"Yeah, But You Rape Women": Hannibal Buress and the Comedy Community's Role in Shaping Public Opinion of the Bill Cosby Sexual Assault Allegations

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"Yeah, But You Rape Women": Hannibal Buress and the Comedy Community’s Role in Shaping Public Opinion of the Bill Cosby Sexual Assault Allegations

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“Yeah, But You Rape Women”: Hannibal Buress and the Comedy Community’s Role in Shaping Public Discussion of the Bill Cosby Sexual Assault Allegations

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Introduction and Literature Review

The episode was called “Theo’s Holiday,” and it was our favorite. I can still picture watching it with my older sister, lying on the floor of our parents’ room a little past bedtime. We laughed as the Huxtables turned their house into a make-believe “real world” complete with Rudy as a banker and a restaurant in the kitchen to teach their eldest son about financial responsibility. We asked to stay up just a little longer to finish the episode, and we were allowed, for Nick@Nite was wholesome enough to push bedtime back a few minutes. This was the episode I thought about, this was the moment from my childhood that came back to me when the Internet began calling Bill Cosby a rapist in the fall of 2014. I thought about “Theo’s Holiday,” America’s father figure, my parents’ old television set. As the allegations mounted, and as the shocked public seemed increasingly convinced of Cosby’s guilt, I could not put it off any longer: I looked up the release date of this favorite episode. March of 1986. 1986: the same year that Barbara Bowman claimed Cosby “pinned (her) down in his own bed while (she) screamed for help” in an Atlantic City hotel room. So many years later, I had not forgotten watching The Cosby Show with my sister one night. Barbara Bowman said she “would never forget the clinking of his belt buckle as he struggled to pull his pants off.” (Bowman 2014).

***

America’s perception of Bill Cosby and his legacy is at a crucial point. Cosby is now facing sexual assault allegations from more than fifty different women over multiple decades, and is currently handling related criminal charges in Pennsylvania (Casarez, Castillo, and
Shoichet 2015; Sifferlin 2015). As allegations surfaced over the past year and a half, the media-consuming public faced the uncomfortable challenge of either reconciling or abandoning the once widely established view of Cosby as a gentle and loving father figure, innovative comedian, doctor of education, author, and charity donor. Further complicating perceptions is Cosby’s position in the Black community: at times applauded for the gains he made in transforming public opinion of Black men, and at other times denounced for preaching “respectability politics.” More broadly, the accusations mean negotiating America’s history of stereotyping Black men as sexually aggressive and devious, and lynching Black men under the guise of fear that they might rape White women.

A case with the size, scope, and significance of Cosby’s thankfully does not come often. However, in appreciating the uniqueness of this controversy, we should not forget to situate this scandal within the larger context of our society, its history and its perceptions. It is important to consider Bill Cosby and the allegations not only in terms of immediate repercussions, but also for what this controversy reveals about society’s definition of rape, its treatment of sexual assault victims, how celebrity can potentially shield someone from misconduct, the overlap of racial and sexual discrimination, and finally, the use of comedy as a strategy for encouraging public discussion of so complex an issue.

According to statistics compiled by RAINN, the Rape Abuse and Incest National Network, an American is sexually assaulted every 107 seconds. Four out of five cases of sexual assault involve perpetrators known to the victims, as in the alleged Cosby cases. 68% of these assaults will not be reported to the police, mirroring decades of silence among Cosby’s alleged victims. Survivors of sexual assault are also three times more likely to suffer from depression, six times more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, and four times more likely to
contemplate suicide, while at the same time, there is little repercussion for rapists: 98% will never spend a day in jail or prison. (“Statistics” RAINN). Recent work by feminist scholars, particularly Kate Harding with her book Asking For It, argues that not only do we live in a society where rape is prevalent, underreported, and unpunished as the statistics above suggest, but we have actually fostered a culture of rape- a culture that normalizes perpetrators and, “encourages us to scrutinize victims’ stories for any evidence that they may have brought violence upon themselves” (Harding 3-4). By exploring the media backlash against Cosby’s accusers, we are able to relate this case to society’s larger pattern of discrediting victims, protecting rapists, and normalizing or trivializing rape.

As noted earlier, because of Cosby’s complicated status in the Black community, as well as America’s past of falsely accusing Black men of rape because of their Blackness, this controversy provides an opportunity to explore race through a gendered lens, gender through a racial lens, and sexual assault at the point of the intersection. In her book Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism, Patricia Hill Collins notes that, “Not only are sexuality and violence part of representations of Blackness, these mass media images circulate in a climate where social institutions are increasingly saturated with relations of sexualized violence” (Collins 20). The “increasing saturation” of these images in media is another symptom of the rape culture described by Harding, yet Collins is careful to note how this culture differs in impact based on race.

Situating current trends into historical contexts, Collins notes, “Lynching and rape as forms of sexual violence historically visited upon African American men and women have been linked with U.S. sexual politics,” or the set of race-based beliefs regarding the sexuality of a given person (Collins 20-21). Harding also cites the effect of historical lynching on modern
discussions of sexual assault, connecting current beliefs about the prevalence of false rape claims with our fear of a past that allowed lynchings of African Americans in the south on “the mere accusation of rape, even without an identification by the alleged victim” (qtd. in Harding 68-69). This violent and unjust past has been used to problematize claims of sexual assault, particularly claims of sexual assault against prominent Black men such as Bill Cosby. Victims’ stories can be seen as potential “reputational lynching,” designed to tear down important members of the Black community by pinning them with old, unsightly stereotypes of Black men as sexually depraved.

Bill Cosby’s case offers valuable insight into our cultural navigation of each of these issues. It is also a high-profile test case in how social media, specifically comedic engagement through social media, can be used to shape public perceptions of a socially complex controversy. The strategic use of comic discussion in cultural analysis has long been documented. For example, in the article “Jokes and Their Relation to Society,” Christie Davies traces the impact of Soviet-Union era jokes in Russia to the desire to challenge the political regime: “Their jokes displayed an insight into the failures of the social and political order…it was a humor for a future very different from their recent past” (Davies 99). Similarly, comedy can be used for a future very different from current trappings of the rape culture that invalidates and silences victims of sexual assault. In the case of Bill Cosby, comedy pieces shared over social media contributed to the public awareness and legitimization of the allegations. Comedians have offered a strong example of, “satire that shines a light on rape culture,” just as Harding encourages (Harding 42). It is still important to realize, though, that comedy is not perfect as a medium of engagement with difficult topics. Given its emphasis on personal perspective and experience, comedy can isolate certain facets of a complex issue, while ignoring others. The prioritizing of White
comedian voices has hemmed in the discussion of Cosby, highlighting White American’s perception of the icon’s fall and failing to engage with his position in the Black community.

In the following sections, we will explore first, the pivotal role that comedy, shared through social media, has played in public understanding of the Bill Cosby allegations. Then, we will discuss the factors that contributed to the long silence surrounding the controversy, particularly the failure of media outlets to report on the rumors, and cultural resistance to the idea of Bill Cosby as a rapist. Finally, we will analyze how comedy has been able to break through the silence, as well as the limitations of the conversation that it fosters. Overall, it is the goal of this paper to deconstruct society’s systematic resistance to the stories of Cosby’s accusers, and to explore how, why, and the potential issues of the fact that comedians have consequently been leading the public debate about the controversy.
Section One

It Started With A Joke: A Timeline of The Bill Cosby Allegations

In mid-October 2014, YouTube user “eye sight” uploaded a low-quality cell phone video to the popular media-sharing website. As of April 2016, that video has over 840,000 views, not counting those who watched it after it was embedded in articles by Business Insider and Daily Mail.com, or read transcripts and summaries of its content when other major online news sources and entertainment sources picked up the story. In the age of viral videos, perhaps this is not surprising or impressive. Yet, unlike piano-playing cats or adorable British children, “eye sight’s” clip is more than a passing fad- destined to be forgotten in the backlogs of the Internet. It is already a landmark in the history of American pop culture: a line of demarcation dividing public perception of an icon from beloved to reviled.

