neighborhood. The Harlem Renaissance brought together figures such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen,

and Jean Toomer, constituting the first large-scale assertion of Black cultural identity in the American mainstream (Collins, 2000).

However, even within this relatively progressive movement, Black women's specific experiences remained largely invisible. Women like Zora Neale Hurston had to fight for any space at all, and their work was often dismissed by male critics within the movement itself. Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) was famously disparaged by Richard Wright and Alain Locke, who found its attention to the domestic lives of Black Southern women insufficiently political (Collins, 2000).

Hurston's achievement was nevertheless significant. She wrote about the domestic lives of Southern rural Black women — their desires, their disappointments, their humor, their language — as if these lives were inherently worthy of serious literary attention. By doing so, she established a tradition of Black women's self-representation that would later include authors like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker (Collins, 2000). This tradition also serves as the critical baseline against which white-authored representations of Black life, such as Stockett's *The Help*, are evaluated by contemporary feminist scholars.

1.6.5 Black Feminist Literary Criticism: Reading Differently

By the 1970s and 1980s, African American women scholars had developed a formal critical apparatus for reading literature from the specific perspective of Black women's experience. Smith (1977)'s foundational 1977 essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" is widely recognized as a pioneering text in this field. Smith argued that Black women's literature had been systematically ignored by both white feminist critics — who focused on white women's experience — and Black male critics — who focused on racial politics without gender. Black feminist criticism intervened to make this marginalized tradition visible and validate its specific epistemological grounds.

hooks bell (1981), Collins (2000), and other scholars extended the Black feminist critical project through their theoretical work on the intersections of race, gender, and class. The key claim of Black feminist criticism is that Black women's writing cannot be properly understood by applying theoretical frameworks developed from the experience of white women or Black men. It requires its own framework — one that takes seriously the specific historical position of African American women as a group that has been exploited by multiple systems simultaneously. Ikhsano and Jakarudi (Ikhsano & Jakarudi, 2020), drawing on Collins, call this the condition of triple op-

pression: racism, sexism, and classism working together.

1.6.6 Epistemic Injustice and the Right to One's Own Story

The philosopher Miranda Fricker introduced the concept of “epistemic injustice” to describe a specific harm that is distinct from other forms of social injustice (Fricker, 2007). She defines epistemic injustice as a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower — as a person who has knowledge, who can testify to their own experience, who deserves to be heard and believed. She distinguishes two main forms. “Testimonial injustice” occurs when a speaker’s testimony is discredited or discounted because of their social identity. “Hermeneutical injustice” occurs when there is a gap in the collective interpretive resources available in a society, making it difficult or impossible for a person to make sense of or communicate their own experience — as when there was no recognized concept to describe the double discrimination Black women faced before scholars like Murray and Crenshaw developed the vocabulary (Fricker, 2007, pp. 7–8).

1.6.7 The Contemporary Novel and the Politics of Representation

By the time Stockett’s *The Help* appeared in 2009 and Shetterly’s *Hidden Figures* in 2016, the conversation about who has the right to tell Black stories had been going on for decades. The Black feminist critical tradition had established a clear framework: representation is not neutral. Who writes matters. What stories get published and celebrated matters. The silence around certain kinds of stories and the noise around others is itself a political fact that requires analysis (Smith, 1977, p. 168).

Both primary texts sit inside this debate. *The Help* became a massive commercial success — a bestselling novel turned into a Hollywood film that won Academy Awards. *Hidden Figures* also became a major film. But the two books were received very differently by Black academic critics. Stockett’s novel, written by a white woman claiming the voices of Black maids, raised serious questions about appropriation and the limits of imaginative empathy. Shetterly’s book, written by a Black woman about women from her own community, was seen as an act of historical recovery and recognition. These differences in reception are not just matters of personal taste. They reflect the ongoing struggle over whose stories get told, who gets to tell them, and who benefits when they are told. Placing these two books side by side, as this dissertation does, makes that struggle visible, illuminating the structural dimensions of their resistance.

1.7 Contextualizing the Primary Texts

The theoretical and historical frameworks developed in the preceding sections now need to be brought to bear on the two specific texts that this dissertation analyzes. This section situates *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* within their shared historical moment — the early 1960s — before examining how each text's particular authorial position and narrative form shapes its representation of Black women's resistance.

1.7.1 The 1960s: A Decade of Violent Contradiction

Both *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* are set primarily in the early 1960s. This was not a politically quiet decade. The Civil Rights Movement was at its most intense. The sit-in protests at lunch counters in Greensboro happened in 1960. The Freedom Riders were attacked by mobs in 1961. Medgar Evers was murdered in his own driveway in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1963 — the same city where *The Help* is set. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968. The mass demonstrations of this era formed the turbulent historical backdrop against which both primary texts are set, creating a climate of political urgency that each text engages from its specific class perspective. At the same time, space exploration was becoming the central arena of Cold War competition. The Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1957. Yuri Gagarin orbited the earth in 1961. John Glenn became the first American to do the same, in 1962, with calculations checked and authorized by Black mathematician Katherine Johnson. The Space Race gave the American government a powerful incentive to maximize the use of all available intellectual talent — including, eventually, the Black women mathematicians who had been quietly doing essential work since World War II.

Both novels place their characters inside this specific historical moment, but they approach it from completely different class positions and from completely different authorial perspectives.

1.7.2 *The Help*: Fiction, Voice, and the Limits of Imagination

The Help was published by Kathryn Stockett in 2009. Its story takes place in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1962–63. The novel tells the story of several working-class Black domestic workers and a young white woman named Skeeter Phelan who decides to write a book about their

experiences. It became one of the bestselling novels of the decade.

The critical debate around *The Help* centers on a basic and uncomfortable question: does a white author have the right — and more importantly, the ability — to tell the stories of Black women she never was? Murphy and Harris (2018) argue that the novel's structure reinforces the "White Savior" trope, wherein a white protagonist acts as the primary agent of liberation for marginalized Black characters, thereby centering white subjectivity. Vera and Gordon (2003) note that such narrative architectures tend to prioritize the moral development of white characters, reassuring mainstream audiences rather than centering the structural critiques voiced by the Black subjects.

The novel captures this double position most precisely in Aibileen's opening narration. From the very first page, she establishes her life as one entirely consumed by service to white families: caring for their children, managing their households, and absorbing their grief while her own goes unrecognized (Stockett, 2009, p. 1).

The syntax of this narration — matter-of-fact, unadorned — is itself a document of the ideological system this dissertation analyzes. Aibileen records decades of labor as simply what she does, because the system has calibrated her expectations accordingly.

The novel also gives a voice to Minny Jackson's raw awareness of the economic and physical terror that maintains the racial hierarchy. When she confronts the reality of participating in the clandestine book project, the weight of potential retaliation is made visible:

"But what would they do? Hitch us to a pickup and drag us behind? Shoot me in my yard? Or just starve us to death?" (Stockett, 2009, p. 196).

This fear is not psychological weakness. It is a precise response to a system in which Black workers face physical violence and economic blacklisting with no appeal, no recourse, and no institutional protection.

Whether or not Stockett intended this, the structural result is that Aibileen and Minny — the most compelling and morally complex characters in the novel — are ultimately mediated by the narrative choices of a white woman from Mississippi (Murphy & Harris, 2018, pp. 3–4). This raises questions that a Black feminist reading takes seriously: whose voice is actually on the page? Who benefits from the commercial success of this story?

1.7.3 *Hidden Figures*: Biography, Truth, and the Claim to Self-Representation

Hidden Figures was written by Margot Lee Shetterly in 2016. It is not a novel. It is a work of historical non-fiction based on years of archival research, oral history interviews, and personal family connections — Shetterly's father worked at NASA during the same period. The book tells the true story of African American women mathematicians who worked as “human computers” at the Langley Research Center in Hampton, Virginia, from World War II through the Space Race.

Because it is non-fiction, *Hidden Figures* makes a different kind of argument about representation. Shetterly is not imagining what it felt like to be Katherine Johnson. She is reconstructing it from documentary evidence and from the testimony of people who were actually there. As a Black woman writing about the history of her own community, Shetterly occupies an authorial position that grants her work a degree of representational authority that is unavailable to an outside observer — a distinction that carries significant implications for the politics of narrative legitimacy (Smith, 1977, pp. 168–170). The questions about appropriation that haunt *The Help* do not arise in the same way.

The book's core argument about class and recognition is stated most starkly in Shetterly's account of Dorothy Vaughan's professional situation. Shetterly documents how Vaughan navigated the racial and gender barriers of the Jim Crow era through a combination of pragmatism and strategic resilience: when systemic obstacles could be dismantled, she worked methodically to dismantle them; when they could not, she endured them without surrendering her sense of professional purpose (Shetterly, 2016, p. 21).

Shetterly's account of the professional barriers facing Black women mathematicians makes the institutional dimension of their struggle equally clear, highlighting how their intellectual contributions were systematically obscured. Women who worked closely with engineers on the content of research reports were rarely rewarded by seeing their names on the final publications (Shetterly, 2016, p. 191).

