

NOTES

A Barrel of Laughs? Or, A River of Tears? The Problem with African Americans Using Comedy to Air Dirty Laundry

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I. INTRODUCTION

Some of the most uncomfortable memories of my childhood revolve around what my grandmother often referred to as my “big mouth.” I was a smart, spunky kid with a keen knack for speaking at an early age. People often admired me for being such a well-spoken child; unfortunately, the frequent praise I received encouraged me to talk in spite of my grandmother’s criticism and I constantly found myself in trouble. On one particular occasion, I told my cousin’s closest friend a family secret that she had taken pains to conceal. I was shocked by her rage and my family’s disappointment because, while I knew I shared privileged information, I was unaware that a secret could be such a significant source of grief for an individual or a family—my family.

Although everyone seemed to get over the incident quickly (I was still a child after all), I never did. Admittedly, even after the experience with my cousin, there were times I shared confidential information, but my indiscretions were few and far between. I became forever cautious that I might reveal someone’s secret in such a way that would damage that individual emotionally, particularly where my family and friends were involved. I also became extremely sensitive to the possibility of my own confidences being violated. And so, I feel personally attacked and severely wounded by African Americans who violate the unspoken contract of confidentiality¹ by using their privileged positions to disclose private and sensitive information about the secrets knowingly held dear by their own people.

Audre Lorde wrote, “When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed but when we are silent we are still afraid so it is better to speak remember-

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1. I spend a large section of this paper offering evidence that this “contract of confidentiality” exists. *See infra* Section II. Further, this introduction is based on my own life experiences and personal opinion, and the topic regarding the unspoken contract of confidentiality is not a widely written about topic.

ing we were never meant to survive.”² Her words still ring true. Any form of expression can be eye opening and therapeutic. Indeed, any person’s story has the power to effect change for an entire group.³ In full recognition and full appreciation of African American scholars and artists like Michael Eric Dyson,⁴ Toni Morrison,⁵ and Spike Lee,⁶ who have contributed to important, influential, and necessary race-related discourse, I do not aim to discourage neither race talk nor race-related art. My problem is with famous Blacks who expose “dirty laundry”⁷ to gain popularity with Whites, at the expense of their original African American fan base who were not afraid to speak, but simply preferred to have private conversations or for the issue not be spoken on at all.

“[E]very family has dirty laundry. How we air it either binds us together or tears us apart.”⁸ In this paper, I will argue that Black people who air dirty laundry do significant harm to the African American community. More specifically, I will argue that while Black comedians who speak critically, publicly, and extensively about controversial issues that solely involve the Black community claim to be well intentioned, their exposés validate stereotypes about African Americans and allow White people to justify their own stereotypes about Blacks by pointing to well-known African American voices. Although open communication and public forum are often purported to be an impetus for racial harmony, this transgression actually further alienates African Americans from the general American population by subjecting them to further scrutiny, judgment, degradation, and shame. Furthermore, revealing these secrets divides the Black community into fragmented groups, each attempting to overcome the negative effects of the disclosure by distinguishing themselves from one of the other factions. The aftermath is extensive division within the Black community, depriving African Americans of the camaraderie necessary for progress.

Part II of this paper provides a historical context of the traditionally honored African American custom of “not airing dirty laundry,” and examines its effectiveness as a tool to stimulate African American advancement. Part III analyzes the dangers of using comedy and fame as vehicles to air dirty laundry by focusing on Chris Rock’s documentary, *Good Hair*, as an example of a project created and publicly exhibited by a notable African American comedian and argues that Rock, in an effort to bolster his career, selfishly marketed this film to White audiences, causing

2. Audre Lorde, *A Litany for Survival*, in *THE BLACK UNICORN* (W. W. Norton ed., 1995) (1978).

3. See generally, TEMPI BRIDGENE CHAMPION, *Tell Me Somethin’ Good: Storytelling from Africa to America*, in *UNDERSTANDING STORYTELLING AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN: A JOURNEY FROM AFRICA TO AMERICA*, 1-7 (Lawrence Earlbaum Associates 2003).

4. Author and one of the leading scholars on hip-hop culture.

5. Author of celebrated novels such as *THE BLUEST EYE* (1970), *LOVE* (2003), and *BELOVED* (1987)—which focus on serious issues in the Black community.

6. Film director, producer, writer, and actor regarded as the “creative mind” behind critical race films such as *MALCOLM X* (1992), *SCHOOL DAZE* (1988), and *HE GOT GAME* (1997).

7. “Dirty laundry” is defined as “personal matters that could be embarrassing if made public.” Wordnet: AN ELECTRONIC LEXICAL DATABASE (Christiane Fellbaum ed., MIT Press 1998), available at <http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=dirty%20laundry>.

8. Phill Wilson, *Is AIDS Black America’s “Dirty Laundry”?*, BLACK VOICES BLOG (Dec. 19, 2007, 9:50 PM EST), <http://blogs.blackvoices.com/2007/12/19/aids-should-we-air-our-dirty-laundry/>.

significant emotional pain for women in the African American community. Part IV considers and refutes the argument that bringing controversial and hushed African American conversations into the spotlight opens lines of communications within the Black community and across racial lines. Part V calls for a return to traditional secrecy within the Black community and explains the value in doing so.

II. ROOTED IN TRADITION

A. *What Your Mother Always Told You*

Like most myths, legends, tales, and sayings, “don’t air your dirty laundry” is derived from the human experience.⁹ It, too, is the “[product] of long reflections about the relations among humans, between man and woman . . . responses to challenges of the unknown and to the universal need to create order and reason out of chaos and accident.”¹⁰ The phrase is universal, but it is particularly utilized in the African American community. Whoopi Goldberg maintained in an interview that she would not air dirty laundry about disagreements with her co-host on *The View*.¹¹ Michael Jackson and his family had an understanding that dirty laundry would not be aired in public.¹² Whitney Houston acknowledged her shame in allowing her dirty laundry to be aired on the reality show *Being Bobby Brown*.¹³ Phil Wilson, a Black man from the south side of Chicago recalled the people in his neighborhood constantly reminding other neighbors not to air dirty laundry in public.¹⁴ Brandon Bell from Columbia, Maryland remembered his mother telling him that “airing dirty laundry does two things: it ruins a reputation and brings about major karma.”¹⁵ Maudie Thomas of Washington, D.C., recollected a time where she expressed some of her frustrations about her sister to friends in the neighborhood.¹⁶ When her words got back to her mother, she was sternly told not to air dirty laundry—family problems would be solved in the family.¹⁷ Years later, she passed along a similar mandate to her own daughters.¹⁸ Azariah Ellington recounted airing his mother’s dirty laundry.¹⁹ She responded by telling him not to air other people’s business and to learn to keep his mouth shut; he hasn’t aired dirty laundry since.²⁰ Numerous other Black

9. HAROLD COURLANDER, *A TREASURY OF AFRO-AMERICAN FOLKLORE I* (Crown Publishers 1976).

10. *Id.*

11. Clarence Waldron, *The View According to Whoopi*, JET MAG., April 14, 2008, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1355/is_14_113/ai_n25336717/.

