

The Letters

LETTER 01
THEY BLAZED A PATH FOR THE NEXT
GENERATION

Akosua Haynes to Margot Lee Shetterly
2018

Published in 2016, Margot Lee Shetterly's Hidden Figures tells the true story of Dorothy Vaughan, Katherine Johnson and Mary Jackson, three pioneering African-American women who worked as 'human computers' at NASA in the 1960s. It was thanks to their pivotal calculations that celebrated astronauts such as Neil Armstrong and John Glenn could enter space, and yet for a long time their work remained uncelebrated. Shetterly's retelling of their remarkable story became a bestseller and an award-winning movie adaptation followed. In 2018, this letter was written to Shetterly by Akouska Haynes, a ten-year-old African-American girl with aspirations to become an astronaut one day.

THE LETTER

Dear Margot Lee Shetterly,

On August 21, 2017 I felt so lucky because it was the first day of school, and my friends were in class while I was watching the solar eclipse in Carbondale, Illinois. When the moon had completely covered the sun, I looked up and wondered how Katherine Johnson felt when she helped John Glenn orbit the earth. Reading your book “Hidden Figures” made me more excited about becoming a NASA astronaut, but it also made me question my career choice. It scared me when I read that a fireball entered into a spaceship killing all three astronauts inside. Becoming an astronaut had been my dream, I met Mae Jemison when I was four and have dressed up as an astronaut for at least four Halloweens, but I didn’t want to die in a ball of flames.

I finished your book on the train ride back from Carbondale just five days before my “Hidden Figures” themed birthday party. I made up a rule, and told my friends that if they wanted to come they had to read at least two thirds of your book so that we could have an interesting discussion. I asked everyone to share their favorite passage. When it was my turn everyone read my selection, on page 217, aloud. Learning that John Glenn trusted

Katherine Johnson with his life, because of her superior math skills, motivated me to take my own math homework more seriously. I love math but some of my friends don't. I wanted them to read your book to see the magic in math and how useful it can be. Right before my party I looked up the definition for analytic geometry because Katherine used it to calculate the trajectory of John Glenn's Mercury capsule—useful magic!

Although John Glenn respected Katherine Johnson, they lived in two different worlds. When I read about the discrimination that Katherine and the computers had to put up with (people not trusting them and separate bathrooms), it made me think what it would have been like to live in the Jim Crow time period. I asked myself if I would have been able to work so well under pressure. I felt proud of Ms. Johnson.

There are many more opportunities for African Americans today because of what Katherine Johnson and the other computers accomplished. They blazed a path for the next generation. My friends thanked me for choosing your book to celebrate my birthday. I know that I can still be an astronaut, an astrophysicist, or have a space career on earth!

Sincerely,

Akosua Haynes

LETTER 02

I AM SO VERY ANXIOUS TO 'COME HOME'

Betty Trier Berry and Mount Wilson Observatory

21 January 1918

In the early 1900s, decades before the women of Hidden Figures played a pivotal role in the Space Race – a time of heated competition between Cold War rivals the USA and Russia (then the USSR) over space exploration – the Mount Wilson Observatory hired dozens of highly skilled women to do similar work. In return for their invaluable efforts, they were offered very little recognition and a paltry wage. As evidenced by this exchange, despite her Masters degree in mathematics and love of astronomy, Betty Trier Berry could not afford to work as a 'human computer'. Instead, she went on to become a celebrated attorney and the first woman to work as a public defender in the United States.

THE LETTERS

January 21, 1918

Mrs. Betty Trier Berry
1929 No. Western Avenue,
Los Angeles, California

Dear Mrs. Berry,

We have a position in our Computing Division now vacant that I can offer you at a beginning salary of \$825.00 per year, the appointment to take effect on February 1. An annual vacation of one month is granted to the staff, and there is no work on Saturday afternoons.

The amount offered is probably much less than you have been earning, but I am hoping that you will wish to try the work under these conditions. With your interest in astronomy, I am under the impression that you will not regret such an acceptance.

Very sincerely yours,
Superintendent Computing Division

January 23, 1918

My dear Mr. Seares,

Your kind communication of the 21st referring to a vacancy in your Computing Department at a \$16 per week wage, reached me today; I trust you will pardon the intrusion on your time if I write you at some length on the matter.

I am dependent on my own efforts for my support; and desirous as I am of entering again the field of astronomical work, I am afraid of the ugly practical questions that would inevitably arise were I to limit my earning capacity to that rather pathetic amount. So far therefore as the position of which you write is concerned, I am regretfully obliged to say that it will be impossible for me to accept it.

It occurs to me, however, that you speak of my "interest in astronomy" as something quite apart from the work of the position you offer me. If I am correct in assuming from this that you have in mind for me, at a later time, some better position at a less mechanical, hence far more interesting, branch of the work, then it would seem that I am being given an opportunity to "try out," for which I am certainly grateful — but with all the risk of non-success resting upon me. As I say, I am scarcely

in a position to assume this risk, and a salary which actually supports me during the probationary period would be obviously quite essential before I dared make a radical change of profession.

I am so very anxious to "come home" to the work I love and so confident that I can be of actual assistance to you in it, that I still venture to hope for an opportunity to join your staff.

Respectfully yours,

Betty T. Berry

* * *

January 30, 1918

Dear Mrs. Berry:

I am afraid that under existing conditions we can do nothing more than repeat the offer of my former letter; but from your reply I appreciate that that would be useless. I am sorry, for I had hoped that we might have you with us.

Very sincerely