The video, a minute and forty-one seconds long, is titled “Hannibal Buress Called Bill Cosby A Rapist During a Stand-Up”. It was filmed at a live show in Philadelphia featuring well-known comedian Hannibal Buress, a writer at SNL and guest-star in the 2014 comedy Neighbors (“Hannibal Buress,” IMDb). An attendee posted the clip almost immediately after the performance, and it began gaining views and comments with astounding speed. The video’s transcript contains this excerpt:

It’s even worse cuz Bill Cosby has the fuckin’ smuggest, old black man public persona that I hate. “Pull your pants up, black people, I was on TV in the ‘80s. I could talk down

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1 Online news sources include CBS News, TIME, News One, The Los Angeles Times, and the New York Daily News. Specific article citations are all included in the Works Cited page for reference.

to you cuz I had a successful sitcom!” Yeah, but you raped women, Bill Cosby so…that brings you down a couple notches…I don’t know why I’m telling you. I guess I wanna make it weird for you when you watch Cosby Show reruns…that shit is upsetting. If you didn’t know about it, you leave here, Google “Bill Cosby Rape.” That ain’t funny. That shit has more results than “Hannibal Buress” (eye sight).

Because of the video, many consider Buress the first substantial whistleblower in the ongoing controversy surrounding Bill Cosby. In fact, the LA Times referred to Buress as “The Comic Who Kindled the Cosby Firestorm” (Anderson 2015). But while we should not minimize the stand-up’s pivotal role in encouraging public discussion and acknowledgment of this issue, I would argue that if it was “the comic” who kindled the Cosby firestorm, comedy in general kept it from burning out. Buress’ routine may have sparked society’s engagement with the assault allegations, but we have continuously made use of comedy in order to navigate the distressing territory of the headlines since.

Not even a month after the Buress video, public engagement with Cosby through comedy reached a new peak online. In November 2014, the Twitter account promoting Bill Cosby invited the Internet to “meme” him, overlaying pictures with text in the expectation that the photos would be shared and reposted by other users who found them humorous. The tweet connected users to a meme generator on billcosby.com. (Aurthur 2014). Presumably, its intention was to create a resurgence of nostalgia for the Cliff Huxtable Cosby of millenials’ youth, with the promotion of the comedian’s new, now defunct NBC show in mind. This plan backfired dramatically: the “Cosby Memes” quickly took over the Internet in varying degrees of vulgarity. Nearly all referred to the sexual assault allegations and depicted Cosby as guilty and remorseless. Some memes alluded to additional allegations that Cosby had paid his victims to keep quiet (an
image of Cosby giving a thumbs up: “When you realize you got enough cash to pay off the victim”), or that he used Cliff Huxtable as a shield between himself and character defamation (“Remember when I ate cake? Let’s remember the cake times instead of the rape stuff”). Nearly all the memes used stills of Cosby from *The Cosby Show*; others reference his position as spokesperson for family-oriented Jell-O and pudding brands (“I love pudding…my dick where it don’t belong,” and “Where Hell-No means Jell-O”). Though the original tweet and the meme generator have been taken down from Cosby’s social media sites, many of these images continued to circulate on the Internet, picking up popularity as more and more allegations surfaced. A simple Google image search for “Bill Cosby Memes” yields many pages of results, including “related search” category tabs of “Bill Cosby- Rape,” “Bill Cosby- Pill,” and “Bill Cosby- Roofie,” in reference to allegations that he used Quaaludes to subdue women in several alleged instances of sexual assault. A number of the memes, including those discussed above, are included in Appendix A.

The “Meme-Me” response- combined with the viral reaction to Buress’ video- was a catalyst for ubiquitous public commentary. Because the memes threw their support behind victims, their circulation urged more alleged survivors to come forward. The traction of these comedic engagements succeeded where other media failed in part due to good timing. Though by nature “viral” videos erupt overnight, Buress had been performing his Bill Cosby routine for about six months prior to its YouTube upload (TheLipTV 2014) and, in a more abstract timeline, his joke could be considered about eight years overdue, as most mainstream coverage of any sexual assault allegations against Cosby died out around 2006. So…why now?

The article “18 Moments That Led to Bill Cosby’s Stunning Downfall” attributes re-emergence of the allegations to NBC’s January 2014 deal with Cosby for a new *The Cosby
Show-esque sitcom. This time, Cosby would play a humorously put-upon granddad (Arthur 2014). Potential reintroduction of Cosby into the family-values spotlight gave new relevance to the long-buried accusations. This likely contributed to Buress’ desire to make his comment and to the audience’s willingness to listen. From there, it took only one blogger with a low-quality phone camera and one PR team with a horrifically miscalculated publicity stunt to embroil Cosby in a hotbed of controversy. Since then, the comedy community has continued to produce material that directly engages the Cosby situation, insisting on its relevance to the general public and legitimizing the claims of the accusers as worthy of attention and discussion. Since the moment Buress stepped onto that Philadelphia stage, comedy has been front and center in our negotiation of the Bill Cosby sexual assault scandal.
Section Two
The Media and Bill: Tracing Decades of Silence

November 13, 2014, a week after the Twitter storm of Cosby Rape memes, *The Washington Post* ran an article by alleged victim Barbara Bowman entitled, “Bill Cosby raped me. Why did it take 30 years for people to believe my story?” In the piece, Bowman, who alleges that Cosby drugged and assaulted her on multiple occasions in 1985-86, states, “Over the years, I’ve struggled to get people to take my story seriously” (Bowman 2014). After the alleged incidents, which occurred when she was a seventeen-year-old aspiring actress under Cosby’s supposed mentorship, Bowman reached out to her agent and to a lawyer. The former had financial ties to Cosby and the latter dismissed her claim as fabricated. After these experiences, Bowman felt discouraged. “I was a teenager from Denver acting in McDonald’s commercials,” she writes, “He was Bill Cosby: consummate American dad Cliff Huxtable and Jell-O spokesman. Eventually, I had to move on with my life and career” (Bowman 2014).

However, March 8, 2005 brought a new surge in interest about allegations like Bowman’s. Andrea Constand, a former athletic director for Temple University, was moving forward with a civil suit against Cosby. Constand’s attempts to press other charges were denied by District Attorney Bruce Castor, who felt that the case was too weak to pursue, given the year-long delay between the alleged assault and Constand’s contact with the police. According to Constand’s 2004 account, Cosby “drugged her to a state of semi-consciousness and then groped and digitally penetrated her” (Malone 2015; CNN 2014; *Cosby: The Women Speak* 2015).
Subsequently, the civil suit Constand filed accused Cosby of battery, assault, and defamation of character (CNN 2014).

That fall, Cosby gave a deposition regarding these accusations, which was unsealed in 2015 by court ruling. A portion of this transcript and a link to the full PDF are included in Appendix B to supplement understanding of the Constand case and the other allegations. The documents, signed by Cosby, are an admission of obtaining prescriptions for Quaaludes, a brand of methaqualone, a “sedative-hypnotic drug” (“Quaaludes” 2010). Cosby further admitted obtaining the drugs to use on women with whom he wanted to have sex (Constand v. Cosby 2005). Since their release, these documents have become a source of fierce discussion in the news. However, in 2005-2006, the media did not yet have Cosby’s admission to report. Instead, coverage focused on the thirteen anonymous Jane Doe’s who had volunteered to testify in the case, all of whom shared similar stories of sexual assault by Cosby. On November 8, 2006, though, the legal proceedings ground to a halt before any of the Jane Does’ stories made it into the record. Constand and Cosby had settled out of court, with a confidentiality agreement preventing Constand from reaching out to the media or continuing to discuss the case. (Cosby: The Women Speak 2015).

Still, this brief period of attention to the accusations encouraged some of the Jane Does and other alleged victims to come forward. In 2005, The Today Show ran an interview with Cosby accuser Tamara Greene, who stated, “He had gone from helping me to groping me and kissing me and touching me and handling me and, you know, taking off my clothes” (CNN 2014). Barbara Bowman also continued to reach out to the media with her personal experiences. In 2006, she was interviewed by a number of news/entertainment outlets, including KYW-TV news, and the December issue of People Magazine (Bowman 2014). Additionally, in 2006,
Philadelphia Magazine garnered a good deal of attention when it ran a lengthy piece about Cosby, his legacy, and the accusations, entitled “Dr. Huxtable and Mr. Hyde.”

For the most part, though, the early-2000s media response to the accusations against Cosby remained underwhelming. As one journalist commented, after the Philadelphia Magazine article, “the story just died. Mr. Cosby was (mostly) out of view, his lawyers pushed back and tried to knock down every story and victim, and no one in the media seemed interested any longer” (Carr 2014). For just shy of a decade, the silence continued. Erin Keane, a former reporter for a local public radio station, holds the media accountable for being coerced into silence. In 2014, she published an article titled, “What I Wish I Asked Bill Cosby: How I Learned That Entertainment Journalists Can Play Hardball Too.” In it, she criticizes herself for failing to confront Cosby for the 2006 accusations despite a rather lengthy interview with him, and claims, “entertainment journalism has largely given [Cosby] a pass on the subject over the last ten years” (Keane 2014). However, the silence surrounding Cosby does not just rest on the shoulders of journalists in the entertainment industry.

