



Film Review: "Black Political Ideology and Identity"

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FILM REVIEW:
BLACK POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND IDENTITY: REVIEW OF
ONE NIGHT IN MIAMI

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One Night in Miami, now playing on Netflix, is an honest and original look at the ideologies that drove the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. A night of conversation, conflict, and male bonding between Malcolm X (Kingsley Ben Adir), Cassius Clay (Eli Goree), Sam Cooke (Leslie Odom, Jr.), and Jim Brown (Aldis Hodge) illuminate these ideologies. Directed by Regina King, a longtime actor, the film is entertaining while never losing sight of how each of these men shaped Black politics and their space in African Americans' minds and hearts. King is deft at balancing the personalities with the tensions of the time, which is remarkable. This film is her directorial debut of a feature film, and it is an auspicious one.

Kemp Powers, who wrote the script, also penned the stage play. Sometimes stage plays are not readily adaptable to the screen critics noted when the film adaptation of *August: Osage County*, where what was riveting drama on stage became almost a parody and the actors, most of these actors luminaries in the art, turned in "over-the-top" performances (Green et al., 2020). *One Night in Miami* avoids these traps and leaves us satisfied by a glimpse into the lives of these men who were at once larger than life and complicated, flawed human beings.

Most of the action occurs in a motel room reminiscent of the room at the Lorraine Hotel where Martin Luther King Jr. stayed in Memphis and where he was assassinated. The room itself foreshadows a similar fate for Malcolm X. Muhammed Ali unexpectedly wins a boxing match

against Sonny Liston on February 25, 1964. That night, Malcolm X has planned a party to be attended by Jim Brown, Sam Cook, and Cassius Clay/Muhammed Ali. When the men arrive in Malcolm X's room, there is no party. Malcolm X has other plans. There is not much festive about the atmosphere beyond vanilla ice-cream in the hotel refrigerator. The night evolves into a long, intriguing conversation about competing strategies for achieving black equality and the price each man has paid for success. Under Regina King's skillful direction, the film reveals the bond between men who are trying to carve out spaces for themselves while grappling with their responsibilities to the broader black community. At the same time, they must navigate the troubled waters of a white America that would routinely remind them of their "proper place."

The film opens with Jim Brown visiting a white neighbor in his hometown, St. Simon's Island, the largest barrier island in the Golden Isles. Blacks owned 86 percent of the island postbellum, but inhabitants have had to deal with "island gentrification" as wealthy whites discovered the Golden Isles' beauty over time. Reflecting the steady dwindling of the island's black population, recent figures from the early 2000s show that blacks made up less than one-half of one percent of the total population of slightly more than 13,000 (Johnson, 2002).

As we watch Brown drive his convertible Cadillac along a picturesque road, he arrives at a palatial house. He is greeted with enthusiasm at the door by the owner's granddaughter. Her grandfather seems elated to see Brown, an old family friend and hometown football hero. Brown is warmly welcomed and invited by the grandfather to take a seat and join him for a glass of lemonade. In the backdrop to the scene, the island's incredible beauty is juxtaposed with the condescending way the family friend, a stalwart member of the landed gentry, both embraces Brown and reminds him of his place. The scene establishes what we will see and hear throughout

the rest of the film: beauty tainted by ugliness, victory tainted by jeers, political agency suffocated by surveillance, and artistic brilliance circumscribed by the demands of white gatekeepers.

One Night in Miami uses flashbacks to allow the audience to witness these men as they navigate the unyielding schizophrenia of American racism, the cheers and jeers, the embrace and violence. When Brown, Cooke, and Clay arrive at the hotel, they realize that they are not there for the kind of party they anticipate. As the men negotiate whether to stick around for a celebration without booze or women, a conversation ensues about black life in America. Where they sleep, how they perform and for whom, the decisions they make about their professional and personal lives, are all complicated by how they see their own roles as leaders in the black community. Malcolm is hopeful that the conversion to Islam of a beloved black hero will give him the added visibility and leverage he needs to bring converts to the Muslim Mosque, Inc., (MMI), and Organization of African-American Unity (OAAU).

The four men represent four aspects of black political ideology and four kinds of black identity. In the social sciences, we have developed measures of racial identity to explain various orientations of black people to the American polity. Racial identity is measured with questions that probe to what extent individuals believe in the collective fate of all blacks. The most used set of survey questions asks the extent to which what happens to other blacks affects what happens to me, reflecting a measure of “linked fate.” Linked fate is one explanation for overwhelming black support of the Democratic Party, with upwards of 80 percent of black citizens routinely voting for Democratic candidates. Linked fate is also one explanation for why class divisions do not explain the black vote. Growing class stratification in the black community predicts greater support for the Republican Party. Of course, the Republican Party, with its adoption of the Southern Strategy in 1968, ceased credibly competing for black votes long ago.

