

# Queen & Slim: An African-American couple on the run

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*Directed by Melina Matsoukas; written by Lena Waithe, from a story by Waithe and James Frey*

*Queen & Slim* is the debut feature film of Melina Matsoukas. Written by Lena Waithe, from a story by Waithe and James Frey, it concerns an incident involving two young black people and a racist white policeman. The pair are forced to go on the run. Most of the film is taken up with their underground flight, leading to a bloody denouement.

The movie draws from and relies on aspects of reality—the epidemic of police violence and killings disproportionately affecting the black population—to create a broader, substantially mythological picture and to justify a definite strand of rabid, self-aggrandizing racial politics. Significantly, the *New York Times* is aggressively promoting Matsoukas’s film.

On a wintry Cleveland evening, a criminal defense attorney, Angela “Queen” Johnson (Jodie Turner-Smith) and Ernest “Slim” Hines (Daniel Kaluuya), a retail worker, are out on a first date, when Slim, whose car sports the license plate “TRUSTGOD,” is pulled over for a supposed traffic violation. The white cop draws his gun on Slim and shoots Queen in the leg when she tries to phone-record his brutality. Slim then wrestles the weapon from the officer, fatally shooting the latter in self-defense.

Knowing the odds against being treated fairly by the authorities, the couple flee. It is not long before they are branded as cop killers on the national news. After stealing a pick-up truck from an off-duty sheriff, they make their way south toward New Orleans, where they plan to seek help from Queen’s estranged Uncle Earl (Bokeem Woodbine). He is a pimp and an emotionally crippled Iraq war veteran who killed Queens’ mother, his sister, in an altercation. Oddly, he was his lawyer niece’s first client!

At Earl’s home, Queen and Slim change their appearance. Despite the new, “funkier” and “sexier” guises, their images have gone viral, making more improbable a successful journey to their final destination of Cuba. The couple, however, do win the respect and admiration of many black people they meet along the way as they travel the back roads of Alabama, Georgia and Louisiana. In fact, the duo decide to pay a visit to a Louisiana juke joint whose patrons hail them as heroes.

The film cannot resist various absurdities. Queen and Slim take time out from evading their presumably murderous pursuers for some steamy roadside sex, which the filmmakers clumsily intercut with scenes of a demonstration in the outlaws’ defense. Other notable scenes include Queen coaxing Slim to mount a horse

because “nothing scares a white man more than seeing a black man on a horse ... cause he has to look up at him.” It’s not clear how many such opportunities are likely to arise in Slim’s life.

In addition, the couple’s travels are peppered with bits of philosophizing: “Why do black people always have to be excellent?” asks Slim, “Why can’t we just be normal?” Nor should one leave out the moment when Queen exclaims: “It should be a sin to call a black woman crazy.”

At one point, she describes her perfect man: “I want him to show me scars I never knew I had. But I don’t want him to make them go away. I want him to hold my hand while I nurse them myself. And I want him to cherish the bruises they leave behind.”

The final shots immortalize Queen and Slim, the “black Bonnie and Clyde,” living on as neighborhood graffiti.

There are many problems with *Queen & Slim*, as a description of its basic outline should already indicate. The initial episode with the policeman and the everyday threat of state violence it brings out have the ring of truth. 2018 marked the fifth year in a row that police killed more than 1,000 people in the United States. And racist, fascistic police are undoubtedly a fact of life.

However, relatively little of what takes place subsequently is rooted in reality. Nor does the film adopt a consistently anti-establishment or “radical” social standpoint. *Queen & Slim* does not express opposition, for example, to the police as enforcers of capitalist rule. African-American cops in the movie perform more humanely than their white counterparts when they confront demonstrators and, in one scene, a sympathetic black officer helps the couple escape.

The implication that only black people are shot by the police in the US is false. As the WWSWS has noted, “In 2017, according to the *Washington Post*, 987 people were shot and killed by the police. ... Racial demographics included 475 white non-Hispanic victims (48.2 percent), 231 black victims (23.4 percent) and 209 Hispanic victims (21.2 percent).”

How much does the storyline in *Queen & Slim* reflect American life and how much does it reflect and project the fantasies and concerns of an already affluent social layer?

In two recent articles, the *New York Times* made a case for the film and provided a platform for its creators. A November 29 piece, entitled, “What ‘Queen & Slim’ Gets Right About Black Women,” argues that the drama “depicts black womanhood without undercooked idiosyncrasies, all while centering a dark-skinned female lead. It’s a reminder of the compelling artistry that

can come out of Hollywood when there's inclusion in front of and behind the camera... A film that shows a multidimensional black woman falling in love and standing her ground as chaos churns? Sounds like an accurate portrayal of black womanhood." Sounds like a picture of the complacent petty bourgeoisie to us.