12. Theresa J. Thurmond Morris, *King of Pop Dead at 50 Years*, AM. NEWS MAG. (June 26, 2009), <http://americannewsmagazine.com/2009/06/theresa-morris-social-paranormal-oracle-source/>.

13. *The Oprah Winfrey Show: Whitney Houston* (ABC television broadcast Sept. 15, 2009).

14. Wilson, *supra* note 8.

15. Interview with Brandon Bell, African American entrepreneur (Oct. 28, 2009).

16. Telephone Interview with Maudie Thomas, African American mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother (Oct. 28, 2009). The author is the maternal granddaughter of Maudie Thomas.

17. *Id.*

18. *Id.*

19. Interview with Azariah Ellington, African American student at Georgetown University Law Center (Oct. 28, 2009).

20. *Id.*

people admitted referring to personal business as “dirty laundry” themselves or hearing it from their mothers, grandmothers, and other close relatives.²¹

The tradition of secrecy likely derived from Negro enslavement.²² White masters forbade their slaves to participate in certain activities or share certain information with one another. The consequences of breaking these rules often resulted in a slave being sold away from his family, flagellation, bodily mutilation, and even death.²³ Thus, slaves found ways to conceal the practices they created to violate the rules.²⁴ Slaves secretly taught one another to read and write by using sticks to script letters in the dirt because the characters could easily be erased.²⁵ When masters prohibited marriage among slaves, the slaves performed secret ceremonies that required jumping a broom instead of having participating in a traditional church wedding.²⁶ When working in the field, they sang Negro spirituals, which appeared to be religious work songs. In reality, the songs were used to communicate secret messages between slaves. Slaves used other coded language such as the “grapevine telegraph” to transmit information to other slaves across plantation lines and even to have conversations on forbidden topics in the presence of White people.²⁷ Thus, secrecy proved to be a vital mechanism for survival,²⁸ a source of establishing relationships with one another, and the primary means by which slaves could hope to obtain freedom. These secret conversations among slaves amounted to a pseudo initiation that established whether each slave was a legitimate member “of the group” or not.²⁹ Devotion to that group is what “prepared them to fight for freedom by becoming morally free of an intrusive and debilitating [W]hite out-group and by becoming more responsible to the inner slave community.”³⁰ Keeping quiet about one’s personal life and the things that occurred within the enslaved group proved to be an effective tool to foster community and resist oppression. The practice developed into an important tradition and continues to be passed from one generation to the next.

21. By numerous other Black people I am referring to personal observations and conversations exploring the concept of dirty laundry rather than formal interviews in a professional setting.

22. LESLIE W. LEWIS, *TELLING NARRATIVES: SECRETS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE* 7 (2007). The term Negro here depicts the period of Slavery. Further, Negro, African American, and Black are often used interchangeably, particularly in a scholarly setting, and one reference may be especially or more appropriate when referring to certain or specific time periods.

23. See generally, Diana Patton, *Punishment, Crime, and the Bodies of Slaves in the Eighteenth Century Jamaica*, 34 J. OF SOC. HIST. 923 (2001) (analyzing the punishments of slaves of African descent in the British colony of St. Andrew, Jamaica).

24. *Id.*

25. Antonio T. Bly, *Pretends He Can Read: Runaways and Literacy in Colonial America*, 6 EARLY AM. STUDIES 263, 286 (2008).

26. HARRIETTE COLE, *JUMPING THE BROOM* 18 (Second Owl 2004) (1993).

27. LEWIS, *supra* note 22, at 14.

28. It is common knowledge that slaves were often beaten (sometimes to death) and hung for punishment purposes. Secrecy was a means of ensuring they would not be punished.

29. *Id.* at 16.

30. *Id.*

B. *Mother Knows Best*

Considering the history of dehumanization and degradation that has plagued the Black community, it is not surprising that such advice continued to be passed on to future generations of African Americans. Frequently handed down from mother to child, the tradition of secrecy soon gained strength as a means by which to protect the reputation and integrity of Black people in White America. And, in many cases, it worked.

In the early 1900's, governments used literacy tests to deny freed Negroes the right to vote because, due to laws forbidding slaves to be taught to read, it was well known that Black people had an extremely high illiteracy rate.³¹ In response, literate Blacks secretly memorized the test and taught illiterate Blacks how to memorize the correct answers.³² While it only worked for a short time, the impact was substantial. Black votes did not have much of an effect on the elections, but their ability to bypass the roadblocks set by Whites served as proof to their oppressors and to themselves that they were not the stupid, lazy, shiftless people that they had been stereotyped.

Passing is another example where secrets among Black folk proved to have immediate benefits.³³ Black women who were raped by or had romantic relationships with Mulatto³⁴ or White men producing biracial children sought to protect their offspring by *passing* them off as White.³⁵ Others escaped Slavery or the homes of their parents to do the same. Early on, Black people could recognize other Blacks, even when Whites could not. Although darker skinned Negroes could not escape their circumstances through the same means and though they often felt painful jealousy toward those who could, they were careful not to violate the pact. Consequently, many Negroes were able to successfully prevent themselves from experiencing the racism and degradation that accompanied Blackness in America.

Recently, the failure to adhere to traditions of secrecy has proven to increase exactly what the practice was intended to reduce—the perpetuation of stereotypes about African Americans. Incidences such as the infamous feud between hip-hop

31. See generally Ralph Erikson, *The Laws of Ignorance Designed to Keep Slaves Illiterate and Powerless*, 118 EDUCATION, 206, 206 (1997) (arguing that the intended and direct effect of making it unlawful for slaves to read), available at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3673/is_n2_v118/ai_n28697175/.

32. CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT VETERANS, <http://www.crmvet.org/info/lithome.htm> (last visited Sept. 29, 2010).

33. *Passing* is a controversial subject because it also contributed to discord within the African American race. Yet, its success as a life-changing mechanism should not be minimized and the often unspoken pact between Black Americans who could not pass with those who could should not be ignored. See generally KATHY RUSSELL, ET AL., AND THE COLOR COMPLEX: THE POLITICS OF SKIN COLOR AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS (1992) (discussing the ability of very fair skinned Blacks to gain full inclusion in American society by living as White even though the law defined Blackness as having one drop of Black blood).

34. See *id.* at 6-7 (discussing a term used to refer to the offspring of a white person and a black mate). Quadroon and octoroon were also used to describe mixed race children who were one-quarter and one-eighth Black respectively, but these terms were used with less frequency.

35. *Id.* at 138-39 (discussing Charles Chesnut's "The House Behind the Cedars," which argues that mixed-raced people often experienced internal conflict); see also Avonie Brown & Laura Lieberman, BLACK OR WHITE available at <http://www.demovisions.com/afro2/bnw/bwmain.html>.

superstars Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G.³⁶ and the released tapes of Reverend Jeremiah Wright's church rants³⁷ are examples of personal business or private African American behaviors (respectively)³⁸ that, when introduced to the public, reaffirmed negative stereotypes about Black people.