The social class of the subjects is also fundamentally different. These are not women who were denied education. They were women who *had* education and were denied recognition for it. The discrimination they faced was not the blunt Jim Crow of the kitchen, but the sophisticated institutional racism of a federal bureaucracy that needed their work desperately but refused to

acknowledge them. Doane and Bonilla-Silva (Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003) describe this as “new racism” — a form of exclusion that operates through bureaucratic neutrality and structural barriers rather than open hostility.

To systematically outline the divergence in labor relations between the subjects of the two primary texts, Table 1.1 contrasts the material conditions of domestic service against those of federal employment during the early 1960s. This comparison highlights the structural disparities in compensation, security, and institutional leverage that shaped each group’s capacity for resistance.

Table 1.1

Labor Conditions Comparison: Domestic Workers vs. Federal Professionals (1960s)

Dimension	Domestic Workers (<i>The Help</i>)	Federal Professionals (<i>Hidden Figures</i>)
Minimum wage protection	None (excluded until 1974)	Yes (federal pay scale)
Job security	At-will, no notice required	Civil service protections
Discrimination recourse	None	Federal EEO channels (limited)
Professional advancement	No formal pathway	Promotion by merit (theoretically)
Union membership	Excluded from most unions	Government employee associations
Employer accountability	None	Institutional (personnel file)
Public recognition	Zero	Possible (federal publications)
Pension / retirement	None	Federal pension system

Conclusion

This chapter has established the historical and theoretical framework necessary for the comparative analysis in the following chapter. It began by outlining the socio-legal architecture of Jim Crow as a systematically engineered system of racial control rather than an organic Southern tradition (Woodward, 1955). The analysis then explored the gendered dimensions of this system, incorporating Pauli Murray's concept of Jane Crow (Murray, 1970/2005), the intersectional double burden discussed by bell hooks (hooks bell, 1981) and Stephanie Shaw (Shaw, 1996), and the survival strategy of dissemblance conceptualized by Darlene Clark Hine (Hine, 1989). To render these historical conditions analytically legible, the chapter examined critical frameworks including Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and Patricia Hill Collins's matrix of domination (Collins, 2000). Additionally, the neo-Marxist concepts of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) and ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 1971) clarify how the racial caste system reproduced itself through cultural normalization. Finally, James C. Scott's theory of everyday resistance (Scott, 1985) provides the theoretical vocabulary to analyze the subtle, class-determined strategies that the subsequent chapters will trace. The development of Black feminist literary criticism demonstrates that narrative authority is inextricably linked to political power, and that the primary texts must be evaluated within these intersecting vectors of race, gender, and class.

It is to these questions that Chapter Two now turns directly. Through sustained close reading of specific scenes, dialogues, and narrative choices in both *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, the following chapter will demonstrate in textual detail the argument that this dissertation has established theoretically: that the domestic kitchen and the federal laboratory produced different kinds of resistance not because the women in each setting had different values or different courage, but because their structural class positions gave them access to different tools, different protections, and different definitions of what was survivable.

CHAPTER TWO

Class, Space, and Resistance: A Comparative Analysis

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Chapter Two: Class, Space, and Resistance: A Comparative Analysis

Introduction

This chapter employs a method of sustained comparative close reading, drawing on the theoretical and historical framework developed in Chapter One to examine specific scenes, narrative decisions, and structural patterns in *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*. The objective is to demonstrate, through direct textual evidence, that social class shaped the forms of resistance available to African American women under the Jim Crow system. Class position is not an abstraction. It is a set of material conditions — wages, contracts, credentials, legal protections — that determine, with considerable precision, what a person can and cannot do when the institutional order moves against them. This chapter tests that claim through sustained close reading of *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*. The analysis is organized around four major axes of comparison: the physical and symbolic spaces in which each group of women operates; the structure of the labor relation that binds them to white institutional authority; the manifestations of resistance available to each group; and the authorial gaze and white savior narrative enacted through each writer's choices. The argument throughout is that the domestic kitchen and the federal laboratory are not two versions of the same struggle — they are two structurally distinct positions, and they produce two structurally distinct resistances.

2.1 The Primary Characters and Their Authors

The Help (2009) is set in Jackson, Mississippi, in the early 1960s. Its central characters are Aibileen Clark, a quietly spiritual Black domestic worker who has raised seventeen white children over a lifetime of service, and Minny Jackson, her sharp-tongued, fiercely intelligent friend who works as a cook and refuses to accept indignity without some form of resistance. Both women labor in white households without contracts, without minimum wage protections, and without any legal recourse if they are dismissed. Their lives are held together by community, faith, and an interior dignity that the Jim Crow system is designed to crush.

Alongside Aibileen and Minny, the novel introduces Skeeter Phelan, a young white woman from a wealthy Mississippi family who has just returned from university with dreams of

becoming a writer. It is Skeeter who conceives the project of recording the domestic workers' testimonies and who manages to place the resulting book with a New York publisher. Without Skeeter's connections, her access to the publishing world, and the legal and financial buffer her whiteness and class provide, the maids' voices would not have reached a national audience. The novel thus positions a white woman as the intermediary through whom Black women's experiences become legible to a predominantly white readership — a dynamic that critics have identified as the "White Savior" structure, a pattern analyzed by Vera and Gordon (2003).

Stockett opens the novel with Aibileen's voice — spare, direct, carrying decades of accumulated weight. It is a narrative choice that immediately signals both the novel's ambitions and its most serious critical problem: whose voice is this, really? Can a white Southern woman accurately render the inner life of a Black domestic worker? That question is not resolved in the novel, and its unresolved tension is one of the things that makes *The Help* analytically productive.

Hidden Figures (2016) is set at the Langley Research Center of NASA in Hampton, Virginia, in the 1950s and 1960s. Its three primary characters are Katherine Johnson, a mathematical genius whose trajectory calculations for the Mercury and Apollo programs were so precise that John Glenn personally requested she verify the IBM computer's numbers before his orbital flight; Dorothy Vaughan, the supervisor of the "West Area Computers" — the group of African American women mathematicians — who taught herself FORTRAN and then trained her entire team in order to preserve their relevance when the IBM 7090 machine arrived; and Mary Jackson, who petitioned a Virginia court for permission to attend graduate engineering classes at a white high school and became NASA's first Black female engineer.

Shetterly documents the emotional cost of Katherine's daily navigation of a federal institution that depended on her intellect while refusing her its most basic institutional dignities. The bathroom policy alone cost Katherine forty-five minutes of working time every single day — a measurable, documented loss that Shetterly records with the evidentiary precision of a historian, not the approximation of a novelist.

A pivotal figure in the institutional setting of *Hidden Figures* is Robert Gilruth, the director of the Space Task Group and Katherine's supervisor. In Shetterly's account, the desegregation of the facilities is not accomplished through a single heroic gesture by a supervisor, but through a gradual process driven by the practical cost that the segregation policy was inflicting on

the Space Race. The institution eventually bends not because of moral awakening but because the racial hierarchy was costing it operational efficiency it could not afford — a point that reveals the structural logic of the change. Miriam Mann, one of the Black women computers, carried out her own quiet protest by repeatedly removing the segregated cafeteria sign and slipping it into her purse — what Shetterly calls “her own personal civil rights movement” (Shetterly, 2016, pp. 43–44).

2.2 Spatial Politics and the Architecture of Segregation

The physical spaces that the characters inhabit in both primary texts are not merely passive backgrounds for the narrative action; rather, they are active, spatialized manifestations of the Jim Crow racial and class hierarchy. By dictating who can occupy specific rooms, which doors can be entered, and how bodily functions are segregated, the built environment serves to normalize and enforce systemic inequality. This section examines how these physical layouts function as ideological apparatuses that police the movement of Black women while simultaneously serving as the primary sites where they enact their resistance.

To understand the class-enabling conditions of this resistance, the analysis contrasts two distinct spatial domains: the private white domestic household in Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help* and the public federal campus of the Langley Research Center in Margot Lee Shetterly’s *Hidden Figures*. The following subsections trace how the domestic interior and the institutional workplace impose different spatial constraints and, consequently, yield different possibilities for subaltern subversion and self-definition.

2.2.1 Domestic Spaces as Sites of Ideological Discipline and Subversion

In *The Help*, almost every meaningful event takes place inside a house. The kitchen, the living room, the bathroom, the nursery — these are the spaces where power is enacted, challenged, and occasionally disrupted. The Jim Crow household was one of the primary sites where the racial order was daily reproduced and daily performed. The domestic interior was both a workplace and an ideological theater. It was where African American women labored for wages too low to constitute genuine economic independence, and where, simultaneously, they were expected to perform emotional loyalty and personal devotion to the families that employed them (hooks bell, 1981, pp. 119–121).

In the opening of the novel, Aibileen Clark states that she has raised seventeen white

children over her career (Stockett, 2009, p. 1), a figure that highlights the structural extent of her domestic labor. This life of intimate, low-wage service provides no formal recognition, pension, or contractual protections. For Aibileen, the domestic interior represents both a site of immense personal investment and a space of extreme legal and economic vulnerability. Lacking union representation or formal contracts, domestic workers could be dismissed without notice or accused of theft based solely on the employer's word, rendering their presence in the household economically and socially precarious.