David Carr of The New York Times accused many reputable news reporters of also granting Cosby a pass. In the November 2014 article “Calling Out Bill Cosby’s Media Enablers, Including Myself,” Carr indicts numerous journalists, writers, and interviewers for allowing Cosby to evade questions about the allegations, although they were common knowledge in most media circles. Among the “enablers” Carr identified is Mark Whitaker, who completed a 500-plus page biography on Cosby entitled “Cosby: His Life and Times,” which failed to include any reference to the four women who had already gone on record to accuse the comedian of sexual assault (Carr 2014). Similarly, Carr criticizes Ta-Nehisi Coates for omitting the accusations and rumors in his lengthy article for The Atlantic in 2008, only two years after the settlement of the
Andrea Constand civil case. Finally, *The New York Times* journalist acknowledges his own complicity in the unspoken effort to shield Cosby. He writes,

> And those in the know included me. I did a Q. and A. with Mr. Cosby…and never found the space or the time to ask him why so many women had accused him of drugging and then assaulting them. We all have our excuses, but in ignoring these claims, we let down the women who were brave enough to speak out publicly against a powerful entertainer. (Carr 2014).

Mark Ebner, a journalist who considers himself one of very few willing to investigate allegations against Cosby, argued that even for those willing to probe, the demand for articles and exposes was shockingly low. “The media has been protecting him…for decades,” he commented in a recent interview on CrimeTime (TheLipTV 2014). Ebner, already a well-respected journalist at the time of the Constand case, had to peddle a piece on Cosby to thirty-three different media outlets in order to find someone willing to run it (TheLipTV 2014).

Accuser Tamara Greene commented on this phenomenon and the recent turning of the tides, stating, “In 2005, Cosby still had control over the media. In 2015, we have social media. We can’t be disappeared. It’s online and can never go away” (Malone 2015).

In an article from Tech.Mic, Sophie Kleeman expounds on Greene’s quote, stating that the accuser “just nailed why it took a decade for the world to listen” and affirming that, “from the initial spark of public awareness to the online platforms adopted by Cosby’s accusers, social media and the Internet have played a vital role in bringing the accusations out into the open” (Kleeman 2015). The impact of such sites and forums is undeniable, considering how YouTube enabled access to Hannibal Buress’ stand-up and Twitter disseminated the Cosby Memes.
Numerous reports on Cosby also appear on the popular website BuzzFeed, on equal footing with quirky quizzes and “click bait” articles. These examples of hard-hitting stories integrated into highly trafficked social spaces on the Internet illustrate how we absorb news through consumer-driven media: we find the answers we want to find; we demand the stories we want to read. This creates pressure for news to be “consumable” right alongside tweets about friends’ lunches and personality quizzes. Disturbing as the allegations against Cosby are, comedic interpretation of the events renders the complex and unsettling situation more palatable for the viewer. News from formal outlets like *New York Magazine* still draws major attention, but we have now begun to rely on pop culture comedy to convince us the conversation is worth having.
Section Three

Where Cultural and Media Resistance Meet: Explaining Decades of Silence

It might be tempting to frame social media and comedy within it as a utopian wave in journalism, one that gives voice to the voiceless and enables citizens to be informed at unprecedented rates. However, many of the same resistances to reporting that shielded Cosby pre-social media are still at play in discussion of him now, post-social media. Just as there was systematic resistance to reporting on alleged victims’ accounts in the early 2000s, there remains cultural resistance to the idea of Bill Cosby as a serial rapist. Both types of resistance not only kept the media from reporting, but also dampen belief of the accusers, or even willingness to hear their accusations.

I argue that the resistance to the Cosby controversy breaks down into at least four issues: The Huxtable Effect, Proactive/Preventative PR, A Culture of Discrediting, and the Race v. Rape Conception. We will examine them in order.

The Huxtable Effect

From 1984-1992, The Cosby Show followed the lives of the Huxtables, a well-to-do Black family living in Brooklyn, New York. The show focused on day-to-day dramas of family life and emphasized stereotypical suburban American values including respect, responsibility, hard work, and honesty. Over the course of eight seasons, the show earned three Golden Globes and numerous other awards (“The Cosby Show,” IMDb). Groundbreaking for featuring a successful, stable, and happy Black American family, some consider it to have paved the way for
other like-minded sitcoms including Will Smith’s *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air.* (Schwarzbaum 1992). The show also cemented Bill Cosby in the public eye as a kind-hearted, humorous, often put-upon father figure. For viewers who tuned into the original airings, as well as the new generation reached when reruns enjoyed broadcast throughout more recent decades, Bill Cosby was Cliff Huxtable, doting dad, loving husband.

This is not a surprising conflation, given that much of *The Cosby Show* was built upon the actor’s real-life and stand-up material, and that during these years, Cosby was also the representative of family-branded products like Jell-O, Pudding Pops, and Coca-Cola. He also guest starred on the children’s programs *Sesame Street, The Electric Company,* and *Children’s Theatre* ("Bill Cosby" 2013). He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2002 and the Bob Hope Humanitarian Award in 2003. He authored numerous works (*Fatherhood* (1986), *Time Flies* (1987), *Childhood* (1991), *Kids Say the Darndest Things* (1998)) full of personal views, anecdotes, and stories of family life ("Bill Cosby” 2013). In essence, Cosby’s television and media exposure was near constant, and everything about him was branded loving, fatherly, and trustworthy. In fact, many of Cosby’s accusers based their own trust of the actor/comedian on this persona, contributing to their sense of disbelief after the alleged assaults. After coming forward, multiple accusers stated that fear that their story would not stand up to Cosby’s immaculate reputation was a major cause of their former silence.

“I knew that if I made this allegation against the squeaky clean Bill Cosby sh—who’s she [her agent] going to believe? In the battle of public opinion alone, he was Teflon,” stated Heidi Thomas, who alleged that Cosby sexually assaulted her over the course of multiple days in a friend’s ranch house (*Cosby: The Women Speak* 2015). Beverly Johnson, who alleged Cosby drugged and sexually assaulted her in the mid-1980s commented “It was like a family member
had done something to me” (Cosby: The Women Speak 2015; Malone 2015). She had long admired Cosby and considered him a near father figure. An actress herself, Johnson had actually hoped to gain a role on The Cosby Show and was in a private audition in Cosby’s apartment when he allegedly assaulted her (Cosby: The Women Speak 2015).

In short, the protection that Cosby’s Huxtable/family man reputation afforded him was cyclical: his media image established an irreproachable character, the public accepted and cemented that character as fact, and alleged victims censored themselves (or the media censored them) because they believed their stories could not challenge this character. In the years of silence, Cosby’s reputation as “squeaky clean” continued to stand, preventing the next round of alleged victims from coming forward.

**Proactive/Preventative PR**

Of course, even an established and meticulously well-maintained public image like Bill Cosby/Cliff Huxtable’s must rely on some defensive strategy by PR teams and other publicists in order to remain unimpeachable. The substantial burying and discrediting of rumors and allegations for close to a decade can be traced to, first, Cosby’s bullish and domineering style in interviews and second, to pressure on media outlets to avoid certain questions, pull certain stories, and omit certain quotes. Through a combination of these tactics, Cosby and his managers strategically controlled Cosby’s portrayal in the media as a moral and upstanding family man.

A firsthand witness to Cosby’s manipulative interview style, David Carr published an account of a 2011 Q&A for Hemispheres magazine, commenting on the uncomfortable experience. The journalist stated that,
The interview was deeply unpleasant, with a windy, obstreperous subject who answered almost every question in 15-minute soliloquies...after an hour of this, I mentioned that the interview was turning out to be all A. and no Q. ‘Young man, are you interested in hearing what I have to say or not?’ he [Cosby] said. ‘If not, we can end this interview right now.’ Mr. Cosby was not interested in being questioned, in being challenged in any way. By this point in his career, he was surrounded by ferocious lawyers and stalwart enablers. (Carr 2014).

