Why Jussie’s Lies Matter

The actor owes an apology to a lot of people—including me, a gay Black man.

February 21, 2019 By Aundaray Guess

Everyone is talking about Jussie. If you don’t know who I’m talking about, you must have a serious disconnect with news or just came back from outer space. In short, Jussie Smollett, an actor on the TV series Empire, reported that he was attacked by two men who also placed a rope around his neck. During the assault, the two parties allegedly said, “MAGA,” an acronym that half the country views as affirmative and the other half views as divisive and discriminatory, similar to a racial slur.

Recently Jussie was arrested and charged with filing a false police report. According to the police, his reasoning was that he was not making enough money on his current show and the attention from the attack would promote his career.

I have to emphasize that he has yet to be convicted. Yet if you looked at public opinion, many have already found him guilty. The drama surrounding Jussie, a gay black man, and his alleged assault created a rift and tore open a wound created by racism, homophobia, hate crimes, mistrust of the police, and the general divisiveness in our political environment. His stunt, if you can call it that, shines a light on the current state of our country and to some extent the role media plays in the situation by providing 24/7 coverage of a celebrity’s crime while offering little to no attention to those who actually experience real acts of violence.

When I first heard the news of Jussie’s attack, like others I was shocked. Shocked that something like this could happen in a liberal city like Chicago. Shocked that a noose was used as part of the attack. And shocked because Jussie could have been me, another gay black man. And this happened in 2019, so far removed from the times when blacks were hung on a regular basis. Yet the incident is also a sad reminder that our country has reverted in many ways to its history of racism and other -isms.

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As a gay black man, I have to share why his story matters. As I have posted on my own social media, an attack like this is a common occurrence for other LGBT individuals, especially for those

who represent the T (Transgender). Attacks on Transgender people are sadly a common experience. Unlike Jussie, they rarely make any headlines or get mentions in the evening news.

If we truly want to look at modern-day lynchings, simply hear the stories of Trans people and their encounters. And also hear about how many of these crimes go unreported because folks don't trust the police or they feel they'ill receive unfair treatment based on their gender presentation.

Another reason why Jussie's actions matter is that those who are experiencing trauma and/or violence may feel that, after this incident, they won't be believed.

His story matters because it is a slap in the face to the gay communities around the country who quickly assembled for rallies in support of Jussie and who denounced acts of violence. For many gay individuals of color, Jussie's story can unleash reminders of their own encounters and the emotional baggage they thought was gone—only to have it resurface now.

It's a huge slap to black LGBT who are often made to feel marginalized even within their own black or/and LGBT communities. Our pain is never quantified, and we often feel that our black lives matter even less than our straight-identified black brothers and sisters.

I still wish Jussie's story wasn't a lie, but as details unfolded, I went through complicated feelings of judgment and the vilification. When the story first broke, I wondered whether he was being honest. Many questioned my viewpoint, saying that as a gay black man I should feel connected to the experience Jussie went through and by not doing so I was somehow showing my disloyalty.

I even started to doubt my views, and I tempered my arguments, reminding myself of how "messy" social media can be and how fast the speed of untruths can travel. I know firsthand how ugly things can get: One time it was claimed on social media that I had exposed my negative partner to HIV when it was not the truth. In fact, he's still negative. But once a claim is made on social media, you're sometimes declared guilty regardless of the facts, and claims of innocence fall on deaf ears. So I had to be careful with Jussie's situation as I've been there.

But to me, the facts of his case were not adding up. Too many nuances stood out and didn't make sense. Issues like, why was a person was out at 2 am in the freezing weather, and why was there a lack of captured video images in an area dense with cameras. Sadly, it appears my feeling of his guilt may, in fact, turn out to be true.

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Now I'm left with a bunch of questions.

Why did Jussie use my cause—the lives of gay black men? Why did he manipulate my experiences and my real fears? Why doesn't he fully understand the symbolism of the noose and its history? (And if he does, that makes his lies even more difficult to comprehend.) And for what? More money. Greed. Apparently, Jussie felt he wasn't making enough for his role on the national popular show that any actor—no matter his or her race or sexual orientation—would die to be on.

And the most disappointing aspect for me is that unlike the white gay community, we in the gay black community don't have a lot of people to look up to. I'm talking about celebrities and success stories we can see reflected in the media, and people who can tell our stories and inspire others. I realize that Jussie had a powerful platform—and all that potential was basically thrown in our faces.

Jussie owes an apology to the LGBT community, the LGBT people of color community, to ancestors who actually died from lynchings, to black elders who lived through the civil rights fight, to all the open case files in Chicago that are not being worked on, to true victims of hate crimes and to so many people who admired him for his gifts. And he owes me.

I just hope this does not deter people from reporting hate crimes. We can't go back into the shadows. To do so says that our accusers were right and we're wrong to live our truths, that our lives as LGBTQ individuals don't matter. When in fact our lives to matter. Every day, hour, minute and second.

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