



## BlackEconomics.org

### “The Psychoeconomics of ‘Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom’ and ‘One Night in Miami’”

Every observation or perception is indelibly imprinted upon our brain and can produce a lasting psychological impact—positive or negative. Importantly, the psychological impact may carry economic implications. It is common knowledge that because of the just cited reasons experts advise that we take care in determining the media that we consume.

“Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” and “One Night in Miami” are two recent Netflix and Amazon releases, respectively, that have particular relevance for the Black American audience. As experts, we repeat the aforementioned advice. Why? Let us explore.

Artistically, there is no question that the aesthetics of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” and “One Night in Miami” are superb. In both movies, we get a stylized flavor of the periods and the nuances of the periods’ prevailing cultures—Black versus White. Also, the dialogue is powerful.

On the psychological front, we must first be aware of the double entendre nature of the title “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.” On the one hand, we are reminded of the fact that Ma Rainey is a product of the “Black Bottom” South. On the other hand, with the prevalent and titillating display of Ma Rainey’s bosom throughout the movie, those so inclined might also be caused to ponder about the nature of Ma Rainey’s bottom, which is, of course, Black. Put that one on August Wilson for formulating such a title for his play. Nevertheless, we must ask: “Are references to Ma Rainey’s physical bottom relevant for conveying the ultimate intent of the play?” There is no such contrived psychological reference in “One Night in Miami.”

But there are subtle and powerful events in both cinematic works that Black Americans should be careful to observe, ponder, and rationalize clearly in our consciousness so as to not be harmed by them—especially economically. In this case, we will begin with “One Night in Miami.”

Deep into the movie, the Jim Brown character says the following to the Malcolm X character: “You know, I always find it kind of funny how you light-skinned cats end up being so damn militant.” The point places the Malcolm X character on the defensive, is divisive, and is likely to generate double mindedness for the audience. That is, you are likely to, on a conscious or subconscious level, confirm/disconfirm in your thinking that efforts to challenge the *status quo* on racial justice are most often promulgated by light-skinned Black Americans, which is not true.

Most Black Americans are not light skinned. As you well know, Black Americans have challenged the racial justice *status quo* from the very outset of our presence in North America. Therefore, it cannot be the case that mainly light-skinned Black Americans perform this valued and essential function—although we may think of the exploits of W.E.B. Dubois, Adam Clayton Powell, H. Rap Brown (aka Jamil Al-Amin), Huey P. Newton, and Malcom X (aka El-Hajj Malik El Shabazz)—all light-skinned Black Americans. Any perception that light-skinned Black Americans are the chief progenitors of racial protests can be linked to the fact that, even to this very day, the media, White Americans, and Black Americans ourselves often give deference and preference to light-skinned Black Americans. But we should never forget that the fight for racial justice is a widespread Black American effort, writ large.

The injection of the aforementioned divisive dialogue sets up the conclusion and inference that Malcolm X, in the end, was not so influential. Muhammad Ali went with the Nation of Islam; not with the Association of Afro-American Unity (Malcolm X's group). Jim Brown went on to make movies and did not join Malcolm X on his trip abroad. Similarly, while Sam Cooke went on to produce a "message song," he had already begun the process before his conversation with Malcolm X. However, even if you ever want to think that Malcolm X was not so influential, then ask whose name is arises most today when the topic of racial justice surfaces—Malcolm X or MLK. Google says that they are about even. Let us never forget that, as Ossie Davis deemed it, Malcolm X was our "Black Shining Prince." If we lose this realization, then we lose our all-important link to Black Nationalism and our hope for economic self-determination.

Going back to "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," the climactic murder scene is fraught with psychological suggestions. Many, many years ago when I first heard Professor John Henrik Clarke deliver his lecture, "The Impact of the African Mind on World History," little did I know that "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" would elucidate the content of his lecture so vividly—explicitly.<sup>1</sup> Professor Clarke said:

You will kill each other for stepping on your freshly shined shoes, but you won't kill anything that looks like that image [image of a White Jesus/God].

You will recall the scene. The Levee character has just been stiff-armed by Mr. Sturdyvant, who had promised to permit Levee to audio record his created works. Also, Mr. Sturdyvant has just, for all intents and purposes, taken outright those created works in exchange for a small sum. Obviously, Levee is furious, and ultimately unleashes his fury on fellow musician, Toledo, for stepping on his new and freshly shined shoes and failing to apologize sufficiently for it. Levee violently stabs Toledo to death. Please do not deceive yourself. The murder has almost nothing to do with blemished shoes. It has everything to do with anger over a White man's denial of opportunity to a Black man, and the outright theft by a White man of a Black man's labor.

The obvious question is: Why did Levee not unleash his fury on Mr. Sturdyvant? The answers to this question are also obvious. But the most important questions that you should ask are: "Why, in 2021, are we still seeing images of Black men murdering other Black men when the impetus for the violence and murder is White men? Also, why do we not see movies where White men and

---

<sup>1</sup> A video of Professor Clarke's lecture can be found here; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SH55JGOC3RQ> (retrieved on January 24, 2021). The quote occurs within the first five minutes of the video.

women are actually held accountable for their racist acts? That is, why do we not see movies where Black men and women kill/murder White men and women to exact justices? Here, we are not talking about, for example, a Black policeman killing a White man who has committed a civil or criminal violation against the community at large. Rather we are referring to cases where Blacks commit “justified” violent murders against Whites for racial injustices. No doubt, we have seen innumerable cases in our lifetimes when Whites have killed Blacks mercilessly for no crimes at all. Is it not time that we begin to see the other side of the coin in order to generate a balance in our psyche? Again, we must realize that “it’s only a movie.” Is it?

No, it is not “only a movie.” These images enter our psyche and shape our behavior. It is a key reason why we almost never see or hear about Blacks murdering Whites in response to injustice. It is not because these injustices do not occur. It is because Blacks are “programmed” to not murder Whites, even when injustices occur. At the same time, we know that the American criminal justice system almost never exacts justice from Whites for their horrendous crimes against Blacks. Yet we continue to accept these unjust outcomes. As a result of this behavior, we are viewed as weak. Therefore, the status quo repeats, and repeats, and repeats. Most importantly, this weakness hampers us from imposing our economic will on the broader society and realizing our richly deserved economic success.

In some respects, it is favorable that Netflix and Amazon have opened opportunities for Black artists to create new cinematic works that present culturally relevant themes. It is unfavorable that Black artists, wittingly or unwittingly, produce movies that reinforce images and perceptions that are damaging for the intended audience. If we will not protect ourselves and build up our own confidence and self-perception, then we certainly cannot expect others to do it for us.

This is a cautionary reminder for Black artists not to be the pawns that ensure the continued oppression of Black America. That is why we decided to share these thoughts about the psychoeconomics of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” and “One Night in Miami.”

B.B. Robinson  
01/24/2021

### -- ###