Another significant and current example is the use of the word "nigga." "Nigga" is a modern derivative of the word "Nigger"³⁹—a word established in the early 1800s as a derogatory name for people of African descent.⁴⁰ Although the term was degrading, severe oppression and mass self-hatred among Black slaves led them to embrace the term and use it to describe themselves. While there were public movements to rename the race from "nigger" to Negro, from Negro to Black, and from Black to African American, Black people continued to secretly use the word "nigger" within the confines of their own communities.⁴¹

In the Black community "nigga" can refer to all Blacks, Black men, disgraceful or stereotypical Blacks, Black enemies, and Black friends.⁴² Hip-hop artists frequently use the words in their songs to refer to Black people in any of the aforementioned ways. Initially the music was only marketed and embraced by Black communities, possibly explaining why Black activists did not feel an immediate need to discourage Black hip-hop artists from using the word in their music. Yet, hip-hop eventually became a vastly successful art form and the cavalier use of "nigga" by Black artists has

36. Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. were both murdered. Earl Ofari-Hutchinson, *Rap Killing Reinforces Racial Stereotypes*, NEW AMERICA MEDIA, May 20, 2009, available at http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=a65827f3a3908b7d2336fe29eebf4e9. While their murders remain unsolved, the very open and very hostile vocal battle that occurred between them led many people to believe their murders were the result of a hit put out by B.I.G. on Tupac and the retaliation of Tupac's affiliates on B.I.G. *Id.* The incident reinforced stereotypes about the prominence of Black on Black violence—even successful and wealthy African Americans could only solve their problems with one another by using violence. *Id.*

37. Reverend Wright's released sermons reinforced the stereotype that it is Black people who perpetuate racism and that White people should fear a Black, animalistic uprising. Kimberly Gross, et al., *Racial Framing in Coverage of the 2008 Presidential Elections*, (Sept. 3, 2009) (presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, George Washington University) (on file with author), available at <http://www.pratiquesciencesociales.net/exposes/S11.%20Racial%20Framing%20in%20Coverage%20of%20the%202008%20Presidential%20Election.pdf>. The stereotypes were used in an attempt to attack the political reputation of President Barack Obama who was a Presidential candidate at the time. *Id.*

38. The disputes between Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur were personal affairs and business, while Reverend Jeremiah Wright's church rants are private African American behaviors. Although B.I.G. and Shakur were public figures, their dispute was a personal one that remained largely unknown to the White community, as the Hip-Hop era was still emerging and being molded. Reverend Wright's church discussions can be considered private because although the Church is a public place and open to all who wish to gather and worship, the venue is generally considered a private—a place where people may gather to worship and share or confess opinions, ideas, and truths.

39. See Phil Middleton & David Pilgrim, *Nigger (the Word) a Brief History!*, AFR. AM. REGISTRY, June 1, 2001, http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/nigger-word-brief-history (explaining that "Nigger" comes from the Latin word "niger," meaning Black. "Niger" became the noun "Negro" in English and it is often believed that "Nigger" is a phonetic spelling of the White, Southern mispronunciation of the noun).

40. *Id.*

41. Dr. Laura Schlesinger's rant about the "N-word" serves as an example of the ongoing affects of this phenomenon. See Laura Schlesinger (Radio One radio broadcast, Aug. 12, 2010), available at <http://mediamatters.org/blog/201008120045>.

42. Middleton & Pilgrim, *supra* note 38.

undoubtedly removed much of the stigma from people of other ethnic backgrounds using the word to refer to Blacks in many of the same ways Blacks use the word to refer to themselves—even where use of the word may be terribly offensive.⁴³ Consequently, the “nigga” stereotype has a strong presence in society, compelling many Blacks to find ways to distinguish themselves from the people they believe the stereotype most accurately applies to.

III. THE DANGER OF AIRING DIRTY LAUNDRY

Stereotypes are “generalizations, or assumptions, that people make about the characteristics of all members of a group, based on an image (often wrong) about what people in that group are like.”⁴⁴ They are generally unavoidable, uncomfortable, and often painful for individuals within the stereotyped group. African American people are often stereotyped as over-sensitive, lazy, big-lipped, sexual, ignorant, angry, crime-ridden, welfare-dependant, illegitimate baby-making, nappy-hair having, drug-doing, dancing fools.⁴⁵ One of the biggest problems with (these particular) stereotypes is that they are only perpetuated when based in truth.⁴⁶ Someone, somewhere, had an encounter with a Black person that reaffirmed the validity of a stereotype about Blacks. As a consequence, in spite of the best efforts made by many Blacks to dispel them, these stereotypes may be around for the long haul. Nevertheless, it remains possible to minimize their presence in America. Yet, that possibility becomes unattainable if those Black people in the spotlight continue to air dirty laundry, validating the very stereotypes lower, working, middle, and upper class Blacks are working to dispel.

A. *A Historical Look at Using Comedy to Air Dirty Laundry*

African American people have always possessed, depended on, and taken pride in their own rich comedic tradition. Yet, “[h]aving been so vehemently maligned and negatively stereotyped by mainstream society,” Black people have appropriately been skeptical of sharing that part of their culture which is uniquely characterized by “self-mockery and self-deprecation.”⁴⁷ More problematic is the fact that when Whites do not regard Black laughter and Black comedy as a negative trait, it serves as a source of comfort because it communicates that Black people remain jovial in spite of their history of enslavement, racism, segregation, degradation, and utter humiliation in

43. See Schlesinger, *supra* note 41.

44. Conflict Research Consortium, *Inaccurate and Overly Hostile Stereotypes*, Int'l Online Training Program on Intractable Conflict, available at <http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/problem/stereoty.htm>.

45. This is not a complete list of stereotypes about African Americans.

46. Stereotypes can both be wrong and based in truth. I do not mean to imply that these stereotypes are completely true, nor do I mean to contradict myself. I am pointing out that these characteristics may have been true to an individual, or a few individuals, and were then wrongfully applied to an entire race or group of people based on their similar appearance or physical characteristics. That is often how stereotypes are formed or developed.

47. MEL WATKINS, *ON THE REAL SIDE: LAUGHING, LYING, AND SIGNIFYING—THE UNDERGROUND TRADITION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HUMOR THAT TRANSFORMED AMERICAN CULTURE, FROM SLAVERY TO* RICHARD PRYOR 12 (1994).

America.⁴⁸ And yet, despite this troubling history, while White people laugh at and excuse their own past behavior toward Blacks, African American comedians are increasingly using mass-marketed comedy to air Black dirty laundry.

Since Slavery, Black comedy has traditionally been a necessary means of coping with and escaping from the harsh conditions of life. Though they maintained an ingratiating demeanor, slaves often used wit as an instrument of resistance by responding to their master's belittling questions with passive, but snappy and revealing humorous remarks. One story describes an encounter between a Black maid who worked for a White family near an Army camp during World War II.⁴⁹ When her mistress asked, "Do you suppose we'll be able to get more work out of you girls now that they've moved all the colored soldiers away from this camp?"⁵⁰ She replied: "I don't know, ma'am. They ain't moved none of the [W]hite fellows away."⁵¹ It was this type of subterfuge, combined with an element of secrecy that shaped Black humor.