Stockett gives this emotional labor a voice in the novel's most celebrated scene. Aibileen's daily ritual of affirmation for the white toddler Mae Mobley is simultaneously an act of care and a quietly radical act of counter-ideology: "You is kind, you is smart, you is important" (Stockett, 2009, p. 522). This three-part declaration — offered daily to a child who has every institutional advantage Aibileen lacks — encodes precisely what Hine (1989) conceptualized as *dissemblance*: the practice of maintaining a hidden space of interior resistance beneath an outward presentation of compliance. By offering the child this positive reinforcement, she quietly influences the child's moral development under the guise of routine caregiving.

The spatial politics of the novel become most explicit in the famous "bathroom bill" episode. Miss Hilly Holbrook — the social arbiter of the white women's community in Jackson, Mississippi — drafts what she calls the "Home Help Sanitation Initiative," which would require every white household employing a Black domestic worker to build a separate outdoor bathroom for their use. The stated justification is hygiene. The actual function, as Stockett's narrative makes clear, is symbolic: it is a reassertion of the racial boundary at the most intimate and bodily level. By controlling where Aibileen and Minny's bodies are permitted to be — specifically, by keeping those bodies out of spaces that white bodies occupy — Miss Hilly is performing exactly what Althusser (1971) called the reproduction of the conditions of production. The segregated bathroom functioned as a primary site of spatial control and a daily, embodied reminder of racial categorization. This spatial segregation enforces the notion that the presence of Black workers is strictly instrumental — tolerated only for their labor while their physical bodies are marked as separate and polluting. This physical separation underwrites the broader racial hierarchy, reinforcing the domestic sphere as a site of racial discipline.

A pattern consistent throughout the novel emerges from Stockett's spatial arrange-

ments: the white-controlled domestic interior is a space of discipline and surveillance, while the only spaces available to African American women that are genuinely theirs — the church, the informal network, the kitchen conversations when the employer is absent — are spaces of concealment and counter-activity. This matches precisely what Scott (1985) described as the infrastructure of “infrapolitics”: the hidden transcript of the subordinate group, conducted in the spaces the dominant group does not watch.

2.2.2 The Federal Workplace as Contested Institutional Space

Hidden Figures opens in a very different physical space: the Langley Research Center of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA, later NASA) in Hampton, Virginia. It is a federal government campus, and it is, in theory, governed by different rules from the Mississippi household. Federal employment offered African Americans something that domestic service never could: legal protection, a pay grade, a union, a personnel file, and an institutional identity that existed independently of any individual employer’s goodwill.

And yet the spatial politics of Langley in the late 1950s and early 1960s are still organized by the logic of Jim Crow. The “Colored Computers” — the designation given to the group of African American women mathematicians who perform calculations by hand — are housed in a separate wing of the campus. Their desks are segregated. The bathrooms carry “Colored Ladies” signs. The cafeteria has a separate section. Even the coffee pots are labeled separately. The federal institution has adopted the spatial grammar of Jim Crow within its own walls.

The critical difference from the domestic interior of *The Help* is that the federal campus is a space in which expertise has institutional value. Katherine Johnson’s mathematical skill is not a personal quality that her employer can choose to recognize or ignore based on social convenience. It is a professional credential, documented in her personnel file, evaluated against objective standards, and — as the narrative demonstrates — measurably superior to that of many of her white male colleagues (Shetterly, 2016, p. 125). This means that the spatial battles Katherine fights are battles over institutional recognition rather than over simple bodily presence.

In Shetterly’s biographical account, Katherine Johnson’s spatial resistance is characterized by a direct refusal to comply with segregated arrangements. When she was assigned to the Space Task Group in the East Area, she used the unmarked white bathrooms since the segregated ones were not clearly designated in her building. Even after discovering the segregation policy,

she refused to walk to the designated colored bathroom in another building, continuing to use the white facilities. Her supervisors, recognizing the critical importance of her mathematical work for the space mission under the direction of Robert Gilruth, chose not to enforce the segregation rules, and the matter was quietly dropped (Shetterly, 2016, pp. 125–127).

This spatial navigation crystallizes the argument this chapter makes about class: her mathematical credentials made her labor so institutionally valuable that the administration could not afford to enforce racial boundaries that disrupted her calculations. The desegregation of Langley did not occur through a single dramatic administrative gesture, but rather through the gradual, persistent presence of Black women mathematicians who occupied professional spaces and facilities that were nominally closed to them, forcing the institution to adapt to their presence (Shetterly, 2016, p. 128).

An instructive act of spatial resistance is Shetterly (2016)’s documentation of Miriam Mann’s quiet, repeated removal of the segregated “Colored” sign from the cafeteria table. Shetterly describes how Mann would slip the sign into her purse whenever it appeared, only for the administration to replace it — a cycle she continued with deliberate persistence (pp. 43–44). This concretizes the epistemic paradox Fricker (2007) identifies: the institution simultaneously depended on these women’s calculations for national security while insisting on enforcing racial boundaries in the spaces where they ate lunch. Mann’s quiet, repeated act of removal is a literal, documented reclaiming of institutional space.

2.2.3 Space as Measure of Class Difference

The contrast between the domestic interior of *The Help* and the federal campus of *Hidden Figures* is, at its root, a class contrast. The domestic worker has no institutional identity. She is present in the employer’s space by personal permission, which can be revoked at any time without explanation. The professional has an institutional identity — a job classification, a salary grade, a security clearance — which gives her a formal claim to occupancy that is not purely dependent on individual favor.

This does not mean that the professional is free from spatial discrimination. As the bathroom example makes clear, she is not. But it means that when the discrimination causes a measurable cost to the institution — as it did in Katherine Johnson’s case, when the bathroom policy was literally costing the Space Task Group calculated work hours — there exists a mechanism

through which that cost can be named, documented, and eventually acted upon. The domestic maid has no equivalent mechanism. When the bathroom policy costs Aibileen time, there is no one to whom she can report this cost. There is no personnel file, no grievance procedure, no institutional interest in maximizing her output. Her time does not have the same institutional value.

Ultimately, a comparative reading demonstrates that class position determines the physical spaces available to resistance. While the domestic worker in *The Help* is confined to privately controlled household spaces where resistance must remain covert or coded — operating as the hidden transcript of infrapolitics — the professional in *Hidden Figures* inhabits institutionally governed workspaces. In these federal spaces, resistance can, under specific conditions, take the form of direct institutional confrontation backed by documented technical expertise.

2.3 The Political Economy of Labor: Wage Structures, Contracts, and Valuation

The labor relation represents the direct material interface where class differences are enacted. While both groups of women performed work that was crucial to their respective environments, the formal structures of their employment — ranging from the undocumented, precarious arrangements of domestic service to the legally codified civil service grades of federal employment — produced vastly different opportunities for economic survival and resistance. The following subsections analyze these contrasting labor relations and their structural implications.

2.3.1 Subjugated Labor: The Unacknowledged Realities of Domestic Service

The economic dimension of the labor relation in *The Help* is deliberately kept in the background of the narrative. Stockett focuses primarily on the emotional and psychological dimensions of the maid–employer relationship, and this focus itself has been the subject of significant critical debate (Murphy & Harris, 2018). But the economic structure is always present, and it shapes everything that happens.

Domestic workers in Mississippi in the early 1960s received wages that placed them firmly below the poverty line even by the standards of the time. The federal minimum wage in 1963 was \$1.25 per hour, but domestic workers were explicitly excluded from minimum wage protections until 1974 (American Civil Liberties Union, 2020). The ACLU has documented how these exclusions — rooted directly in the compromise arrangements that Southern Democrats demanded when the New Deal labor legislation was originally passed — were a deliberate continuation of the

Jim Crow economic system (American Civil Liberties Union, 2020). A Black woman working as a domestic servant in Mississippi in 1963 had no legal floor under her wages, no right to overtime, no right to sick leave, no workers' compensation if she was injured on the job, and no unemployment insurance if she was dismissed (Carlton-LaNey, 2011, pp. 43–45).

This economic vulnerability is not merely a background condition in *The Help*. It is the primary mechanism through which the employer exercises control. When Minny Jackson is fired by Miss Hilly and blacklisted throughout the Jackson social network, the consequence is not just professional humiliation — it is the immediate possibility of starvation for her family. Stockett makes the structural nature of this trap plain throughout the novel: Minny's careful avoidance of any direct confrontation with white employers is not timidity but a rational calculation grounded in the knowledge that no legal protection stands between her and destitution (Stockett, 2009, p. 9). The power of the employer in this context is not simply interpersonal. It is structural, backed by the law's refusal to protect Black women's labor.

By contrast, the federal professional operated under a civil service pay scale, was enrolled in a federal pension system, and had access to formal grievance channels — however limited in practice. This legal difference produced a different landscape of possible action, structuring not just what these women could do but what it would cost them to do it.

2.3.2 The Calculation of Katherine Johnson: When Labor Has Measurable Value

In *Hidden Figures*, the relationship between Katherine Johnson's labor and its recognition by the institution is the central drama of the book. Katherine is hired because she can calculate. The Space Race context means that her calculations are directly tied to questions of life and death — specifically, whether John Glenn's spacecraft re-enters the atmosphere at the correct angle. This gives her mathematical labor a value that can be measured in objective terms that are independent of race and gender: either the calculation is correct, or the astronaut dies.

