

WILL SMITH SLAPPED CHRIS ROCK, BUT CHRIS ROCK DELIVERED A BLOW TO ALL BLACK WOMEN

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After two decades of decline, the 2022 Oscars' viewership was almost at an all-time low (Stoll). Suddenly viewership increased by a staggering 555,000 people (Hsu). The catalyst for this sudden jump was Will Smith casually strolling onstage and slapping Chris Rock in the face on live TV. It was in response to a joke that Chris Rock made about Will Smith's wife, Jada Pinkett Smith. After returning to his seat, Smith even followed the slap by shouting, "Keep my wife's name out your fucking mouth" (Stevens). When the "Slap Story" broke, it seemed to eclipse even the initial media response to the invasion of Ukraine. Instantly pop culture references and thousands of memes were created. In the torrent of op-eds about the incident, most writers focused on the slap and the lasting impacts it would have ranging from how the slap reinforced stereotypes for Black people (Capehart) and women (Abdul-Jabar), set a violent precedent for comedians (Lang), and even how it toxically portrayed violence as an "act of love" (Marples). Others even applauded it, like Tiffany Haddish who stated, "That meant the world to me. And maybe the world might not like how it went down, but for me, it was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen" (Patterson and McNiece). The slap was constantly discussed and stayed in the news cycle for weeks. Even at the Grammys, the slap was still being heavily referenced. Trevor Noah joked we will be "keeping people's names out of our mouths," while Questlove stated, "All right, I am going to present this award and I trust that you people will stay 500 feet away from me" (Sharf). We all saw or heard about the slap that reverberated throughout the world, but what about the joke?

For all of the mainstream media coverage and conversation about the incident, the joke itself got relatively little coverage. Most people agreed that Rock handled the slap unbelievably professionally. While this was undoubtedly a positive thing, it also resulted in many focusing on the immorality of the slap rather than the possible immorality of the joke. A headline in the *Hindustan Times* said it best: "Chris Rock's joke was bad, Will Smith's reaction worse" (Mathur). This was something I initially fell victim to as well.

On the surface, the joke is benign. Rock simply said, "G.I. Jane 2, can't wait to see it, all right?" "G.I. Jane 2" was an allusion that compared Pinkett Smith to the strong female lead and heroine in *G.I. Jane*, who was played by the conventionally beautiful, white actress Demi Moore (Davies, Gleiberman). Given this comparison, it could very reasonably be taken as a compliment. One commenter on the movie reviewing platform *MovieChat* claimed, "If anything, the *G.I. Jane* comment was kinda

a compliment.” Chris Rock also prefaced the joke with “Jada, I love you,” while using a relatively endearing tone to further add to the benign nature of the joke.

Others saw it as less benign. Monica Hesse from the *Washington Post* opens her article about the incident with, “Chris Rock made a bad joke about Jada Pinkett Smith. Unfortunately, her husband’s offense became the story.” Even given Hesse’s opening, she focuses largely on the slap, something the media as a whole had fallen victim to as well. When the joke’s morality is briefly questioned, those critiques were focused on Pinkett Smith’s disease, alopecia areata, which causes hair loss. This was a common theme among the articles and opinion papers criticizing the joke.

Of course, many people were quick to dismiss the discussion and said there was no harm in the joke. A common argument against caring about and evaluating the morality of the joke is that it’s in fact “just a joke” or that “it wasn’t [that] bad” (Krol). To adjudicate between these claims of morality we can turn to Robin Tapley, a humor ethicist. In Tapley’s essay “Just Joking: The Ethics of Humor,” she calls into question the “idea that because we are ‘just joking’ we can say anything whatsoever with moral immunity” (181). In Rock’s case, many people give him an extraordinary amount of moral immunity because he is a professional comedian at the Oscars. It is very clear he is making a joke and it is part of his job to make these jokes which further solidifies his moral immunity. Tapley challenges this moral immunity by asserting, “Jokes have an intimate connection with our beliefs, our knowledge, and our interpretation of the world. Jokes have the power to reinforce, promote, or challenge our way of thinking” (172). This direct influence jokes have on our beliefs means that jokes can spread and perpetuate ideas the same way any other speech can and does. It also prompts us to look at what possible beliefs are being conveyed or reinforced by the jokes.

The public largely focused only on how the beliefs conveyed by the joke were benign, potentially problematic because it was about a disease, or that it was simply “just a joke.” However, focusing only on these categories distracts from where the joke was most likely to do harm, that is, to whom the joke was targeted: at a Black woman, her appearance, and even more specifically, her hair. Hair has long been an integral part of a Black person’s identity as well as a target of much scrutiny. As an article titled “Tangled Roots: Decoding the History of Black Hair” explains, “In pre-colonial African societies, Black hair was seen as a symbol of a person’s identity... But when the transatlantic slave trade began, these traditions were erased, and a new set of meanings were imposed onto Black people’s hair, particularly by white slave owners” (Bero). Throughout history and the present day, Black hair has been villainized, likened to animals, and labeled inferior and dirty in its natural form while called ugly and masculine in its shorter forms when worn by women (Bero).