As Black comedy became more public post-Slavery, the craft also became a mechanism used to entertain the White masses. Emancipation brought technical freedom, but little more. In the face of the increasing threat of Blacks in the labor market, White people needed a sense of comfort and reassurance that White remained superior to Black.⁵² Black people and Black culture quickly became a major source of comedy as Black entertainers bought into an already-distorted image of themselves—African Americans "had no choice but to reaffirm [this image]. In doing so they also helped provide superficial justification for the racial repression that marked the nineteenth century."⁵³ Thus, minstrel shows such as *Little Black Sambo* and other television shows like *Amos n' Andy* inaccurately portrayed Black people as ignorant, happy-go-lucky fools.⁵⁴

In the sixties, the emersion of a strong Black middle class, lead by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and motivated by the Civil Rights Movement, demanded that shows which insulted Black culture and ignored African American progress be pulled from the air.⁵⁵ When asked about the popularity of shows like *Amos n' Andy* in the Black community, Civil Rights leader Jessie Jackson said:

Black people had enough sense to appreciate them as funny people playing at their roles. But, after all, in the same period where all that was on radio and TV, out came Martin Luther King, out came Malcolm X, out came Adam Powell . . . There was a tradition in our community of funny people. [But] it did not dominate

48. See *id.* at 18-19.

49. *Id.* at 52.

50. *Id.*

51. *Id.*

52. *Id.* at 123-24.

53. *Id.* at 124.

54. See *Little Black Sambo: Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat* (Feb. 6, 1938), available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7cvsh2ilwQ&feature=related>; see also *Amos n' Andy: Sapphire Disappears* (Feb. 7, 1952), available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gc5zV-80ag>.

55. *Id.*

[B]lack life to the extent that it has been projected. Even to this day, our struggle is to show the breadth and depth of the [B]lack experience.⁵⁶

With that struggle in mind and a new sense of control over their own likenesses, Black people became increasingly protective of humorous portrayals of their circumstances. Shows about Black people such as *Good Times* and *Sanford and Son* were uniquely marketed to the Black audience. Cross over shows like *The Cosby Show* focused on middle class Blacks and the commonalities between White and Black families. Efforts were being made to contain Black family behavioral secrets within the community.

Richard Pryor “signaled the end of diffident [B]lack comedy and challenged Americans to acknowledge the full range of African Americans’ humorous tradition”⁵⁷ but at what price? What was initially meant to be shocking, in your face, “deal with it” humor, has created a desensitized American society who is able to laugh at Black people and their culture free of guilt, never having to acknowledge or examine the possibility that it is a deeply-rooted racism that made them laugh to begin with. Moreover, it signifies a return to the “shuckin’ an’ jivin’ for masta’s approval” persona that—once used as a means of survival—is now used to bolster celebrity status, as evidenced in the following examples.

B. Chris Rock, “Good Hair,” and *Airing Dirty Laundry*

African American comedian Chris Rock is a perfect example of Black comedy gone wrong. Having made Hollywood films such as *I Think I Love My Wife* where he uses a comedic angle to look at Black relationships, Black women, and marital indiscretions from a biased, masculine perspective, his success is dependent on the exploitation of Black people and culture.⁵⁸ In a famous stand up routine, Rock openly sought to distinguish law abiding Blacks from Black criminals when he said, “I love Black people, but I hate niggas.”⁵⁹ Soon after Rock’s statement, one could find bumper stickers “bearing his declaration of disdain cropped up on car bumpers like bitterly sardonic political slogans.”⁶⁰ Sadly, he remains popular among Black audiences and his exploitative films and standup acts have managed to generate great crossover appeal. Thus, Chris Rock has become a dangerously influential comedian with the power and, quite possibly, the desire to reveal Black secrets with the goal of perpetuating racial stereotypes to the detriment of African Americans.

56. *Id.* at 322.

57. *Id.* at 13.

58. Rock is a married man who begins to lose interest in his wife who is more interested in raising their children than having fun or having sex. Rock is depicted as a solid husband and father whose eye occasionally wonders. He begins to lose his self control when a sexy woman seduces him. As things heat up between the two of them, Rock runs back to his wife leaving the woman in the bed, untouched, wondering how she failed. Rock’s depiction of both women is sexist—they are the epitome of traditional stereotypes of Black women. His wife is too strong and independent so she emasculates him; his mistress is over-sexualized and responsible for causing him to almost have sex with her. See generally *I THINK I LOVE MY WIFE* (Fox Searchlight Pictures 2007).

59. Jody David Armour, *Nigga Theory in the Substantive Criminal Law* (forthcoming).

60. *Id.*

Even *Essence Magazine*, a frontrunner in African American print media, recently credited Rock as one of 150 Black power agents who are effecting “change we can believe in” because of the recent release of his new documentary film entitled *Good Hair*.⁶¹ According to *Essence*: “With humor and history, Rock messes with our heads and gets down to the root of the problem with an age-old examination of the hairy truth.”⁶² Shame on them—Rock is even less of a Black leader effecting change than he is an individual who examines the truth. While Rock believes “secrets are bad for the human spirit,” he must also believe the same about the truth because, devoid of context and wanting in authenticity, *Good Hair* falls far below the minimum threshold for what qualifies as truth—it is, at best, a perverted version of a complex Black hair story.

In the very biased documentary, Rock dishes about Black women and many of the methods they employ to perfect their hair.⁶³ Specifically, Rock looks at perms, which he refers to as “the creamy crack,” relating women who get perms to crack addicts—an unnecessary and inappropriate comparison. He also takes a shallow look at hair weaving, offering only a limited discussion of weave, to conversations with other men who know little about Black women or their hair and B-list Black female celebrities who, self-admittedly, are totally out of touch with the general Black female population. Alynda Wheat echoed these sentiments and stated that “as a [B]lack woman, I sat through *Good Hair* with one dominant thought: Who are these people? Their opinions rarely represented my own, or those of anyone I know.”⁶⁴ Rock fails to include testimonies to the experience of the average Black woman who refuses to chemically straighten her hair, but will use a flat iron to enjoy a straight look; or who adds a track here and there, every now and then as more of an accessory than a clutch; or who can execute her own perm, sew her own weave, and/or style her own hair, at little cost to herself.⁶⁵ Even more disturbing than his failure to interview a more representative and diverse sample of Black women is Rock’s additional failure to provide any background information on how “good hair” came to be distinguishable from “bad hair” in the Black community, as if it is an unexplainable, incomprehensible, overnight phenomenon.⁶⁶

Rock claims that he is using the film to examine why Black women spend so much money to straighten and smooth their hair. Is it because they want to look White? If

61. *The Power 150: Change We Can Believe*, in *EBONY*, Dec. 7, 2009 at 90, 91.

62. *Id.* at 91.

63. *GOOD HAIR* (HBO Films 2009).