This objectivity is both empowering and limiting. On one hand, it gives Katherine a form of leverage that no domestic worker can possess. When she demonstrates, in a briefing room full of hostile white men, that her geometric analysis is correct and the IBM computer's answer is wrong, she cannot be dismissed. The correctness of the calculation is empirically verifiable, and the stakes are too high for the institution to ignore empirical reality. On the other hand, the institution systematically refuses to let her author the very results that depend on her work. She

is initially credited nowhere in the reports she writes. Her name appears on none of the technical documents that go out under the names of her white male supervisors.

Shetterly documents this with careful precision (Shetterly, 2016). She describes how the institutional custom at NACA systematically excluded female computers from receiving authorship credit on technical reports, reserving this recognition solely for male engineers. When Katherine Johnson questioned this practice and requested to sign the reports she had calculated, she was initially met with institutional resistance, as female authorship was unprecedented in her division. The refusal to credit her authorship was not a matter of oversight; it was a reflection of a deeply entrenched institutional structure that reproduced gendered and racial hierarchies, even when the actual intellectual labor was performed by Black women. This is what Fricker (2007) would call a pure case of epistemic injustice: the institution simultaneously depends on Katherine's knowledge and denies her the formal recognition that would flow from that knowledge. It uses her mind while refusing her status.

The breakthrough comes not through a formal grievance or a legal challenge, but through exactly the kind of instrumental argument that the institutional structure makes possible: Katherine's contributions are so central to the mission that excluding her from authorship creates a documentation problem that the institution eventually cannot ignore. Her name appears on the reports (Shetterly, 2016, p. 175). The process is slow, partial, and never accompanied by the kind of public acknowledgment that her work warranted. But it is structurally different from Aibileen's situation, where no such institutional mechanism for recognition exists at all.

In this manner, class position directly structures the labor relation and the corresponding power dynamics of the employment situation. The domestic workers are bound by an undocumented, highly personalized relationship with no contract, no minimum wage protections, and no legal recourse. Conversely, the federal professionals operate under codified civil service grades, contracts, and formal regulations, allowing them to leverage the institution's own operational interests to demand recognition and fair treatment.

2.4 The Double Burden Materialized: Daily Life Under Two Systems

Both groups of women in the primary texts carry what Murray and Eastwood (1965) named "Jane Crow": the simultaneous weight of racial and gendered oppression. Yet the content and conse-

quence of this double burden differ markedly across class lines. The following two subsections reconstruct the daily structure of that burden for Aibileen Clark and Katherine Johnson respectively, using the textual evidence each author provides.

2.4.1 Aibileen's Day: Exhaustion as Structure

To understand what the double burden actually looks like as a lived experience rather than a theoretical concept, it is worth reconstructing the structure of Aibileen's day as the novel describes it. She wakes before dawn to attend to her own household duties before traveling across town to the Leefolt household. She arrives early and begins the first of her domestic duties. She cooks, cleans, does laundry, and manages the household's daily operations. She also provides primary childcare for Mae Mobley Leefolt, the white toddler for whom she feels genuine affection.

In addition to these physical labors, she performs the emotional labor of maintaining a demeanor of cheerfulness, deference, and gratitude throughout the workday. She must smile when spoken to condescendingly. She must express appreciation for gestures of condescension presented as generosity. She must suppress any expression of frustration, exhaustion, or resentment, because any such expression could be interpreted as "attitude" — a category that, in the Jim Crow household, carries the threat of immediate dismissal (Stockett, 2009, p. 9). The term that Hochschild (1983) would later develop for this kind of labor — "emotional labor" — captures what Aibileen performs every day, for years, without recognition or compensation.

At the end of the workday, Aibileen returns to her own house, which is not clean and fed the way the Leefolt house is, because she has spent her cleaning energy on someone else's home. She cooks her own dinner — often from cheaper ingredients because her wages leave little room for alternatives. She manages whatever church or community commitments she has taken on, because the Black community's survival structures require volunteer time from those who have very little time to give. She reads her Bible, grieves the son she lost in an industrial accident that was caused by dangerous working conditions, and prepares to repeat the entire cycle the next morning.

Shaw (1996) documents a pervasive structure of exhaustion among Black professional women during the Jim Crow era. Although these women, unlike Aibileen, possessed formal professional roles, they continued to bear the primary responsibility for household management and community service. This double burden persisted because neither white institutions nor Black male leadership shared these domestic and civic labors. For a domestic worker, the burden is even heav-

ier, because the professional at least receives a wage that reflects (however inadequately) the value of her labor, while the domestic worker receives wages that are deliberately depressed by law and by custom.

2.4.2 Katherine Johnson's Commute: Class Is Also Distance

Katherine Johnson's double burden is differently structured. She is a trained mathematician, which means that her professional labor is recognized and compensated at a level that Aibileen's is not. She has a husband (first James Goble, later James Johnson), which means that the household's economic pressure is shared, at least in principle. She lives in a Black neighborhood in Newport News, Virginia, from which she commutes to the Langley campus — a commute that is itself a daily performance of dignity under surveillance, as a Black woman navigating public transportation in a segregated state.

But the professional success that her mathematical talent makes possible does not exempt her from the second system. She is a mother. The demands of childcare fall primarily on her, as they did for virtually all women of her generation, regardless of race. When her first husband James dies of a brain tumor in 1956, leaving her a widow with three daughters, she becomes the sole provider for the family while continuing to perform at the highest technical levels of the NACA program. The institution does not adjust her workload. It does not offer additional support. It continues to demand the same precision and speed as before, with the same institutional ambivalence about officially recognizing her contributions.

Collins (2000, pp. 18–19) used the term “matrix of domination” to describe the way that multiple systems of power operate on a single body simultaneously. Katherine Johnson's life in the late 1950s is an almost clinical illustration of that matrix: the racial system denies her access to bathrooms and authorship credit; the gender system denies her the assumption of authority that her male colleagues receive automatically; the class system — which distinguishes her from a domestic worker — gives her institutional protections that make her resistance possible, but it cannot exempt her from the other systems.

A structural asymmetry emerges from comparing the two characters' daily lives: both women carry a double burden, but the content and consequence of that burden are determined by class. For Aibileen, exhaustion is the natural end state of a system designed to extract maximum labor while providing minimum return. For Katherine, exhaustion coexists with the possibility —

partial, contested, always requiring proof — of institutional recognition. That possibility is what class provides. It is not comfort. It is not freedom. But it is a different relationship to what the institution owes you.

Furthermore, class determines the material structure of the double burden that these women carry. While both groups of women experience the simultaneous weight of racial and gender discrimination as predicted by Crenshaw's intersectionality framework, the lived reality of these burdens diverges across class lines. The domestic worker's double burden is characterized by physical exhaustion, extreme economic precarity, and the constant demand for interpersonal deference. In contrast, the professional's burden is structured around proving competence in the face of institutional skepticism and managing the emotional labor of navigating hostile professional environments while still carrying domestic and family responsibilities.

2.5 Intersecting Oppressions and Epistemic Exclusions in the Primary Texts

Having examined spatial politics, labor conditions, and the double burden, it is now possible to apply the theoretical frameworks established in Chapter One to the specific textual evidence gathered above. Crenshaw's intersectionality and Fricker's epistemic injustice offer two complementary lenses through which to read the forms of discrimination — and resistance — documented in both primary texts.

2.5.1 Applying Intersectionality: Textual Manifestations of Multi-Layered Oppression

Crenshaw (1989)'s intersectionality framework makes visible what a single-axis reading of either text would miss. In *The Help*, the enforcement of segregated outdoor bathrooms represents a racial boundary that targeted all Black domestic workers, regardless of gender, while white household members and visitors occupied the clean interior spaces. However, the gendered aspect of this labor is visible in the expectation that Black women perform reproductive and emotional labor inside the home, placing them in highly intimate yet legally unprotected positions. In *Hidden Figures*, the intersection of race and gender is manifested in the dual barriers faced by the Black women mathematicians, who were segregated from white men in engineering roles and ignored in technical briefings where their white female colleagues, though marginalized by gender, still had greater proximity to institutional recognition. Intersectionality establishes that these forces cannot be analyzed in isolation without distorting the structural reality of the subjects' lives.

2.5.2 Dissemblance as Resistance: Aibileen Clark

The concept of dissemblance — the strategy of protective invisibility theorized by Hine (1989) — is directly visible in the characterization of Aibileen Clark in *The Help*. Her soft voice, her apparent acceptance of her working conditions, her warm relationship with the white children she raises — these are not signs of contentment. They are the surface layer of dissemblance. Underneath, Aibileen is writing down her true feelings in a private notebook and telling the children a different story: that they are kind, they are smart, they are important. She is quietly shaping the next generation while appearing to simply cook and clean. This is dissemblance operating exactly as described by Hine (1989): a sophisticated survival technique that preserves an inner life of resistance beneath an exterior of compliance.