This account is especially unsettling because Carr had not even attempted to address the sexual assault allegations that had risen by that year. Cosby’s remarks and standoffishness were inspired not out of defensiveness in the face of accusation, but rather were part of a kind of proactive or preventative need to control media image, or perhaps pure megalomania. Another interviewer, who dared to move on the offensive and offered Cosby a chance to comment on the allegations, faced even harsher treatment from the aging comedian.

In early November 2014, the Associated Press interviewed Cosby and his wife regarding an art exhibit in Washington. A few weeks later, after allegations and the media storm continued to swirl around Cosby, the AP decided to release the full content of that interview (the link to which is available in Appendix C), including several minutes of footage during which Cosby continued to speak while believing the cameras were off. Responding to the interviewer’s earlier line of questioning about the rumors and allegations (on which Cosby refused to comment during the interview itself), Cosby stated, “Now can I get something from you? That none of that will be shown...I know I didn’t say anything, but I’m asking your integrity that said I didn’t want to say anything...and I would appreciate it if it was scuttled” (Associated Press 2014). Cosby continued, with his tone becoming vaguely threatening toward the young journalist, commenting,
I think if you want to consider yourself to be serious, then it will not appear anywhere…And we thought, by the way, that because it was AP, that it wouldn’t be necessary to go over that question…we thought the AP had the integrity to not ask. (Associated Press 2014).

Closing the interview, Cosby remarked to a higher-up on the far right of the frame that the interviewer’s supervisor should be contacted in regards to this incident.

Soon after the AP posted this footage, the clip went viral. To date, it has been viewed over 2.2 million times on YouTube alone-over a million more than the Hannibal Buress clip. For many, the video makes a decidedly un-Huxtable Cosby public for the first time. Words like “creepy,” “scumbag,” “sociopathic bully,” and “perv,” all appear at regular intervals in the comments section (Associated Press 2014). User Nicole Manning comments, “I grew up idolizing him because he was one of the few who can do a stand up with no curse words…but seeing this side of him makes me so sad…,” just as user Mr. Stonefallow writes, “This interview really says it all…” (Associated Press 2014). The “all” strongly suggests guilt. However, other viewers have replied to the video defending Cosby’s innocence, calling him a “poor old man,” who is trying to face down false accusations from all sides (Associated Press 2014). The fierceness of the advocacy for Cosby is further proof that those decades of The Huxtable Effect and Proactive/Preventative PR still have a profound influence on public opinion.

The strategic influence of Cosby and his PR team also extends beyond what Cosby himself says. Over the years, there has been a thorough attempt at policing what others say. According to reporter Mark Ebner, and corroborated by the New York Magazine article on Cosby’s accusers, Robin Mizrahi, a journalist at the National Enquirer, had thoroughly investigated and completed a story on Beth Ferrier’s accusations against Bill Cosby around the
time of Constand’s civil suit. (Malone 2015; TheLipTV 2014). However, despite knowing that Ferrier had passed a lie-detector test and that the claims had been carefully vetted, Mizrahi’s piece was abruptly pulled before going to print. As fellow journalist Mark Ebner describes the situation,

Well what happened was, it got back to Cosby’s camp, i.e. Marty Singer and they said ‘Stop this. What’s it gonna take?’ I’m kinda imagining how it went down. ‘What’s it gonna take to get this story pulled?’ …so they [National Enquirer] said, ‘Alright Cosby, we’ll bury this story. We’ll have to make a deal here.’ And the editor from New York, Marty Singer, I believe, and Bill Cosby all met in a hotel room in Houston, Texas…and they negotiated the deal to get that story killed. And what it was was they [The Enquirer] got an exclusive interview with Bill Cosby…basically a puff interview…that’s why I get a little bit angry when I think that the lengths that guys like Marty Singer will go to protect their clients. (TheLipTV 2014).

In the 2005 “puff” interview, Cosby publicly if cursorily addressed the allegations for the first time, saying, “I am not going to give in to people who exploit me for my celebrity status” (CNN 2014). In this way he accused his accusers: I am innocent; these women are lying to gain fame/attention. We will turn to this pattern in our analysis of The Culture of Discrediting.

The Enquirer incident is part of a longer history of bribes, publicity trades, and other backdoor dealings in which preventative and proactive PR exist as the flip side of the coin of the Huxtable image. While the latter builds the perception of everyone’s favorite dad, the former ensures that neither the press nor the alleged victims will challenge it.
Culture of Discrediting

“Forty years...listen, how big is his penis that it gives you amnesia for forty years?...Just listen to what they’re saying. And some of them, really, is unrapeable...I look at them and go, ‘No, he don’t want that.’...Sitting back and looking at it, I just don’t believe it. I think it’s a money hustle” – Damon Wayans (FactPixel 2015).

The Culture of Discrediting refers to systematic attempts in public and private contexts to dismiss the Cosby sexual assault allegations as false because of the actions or characters of women making allegations. This Culture manifests itself on large and small scales, from the widely read and overwhelmingly criticized remark in a radio interview with Damon Wayans cited above, to the easily missed but nonetheless potent comments on YouTube like those of user neetrab,

well, they WILLINGLY took those pills. You think he slipped them in a drink? You think he forced them down their throat?? None of that was in any deposition I read…and I seriously believe it was for women who wanted to have a good time…ESPECIALLY any slut that was at the playboy mansion (TheLipTV 2014).

These two remarks are representative of thousands of others online, on the news, on social media, and at the water cooler. Together, they highlight a few of the most common justifications for discrediting Cosby’s accusers, which we will analyze below.

Sexual Practice/Sexual Appeal

“Too ugly to rape”/“Too slutty to rape” is a widely used dual-pathway condemnation to deny or discredit survivors of sexual assault. Wayans comments that some of the women are
“unrapeable,” because their appearance renders them physically unappealing (“‘No, he don’t want that’”). Conversely, neetrab insinuates that some of the women could not have been raped because they had a pattern of sexual promiscuity, and thus they likely sought out and enjoyed any sexual experience that occurred (“any slut that was at the playboy mansion”). By this logic, one can justify discrediting any of Cosby’s accusers by putting her at one end or the other of the sexual attraction spectrum. Either “She was not raped…no one could be sexually attracted to her!” or “She was not raped…she has been sexually attracted to way too many people!”

Both justifications for discredit can even be used against the same woman. When former supermodel Janice Dickinson made allegations against Cosby on Entertainment Tonight, YouTuber user “Glenn Quagmire” responded with the “too ugly to rape” discredit method: “my dog wouldn’t even hump this ugly bitch leg” (Entertainment Tonight 2014). On the same thread, user “Jay Riley” employs the “too slutty to rape” logic, commenting, “Janice Dickinson I mean the last name sums it up. She likes the Dick-in-son…Nobody has ever had to drug Janice Dickinson for sexual favors” (Entertainment Tonight 2014).

In her book *Asking for It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture- and What We Can Do about It*, Kate Harding addresses these kinds of discrediting attempts head on. She argues, “It’s not about sex; it’s about power,” and explains, “If the real crime of rape is the violation of another person’s autonomy, the use of another person’s body against their wishes, then it shouldn’t matter…how much sexual experience she’s had before” (qtd. in Harding 12). However, despite dialogues on rejecting victim-blaming, and feminist reminders that “it’s never a survivor’s fault,” it is still the norm for women like Cosby’s accusers to have their sexual histories and appeal attacked when making allegations of rape or sexual assault.
“Long-untold,” Likely Lying

Wayans frames his comments discrediting the accusers with the reference “Forty years…” and a joke about the women’s supposed amnesia in waiting so long to share their stories. While certainly sarcastic, this quip echoes the sentiments of many a YouTube user, formal reporter, and Cosby apologist. The logic, simply, is that were the allegations true, these women would have been coming forward long before now with their stories.

However, this argument 1) assumes the accusers had a safe and reliable option or outlet for telling their stories, which, in the section Proactive/Preventative PR, we revealed as doubtful and 2) ignores the emotional aftermath of the trauma of a sexual assault. In public statements, many of Cosby’s accusers have explained that feelings of shock, shame, and fear that they would not be believed all contributed to their silence.