64. Alynda Wheat, *Good Hair? Hardly. How Chris Rock Gets It Wrong*, *ENT. WKLY.*, Oct. 12, 2009, available at <http://popwatch.ew.com/2009/10/12/good-hair-hardly-how-chris-rock-gets-it-wrong>.

65. In the majority of Black communities that I have spent time in, I’ve noticed that it is more typical for a woman to use a straightening iron or hot comb than to chemically straighten her hair, and that often Black women find ways to save costs when it comes to hairstyling by either teaching themselves or undergoing expensive braiding sessions less often.

66. For an in-depth analysis of the genesis and evolution of the definition of good and bad hair in the Black community, see generally AYANNA D. BIRD & LORI L. THARPS, *HAIR STORY: UNTANGLING THE ROOTS OF BLACK AMERICA* (St. Martins Publishing 2001); NOLIWE M. ROOKS, *HAIR RAISING: BEAUTY, CULTURE, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN* (Rutgers Univ. Press 2000); SUSANNAH WALKER, *STYLE AND STATUS: SELLING BEAUTY TO AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN* (Univ. Press of Kentucky 2007).

you ask Rock, the answer is yes. In fact, when explaining that sodium hydroxide is used in chemicals to straighten Black hair, Rock tells the chemist that their desire to look White is exactly the reason Black women continue to use the procedure.⁶⁷ Right? Wrong. Rock took back this claim when interviewed on *The View*, but the damage had already been done. The Black hair issue was on the big screen for everyone to see and for people to laugh at—procedures and customs that were once closely held beauty secrets in Black America have now been distorted and publicized by someone whom the secret did not belong to in the first place. But what does he care? After all, “spilling the beans” has made him one of the biggest celebrities in America.

Fans of *Good Hair* praise the film⁶⁸ as a concerned and genuine attempt to address a question posed by Rock’s daughter (as well as the purported inspiration for the movie): “Daddy, why don’t I have good hair?”⁶⁹ After all, these supporters assert, “[s]hameful attitudes about hair often begin at home”⁷⁰ and “Black parents need to teach their sons and daughters that though hair comes in a variety of textures, there is no such thing as good or bad. If you got hair, good!”⁷¹ While this position may seemingly coincide with the documentary’s alleged inspiration, perhaps Rock could have offered the fatherly words of W.E.B. Du Bois, who once wrote a letter to his daughter which said, “[B]rown is as pretty as white, and crinkly hair as straight, though it is harder to comb.”⁷² However, Rock uses the film to make a very private issue public instead of confining the conversation tactfully and within his own home as would seem appropriate. Rock never even gets around to addressing his daughter’s question. In fact, one could imagine Rock’s daughter or any Black woman who sees the film feeling more insecure about her “bad hair,” better about her “good hair,” or one day feeling ashamed that she chose to buy herself some hair—especially after watching the scene where “a sheepishly grinning Rock tr[ies] in vain to unload bushels of tightly coiled [Black] hair to beauty suppliers”⁷³—hair that could have belonged to his daughters, his wife, or his mother.

Rock also claims his film is a social critique as it “explor[es] how the preoccupation with so-called ‘good hair’ has affected the image, self-esteem, sexual relations and even the pocketbooks of black people” in order to remove some of the stigma that

67. GOOD HAIR, *supra* note 63. The chemist asks Rock, “Why do they do it?” Rock responds, “To look White,” then shrugs. *Id.*

68. *Id.*

69. Greg Braxton, *Chris Rock Finds the Humor in ‘Good Hair’*, L.A. TIMES, Oct. 4, 2009, available at <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/oct/04/entertainment/ca-rock4>.

70. RUSSELL, *supra* note 33, at 93.

71. *Id.*

72. The Editors, *To Chris Rock and Beyond: Reactions, Responses, and Ruminations on ‘Good’ Hair*, THE DEFENDERS ONLINE, Oct. 16, 2009, available at <http://www.thedefendersonline.com/2009/10/16/to-chris-rock-and-beyond-reactions-responses-and-ruminations-on-‘good’-hair/>.

73. Pamela Newkirk, *An Unloving Portrait of Black Women, in To Chris Rock and Beyond: Reactions, Responses, and Ruminations on ‘Good’ Hair*, THE DEFENDERS ONLINE, Oct. 16, 2009, available at <http://www.thedefendersonline.com/2009/10/16/to-chris-rock-and-beyond-reactions-responses-and-ruminations-on-‘good’-hair/>.

prevents people from talking about it.⁷⁴ While Rock's film may show some of these things, it fails to reveal other important and necessary components of the "good hair" discussion.⁷⁵ When asked why he failed to interview more women who have natural hair, Rock replied, "[t]hat would be like doing a story on 'Hey, there's no toxins in the water.' Or 'Let's do a story on people who didn't get murdered yesterday [sic].'"⁷⁶ Instead of showing all sides of the story, the film simply pokes fun at African American women who suffer because of how they feel about their hair, and provides a platform for White people to laugh at how the racism of the Old South has manifested itself in modern day Black America. The film's ridiculing character is exemplified in Rock's depiction of women in salons who pay to have their hair relaxed or to get hair extensions.

Rock's ill-advised, one-dimensional, disparaging examination of Black women and their hair does little to make Black women feel more comfortable talking about their hair, but instead reinforces the shame that is the driving force behind the "good hair" versus "bad hair" discussion, strongly suggesting that a more constructive result was not the intended goal of the documentary. In one particularly troubling scene, Rock goes to India to investigate where hair extensions actually come from.⁷⁷ He quickly learns that the value of hair in India is higher than the value of gold and there have been many incidences where people have used scissors to steal hair off of an unsuspecting woman's head.⁷⁸ With this new knowledge he asks a teenage Indian girl if anyone has ever tried to steal her hair.⁷⁹ When she replies in the negative, he tells her, "If you see some Black women, just run the other way," suggesting that a Black woman would steal her hair if given the opportunity.⁸⁰ The implication is insulting, degrading, and appears to be an attempt to humiliate and demean rather than an effort to get a conversation started.⁸¹ Rock's "unloving portrait of [B]lack women and [B]lack hair might be good for a laugh or a pot of gold, but it won't help his daughters . . . navigate a society that demeans and devalues their very physical essence."⁸² Rock's true motivation behind creating the film was fame and celebrity via controversy, by any means necessary.

74. Braxton, *supra* note 69.

75. See previous discussion, *supra*, explaining how Black women are not all perming, pressing, and weaving their hair. See also AYANA BIRD & AKIBA SOLOMAN, *NAKED* (Berkley Publishing Group 2005) (documenting how Black women feel about their hair and bodies).

76. Esther Armah, *Chris Rock's Celebration of Rape, in To Chris Rock and Beyond: Reactions, Responses, and Ruminations on 'Good' Hair*, THE DEFENDERS ONLINE, Oct. 16, 2009, <http://www.thedefendersonline.com/2009/10/16/to-chris-rock-and-beyond-reactions-responses-and-ruminations-on-'good'-hair/>.

77. *GOOD HAIR*, *supra* note 63.