2.5.3 The Strong Black Woman in Both Texts

Collins (2000, pp. 80–82)’s analysis of the “strong Black woman” as a controlling image illuminates the specific burdens placed on the characters in both primary texts, but in different ways. Aibileen Clark in *The Help* is surrounded by this image: she is expected to absorb grief, labor, and indignity without complaint. Her famous line to the little white girl she cares for — “You is kind, you is smart, you is important” (Stockett, 2009, p. 522) — is, among other things, a quietly radical act of offering to another child the affirmation that no one has ever thought to offer her. The NASA scientists in *Hidden Figures* encounter the image differently: their extraordinary technical competence is used as evidence that discrimination has not really harmed them, when in fact their achievements have been accomplished against a system actively working to block them at every step. The strong Black woman is simultaneously a real historical achievement and an ideological trap, and the two primary texts illuminate different dimensions of that bind.

2.5.4 Epistemic Injustice: Voice and Authority in Both Texts

Fricker (2007)’s concept of epistemic injustice is particularly productive for reading the two primary texts comparatively. In *The Help*, the maids are subjected to systematic testimonial injustice: their knowledge of the white families they serve is extensive and intimate, but the social order denies them any legitimate platform from which to speak that knowledge publicly. Skeeter’s book project is, in part, an attempt to create such a platform — but it immediately

raises the hermeneutical question that Fricker identifies: can a white woman provide the interpretive framework through which Black women's testimony reaches a predominantly white readership without distorting it? This question is not resolved in the novel, and the tension it creates is one of the text's most productive critical openings.

In *Hidden Figures*, the epistemic injustice is differently structured but equally systematic. Katherine Johnson calculates numbers that are trusted to keep an astronaut alive, but she is denied authorship of the reports she writes and excluded from the meetings where her own data is discussed (Ikhsano & Jakarudi, 2020). The institution simultaneously depends on her knowledge and refuses to extend to her the formal epistemic status that would come with recognition. These are not just moral wrongs. They are specific acts of epistemic violence that operate through institutional procedure rather than overt hostility — and they are precisely the form of “new racism” that Doane and Bonilla-Silva (2003, pp. 9–11) describe as characteristic of the post-*Brown* era.

2.6 Narrative Modes: Comparative Analysis of Fictional and Biographical Structures

The choice of narrative mode — whether a writer approaches their subject through the conventions of imaginative fiction or the rigorous documentation of biography — carries profound implications for how historical agency is represented. This section contrasts the formal strategies employed in the two primary texts, analyzing how Stockett's multi-vocal fictional structure and Shetterly's documentary biographical approach establish distinct forms of narrative authority.

2.6.1 Polyphony and Standpoint in *The Help*: Contested Representational Authority

The formal choice that Kathryn Stockett made when she sat down to write *The Help* is one that has enormous consequences for what the novel can and cannot do. She chose a multi-narrator structure: three women take turns telling the story from their own first-person perspective. Skeeter Phelan, the young white aspiring journalist; Aibileen Clark, the quiet, deeply spiritual maid; and Minny Jackson, the combative, brilliant cook. This structure gives the novel a surface appearance of democratic polyphony — three voices, three perspectives, equal access to the reader (Murphy & Harris, 2018).

But the equality of the structure is partly illusory. Skeeter is the character who makes things happen. Her chapter openings tend to introduce new plot developments; Aibileen's and Minny's chapters tend to respond to those developments. More significantly, Skeeter is the author-

figure within the novel: she is the one who conceives the project, negotiates with the New York editor, manages the logistics of the interviews, and ultimately controls what gets published. The maids provide the content. Skeeter provides the infrastructure. This division replicates, at the level of narrative form, the actual power relation between a white employer and a Black employee in Mississippi in 1963.

The deeper problem, as identified by multiple critics (Murphy & Harris, 2018), is that Stockett — a white Southern woman — is writing in the voices of Black women. She is performing a kind of narrative cross-racial ventriloquism, and the novel's critical reception has been sharply divided about whether she does this well. The Association of Black Women Historians issued a statement criticizing the film adaptation for relying on racial stereotypes in its portrayal of Black Southern dialect (Association of Black Women Historians, 2011). The question is not merely aesthetic. It is epistemological: can a white author, however well-intentioned and well-researched, accurately render the inner life of Black women whose experience she has not shared? Fricker (2007, pp. 1–7)'s concept of testimonial injustice is directly applicable: when Stockett writes Aibileen's internal monologue, she is also, in a sense, performing an act of appropriation — taking epistemic authority over an experience that was not hers to own.

2.6.2 *Hidden Figures* as Biography: Documentation and Personal Connection

Shetterly's narrative position is entirely different, and that difference is not incidental. She is an African American woman. Her father was a NASA scientist who worked at Langley. She grew up hearing the names Katherine Johnson and Dorothy Vaughan as figures in family stories (Shetterly, 2016, pp. xiii–xviii), not as historical abstractions she later discovered in an archive. Her relationship to the material is that of a person recovering her own community's history — history that the dominant culture had systematically omitted — rather than a person approaching an unfamiliar experience with research and imagination (Shetterly, 2016, pp. xiii–xviii).

This personal connection shapes the book's narrative authority in ways that go beyond the simple fact of race. Shetterly can write about what it felt like to be a Black woman at Langley in 1953 with a degree of phenomenological confidence that Stockett cannot claim about the Jackson kitchen in 1962. She has access to oral histories, family accounts, and community memory as sources alongside the archival documentation (Shetterly, 2016, pp. 287–315). This personal and historical context frames the institutional contradictions visible within NASA: a federal agency

formally committed to technological advancement that simultaneously maintained the full spatial logic of segregation within its own campus walls (Shetterly, 2016, pp. 42–44). The result is a biography that reads with the warmth of family history and the precision of academic research simultaneously.

The non-fiction format also gives Shetterly a different kind of narrative authority at the level of plot. She does not have to invent confrontations or climactic scenes. She documents them, with names, dates, and archival sources. When Katherine Johnson is excluded from a briefing, Shetterly can say: this happened, here is the date, here is who was in the room. That evidentiary precision is the kind of epistemic authority that the Jim Crow system spent decades trying to deny Black women — the authority to assert their presence, document their experiences, and present their empirical proof (Shetterly, 2016). Shetterly, in recovering and publishing that record, is performing exactly the kind of hermeneutical repair that Fricker (2007, pp. 147–152)’s framework calls for: the collective work of identifying and naming a hermeneutical gap, and providing the conceptual resources that allow a previously invisible experience to be understood and communicated.

2.7 Manifestations of Resistance Across the Class Divide

Resistance under the Jim Crow system was never a uniform practice; rather, the ways in which African American women challenged racial and gender boundaries were directly enabled or constrained by their material resources and class positions. The following subsections analyze specific instances of resistance in both texts, ranging from the covert infrapolitics of the domestic kitchen to the overt institutional confrontations and collective upskilling in the federal workspace.

2.7.1 Infrapolitics in the Kitchen: Minny’s Pie

The most celebrated act of resistance in *The Help* is Minny Jackson’s “terrible awful” (Stockett, 2009, p. 291). Dismissed and blacklisted by Miss Hilly, Minny bakes a chocolate pie and delivers it as a peace offering to her tormentor. Miss Hilly eats two slices before Minny informs her that the pie was made with her own feces. The scene is meant to be read as triumphant — and in one register, it is. Minny has found a way to strike back at the most powerful white woman in Jackson without any direct confrontation, without any evidence that could be used against her, and in a way that will never be reported because reporting it would require Miss Hilly to humiliate herself publicly by admitting she was fooled.

This is exactly what Scott (1990, pp. 1–16) meant by the “hidden transcript” — resistance conducted in the gaps of the dominant system’s surveillance, using the very tools of the subordinate’s assigned role (the kitchen, the cooking, the serving of food) against the employer. Crucially, this covert sabotage represents the only mode of resistance available to Minny. She cannot file a complaint. She cannot take Miss Hilly to court. She cannot write a public exposé (at least not under her own name). She cannot refuse to work somewhere else because the blacklist that Miss Hilly controls makes other employment impossible. Ultimately, this act is not merely a clever gesture; it is the inevitable outcome of a system that has closed all formal avenues of redress.

The literary representation of this resistance is revealing in a different way. Stockett, as a white author, chose to frame Minny’s most powerful act of defiance as comic. The scene is played for laughter — in the novel, in the film adaptation, and in the broader cultural reception of the story. Multiple critics (Murphy & Harris, 2018) have pointed out that this framing deflects from the genuine anger and desperation that produced the act. When a white audience laughs at Minny’s pie, they are not being asked to reckon with what the system did to Minny that made the pie necessary. They are being offered a release from that reckoning.

Stockett’s own rendering of Minny’s voice in this scene is worth quoting directly, as it illustrates this tension between defiance and comic framing: “Eat my shit” (Stockett, 2009, p. 340). The directness of Minny’s spoken declaration stands in sharp contrast to the comic orchestration Stockett builds around it; the words carry a genuine rage that the surrounding narrative consistently softens into entertainment.

