

Opinion: Black man vulnerability

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Will Smith, right, hits presenter Chris Rock on stage while presenting the award for best documentary feature at the Oscars on Sunday, March 27, 2022, at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles. (AP Photo/Chris Pizzello) (Chris Pizzello/Chris Pizzello/Invision/AP)

When I plopped down in a comfortable chair to watch the 94th annual Oscar ceremony, I was fresh from attending a symposium about the Lives of Black Men, Past, Present and Future sponsored by William & Mary's Lemon Project. The takeaway was clear; Black men are most vulnerable to acts of violence. I watched this play out when actor Will Smith walked onto the Oscar stage

midway through comedian Chris Rock's jokes and angrily slapped him in the face.

Like millions of people, I spent the following days trying to push the "slap seen 'round the world" out of my mind. But thoughts lingered as friends and family members called to discuss it. When I wasn't talking to people, videos of the assault splashed across television and computer screens and social media, as the media analyzed it to the bone.

"Yes, at first I thought, it was pre-planned too," I say for the umpteenth time when my cousin calls on Friday evening.

"Yes, it was commendable how Chris Rock maintained his composure," I agree.

"Yes, I saw Will Smith initially laughing at the joke with the rest of the audience," I acknowledge.

Yet, I was still trying to wrap my head around what happened. As a racial healing professional who leads and facilitates conversations about race, I dive deeper by asking questions.

"What if Jimmy Kimmel had presented the award and delivered the joke about Jada Pinkett Smith? Would Smith have handled this differently?"

Dead silence!

I continued.

"Would there be more empathy for Kimmel being slapped in the face before his colleagues and a worldwide audience? Would people be looking for reasons why he deserved to suffer humiliation?"

"Would Kimmel have been victim-shamed? Would he have been expected to know that Pinkett Smith was suffering from alopecia, a medical condition that causes hair loss?"

“I didn’t know she had alopecia,” my cousin admits.

While we continue our honest discussion, my mind wanders to reports about George Floyd and his predecessors — Ahmaud Arbery, Trayvon Martin and 12 year-old Tamir Rice. Then I pivot back to the startling symposium takeaway point: Black men are most vulnerable to acts of violence.

Even under the most favorable circumstances?

Even during a time of celebration — the movie industry’s biggest night of the year — the Oscars?

Even when they are world famous actors and millionaires?

Still, Black men are most vulnerable to acts of violence!

But why?

Dehumanizing racial stereotypes and violence are legacies of centuries of American slavery and racial discrimination. Historically there has been little or no accountability for racial injustices against Blacks. Notably, it has been 67 years from the infamous lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till to the first federal anti-lynching law to be signed, which just happened on March 29, 2022.

Racial trauma stems from racial injustices and can produce cycles of violence. Left untreated, its impact can be generational.

Although Chris Rock held his composure and laughed off the confrontation, he was visibly shaken. Slow motion videos of Rock handling the Oscar statue moments later show a man looking confused and hurt. Days later he admits he is still processing the incident and refuses to discuss it.

On the other hand, Smith’s seemingly act of chivalry could indicate that he is experiencing trauma. Did public revelations about infidelity in his

20-plus-year marriage threaten his masculinity? Did he feel he had something to prove to his fans? Was he trying to score brownie points with his wife?

The good news is this traumatic incident could have promising outcomes. Both men can get the help they need to heal. This can become a watershed moment to advance Black Male Studies. Finally, by challenging centuries-old stereotypes about Black men and boys that make them vulnerable to violence, we have an opportunity to help transform trauma into healing power.

Laura Hill is the executive director of Virginia Racial Healing Institute, an organization established by Coming to the Table-Historic Triangle to help people understand and heal from racial trauma.

www.comingtothetable-historictriangle.org