Tamara Greene comments, “People often these days say, ‘Well, why didn’t you take it to the police?’ Andrea Constand went to the police in 2005- how’d it work out for her? Not at all” (Malone 2015). Additionally, several of the women explain that, at the time of their alleged assaults, police action (or even public sympathy) would have been severely hampered by the lack of understanding of acquaintance rape. Joan Tarshis commented, “I didn’t realize that I had been raped. Back then, rape was done in an alleyway with somebody holding a knife to your throat that you didn’t know. There was no date rape back then. I just knew that something horrible had happened” (Malone 2015). Marcella Tate echoes her, “In 1975, it wasn’t an issue that was even discussed. Rape was being beaten up in a park. I understood at the time that it was wrong, but I just internalized it and dealt with it and pushed it down” (Malone 2015).
**Seeking Fame, Money, or Ruin**

Finally there is the opinion that Bill Cosby accusers are motivated by desire for money, fame, the unmerited ruination of Bill Cosby, or some combination of the three. Wayans comments that he believes the string of accusers are part of a “money hustle,” an opinion often voiced in regards to the controversy. Others insist that the fifty-plus women, many of them former actresses, models, or other figures in the entertainment industry, are simply seeking fame and attention. This backlash was particularly pointed in the case of Janice Dickinson, whose career as a model and Reality TV star has been consistently leveraged as evidence of her lack of credibility. Even Mark Ebner, in a video interview supposedly defending the accusers in their fight against Cosby, calls Dickinson a “fame whore” (TheLipTV 2014). Still, the women themselves consistently rebut the claim that they are merely seeking attention or compensation. Accuser Kathy McKee states, “How would it benefit any of us? It doesn’t. We’re telling the story because we can’t hold it inside anymore” (Malone 2015). Joan Tarshis commented, “I knew I wasn’t ever gonna receive any money. I certainly didn’t want to be remembered as the woman that Bill Cosby raped” (Malone 2015).

However, the theory that the accusers are simply seeking Cosby’s ruin is a bit more complex. This idea finds roots in the tragic racial histories of Black men whom White American women falsely accused of rape…allegations that frequently and horrifically ended in lynching. Some have expressed concern that the controversy surrounding Cosby is a new, reputational, and financial lynching that enables Whites in general, and White women in particular, to reassert their power over Blacks. As accuser Jewel Allison commented in her op-ed,

Last year, before I revealed my own story, I called a very dear African American friend and asked her what she thought about the women accusing Bill Cosby. ‘I don’t believe
these white women,’ she said. ‘They are just trying to destroy another black man.’ It pained me terribly to hear her say it, but…Black people are sensitive to the fact that, for centuries, images of African American men as threats to white women have been used to justify oppressing them. (Allison 2015).

In her interview with *New York Magazine*, Allison explains that part of her desire to come forward as a Black woman allegedly raped by Cosby, was to head off the dismissal of White women’s accusations. I will return to the complexities of this issue shortly in the section on the Race Versus Rape Conception.

Overall, the Culture of Discrediting is a reminder that comments like Wayans’ and YouTube user neetrab’s have very real consequences, as they are part of the rhetoric that bolstered Bill Cosby and his lawyers in a defamation of character lawsuit against seven of the accusers. As legal proceedings currently unfold in Pennsylvania, how the general public feels about the viability of the accuser’s claims could even sway Cosby’s trial. The remarks of even one or two Internet “trolls” can infect the dialogue around the Cosby allegations, and spread of discredit operates like shares of a viral video. If treated carelessly, comments on an accuser’s sexual history, period of silence, and chosen profession could obscure discussion of the case enough to affect legal outcomes and the legacy of Bill Cosby.

**The Race Versus Rape Conception**

“*Buress said people asked him how he could say such a thing about a pioneer such as Cosby.*

[Buress responded], ‘*You can’t be a pioneer and a rapist?*’”(Johnson 2014).
For many, a deeply troubling facet of the Bill Cosby allegations is the way they undermine the work that Cosby has done to shift White perceptions of Black Americans. Hence Buress’ haunting question: can we still consider a rapist a pioneer? Do the allegations against Cosby undo or threaten to undo the progress he made in breaking down stereotypes of the Black male? If so, the stakes are tremendous: not only could the accusations destroy the successful, fatherly, role-model figure of Bill Cosby/Cliff Huxtable, but they could reinforce some of the most harmful stereotypes Black men battle--that Blacks are predatory, sexually deviant or aggressive, and intrinsically sub-human. Jewel Allison, who has accused Cosby of drugging and sexually assaulting her in the late 1980s, comments at length on these concerns in The Washington Post op-ed, “Bill Cosby Sexually Assaulted Me. I Didn’t Tell Because I Didn’t Want to Let Black America Down.”

According to Allison, when women began coming forward to accuse Cosby, she “struggled with where [her] allegiances should lie—-with the women who had been sexually victimized or with black America, which had been systematically victimized” (Allison 2015). Understanding Dr. Huxtable as a beacon of hope for the Black community, she comments,

Admitting that Cosby is a rapist would feel like giving in to white America’s age-old stereotypes about black men. It would be akin to validating fears that African American men are lustful and violent. It would be taking away one of our greatest and most inspiring role models – one many African Americans feel we can’t afford to lose. (Allison 2015).

Indeed, the history of portraying Black men as “lustful and violent” has only been amplified with technologies that allow broader public access to news and news media. Sujata Moorti, author of “Color Of Rape: Gender And Race In Television’s Public Spheres,” analyzes how cases of
sexual assault, particularly high-profile ones, are presented in the news through language shaped by centuries of conceptions of race and intra- and interracial relations. According to Moorti,

Since slavery, the black body has been menacingly sexualized; while the black male has been cast as sexually rapacious and a threat to white women, black women have been presented as promiscuous. This constellation of ideas continues to prevail and shapes contemporary understandings of rape. (Moorti 76).

Thus, it is not surprising that Allison recalls the inner turmoil she felt about coming forward with her story. Many of her Black friends offered conflicting views, some encouraging her to share her experience and others urging her into silence out of protection for herself or the public memory of Cliff Huxtable. Allison, herself, had long idolized the Cosby TV family, stating,

With his 30-minute sitcom, Cosby helped soothe black America’s psyche, showing that our men could be engaged fathers, our women could become successful lawyers and our children could go to college. By simply providing a better vision of ourselves, Cosby became one of the African American community’s most celebrated and admired icons (Allison 2015).

And yet, although on some level she felt she “had betrayed black America,” Allison nevertheless brought her story public in November 2015 and claimed she had been sexually assaulted by this “celebrated and admired icon” (Allison 2015). At the end of her piece, she encourages the Black community to remember that Cosby is a singular man, a celebrity, and not the end-all be-all for Black pride. She closes her op-ed with the line, “The only legacy at stake is of one entertainer, not of black manhood, as I once feared” (Allison 2015).
Cosby is not the first high-profile Black celebrity to spark discussions of “race versus rape,” though his case involves an exceptional number of alleged victims. An interesting set of comparisons are the sexual scandals of Mike Tyson and Clarence Thomas.

*Mike Tyson’s Sexual Assault Case*

In 1988, Mike Tyson became the youngest heavyweight-boxing champion in history, an accomplishment that earned him money and fame, despite a reputation for violent behavior in and outside the ring. Tyson faced accusations of domestic abuse from his wife, as well as claims of sexual harassment from a number of women, and had a history of street fights. In 1991, he was confronted with a new and serious charge: Desirée Washington, a contestant in the beauty pageant that Tyson had been promoting, accused the boxing champ of rape. The media coverage was exhaustive, and at some points damning. In the end, Tyson was convicted, fined $30,000, and served three years in prison. (Moorti 80-82).

While Cosby had won notoriety through his image as a mild-mannered family man, Tyson won his through violence and aggression. Because of this, one can argue that there is much more at stake in terms of Black image with the former’s scandal than the latter: with Cosby, we risk losing a Black role model as well as reinforcing harmful Black stereotypes; with Tyson, we risked only the stereotypes, some of which had already been reinforced by his proven violence. And yet, although Tyson was certainly no one’s idea of a doting family man, his fame and success were undeniably sources of pride in the Black community. For many young boys growing up in similar, impoverished circumstances, Tyson’s was a rags-to-riches story to latch onto (Moorti 97-98).
However, after the sexual assault charges, the news was vicious, transforming the boxer from a champion and role model into an example of centuries-old stereotypes of Black maleness. According to Moorti,

Tyson was presented as an athlete who partially transcended his race before the rape charges were filed, but once the court trial was underway, news workers emphasized his racial identity. His alleged sexual violence was linked to his past, “to what black men in the ghetto born are destined to do by nature” (Moorti 100).