Ultimately, the pie scene reveals a structural contradiction at the heart of *The Help*: the most radical act of defiance the novel contains is framed in a way that lets readers celebrate it without confronting the conditions that produced it. The comedy does not diminish Minny’s intelligence or her courage. It diminishes the reader’s obligation to take both seriously. A white author writing a Black woman’s resistance as primarily comedic is, in this regard, making a representational choice that says as much about her own narrative position as it does about her character’s situation. Shetterly never makes this choice. Her resistances are documented, not performed.

This fictional rendering of covert sabotage finds its documentary counterpart in Miriam Mann’s quiet, repeated removal of the segregated cafeteria sign, discussed in the preceding section. Both acts are conducted through infrapolitics — using the tools of the subordinate’s assigned space

against the dominant order. The critical difference is that Shetterly documents the act as a sustained campaign, not a single spectacular gesture, and its framing carries no comedic register. Documentary and fiction diverge precisely at the point of tone: Stockett uses comedy to soften a radical act; Shetterly uses precision to restore its full weight.

2.7.2 Self-Definition in the Workplace: Katherine's Bathroom Resistance

Shetterly's biographical account highlights Katherine's resistance not through a single dramatic confrontation, but as a sustained practice of self-definition in her daily work. In the East Area office, when she was assigned to the Space Task Group under Robert Gilruth, she chose to use the unmarked white bathrooms rather than traveling to a segregated restroom in another building. When she was eventually informed of the racial policy, she quietly refused to comply, continuing to use the white facilities without apology or disruption. This quiet refusal to accept the institution's spatial boundaries constitutes what Collins (2000) terms self-definition: the rejection of an externally imposed, subordinate identity. By insisting on using the closest available facilities, Katherine defined herself as a professional whose time and cognitive energy were too valuable to be wasted by discriminatory rules.

This quiet, direct refusal was made possible by Katherine's class position in a specific and concrete way. She possessed information and analytical skills that the institution needed — trajectory calculations that no one else on the campus could currently produce. That knowledge gave her what a domestic maid did not have: a form of leverage where her absence or suboptimal performance would cost the institution something it valued more than the racial hierarchy. When the spatial segregation interfered with the progress of the Space Race, the administration quietly accommodated her actions, demonstrating that her professional credentials provided a buffer against the full enforcement of Jim Crow boundaries.

2.7.3 Collective Action: Dorothy Vaughan and the IBM

Dorothy Vaughan's resistance is the most forward-looking of the three scientists' strategies, and it is the one that most clearly demonstrates the relationship between class, access to information, and the capacity for institutional navigation. Faced with the prospect that the IBM 7090 computer will replace the human computers and make her entire team redundant, Dorothy does not wait for the institution to protect her. She goes to the public library, obtains a programming manual

for FORTRAN, and teaches herself the language — from a shelf she is technically not supposed to access as a Black woman under the segregated library system of the Jim Crow South, which restricted African Americans' access to academic and technical texts — then teaches the entire pool of Black computers before the white engineers have learned the system themselves.

Shetterly records that Dorothy Vaughan checked out a textbook on Fortran from the library, studying the programming language independently before organizing evening classes to train the other West Area mathematicians in computer programming (Shetterly, 2016, pp. 172–174). This collective upskilling ensured that the Black women computers remained indispensable to the Langley administration as human labor was replaced by mainframe computers. The initiative represents a preemptive act of collective self-preservation conducted through the acquisition of human capital. The phrase “informal classes in the evenings” carries the full weight of Black women's double burden: after a full day of denied professional recognition, Dorothy Vaughan ran a coding school.

This resistance was enabled by Dorothy's class position. She was an educated woman who held a supervisory role (though without the official title or pay), which gave her the credibility and authority within the group of Black computers to organize a collective response to the technological threat. Her actions align with the historical tradition documented by Carlton-LaNey (2011) regarding African American clubwomen, who consistently used education, collective organization, and institutional access to build power within the constraints of a segregated society.

From an analytical perspective, Dorothy Vaughan's initiative represents the most structurally significant mode of resistance examined in this study, as it is the only one that yielded a durable collective outcome. Whereas Minny's sabotage affects only a single employer, and Katherine's confrontation desegregates a single facility, Dorothy's FORTRAN classes secured the professional viability of an entire cohort of Black women. This divergence is not merely a function of individual agency; rather, it is enabled by supervisory authority, which is itself a function of class position. The domestic service in *The Help* offers no structural equivalent, as its material logic precludes the development of institutional leverage that collective upskilling provides.

This comparative analysis highlights that class position ultimately determines which forms of resistance are survivable. Minny Jackson's covert infrapolitical resistance in *The Help* is constrained to acts that leave no traceable evidence, as any overt challenge would result in immedi-

ate destitution and blacklisting. Conversely, the institutional negotiations and collective upskilling of the mathematicians in *Hidden Figures* are made possible because their professional credentials and mission-critical expertise provide them with a degree of protection against the immediate consequences of challenging segregated rules.

2.8 The Mediation of Agency: Analyzing the White Savior Paradigm and Its Limits

The representation of Black women's struggles in American literature is often complicated by the presence of white intermediaries or institutional figures who assume a heroic role in the narrative. This section examines the "white savior" dynamics in both *The Help* and *Hidden Figures*, exploring how the text-based narratives navigate, challenge, or occasionally succumb to these problematic representational conventions.

2.8.1 Narrative Ventriloquism and the Skeeter Phelan Intermediary Character

The publication of *The Help* in 2009 generated significant controversy within African American literary and cultural communities, and that controversy has only deepened in the decade since. The central criticism is straightforward: the novel is, in its narrative structure, a White Savior story (Murphy & Harris, 2018). Skeeter Phelan — a young white woman from Jackson, Mississippi, who aspires to a career in writing — conceives the idea of recording the experiences of Black domestic workers, finds the maids willing to share their stories, arranges publication with a New York editor, and thereby enables the maids' voices to reach a national audience. Without Skeeter, there is no book. Without Skeeter, Aibileen and Minny remain voiceless.

The White Savior narrative in literature has been analyzed by critics who note how such structures place a white character at the center of racial justice struggles, transforming the narrative into a story of white moral development while relegating minority characters to passive roles (Murphy & Harris, 2018). In Stockett's novel, this structure is manifested in the characterization of Skeeter Phelan. Although the novel is told from three perspectives, the plot-driving agency is concentrated in Skeeter, who initiates the book project, manages the risks, and secures the publishing contract. As Murphy and Harris (2018) argue, this narrative strategy reproduces the historical power asymmetry it purports to critique, since the Black domestic workers must rely on a white intermediary to achieve a voice and visibility.

2.8.2 White Authority in *Hidden Figures*: Pragmatism Over Saviorism

In Shetterly's biographical text, the role of white male authority figures is represented not through the lens of individual moral heroism or saviorism, but through the logic of institutional pragmatism. Managers like Robert Gilruth are depicted as administrative bureaucrats who are primarily motivated by the geopolitical pressures of the Space Race. Rather than actively championing civil rights, they accommodate the Black mathematicians because the success of the space mission depends on their calculations. This representation avoids the white savior trope by ensuring that agency remains firmly with the Black women themselves. It is their exceptional mathematical competence and quiet persistence, rather than a white supervisor's moral awakening, that forces the institution to bend its racial rules. Shetterly represents white authority as a structure that is negotiated and managed by the Black computers, rather than a source of rescue.

2.8.3 Shetterly's Counter-Narrative: The Book as Epistemic Resistance

It is important to distinguish between the film adaptation and Shetterly's book, because the book does something considerably more radical than the film. Shetterly is not merely telling a story of remarkable women. She is constructing an argument: that the story of the American space program has been systematically told in a way that erases the contributions of African American women, and that this erasure is not an accident but a predictable consequence of the epistemic injustice that Fricker (2007) describes.

Shetterly's methodological choices reflect this argument. She does not organize the book around the white supervisors' perspective. She does not use the white male engineers as the point-of-view characters through whom the reader is introduced to the Black women. She begins with Dorothy Vaughan and follows her forward, treating the institutional setting as the background for Dorothy's story rather than the other way around. When white characters appear, they appear as they would have appeared to Dorothy and Katherine — as obstacles, allies, or background figures in someone else's story. This is a deliberate narrative inversion, and it is one of the ways in which *Hidden Figures* as a book performs a different politics of representation from the film that claims to adapt it.

Rudnick et al. (2005), in their survey of American identities, describe this kind of counter-narrative as a fundamental challenge to dominant historical representations: the insistence

on telling American history from the position of those who have been excluded from its official versions. Shetterly is making an argument not just about what happened at Langley, but about who gets to be the subject of history and who gets to be its background.

2.8.4 Black Feminist Reception: Voices That Align

The critical reception of both primary texts among Black feminist scholars (see Collins, 2000; hooks bell, 1981; Smith, 1977) reveals a productive tension between endorsement and critique that is itself theoretically instructive. Neither text has received uncritical praise from within the Black feminist tradition, but both have been engaged seriously by scholars whose work illuminates the very dynamics the texts attempt to represent.