Adir presents an understated, but remarkable portrayal of Malcolm X, a man with little time left to fulfill his dream of black liberation. Viewers see Malcolm as never before, relaxed but anxious, affable, and angry, but most of all filled with love for humanity. He has accompanied Cassius at several matches, with his camera always nearby, and has taught the pro-fighter the practice of Muslim prayer. On this night in Miami, Cassius is working through his decision to declare his new membership in the Nation of Islam. Malcolm wants Cassius to reveal his decision to Brown and Cooke. Malcolm is interested in black empowerment of a kind that sees the men speak directly to and transform their black audiences without seeking to gain favor from white ones.

Clay is young, very young when he wins the first bout with Sonny Liston. Four years earlier, he had won a gold medal in boxing at the summer Olympics. Just twenty-two years old when he beats Liston, he is developing a political and social consciousness beyond his years. Some think Malcolm X has undue influence over Clay, but as the night progresses, we see glimpses of Black Power ideology in the making. Unlike Cooke, who had his white manager book him a room at a whites-only hotel, Clay is at home lodging at the black-owned motel. He is attracted to the idea of black economic independence, both his own and that of the broader black community. Both the Nation of Islam and Black Power movement leaders shared the position that black liberation required that black people have independent control over their economic fortunes.

Cooke is a seasoned entertainer who is skeptical about Malcolm's motives and the philosophy of the Nation. He represents the integrationist, insisting on lodging where whites of his stature would lodge. Cooke drives a foreign sports car and aspires to be a "crossover" or mainstream entertainer. During the night, Malcolm critiques the romanticism of his music, lamenting the lack of a message for the people. He compares Cooke's songs unfavorably to Bob

Dylan's song, "Blowin' in the Wind," which was prophetic and political. For Cooke, the criticism stings. The two men nearly come to blows.

Brown is neither an integrationist like Cooke, nor a separatist like Malcolm and Clay. For Brown, the National Football League (NFL) is both a way to demonstrate his superiority and gain the respect of peers, black and white. But, his NFL career is also a reminder of the limited mobility and agency of black men in America. He wants to leave professional football and build an acting career. This move is met with derision from some. For Brown's character, and indeed for the entire film, the genteel plantation owner whose house he stopped by at the opening of the movie symbolizes the way whites commodify the black body. He wants the broader audience that a career in film would provide. He wants to earn more money without risking his health. Brown is clear that he is not a candidate for the Nation of Islam. Their code of conduct is strict—one must be monogamous, with a whole set of dietary restrictions, none of which appeal to Brown.

These four men, all of whom are American icons, are depicted in ways that illuminate their flaws, worries, and desires. In her directorial decisions, King reminds the viewer of the stage play elements of the film. Most of the action takes place in a single room among the four men who laugh, cry, quarrel and commiserate with each other. The emotional depth of the characters is rare in the presentation of black men on the big screen. The film's insights into the evolution of black ideology and identity are subtle and remarkable. For all their achievement, these men have not escaped the indignity and violence of white racism, but each has embarked on a different path toward freedom. Despite regional and professional differences that shape how each responds to their circumstances, they all identify as black men—a fact which Malcolm reminds them of in a quiet, understated, but richly insistent way. Their shared experience as black men is their bond, their love and respect for each other helps them persist through that hot night in Miami. The

characters of these four men show us competing ideas about how black folks can gain freedom for themselves. Will it be through commitment to a common good, as Clay and Malcolm advocate? Or will black liberation be realized through the individual successes of people like Cooke and Brown aspire?

While there is much to applaud about this gem of a film, women are woefully absent except as accessories and afterthoughts. There is little dialogue about women other than when Brown mentions that he expected to find “pussy” at the party. That the absence of women’s presence and agency occurs under the direction of a wonderfully talented Regina King is disappointing; however, we recognize that neither the play, nor the script, can be all things to all people. Although a nod to Black women through a depiction of their influence and presence in these men’s lives might have added depth, Kemp did not include this perspective in his screenplay. Despite this shortcoming, *One Night in Miami* stands out as one of the best films of this year, indeed of any year. It is an original, entertaining, educational, and fascinating snapshot of the lives of four iconic, brave, beautiful, strong, and fragile black men—marvelously depicted under the superlative direction of Regina King and the deft performances of the actors.