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

By Joanne Laurier
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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. … Racial demographics included 475 white non-Hispanic victims (48.2 percent), 231 black victims (23.4 percent) and 209 Hispanic victims (21.2 percent).”

The implication that only black people are shot by the police in the US is false. As the WSWS 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 un-serious, 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 were 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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