Collins (2000, pp. 201–207) has argued that the representation of Black women in popular culture is never politically neutral: it either reproduces controlling images or it challenges them. Measured against this criterion, *Hidden Figures* performs considerably better than *The Help*. Shetterly's text consistently presents Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson as agents of their own intellectual and professional lives — not as victims who need rescue, not as exotic subjects of a white author's imagination, but as women whose mastery of mathematics and institutional navigation constitutes a form of resistance in itself. This is precisely the kind of representation that Collins's framework calls “oppositional”: it insists on Black women's full humanity against a cultural context that routinely denies it.

hooks bell (1981, pp. 119–121), whose foundational critique of racism within mainstream white feminism established the theoretical ground on which later Black feminist scholarship was built, would read *The Help* as a symptomatic text: one that claims to center Black women's experience while structurally positioning a white woman as the agent who makes their voices legible (Association of Black Women Historians, 2011). hooks contends that individual empathy and creative imagination cannot compensate for the material and socio-political positionality of the speaking subject. Consequently, despite Stockett's benevolent authorial intent, her narrative remains bound to the constraints of this structural critique. By contrast, *Hidden Figures* operates from a position of authentic community knowledge that hooks's framework would recognize as epistemically sound: Shetterly is not imagining her way into Black women's experience but recovering and amplifying a history she inherited.

Smith (1977, pp. 168–170), in her landmark essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criti-

cism,” established that Black feminist literary criticism must attend to the specific conditions of Black women’s lives rather than applying frameworks developed from white or male experience. Applied to the two primary texts, Smith’s criterion is instructive. *Hidden Figures* meets it: Shetterly builds her analysis from the documented material conditions of the women she writes about — their wages, their commutes, their institutional classifications, their family structures. *The Help* meets it partially: Stockett clearly researched the material conditions of domestic service, but her decision to narrate from inside Black women’s first-person consciousness crosses the boundary that Smith’s criticism identifies.

Shaw (1996, pp. 2–5), whose research on Black professional women during the Jim Crow era provides the historical grounding for Shetterly’s account, similarly documented how Black women built professional lives and community structures within the constraints of a system designed to prevent exactly that. Her work validates the historical accuracy of Shetterly’s portrait: the women of *Hidden Figures* are not exceptional anomalies but representatives of a broader tradition of Black women’s professional organizing and collective resistance that existing historical scholarship has consistently confirmed.

Ultimately, the most productive way to evaluate the Black feminist critical reception of both texts is not to seek a simple determination of representational correctness, but rather to analyze how each text illuminates the limits and possibilities of popular narrative in representing Black women’s historical experiences. *Hidden Figures* achieves its representational authority by operating from within the community it depicts, aligning its narrative standpoint with its subjects. Conversely, while *The Help* remains more representational and ambiguous, its narrative tensions are analytically productive, exposing the very power dynamics that a more seamlessly idealized portrayal might obscure. Shetterly’s biographical documentation demonstrates that institutional desegregation at NASA was not the product of a singular white manager’s heroic intervention, but rather the result of a gradual, collective insistence by Black women who actively navigated and challenged the spatial and professional boundaries of the Jim Crow system.

2.9 The Authorial Standpoint and Epistemic Accountability

Ultimately, the political meaning of a narrative is inseparable from the social position and epistemic standpoint of the author who constructs it. This section evaluates how Stockett’s and Shetterly’s

respective racial, gender, and class backgrounds shape the authorial gaze, determining who is positioned as the active subject of history and who is relegated to its background.

2.9.1 Subject Positionality and the Legitimacy of Narrative Representation

The question of who tells a story is not separate from the question of what the story means. Stockett and Shetterly are both women. Both are Southern. Both set their books in the same decade, against the same backdrop of Jim Crow and civil rights organizing. But they approach their material from fundamentally different positions, and those positions produce fundamentally different books — not just in tone but in politics.

Stockett's position as a white Southern woman writing Black Southern women's voices is the source of both the novel's strengths and its most serious critical problems. She clearly researched carefully, and the material details of Jim Crow domestic service are rendered with considerable accuracy. But the decision to use first-person narration for Aibileen and Minny — to speak as them, rather than about them — is a decision that requires a level of epistemic confidence about another person's inner life that cannot be fully earned by research alone. The result, as Doane and Bonilla-Silva (2003) argue, is a form of "colorblind" narrative practice: the assumption that imagination and goodwill can bridge the experiential gap that race, class, and history have produced.

2.9.2 Representational Structures of White Authority

A comparative reading of the two written texts reveals distinct structures in how white authority and mediation are represented. In Stockett's novel, the white intermediary Skeeter Phelan is positioned as the primary narrative engine. Her decisions, aspirations, and risks drive the plot forward, naturalizing the role of white leadership in Black liberation. Skeeter's role is built into the novel's multi-vocal structure, where the Black domestic workers supply the raw testimony but Skeeter organizes and publishes it. By contrast, Shetterly's biographical text represents white authority as a decentralized, bureaucratic system that Black women navigate through their own professional credentials. In the book, there is no singular white savior who rescues the mathematicians or desegregates the campus; rather, figures like Gilruth respond to the material necessity of their skills, allowing the Black mathematicians to retain complete agency in their historical achievements.

2.9.3 Shetterly and the Politics of Recovery

Shetterly's book operates on different political ground. She is not imagining her way into unfamiliar experience. She is documenting, amplifying, and restoring to public view experience that has been systematically suppressed. The women she writes about are, in a meaningful sense, her people. Their struggle is the context from which her own professional life emerged. Writing their story is an act of solidarity and restitution rather than an act of imaginative appropriation.

This difference is legible in the books' different relationships to their source material. Stockett's novel is self-contained — the reader is not meant to go to archives and check her work. Shetterly's book is heavily footnoted, thoroughly sourced, and explicitly positioned as a contribution to the historical record. She is not just telling a story. She is making a claim about what actually happened, and she is doing so with the evidentiary standards of academic history.

Rudnick et al. (2005) argued that American identity is constituted not just by the stories that are told but by the stories that are consistently not told. The suppression of the Black women mathematicians' contributions from the official history of the space program for fifty years is exactly the kind of negative space they describe. Shetterly's book fills that space. In doing so, it is not merely a story about the past. It is an argument about how the past has been narrated, and who has been allowed to narrate it.

2.9.4 The Limits of Class: What Money Cannot Buy

The argument of this chapter is not that class is more important than race or gender, or that professional status is a solution to the problem of racial discrimination. The Black feminist tradition, from hooks bell (1981) to Collins (2000), has consistently insisted that all three systems — race, class, and gender — must be analyzed together, because the experience of any one of them is shaped by the other two.

The professional women of *Hidden Figures* remain Black women in a racist and sexist institution. They face discrimination that is different in form from what domestic workers face, but it is not less real. Katherine Johnson still has to walk half a mile to the bathroom. Mary Jackson still has to petition a court for permission to attend a class in a white high school. Dorothy Vaughan still supervises a team that the institution refuses to officially designate as a “section” because

that designation would require them to follow the same promotion and pay rules applied to white sections. Class does not make racism disappear. It changes the terrain on which racism operates.

Du Bois (1903) used the concept of “double consciousness” to describe the psychological burden of always seeing yourself through the hostile eyes of a world that has already decided what you are worth. That burden falls on Katherine Johnson exactly as it falls on Aibileen Clark, and no salary grade makes it lighter. What class provides is not freedom from that burden. It is a different set of institutional tools for refusing to accept its premise.

2.9.5 Economic Disparities and the Historical Legacy of Jim Crow

The difference in class position between the two groups of women did not arise spontaneously. It was produced by the same historical processes this dissertation has analyzed. Research by Derenoncourt, Kim, Kuhn, and Schularick (2024) demonstrates that the racial wealth gap in the United States — the systematic difference in accumulated wealth between Black and white households — has deep historical roots that trace directly to slavery and the Jim Crow period. The exclusion of African Americans from homeownership programs, from FHA mortgage lending, from union membership, and from Social Security and minimum wage protections in the New Deal period, all contributed to a wealth gap that persists structurally into the present.

The class difference between the domestic worker and the federal professional in the 1960s is a product of this history. Dorothy Vaughan had access to education because her family had accumulated enough stability, over several generations, to prioritize schooling. Katherine Johnson’s mathematical talent was recognized and developed because she had parents who valued education and a community — the Black college network of Hampton, Virginia — that provided the institutional infrastructure for that development. Aibileen and Minny, who did not have access to that educational infrastructure, are not less intelligent or less capable. They are less resourced, in the specific historical sense that the accumulation of resources across generations was systematically blocked for certain Black families and not others.

The spatial segregation of Jim Crow — enforced not just in high-stakes environments like NASA, but in mundane public facilities and private homes — was the physical manifestation of this structural inequality. In *The Help*, this logic invades the domestic sphere when Elizabeth Leefolt instructs Aibileen to use a separate bathroom located in the garage, citing hygiene concerns. In the novel, Aibileen’s internal reaction highlights the deep resentment and humiliation caused by

this exclusion, as she contemplates the small, poorly maintained facility and the broader hostility of the household (Stockett, 2009, pp. 28–29). Such spatially segregated spaces served as daily, inescapable reminders of the social and economic marginalization that both Aibileen Clark and Katherine Johnson were forced to navigate, albeit with vastly different institutional resources at their disposal.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis of *The Help* and *Hidden Figures* shows how social class directly shaped what kind of resistance was possible for Black women under Jim Crow. While both groups of women had to navigate a system built on racial segregation and gender hierarchy, their everyday realities and options for fighting back were fundamentally different. Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson, working as domestic maids, were confined to privately owned households where their livelihood depended entirely on the whims of white employers. In this setting, any direct challenge was too dangerous, forcing them to rely on hidden strategies like everyday sabotage and quiet, coded affirmations of dignity under Hine (1989)'s concept of dissemblance.