These anti-Black hair stereotypes are so ingrained and influential in our society that they affect the livelihood and ability of Black people, and especially Black women, to support themselves and their families financially. A study conducted at multiple universities and on multiple hiring platforms and agencies found that “Black women

with natural hairstyles were perceived to be less professional, less competent, and less likely to be recommended for a job interview than Black women with straightened hairstyles and White women with either curly or straight hairstyles.” (Koval and Rosette) This issue is so widespread that recently in March of 2022 the CROWN Act was elevated to the House of Representatives and successfully passed. The CROWN Act “ban[s] race-based hair discrimination at work, federal programs and public accommodations” (Diaz). Issues like these don’t often get legislation dedicated to them unless there are numerous studies backing them, on top of lots of advocacy work. Even with legislation like the CROWN Act and advocacy, in order to erase the effects of institutional discrimination, we must work to rectify them socially as well.

Chris Rock himself has shown the public how Black hair is represented and perceived in a more personal context. In 2009 he made a documentary about Black hair titled *Good Hair* in response to his daughter’s feeling of inferiority caused by her Black hair. In *Good Hair*, Sheila Bridges, a Black woman, states:

I have alopecia [the condition Pinkett Smith has], which causes hair loss on your head or on your body. I chose not to wear a wig for a number of reasons. There’s this feeling of hiding and I never wanted to feel like I was hiding something. You are sort of accepting who you are and looking in the mirror and feeling as though you’re beautiful and doing it. So I think the reason hair is so important is because our self-esteem is wrapped up in it. It’s like a type of currency for us, even though those standards are completely unrealistic and unattainable, especially for Black women. (1:04:57)

Good Hair is filled with powerful anecdotes like Bridges’. These anecdotes, on top of Rock’s lived experiences, gives him the ability to understand the stigmatization Black people’s appearances have endured, as well as the resulting shame and unequal treatment that come from it. These unattainable standards projected onto Black women are largely damaging not just to their self-esteem but also to their self-worth. Issues of self-worth are especially important in the Black community, which has and is still largely being degraded.

Black women’s appearance and self-esteem have historically been targeted in many ways. One such method is their being labeled as masculine. Unfortunately, a large number of people still wield this stereotype with reckless abandon. Reactions to people like Michelle Obama and Serena Williams illustrate this fact very clearly. Far-right political commentator Alex Jones states, “Michelle appears in photos and videos to have a very large penis in her pants, her shoulders are wide, her face is very, very masculine” (Farand). Comments like these are not limited to hecklers or entertainers; even government officials feel comfortable participating in this rhetoric. Pamela Ramsey Taylor, the director of the Clay County Development Corporation tweeted, “It will be refreshing to have a classy, beautiful, dignified First Lady in the White

House. I'm tired of seeing a [sic] Ape in heels" (Chan). While these comments may seem disturbing and surprising, they are not new, and Williams is not treated any better. Even people who watch her claim victory after victory make comments comparing her to a gorilla and calling her "unbelievably dominant . . . and manly" (Desmond-Harris). Similar to Michelle Obama, Williams is targeted by those in official positions of power. "In 2014, a high-ranking Russian tennis official snarkily referred to Serena and her sister Venus as 'the Williams brothers'" (Kendall). This ridicule doesn't only happen to hugely successful and high-profile Black women; the everyday Black woman is targeted too. In Hannah Eko's *Buzzfeed* article titled "As A Black Woman, I'm Tired of Having to Prove My Womanhood," she speaks about her experiences of being masculinized and made to feel less than. "For over a decade, I've had experiences like these: public instances where I have been mistaken for a man . . . I'm always left disoriented, wondering which fragment of my identity was responsible for the misdirected sir, the muffled joke." These "muffled jokes" can stem from unmuffled ones like Rock's. An unintentional and unfortunate undertone of Rock's joke is the masculinization of Pinkett Smith. Tim Grierson, a film and pop culture journalist, writes about *G.I. Jane's* haircutting scene as "she shaves off her long hair, symbolically demonstrating she's just like the men." With the scene's symbolism so clearly intended to represent a masculine transformation and not one of traditional beauty, Rock's joke inherently conveys the same sentiment.

It is especially potent and damaging when these two masculine stereotypes of short hair and Blackness are used in conjunction to dehumanize their target, something not uncommon. Disturbing messages leaked from a Columbia University wrestling team group chat from 2014 illustrate how easily this can occur. Members wrote to one another: "you fucked a bald black girl so you came out like 2 months ago," and "How big was her dick," while multiple members upvoted such comments ("Messages Reveal Culture of Intolerance"). Even further, the article about the messages and those much worse were met with mixed reactions. There were hundreds of comments denouncing these sentiments but also hundreds defending the messages saying things like "they aren't that bad" or "they should be protected under the 1st amendment" ("Messages Reveal Culture of Intolerance"). Comments like these downplay the harm ideas like these can cause in a community or shift the conversation away from the issues brought up that need to be addressed. The stigmatization of Black hair in all forms is widespread and affects the mental health and well-being of Black people everywhere.