In recent years, Tyson has largely recovered his public image: he was given a cameo role in the 2009 smash comedy *The Hangover*, and to those who did not live through his court case, he is known primarily for his face tattoo and biting off a man’s ear—disturbing, but not sexual assault. And yet, despite Tyson’s reclaimed image, public perception of Black males has not substantially improved. His case, though largely forgotten, exists as part of the stereotyped association between Black men and sexual violence: an association that does not require specifics instances to remain in force. Thus, it is no wonder that even beyond Cosby’s individual fate, accuser Jewel Allison would hesitate to add her allegations to negative associations that have persisted for generations. In years to come, they could still stand as reinforcement of the worst stereotypes.

*Clarence Thomas’ Sexual Harassment Allegations*

As the second Black American to serve on the United States Supreme Court, Clarence Thomas commands a very different reputation from Tyson and Cosby. However, in 1991, when Thomas was nominated for the Court, discussion about his worthiness circled around more than his politics and legal career. During Congressional hearings on the nomination, Thomas faced a
high profile allegation of sexual harassment by Anita Hill, a fellow Black lawyer and former employee. This accusation quickly consumed the media’s coverage of Thomas’ potential appointment. It also motivated many Black women to harshly criticize Hill, like the Cosby accusers, for bringing her allegations at such a crucial moment and against such a crucial figure in racial history. (Gorman 3999-4001; O’Connor 204-208). According to a 2001 report on the incident, many Black women were “very angry, and many were very ashamed that Hill made her charges public,” despite suspecting that the accusation had merit (qtd. in O’Connor 204).

The Thomas case hinged on a single allegation of sexual harassment rather than Cosby’s fifty-plus allegations of assault or rape. Additionally, the evidence in Hill’s favor seemed substantially less overwhelming than the sheer volume of stories and the signed deposition surrounding the Cosby case. However, a comparison between the two still merits careful thought, as there is a remarkable similarity in the treatment of Clarence/Cosby in the media, as well as the behavior of accused to accusers in both instances.

First, there is Clarence Thomas’ outright and fervent denial of the charges: just as Cosby has attempted to sue seven of his own accusers (Ellis 2015), among other things calling Janice Dickinson a liar attempting to make money off the “media frenzy” (Higher 2015), so too did Thomas’ formal statements angrily refute Hill’s allegations. In a hearing of the Senate Judiciary Committee on October 11, 1991, Thomas called the accusations “sleaze,” “dirt,” and “lies” and said the hearing itself, in legitimizing the claims for the public, was “a national disgrace” (Gorman 4001). Thomas then suggested, as many Cosby apologists have, that the allegations were part of a conspiracy to eliminate and vilify the positive role models of the Black community, thereby ‘putting Blacks in their place,’ so to speak. As Thomas stated,
From my standpoint as a black American, as far as I’m concerned, it [the hearing for the allegations] is a high-tech lynching for uppity blacks…it is a message that unless you kowtow to an old order, this is what will happen to you. You will be lynched, destroyed, caricatured by a committee of the U.S. Senate rather than hung from a tree. (Gorman 4001).

While some, especially White Americans, saw this comparison as overly dramatic, Thomas insisted on its suitability, given that his career and character were hanging by a thread of public opinion based on one accusation.

Comparing the cases, Thomas and Cosby also shared a similar, complex position (while high-profile) within the Black community as important figures in Black history and as role models. However, they were also both criticized by some members of the Black community with regards to their public positions on Black issues. Bill Cosby has been called a preacher of respectability politics, specifically in reference to his infamous “Pound Cake Speech,” during which he critiqued Black victims of police brutality, claiming Black people needed to remember the initial wrongdoing in these situations (i.e., yes he was shot for stealing a piece of pound cake, but he still stole the pound cake) (Cosby 2004). Cosby has also been an outspoken critic of Black youth, to which Buress directly refers in his whistleblowing routine: “Pull your pants up, Black people.” Likewise, Clarence Thomas has drawn critique for his strong negative “views on affirmative action and school desegregation [which] put him at odds with many African American political leaders” (Gorman 4000).

The vitriol with which Hill and the Cosby accusers were attacked by their alleged harassers/rapists, the media, and some members of the Black community, further illustrates the complexities of cases of assault involving respected high-profile Black men. Issues of race and
gender overlap in these instances, challenging loyalties, fostering stereotypes, and reaffirming the already ever-present Culture of Discrediting.
Section Four

Comedy as Catalyst, Comedy as Circumscribing: The Cosby Dialogue

Taken together, The Huxtable Effect, Proactive/Preventative PR, The Culture of Discrediting, and the Race vs. Rape Conception worked to keep victims silent and the public unaware or disbelieving about the Cosby allegations. Comedy, which for the purposes of this essay means any attempt to portray the Cosby situation humorously in sketches, skits, stand-up routines, and “punch-line monologues;” has been more successful than any other outlet in breaking through this systemic silence.

This is not surprising, given that humor is often used to navigate difficult topics. Murray S. Davis’ book, *What’s So Funny? The Comic Conception of Culture and Society*, studies correlations between the work of comedians and the work of sociologists in “disordering what has been ordered by human constructions and social expectations” (Bingham, Chandler, Hernandez 337). He contends that both the sociological and the comedic approach,

(1) take the contemporary and everchanging world as their subject matter, (2) deconstruct, unmask, and debunk status quo social expectations, organizations, rules and people, (3) reorder and reverse the audience’s perspective, (4) compare social ideas to reality, (5) play off typically expected patterns, (6) compare and contrast groups, (7) challenge hypocrisy, (8) examine the presentation of self in everyday life, and (9) point out the fluidity of social life. (qtd. in Bingham, Chandler, Hernandez 336-7).

Such actions retain a valuable place in a society faced with issues as complex, sensitive, and disturbing as the Bill Cosby sexual assault allegations. Conversations that involve race, gender,
rape, assault, consent, drugs, sexuality, power dynamics, and betrayal can seem impossible to put in perspective without humor to alleviate tension. In their article “Laughing Matters”: The Comedian As Social Observer, Teacher, And Conduit Of The Sociological Perspective,” authors Bingham, Chandler and Hernandez note,

The audience-comedian interaction is one of the few arenas in which topics of race, class, gender and religion can be openly explored. For example, both Richard Pryor’s ability to speak to a white audience in the 1960s about racial issues and Margaret Cho’s discussions of her own bi-sexuality in her stand-up shows demonstrate that the comedic arena is a space of free inquiry where no subject is taboo and the rules of political correctness can be temporarily suspended. (Bingham, Chandler, Hernandez 339).

What is more, due to the share-oriented nature of social media and the Internet as a whole, the “comedic arena” of free inquiry is radically expanding. No longer does audience-comedian interaction exist only within the confines of the stand-up club, shared among a few strangers and perhaps resurfacing in the quotation of an ill-remembered joke at a later date. Rather, the use of YouTube to share videos of stand-up routines, monologue punch-lines, and sketches from Saturday Night Live all encourage the public to engage in one grand comedic dialogue. “Have you seen ________? It’s so funny, I’ll send it to you,” is the phrase of our generation’s relationship with comedic material: we emphasize the ability to share. We feel connected when we can laugh at the same jokes. Thus, the comments of comedians are seen much faster, by a larger audience, and with a permanence that can only be supported by the limitless memory of the Internet. For better or worse, certain popular pieces of comedy become a shared framework for interpreting real-world events. As national elections can be influenced by the political
comedy of Jon Oliver, Trevor Noah, and Saturday Night Live, so, too, are perceptions of Bill Cosby and his accusers.

However, as tempting as it may be to conceive of comedy as the panacea to social injustice- a bold and healthy dialogue that breaks down norms and challenges stereotypes- the conversations facilitated by comedians can be limiting. Comedy relies on personal perspectives and realities, and what each comedian is entitled to joke about depends on the communities to which he/she belongs. Across categories of age, race, sexuality, family status, and religious affiliation, a comedian’s material is permitted by their status as insiders. In part, this stems from a desire for authenticity in comedy, connected to the long history of stand-up routines centered on personal experiences (“So the other day I was out walking and [amusing anecdote]” or “The last time I was at the dentist [amusing anecdote]”). The concept of in-group comedy also reflects social trends in rejecting what is not “politically correct.” In recent years, the phrase, “I can joke about that, I have a Black friend,” has been widely condemned as a tagline of racist material: friends in a group do not make one a member, and only members are entitled to make certain comments. While “pushing the envelope” is central to the goal of the comedian, modern audiences demand to know the envelope was addressed to the person joking.

