“The Funniest Woman in the World”: Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley and Redefining Political Activism in the Modern Black Freedom Struggle

Grace Leeson

Advisor: Brenna Greer

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INTRODUCTION

Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley and the Making of Comedic Activism

“As long as I can run, I’m gonna say what I want to say.”¹

As an improv comedian, I have witnessed the power of humor to engage, measure, control, and convert the cultural assumptions of an audience. Jokes can hold people’s attention longer than a rant and the guise of humor allows a comedian to speak “truth” to an audience about loaded topics without generating animosity.² With humor and unexpected punch lines, comedians can point to incongruities in the world, highlight and critique cultural norms of a society, and upset audience members’ preconceptions. The comedian Jackie Mabley excelled in telling stories with drawn out premises and colorful characters. Her jokes

¹ Jackie Mabley, Funny Sides of Moms Mabley (Chicago: Chess Records LP, 1964).
prompted people to consider and even question the workings of power, as well as their relationship to those systems. An African American woman, Mabley worked as a professional comedian for over five decades. Her career took her all over the United States and gained her a broad fan base as her comedy carried across different forms of media. Such was her prominence and success as a comedian that most current African American and female comics consider her the mother of modern stand-up comedy.

The details of Jackie Mabley’s early life remain unclear and contested. Scholars and historical documentarians, however, have reached a general consensus on the following biography. Jackie Mabley was born Loretta Mary Aiken in 1896, in Brevard, North Carolina. Both of her parents died when she was young. According to police reports, her father died in a tragic accident when she was just eleven. Afterward, Mabley’s grandmother was her primary guardian. Mabley mentioned her grandmother in her stand-up routines, indicating the elder woman’s significance to her upbringing. Reportedly, Mabley was raped twice: once by an older black man and once by a white town sheriff. She gave birth to several children in her teens, which she gave up for adoption. Mabley brought these events into her later comedy. In doing so, she spoke to and for women in her audiences that had experienced similar tragedies and brought topics of sexual violence and disgrace into the public sphere. Despite the service it provided, however, this type of narrative ran afoul of the politics of respectability central to contemporary ideologies of black uplift conceived by the African American elite.

Growing up, Mabley lived in the historically impoverished Anacostia section of Washington, D.C., and then moved to Cleveland, Ohio. This steady migration up the

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3 For the most complete biography of Jackie Mabley, see Elsie Williams, *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African American Comedic Tradition* (Florence: Routledge, 1995).
northern coast may have been an escape from the oppressive relationship with her abusive stepfather. Around 1915, she ran away from home to begin performing in show business. She attributed her stage name, “Jackie Mabley,” to her fellow performer and boyfriend Jack Mabley, explaining with her usual humor: “he took a lot off me, the least I could do was take the name.” In 1974, Mabley suffered a heart attack while on the set of her film Amazing Grace, which seriously weakened her health. She died the following year in her home in Great Plains, New York. In death, despite her long, consistent, and successful career as a prominent black comedian, Mabley quickly fell into obscurity.

I first encountered Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley by listening to her 1961 record ‘Moms’ Mabley at the Playboy Club, in which she spent a full eight minutes insulting the “old, old” man that her father had “forced her to marry.” Mabley was never married, but this false marriage was fundamental to the ‘Moms’ character she created for the stage. As I listened to Mabley belittle this old man and his ego, appearance, and impotence, claiming he “could do nothing for me but bring me a message from a young man,” I thought of the multiple times when, on stage doing improv, I have distracted the audience from judging me by deflecting their attention to a comically exaggerated sexual conquest of a boy. If a comic has something to hide, she redirects the attention to another person. If an audience is uncomfortable with a woman acting out of line, she becomes less threatening when she is safely placed in the bounds of heterosexual normalcy. When bragging—and lying—about her relationships with young male celebrities like contemporary night club singer Cab Calloway, Mabley gestured toward her own identity as a lesbian with a wink and used this overt sexuality as a cover. I recognized this gesture from my own early experiences with improv comedy, and it

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motivated me to dig into Mabley’s hidden politics with the hopes of finding her contributions to the Civil Rights Struggle.

With her old man jokes, Mabley addressed her previous experiences with sexual assault. With lines like “he had a job at the doctor’s office, sitting around in the waiting room making people sick!” ‘Moms’ boldly disparaged old men the way that male comedians had attacked women and their wives for years. On the 1964 album *The Funny Sides of ‘Moms’ Mabley*, Mabley retold these situations with wit and assertion that placed her in the position of power by the punch line. Mabley described that her old man was “always callin’ me a dog. Sayin’ I was as ugly as a dog, dumb as a dog. Sometimes I wish I was a dog, and he was a tree!” Through her humor, she exposed the ubiquitous yet often veiled stories of black women’s sexual assault. Her actions countered the Jezebel stereotype that originated with slavery—which figured black women as hypersexual, promiscuous, and sexually available—and replaced it. Though the societal norms of her lifetime prevented Mabley from being open about her sexuality and life experiences, using her ‘Moms’ persona on stage, Mabley popularized articulating realities about racism, politics, and human nature behind bulletproof comedic tropes such as a self-deprecating costume playing the archetypal “fool.”

During the 1930s and 1940s, Jackie Mabley delighted audiences in Harlem and on the Chitlin’ Circuit with her vaudeville sketches and monologue routines. By the forties, when Mabley performed stand-up comedy, she dressed herself in oversized shoes, mismatched clothing, and a floppy hat. Outfitted as such, she identified as only ‘Moms’ Mabley. ‘Moms’ swaggered onto the stage, sending compliments and winks to any young man she laid her eyes upon, while simultaneously assuming a grandmotherly persona and referring to her audiences as her children. As ‘Moms,’ Mabley instructed her “children” on the truth, by

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“hopping” them to the realities of the world and contradictions between what people say and what they mean. “Hopping” has two definitions: the act of a mother figure holding a baby to her hip and the idea of being young and cool. ‘Moms’ combined these two meanings to metaphorically take her audience by the hand and teach them about the world, while doing it in cool, approachable way.7 Her jokes ranged from satirical opera songs to bawdy innuendos about her relationships with young men to whopping lies about ‘Moms’ participating in political affairs at the White House and in the United Nations. Sprinkled throughout her repertoire were jokes from all the places she had lived and traveled. Through her comedy, she smuggled stories about the inadequacies of Harlem hospitals, racial discrimination in the South, and tales of sexual violence into spaces of entertainment and, by extension, into U.S. popular culture. The majority of these criticisms were brought into the mainstream through the vehicle of stand-up comedy.

In concert—if not collaboration—with well-known comics like Bob Hope, Fred Allen, and Frank Fay, Mabley helped to build stand-up comedy as a genre through the 1920s and 1930s. Stand-up comedy as a popular genre has its roots in social satire monologues from vaudeville shows in the late nineteenth century. Stand-up comedy is a kind of comedic entertainment where an individual speaks directly to the audience, creating observational comedy by telling them jokes and humorous stories. During stand-up comedy’s formative years in the late nineteenth century, stand-up comics incorporated some of the props and costumes of popular vaudeville shows from the turn of the century. These performers often adopted known characters or formed themselves into caricatures of the marginalized racial

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7 Jackie Mabley, Moms Mabley at the UN (Chicago: Chess Records LP, 1961). On this record, Mabley describes a baby in the audience as “hopping age,” as in the age where they sit in their parents’ laps. Then she performed a series of jokes about telling the baby the truth, or “hopping” him, so that the parents would not see any more trouble out of him.
populations. They took advantage of popular comic stereotypes of African Americans or Italians. While black stand-up comics were using this cultural arena for their livelihoods and politics, African Americans across the nation were inserting their talents into arts and performance to make political statements.

At the same time, blacks in northern urban centers such as Chicago and Harlem initiated black “renaissances,” which established black art and entertainment forms as a political battleground for addressing issues of race. For example, one of the main goals of Harlem Renaissance authors like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston was to produce books, short stories, essays, plays, and poems that furthered African American’s ownership over the black identities that Americans would culturally consume. Mabley worked alongside these artists as a collaborative playwright and with her own profession. A pioneer of social satire monologues, in her early career, Jackie Mabley performed in black-only spaces like the Howard Theater and the Apollo Theater in New York City. She tailored her jokes throughout her career to specific audiences, which reflects the adaptable quality of comedy as a craft. Through their comedy, black comedians like ‘Moms’ Mabley, Willie “Ashcan” Jones, and, later, Dick Gregory were able to critique the everyday obstacles in employment, sex, education, and negative stereotypes.

These comedians that enjoyed a career in the 1950s and 1960s highlighted different facets of the Civil Rights Struggle during decades of greater visibility in mass media. Mabley articulated the contradictions of Southern segregation and drew on popular events in the Civil Rights Struggle, but also brought to light elements often minimized in conventional articulations of the struggle: queerness and queer people, international politics and the United

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9 Mabley, *The Funny Sides of Moms Mabley*.
Nations, and the independent sexuality of women. Jones, like Mabley, came from vaudeville routines but used the humor in his stand-up routines to attack Jim Crow racism and segregation. In one of his popular jokes, Dick Gregory was able to speak for activist organizations like the NAACP, since he was smart and dignified looking. He stood at the head of protest marches in the early 1960s, expressing a confident and eventually abrasive black masculinity. However, two out of three of the above comedians began their careers in the 1920s and 1930s, decades before the conventionally celebrated “Civil Rights Movement” of the 1950s and 1960s. The history of black comedians in the United States is another collective political development that supports expanding our study of the “Civil Rights Movement” beyond the 1950s and 1960s.

As many proponents of the “Long Civil Rights Movement” have argued, the modern civil rights struggle formed in the labor unionism and leftist New Deal politics of the 1930s, rather than with post-World War II desegregation protests and marches in the Jim Crow South. As historian Lauren R. Sklaroff has argued, during the New Deal, the cultural arena proved a vital source for promoting integration and acceptance of black Americans in mainstream society. Comedians serve as a narrative center for the cultural arena, since comedy is both a reflection of the society’s values and, in the case of black humor, a critique of the contradictions in dominant society. Stand-up comedy developed as a genre alongside and within black Civil Rights politics. These comics helped unite African Americans of different classes and backgrounds through jokes that identified all African Americans as an “in-group” against the “out-group” of Jim Crow racism and segregation. In these more

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unified political communities, black Civil Rights politics grew in prominence and
effectiveness.

Perhaps not surprisingly, within the civil rights struggle, the black press, mainstream
media outlets, and prominent civil rights organizations tended to deploy or rally around
entertainers deemed more “respectable” according to definitions rooted in uplift traditions of
the black elite. In *Righteous Discontent*, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham summed up this tactic
with her concept of the “politics of respectability.” Commenting on how black Baptist
churchwomen resisted Jim Crow racism in terms of a “politics of respectability,” she writes
that black women “perceived respectability to be the first step in their communication with
white America.”  

Many consider a politics of respectability to be the outgrowth of Booker T.
Washington’s “accommodationism,” through which he sought to protect black people from
the brunt of racism and Jim Crow by insisting that black people had the same values and
experiences of middle class white Americans. As part of their uplift strategies during the
early twentieth century, black political leaders and members of black churches and
community organizations combated racism by presenting an image of blacks as moral,
industrious, modern, and appropriately masculine or feminine people, as opposed to
dimwitted “coons,” depraved temptresses, or desexualized mammies—images that
proliferated in the popular culture. The performance of male and female respectability was

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13 For more applications of the politics of respectability in the historiography of the modern black freedom
struggle, see Marissa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward, “”Dress Modestly, Neatly, As if you were
going to church”: Respectability, Class, and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott's and the Early Civil
Rights Movement," in *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press,
2004), 69-100. Additionally, see Deborah Gray White’s study of African American women’s clubs such as the
National Association of Colored Women, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves: 1894-
treated as a means to teach the ideals of self-help to black people while improving the African American image in the eyes of white America.

Throughout the twentieth century, African Americans have combined activism with resourceful uses of elements from U.S. media and consumer culture to fashion black identities, assert black pride, and fight anti-black racism. And, within a context of an expanding media culture in the twentieth-century United States, the respectable representation of black people became of utmost political importance. Jackie Mabley did not fit the respectability mold. Her humor, appearance, and behavior (both on and off stage) as a black lesbian woman affronted black middle-class respectability politics. My work explores how, despite the black elite’s concerns about the image of blackness and the resulting lack of important sponsorship, Mabley enjoyed popularity and success across racial lines as a black female comedian. I argue that, from her outsider position, her comedy, and her personal and professional self-presentation, Mabley found large audiences and managed to contribute to and intervene in conversations central to contemporary civil rights politics.

In representing blackness publicly, Jackie Mabley and other individual producers of culture competed or had to contend with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in particular. As a civil rights organization founded by interracial northern elites in 1909, a primary function of the NAACP was monitoring and policing images of black people in mass culture. The NAACP promoted respectable or “normal” images of black men and women across various media, including print media, advertising, photographs, radio programs, film, cartoons, and television. The NAACP’s war on representation in Hollywood began with the release of D.W. Griffith’s infamous Birth of a

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Nation (1916) but peaked during the 1940s, when executive secretary Walter White constantly communicated with and pressured the Office of War Information (OWI) and Hollywood studios to eradicate stereotypical roles for African Americans. For the executive secretary to devote so much time to media representations of blackness indicates that these concerns were significant within black politics.

The well policed boundaries of middle-class black respectability did not allow for representation of the experiences, behaviors, or ideologies of many black men and women. Those boundaries produced a narrow dialogue that might have silenced Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley, given that her life narrative and bawdy blue humor laughed in the face of black elite respectability. For example, one of Mabley’s jokes created a conversation between an old man and a widow to challenge the belief that widows should remain celibate and alone after their husbands die. In the joke, the old man asked the woman “How old is your son now?” to which she responds, “Six years old.” The old man reacts with shock: “But your husband’s been dead twenty years!” Succinctly, she replies “He dead. I ain’t.” Mabley’s commentary elevates the woman’s happiness and sexual fulfillment over societal expectations for “what a lady should do.” By shunning respectable blackness, Mabley was able to create a space for laughter at recognizable experiences and obstacles for African Americans. Laughter releases tension and provides a bridge to bring people to discuss difficulties in their daily lives; Mabley’s refusal to “act like a lady” and stay in the home allowed her to defy expectations for what black people could and would publicly announce.

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15 For more on respectability and cultural political battles in the New Deal Era, see Lauren Rebecca Sklarhoff, Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
In the interest of respectable blackness, civil rights organizations pressured comedians to perform more refined material without the vaudeville tropes and blackface throughout the 1940s and 1950s. In some cases, comedians policed themselves along these lines as a matter of self-preservation, both in terms of assuaging hostile Southern audiences and avoiding the scrutiny of the NAACP for their careers’ sake. Black performers that toured on the Chitlin’ Circuit, a loose association of segregated theaters across the South, recount tales of violence ranging from being denied restaurant service to hostile whites chasing them out of town. But overall, the pressure to change one’s appearance to suit traditional respectable blackness came from the NAACP’s domination of public opinions about representation.

By comparison, Mabley ignored these concerns. With her particular comedy and style, Jackie Mabley appropriated traditional vaudeville tropes, such as mismatched costumes and song routines, and even black stereotypes like love for watermelon and fried chicken. Mabley’s stage persona ‘Moms’ is a particularly interesting example of this juxtaposition of a nonthreatening “fool” character that openly performed some of the most biting satire of society’s ills and gender norms. ‘Moms’ told stories for her “in-group,” African Americans, but with a satirical wit that allowed for her becoming a nationally appreciated icon across the color line. Mabley’s persona and her jokes highlight women in black humor and another way that African American activists integrated politics into their culture. Given this premise, my project places Mabley at the center of the civil rights narrative to illuminate how women had to appear, both visually and verbally, in order to insert their politics into the public sphere.

Her early career’s comedy contributed to black humor by foregrounding old slave narratives and trickster tales in her present context. In her later career, she updated these
jokes, structuring them for the political climate of the 1960s.\textsuperscript{17} As part of her routines, Mabley incorporated the current publicized events of the civil rights struggle. She brought a sense of humor and ironic spins to serious problems like lynching in the South and Senator Bobby Kennedy’s reluctance to enact stronger enforcement of new civil rights bills. Through her comedy routines, which in addition to enjoying large, mixed live audiences, found wider audiences through their distribution through LPS and television, Mabley contributed to the non-violent direct action central to the post-World War II modern black freedom struggle.

Like many other entertainers, Mabley typically receives no credit for her “civil rights work” she accomplished in the historiography of the modern black freedom struggle.\textsuperscript{18} Mabley’s erasure as a political figure is a common plague of female entertainers in the modern black freedom struggle. The most recent historian to rectify this problem is Ruth Feldstein, especially her case study of Nina Simone, “I Don’t Trust You Anymore”: Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s.” Simone was a classic pianist and jazz singer from North Carolina that gained international fame in the 1960s. Her song lyrics began to take on a civil rights tone in 1963 with the political anthem “Mississippi Goddamn.” Her song provided a cultural expression for a common attitude among African Americans inside and outside of the conventional movement at the time, namely an attitude critical of the respectable politics of “going slow” and liberal integration that had no alleviating effect on violence in the South. Leaving female entertainers out of the historiography for the

\textsuperscript{17} I define “black humor” as an all-encompassing category of jokes that related to African American experiences made by African Americans. William Schechter’s earliest comments on black humor focused on the necessary subtly of slaves’ humor in order to insult or refute their masters without insulting them and being punished. Within this dialectic relationship between master and slave, a critical audience had difficulty discerning whether the true aggression came from the slave or the slave owner. William Schechter, The History of Negro Humor in America (New York: Fleet Press Corp., 1970), 35.