78. *Id.*

79. *Id.*

80. *Id.*

81. While the delivery of the statement was meant to be comical, its substance was rooted in the controversy surrounding airing Black women's secrets about beauty and hair. Jokes and comedy can be insulting and offensive to the group or individual that is the brunt or subject of the joke—a sort of 'Harsh Humor' if you will.

82. Newkirk, *supra* note 73.

C. *The Problem with Celebrities Airing Dirty Laundry*

According to African American iconoclast Ishmael Reed, “The profitable literary scam nowadays is to pose as someone who airs unpleasant and frank facts about the [B]lack community, only to be condemned by the [B]lack community for doing so. This is the sure way to grants, awards, [and] prizes . . .”⁸³ Airing dirty laundry has become a popular way to bring attention to one’s self because Blacks who air dirty laundry are hailed in White society as courageous.⁸⁴ The fastest way to gain appeal in White society is to exploit your own Black culture by perpetuating, validating, and justifying stereotypes generated by White society. This phenomenon was demonstrated in Hollywood when Halle Berry and Denzel Washington received Academy Awards for their roles in films that depicted them as the stereotypically over sexualized Sapphire and the angry, criminal-minded Black man, respectively.⁸⁵ It can also be seen in politics, as Clarence Thomas and Michael Steele are both heralded by conservatives for speaking against traditional Black political views in spite of their racial backgrounds.⁸⁶ More recently, Chris Rock has received an incredible amount of praise from White audiences for his “bravery” in making *Good Hair*. This sends the message that for an African American to rise to greatness, and to rise quickly, sacrificing secrets of the Black community will be rewarded in White America.

In 2000, Spike Lee demonstrated this concept when he released *Bamboozled*, a film satirizing the inclination of Black celebrities to sell out their people in order to gain favor in White society.⁸⁷ In the film, Damon Wayans plays an upright Black man who graduated from Harvard University.⁸⁸ He works at a television station and is having little luck in convincing the network to produce one of his proposals for a show about intelligent Black people.⁸⁹ Fed up, Wayans decides to try to get fired so that he will be released from his contract and be able to pursue work with other television networks.⁹⁰ In order to do so, he pitches a minstrel show entitled: *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show*.⁹¹ He hires two impoverished street performers to star in the show who eagerly agree, hoping to get their first big break.⁹² The actors are in blackface and the jokes are racist, but the network loves the idea and agrees to

83. ISHMAEL REED, *AIRING DIRTY LAUNDRY* 3 (Addison-Wesley Publ'g Co. 1993).

84. *See id.* at 18.

85. Berry and Washington received Academy Awards for their roles in *MONSTER'S BALL* (Lions Gate Films 2001) and *TRAINING DAY* (Warner Brothers Pictures 2001), respectively. Oscars Organization, Nominee's and Winners for the 74th Academy Awards, <http://www.oscars.org/awards/academyawards/oscarlegacy/2000-2009/74nominees.html>.

86. For a discussion on how many African Americans have disclaimed Clarence Thomas and Michael Steele as members of the Black Community, see RANDALL KENNEDY, *The Case of Clarence Thomas, in SELLOUT* 86 (2008); see also Suzy Khimm & David Corn, *Pitching for the Racist "Master": House Negro/ Uncle Tom, Michael Steele—Attacks Black Civil Rights Icon Thurgood Marshall*, POLITICAL ARTICLES, July 4, 2010, available at <http://www.politicalarticles.net/blog/2010/07/04/pitching-for-the-racist-master-house-negro-uncle-tom-michael-steele-attacks-black-civil-rights-icon-thurgood-marshall>.

87. *BAMBOOZLED* (New Line Cinemas 2000).

88. *Id.*

89. *Id.*

90. *Id.*

91. *Id.*

92. *Id.*

produce the show.⁹³ It becomes a huge success and Wayans quickly embraces the show because he is starting to receive a great deal of awards and attention.⁹⁴ In the end, the show proves to be more trouble than it is worth, because the leading star is murdered by a group of frustrated rappers and, in response, Wayans' assistant (played by Jada Pinkett-Smith) murders Wayans.⁹⁵ When asked about the film, Pinkett-Smith said:

Making this movie, we were all pointing fingers at ourselves in a way. It was really an exploration of "What do we represent in this business? Who are we? What compromises and sacrifices are we willing to make of our commitment to our higher selves and our community and our humanity? What are we doing in this industry that uplifts our community, and what are we doing that breaks it down for the sake of celebrity and money."⁹⁶

Perhaps Rock should have asked the same questions about his own film when producing *Good Hair*, as his behavior and the documentary are perfect examples of the phenomenon Reed describes and Lee criticizes. Instead, Rock used his fame to get information out of average citizens by giving them a taste of the spotlight. "By being a comedian," Rock explained, "people think they know me, so they talk to me, they just blab."⁹⁷ Like Wayans's character in *Bamboozled*, the people featured in *Good Hair* are hoping to get their own big break, or at least their fifteen minutes of fame, and Rock is hoping to profit by exploiting their desire to do so. Moreover, when celebrities air the dirty laundry, the people who are negatively affected by the message have little recourse, as they often lack significant access to the media.⁹⁸ In *Bamboozled*, the Black people who felt offended and belittled by the portrayals of Black people in the show resorted to violence to get some relief.⁹⁹ The women who are upset about the way Black women are depicted in the film have mainly expressed their anger by posting their opinions on message boards. Even if they are able to express their reactions to the public on a grander scale, the damage is already done. The image is out there, people are laughing at it, and Chris Rock is making money off the secrets of Black people—the insecurities generally attributed to Black women without showing the other side. The other side simply isn't profitable.

Good Hair has generated a great deal of chatter and Rock has been interviewed on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The View*, various major news channels and numerous print media outlets. The film won the "Special Jury Prize"¹⁰⁰ at the Sundance Film

93. *Id.*

94. *Id.*

95. *Id.*

96. KALEEM AFTAB, SPIKE LEE: THAT'S MY STORY AND I'M STICKING TO IT 266 (W. W. Norton & Co. 2005).

97. Braxton, *supra* note 69.

98. REED, *supra* note 83, at 6.

99. BAMBOOZLED, *supra* note 70.

100. The Special Jury Prize is considered the third most prestigious prize at the film festival, after the Palme d'Or and the Grand Prix.

Festival and was also featured in the Toronto Film Festival.¹⁰¹ Thus, the documentary, primarily about Black people, is generating exactly what Rock hoped for: accolades and crossover appeal.¹⁰² During an interview, Rock asserted, smiling, that “This movie is like James Brown . . . you can’t get much blacker than James Brown. There’s not a crossover bone in his body, but he’s for everybody. What’s blacker than Snoop Dogg? But he’s the biggest rapper in the world. This movie is really, really black, but it’s for everyone.”¹⁰³ Rock misses the target. While Brown and Snoop Dogg may be good musicians, their claim to fame in White America arguably has more to do with stereotypical images of Black people than it has to do with music. Further, while Brown and Snoop Dogg marketed their own talent and image, Rock takes a stereotypical image of Black women, criticizes it, and puts it on the big screen for all the world to see, in order to market himself—in spite of the façade that he’s making it because of his little girls, the film clearly has absolutely nothing to do with him or anything he knows about. The crossover appeal in *Good Hair* stems from Rock’s carefree desire to berate and mock his own people in addition to the desire of White people to watch him do so.