The issue with comedic engagement of the Cosby controversy is that the most highly publicized pieces of comedy, which construct the public’s framework for interpreting the situation, feature the perspectives of White comedians. Although Hannibal Buress began comedy’s engagement with the allegations (“Bill Cosby has the fuckin’ smuggest, old black man public persona that I hate”), subsequent high-profile jokes and sketches deal primarily with White Americans’ reaction to the accusations. White comedians’ perspectives, emerging from their groups’ assumptions, have value in representing some of the ways people have negotiated
the scandal. However, the dominance of White perspectives in the comedic commentary on Bill Cosby also ignores much of the complexity of the man, his situation, and his legacy. At its worst, the dominance reinforces the voiceless-ness of Black Americans. Below, we examine four of the most widely viewed instances of White comedic engagement with Cosby, noting how the perspective of Whiteness influences the interpretation and presentation of the case. Then, we will examine an instance of Black comedic engagement, particularly the attention paid in this sketch to the racial aspects of the controversy glossed over by its White counterparts.

**Cosby As A Sweater, Not A Skin Color:**

**White Comedic Engagement with Bill Cosby**

Amy Schumer’s “Court of Public Opinion” sketch, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler’s Golden Globes monologue, *Family Guy*’s parody of *The Cosby Show* opening credits, and *Bojack Horseman*’s episode on entertainers too big to accuse: each of these is an example of commentary on the Cosby situation that analyzes Cosby in terms of what he means to White America, not Black America. They portray Cosby as a rapist, as a former beloved father figure, and as an entertainer whose celebrity protected him from his crimes. All these are significant dimensions of the controversy, yet these clips lack the nuance of who Cosby has been as a Black man.

In Schumer’s May 2015 sketch on *Inside Amy Schumer*, the comedian tackles how the public is wrestling with Bill Cosby’s Cliff Huxtable legacy in light of the allegations. With nearly 2 million views on YouTube, the clip is one of the most popular engagements with Cosby through comedy. Schumer, who plays Cosby’s lawyer in the “court of public opinion,” explains to the jury and to the viewers,
Let’s remind ourselves what’s at stake here. If convicted, the next time you put on a rerun of *The Cosby Show*, you may wince a little…and we don’t deserve to feel that pang. We deserve to dance like no one’s watching and to *watch* like no one’s *raping*. (Comedy Central 2015).

Schumer tries to sway the jurors with Cosby-Show nostalgia: playing the sitcom’s theme song and handing out pudding pops, patterned sweaters, and chocolate cake. After she plays a clip from *The Cosby Show*, she turns to the court and demands, “Did anyone feel *raped* by that? How about drugged? No? Me neither. I felt comforted by a familiar father figure” (Comedy Central 2015). In the sketch’s closing gag, Schumer receives a martini from Bill Cosby to “thank her for representing him.” Schumer’s smile is a little stiff, and she looks around before tossing the drink over her shoulder. The parting message: Cosby, despite the gimmicks, is clearly guilty.

Based on viewer comments, Schumer’s sketch resonates deeply with a large segment of the public as they personally navigate the allegations. In contextualizing Cosby as beloved TV dad, Schumer is more subtle than comedians whose gags are “did he/didn’t he” based and peppered with comments about pills or roofies. Schumer broadens the joke to encompass the repercussions of the accusations against Cosby: what does this mean for former fans, and for the legacy of *The Cosby Show* (“If convicted, the next time you put on a rerun of *The Cosby Show*, you may wince a little”)? It also explores the public’s willingness to consider ignoring the stories of the fifty-plus accusers in favor of preserving a remembered image of Dr. Huxtable. And yet, Schumer’s target audience is definitively White America: those who grew up with a fondness for *The Cosby Show*, but were not encumbered by Cosby’s complicated status in the Black community. For the intended viewers of this sketch, the worst part of negotiating the reality of the allegations is the tarnishing of a “familiar father figure.” Schumer, as a White
woman, does not have the comedic access to explore the racial complications of the case from a Black perspective.

Similarly, when Tina Fey and Amy Poehler opened the 72nd Golden Globe Awards, their monologue placed Cosby into a larger pattern of feminist commentary, but not racial commentary. Alongside quips about George Clooney’s wife being more deserving of his lifetime achievement award, and how long it takes in hair and makeup to play the role of “human woman,” Poehler jokes, “Sleeping beauty just thought she was getting coffee with Bill Cosby.” (Willjuan 2015). The two comedians went on to make a gag of one-upping each other with the best Cosby impression, focusing on the exaggerated, sometimes babbling scat-speech for which Cosby has become famous. They switch back and forth, impersonating: “I put the pills in the people-people did not want the pills in them,” and “I got the pills in the bathroom and I put them in the people!” (Willjuan 2015). The monologue, which was nationally televised and made headlines the next morning, situates the Cosby controversy as a gender issue. Considering their status as outspoken White feminists, this angle is certainly within Fey and Poehler’s “in-group comic access,” as well as being an important aspect of the Cosby controversy. Exploring issues of consent, rape, and drugging drinks within a larger comic dialogue on society’s unfair treatment of women, is valid and valuable. With their address of the issue, Fey and Poehler demanded national attention for the accusers, and reminded the public that sexual assault is only the horrific tip of the gender discrimination iceberg.

Season 2, episode 7 of the animated series Bojack Horseman (written by a team of White comics) also attempts to fit Cosby’s scandal into a larger, non-racial pattern: this time, criticizing Hollywood for protecting its alleged rapists. The episode, titled “Hank after Dark,” follows sexual assault claims against big-name entertainer Hank Hippopopolis in an anthropomorphized-
animal version of Hollywood. It explores media backlash against victims that echoes the Culture of Discrediting in the Cosby case: one reporter comments of Hippopopolis’ accusers, “Who are these women? Have they ever shoplifted perhaps? Do they wear short shorts? Do they drink alcohol? All these things are possible: We don’t know the facts” (“Hank after Dark”). Additionally, “Hank after Dark” examines how conflict of interest within the entertainment industry helps silence potential whistleblowers. Just as media outlets, agents, networks, and publicists had too much at stake to acknowledge the Cosby accusations, so Hippopopolis finds his reputation protected by those with investments in his next show. One actor, who is about to start a new venture with Hippopopolis, asks his friend who has been speaking up about the allegations, “Please don’t make a big thing out of this, it’s really not a good time with my show about to launch” (“Hank after Dark”).

The episode succeeds in its pointed reference: Cosby’s scandal is the most recent product of systemic protection of celebrity in the entertainment industry. This perspective places Cosby in line with White entertainers Woody Allen and Jay Leno as men who are “too beloved to fail,” and thus challenges the entire industry that shielded Cosby (Thurm 2015). Such engagement with the controversy is laudable, even if it does not explore the racial distinctions of Cosby’s case, for it encourages the public to criticize not just Cosby for his alleged crimes, but also those who helped to bury them.

In closing our examination of White comedy regarding Cosby, we turn to a November 2015 episode of the popular series Family Guy, which featured a brief but biting reference to the allegations. As Peter Griffin, family, and neighbors sit around their television set, we cut to a near shot-for-shot remake of the classic opening to The Cosby Show, with one glaring difference: all the female actors are portrayed as drugged, passed out in chairs and on couches. As the theme
song continues, we see an older woman wearing nothing but a colorful “Cosby” sweater wandering in a stupor in the background. To finish it off, Cosby is met by an intoxicated peacock (a subtle jab at NBC, the network that hosted The Cosby Show). The peacock passes out at his feet and Cosby shoots the camera a classic sitcom “Oopsie!” face. We pan back to the living room with Peter, his White family and his Black neighbors. He comments, “Huh. I was so busy not seeing color, I didn’t see the raping either.” (Jacki Geduld 2015).

In this singular comment, Peter captures a uniquely White aspect of navigating the Cosby allegations: the feeling that one must prove a lack of racism by interpreting Cosby outside the stereotypes of Black men. While Peter’s comment is misguided, it highlights the heart of why White comedians resist tackling a racialized discussion of the Bill Cosby accusations. Just as Peter nervously claims he cannot see color, so the White comedy community chooses to engage with the Cosby controversy at other levels besides the complications of race. They focus on questions of nostalgia for Dr. Huxtable, the feminist issue of sexual assault, the larger problems in the entertainment industry that protect celebrities…all valid points to make and, according to the rules of in-group comedy, all permissible for these comedians.