\textsuperscript{18} This definition for civil rights work comes from Brenna Greer, Image Matters: Black Representation and Civil Rights Work in the Mid-Twentieth Century U.S. Culture (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2011), 20.
modern black freedom struggle silences their various actions to highlight the inequalities between blacks and whites and men and women in their public, privileged position. This absence results in the segregation of the politics of gender from the politics of race in historical analysis of the period. Mabley’s jokes and Simone’s songs suggest this segregation in the historiography is far starker than it ever was in the 1960s. If we ignore the civil rights work that these women completed, then we negate half of the story of the Civil Rights Struggle in the 1950s and 1960s—the establishment of an international mass culture that changed how we viewed race and gender—alongside the efforts of grassroots organizers and NAACP sponsored marches.

While a major objective of this project is to distinguish black humor as a unique genre and set of circumstances, the performance of this humor must be read in terms of its influence on the entire American culture. This braided history of entertainers and civil rights organizations reveals the limitations of a methodological framework that separates blacks and whites into two monolithic groups with segregated cultural tastes or political agendas.

Mabley marketed herself to black and white audiences alike, beginning with audiences at the Apollo Theatre in 1921, who were predominantly black, though a few white audiences members would come for a night “downtown.” By the 1960s, she performed for white-only audiences when hired at The Playboy Club and then, in late 1967, she dazzled integrated audiences on live television. Both black and white institutions and individuals claimed and used ‘Moms’ as a symbol of black culture and humor by the early 1970s, after the NAACP lost its grip on public black representation. Both black and white men recycled her jokes, white television shows booked her, and dozens of black female impersonators wrote one-woman show tributes for Mabley after her death. Her career endured while other
female entertainers floundered. While the Harlem Renaissance concluded in the Great Depression and the New Deal’s Federal Art Program failed, while the NAACP focused on national marches: while Malcolm X, radical labor organizations, Red Scare communists, and cultural icon Paul Robeson were put on trial, Mabley successfully negotiated the entertainment industry as ‘Moms.’ What does her success tell us about the acceptance of black culture in America? In order to have a platform and a microphone for her comedy and political views, Mabley disguised her intelligence and her body to mute her power. For one of the first and most enduring female stand-up comics to dress like a black Mammy figure indicates the added barriers women encounter in comedy as opposed to men.

Precisely because of her prominence and popularity as a black female comedian who used humor to address contemporary race issues, Mabley was a politically significant actor in the modern black freedom struggle. When Jackie Mabley performed stand-up comedy, she provided dialogues of resistance, unification, and black pride that created political communities that could eventually coordinate strategies together.19 ‘Moms’ illuminated the struggle for control of black culture, and she united political communities by identifying commonalities among African Americans. By the 1960s, this self-made comedic icon helped shrink the gaps in knowledge for white audiences about black culture by presenting these unfamiliar themes in hilarious stand-up performances. How did Jackie Mabley navigate the entertainment industry, and how did she circumvent barriers to women and African Americans like segregated entertainment venues? How did her work contribute to the civil rights struggle and complement or contradict the models for black respectability posited by black civil rights organizations? How does a consideration of the role of black humor and

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humorist political significance complement or contradict the popular narratives and our own history of the modern black freedom struggle? These are questions this thesis considers in its examination of political methods in the modern black freedom struggle.

**Methods and Sources**

The purpose of this project is not to present a comprehensive biography of Jackie Mabley. She serves to illuminate lived experiences of African Americans from the 1920s to 1970s and she is a focal point for exploring the role of women in the development of stand-up comedy. In addition, Mabley provides a bridge between black humor and the black civil rights politics. Mabley sheds light on how major media outlets and political institutions used black entertainers to represent African Americans to suit their commercial goals.

Throughout, I refer to Jackie Mabley as either “Mabley” or “Moms,” respectively, to distinguish between the comedian and the comedic persona that she adopted as a vehicle to present her jokes. The two names, while referring to the same person, are not interchangeable. Also, when I quote Mabley in this text, usually I have transcribed her speech directly from a Long Play comedy record.20 I have chosen to preserve Jackie Mabley speech in a consistent way, as scholars like Elsie Williams and Natasha Patterson have. Since I am transcribing directly from her records, I have no need to preserve the old, somewhat racist styles of recording Afro-American vernacular and accent as pseudo English. I may shorten words like “because” to “‘cause” since she did, but that would be the extent of how I alter words to demonstrate the inventiveness of her speech. I provide critical discourse analysis for her jokes based on comedy’s, and specifically Mabley’s, ability to subvert

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politically determined racial and gendered power dynamics. This method best discerns how she used humor to construct a loveable, non-threatening and hilarious, yet barbed Afro-American identity for popular consumption. The integrationist themes of Mabley’s jokes and television career suited the goals of white liberal television and new black television alike, yielding insight into how a female comedian needed to appear and perform in order to merit this privileged position. I have presented many of Mabley’s jokes in full for the sake of delivering her materials in a format as close to the audience’s experience as possible. Some jokes, such as her old men joke, she repeated in various places with seemingly endless variations. To limit repetition, I have not included all versions. It is important to note that while her comedy developed and expanded, a large percentage of her repertoire repeated and evolved off the same comedic premise.

In its efforts to track Mabley, this work draws on ‘Moms’s comedy records, television specials and film roles. Additionally, Mabley’s life in the press and her celebrity endorsements of products like Kool Aid are ripe with indications of how the public read her, celebrated her, and memorialized her. These sources are useful for gauging audience reception and how they “purchased” ‘Moms’ through her records or by watching her on television. Mabley’s assets as a commercial product contributed to her political significance because they indicate how much her comedy permeated popular culture.

**Historiography**

This project engages debates about who and what constitutes the black freedom struggle. The definition of the “modern black freedom struggle” in terms of its scope,
breath, leadership, and unifying political aims remains contested. Over the past thirty years, historians have intervened to complicate the idealized narrative of nonviolent activism and the idea that nonviolence and Black Power’s armed self-defense were incompatible movements. Additionally, scholars have rejected the claim that a single formulation of black identity was enough to unite a nationally diverse racial group. For the purposes of my project, I will define the modern black freedom struggle as the multiple ways that black Americans struggled for their rights and equality using the resources at their disposal in the twentieth century. By distinction, in this work, I use the term “Civil Rights Movement” to denote the popular narrative of legal battles and national marches in the 1950s and 1960s.

In Righteous Discontent, Higginbotham wrote of an “emergent revisionism” in civil rights scholarship that has concentrated on the coexistence of seemingly incompatible political agendas, as well as adding lenses of women, gender relations, sex and sexuality,

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22 Historically, there were differences between civil rights, black power, black liberation, black freedom struggles, and other terms used to describe the multitude of strategies used by African Americans and their supporters to gain equality and power in the United States. My project emphasizes the cultural and therefore political ground gained during this time period because of Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley. Often this work requires me to use these broad and overlapping strategies to explain how her work becomes politically significant activist work. I distinguish how Mabley’s jokes and opportunities changed due to the rise and fall of strategies like nonviolent direct action and Black Power militancy in the public media.

transnational dimensions, and cultural texts. My project contributes to this revisionism and is situated in the shift of the historiography to redefine “political” and “political action” as demonstrated by Robin D.G. Kelley. In *Race Rebels*, Kelley challenges civil rights scholars to define what struggles for social change actually entail. He insists that beyond the conventional civil rights organizations like the NAACP and SNCC, everyday people fought for their visibility and respect within the modern black freedom struggle. Kelley argues that “in absence of a real political action community, blackness creates a common identity, and it’s political.” For Kelley, the work that individuals do against a dominant power structure through their everyday modes of expression that eventually create collective identities and demand recognition in dominant politics constitute political action. His three main questions when exploring the extent to which black working people struggled to define and maintain a sense of black identity and solidarity were: 1) How do African American working people struggle and survive outside of established organizations or organized social movements? 2) What impact do these daily conflicts and hidden concerns have on movements that purport to speak for the dispossessed? 3) Can we call this politics? This approach allows me to use black humor and Mabley’s jokes to denote political action when they ameliorated collective identities that eventually demanded recognition in dominant politics.

Kelley examined the hidden social spaces, such as the black church, that allowed for the community to discuss experiences, grievances, and dreams and eventually shape black working class consciousness. Drawing on his example, I argue that the stand-up comedy clubs that Mabley frequented and performed in produced similar social spaces where her

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jokes identified common experiences among black people that coalesced into political identities. Through his study of the black working class in the twentieth century, Kelley analyzed how the everyday acts of resistance accumulate to politically conscious that can birth social change. This work is important to the overall project of how methods and historical actors achieve social change for marginalized groups. However, comedy as stage work is not an everyday black experience. Her performance of everyday blackness, everyday humor, on a public stage was an isolated experience. But her jokes, when cycled through households on LP records and the mouths of her fans, sustained the use of black humor as an everyday act of resistance. Comedy built political communities; recognizing its strengths and limitations during the earlier black freedom struggle gives insight to its current applicability to activism.

The typical narrative of black humor begins in the 1890s with blackface greats such as Bert Williams, who used slow, docile moves and bulging eyes to present tragically dumb characters of minstrelsy and vaudeville. Stage actors often found their way into early films performing their vaudeville sketch bits. The advent of radio, Long Play records, and television, coupled with the domestic communications and propaganda machines built during World War II, multiplied the opportunities for African American entertainers. More politically charged stand-up comedians such as Slappy White, Redd Fox, and Dick Gregory enter the historical narrative in the 1950s and 1960s; Richard Pryor, Bill Cosby, Flip Wilson, and Chris Rock procured television specials, shows, and tours in the 1970s. My project

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complicates this narrative by inserting Mabley’s work and contributions during a career that endured the late days of Bert Williams through the heyday of the Flip Wilson Show.

Since women have been historically disassociated from humor in general, it should come as no surprise that the historiography of black humor in the United States has excluded them as well. Mabley is not remembered beyond her own time except in revivals and among professional comedians due to this oppression. While scholars have analyzed the physical, social, and psychological functions of humor for women, there is a persistent gap in knowledge about women’s use of humor in the politically discursive way that has been attributed to black or Jewish people in the United States. Elsie Williams provided the first comprehensive biographical study of Jackie Mabley and her ‘Moms’ persona in 1995. I utilized this source for a general overview of Mabley’s life and build on her analysis of the ‘Moms’ persona to implicate Mabley’s activism. I contextualize Mabley’s humor within the spectrum of women’s contributions to black humor as collected in Daryl Cumber Dance’s anthology of African American women’s humor. The book identified the diverse multitude of stories, poems, folklore, and literary excerpts to document the evolution of female black humor as a tool to “laugh to keep from crying.” During the feminist scholarship revisionism in the 1970s and beyond, many psychologists and cultural theorists began to examine women’s stand-up comedy. June Sochen’s Women’s Comic Visions is the most significant historical study on the topic of female stand-up comics; however, it focuses mostly on white women in the United States. Still, Sochen suggests that black women are doubly advantaged as comedians because they understand the nuances of oppression from both white people and

the patriarchy. This perspective enhances their ability to identify social problems and joke about their society. I build on these works to argue that, even though black humor was not necessarily enough to overcome the social and political barriers that mainstream society bolstered, Jackie Mabley utilized humor as a tool to defy oppression, skirt violence, speak truth to power, and publicize and popularize issues central to contemporary civil rights politics.31

Regardless of the lack of attention, women have always participated in the creation of humor in African American communities.32 Through comedy, black women were able to tell the truth about their previously invisible experiences as a way to publicly expose underlying resistance in a political system that oppressed them due to their race and gender.33 Jokes among female slaves described the hidden politics of resistance and plantation survivalist humor created by a class of people who were relegated to the lowest social status due to their race, gender, and classification as a commodity.34 As I explore in the second chapter of my thesis, news media tended to focus on masculine aspects of both the civil rights struggle and comedy in general. This trend indicates why Mabley, despite outselling every other black comedian in the 1960s, did not maintain historical recognition in the way that comics like Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor have. ‘Moms’ was making jokes that playfully disrespected

31 Dance, *Honey, hush!*, 4-5.
33 I take the term and definition for “hidden transcripts” from James C. Scott *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, 1992). He was distinguishing between public transcripts (the open interactions between subordinates and those who dominate and hidden transcripts (discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation of power holders). Understanding oppressed peoples on the level of consciousness of hidden transcripts is a much closer picture of their lived experiences and a better basis for understanding their political behaviors.
34 Plantation survivalist humor is a term defined by Elsie Williams when describing the creative responses of African Americans and their humor to their historical and social contexts in the United States. “Plantation survivalist” humor in particular is traced to the days of slavery and was a mechanism to deal emotionally and psychologically with the effects of slavery and to satirize the injustices of the institution itself. See Williams, *Jackie Moms Mabley*, 34.
influential white figures decades before black men could commercially satirize racism and power politics. Female comedians have not been perceived as activists in the historiography of the “Civil Rights Movement,” not even those who were perceived as active members of the struggle for racial equality during their lifetimes. Despite Mabley’s groundbreaking career, other black female comedians have continually struggled to achieve the same artistic and financial recognition as their male counterparts.35

Although scholars have regularly used comedy or ironic jokes delivered by black entertainers as part of their analysis of African American history in the United States, I build on the trend of the below scholars to use comedy to highlight innovative political resistance. William Schechter pioneered comedic cultural studies with his book on antebellum black culture and folklore. Later scholars like Lawrence Levine, Mel Watkins, and Justin Lorts have moved beyond slavery era folklore to reconstruct the development of black humor through the entertainment styles of minstrelsy, vaudeville, film, stand-up comedy, radio, and television. Mel Watkins has produced a comprehensive narrative of black humor through performance and comedy in the twentieth century, but he focused on male actors, singers, and comics. Justin Lorts provides the most recent intervention into the historiography with his dissertation that placed comedians at the center of the civil rights narrative and focused on the relationship between comics asserting their independence in their careers and the actions of the NAACP to control the comedians or utilize them for celebrity status at political rallies.

35 Whoopi Goldberg’s documentary Moms Mabley: I Got Somethin’ to Tell Ya. (2013), especially interviews with Whoopi Goldberg, Kathy Griffin, Anne Meara, Joan Rivers, and Norma Miller.
This thesis rests on the extensive scholarship in the psychology of stand-up comedy, black humor, and African American folklore. Nevertheless, the aims and methods of this project remain those of a historian. My model and exemplar for combining female entertainers and constructions of gender in the modern black freedom struggle is historian Ruth Feldstein. Most recently, Feldstein successfully intertwined African American female jazz singers and actresses into the political activism of the twentieth century in *How it Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the “Civil Rights Movement.”*  

Previously, Feldstein saluted women in the political battles of modern America with *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965*. Both of these works allow me to evaluate the ‘Moms’ persona within an established matrix for constructions of gender in the modern black freedom struggle.

Often, I contextualize Mabley’s jokes within the time period and compare her to contemporary comedians like slapstick queen Lucille Ball, vaudeville icon Pigmeat Markham, and stand-up comic Dick Gregory. While these kinds of comparative touchstones are important for history, this project will be less a comparison and more an analysis of ‘Moms’ Mabley as a case study to illuminate the historical circumstances for women in the modern black freedom struggle. Comparative analyses occur when they serve the argument of this thesis, but they are limited, as much work remains in the area of women’s

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contributions to comedy and political activism. My main objective with this work is to signify and explicate the importance of Jackie Mabley to the popular narrative of civil rights work and call the attention of other historians to a difficult yet scholarly, profitable body of sources that would benefit the historiography of the modern black freedom struggle in the United States.

**Chapters Outline**

Since the scope of the project spans Mabley’s career from the 1920s to the 1970s, the structure lends itself well to a chronological framework divided into three parts. The first chapter provides a history of the development of African American comedians and stand-up comedy by tracing them through the minstrel shows, the vaudeville genre, and the Chitlin’ Circuit. Mabley’s career began against the backdrop of New York City, the Harlem Renaissance, and the politics and decisions surrounding the Apollo Theater. In order for Jackie Mabley and similar entertainers to make a living, she had to appease black audiences in Harlem and the Chitlin’ Circuit. Limited funds cycled through these theaters and only the strongest entertainers survived. This chapter anchors Mabley’s life in the radical Harlem Renaissance when Afro-American artists used culture a grounds for political contest, an idea that the United States government and the NAACP would expand in the New Deal and World War II era.

The second chapter details Mabley’s creation of the ‘Moms’ persona as a gendered strategy to further her career as a comic entertainer. Through the 1940s and 1950s, Mabley toured much of the east coast and starred in two ensemble race films featuring vaudeville performers, *Boarding House Blues* (1948) and *Killer Diller* (1948). In both of these films, Mabley performed in her ‘Moms’ character, serving as a matriarch for a “family” of young
entertainers. This portion of her career coincided with the Second World War and the expansion of mass media and the NAACP’s involvement in image creation in Hollywood, both made possible partly by the war machine. Although her ‘Moms’ persona produced topical political comedy and asserted strong identities for black women, her tendency to use the bulging eyes and unattractive costumes of minstrel humor was seen as regressive by large civil rights organizations. The second chapter clarifies why Mabley developed the ‘Moms’ persona to find fame in the traditionally male dominated field of comedy.