Crossover appeal also tends to lead to more money, and that means more problems for those whose personal lives are sacrificed by comedians who air the community dirty laundry. When talking about some of the negative images of Black people he broadcast on the show, and his later decision to end production, comedian Dave Chappelle said, “Fifty million dollars is a lot of money. And what I’m learning is I am surprised at what I would do for \$50 million. I am surprised at what people around me would do for me to have \$50 million.”¹⁰⁴ In 2004, Chappelle walked off his own set while taping a comedy sketch about magic pixies that represented racial stereotypes.¹⁰⁵ In the sketch, Chappelle wore blackface and attempted to persuade Black people to behave stereotypically.¹⁰⁶ A White audience member laughed at the sketch in a way that made Chappelle uncomfortable.¹⁰⁷ He wondered (and not for the first time): “Had his show transitioned from confronting racial stereotypes to simply reinforcing them?”¹⁰⁸ It was the last straw in a series of events that led Chappelle to give up one of the most popular television shows in comedy history.¹⁰⁹ Chappelle drew a line when people started laughing at the “wrong jokes for the wrong reasons at the wrong time.”¹¹⁰ As a man who has experienced the painful reality of what it means to be a Black man in America, he took it personally. The major problem with Rock and other celebrities airing dirty laundry is that they often enjoy an unrealistic,

101. Braxton, *supra* note 69.

102. *Id.*

103. *Id.*

104. Christopher John Farley, *Dave Speaks*, TIME MAG., May 14, 2005, available at <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1061418,00.html>.

105. *Id.*

106. *Id.*

107. *Id.*

108. *Id.*

109. *Id.*

110. *Id.*

idealized self-image that allows them to separate themselves from and look down upon the people who are the subject of their humor. Accordingly, they refuse to realize the need for a line to be drawn.

D. The Problem with Using Stereotypes and Comedy to Air Dirty Laundry

A particularly good comedian knows history, politics, and pop culture from various angles and can use his or her knowledge to disrupt the status quo. However, the skill of the comedian is irrelevant if the audience doesn't know the background information necessary to understand the comedy. When Dave Chappelle walked away from his show in 2004, he stayed long enough to raise this point to the audience. He first explained how comedy is supposed to work: "I say something. You mull it over and decide whether you want to laugh or not, and then you do or not. Then I say something else, and you think about that."¹¹¹ He went on to address why the show was so popular: "Because it's good. You know why my show is good? Because the network officials say you're not smart enough to get what I'm doing, and every day I fight for you. I tell them how smart you are. Turns out, I was wrong. You people are stupid."¹¹² He was right about that—people are stupid. Not because they lack intellect, but because they don't pay enough attention to what is happening in the world around them to understand sophisticated comedy. In order to get a joke, one must understand its context, and many people do not appreciate Black culture enough to be able to make the necessary connections. Instead, they take the joke at face value and inappropriately laugh at the circumstance and the situation, rather than laugh at the joke's hypocrisy, sarcasm, or satire.

Perhaps Chris Rock should have given some thought to Chappelle's rant, because he had an opportunity to provide context in *Good Hair* but chose not to do so. Consequently, people who are unfamiliar with the origin of the concept of "good hair" don't know that they are laughing at an emotionally and racially charged subject within the Black community.¹¹³ Pamela Newkirk described her reaction to the film when she said,¹¹⁴

111. Jim Carnes, *Dave Chappelle Let's Rude Crowd Have It, Sticks Up for Cosby Comment*, FREE REPUBLIC, June 19, 2004, www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1156342/posts.

112. *Id.*

113. The concept of "good" and "bad" hair derives from American slave plantations where Black women were raped and forced to have their White master's children. Early on plantation owners frequently freed their mulatto children because they were the only children they had. Some even provided them with trades, start-up companies, or slaves of their own. This resulted in a separate colored class, set apart by its light skin, soft hair, and high breeding. When Whites began to realize that mulatto slaves were worth more money because of their beauty, they stopped freeing them so easily and instead sold them where they took higher positions on the plantations as house slaves. As house slaves they were often able to receive education, wear fine clothing, attend social events, and still had the possibility of earning their freedom. The divide led to Black people having a color complex, which included the desire to achieve "good" mulatto hair. RUSSELL, *supra* note 33, at 13-17.

114. Pamela Newkirk is a Professor of Journalism at New York University and editor of *LETTERS FROM BLACK AMERICA* (Beacon Press 2011).

One would expect the [Black woman's] longing for 'good hair' to be contextualized by [the] painful history. But instead [Rock] unleashes an ahistorical and apolitical riff on [B]lack women who are cast as mindless, vapid creatures who spend their rent money on relaxers and exorbitantly priced hair from India just because.¹¹⁵

The lack of context provided in the film means people are blindly laughing at Black women without their permission and without fully understanding what they're laughing at.

While a mixed-race audience, at an African American comedy show or a disparaging film like *Good Hair*, gives the illusion that people of all races are laughing with each other, the entire audience is actually laughing at the object of the comedy. For example, while a Black woman with natural hair could look at *Good Hair* and find it humorous, all the while taking into account the fact that the movie isn't really portraying her or people like her in a negative light, a White woman watching the same film, laughing at the same jokes, might easily interpret the film to be about all Black women including the one sitting next to her. While the Black woman is laughing at all of the other Black women she is able to distance herself from, the White woman is laughing at her. Consequentially, the comedy no longer amounts to the developed level one expects from a professional comedian; instead the joke is demoted to the equivalent of childhood heckling.

IV. REFUTING ARGUMENTS JUSTIFYING THE AIRING OF DIRTY LAUNDRY: THE MYTH ABOUT OPEN LINES OF COMMUNICATION

It is a common belief that exposing the secrets and sacred traditions of a race-based community will foster a mutual understanding across racial lines and will inspire cultural awareness. For that reason, when people speak about racial harmony, they almost always mention the need to open lines of communication between races. In the novel *A Country of Strangers*, David K. Shipler suggests that Black people must take "White people by the hand and lead them toward open-mindedness" by making them aware when they have been insensitive to racial implications in their discourse.¹¹⁶ According to Shipler, White people do not recognize that they have done or said something wrong, not politically correct, or offensive.¹¹⁷ Other scholars believe that talking about any and all racial issues will remove the stigma from racialized others. In some cases, each may be right.

There are moments when talking about race is important and necessary in order to further progress. Shipler uses the example of a White and a Black coworker who became friends. The White woman raved about how much she loved the film *Gone With the Wind* and said, "Wouldn't you have loved to be there?"¹¹⁸ Surprised by her

115. Newkirk, *supra* note 73.

116. DAVID K. SHIPLER, *A COUNTRY OF STRANGERS: BLACKS AND WHITES IN AMERICA* 562 (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1997).