The Show No One Is Talking About: An Example of Black Comedic Engagement with the Cosby Controversy

White comedians have successfully encouraged broader public attention to the Cosby allegations; yet, the fact that their commentary is front and center in public discussion limits comedy’s overall ability to engage with the issue. If the comedian is social observer as Bingham, Chandler and Hernandez suggest, then it is important for the public to be exposed to comic perspectives from different backgrounds and social contexts. White women, Black
women, White men, Black men, people of other backgrounds, varying ages, and sexualities: in order to truly disrupt the norms of social thought, society must immerse itself in perspectives that offer a spectrum insights on the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and power at play in the Cosby case.

Season 2, episode 2 of the low-rated NBC sitcom *The Carmichael Show* was not widely watched, especially by White America, and did not enjoy the same news coverage as Fey and Poehler’s Golden Globes bit, or even the *Bojack Horseman* parody. However, the episode entitled “Fallen Heroes” offers one of the most nuanced interpretations of Black American negotiation of the Cosby allegations. Peppered with a light humor, “Fallen Heroes” shows a Black family debating whether or not to attend Bill Cosby’s newest stand-up in light of the accusations against him. It explores the divide in perception of Cosby across gender lines: girlfriends and wives feeling more compelled to boycott the show because he “took advantage of those innocent women;” fathers and brothers more willing to look past the accusations because Cosby was an “idol” and the opportunity to see him live is so rare (“Fallen Heroes”). It addresses the complicated matter of Cosby’s past criticism of the Black community: “He’s always so critical of us young people. Always talkin’ about the way we wear our pants and the music we listen to” (“Fallen Heroes”). It questions, not unlike Schumer’s sketch, whether the allegations should be allowed to tarnish the memory of *The Cosby Show*. As the Carmichael family reads through Cosby’s Wikipedia page about his pioneering work as a Black actor and his charity contributions, then laugh over a rerun of *The Cosby Show*, they still comment, “Damn shame what he did to those women, though.” Like *Bojack Horseman*, “Fallen Heroes” also situates the controversy in the larger scheme of entertainers accused of unsettling and illegal behavior. One character comments that we still watch Woody Allen films and still listen to Michael Jackson,
James Brown, Chris Brown, and Bobby Brown despite the allegations against them. Ultimately, though, the characters decide not to attend the stand-up show, and the one who does go claims he could not enjoy it after the discussion. He comments sadly, “You ruined my idol for me” ("Fallen Heroes").
Conclusion

The debate among members of the Carmichael family offers an illuminating analysis of the Cosby situation that could not be fully explored by the jokes of White comedians. It picks up the thread of Buress’ commentary and follows it through the complicated ramifications of widespread attention on the accusations, yet there is one unfortunate distinction here: Buress’ video went viral; “Fallen Heroes” did not. Perhaps *The Carmichael Show* simply did not have the right joke-to-hard-truth ratio of Buress’ clip. Perhaps more Whites bolster Buress’ viewer numbers than tune in for sitcoms about Black families. In any case, the capitalist “most laughs wins” culture of American comedy could not support this episode’s social media dissemination.

Still, the production of episodes like this, as well as other forms of Black comedic engagement with Cosby, should be encouraged, and the general public should give them due attention. If it took a student researcher diligently searching for comedy material on Cosby to unbury this clip, then something is wrong with accessibility in our comedic pool. Though society should celebrate the progress made by comedians in breaking down the resistances of The Huxtable Effect, Proactive and Preventative PR, The Culture of Discrediting and the Race v. Rape Conception, it should not allow the comedic space to become an exclusively White space. As discussed earlier, social media has transformed news into a consumer-driven beast. Given this, a public aware of its national problem in race and gender relations should, for its own benefit, chose to drive that beast into production and equal promotion of a range of perspectives on a given issue, especially one as complex as Cosby’s. It is no longer enough for comedy to
start the difficult conversations: it now has the responsibility, as a key framework for serious national issues, of filling those conversations with a diversity of voices.
Appendix A

All images below have been cited in the Works Cited Section. They are a sample of thousands of similar Memes created by Twitter users to address the Cosby sexual assault allegations.

Image One: “Fourteen Allegations”

Image Two: “She Said I Did What?”
Image Three: “Pudding Pop Her”

Image Four: “I Love Pudding”
Image Five: “Where Hell-No Means Jell-O”

Image Six: “Paying Off Victims”
Image Seven: “Remember When I Ate Cake?”
Appendix B

Below is an excerpt of Bill Cosby’s 2005 deposition in the Andrea Constand civil case.

The transcript is not complete, but the following link provides a PDF version of the document in its entirety.

https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/2158445/cosby-deposition.pdf

Deposition Excerpt (Beginning Page 5)

“After defendant testified that he obtained seven prescriptions for Quaaludes, the following testimony was elicited:

Q: You gave them to other people?
A: Yes.

Q: You gave those drugs to other people knowing that it was---

MR. O’CONNOR: He said he gave it to T--- right now.

MS. TROIANI: He said other people. He did say other people.

BY MS. TROIANI:

Q: Knowing that it was illegal?

***MR. O’CONNOR:
Whatever the legality of it is, it will stand. I’m instructing him not to answer. He gave the Quaaludes. If it was illegal, the courts will determine that.

[Some sections excised here for space]

BY MS. TROIANI:

Q: When you got the Quaaludes, was it in your mind that you were going to use these Quaaludes for young women that you wanted to have sex with?
A: Yes.

Q: Did you ever give any of those young women the Quaaludes without their knowledge?

MR. O'CONNOR: Object to the question. Restrict it to the Jane Does, would you, please.

MS. TROIANI: No, I will not.

MR. O'CONNOR: Do not answer it.

MS. TROIANI: It's a discovery deposition.

THE WITNESS:

I misunderstood. Woman, meaning T-----, and not women.

BY MS. TROIANI:

Q: Okay. So, you're saying you never gave the Quaaludes to anyone other than T-----?

MR. O'CONNOR: Don't answer the question. You can ask all the questions you want about the Jane Doe.
Appendix C

Provided below are a series of “quick links.” All videos are cited fully in the Works Cited section, but a selection has been listed here in URL form for convenience.

1.) Associated Press interview with Bill Cosby, full clip
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RI6z97Efw3I

2.) Hannibal Buress’ whistleblowing routine
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzB8dTVALQI.

3.) Comedy Clip: Family Guy
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOu_MsjKp6s

4.) Comedy Clip: Tina Fey and Amy Poehler Golden Globes Monologue
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZRT1X4Dxo4.

5.) Comedy Clip: Amy Schumer Skit
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1sq4gVZ4cBc.
Works Cited


http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1000020891&v=2.1&u=viva_wm&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w&asid=3207efc7e3f917c9a367eb64994b98c7.


Carr, David. “Calling Out Bill Cosby’s Media Enablers, Including Myself.” The New
Granato 57


http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=DaEJQntlXtU.


https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=feOSAgAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=(sexual+harassment+OR+sexual+assault+OR+rape)+AND+(race+OR+Black+OR+%22African+American%22)&ots=OYrk4TuSd3&sig=U3veJbJcklhg_zWbHXVIMw5IY_0#v=onepage&q=(sexual%20harassment%20OR%20sexual%20assault%20OR%20rape)%20AND%20(race%20OR%20Black%20OR%20%22African%20American%22)&f=false.

Comedy Central. “Inside Amy Schumer- Court of Public Opinion: The Trial of Bill


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzB8dTVALQI.


FactPixel. “Bill Cosby Didn’t Do It According to Daymon Wayans.” Online video clip.


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NZvR-16I4I.


Harding, Kate. Asking for It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture- and What We Can Do


http://www.imdb.com/name/nm2868110/.


Johnson, Kevin C. “Hannibal Buress addresses Cosby controversy at Pageant concert.”

*St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri)*, 26 October 2014. Web. 4 April 2016.


https://twitter.com/sideshowRaheem/status/531945284658806784/photo/1?ref_src=twsre%5Etfw.

http://imgur.com/gallery/8lvXwaX.


http://s64.photobucket.com/user/ybfchic/media/November%202014%20Part%201/dy7udpoausb23v3oip8i.jpg.html.


TheLipTV. “Bill Cosby: A History of Alleged Rapes and Cover-Ups with Mark Ebner.”


[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euXvur4MSeQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euXvur4MSeQ).


[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZRTIX4Dxo4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZRTIX4Dxo4).
Zuckerman, Esther. “Hannibal Buress calls Bill Cosby a ‘rapist’ in stand-up set.”