The third and final chapter reconciles the ‘Moms’ persona with the changing demands of the “Civil Rights Movement” and white-owned liberal media and television in the 1960s and early 1970s. Black magazines like Ebony as well as white television shows like the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour and the Ed Sullivan Show all claimed ‘Moms’ as their own. All the while, Mabley recorded more records and performed on more television specials. As her persona gained a national following, Mabley was able to insert her more controversial political jokes into the previously white space of television to create visual nonviolent direction action. As she aged, Mabley began to resemble the ‘Moms’ character she had perfected over the years, yet still chose to physically exaggerate her outrageous personality by performing without her dentures. Mabley revealed truths and humorous incongruities in racism and segregation and the struggles of integration in a code that was simultaneously satisfying to African Americans and safe to white Americans. As long as her audiences were laughing, Mabley safely called attention to society’s hypocrisy through their own cultural metaphors. In short, the third chapter delivers the punchline for the decades Mabley spent invoking discussions of sex, sexuality, race, gender, and popular events of the “Civil Rights Movement.”
Conclusion

History textbooks commonly portray the civil rights struggle as the story of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.; Rosa Parks in Montgomery; and the legal battles waged by the NAACP. Problematically, when we construct popular memory to memorialize a few special men or women, the movement dies when the leader can no longer symbolically guide the political action. This project poses comedy as a device to complicate this narrative. For the sake of simplicity, activist organizations tend to represent their marginalized population with a simple, monolithic identity. The civil rights work of entertainers complicates the narrative in a way especially when creating their own material to produce humor for an audience, in a collective way that that does not necessarily simplify the experiences of African Americans. Stand-up comedians pushed the envelope of acceptable behavior. Mabley’s visual presence in popular culture expanded conceptions of what respectable blackness could look like.

Given “colorblind liberalism,” political attacks on affirmative action, and institutional violence committed between and upon people of color, the struggle for racial equality in the United States endures into the present day. In order to invent new avenues for social, economic, and political change, we must recognize the historical actors—and their tactics—that were acting beyond the realm of mainstream civil rights campaigns and respectability politics. This thesis shows that Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley won victories for the civil rights struggle in her own right.
CHAPTER I:

Black Humor and Black Performance:
Jackie Mabley’s Early Career during the Harlem Renaissance

Figure 1.1. A portrait of the comedy team and married couple Butterbeans (Jodie Edwards) and Susie (Susie Edwards) from 1924. Source: Cover for the Butterbeans and Susie Vol. 1:1924-1925.

Four decades before Jackie Mabley made $10,000 a week touring around the United States as a stand-up comic in the 1960s, she ran away from her home in the South to pursue show business. Young Jackie Mabley was among the waves of men and women who moved to the romanticized North to escape violence and seek education and employment opportunities. Around 1910, Mabley joined a traveling vaudeville troupe led by the famous married comedy duo Jodie “Butterbeans” and Susie Edwards. “Butterbeans and Susie”, as they were known, toured around the Theatre Owners Booking Association (TOBA), also known as the Chitlin’ Circuit, a loose association of segregated theaters across the South, performing their husband-and-wife themed song and tap routines. Mabley joined the group of vaudeville performers and honed her singing, acting, and tap-dancing skills. It was here that
Mabley got her start, participating in sketches focused on the dynamics of gender and marriage. Such setups allowed the comedians to parody domestic life and relationships between men and women, tackling everything from sex to rearing children. Much like the family life and workplace based situation comedies of today’s entertainment, these subjects were popular fare because many kinds of audiences could relate.

Legend has it that “Butterbeans and Susie” encouraged young Mabley to strike out on her own in New York City, claiming that she was “too gifted to work for only $14 a week.”39 At the turn of the century, New York City was the center of comedy and live theater production. In New York, working and competing with a community of black artists and performers, all of whom were auditioning and participating in the black only theaters, improved Mabley’s show business skills while exposing her to comedians like Fats Wallis, jazz musician Duke Ellington, activist actor Paul Robeson, and writer and performer Zora Neale Hurston. New York City, specifically Harlem and Queens, hosted vibrant African American communities that financially supported black theaters. The Chitlin’ Circuit in New York City featured the Cotton Club, Small’s Paradise, and the Apollo Theater. Beyond New York, the Chitlin’ Circuit ranged as far south as the Royal Peacock in Atlanta and the Ritz Theater in Jacksonville, Florida; and as far west as Club Delisa and the Regal Theatre in Chicago. Traveling vaudeville shows were a common feature of the Chitlin’ Circuit.40 The Apollo was also one of the few interracial entertainment venues in the 1930s and 1940s. House manager Audrey Neal estimated that forty percent of the audiences were young whites.

40 Morwitz, “Moms Mabley,” 91.
and entertainers flocking from downtown to see the comedy. These venues specialized in burlesque entertainment and their managers booked black talent primarily because it satisfied white people’s curiosity for black entertainers and their culture.

Jackie Mabley’s life and career path was shaped by the outpouring of energy devoted to cultural activism that permeated the Harlem in the 1920s, a phenomenon known as the “Harlem Renaissance.” The Harlem artist community was a vibrant hodgepodge of writers, actors, dancers, singers, musicians, visual artists, and comedians living, writing, and performing in the same spaces. Together, they conceived and implemented a black renaissance, which publicized ideologies for the lifestyles of African Americans, chiefly racial uplift and “the New Negro.” Then only a decade old, the NAACP magazine *The Crisis* helped extend the reach of the Renaissance far beyond the urban artist enclave, supplementing this cultural flowering by publishing black works of literature alongside articles and news on labor movements and political campaigns. These activities mark a collective recognition and use of cultural items or expression as political currency in the modern black freedom struggle. By developing literature and imagery that broke from the Anglo-American literary cannon, participants in the Harlem Renaissance furthered notions of the cultural as political during the 1920s. The politically charged atmosphere of New York City at the time, with its vigorous labor unions and growing African American populations, shaped Mabley’s comedy. In the same way that the “Civil Rights Movement” would make

possible her incredible comedic success after 1960, the Harlem Renaissance provided an
ideal environment for Mabley to create her politically savvy humor and comedic self.

This chapter explores the social and political contexts for black humor and entertainment that influenced Jackie Mabley’s political comedy. First, I provide a summary of the development of black humor in America starting with old slavery-era “trickster tales” and culminating with the emergence of stand-up comedy in the 1920s. Next, I trace Mabley’s early career as a vaudeville performer and within the Chitlin’ Circuit alongside other comedians like Ruth Draper, Bob Hope, and Willy “Ashcan” Jones. The Chitlin’ Circuit created a network of clubs in which black entertainers were welcome, allowing them to share their performance styles and cooperatively develop a unique black humor. The laws of segregation, ironically, sheltered black entertainers from Jim Crow racism and allowed them to work without fear of censorship. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the relationship between institutions like Hollywood studios and the Apollo Theater, and civil rights organizations, thus illuminating the experiences and historical circumstances that birthed the ‘Moms’ character.

“White folks do as they pleases, and the darkies do as they can”:
Roots of Black Humor

In an interview with celebrity columnist Sidney Fields in 1966, Mabley joked that she chose to pursue entertainment because she “was very pretty and didn’t want to become a prostitute.” With this self-deprecating crack, Mabley spoke to the reality for many black women of her generation. In the early twentieth century, African American women often had little education and few employment options beyond domestic or sex work. In the early

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44 This is a slave maxim, repeated over and over in proverbs. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 102.
45 Sidney Fields as quoted in Williams, Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley, 78.
twentieth century, employment for blacks effectively constituted similar menial roles as existed during slavery itself. In the decades following the Civil War, thousands of people once bought and sold in a marketplace had to redefine their relationship with labor and employment. They looked for new occupations to market their existent skills. Professional entertainment, which required no traditional education and profited from racial stereotypes and curiosities, offered an alternative for a few emancipated slaves and their children. When African Americans pursued an entertainment career in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, they did so in light of the fact that they traditionally were commodities in the United States.46

Comedy and its performance have occupied a central place in the African American experience.47 Humor has long been the tool of oppressed peoples to “laugh to keep from crying,”—which, in the context of slavery or Jim Crow culture could be a useful and even necessary survival tactic.48 Popular twentieth century black comedians like Redd Foxx, Richard Pryor, and Whoopi Goldberg have traced the lineage of black humor to the days of slavery. According to historians William Schechter and Lawrence Levine, themes and tropes common to the black humor that African Americans have used to “laugh to keep from crying” have their roots in the oral traditions of different tribes in West Africa. Lawrence Levine in particular argued that black humor—as expressed in mainland North America—originated in West Africa, the birthplace of almost fifty percent of imported slaves.49

In Black Culture and Black Consciousness, Levine identifies the origin of the “animal trickster” tales popular in West African folklore that developed into human trickster stories in

47 Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 2; Lorts, “Black Laughter/Black Protest,” 14.
48 Dance, Honey hush!, 17.
the United States slave populations. These animal tales disguised narratives of social protest or psychological release that the in-group (slaves) could use to relate to each other and those outside of their group (white American individuals and institutions). Occasionally, the animals in the stories were thinly-veiled allusions to the authority figures in their lives, but all of the stories illustrated patterns of human behavior. Trickster tales imparted important lessons about authority relationships. Slaves preferred a plotline where the weak outwitted the strong, glorifying the tactics of trickery and misdirection. In a world where slaves had little control over their lives and often had to rebel just to survive, these tales served a dual function. First, they provided a medium for slaves to express their repressed feelings. Second, they inculcated tactics for survival to listeners. Abigail Christensen, a nineteenth-century folklore collector born to abolitionist parents, recognized the discursive function of trickster tales. In the preface to her 1892 collection of black tales, she stated “It must be remembered that the Rabbit represents the colored man... so the Negro, without education or wealth, could only hope to succeed by stratagem.” These tales and fables were foundational for black humor; their adapted translations of stories and characters appear in both vaudeville sketches and stand-up comedy.

One of the comedic techniques common to both slave trickster tales and modern black humor is incongruity. Humor theorists present incongruity—or a radical contrast between expectation and reality—as an essential component of what people find funny. Incongruity has a particular function in black humor to confront assumptions about the

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50 Abigail Christensen, as quoted in Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 112.
51 For a thorough history on the slave “trickster” tales and their roots in Africa, see Lawrence Levine’s second chapter “The Meaning of Slave Tales” from *Black culture and Black Consciousness*, 102-118.
superiority of white people. Jokes that reverse the usual stereotypes for white people and black people date back to slavery: “A black maid and her white mistress become pregnant and give birth over the same time period. One day the white woman runs into the kitchen crying out in delight, “Oh! My baby said his first word today.” The black baby, in his basket on the kitchen floor, looks up and asks, “he did, wha’ ‘id ‘e say?” This joke maintained the stereotype of African American dialect while implying that the black child was intellectually superior to the white child. These recurring themes and jokes within black humor help derive its power to unite unfamiliar African Americans within the same political situations.

Jokes that communities find funny reflect their collective cultural values. Thus, when a comic is paid to perform black humor publically, that commercial comedy indicates who has the power to make jokes in the community. For example, white southern communities in the antebellum United States valued their superior position relative to slaves. Some of their most popular jokes were made at the expense of slaves and their dignity. The power dynamic between oppressors and the oppressed is essential to understanding the development of minstrelsy and vaudeville in the antebellum United States. From the post-slavery era through the early twentieth century, black comedians found work within these genres of blackface minstrel shows and vaudeville comedy.

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53 Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 308.
Minstrelsy and Vaudeville

Figure 1. Bert Williams posing in blackface in 1908.
Source: http://www.pbs.org/wnet/broadway/stars/bert-williams/

The foundation for twentieth century American stage entertainment, both white and nonwhite, was minstrelsy. Popularized during the mid-nineteenth century, minstrelsy consisted of comic acts, variety shows, songs, and dances. Most minstrel shows were filled primarily with white entertainers performing in blackface. More than simply darkening their faces with cork and whitening their lips with ash, blackface was an entire attitude and performance style. White men in blackface emulated stereotypical “slave behavior” by exaggerating their smiles and widening their eyes, while dressing themselves in torn suits and oversized shoes to likewise look the part of the slave. These traits appear comical on most

adults, but when Jackie Mabley, a black woman, performs them, the traits run the risk of reinforcing stereotypes about the race as conceived by members of dominant society. Most minstrel acts included a routine of overly energetic tap dancing and singing with slurred, stupefied speech. White actors in blackface presented African Americans as the butt of their jokes to create popular shows for their audiences. However, the audience’s reception of these jokes is what really motivated the development of this subordinating humor, since comics are only popular insofar as the public finds them funny.

The infamous “Jim Crow” character, credited to the white comic actor Thomas D. Rice in 1828, was the dominant comedic representation of black men in the southern United States. Rice’s performance involved a song and dance routine wherein his character “jumped Jim Crow,” or acted like a stereotypical black person. Historians have postulated various reasons for why blackface minstrelsy was so popular. In Eric Lott’s Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class he suggests that, “The black mask offered a way to play with the collective fears of a degraded and threatening male ‘other’ while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them.”

Therefore, jokes about the ignorance of slaves served a dual purpose; they reinforced control over the black majorities and secured proof of a superior white masculinity. The institution of slavery and widespread violence such as lynching and rape also solidified white control. But the constant fears of slave insurrection, fueled by legends like the failed uprising of Denmark Vesey of South Carolina in 1822, undermined this outward projection of white security. Minstrel actors performing as the happy-go-lucky ‘darky’ appeased Southern audiences by reassuring them of the careless foolishness of slaves. Therefore, while comedy has the ability to relieve

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tension and unite the oppressed, it can also solidify deeply held assumptions within the oppressor’s culture.

After the Civil War, black people began performing in minstrel shows, mostly as part of the Chitlin’ Circuit, away from white minstrel performers. Most of these black performers continued to use blackface tools, such as cork and exaggerated gestures, because that was the kind of entertainment that was acceptable and popular. These “real Negro delineators” could provide authentic black entertainment, veiled by white minstrelsy and blackface. Black performers used parody of blackface as a gateway into the entertainment sphere. This gateway was limiting, in that if they imitated traditional minstrel styles, they could only parody their own livelihood. Audiences expected these performers to give them a traditional minstrel show and to live up to the stereotypes created by white performers. Incidentally, in conforming to the expectation of patrons, cultural assumptions about the inclination of African Americans to perform for white audiences were formed.

African American male entertainers portrayed stereotypical tropes of their race known as “sambo” or “coon” characters in their minstrel routines. “Coons,” short for raccoon, were typical “wily slaves” that cleverly escaped work but often suffered the consequences of transgressing their spatial or political boundaries. The derogatory term was popularized with the minstrel song “Zip Coon.” A “sambo” referred to an African American man who was even more of a trickster than a coon. The end of the story usually affirmed the white owner’s authority.56 Like the “Kingfish” character of the popular radio and television show *Amos and Andy*, “coons” were characterized as aggressive, pretentious, or “uppity,” but

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still ignorant. The ignorance of a black “coon” also originated in slave humor, thereby making this trope a construction of both white minstrels and African Americans. As scholar William Schechter concluded in his early study of black humor, slaves often allowed for the assumption of their ignorance to be the butt of their master’s joke in order to confound their master. The “trickster,” though he is caught, gets the better of his powerful master in the end, whether it is relief from work or a parcel of food that he smuggled. When African American comedians appropriated these same tools and traits of minstrelsy, such as slow movements, blackface cork, and song and tap dance routines, they challenged the control implied by the exchange. Underneath these unfortunate circumstances, entertainers like Bert Williams created social satire. One of the first exemplars of Bert Williams’ social satire was his starring role alongside George Walker in the 1904 Broadway musical, *In Dahomey*. Dahomey, now known as Benin, is a country in West Africa, and the musical’s premise was that a group of African Americans had chanced upon a pot of gold and returned to their homeland to rule. Though the audience was segregated, the musical was a landmark piece in American history and traveled to London. With lyrics written by Paul Lawrence Dunbar and music scored by Will Marion Cook, the musical explored themes of black life, independence, and potential royalty while Walker and Williams danced behind blackface masks. Williams maintained the slow-talking, woeful victim character that allowed him to point out the misfortune that befell African Americans, while still appeasing their stereotypes as a slow “darky” in blackface.

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Black minstrel shows destabilized the power dynamics of blackface minstrel shows. In the late 1800s and early 1900s black comedians Bert Williams and George Walker subverted this tradition of white sketches written for both white and black minstrels. Bert Williams, one of the first African American crossover artists, serves as a helpful point of comparison for Mabley. Black entertainers adapted the humor available to them and began to satirize the social inequalities that defined their performances. In their performance, “The Two Real Coons,” Williams and Walker critiqued white minstrels with the lyric:

You may look like a crow
But you can’t take flight
Your spirit is willing
But your color ain’t right!

In this joke, Williams and Walker poked fun at white minstrelsy performers’ inability to perform blackness properly, despite their makeup and affected mannerisms, minstrel in blackface were not truly black and never would be. They stated that these “crows…can’t take flight,” and implied that the white minstrels were also bad at their craft. White minstrels’ construction of “blackness” provided these early comedians with the formula to be funny African American entertainers during this time period. But underneath the blackface masks, the beginnings of black social satire took shape.

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60 Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 64.
63 Chude-Sokei, *The last "darker,"* 55.
64 Most of the sources I have encountered have mentioned Jackie Mabley as a comedian, but have never centered her in their narrative. The few studies that concentrate on her (Patterson, *A Womanist Discourse* and Williams, *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley*) fall under gender studies and sociology classifications. Other female comedians and comedic singers like Pearl Bailey and Anne Williams are rarely mentioned.
Vaudeville and minstrel shows shared the format of a variety show with unrelated acts, but vaudeville did not necessarily include blackface performers.\(^{65}\) Vaudeville shows included singing, dancing, dramatic monologues, and comic sketches, but also acrobats, animal acts, and minstrel comedians. A mixture of circus and conventional theater, vaudeville was a cutthroat industry where most entertainers lived gig to gig. Revenue was generated by ticket sales, so shows had to travel from town to town to find new audiences. In the early twentieth century, black entertainers could make a living working for black owned or white owned vaudeville teams. Among the entertainers peddling their talents was the young Jackie Mabley.

Through these forms of entertainment, Jackie Mabley avoided the compulsion toward domestic labor, church work, and sex work. Minstrelsy and vaudeville provided opportunities for the professional black female entertainer.\(^{66}\) An entertainer’s immediate success with a live audience primarily determined her value. If a woman of color sold out tickets with her burlesque dances or funny monologues, her race and gender became less important in this cultural arena. While the initial barriers to entry persisted, talented women of color could subvert their marginalization and pursue their occupation.