117. *Id.*

118. *Id.* at 563.

coworker's inability to recognize the impact race would have played in her circumstance if she had been there, the Black employee replied, "I would have been a slave."¹¹⁹ This was an opportune teaching moment and an appropriate time to have a candid conversation about race that could potentially dispel stereotypes for each party. But the reality is that these intimate conversations do not and cannot happen for the vast majority of Americans because the country remains incredibly segregated.¹²⁰ In an alleged attempt to stimulate conversation among the masses or, more likely in order to stir up some controversy bringing attention to themselves, many celebrities and common people hoping to attain celebrity status use media outlets to expose Black secrets. However, even the right information in the wrong hands can and has had devastating effects. Instead of breaking down barriers and stereotypes, the examples illustrated in this paper demonstrate how the media has instead reinforced barriers and stereotypes, subjecting Black people to the very scrutiny, judgment, degradation, and shame that public discourse was purportedly intended to erase.

Alienation is the ultimate effect of publicly engaging in conversations that should be executed privately. Primarily, Blacks are alienated from other races. In her essay, *The Pain of Word Bondage*, Patricia Williams describes the necessity of formalities between Black and White people. She says:

As black, I have been given by this society a strong sense of myself as already too familiar, personal, subordinate to white people . . . the lack of formal relation to the other would leave me estranged. It would risk a figurative isolation from that creative commerce by which I may be recognized as whole, by which I may feed and clothe and shelter myself, by which I may be seen as equal—even if I am stranger. For me, stranger-stranger relations are better than stranger-chattel.¹²¹

Participating in public discourse about topics normally contained within the Black community results in the breaking down of these necessary formalities, often to the detriment of African Americans. For example, when Chris Rock appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to promote *Good Hair*, a woman in the audience stood up to comment because she was offended that a White woman sitting near her had just complimented her on her nice hair and then proceeded to ask if it was her real hair or a weave.¹²² Although the woman's intentions may not have been misguided, the fact that she felt comfortable asking the question at all demonstrates that Black hair is no longer a taboo subject. Consequently, whether a woman chooses to wear a weave, get a chemical relaxer, or simply wear her hair natural, she will often wonder: "Are (White) people looking at my hair?" "Do they know it's real?" "Do they know it's fake?" A once confident woman could easily be reduced to a bundle of insecurities

119. *Id.*

120. See Derrick A. Bell, *Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest Convergence Dilemma*, in *CRITICAL RACE THEORY* 20, 24-26 (Kimberle Crenshaw, et. al. eds., 1995).

121. PATRICIA WILLIAMS, *THE ALCHEMY OF RACE AND RIGHTS* 147-48 (Harvard Univ. Press 1991).

122. *The Oprah Winfrey Show: Chris Rock* (ABC television broadcast Sept. 30, 2009).

because the formal relation she once relied on is no longer available as a source of protection.

Secondly, public discourse about topics normally contained within the Black community alienates Black people from one another. Black people will distinguish themselves from other Blacks, who they feel are more susceptible to the scrutinizing eyes of White people, and will seek to align themselves with people who they believe have a positive racial reputation.¹²³ The effect is a split African American community. It is foreseeable that because of *Good Hair*, Black women with real or natural hair will make every effort to avoid being ridiculed by distinguishing themselves from those women who spend astronomical amounts of money to get hair extensions. Or, in search of securing a relationship, they will not want to be affiliated with Black women because, in the film, Black men were complaining about how they can never put their hands in a Black woman's hair. Thus, bringing private issues to the public arena has resulted in more doors being closed than opened, and more people feeling estranged than included. Chris Rock's one step forward has sent African Americans five steps back and it all could have been avoided by containing the conversation within the community so as not to subject Black women to outside scrutiny.

V. A CALL FOR A RETURN TO TRADITION

Leslie Lewis is right when she says, "African American narrative production is all about telling secrets."¹²⁴ After all, secret information is not necessarily denied information:

Denial implies a conscious refusal to acknowledge subconscious truths, all of this taking place within an individual (or group) consciousness. Secrecy, on the other hand, operates in the realm of communication. [Secrecy] is 'a method of handling concealed information . . . while telling a secret . . . communicates that the information told secretly is restricted to a particular 'membership group' . . .'¹²⁵

By definition, all secrets must be communicated to someone.¹²⁶ Up until recently, the sharing of secrets had been intentionally limited to sharing within the race so as to show someone that there is at least one other person who feels that way, who's had that experience, and has lived to talk about it. More recently, the sharing has been about advancing one's individual goals at the expense of another's emotional well-being to the detriment of the African American community. The exploitation of Black people by one of their own breaks down bonds and evaporates trust—both

123. See Armour, *supra* note 59 for an in-depth discussion on how "Good Negroes" try to distinguish themselves from "Bad Negroes." The phenomenon explained in this paper can be attributed to other areas of Black life outside of criminal versus noncriminal.

124. LEWIS, *supra* note 22, at 2.

125. *Id.*

126. *Id.* at 12-13. Secrets are generally shared between two or more people. E.g., "I have a secret to tell you," or "We have a secret to keep." See Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary, www.m-w.com, entry: secret (noun), definition 1(b): something kept from the knowledge of "others" or shared in confidentiality only with a few (emphasis added).

necessary factors in developing the camaraderie to build a movement with hopes of advancing African American progress.

To make matters worse, revealing these secrets has, once again, made African American people the butt of America's jokes. In a letter to his daughter, W.E.B. DuBois once wrote: "Remember that most folk laugh at anything unusual whether it is beautiful, fine or not. You, however, must not laugh at yourself."¹²⁷ Today, Black people are constantly laughing at themselves with the help of African American comedians. While jokes about Black people by Black people may not seem inappropriate, they advance bias depictions of African American traditions, behaviors, and cultural norms while offering White people a license to laugh at those stereotypical images. This critique of the disparaging comedy should not be dismissed as an exaggeration of problems due to Black people's sensitivity and inability to take a joke at their own expense. The trouble lies in the fact that the jokes lack context, contribute to cultural misunderstandings, validate stereotypes, and destroy the sense of formality Black people have worked to establish in order to feel comfortable in society.¹²⁸ As Langston Hughes once said:

Humor is laughing at what you haven't got when you ought to have it. Of course, you laugh by proxy. You're really laughing at the other guy's lack, not your own. That's what makes it funny—the fact that you don't know you are laughing at yourself. Humor is when the joke is on you but hits the other fellow first—because it boomerangs. Humor is what you wish in your secret heart were not funny, but it is, and you must laugh. Humor is your unconscious therapy.¹²⁹

But what happens when everyone else is laughing at you—not with you, but at you? Is it still funny then? Therapeutic? No. It hurts more than helps. It bites when it should tickle and it shames you instead of lifting your spirits. My call is not for one to turn a blind eye to emotional and psychological issues in Black culture that linger when they should be dealt with, but to allow them to be dealt with within the confines of the Black community—guarded from the scrutiny of outsiders.

127. *To Chris Rock and Beyond*, *supra* note 72.

128. *See generally* WILLIAMS, *supra* note 121, at 146.

129. WATKINS, *supra* note 47, at 16.