In contrast, Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson worked within a large federal bureaucracy where their technical expertise had documented, mission-critical value. Their credentials and contracts did not shield them from racism, but they provided institutional leverage that the domestic workers lacked. When Katherine Johnson protested the bathroom segregation, she could frame her argument in terms of lost operational hours — a language that NASA's leadership, desperate to win the Space Race, had to take seriously. Similarly, Dorothy Vaughan's collective training of her team in FORTRAN shows how professional access allowed for organized, preemptive resistance to protect their jobs.

Ultimately, these two texts illustrate that the domestic kitchen and the federal laboratory represent two distinct structural positions within the matrix of domination (Collins, 2000). Class does not make a woman braver or more willing to resist; rather, it structures what forms of resistance are survivable. Covert infrapolitics and direct institutional negotiations are both valid responses to oppression, but the tools available to enact them, and their long-term outcomes, are shaped by the material and economic resources that only social class can provide. It is to the broader implications of this finding that the General Conclusion now turns.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

General Conclusion

This dissertation set out to examine whether social class, as a material structural position, determined the forms of resistance available to African American women under the Jim Crow system, and whether that determination is visible in the literary and biographical texts that have documented their experience. The comparative analysis of Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* (2009) and Margot Lee Shetterly's *Hidden Figures* (2016) demonstrates that class position was not merely a passive context for resistance, but rather the active mechanism through which the range of survivable opposition was structurally defined.

The first chapter built the theoretical and historical framework that the comparative analysis required. It established that Jim Crow was not a natural social arrangement but a deliberately constructed political system, invented in the 1890s to divide the poor across racial lines and maintain the economic dominance of the Southern white ruling class. It demonstrated that African American women under this system carried what Pauli Murray named “Jane Crow” (Murray & Eastwood, 1965) — the double burden of racial and gendered oppression — and that this burden was experienced differently depending on the class position of the woman who carried it. The chapter also documented the forms of white complicity and white dissent that shaped the historical context of both primary texts: white allies within the abolitionist and civil rights networks, and white authors whose representations of Black communities raised fundamental questions of narrative authority. The theoretical tools that the chapter assembled — Crenshaw's intersectionality, Collins's matrix of domination, Gramsci's hegemony, Althusser's ideological state apparatuses, Scott's everyday resistance, and Fricker's epistemic injustice — provided the framework for the close literary reading that followed.

The second chapter applied that framework to the two primary texts through four major axes of comparison: spatial politics, labor relations, manifestations of resistance, and the authorial gaze. The analysis demonstrated, through sustained close reading, that the domestic kitchen and the federal laboratory are structurally different spaces that produce structurally different resistances. Aibileen Clark's oral testimony and Minny Jackson's covert sabotage were the forms of resistance that the kitchen made survivable: indirect, hidden, conducted below the threshold

of institutional visibility. Katherine Johnson's institutional confrontation and Dorothy Vaughan's preemptive upskilling were the forms of resistance that the laboratory made possible: direct, documented, conducted through the institutional mechanisms that a professional credential and a federal personnel file made available.

While this comparative analysis demonstrates the structural influence of class on resistance, the findings of this study are subject to certain limitations. This dissertation is a literary study, not a sociological or historical one. Its evidence is textual, and its arguments are grounded in what the two primary texts make visible rather than in direct historical documentation. This has two significant implications. First, the figures of Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson are fictional. Stockett created them from her imagination, however well-informed that imagination may have been by personal experience and research. Using them as evidence for historical claims about the experience of domestic workers requires careful attention to the difference between novelistic representation and historical documentation — a difference that this dissertation has attempted to maintain, but that remains a fundamental limitation of the comparative method applied here. Second, the sample of two texts, however carefully chosen, cannot represent the full range of African American women's experience under Jim Crow. The two texts were selected to maximize the contrast along the class axis: the kitchen and the laboratory represent the extremes of a spectrum, not its entire range. A study that incorporated texts documenting the experience of Black women teachers, Black women nurses, or Black women entrepreneurs would complicate the class argument in productive ways that this dissertation has not had space to pursue.

In light of these limitations, three directions for future research emerge from this study. The first is an expansion of the comparative corpus to include texts that document the experiences of Black women in the intermediate class positions — teachers, nurses, social workers, community organizers — who occupied the space between the kitchen and the laboratory and whose resistance strategies were correspondingly more complex and ambiguous. The second direction is a more sustained engagement with the question of narrative authority and appropriation. This dissertation has identified the representational politics of *The Help* as a problem, but has not had the space to develop a full theory of when cross-racial literary representation is epistemically responsible and when it is not. Fricker's (Fricker, 2007) framework offers the beginning of such a theory, but it requires supplementation with Black feminist accounts of narrative authority, particularly those

developed by Smith (1977), Lorde (1984), and more recently hooks bell (1981).

The third direction is a comparative study that crosses national and cultural boundaries. Specifically, future researchers could examine how class structured the resistance of colonized women in Algeria during the French colonial period. By applying this intersectional lens, one could analyze how the French colonial legal codes (such as the *Code de l'indigénat*) intersected with local class stratification and gender roles. This comparative approach would illuminate whether working-class Algerian women in rural areas relied on informal, covert infrapolitics similar to those of domestic maids in the American South, while educated, middle-class Algerian women in urban centers deployed more formal, institutional challenges. Such cross-cultural analysis would test if the central class-based argument is applicable in postcolonial and Francophone African settings.

In conclusion, this dissertation posits that class is not the sole determinant. Class must be considered to provide a complete understanding of the functioning of racial and gendered oppression within specific historical contexts. The domestic kitchen and the federal laboratory were not two versions of the same struggle. They were two different structural positions, and they produced two different resistances — each shaped by what its conditions allowed, each limited by what its conditions foreclosed. That difference is what a class-conscious Black feminist literary criticism must learn to see.

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Appendices

The following historical photograph illustrates the material reality of the class positions and labor relations discussed in Chapter Two.



Figure 1

NASA mathematician Katherine Johnson photographed at Langley Research Center in 1966. Johnson was known for verifying the orbital trajectory calculations for John Glenn's 1962 spaceflight and for her contributions to the Apollo 11 mission in 1969. Source: NASA Langley Research Center Archives.

ملخص

تستكشف هذه المذكرة كيف شكّلت الطبقة الاجتماعية استراتيجيات المقاومة لدى المرأة الأمريكية من أصل أفريقي في جنوب الولايات المتحدة إبان حقبة جيم كرو (1877-1964). وذلك من خلال المقارنة بين رواية كاترين ستوكيت (*The Help*) الصادرة عام 2009، والسيرة التاريخية لمارغوت لي شينيرلي (*Hidden Figures*) الصادرة عام 2016، إذ تهدف الدراسة إلى إيضاح كيف حدّدت الفوارق الطبقية داخل الجنوب المنفصل عنصرياً الإمكانات والقيود الاستراتيجية لقدرة المرأة السوداء على التصرف ونشاطها. وبالاستناد إلى مفاهيم التقاطعية، ومصفوفة الهيمنة، والمقاومة اليومية، والظلم الإبتسيمي، تُجادل هذه المذكرة بأن الموقع الطبقي كان العامل الرئيسي في تحديد ما إذا كانت المقاومة ستتخذ شكل السياسة التحتية الخفية أو شكل المشاركة المؤسسية المباشرة. فقد اعتمدت عاملات المنازل في رواية (*The Help*)، اللواتي واجهن هشاشة اقتصادية حادة، على الخطابات المستترة والتخريب اليومي للتعامل مع الاستغلال. وفي المقابل، وظّفت الرياضيات المهنيات في (*Hidden Figures*) مؤهلاتهن العلمية ونفوذهن التنظيمي للمطالبة بإلغاء الفصل العنصري ونيل الاعتراف المهني. علاوة على ذلك، يسلط التحليل الضوء على كيف يميل سرد ستوكيت ذو التأليف الأبيض إلى إعادة إنتاج مجازات "المنقذ الأبيض"، في حين يعمل سرد شينيرلي السير-ذاتي ذو التأليف الأسود على استعادة السلطة المعرفية للمرأة السوداء بشكل نشط. وفي المحصلة، تؤكد هذه الدراسة على ضرورة نقد أدبي نسوي أسود واعٍ بالطبقية، مما يثبت أن الطبقة الاجتماعية هي محدد رئيسي لكيفية ممارسة وتمثيل القدرة التاريخية للمرأة السوداء على التصرف.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المرأة الأمريكية من أصل أفريقي، التقاطعية، جين كرو (Jane Crow)، جيم كرو (Jim Crow)، الطبقة الاجتماعية.