Traveling shows like the “Butterbeans and Susie” troupe picked up talented people as they moved from city to city along the Chitlin’ Circuit.\(^{67}\) Venues on the Chitlin’ Circuit provided safe and acceptable places for black stage shows and musical artists during racial segregation and remained popular through the 1960s.\(^{68}\) In the cutthroat world of vaudeville, it


\(^{68}\) Williams, *Jackie Moms Mabley*, 74-77.
was more economical to have multidimensional entertainers than rely on a large cast. Theaters usually hired fewer entertainers who provided them with multiple acts. Big time vaudeville tycoons like B.F. Keith and Edward Albee sought to monopolize all of the vaudeville theaters and troupes on the East Coast, creating even stiffer competition in an already tough industry. In response, vaudeville performers in New York City formed a union, and in 1917 even went on a performers strike against poor pay and exploitation. Competition between individual entertainers was steep. Almost all comedians were triple threats; they could sing, act, and dance in addition to their humor.⁶⁹ Mabley developed her talents as a triple threat during her days on the vaudeville circuit, and these sketches and show business tricks remained in her comedy long after they went out of style.

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Mainstream comedy in 1920s New York City was active, slapstick-oriented, and based in sketch comedy. Charlie Chaplin’s farcical comedy and dance routines dominated this era. If their routines did well enough in live stage shows and on tour, entertainers might be flown out to Hollywood to perform similar bits which would be interwoven into the plot of a film. Despite Mabley’s proximity to filmed stars like Bert Williams, monologist Ruth Draper, and jazz musician Duke Ellington, Mabley would not appear on screen until the late 1940s with her ‘Moms’ persona and stand-up comedy. In the next chapter, I detail why her comedy and visual presentation did not suit the film roles available to black women at the time.

The genre of stand-up comedy evolved from the role of the “emcee,” or the host of vaudeville performances, who introduced each of the acts so that the audience knew what
was coming next. These hosts often had to vamp time for actors or actresses to change costumes, and the easiest way to deflect this tension was through jokes.\(^{70}\) The emcees were responsible for uniting the disparate acts to create a cohesive show format; they used comedic banter to build a relationship with the audience and sustain their interest throughout the show. If the audiences were all African American, which was often the case at the Cotton Club and Apollo Theater in Harlem, then jokes about politics, race relations, sex, and marriage were tailored to them. Eventually, the role of the emcee became an act in itself; entertainers began to specialize in storytelling and political humor as individual acts. This more personal relationship between the emcee and the audience allowed the entertainer to experiment without the tools of blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville, and to eventually do comedy without it. At the Apollo Theater, emcees would be hired a week at a time. Leonard Reed, Ralph Cooper, Nipsey Russell and Willie Bryant all rose to greater fame in the 1940s and 1950s after emceeing at the Apollo Theater. Jackie Mabley, along with comics such as Dewey ‘Pigmeat’ Markham (a popular entertainer at the Apollo Theater who performed in blackface), helped make this transition from vaudeville to more modern stand-up comedy styles. Mabley developed her repertoire of stand-up comedy monologues throughout her time in vaudeville sketches and in colored revues.

Years before Mabley appeared as the solo act, ‘Moms,’ she performed as the “Rich Aunt from Utah” in venues around New York. This role was a predecessor to the ‘Moms’ persona in that she played an outlandish, older woman character. She combined comedy with song and dance and began performing in colored revues. In two of these revues, *Look Who’s Here* (1927) and *The Joy Boat* (1930) Mabley performed in the burnt cork makeup typical of minstrel and vaudeville comics. Even if her comedy was innovative and established her as an

independent figure, Mabley was not immune to the expectations for black entertainers to perform in blackface in the early twentieth century. After her stint in tent and variety shows, Mabley appeared on stage in several musical comedies in the twenties and thirties. Among them were Miss Bandana (1927) produced by Clarence Muse, and Fast and Furious (1931), which starred Tim Moore, Dusty Fletcher and Zora Neale Hurston. She appeared on playbills alongside famous entertainers like tap dancer Sidney Poiter, Pigmeat Markham, Cootie Williams, Tim “Kingfish” Moore, Peg Leg Bates, and John Mason.\textsuperscript{71} The process of traveling on tours and living in close quarters brought the styles of black humor closer together while driving a need to distinguish acts from each other so as to not be jobless by day’s end. It would not have shocked audiences for Mabley to perform in blackface during the 1920s, but as the social and political climate changed, she shed blackface in favor of the ‘Moms’ persona. However, she never again performed in blackface once she began to gain prominence in the 1940s and 1950s.

Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, white men, white men in blackface, and black men in blackface dominated cultural expectations for funny people. Men suited the audience’s expectations for humor and they more quickly gained the audience’s support and trust.\textsuperscript{72} At venues like the Apollo Theater in Harlem, emcees told jokes about the contemporary political and social environment. The laughter these jokes highlighted the shared experiences, united the audience, and made them more likely to enjoy the subsequent entertainment. Mabley used this tactic on her 1962 Apollo Theater record Young Men Si, Old men No!, on which she tells a emcee-esque joke about Harlem:

\textsuperscript{71} Morwitz, “Moms Mabley,” 2; Williams, Jackie Moms Mabley, 12. She would reunite with many of these entertainers later for films such as Boarding House Blues (1948), suggesting how tightly knit the entertainment culture was and how influential these comedians could be upon one another.

I got sick. Went to Harlem hospital, it ain’t never did much. [Mabley laughs]. They got a sign up at Harlem hospital that says do your cutting on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and avoid the weekend rush….

Here, she addressed the violence in Harlem and the dilapidated conditions of the hospital in an ironic way, causing the whole audience to laugh with her about their shared living experience. Based on the context of the joke, it is reasonable to speculate that she developed it in the 1920s. An audience that is made to feel comfortable and ‘in’ with the comedian is always more likely to stay for the whole show and return for repeat performances. Therefore, the commercial success of a stand-up comedy routine accurately measures how a comic reflects the political beliefs of a specific community.

Blackface persisted in vaudeville acts at the Apollo through the late 1930s when the new generation of African American stand-up comedians cast off blackface as a comedic tool. These new comics like Timmie Rodgers criticized the vaudeville entertainers who continued the practice. Comic Pigmeat Markham recounted a time he was assaulted by young black comedians who told him “he didn’t need the makeup to be funny.” Others, like comic veteran Spo-Dee-O-Dee, stopped using the blackface when he realized himself that the makeup was not the comedy, he was. While Pigmeat Markham and Tim Moore used blackface, it was not always the actor’s choice to wear blackface, since film directors or theater executives demanded it. In 1933, popular theater columnist Vere E. Johns highlighted the class differences between audiences that still laugh at blackface and those who did not. Blackface, he said, only appealed to “yokels, morons, and nincompoops,” and was only popular among “antiquated baboons of a bygone era.” Some old vaudeville comics,

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74 Ibid.
75 Vere E. Johns quoted in Anderson, This Was Harlem, 239.
however, were angry that novices or critics of the entertainment industry did not understand them. They identified blackface with comedy, not with racism. Diverse opinions persisted over the use of blackface: while some men said that blackface was not necessary to be funny, others said that blackface was what made them comics in the first place.

Mabley herself stopped appearing in blackface once she earned regular roles in musicals and comedy shows in the 1920s. Since there exists little documentation of these earlier stand-up routines, it is difficult to determine how she used the blackface as either a normal tool or a similar satirical edge as Bert Williams, though later critics did market her comedic styling and timing as a “female Bert Williams.” There is no material from Mabley herself that indicates why she stopped the practice, but based on the documented experiences of her peer comedians, we can speculate that it may have corresponded with a push from civil rights organizations and fellow entertainers alike. Additionally, it could have been an indication that Mabley had gained more power as an individual emcee or stand-up comic, much like the trajectory of her peer entertainers at the Apollo Theater. But since she stopped using the cork in favor of a vaudeville costume, Mabley avoided the fate of Lincoln Perry. Blackface offended the NAACP, and its members used it as a rallying point for political activism around representations of blackness.

With its protest of the first blockbuster feature film *Birth of a Nation* in 1915, the NAACP set a precedent for opposing stereotypical portrayals of African Americans in the entertainment industry, regardless of what that protest might mean to the careers of black actors whose livelihood lay in performing black stereotypes. One prime example of these risky comic portrayals was the black celebrity Lincoln Perry, also known by his stage persona Step’N Fetchit. He picked up this stage name early in his career as a reference to his
classic servant character would “step and fetch it,” in a bumbling, comical way. In the 1930s, he was the most popular black actor in Hollywood, well known for his shuffling, droll-faced performances as a lazy comic servant. He gained fame and wealth through his film *Hearts in Dixie* (1929) and about forty others. Directors blamed Perry at times for being “undirectable” in that he could only perform these traditionally blackface “sambo” roles. Unfortunately for Perry, his success as Step’n Fetchit made him popular for “coon” performances right in the 1930s when these stereotypes were increasingly recognized as publicly offensive. The NAACP would have much rather supported respectable and publicly “movement conscious” entertainers like the beloved Sidney Poiter. Perry supported himself with these roles, however, and the negative responses of the NAACP brought him anger and shame when he was finally achieving recognition as an entertainer. The story of Perry’s falling out with both the NAACP and the African American public illustrates the conflation of approval for comedians with disapproval for the way that they expressed their comedy, a way that conspired to end the practice of blackface. A combination of entertainment peers, the public, and political activists threw their support behind new comedians who condemned the use of blackface.76

When the NAACP made a public example of Lincoln Perry, they established the politics of humor and representation that Mabley and others encountered and negotiated in their early careers. Mabley had a specific black audience in the 1920s and she did not suit the limited roles available to black leading ladies at the time.77 Another premier entertainer in New York City during the 1920s, the young dancer Fredi Washington attended school and worked in New York City. As a teenager she worked first as a dancer, getting her big break

in one of the first black Broadway shows, *Shuffle Along*. After establishing herself as a dancer, Washington earned the leading role in Dudley Murphy’s *Black and Tan*.\(^78\) Her acting career continued in live stage performance and film adaptations of these performances, earning her the lead role opposite Paul Robeson in the 1924 revival of *Emperor Jones*.\(^79\) Soon after, Fredi Washington starred in her first major Hollywood film in a role that would arguably send her career toward overt political activism in lieu of acting.

![Image of Louise Beavers and Fredi Washington in *Imitation of Life*](image)

**Figure 1.4.** A still photograph of Louise Beavers (left) and Fredi Washington (right) in *Imitation of Life*. Source: Box 2, Folder 1, “Fredi Washington’s Papers” at the Amistad Research Center, New Orleans.

In 1934, Universal Pictures released the film *Imitation of Life*, starring Louise Beavers and Fredi Washington.\(^80\) The green-eyed, fair-skinned Washington played Peola, a young mulatto girl who struggled with her blackness after being raised alongside the white


\(^80\) *Imitation of Life*, Directed by John Stahl, (VHS: 1934).
child that her mother nursed. Based on the contemporary standards for black maids in film, set by actresses like Louise Beavers and Hattie McDaniel, Washington’s skin was not dark enough. On the other hand, producers refused to use her for leading lady roles alongside white men due to criticisms of presenting miscegenation on screen. While light-skinned actresses like Fredi Washington and heavier mammy figures like Hattie McDaniel had their own host of complications with the NAACP, they garnered roles in Hollywood films in the 1920s and 1930s because they did not threaten both institutions. While McDaniel frustrated the NAACP, she was beloved in Hollywood. The Apollo veteran comic Spo-Dee-O-Dee noted about the comedy of the 1920s that, “Our humor was ethnic, sexual, cruel, and, quite often, slapstick. We did just about everything to get laughs, and we usually did.” Mabley’s bawdy comedy and appearances in blackface, though holding to comedy norms, barred her from crossing over to the Hollywood film industry.

At the Apollo Theater, Jackie Mabley used techniques from vaudeville to gain more fans. Because a stand-up comedian performs alone on stage without the chemistry or security of fellow actors, stand-up comedians like Mabley are completely vulnerable to the judgment of the audience. The audience expects a stand-up comic to be funny, but various factors can determine whether that audience will be receptive to the comedian or not. An unforgiving audience may reject a comedian for an offensive joke, failing to make them laugh in the first place, or the disunion between the audience’s expectation for what a humorous person looks like and the comic in front of them. Thus, the only defense from an audience’s cultural prejudices is to be funny. The humor catches the audiences’ attention, but the content of the joke can change their perspective. A final way for stand-up comedians of marginalized races

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and genders to gain more consistent access to the comedy arena is for the work of activists to help change the preexisting prejudices and social context that the stand-up comic lives within. In the next section, it becomes apparent why comedy and social change can work so symbiotically in the produced works and theater shows of the Harlem Renaissance.

**Black Activism in the early twentieth century and the Harlem Renaissance**

The Harlem Renaissance was one of the first overtly organized activist movements by African Americans in the United States. With her comedy, Mabley contributed to the Harlem Renaissance. Historians have evaluated the political merit of the Harlem Renaissance and its influence within the larger black freedom struggle over the past forty years. The time period has been combed over for its successes and failures and many consider it one of the first self-conscious activist movements after World War I. In the 1920s, Civil Rights organizations and Harlem artists promoted an agenda of “cultural self-determination,” i.e. the idea that African Americans could primarily determine their statuses in the cultural arena to support their battles for self-determination in legal matters. This ideology took form within the context of a post World War I international context of self-determination, as articulated by the League of Nations and democratic revolutions in European countries. In this context, literary intellectuals in the Harlem Renaissance attempted to redefine how the rest of the world viewed black citizens by producing literature about actual African American experience in defiance of stereotypes. From their own perspectives and in the sprit of self-determination, these authors brought about an “explosion of culture” by rendering visible the

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memories and experiences that had been hidden from the American public sphere.\textsuperscript{86}

Accompanying this cultural activism of the 1920s was more conventional activism in the unions and protests of the New York City labor movements.

The focus of civil rights activism in 1920s New York City focused on demands for full employment, government subsidized health care, criminal justice reform, and full and complete equality in all aspects of life.\textsuperscript{87} Segregation was both legal and enforced by the government structures in New York City, making it even more difficult to reverse changes. These pluralistic reforms required broad based, nuanced activism and coordinated organization to combat institutionalized discrimination at all levels. Since African Americans of different socioeconomic statuses, hometowns, occupations, and education levels were affected differently despite uniformly discriminatory laws, it was essential to convince people of their commonalities. African American entertainers provided some of the “glue” that created united, politically conscious populations would go on to elect the first African American to Congress, Adam Clayton Powell Jr.\textsuperscript{88}

The early “Civil Rights Movement” in New York City resembled and overlapped with the labor movement.\textsuperscript{89} The NYC labor movement in the 1910s and 1920s at this time focused on workers’ rights, namely, the eight-hour workday. Classically, successful labor movements have required strong leadership and a broad network of support and coordination. Magazines like the NAACP’s \textit{The Crisis} helped provide this coordination and leadership, reaching a circulation of 100,000 people in 1920. As a magazine for an activist organization,

\textsuperscript{86} Sklarhoff. \textit{Black Culture and the New Deal}, 6.

\textsuperscript{87} For a full discussion of black activism and the “Civil Rights Movement” in New York, see Martha Biondi, \textit{To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City}, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid, 17.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid, 19.
it often reads like a call to action, complete with advertisements for higher education and how one should patronize black businesses. While *The Crisis* highlighted the civil rights work of lawyers like Thurgood Marshall, its editors also published poems, literature pieces, and opinion articles that focused on everything from anti-lynching laws to updates on labor movements. The magazine itself sheds light the inherent difficulty in activist organizing of encouraging the working class people who would really benefit from the social changes to leave their jobs and potential payment to march in protests and contribute to magazines. Additionally, the efforts and intention for the magazine provide the beginning of a modern black freedom struggle that posited the cultural arena as a political battleground.

According to journalists at *The Crisis*, there were concerns over whether African Americans could effectively unite in these labor movements. Namely, there were divisions between northern and southern blacks.\(^\text{90}\) While both northern native and northern migrated blacks were desperate for labor, newly arrived southern blacks were especially destitute. To risk their security by going on strike, activists would need to convince these migrated workers that in was in their best interest to join the labor movement. Survival took precedence over involvement in an activist movement, especially since involvement was viewed as a threat instead of a building block to a better life. One opinion editorial of *The Crisis* discussing a new problem of Southern black immigrants used as strike breakers quoted, “One employment agent of the great industrial plant pointed out that one of the great values of Negro migration lies in the fact that it gives him a chance to mix up his labor forces and to establish a balance of power, as the Negro is more individualistic, does not like to group, and does not follow a leader as readily as some foreigners do.” The author does not seem to critique the thought process of the employment agent, but instead identified a

potential danger of failing to unite Northern and Southern black people. Herein lies the opportunity for culture to provide a common ground for people of different social classes but the same race.

During the 1930s, New York City was a site for civil rights activism in relation to matters of economic and housing rights and a major hub for later national aspects of the “Civil Rights Movement.” As articulated by historian Martha Biondi, “New York City was both the location of the first civil rights victories and the first post civil rights disappointments.” As such, it proved especially friendly to comedians like Jackie Mabley. Comedians and artists developed their arts satirizing local struggles and continued on as cultural icons in the national civil rights struggle. As such, comedy routines that utilized social and political satire would be one of the primary responses to disappointments after the legitimate hard work of activist organizations and labor movement strikes and boycotts. The laughter produced by comedians through irony and wit provided a bonding experience that dispersed political messages among African Americans.

