

A Cinematic Love Supreme: Lena Waithe's *Queen and Slim*

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Queen and Slim is an audaciously black story. With a screenplay by Lena Waithe, based on a story written by Waithe and James Frey, and a run time of 132 minutes, *Queen and Slim* is the directorial debut of Melina Matsoukas. This film, starring Jodie Turner Smith (Queen), Daniel Kaluuya (Slim), and Bokeem Woodbine (Uncle Earl), was distributed by Universal Pictures and produced by Waithe, Matsoukas, Frey, Michelle Knudsen, and Andrew Coles with a budget of 20 million dollars. In its opening day on November 27, the film grossed an estimated 1.7 million dollars and 2.7 million on Thanksgiving. Tat Radcliffe provides some stunning cinematography to help orchestrate this powerful story that is supported by a stirring score.

Queen and Slim is primarily a drama focused on the first-date meeting between the two main characters (Queen and Slim) and what follows after their fatal conflict with a police officer. These two nameless protagonists become folk heroes in the African American community after Slim shoots the officer in self-defense during the traffic stop scuffle following their date. Queen,

also injured during the stop, decides that they must run for their lives as the filmed encounter quickly goes viral. Queen and Slim meet a host of characters along their journey out of Ohio across several states and eventually fall in love.

Queen and Slim is a cinematic love supreme in its artistry and thoughtful storytelling. This movie by Waithe and Matsoukas is not only a romance narrative but also a love letter about Black humanity. The trauma of living while Black is at the core of the story but the drama of Black suffering is juxtaposed with the main characters capacity to love *and be loved*. Waithe and Matsoukas are telling us that there is a balm in Gilead. Queen and Slim, despite their circumstances, take time to dance. To love. Racism is a stressor upon the black body but Black folks are human too. That Black people are worthy and capable of love is central to the development of this narrative. Both familial and intimate love are on full display in this film. Humans need love to get through this world as Waithe and Matsoukas illustrate. Love as an idea or concept exists in every human culture. There is something intrinsically human about one's capacity for love. This film is not without faults but the most beautiful thing about this work of cinema is that it is a bold portrait of Black humanity writ large—a cinematic love supreme.

Queen and Slim does have some noticeable limitations. There are a host of characters that are introduced from Uncle Earl to the white couple that offers their assistance towards the end of the story that go underdeveloped (the second cop told to get in the trunk of the car once he realizes who the two are at the beginning of the film is never mentioned again leaving the audience to wonder what exactly happened to this character). Some scenarios seem trite and unbelievable such as with the young white convenience store clerk who asks Slim can he hold his gun—then once he has the gun points it at Slim but then returns it to him. This is somewhat ridiculous for me as an audience member to believe. Hidden floorboards under the bed is also

unbelievable. Who has a hidden space beneath floorboards under their bed? And, because the two characters assisting Queen and Slim in their getaway, at the home with the hidden space under the bed, are never quite developed this too seems implausible. There is also the ‘tragically black’ motif that seems somewhat tired though relevant in these troubled times of mass incarceration and police brutality. *Queen and Slim* has an exceedingly long run time. This movie is not a fast-paced action-packed thriller.

Though the focus of *Queen and Slim* is on the dignity of Black humanity, the filmmakers do not suggest that Black identity is one dimensional. Their cast of Black characters are complicated from Uncle Earl, and his coterie of young women, to the Black middleman who ultimately snitches on the two for the \$250,000 reward by the end of the film. There is also Jr.’s father (the young boy who looks up to the couple as folk heroes) who informs the couple that he does not support their actions though he does decide to repair their vehicle. There is then the Black police officer who assists the couple in their continued getaway—though again this “getaway” seems also implausible in that the other police officers on the scene (in the middle of daylight) never see or hear them start the vehicle that they use to flee the home of the couple with the hiding space under the floorboards of their bed.

Queen and Slim is a notable work of cinema. This is evident in the break out performance of Jodie Turner Smith as “Queen,” the respectable score, and breathtaking cinematography as well as the stronger elements of the script. Matsoukas has done well with her directorial debut and the film should garner some award nominations.