In fact, "the artistry behind the camera" swings between the overwrought variety—as in the gratuitous sex segment—and the unserious, in the interlude, for instance, at the nightclub where the protagonists are slow dancing instead of running for their lives. Generally speaking, *Queen and Slim* seem to bounce around the country as though on holiday.

But worse still is the *Times*' December 2 article, a profile of scriptwriter Lena Waithe headlined, "Lena Waithe's Art of Protest." In it, Waithe rather baldly announces: "Everything a black person does is revolutionary because we weren't supposed to survive. Everything we do is political because they politicized our skin."

Do those "revolutionary" acts include Secretary of State Colin Powell's lying at the UN about Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction" and legitimizing a conflict that has destroyed a society and resulted in more than one million deaths? And do they include President Barack Obama's presiding at "Terror Tuesday" meetings during which officials went over "kill lists" to see who would be murdered in illegal drone attacks?

Carrying on in this vein, after first referring to a "violent" and "cold" world, Waite claims that black people "still are stylish and we still are funny and we still love and we still smoke weed and we still do crab boils. Even in the midst of this trauma, we survive, we live, and that, to me, is what the real meditation of this movie became."

This pretentious, ludicrous and inevitably failing attempt to join "stylishness" and "fun" to political and social "trauma," seen almost entirely from an identity politics point of view, concisely sums up *Queen & Slim*.

Interestingly, Waithe, hoisted on her own petard, becomes defensive about the fact that both leads in *Queen & Slim* "were not born in America." They are from the UK. There is no end to the rabbit-hole of identity politics!

Naturally, *Times* film critic A.O. Scott approves of the film, asserting that its mood "is dreamy, sometimes almost languorous, at least as invested in the aesthetics of life on the run as it is in the politics of black lives. Not that the two are separable. ... What lingers, though, are strains of anger, ardor, sorrow and sweetness, and the quiet astonishment of witnessing the birth of a legend." The "birth of a legend" indeed. And not a healthy or original one, but the stillborn child of racist ideology.

For her part, *Times* contributing opinion writer Roxane Gay tweeted that *Queen & Slim* was "the blackest movie I've ever seen," following a preview screening. "The script is so well written, so black, so honest," Gay wrote in another comment.

In the December issue of the *Atlantic*, director Matsoukas asserts grandly that "Every decision in this film was rooted in authenticity, even the locations where we shot. The film starts in Cleveland. [Ohio] still has the death penalty, and Queen's character defends people on death row." The locations were authentic, but the film's social logic is not. Matsoukas's claim

that her movie is a "reverse slave escape narrative" and has something to do with Cleveland being "the last stop on the Underground Railroad before slaves would go to Canada" is far off the mark. The anti-slavery movement before the Civil War represented the self-sacrificing and heroic efforts of black and white people to transform society in an ultimately revolutionary manner.

*Queen & Slim* speaks to something quite different. Waithe, in an interview with IndieWire, explains the filmmakers' motives: "I want to see movies about black people financed by black people—and they don't even have to be Hollywood people. ... For me, it was also about trying to keep wealth in our communities."

In her discussions with Universal Studios, according to IndieWire, Waithe insisted "she would not accept notes on the project from any white executives." When the studio insisted on one test screening, "Waithe agreed, with caveats of her own, which included that the test audience be comprised of only black people." This is simply repugnant.

Matsoukas is the child of an Afro-Cuban mother and a Greek-Jewish father who were members of the now moribund Maoist Progressive Labor party. She is a commercial, music video and television director. Matsoukas has made music videos for Beyoncé, Rihanna, Lil Wayne and Christina Aguilera, among others. "A couple of videos into my career," she told the *Atlantic*, "Beyoncé hired me to do four videos [for songs from] *B'Day*. My career kind of catapulted from there."

The film's connection to James Frey is revealing. The latter wrote a purported "memoir," *A Million Little Pieces* (2004), about his alleged drug addiction and related misadventures. Oprah Winfrey, who selected it for her book club, called Frey's work "a gut-wrenching memoir that's so raw and so real." It turned out that numerous events in the book, according to the Smoking Gun website, were "wholly fabricated or wildly embellished," including a story about a wild melee with police in Michigan and three months in jail.

Frey was obliged to include a note in subsequent editions of the book apologizing for fabricating parts of it. Better yet, Frey and publisher Random House ultimately reached a legal settlement, whereby readers who felt that they had been defrauded by *A Million Little Pieces* would be offered a refund!

Frey and the others responsible for *Queen & Slim* have created a largely fabricated picture of American life as dominated by a virtual race war. Refunds, however, are not likely to be forthcoming.



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