Mabley’s early experiences in these black, urban environments was formative to development of her comedy and political orientation. In the 1920s, African American artists, created the Harlem Renaissance as a form of “civil rights by copyright.” Authors, playwrights, and performers worked collaboratively to publish works by, for, and including African Americans. In that process, these works took up physical space on bookshelves to generate new visibility for African American scholarship. The political ideas and identities put forth reflected the diversity of the artists that created them. When the Harlem Renaissance is studied as the work of a multitude of artists and performers instead of the few

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91 Biondi, To Stand and Fight, 14.
92 I borrow “civil rights by copyright” from David Levering Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue, 29.
dominant members of high culture that tend to get all the credit, then political diversity cannot be erased. Mabley’s later finesse in unsettling perceived stereotypes about African Americans through a contrast of her visual performance with her jokes, mannerisms, and attitude was rooted in these formative years of her comedy in the Harlem Renaissance.

Through her work and social circles, Jackie Mabley met Zora Neale Hurston, the ubiquitous Harlem Renaissance writer, humorist, and folklore collector. Throughout her career, Hurston combined elements of literature and anthropology to write a wide array of short fiction, poetry, plays, novels, and essays documenting folklore in the United States, Jamaica, and Haiti. At the height of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston’s literary work was responded to the “racial uplift” agenda in literature and film circles. The “racial uplift” agenda was an ideology popularized by black intellectuals, prominent within the NAACP, such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. These elite black men encouraged lower and middle class blacks to aspire to their level by embracing self-help attitudes. In theory, this positive black identity would effectively diminish white racism because the oppressors could not ignore an equally “respectable” race.

In 1926, Hurston collaborated with other authors like Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, of the self named “Niggerati,” to produce the literary magazine FIRE!!!. This magazine allowed for black writer’s work and stories of lived African American experiences to escape the censors of mainstream publishing. Rather than the sanitized, ‘respectable’ stories printed in The Crisis, these works subverted the classic stereotypes that had been used

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94 Ruth Feldstein, *How it Feels to be Free*, 89.
96 Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 52.
by authors, playwrights, and minstrel performers for decades as well as the image of respectability. Her critics considered many of Hurston’s works taboo, especially her literature that included themes of rape and female sexuality.\textsuperscript{97} Hurston’s interest in folklore and ethnography drove her to represent the characters in her work with accurate dialect instead of whitewashed versions of black experiences.\textsuperscript{98} But for middle class activists that often sought to distance themselves from the black trickster characters of the past, the dialect and subjects of her characters proved too radical. The following excerpt from her first short story, “Spunk” (1925) is a sample of dialogue uttered by a black man in a Florida general store admiring the title character, Spunk Banks:

> “But that’s one thing Ah likes about Spunk Banks—he ain’t skeered of nothin’ on God’s green footstool—nothin’! He rides that log down at saw-mill jus’ like he struts ’round wid another man’s wife—jus’ don’t give a kitty. When Tes’ Miller got cut to giblets on that circle-saw, Spunk steps right up and starts ridin’. The rest of us was skeered to go near it.”\textsuperscript{99}

Although the story won second prize in the 1925 literary contest hosted by the Urban League’s journal \textit{Opportunity}, some contemporary critics objected to her characterizations of African Americans. This dialogue evoked notions of black men’s masculinity and promiscuity while substituting conventional English (scared) for a more realistic auditory portrayal (skeered). Her evocation of masculinity, promiscuity, and a particular dialect seemed regressive to many who saw it as a holdover from blackface minstrelsy; used to elicit laughter at the expense of the dignity of black people. Hurston’s work affirmed the assertions of masculinity that she had documented in her experiences and found in folklore. To the untrained eye, her literary tools and ethnographic approaches theoretically perpetuated white


\textsuperscript{98} Ibid, 460.

constructed stereotypes the culture and actions of African Americans. The challenges that Hurston faced foreshadowed much of the criticism Mabley would later incur.

The working relationship between Zora Neale Hurston and Jackie Mabley influenced Mabley’s later persona; ‘Moms.’ Together, they derailed notions of traditional respectability and the politically respectable comedy held by the NAACP. Mabley and Hurston’s collaboration were a start for the possibilities of black women in comedy. They ran in the same social circles and even wrote shows together. The fact that they were inclined toward the same kind of more radical, honest black humor justifies a comparison of Mabley and Hurston. In 1931, Mabley co-wrote with Hurston a play entitled *Fast and Furious: A Colored Revue in 37 Scenes* and Forbes Randolph. The play was produced at the New Yorker Theatre. While copies of the play no longer exist, based on contemporary newspaper reviews we can ascertain that the sketches and songs revolved around Southern black folklore. Most white critics claimed to not understand the humor and the show closed within the week. Based on the formula for colored revues and Hurston’s love for African and Jamaican folklore, we can speculate further that the comedic content retold slave folklore and trickster tales with a modern twist. It is easy to overlook plays as integral parts of the Harlem Renaissance because they were not as well preserved as poems or stories that were published in newspapers or in print books. Yet, these highly visual mediums brought together entertainers of different talents to work together and present their sketches and renditions of black folklore to entire audiences at once. Plays, like stand-up, produced a more communal experience. While this collaboration was important for Mabley’s politics, the fact that the

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100 Otis Ferguson, “Review of Their Eyes were Watching God,” *The New Republic*, October 13, 1937.
101 Morwitz, “Moms Mabley,” 3. Also see Goldberg documentary, *Moms Mabley*, especially the interview with Norma Jean.
pair only produced a play together instead of a literary work indicates why the world is so aware of Hurston and Mabley’s history has been neglected.

Hurston’s contributions to the entertainment sphere were arguably cut short by the public scandal and divergence of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. The two literary giants could not reconcile their differing views of respectable blackness, and thus ended their productive partnership. However, Hurston’s influence on Mabley’s particular comedic style is unmistakable. Mabley did not shy away from portraying real black people; she claimed that even her mammy-ish character ‘Moms’ was based off of her own grandmother. The mammy figure is an enduring image in American culture, and the popular knowledge of Hattie McDaniel’s “Mammy” serves as proof. This old lady persona that allowed Mabley to do progressive politics with a regressive visual image will be analyzed fully in the second chapter.

Immediately following the Harlem Renaissance, the Federal Art Project (FAP) of the New Deal Era expanded upon the notion of cultural as political. For many black leaders, the “cultural self-determination” woven throughout federal art and media projects was a pivotal step in combating discrimination. Authors and publishers in many literary circles published literature to show African Americans positively, hoping that these portrayals would distance African Americans from the “darkies” and “mammies” of their past. According to FAP directors such as African American poet Sterling Brown and Carlton Moss, if white Americans could understand their black counterparts beyond the shallow yet pervasive stereotypes codified by minstrelsy, perhaps they would deem black women and men worthy of civil rights. Usually, this work entailed censoring speech written in dialects or stories about black people supporting themselves through crime or anything that did not conform to

103 Sklaroff, Black Culture in the New Deal, 6.
the white middle class “American dream.” It was hoped that these respectable images of African Americans would then inspire their fellows through their tales of hard work and perseverance against oppression.

**Conclusion**

Black humor and the culture surrounding it have a recurrent importance in black communities throughout U.S. history. Although comedic stereotypes helped justify the institutionalized inequality of African Americans, the trickster tales of the slavery era and the satirical blackface of Bert Williams demonstrate how blacks managed their limited control over the production of their humor and its cultural currency. Trickster characters and their stories permeated black humor as entertainment comedy genres developed throughout the twentieth century. While the underlying ‘game’ of a comedic bit is repeated over and over again, writers and performers update the details of their jokes to suit the cultural expectations of their audiences. Mabley developed this skill set in the 1920s and perfected it throughout the next three decades of her career, gradually putting pressure on the cultural norms for stand-up comics. Though her network of entertainers and the NAACP appeared at odds in terms of the politics of respectability, their relative victories each helped the other push the previously stated social boundaries for African Americans.

Black comedians took advantage of new opportunities in live theaters and in Hollywood films to encroach upon the traditionally white spaces of mainstream comedy. Mabley and her fellow entertainers avoided direct critiques of Jim Crow racism when they traveled around the Chitlin’ Circuit in the 1920s, but their humor that exposed the lived experiences of black people provided the touchstone for public social satire. The kinds of comedic activism and nonviolent direct action through comedy that I examine in the

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following two chapters were successors to the social satire instigated by blackface comedians, however limited by Jim Crow laws and racist attitudes. *The Crisis* magazine implicated how difficult it was to unite African Americans of sundry classes and struggles under one “movement,” especially if protests and work strikes threaten a person’s day-to-day livelihood. Not everyone can afford diehard activist events, but all people are consumers of culture, and can be consumers of entertainment. Comedians inserted a political message in their comedy and infiltrated popular culture, assisting the modern black freedom struggle by buttressing the popular knowledge of political messages of equality.

The 1930s and the Great Depression were the final nails in the coffin of traditional vaudeville entertainment. In an economy where vaudeville performers lived from gig to gig, these entertainers suffered greatly from the mass unemployment of the 1930s, both their own and that of their patrons.\(^{105}\) No longer were shows so popular that the New York Palace had “two a day” tickets for a quarter, because audiences no longer had the quarter to spare. Some vaudevillian entertainers became marathon dancers and, if they were lucky, Broadway and movie stars like June Havoc.\(^ {106}\) The less fortunate dispersed into the service industry of large cities as taxi drivers, waiters, or car salesmen. As a member of the vaudeville ranks, Jackie Mabley had to reinvent herself to cling to a career in entertainment.

Mabley contributed to the vaudeville and stand-up comedy scene in 1920s and 1930s New York City and became a product of the tightly knit political network of the Harlem Renaissance. She performed alongside entertainer activists like Paul Robeson and Zora Neale Hurston, but had yet to become famous enough to warrant the suspicion and criticism of

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\(^{105}\) For more on the structure, rise, and fall of vaudeville entertainment, see Andrew Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars: How the Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits Controlled the Big-Time and Its Performers* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 275.

\(^{106}\) For a thorough, if heavy handed, introduction to June Havoc, see her memoirs *Early Havoc*, Whitefish: Literary Licensing LLC, 2011. Currently, there is no biography on June Havoc and her entertainment family.
concerned civil rights organizations. Though Jackie Mabley found employment in New York City as a comedy performer, her reputation and fame was local and limited to live performances and transient moments. The scope of this chapter preceded her “overnight rise” to national fame with the invention of Long Play records that were able to transport her experience to men, women, and families outside the segregated theaters of the Chitlin’ Circuit. The political communities in Harlem shared cultural capital that Jackie Mabley would soon export with the birth of her stage persona, ‘Moms.’

107 Beginning in 1962, black newspapers and magazines began publishing stories about Jackie Mabley’s “overnight rise to fame.” See for example, “‘Moms’ Mabley is Overnight Hit at 68 years of age,” New Pittsburgh Courier, June 2, 1962; “Behind the Comedy of Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley,” Ebony, August 1962, 91.
CHAPTER II:
‘Moms’ on Stage, Mabley off Stage:
The Development of a Stand-up Persona on the World War II Home Front

Figure 2.1. Three panels of Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley performing live at the Cotton Club, circa 1930s. Source: Ebony Magazine, “Behind the Laughter of Jackie “Moms” Mabley,” August 1962.

Laughter springs from many sources, situations, and emotions. Chief among them is the desire to shed light on or assume control over one’s circumstances. Laughter relieves the tension caused by distress, allowing the people involved in the joke to temporarily escape suffering or reconcile and move past it.\(^{108}\) It makes sense, then, as an oppressed group African Americans have traditionally relied on humor—in the form of trickster stories, playing the dozens, and blues lyrics.\(^{109}\) Moreover, precisely because black humor often reflects on African Americans’ social position, in addition to provoking laughter, it functions as a critique of power. Humor theorist Jane Sochen suggested that members of a disadvantaged minority have a greater advantage as comedians because they are more


oppressed relative to white men. She reasoned, similar to 1970s feminist scholars, that female comedians better understand the strength and foibles of their oppressors, since their livelihood rests on keeping careful track of their oppressors’ motives, thinking, and weaknesses. In other words, their social position gives female humorists a more astute understanding of human nature. Yet, women have historically encountered barriers to the comedy arena since the Victorian era when assumptions existed about women being incompetent or irrational. Therefore, a typical audience would not value their political critiques and witticisms as much as men’s. Despite those barriers, Jackie Mabley broke into the entertainment and comedy industry. This career path makes Mabley unique, but her perspective as a woman of color lent to her success as a political satirist.

Jackie Mabley led a career making light of hard times. Essential to her success in doing so was her development of the ‘Moms’ stand-up persona in the 1940s. While Mabley had performed in musicals, reviews, and vaudeville sketch shows at the Apollo since the 1920s, she solidified her career as a stand-up comedian when she began performing exclusively as ‘Moms.’ Mabley’s routines were a “solid closing act” for the variety shows and dance numbers at the Apollo Theater in Harlem. Mabley’s ‘Moms’ character was a self-deprecating “fool” that told widely acknowledged, if often unstated, truths about the lives of women and African Americans. ‘Moms’ came across as a harmless, bumbling grandmother figure, visually reminiscent of a Southern mammy but with all the sass and energy of a trickster. This strategy enabled her to circumvent barriers to a stand-up comedy

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110 Sochen, Women’s Comic Visions, 14.
112 Williams, Jackie Moms Mabley, 13, 41-43.
career due to her race and sex. The distinctive performance dynamic of ‘Moms’ was key to cultivating her prominence as a stand-up comedian on the national stage.

Mabley developed the ‘Moms’ persona while the United States was entrenched in World War II. In the midst of mobilizing for one of the most expensive and technologically demanding wars to date, the United States government could not afford a disunited home population. U.S. officials needed Depression-weary Americans to come together to serve in the defense industries and the armed services. However, many blacks were disinclined to contribute to the war effort given the anti-black racism they faced on a daily basis in the democratic United States. This sentiment existed even without the bitterness sown by the false promises of equality offered in exchange for their participation in World War I. After successfully patronizing European restaurants during World War I, black veterans returned home to find no change in their legal rights or in the hearts and minds of white America—all the more depressing after experiencing equitable treatment abroad.

Going into World War II, the United States Army’s Office of War Information (OWI) conducted statistical polls in New York City that indicated that blacks across socioeconomic classes did not support the war effort because they felt as though democracy at home took privilege over pursuing democracy abroad.\(^{113}\) Even more alarming to the OWI, many black Americans identified with the Japanese, placing World War II in the context of a war of the colored people of the world against the white oppressors.\(^{114}\) Consequently, the OWI needed to convince African Americans that the war was really their fight. Contemporary social scientists like Donald Young working alongside the War Department came to the conclusion that morale building war films that portrayed race relations in a positive light would alleviate

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\(^{114}\) Ibid, 389.
social unrest and encourage black wartime participation.\textsuperscript{115} This realization resulted in the 1944 film \textit{The Negro Soldier}. An OWI propaganda film originally intended for an audience of black soldiers, \textit{The Negro Soldier} portrayed blacks as constant agents of American democracy. This portrayal was so novel within U.S. media culture as to prompt a reviewer for \textit{The Nation} to remark: “The screen presentation of the Negro as…more than a clown… or a plain imbecile,” it read, “will be more startling and…instructive than we are likely to imagine.”\textsuperscript{116} The OWI, NAACP, Hollywood writers, and social scientists all collaborated to create this top quality propaganda film. It was distributed to civilians and soldiers alike as a means for encouraging black participation while repudiating allegations of white racism.

As executive secretary of the NAACP, Walter White, in particular, leveraged wartime needs to pressure the OWI and Hollywood to represent African Americans in a new light.\textsuperscript{117} Due to the NAACP’s opposition to discrimination in the defense industries during the war and segregation in the armed services, the organization achieved its highest membership theretofore.\textsuperscript{118} In fact, its wartime activities helped establish the NAACP as the most powerful player coordinating battles for civil rights in mainstream, Washington D.C. politics in the 1950s and 1960s.

Representatives of the NAACP had linked black freedom to black representation beginning with its protest of D.W. Griffith’s wildly successful film \textit{Birth of a Nation} in

\textsuperscript{116}James Agee, \textit{The Nation}, March 11, 1944. Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff also attributed the expansion of public black cultural representation to the New Deal sponsored programs in the Roosevelt era that provided “safe treatment for pressing political concerns and a foundation for the government’s policies toward African Americans in the postwar period. See Sklaroff, \textit{Black Culture in the New Deal}, 2.
\textsuperscript{117}For information about this initial trip to Hollywood, see Walter White, \textit{A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White} (New York: Viking Press, 1948), 199-200.
\textsuperscript{118}Lorts, “Black Laughter/Black Protest,” 65.
Set in the Civil War and Reconstruction Era in the South, the film used white actors in blackface to dramatize the heroic rise of the Ku Klux Klan. *Birth of a Nation* disseminated white prejudice against African Americans across the globe, which was of great concern to civil rights organizations and social science theorists convinced of the potential for media representations to affect black peoples’ social status. Through the 1930s, Hollywood films rarely used African Americans except as comic relief. With the addition of sound to movies in 1927, black jazz performers found more work, but the roles rarely offered African Americans the opportunity to perform dramatically or for any great period of screen time. On the other hand, the 1939 film *Gone With the Wind* appeared to give African American actress Hattie McDaniel a substantial, dramatic role. She played a sassy, but maternal Mammy devoted to her Southern white family. McDaniel won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her portrayal of “Mammy,” and was the first African American woman to do so. Yet, the film was controversial and displeased many Civil Rights activists. Walter White accused McDaniel of being an “Uncle Tom” to the white audiences in the United States, to which McDaniel famously responded, “I would rather make seven hundred dollars a week playing a maid than seven dollars being one.” She further questioned White’s ability to speak on her behalf, given that White was light skinned and only one eighth black. These body politics of bourgeoisie versus working class indicators of blackness speak to an enduring issue of the NAACP to try to represent all African Americans but to really prioritize their black elite values. As black actors continued to pursue acting careers, the NAACP

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119 Ibid.
criticized the representation of blackness on screen usually without offering a constructive alternative.

