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What Collateral Damage Could the Cosby Quagmire Inflict on the African-American Community?

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It was the kind of call you dream about as a journalist -- especially as an African-American woman one who grew up in "The Cosby era." It was the spring of 2011 and I was working as a freelance journalist in Atlanta. An old journalism colleague phoned to say that the illustrious Bill Cosby would be in town emceeding a Southern Christian Leadership Conference event and he wondered if I'd be interested in interviewing him. "The Cos?" Are you kidding? Hell, yeah!

Within days I'd pitched the story to an editor and secured a spot in an upcoming issue of Jet magazine. That Sunday evening I dressed in my professional best and with notebook and digital recorder in hand, headed to a four-star hotel in Midtown Atlanta. What I remember most about my time inside his posh hotel suite was him: speaking passionately about his concerns about the future of Black America, taking a group photo with me after the interview, literally stripping down to his undershirt in order to gift his red "Hello Friend" sweatshirt (a tribute to his slain son, Ennis) to my colleague who'd complimented him on it and ordering room service in his signature comedic Cosby style (he was so zany that the person taking the order initially thought it was a prank call). At one point before the interview began, my colleague left the suite to handle some business and to escort my photographer and former SCLC President Howard Creecy, Jr. up from the lobby. Not once did I feel uncomfortable or wonder about my safety. After all, I was hanging out with Cliff Huxtable, right? Why would I be?

So you can only imagine the shock I felt recently -- as a woman who'd, in fact, been alone in a hotel room with Cosby not that long ago -- when the barrage of rape allegations resurfaced against him in the media. I didn't read much about the first couple claims, but when the chorus of complaints from women reached the double digits, I knew it was time to start paying attention. Once I did, it was like when you hear any life-changing news; you're hoping it's just a bad dream that's not really happening. My reaction, like that of many African Americans I know, has been one of stunned silence. Why silence when you hear accusations that a man we all have "known" and loved

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committed such heinous crimes? The answer is simple: This is bad news, really bad news.

It's like hearing that your doting daddy is a serial killer or that your beloved pastor has a disturbing affinity for young boys. It's the kind of accusation -- whether true or not -- that stops you in your tracks and ties your stomach up in knots. It turns your world upside down and makes you question, well, everything and everybody. You don't know where to turn or what to believe. It's been **reported** recently that Cosby testified under oath in 2005 that he gave the *National Enquirer* tabloid an exclusive interview about sexual-assault accusations waged against him by a Canadian woman in exchange for the tabloid passing on another accuser's story. According to court motions initially filed under seal and made available from archived federal court records, Cosby reportedly replied "exactly," when asked if he thought a story about the latter accuser printed in the *National Enquirer* would make the public believe allegations waged against him were true. To date Cosby has not been charged with any crime; he's mostly shared denials through his attorneys. One thing for sure is that I am in no way qualified to speak to Cosby's guilt or innocence. However, it's clear that, either way, we as an African-American community should be very concerned about the ramifications that these allegations could impose on our community as a whole. Here are some reasons why:

1. Most of these allegations can't be proven or disproven. Most of these claims date back long before the digital age we're in now -- a time when a "cell phone" was probably slang for a pay telephone in the jailhouse and YouTube was just the name of a boating company at the nearby community lake. Even though the list of accusers seems to be growing every day, there probably isn't a lot of hard physical evidence still around for examination. Unless one of these women has been holding on to some grainy camcorder footage of her alleged attack all these years, most of these allegations likely will be hard to prove in a court of law. In fact, one woman's claims that he drugged and sexually assaulted her dates as far back as the 1960s.

As we've learned over the years, even with video footage of a crime in progress it is often hard to get a conviction in even the most high profile of cases. Rape can be especially challenging to prove and often the accusers are inundated with questions in the court of public opinion about the timing of their claims. Conversely, if Cosby is not guilty, there's not much he can do to prove it either. If he ends up facing criminal charges, it could end up being merely another nasty "he said, she said" situation like the one that unfolded between Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill more than 20 years ago. Eventually the controversy faded away and Justice Thomas still sits on the nation's high court. If that happened in this case, the uproar would fizzle out without the sort of real closure that you tend to crave in these situations. The other nagging question is whether getting to the truth is even possible in this situation.