Jokes like Rock's, which are broadcast in front of millions of people, must be looked at with extra caution. These jokes have the ability to spread large amounts of what Tapley calls "social harm . . . harm which affects a group or members of a group that makes up our society" (179). There is a difference between making a possibly harmful joke to a few people and to millions. While both are still harmful, a joke to millions of people has the potential to disseminate the idea to a larger audience. The magnitude of caution we have to use is directly proportional to the size of the platform

one has. Rock's joke targeted at Pinkett Smith could unintentionally perpetuate the downplaying of Black women's issues on the whole, especially in regards to hair, and end up inflicting this "social harm" on a massive scale.

During an episode of *Real Time with Bill Maher*, Maher jokes about Pinkett Smith saying, "I mean, [it's] alopecia, it's not leukemia" (Rowley). Comments and jokes like these, even when unintentionally prompted by Rock's joke, convey harmful ideas. The idea of downplaying and mishandling Black people and women's health issues is nothing new and is systematically embedded in our everyday lives. Doctors significantly downplay or underestimate Black people's pain when compared to non-Black people citing common stereotypes like "black people's skin is thicker than white people's skin" (Hoffman et al.). This underestimation of pain is something that multiple studies have shown (Hoffman et al.). On a larger scale, Black women deal with a wholly unequal healthcare system that doesn't treat them as effectively. This disparity has led to a three-year shorter life expectancy when compared with their white counterparts (Chinn, Martin, and Redmond). Black women also have significantly higher maternal death rates, in some cases up to five times higher, when compared to white women, another result of this healthcare inequity (MacDorman et al.).

So if Rock's joke brings with it such dangerous implications and potential harm, why would he think it was okay? We will first look at his perspective as a comedian. The joke was something comedians call crowd work, where the comedian interacts and makes jokes with and about the crowd in an unscripted manner (Zinoman). In this sort of freestyle comedy, it is easy to make jokes with one intention but have them end up having unintentional implications. The amount of benign intent contained by the joke and its preface means Rock likely meant it as a relatively positive *G.I. Jane* joke, rather than one that targets a Black woman's beauty, namely her hair. Furthermore, even if Rock realized the underlying target of the joke, there is another reason he may have felt willing to make the joke.

Once again we can look to Tapley, who uses a claim from LaFollette and Shanks, two other humor scholars, to explain the relationship between the teller and a joke's material. "[O]ne needs a 'psychic distance' from the beliefs to find humour in [it]" (174). This "psychic distance" is the separation one feels from a topic. For example, people who hear a *9/11* joke who were directly affected by it are less likely to find the joke funny when compared with someone who was unaffected or not alive when the attack occurred. This psychic distance is something that Rock arguably does not have. So then how does this apply to our situation? I would actually look at the opposite side of this concept to explain the joke. Rock's close psychic proximity actually allowed him to feel comfortable making the joke and finding humor in it. Rock's joking in this instance feels similar to when someone jokes about those closest to them, but won't allow others to make the same jokes targeting the same people. Namely, Rock being a Black person himself along with his familiarity and work (*Good Hair*) to better the

perception and understanding of Black hair may have led him to believe the joke was benign as long as he is the one who said it.

But was it? Tapley also discusses the moral implications of the joke teller's identity and status when defining a morally objectionable joke. In order for a joke to be morally objectionable, there must be a "social disparity" where "the teller of a joke has a voice, and the target does not (or at least not an equally powerful voice by virtue of membership in a particular group)" (182). Some of the difficulty with this criterion is that it can be hard to determine who is in the more socially vulnerable position and even if you can, by how much does one need to be advantaged to make the joke immoral? Rock sees himself as a part of the "Black in-group" along with Pinkett Smith, thus stopping the joke from being morally objectionable. Rock also sees Pinkett Smith as a rich actress married to Will Smith, which puts her at one of the highest social standings possible. It's understandable why he may have thought he was punching up, that is, joking about someone in a higher social position than him.

But the joke wasn't just between them. Targeting Pinkett Smith herself may not cause a greater social harm, but it also targets those she represents, Black women, which is how this joke can cause serious social harm. Rock may have had only the best intentions when he made the joke, but even given those intentions, he couldn't control the repercussions of his joke. These effects are out of his control and connect back to the size of his platform. There are many people who heard the joke and gleaned nothing from it, but there are also many who are more than happy to weaponize it, something that is completely out of Rock's control. A study done by researchers at multiple universities found that "disparagement humor fosters discrimination against groups for whom society's attitudes are ambivalent" (Ford et al. 178). While Rock's joke is not outright disparagement humor, it could be used to inspire and confirm the negative beliefs that motivate disparagement humor toward Black women and Black hair. As we've seen from the multiple examples of negative attitudes toward Black women, their hair, and their appearance, there's already way too much of that.

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