Under Walter White, the NAACP discouraged actors and Hollywood writers alike to portray roles of accommodating darkies and mammies. White and his peers insisted upon more complex, respectable roles that showed African Americans in ‘normal’ lives.\(^{121}\) His representative advocate for ‘normalcy’ in black womanhood and feminist was the light skinned jazz singer and glamorous film star Lena Horne. In Megan Williams’ case study of the relationship between Walter White and Lena Horne, she argues that White placed Horne on the covers of the 1941-1945 issues of *The Crisis* and advised her public appearances to refashion black women as well behaved, educated, light-skinned, and middle class. After wresting the editorship from W.E.B. Dubois in 1934, White wanted to change the content of the magazine from its elite “ebony tower” approach to a popular appeal that would attract more attention to the NAACP’s legal campaigns. This campaign drew on Horne’s celebrity status. Williams states that Horne’s image reiterated the NAACP’s assimilation politics and issued a visual normalcy that would exclude dark skinned, uneducated, working-class black women from upholding the politics of respectability. White consciously joined the tradition of black activists using the ‘politics of respectability’ to demand equal treatment for African Americans in mainstream society. His definition for ‘normalcy,’ however, placed Lena Horne as a symbol for black respectability and devalued the appearances of all other black women.

Black men and women who preached respectability as a strategy to advance civil rights were radical in that they expected treatment equal to white people; but they were

conservative in that they criticized members of their own race who did not conform to dominant middle class ideals of society. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the NAACP preached respectability in all popular mediums of representation. The NAACP’s adherence to respectability politics was plainly evident in its official magazine *The Crisis*, through which the organization consistently distributed visual and ideological images of normal black manhood and womanhood into the public sphere. For example, *The Crisis* used Lena Horne, beauty pageants, and black ‘cover girls’ to challenge the negative assumptions about black womanhood and to advance the NAACP’s goals of racial advancement through respectable normalcy.

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122 For a thorough discussion of the politics of respectability on black women in the Baptist Church, see Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 145-169. Studies that build upon this idea in different historical contexts of the modern black freedom struggle include Marisa Chappell, et al, “Dress Modestly, Neatly” and Feldstein, “Gender in the “Civil Rights Movement.”
From 1941 to 1945, approximately two-thirds of the magazine’s covers featured photographs of attractive, young, and fashionable black women. One of these women, Thelma Porter, was the winner of the 1948 New York City Subways Beauty Pageant and importantly the first African American woman to do so. Beauty pageants perfectly suited the NAACP’s goal to present respectable female sexuality, in that they built racial pride while implying recognition from a white organization. Beauty pageants were safe to promote, especially relative to potentially offensive entertainment like stand-up comedy. The NAACP supported local activism that reflected their ideas about black political womanhood over activism that violated it. Singer-actress Lena Horne represented the ideal black womanhood.

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123 To learn about black beauty contests as a means of promoting the dignity of African Americans, see Maxine Leeds Craig, “Ain’t I a beauty queen?”: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
the NAACP promoted. During the 1940s, Horne—a striking, light-skinned, black woman from a prominent Northern middle-class black family poplar among black and white troops alike—became the NAACP’s the cover girl—anointed by Walter White himself.

Compared to Horne, Jackie Mabley, and especially her comedic ‘Moms’ persona, challenged the NAACP’s representational objectives. Soon, technology changed how Americans had access to Jackie Mabley, and *The Crisis* and Hollywood lost their monopoly on constructions of womanhood, normalcy, and black respectability.

After 1956, comics could sell their comedy in addition to selling tickets to theaters by recording performances on LP records; allowing consumers to play the jokes at their leisure. With their burgeoning fame and influence, comics were both an opportunity for media attention and a threat to conventional respectability. Comic portrayals of African Americans ran the risk of negating respectable images so carefully constructed by conservative activists. From 1940 to 1960, black stand-up comics occupied greater amounts of black representation in American popular culture. Consequently, the NAACP carefully considered the role of black comics in relation to African Americans modern black freedom struggle, and Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley challenged the organizations’ image politics.

Operating in cultural contexts that underrated the comedic potential of women—and especially black women, Mabley used her ‘Moms’ persona and performance to cultivate respect across the race lines as a perceived “elder.” In this chapter, I detail how Mabley devised her unthreatening older woman persona through her visual presentation and jokes about herself and gender. She wholeheartedly pushed back against a heteronormative

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domestic life and instead pursued a career as an entertainer. Next, I detail how Mabley challenged tenets of the politics of respectability by positioning her among other comics in the post-World War II period. This analysis includes consideration of fashion politics in relation to Mabley’s ‘Moms’ persona on stage. To expose the context and strategies that made Jackie Mabley so successful within the “boys club” of comic entertainment, this chapter focuses on her movements in the 1940s and 1950s. I present a gendered comparison of male and female entertainers, shedding light on the social limitations for conventionally pretty women in comedy. An analysis of the visual performance and actual jokes of ‘Moms’ Mabley’s fashion, songs, and stand-up comedy in the 1950s reveals how her combination of vaudeville costumes with scathing critiques of race and gender relations allowed her to be simultaneously commercially successful and politically relevant within the context of the postwar “Civil Rights Movement.” Though sources for images of ‘Moms’ performing live in the 1940s and 1950s are limited, I extrapolate her performance style from her two films of the period and compare them to images from the 1960s and beyond.
Many scholars and professional comedians alike agree that conventionally attractive people have a more difficult time being perceived as funny in show business. A homely and self-deprecating comic creates a more likeable personality for whom the audience can feel sympathy. There are exceptions to this rule, like how Dick Gregory purposely exaggerated his aggressive style to be an assertive, attractive comedian. However, his historical context and gender made that expression more possible for him than for Jackie Mabley. Historically, male and female comics have relied on goofy and homely appearances to evoke laughter. Since women are judged primarily for their physical appearance and attractiveness, women performing comedy have found it particularly challenging to be beautiful and “bring an audience to the floor, rolling with laughter.”

Female comics typically rely on self-deprecation and performances of homeliness to give their audience a sense of superiority, thereby making that audience more receptive not

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only to their humor, but to their position as the voice of authority. In the latter twentieth century, for example, comics like Joan Rivers and Phyllis Diller used this strategy in the early stages of their careers. There is an opportunity cost in terms of power and representation, since these smart comedians had to degrade their intelligence to gain popularity. Based on this convention, appearing beautiful would have worked against Jackie Mabley in the world of comedy. The album covers of her 1960s recordings typically featured her with characteristically cantankerous face and bulging eyes. The roots of this image lay in the ‘Moms’ persona Mabley developed in the 1940s.

Asked later about her inspiration for her stage persona, ‘Moms,’ Mabley credited two people: her brother in law, Eddie Parton, who encouraged her to create the character and her great-grandmother who inspired the details of the act. Mabley composed her ‘Moms’ persona through clothing, mannerisms, and physical alterations to her body. She donned baggy, mismatched ill-fitting dresses that had loud patterns and frumpy jackets. She accessorized this look with oversized shoes, colorful stockings, and lacy bonnets. Through ‘Moms’ unstylish clothing, Mabley satirized the importance of clothing as a marker of class distinction and the importance of “proper clothing.” In Deborah Gray White’s Too Heavy a Load, she writes that “middle class status in black society was associated as much with ‘style of life’ as with income,” emphasizing the role that clothes played in maintaining black women’s self image and social status. In the same vein, African American churchwomen condemned flashy, colors, unique designs, and conspicuous trimmings in an effort to secure images of respectable female blackness. In order to fashion a persona that wowed audiences

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onstage, Mabley defied all of these cultural attitudes toward clothing, figuratively stripping away the power of a black elite to dictate how black women should appear and behave.

To complete ‘Moms,’ Mabley adopted a lower, gravelly voice, bulged her eyes, and moved stiffly. Each of these actions was a trope for black entertainment of the era, signifying childishness, fear, and wonderment. These stage traits came from blackface minstrelsy and the stereotypes perpetuated by Jim Crow racism and social satirists like Bert Williams. When Mabley emphasized these tropes, she emulated a respectable Mammy figure while contrasting her image with a foolish, energetic playfulness. She looked wise and dumb at the same time. Significantly, ‘Moms’ looked neither pitiable nor intimidating, creating a space for a foolish mammy to have a platform for her stories and perspective.

A comparatively young woman when she created ‘Moms,’ Mabley took on the outfit of a grandmother figure, but as she grew older, she further emphasized her character’s age by making a show of taking her dentures out. By talking through her gums and using boisterous gestures, ‘Moms’ strategically used unattractiveness as a means to assuming power through her humor. For example, despite her choice of costume—or, more likely, precisely because of it—Mabley used ‘Moms’ to make derogatory jokes about the “mammy” figure. With her bulging eyes and unattractive appearance, Mabley produced a comforting Mammy trope that had soothed Southern families and American audiences since the antebellum United States. In studies of early African American culture and folklore, the traditional Southern plantation “mammy” was considered the wise beacon and feminine icon in a context where families were disrupted by plantation life.129 This stereotypical black figure still pervades the commercial industry, with Aunt Jemima featured prominently on maple syrup bottles. Black

female entertainers still have a difficult time escaping this stereotype if they exaggerate their facial features while acting. Mabley brilliantly subverted this beloved asexual, maternal black female figure in manners that allowed her to gain her audience members’ trust as well as their ear, to perform in unladylike manners and comment on decidedly unladylike material. Outfitted as ‘Moms,’ before Mabley even opened her mouth to lead the audience through a series of stories, one-liners, and social critiques, she had carved a space for herself and her humor in the male-dominated world of stand-up comedy.

Performing before a live audience as ‘Moms,’ Mabley told the following joke: “How ya like ‘Moms’ dress? You can get some real nice things with them green stamps, you know that?” This joke encapsulates the spirit of Mabley’s ‘Moms’ persona and demonstrates how it enabled her to bring serious social issues into her comedy. When she posed the initial question—“How ya like ‘Moms’ dress?”—the audience laughed because she appeared in mismatched clothing. Also, Mabley delivered the line with a wide smile and a hint of irony, likely while winking visibly at a young man in the front row. As the laughter died down, Mabley then presented with the real punch line: “You can get some real nice things with them green stamps, you know that?” Here, the audience exploded with laughter as ‘Moms’ pointed to a reality about people on welfare though a joke that might have offended coming from another person’s mouth. Moreover, with her combination irony, style, and timing as ‘Moms,’ Mabley exposed the pervasiveness of stereotypes about black reliance on welfare that allowed for the collective understanding necessary for her joke to land.

**Hiding in Plain Sight: the ‘Moms’ Persona and Mabley’s Private Life**

Mabley’s persona and comedic themes served as a protective boundary between her public and private selves. ‘Moms’ consistently bragged about her sexual encounters with

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young men and her affairs with playboys like Cab Calloway, but Mabley was a lesbian, having come out when she was twenty seven years old. Norma Miller, Mabley’s longtime colleague, confirmed Mabley’s non-normative sexuality:

She was the one woman among these men. She was the best… we were in black show business. So in black show business you always had a band, a singer, some dancers, a comedian, and we shared a dressing room for two weeks. By we, I mean the three of us: she, and I, and her girlfriend. She was real. I mean, she was ‘Moms’ on stage, but she walked off that stage and she was Mr. Moms. And there was no question about it. She had the dual identities because on stage she was always ‘Moms’ after the great Cab Calloway, but off stage she always had girls on her arm.¹³¹

Other comedians, like her friend Slappy White, described Mabley as the first person he saw wearing men’s clothing, which was a surprise but just “what ‘Moms’ did.” Miller discussed further that she and her friends never called Mabley gay or homosexual, they called her ‘Mr. Moms.’ ‘Moms’ provided cover for these aspects of Mabley’s private life, such as her same sex relationships and children out of wedlock—all of which would have certainly troubled the NAACP and discouraged their public sponsorship of her. She dressed herself in fedoras and silk shirts, but promotional materials never photographed Mabley this way. Based on newspaper articles that document Mabley’s career, it is difficult to state whether she actively hid her sexuality, or if journalists simply did not ask. But of greater relevance to this study is the question of how peer comedians perceived Mabley’s lesbian identity and how it affected her ability to produce comedy in a male dominated field.

Eric Garber’s study of lesbian subcultures in Harlem during the Jazz age indicates that African Americans were relatively tolerant of lesbian women and behavior.¹³² During her Harlem days, for example, Mabley surely attended the common ‘rent parties’—large parties at which residents charged admission to cover their rent—dressed in her customary

¹³¹ Goldberg, Moms Mabley, 26:00
¹³² Adam Geczy, Queer Style (Subcultural Style) (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 22.
tuxedos and three-piece suits. Later interviews with comedians of the close-knit black humor community in New York City appeared to be aware of her sexuality and life in these social circles.

Jackie Mabley’s biographer Elsie Williams asserts that that Mabley survived the male dominated field by way of her aggressive wit. As a multi-dimensional artist that parodied herself, gender, and politics with songs, dances, fairy tales, monologues, and jokes, Mabley used her ‘Moms’ character to be a “mammy” (a woman of wise words), but also a trickster and a fool. Mabley’s tenacity and resilience as well as her will to be oblivious to the prescribed notions of a proper lady helped her. Mabley’s lesbian identity and fashion appearance offstage may have ingratiated her with fellow male comedians in the New York City network of entertainers as “one of the boys,” playing checkers and smoking cigarettes with everyone else.

Mabley pursued her comedic career in the context of historical prejudice against women’s capability for humor. Before figures like Nina Simone and Angela Davis openly challenged conventional attitudes for black feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, the standards for female sexuality were widely interchangeable with white femininity. In the 1940s and 1950s, beauty icons like Greta Garbo, Claudette Colbert, and Joan Crawford dominated Hollywood leading lady roles and their portrayals assimilated to Christian values of modesty and purity. On the opposite end of the spectrum, sex symbols like Louise Brooks dominated

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133 Ibid, 29-30, “By the 1920s, the bars and clientele of Greenwich Village and Harlem had established reputations as hubs for lesbian socializing… Vaudeville performer Edna Thomas’s salon brought together an eclectic mix of multiracial intellectuals, artists, writers, and musicians. Harlem’s lesbian venues reflected a zone where sartorial display and extravagance was a key indicator of the diversity of sexual identities and the politics of sub cultural style.”

134 Goldberg, Moms Mabley.

with her slender dance figure and dapper hairstyle. Mable’s body—nor humor—accommodated the standards for beautiful, slender women of the period, which explains why she never appeared on the cover of *The Crisis* while Lena Horne did, repeatedly.

In the postwar era, Mable’s comedic contemporaries included Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, Erma Bombeck, Betty Macdonald, Gracie Allen, Jean Kerr, Pearl Bailey, and Butterfly McQueen. Few women, especially women of color, succeeded as comedians in her generation and few women’s comedy careers rival hers in terms of longevity and celebrity. The iconic figure for female comedians in the 1950s was Lucille Ball, star of the popular CBS sitcom *I Love Lucy*. The main premise of the show was that Lucy consistently found her way into trouble when she ambitiously tried to make it in show business like her bandleader husband, Ricky Ricardo. These plotlines allowed for Lucille Ball to showcase her talents for screwball comedy, including slapstick and clowning. Though Lucy was the matriarch of her small family, her childlike behavior and theatrical emotions implied she, like all women, was beneath reasoning and logic.

Another famous comedian, Gracie Allen, pushed this kind of screwball comedy even further with her “illogical logic.” She and her husband, George Burns, had formed a comedy team in their vaudeville days in the 1920s. Like Mabley, they managed to cultivate a fan base throughout the changing mediums of show business in the twentieth century. Once Gracie and George reached an age when their act needed to move away from a flirtation sketch and become about married couples, Gracie provided illogical logic to George’s straight man lines. One example of her trademark illogical logic was, “Why if you don’t believe me when

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137 Bonney, *Extreme Exposure*, 84.
I’m telling the truth, when I’m not telling the truth, you might think I was lying!” These white actresses and comedians could be both beautiful and foolish comedians because of their race and the proliferation of roles available to white people in the entertainment industry relative to black people. Mabley used the ‘Moms’ strategy to create demand and a space for herself in films and expand her work beyond stand-up comedy at the Apollo Theater.

The musical comedy *Killer Diller* (1948) was an all-black cast race film that was little more than a filmed stage show. As such, ‘Moms’ is one of seven variety acts in the film that is playing herself, or merely performing one of her sketches in front of the camera within a loose plot structure. Most of the other acts are male jazz musicians like Nat ‘King’ Cole and Johnny Miller, making Mabley the only female performer in the film that does not directly support the main character as a wife or secretary. Mabley is in the film to present ‘Moms’ and to escalate the action of the film as the main character (comic Dusty Fletcher) flees the police. Although Mabley’s inappropriate ‘Moms’ persona could not infiltrate Hollywood films, she deftly parlayed her talents to finds jobs in the comedy and entertainment world when the setting allowed for her comedy. Other young attractive starlets like Lena Horne and Fredi Washington were offered Hollywood roles, usually after beginning as dancers or singers in New York clubs. But the consequences of these jobs were intense scrutiny from black media over their personal lives and relegation to roles that suited male dominated Hollywood plotlines. Mabley perhaps would have been jobless without her ‘Moms’ persona, but the costume granted her a newfound power over her content in films.

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In the film *Killer Diller* (1947), Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley warmed up the crowd with her easy stage presence, taking control of the audience with her opening jokes. At the beginning of her act, ‘Moms’ asked the stage manager to change the lighting on her and called out “make me look like Lena Horne!” The audience laughed heartily. Lena Horne was the icon for black female sexuality at the time and the humor was that no amount of lighting would transform the homely ‘Moms,’ into the young starlet. Despite the contrast between the two women, ‘Moms’ expressed an appetite for the “young men” that Horne presumably would have attracted. She flirted with the handsome piano player before beginning a satirical operatic song. Each of these acts constituted an independence that Mabley possessed that other women of color had yet to find in their films.