2. The hit on African-American imagery could be serious: As the rape allegations ramped up, The TV Land network responded by pulling reruns of *The Cosby Show* off the air indefinitely. A bit disturbing, considering that no charges had been (or have yet to be) filed against him. Furthermore, at a time when positive and affirming images of African-Americans in media and popular culture are so sparse, the lasting images of *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World* are ones that many of us who are starved for positive African-American images continue to cling to. I worry about the impact on future generations to come -- particularly ones of color -- if other networks decide to permanently yank these groundbreaking shows from the airwaves. Younger generations could miss out on the shows that some even argue helped lay the foundation for President Obama to become the nation's first black president. Will our youth be left to search for reflections of themselves in the one-dimensional, brash, stereotypical, superficial and materialistic African American characters that pervade in much of today's television programming, especially reality TV? The thought is absolutely terrifying.

3. The negative impact on African-American men could be long lasting. Very few celebrities -- regardless of race -- are bestowed with the iconic status that Bill Cosby has long enjoyed and for as many years as he has. We're not talking about R. Kelly here; this is Bill Cosby -- a name that is synonymous with groundbreaking television and cinema, the All American dad, clean comedy and Pudding Pop commercials. It doesn't get any squeakier or cleaner than that and certainly not for most African-American men past or present. I wonder whether any African-American celebrity would be bestowed with such status ever again if Cosby goes down as a serial rapist? Whether he is guilty or not, the mere assertion that a black man with his profile could violate so many women in this way will long have implications for men of color everywhere. This extends far

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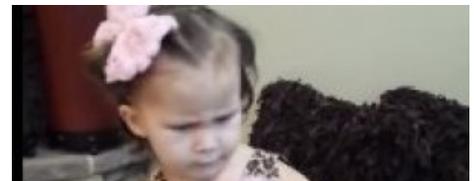
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beyond Cosby in particular and is more about the perception of black men in general. Allegations of this nature are serious and play into ongoing fears and historic stereotypes of African-American men as criminals and sexual predators. Don't think that the ramifications of these assertions won't in some way impact the perception and treatment of legions of African-American men who have absolutely nothing to do with this situation. On the heels of the Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin cases, it is clear that public perception can impact personal encounters. This Cosby situation could add fuel to the raging inferno of biased beliefs that already exists.

4. The potential for backlash against his known causes. Just as much as Cosby is known for his comedic genius, he is equally known for his philanthropic endeavors, particularly he and his family's large financial contributions to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The Cosbys have donated more than \$20 million to Atlanta's Spelman and Morehouse colleges alone. You can't help but question if the impact of these allegations could trickle down to giving at HBCUs, particularly ones for which he's directly affiliated. We all know that these institutions of higher learning struggle to build endowments and raise funds overall. We can only pray that these schools that have educated legions of African Americans (including yours truly) don't end up as casualties in this Cosby controversy. We should financially support these institutions no matter how this Cosby situation shakes out.

Overall, the repercussions of this situation could be huge for the African-American community in more ways than we may even know at this point. We must collectively pray for justice to prevail for all involved in this Cosby quagmire and also hope that if it comes to it, that everyone gets their fair and just "day" in court. In the interim, we also must hope that the collateral damage that this case imposes on our community is minimal. While many of us have celebrated and enjoyed Cosby's talents, he is one man who in no way represents an entire race of people. We all must do our part to ensure that no matter how this situation ultimately unfolds, that it does not end up casting an unwarranted negative shadow on an entire community as vibrant, resilient and dynamic as ours. Allowing that to happen would be another kind of crime of epic proportion.

Chandra Thomas Whitfield is an award-winning multimedia journalist whose work has appeared in People, Essence, Ebony and Jet magazines, along with The Atlanta Journal-Constitution and Time.com. An award-winning feature story she penned for Atlanta Magazine was recently named one of "Atlanta's Top 10 Favorite Stories of the Past 50 Years" by the Atlanta Press Club.

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