Mabley only appeared in two all black “race films” *Killer Diller* (1947) and *Boarding House Blues* (1948). Mabley played herself and performed the ‘Moms’ routine. Her assertive personality disqualified her from the subordinate mammy roles in Hollywood films. Though Mabley looked like the other Mammy figures, her persona did not suit the roles. The most revered mammy figures of this era were Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen. Of course, a multitude of factors other than talent influence whether somebody makes it in Hollywood, and some are as random as chance and personal connections. But it is safe to say that the cantankerous ‘Moms’ persona did not suit the limited roles available to black-leading ladies at the time. To better understand why, it is necessary to examine male black comedians and how their gender allowed them to assert both their individualities and

139 *Killer Diller*, released by All American, was a musical comedy drama film that centered on the antics of a musician (Dusty Fletcher) and his routine in an evening variety show. As such, the film was more of an extended plot device to showcase the stand-up routines and tap dances of Mabley, The Clark Brother, Nat ‘King’ Cole, The For Congaroos, etc.  
allegiances to the political actors in the civil rights struggle through their performance clothing and stand-up comedy.

**Male Stand-up Comics and the Politics of Respectability in the 1950s**

In the 1920s, the monologists and film actors Slappy White and Step’n Fetchit emerged from vaudeville and expanded their comedic endeavors dressed in tuxedos and blackface. They matched their white male comedy peers such as Buster Keaton. These vaudeville monologists and emcees were known for their minstrel styles with bulging eyes and slow, slurred speech and wore tuxedos because most entertainers did. The NAACP hesitated to embrace comics at the Apollo due to their belief that the theater was disreputable and reinforced comics stereotypes of African Americans. As such, the NAACP did not seek to host a fundraiser or political rally at the Apollo Theater until the 1950s, when most of its
entertainers stopped appearing in blackface. In the 1960s, the NAACP sponsored comedians like Dick Gregory, placing him at the head of protest marches in Alabama. Over the years, executives within the NAACP feared their inability to control some of Gregory’s more radical politics and eventually the two activists parted ways.

The NAACP defined and critiqued the images of blackness put forth by comedians. Jokes about sex or black stereotypes contradicted the politics of respectability. For example, in Dick Gregory’s debut performance for an all white audience at the Playboy Club in Chicago, he discussed the subject of segregation, “Last time I went down South I walked into this restaurant, and the white waitress came up to me and said, “We don’t serve colored people here.” I said, “That’s alright, I don’t eat colored people. Bring me a whole fried chicken!” Gregory commented on the idiocy of segregation through reinforcing a stereotype about black people and fried chicken. The NAACP blamed these kinds of minstrel stereotypes for perpetuating the mistreatment of black people in the political and social spheres. A common articulation of the time was “If African Americans are not treated with respect on film, radio, and television programs, how could we expect the world to think they deserve respect?” Activists from the early twentieth century Booker T. Washington and Thurgood Marshall established a common uplift narrative for how dominant society perceived African American culture affected how they treated African Americans politically and socially. Members of the NAACP believed that the cinema could “show the way” for white American citizens to accept black American citizens.

143 Dick Gregory, Nigger: An Autobiography (New York, Pocket Books, 1964), 158-60. For a recorded version of a similar routine see Dick Gregory, In Living Black and White, Colpix CP 417. “Commentary on Affairs Political” is a track title on In Living Black and White.
144 Williams, “Crisis Cover Girl,” 205.
This respectability strategy assumed that film and its production was an ideologically neutral apparatus. If people watch a film together, they will automatically discern the same lessons from it. Given the interpretive nature of cinema and art in general, activists in the NAACP overstated film’s ability to produce social inclusion and equality. Most comedic actors found the NAACP’s intervention offensive and ill informed. Actors like Hattie McDaniel were frustrated by the impact the NAACP sponsored protests had on their employment opportunities. Yet, Hollywood executives were not going to write the roles unless they were pressured by both the needs for World War II patriotism and Walter White, since filmmaking was expensive and driven by the profits at the box office. To offset potential deficits, Hollywood producers avoided displaying miscegenation on screen to appease its audience of white moviegoers in the South. Perhaps studios executives were not participating in a collective conspiracy of reproducing Jim Crow racism in film, but certainly they acquiesced to the mundane imagery for African Americans of their time. To contest these dull metaphors, there was a massive push from within the comic community for intellectual stand-up comedy and political commentary. Black comedians devised new comedy styles to amplify their political critiques of the world.

By late 1948, a new brand of comic was emerging. As male comedians began this “third wave” of black humor, tuxedos became zoot suits and comedians lost the top hats and bowler hats of the vaudeville costume days. Comedian Dick Gregory described that to gain the favor of your audience, in a way you need to look like them. These comedians played up their intellectual status as young college graduates, resembling their audience in the

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146 Watkins, On the Real Side, 22
149 Ibid.
process. Men wore button ups and three-piece suits on stage, relaxing out of the frumpy costumes of the past and shrugging into flashy jewelry, sport coats, and leisure suits. These outfits “professionalized” black stand-up comics, since they dressed similarly to conventional businessmen. A generation of comedic intellectuals changed the look and content of stand-up comedy. These men did not start their entertainment careers in the song and dance days of vaudeville. Male comedians like Redd Foxx, Godfrey Cambridge, Dick Gregory tackled themes of blue humor, family and relationships, politics, segregations, lynching, and other violence in a more assertive way that perhaps only ‘Moms’ was able to successfully pitch in the previous decades. As Dick Gregory once put it, “I’m getting $5,000 a week—for saying the same things out loud that I used to say under my breath.”

The media work of civil rights organizations had partially made it possible for these comics to be so upfront about their comedy.

Dick Gregory’s stand-up routines centered on ritualistic insults as he nonchalantly challenged anyone in the audience who disagreed with his political views. Dick Gregory had various jokes that were for the main purpose of responding to white hecklers in his audiences. In the early 1960s he publically satirized the South, lynching, segregation, and Bull Connor. Dick Gregory had to prepare for verbal violence coupled with a mob mentality in his audiences. For example, if an audience member heckled him and called him “nigger,” Gregory responded with “According to my contract, I get 50 dollars from management every time someone calls me that. Please do it again… Let’s have the whole audience stand-up and do it in unison! I’ll retire tomorrow!”

By reclaiming the word and positioning himself as the person in control—the person who would financially benefit—

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150 Dick Gregory as quoted in Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 361
from the heckling Gregory elicited laughter from the audience and regained their respect. An African American man at the forefront of the civil rights struggle and making a living as a political comedian needed to maintain control of the audience in a way that was dignified and masculine: women like ‘Moms’ Mabley needed to maintain control in their own way.

**Mabley’s Rejection of Respectability in Mass Media**

While black male entertainers were outfitted in suits, Jackie Mabley retained her ‘Moms’ vaudeville costume and character as a vehicle for her humor. In the 1940s, respectable women’s fashion would not have earned her respect as a comedian. Her bawdy and controversial humor required a non-threatening presentation so that she could tell the truth without being attacked. When ‘Moms’ was forming in Mabley’s imagination during the 1930s, fashion mattered professionally, personally, and politically to groups of marginalized women. As Nan Enstad writes in *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*, immigrant women in New York City organized protests around their rights to access certain clothing items and fashioned political identities through their consumption of clothing. For their part, black women, who were largely forced into domestic work or factory work, typically wore uniforms which neither implied professionalism or signified individuality or personality. As her male counterparts moved toward a more professional dress, Mabley ironically augmented her power as a black female comedian through a politics of fashion that involved her intentionally being unfashionable. Through her self-deprecating visual appearance and performance, Mabley enjoyed the authority to speak out, because—thanks to her fashion choices, which remained steeply rooted in vaudeville traditions—she appeared not to be transgressing “her place.” As summarized by contemporary comedian Arsenio Hall, “She

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[Mabley] hid her intelligence behind the costume and snuck a message in the back door. With the costume, she had the license to say what she wanted."⁵⁴ ‘Moms’ was a nonthreatening veneer that allowed Mabley upper hand in her imaginary situations, her stories, and her social satire. Similar to Bert Williams’s blackface social satire at the turn of the century, Mabley created a vehicle to sneak commentary on race and civil rights into the entertainment sphere.

As ‘Moms,’ Mabley rejected constructions of “glamour” that Lena Horne embodied as a black “pin-up girl.” As a black female entertainer described as “radiantly beautiful,” Lena Horne claimed the label of “sex symbol” for black women and challenged white definitions of beauty that had historically excluded black women.⁵⁵ By comparison, Mabley actively fashioned herself stage persona in manners that eschewed beauty, but still managed to draw attention, and even admiration. Press items often emphasized her practicality as an elder that dressed herself comfortably while still suggesting that she was the cool, hip grandmother type. In a Chicago Tribune article, for example, the author summarized Mabley’s typical performance outfit, “on stage, the famous toothless comedienne wears a gaily printed dress, usually with a sagging hem, a little jacket, a small crocheted cap, and bedroom slippers several sizes too big for her ‘ample’ feet.” The journalist then blended Mabley’s on and off stage personas by comparing her two fashion presentations:

⁵⁴ Goldberg, Moms Mabley.
⁵⁵ Feldstein, How it Feels to Be Free, 12
She believes in being comfortable off stage too. During our visit, she greeted me—still without teeth and in an extra wide- blue and white seersucker duster and comfy soft brown mules. Said ‘Moms’: “I design all my outfits. They’re what a small town lady would wear shopping. Altho [sic]she notices current fashion, she said: “I dress to suit myself. I don’t wear girdles or brassiers, I believe in letting everything go.’ She chuckled and then added, “I’m modern, but not modern enough to wear a miniskirt. I don’t want my behind to freeze.”

In this passage, indicates that Mabley understood mainstream fashion and culture, but that she understood equally well the benefits of going against the mainstream, in her personal life and in her presentation as a comedian.

Mabley loved to lie, but the narrative surrounding her celebrity emphasized how she claimed her identity as a bearer of the truth. This truth was rooted in the recognition for her traditional black humor. When journalists interviewed Jackie Mabley, the idea that she “told the truth” was usually incorporated into the article. In an article titled “Moms Mabley’s True Self” in the Chicago Tribune by a typically enthusiastic columnist, the journalist reported “Moms Mabley is the same lady on stage and off!” and that “One of the best loved comedienes then said ‘I always speak the truth. Not many people know what the truth is… That’s why they think I’m so funny.’” The journalist interviewed Mabley the year she became ‘an overnight sensation,’ so it was a time when the newspaper audience would have been interested in meeting Mabley’s true self. Yet even within this short newspaper article, Mabley addressed elements of her life narrative that remain infamously unconfirmed. One of these facts included where the name ‘Moms’ originated. Mabley explained, “The show people gave me that name. Once in Indianapolis, I came across a young performer who was so tired and undernourished he collapsed on the stage. I took care of him and from then on I

156 Paula, Buchholz, “Moms Mabley’s True Self,” Chicago Tribune, Sep 23, 1972, (ProQuest Historical Newspapers), B5
157 Ibid.
was known as Moms.”158 ‘Moms’ took care of other comedians backstage, cooking for them and advising them.159 But Mabley also cheated at checkers, wore men’s clothing, and paraded her girlfriends through the dressing rooms. These other anecdotes were more consistent with the beloved ‘Moms’ persona and logically suited a woman of Mabley’s age, so they were repeated in newspapers and Mabley’s stand-up routines.160 As a veteran in show business, Mabley worked with the media to construct a public identity that sold records and tickets to shows. As quoted in a spread in Ebony magazine, Mabley stated on show business, “he Mafia got everybody in show business… everybody… cept’ Moms, that is, she’s too slick for ‘em. I’m too old a woman to end up in a ditch somewhere.”161 The fact that people accepted Mabley’s perceptions, jokes, and stories as the truth indicated how much her political views were shared by her wide audience in both black and white communities. In this article, the journalist reinforced Mabley’s universality with the statement “Altho [sic] she’s happy performing for any audience, whether young, old, rich, or poor.”

Using ‘Moms,’ Mabley circumvented contemporary gender expectations within the entertainment field, as well as gender and race expectations levied by black political thinkers and organizations. By comparison, Lena Horne redefined contemporary gender expectations for the entertainment field, but Walter White and the NAACP limited her political independence. To ensure that Horne maintained the politics of respectability, White forbade her from wearing excessively expensive clothing, like a dress he bought after her success in

158 Ibid.
159 Fats Wallis, as quoted in Goldberg, Moms Mabley.
Panama Hattie (1942). Flashy clothing was reminiscent of younger African American men and women dressed in zoot suits and furs, which violated black respectability and moderation. Horne occasionally spoke out against accusations that she had the responsibility to symbolize all of black womanhood, claiming that she made choices to preserve her jazz singing career and nothing more. Amid Walter White’s scandalized criticism of Horne’s ‘depraved’ performance as an ignorant Southern girl in Cabin in the Sky and the ensuing media controversy, it seems incredible that one woman could receive so much flack for her transgressions of respectability when Mabley swaggered around the stage making sex jokes in a mammy costume. These polar experiences indicate that Mabley’s methods and ‘Moms’ costume gave her the freedom to comment on politically significant topics, while Horne’s political significance was restricted to her ability to embody black middle-class respectability.

Mabley utilized her costume and performance to emulate an old wise woman because it lent her the authority to speak. Even if the audience felt offended by the material of a joke, they were still inclined to treat her with the respect due an elder. For example, Mabley told a bit about correcting Southerners that she met on the street. If addressed as “Mammy,” Mabley would screech, “I’m no damn Mammy! Moms! M-O-M, same forwards and backwards, upside down, WOW.”162 If it ever appeared like she was losing control of the audience, Mabley diverted the audience’s attention from sensitive topics to a self-deprecating crack, demonstrating her awareness, skill, and flexibility as a comedian. For example, during a routine at Sing Sing Prison in New York, Mabley stated she was “going with” the famous white singer Tom Jones, and the mostly black audience gasped. Mabley alleviated the pressure by following up with “When you get as old as ‘Moms’ is, you glad to get youth as

The punch line was that ‘Moms’ was promiscuous despite her age, while further making a claim along the lines of life being short and youth being wasted on the young. Mabley shifted the tensions associated with interracial dating to ‘Moms’ and her desperation in old age. Interracial dating may have been among the least controversial of her subjects, and she openly expanded this territory to frank discussions of sex and sexuality.

Despite her efforts to occupy a grandmotherly, asexual form on stage, Mabley never played up her messy, shapeless clothing and lack of teeth as a sign that she was unable to obtain sexual partners. On the contrary she bragged about her sexual appetite for young men and her ability to land contemporary male celebrities. For example, Mabley opened many of her routines with a classic line, “Now ‘Moms’ been getting accused of liking young men… And I’m guilty… And I’m gonna get guiltier!” With its bold assertion of ‘Moms’s sexuality, Mabley’s joke challenged contemporary norms dictating that women should hide their sexuality and certainly not prey on younger men; and yet, Mabley remained (seemingly) harmless. The audience could not help but laugh at the gap between the grandmother on stage and her matter of fact claims about her sexual promiscuity.

As she defined conventional respectability, Mabley used ‘Moms’ to comment on the history of race relations and urged her audiences to not romanticize the past. ‘Moms’ critiqued the adults in her audience that reminisced about the “good old days.” Mabley’s implication was that there were no good old days. A diverse African American national community disagreed on the past and how to handle the present, but ‘Moms’ asked for a focus on moving forward. Mabley wanted the audience to stop kidding themselves and

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163 Jackie Mabley, Live at Sing Sing (Chicago: Chess Records LP, 1970).
164 Jackie Mabley, Moms Mabley at the UN (Chicago: Chess Records LP, 1961).
recognize that the present and future will be so much better than the past. A significant theme of these good old days was Mabley’s take on gender dynamics and expectations for power relationships, often using her (fake) stories about marriage to an old man.

Mabley joked about old men and called the members of the traditional power structure ugly and useless. On her album *Moms Mabley: The funniest woman in the world*, she spends the first four minutes griping about the old man her father forced her to marry:

> He was so ugly he hurt my feelings… He had a job working at the doctor sitting around making people sick… I never thought he would die. Rat poison agreed with him…. You know, I shouldn’t talk bad about him, they say if you don’t have anything good to say about the dead you shouldn’t say nothing. He dead. GOOD…. I know he’s dead because I had him cremated. Thought I’d get him hot one time anyhow.166

The disdain that ‘Moms’ expressed for old men was another way that Mabley challenged masculine power but Mabley’s greater target in her comedy was the human condition that nobody can escape: death. Even if men still had the upper hand in power relationships, ‘Mom’ used death as an equalizer that made even the strongest man impotent once again. In another “old men” joke, Mabley pokes fun at the sensitive topic of impotence on her way to making a larger statement about life: “Little boy walking down the street crying. Old man walked up to him, said, ‘Little boy why do you cry?’ Little boy say, ‘Cause I can’t do what the big boys do.’ Old man cried too.”167 Since both of the men in this story tie up all of their self worth in the ability to perform sex acts, Mabley is able to produce a commentary that suggests men are only valuable insofar as they provide sexual pleasure to her.

166 Jackie Mabley, *The Funniest Woman in the World*.
Through her fashioning as ‘Moms,’ Mabley managed to dodge media controversy about her political views and her body as a representation for modern black women. She exploited the ‘Moms’ character to speak candidly on topics off limit to most women, regardless of color, evidence by the fact that her albums were marketed and are remembered as the “dirty record” that children would sneakily listen to and their parents would play when they had company over.\textsuperscript{168} An audience’s silence or dismay at an unfunny or offensive joke can be the tipping point for a horrible performance if the comic loses the viewer’s sympathy.\textsuperscript{169} As discussed further in the next chapter, Mabley’s routines hit almost every social taboo there was: homosexuality, miscegenation, sexual abuse, and race stereotypes, and racial hatred. ‘Moms’ gave her the power to broach these topics, make fun of them, and escape criticism as a woman who failed to uphold the traditional politics of respectability. Using the likeability generated by her ‘Moms’ guise, Mabley pulled her audience into the world she constructed through her black humor, gained momentum with each joke, and brought the house down.\textsuperscript{170}

\textbf{Conclusion}

Jackie Mabley’s fashion, comedic styling, and sense of narrative gave her the credibility to make jokes about the experiences of women and black people to diverse audiences. She always edited the content of her jokes to suit her audiences, but derisively sneered at conventional lady hood. Mabley’s performance was full of incongruity. Mabley flipped misogynistic comedy on its head, but her visual presentation forged a connection with the audience through her harmlessness. In the 1940s and 1950s, Mabley gained fame with

\textsuperscript{168}Goldberg, \textit{Moms Mabley} and “Moms Mabley,” \textit{Soul Illustrated}, (December 1969), 64.
\textsuperscript{170}For more on Jackie Mabley and black folklore, see Levine, \textit{Black Culture and Black Consciousness}, 364-366.
black and white audiences alike that would only grow as television shows, as mass produced products, began to more openly employ black entertainers.

Through her use of the ‘Moms’ persona to gain success as a comedian, Mabley contributed to the entertainment networks of black women that used their careers as liberation spaces for black political womanhood. Mabley appropriated the mammy figure it in order to occupy a significant cultural space of the black grandmother. More importantly, she made visible in entertainment an assertive, bawdy, and sexual version of black womanhood that commanded both her physical space and communicated her desires for something greater than herself.

Mabley looked purposely disheveled, and elderly so that she could articulate more radical political ideas; an arena disallowed to women until the more outspoken women activists during the later era of the civil rights struggle. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was taboo for black men and women to accept roles that had been traditionally “stereotypical.” In the 1968 romantic comedy For the Love of Ivey, rising star Abbey Lincoln portrayed the leading lady Ivey who had worked as a maid for a family but was ready to quit to pursue a professional career as a secretary. When she discussed her role in the film and fielded questions about whether she was being accommodating or radically feminist by agreeing to play a maid, Lincoln stressed that she was proud to illuminate a life experience—working as a maid—that so many women of color had taken up to support themselves and their families. She only hoped that her acting conveyed their personal integrity. But Mabley appropriated some of the “mammy” stereotypes and incorporated them into the appearance of her ‘Moms’ persona, but then fleshed out a character that defied all aspects of the asexual, white caretaker

\[171\] Feldstein, How It Feels to Be Free, 15.
mammy figure. Her comedy illuminated women’s experiences and inspired them to push for visual representation in the “Civil Rights Movement” beyond the NAACP narrative.

When the conventional “Civil Rights Movement” coalesced in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, entertainers contributed to civil rights work. The fact that men typically had more opportunities in show business as entertainers due to societal biases of the time led to different career arcs for men and women. The different access that female and male entertainers had directly impacted the contributions they could make to the black freedom struggle for civil rights and social equality.\textsuperscript{173} The next chapter details exactly how Mabley engaged in civil rights work using her ‘Moms’ persona at a platform and political strategy.

\textsuperscript{173} Watkins, \textit{On the Real Side}, 56.
‘Moms’ Crossing Over: Comedy and Non-Violent Direct Action in the 1960s

Within the modern black freedom struggle, the years from 1954 to 1964 are typically identified as the classic “Civil Rights Movement.” This is the period when, due to a series of dramatic public protest actions, the struggle coalesced into a globally recognized national movement. This classic phase originates with the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas decision in 1954, which ruled segregated public schools unconstitutional. In response to Brown, school boards and white community members across the South employed various methods to resist the desegregation of their public schools. The opposing pro- and anti-segregation forces resulted in tense, lengthy, and sometimes violent stand-offs. In this context, Air Force veteran James Meredith sought admission to the University of Mississippi as a graduate student in 1961. Before applying, Meredith wrote a letter to the NAACP’s lead lawyer Thurgood Marshall indicating his resolve to integrate ‘Ole Miss’ at all costs, as he
deemed it was his duty to his country, race, family, and himself.\textsuperscript{174} The opposition was daunting. After the college’s efforts failed to keep Meredith out of Ole Miss, Governor Ross Barnett of Mississippi publically declared: “We will not surrender to the evil forces of tyranny… No school will be integrated in Mississippi while I am your governor.”\textsuperscript{175} As evidence of this resolve, it took a year, two trials, a Supreme Court Order, a Federal Order, and finally President Kennedy issued a unit of U.S. Marshals to escort James Meredith into Ole Miss and protect him during his year of study.

The NAACP and the mainstream news media broadcasted Meredith’s saga nationally through television newsreels, photographs, and newspaper articles. Juxtaposed against the barbaric rioting of whites at Ole Miss, the humble, well-dressed figure of Meredith appeared comparatively civilized. His actions constituted nonviolent direct action, a strategy preached by Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. According to King, who was first exposed to the theory in Henry David Thoreau’s \textit{Civil Disobedience}, African Americans could refuse to cooperate with an evil system and effect real change if each person in the movement is committed to peaceful, physically nonaggressive resistance.\textsuperscript{176} This kind of pacifist resistance would change the enemy spiritually and was the only way to find reconciliation and redemption instead of precipitating more humiliation and violence. This ideology manifested in nonviolent marches, sit-ins, and voluntary arrests. Therefore, in his behavior and appearance, Meredith conformed to the demands of nonviolent direct action.

\textsuperscript{174} For a thorough background on James Meredith and the integration of Mississippi, see Nadine Cohodas, “James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss,” \textit{The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education}, no. 16 (1997): 112-22.
\textsuperscript{175} Cohodas, “James Meredith,” 114.
\textsuperscript{176} James Cone, \textit{Martin, Malcolm, and America: A Dream or a Nightmare} (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 13.
Meredith’s case is an example of how, in the 1960s, large activist organizations created media spectacles out of nonviolent direct action protests to curry support and attract worldwide attention to civil rights legal battles. However, the purpose of this project is to satiate the need to recognize the civil rights work of people beyond the clearly integrationist protestors like Meredith as political actors in the modern black freedom struggle. Scholars have missed key players in the dissemination of knowledge and political commentary on the main events of the “Civil Rights Movement” when they forget to include the comedic satire of Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley.

After Meredith’s attempt to integrate Ole Miss, Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley parodied the case through her stand-up. On her 1962 album *Moms Mabley and the Geneva Conference*, for example, Mabley transformed the story of Cinderella into “Cindy Ella.” In Mabley’s fairytale, the fairy godmother is “General Robert Kennedy,” who used his magic wands (the Constitution and the Civil Rights Act) to transform “Cindy Ella” into a white American. Then, a team of white horses drove her to a ball, where she danced with “Prince Charming,” identified as James Meredith in Mabley’s routine. The dream unravels, however, when “Cindy Ella” forgets to leave by midnight:

> The clock had struck twelve. Her beautiful white dress had turned to rags. The bow on her head had turned to a stocking cap. She looked down, and her gold slippers had turned to sneakers. She looked out her window and her coach had turned to a wagon. And the beautiful white horse to an old nag. And her chauffer had turned to [African American entertainer] “Pigmeat.” Everybody on the floor was gazing at poor Little Cindy Ella, the little colored girl, dancing with the president of the Ku Klux Klan. This story is to be continued. Her trial comes up next month!177

With this routine, Mabley publicized the struggle for integration, exposed the racism that struggle provoked, and critiqued the government response. By characterizing the event as a

fairy tale, she chided General Bobby Kennedy for his soft approach to the South. On another record released in the same year, Mabley sang an operatic song documenting her feelings about Meredith’s situation.

Now I ain’t gone sit in the back of no bus
And I’m going to the white folks’ school
And I’m gone praise the Lord in the white folks’ church
And I’m gonna swim in the white folks’ pool
I’m gonna vote and vote for whoever I please
And I’ll thumb my nose at the Klan
And I double dare ‘em to come out from behind them sheets and face me like a man
They don’t scare me with their bomb threats
I’ll say what I wanna say!
And ain’t a damn thing they can to about it
‘Cause I ain’t going down there no way!178

Throughout the first half of the song, Mabley expressed her desire to antagonize Southern racists by crossing the color line “in the white folks’ school… church… pool,” and voting for whoever she wanted. All of these examples identify common obstacles that Southern blacks faced, and the voting crisis precipitated the Freedom Summer of 1963. By stating that the Ku Klux Klan should “come out from behind them sheets and face me like a man,” she infantilized them and positioned herself as a heroic figure. The punch line at the end of this first verse was that all of this courage was bolstered by the fact that ‘Moms’ would never in her right mind cross the Mason Dixon line herself. In the second verse, Mabley referenced Meredith more specifically and returned to a more familiar rhetoric of nonviolent action and eventual integration:

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178 Mabley, *At the UN*, Side B.
School days, school days Barnett said,
“To hell with the congressional rule days!”
Lead pipes and black jacks and pistols, too
Those are the books that they take to school
They don’t study science or history
They only study hate and bigotry
They be scaring the heck out of you and me
Since we was a couple of kids
What kind of school is this?
This school they call Ole Miss
I know that sticks and stones will break my bones
But this is ridiculous
How can we pretend we love our foreign friends
When they can plainly see what kind of fools they’ve been So, take me out to
the ballgame (to the campus)
If we don’t win it’s a shame
But with our trust in the Lord and the nation of God
We’ll get in just the same
Keep on knocking
They’ll open that door after awhile

Mabley juxtaposed Governor Barnett’s flagrant illegality and Southern violence (“lead pipes
and black jacks and pistols, too”) with a stoic, nonviolent black determination to end bigotry
(“We’ll get in just the same”). By labeling racist Southerners “our foreign friends” and
claiming that they “study hate and bigotry,” Mabley associated them with Russian
Communists, the public enemy at the time, while also implying that their violent behavior
was indoctrinated. With some proper teaching, hatred and racism could be unlearnt.

Beginning with the line “So take me out to the ballgame,” Mabley’s song shifted to the tune
of the classic American baseball anthem. This choice compared the civil rights struggle to
beloved American baseball, indicating both that there are two teams in this fight, but not
necessarily black and white. All Americans—therefore black and white Americans—can
cheer for the same baseball team and claim ownership of the sport. The “other team” is not

179 Mabley, *At the UN*, Side B.
white people, but Southern racists. The song was in line with nonviolent rhetoric that reconciliation will come, “They'll open that door after awhile,” as long as spirituality dominates: “our trust in the Lord and the nation of God.” This song dispersed ‘Moms’s political take on the events at the University of Mississippi, in which she clearly implies that the Civil Rights cause is valid (“if we don’t win it’s a shame”) and all African Americans and white American allies should find common cause and support each other throughout the exhausting game with Southern racism.

This chapter answers the main objective of the thesis and examines how Mabley contributed to the modern black freedom struggle with her comedy by publicizing dynamics and events central to the struggle and critiquing—through her humor—the power structures impeding black civil rights. In the context of the “Civil Rights Movement,” Mabley deployed her ‘Moms’ persona to inject discussion of race, racism, and black civil rights and citizenship into mainstream channels. As ‘Moms,’ she gained access to national, interracial and intergenerational audiences, which further amplified her cultural significance as a political influence in the civil rights struggle. Mabley’s humor and her ‘Moms’ persona enabled her to be a nonviolent political actor during the modern black freedom struggle in the 1960s and 1970s.

Demonstrating the popularity and crossover appeal she achieved, in 1962, after four decades of performing stand-up comedy on vaudeville and burlesque stages, Jackie Mabley sauntered onto stage as ‘Moms’ before an all-white segregated audience for the first time at Carnegie Hall. Magazines like the Los Angeles based Soul, Illustrated noted, “The fame of Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley keeps spreading with each new generation, and it’s primarily because
of her beautiful intrinsic hipness.” The Carnegie appearance marked a culminating moment in Mabley’s career. Despite having worked steadily in show business for most of her life, it was not until the sixties that she became a household name in comedy, claimed by black and white Americans alike.

Contributing to Mabley’s newfound fame and appreciation was the technology of Long Play records—or LPs. LPs stored live comedy performances split on the two sides of the vinyl. Mabley’s performances began appearing in the form of LPs in 1958, which changed her career opportunities, as it did that of her comedic peers, including Dick Gregory, Pigmeat Markham, and Redd Foxx. Record producers began to sell records on a larger scale, building the demand for Mabley’s live performances. Long Play records provided audiences with a way to consume and share comics’ jokes after the show and in private spaces. Modern comic Arsenio Hall described the excitement he felt sneaking into his parents’ closet to listen the records of Pigmeat Markham, Redd Foxx, and ‘Moms’ Mabley on his parents’ record player. Whoopi Goldberg described how “we all would gather, no matter who it was, to see a black person on TV or to laugh at ‘Moms.’” The ability to re-consume comedy routines on their own time allowed consumers to become invested in the routines and the comics behind them. Long Play records exposed a market for black comedians and their humor. Quickly, record companies like the Jewish-owned Chess Records of Chicago or Mercury Records in New York City jumped on the opportunity to produce the records for black comedians who had proven their worth in the comedy world, but who were neglected from mainstream record companies.

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180 “Moms Mabley,” Soul Illustrated, (December 1969), 64.
181 For information on the hi-fi movement see David Morton, Off the Record: The Technology and Culture of Sound Recording in America (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 38-39.
183 Goldberg, Moms Mabley.
Interestingly, although Mabley had been delighting black audiences for half a century, it was not until white audiences discovered Mabley through Long Plays and her ascendance to Carnegie Hall that members of the black print media rushed to claim Mabley as their own comedian. This occurrence indicates that the politics of representation were no longer concentrated in the hands of the NAACP, and lifestyle magazines and television stations began to promote black icons outside of conventional boundaries of respectability. For example, an entire article dedicated to Mabley appeared in the August 1962 issue of black lifestyle magazine *Ebony*, corresponding to her Carnegie appearance. \(^{184}\) Although the article refers to Mabley throughout as ‘Moms’ or ‘‘Moms’ Mabley,” the differences between her ‘Moms’ persona and lived experiences are documented. Special recognition is paid to her churchgoing activities and inclination for baseball. Even if her ‘Moms’ persona was a mammy figure onstage, Mabley delivered “superbly timed humor that ranges from how to rear children to international politics,” and was witnessed respectably and “reverently saying a blessing over a solitary meal backstage… a sight privileged to very few veterans of show business where performers bless just about everything in sight but their food.” \(^{185}\) Evidently, Johnson Publishing, which produced *Ebony*, deemed Mabley was relevant and lucrative as a cultural interest piece. As Mabley’s potential as a crossover activist and comic grew, black print media established her as a beloved symbol of blackness.

Jackie Mabley’s success as a female comedian was one of a kind. Her peer comedians included mostly men: activist and political satirist Dick Gregory, stand-up comic and actor Bill Cosby, and sketch show host Flip Wilson. In this chapter, I analyze Mabley alongside these male entertainers, especially Dick Gregory, to demonstrate how her ‘Moms’ persona

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\(^{185}\) Ibid.
permitted her a particular position as a spokesperson for the “Civil Rights Movement.” She provided leadership and inspiration for African Americans through her comedy, even if her gender and mammy figure removed her from the NAACP’s respectability strategies. I show that Mabley had a rare, powerful stance for a woman in entertainment industry and in the “Civil Rights Movement” as a whole.

Comedians across the color line benefitted from these changes in U.S. media culture because they popularized variety shows, which typically featured comedians. In these new opportunities, a handful of black comedians found popularity with American audiences. The format of variety show allowed for including and even privileging blacks as entertainers in traditionally white media spaces, since the white host assuaged audience members that feared the intrusive possibilities of integration. This kind of crossover and privilege was not possible in the advertisement industry or many public or private places, like universities or high-end clubs that had traditionally precluded African Americans. In this sense, comedy and comics had an advantaged location from which they could pave the way for more broad based civil rights work.

Comedians like Mabley and Dick Gregory represented potentially useful figures for the movement: they were humorous, could warm up an audience, and attracted donors. Apart from these fundraising rallies, popular comics integrated entertainment venues and found varied audiences to engage with in civil rights dialogue. Dick Gregory, in particular, offers a vital comparison for Mabley’s influence in the “Civil Rights Movement.” In 1962, Gregory integrated entertainment venues for stand-up comics by being the first man of color to perform at The Playboy Club in Chicago. After this initial appearance, Gregory had such a positive reception that Hugh Hefner booked him for the next six weeks. By 1963, Dick

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Gregory was receiving invitations to join student marches and protests in Jackson, Mississippi. He spoke to crowds of 1,000 people, using his characteristically antagonistic humor to provide a model for defiance in the “Civil Rights Movement.” When he marched alongside black protestors, he riled white policemen by responding to their threats with verbal insults. When called a monkey, Gregory responded, “Who are you calling monkey? Monkey’s got thin lips, Monkey’s got blue eyes and straight hair.” He doubly insulted the officer by retorting openly to his threat while implying that he had a white girlfriend with the pet name ‘Monkey.’

Gregory had national prominence not just as a comedian, but also as an African American leader. For example, in a 1964 Newsweek poll, Dick Gregory was among the political leaders that black Americans were asked to evaluate. While Dick Gregory outwardly appeared as an intellectual, respectable advocate for the NAACP and SNCC, Mabley’s ‘Moms’ persona afforded her political opportunities but no corporate endorsement from the NAACP.

Through her comedy and particularly through her ‘Moms’ persona, Mabley successfully negotiated power structures. Her stand-up routines to functioned as instances of non-violent direct action. But, as previously discussed, in the process she had to contend with the expectations of political leaders, because her politically relevant comedy was still spilling out of the mouth of an appropriated mammy figure. Through her jokes and public performances, ‘Moms’ Mabley articulated aspects of African Americans’ experiences in a public forum while defying conventional attitudes about black respectability. Her political significance in the form of ‘Moms,’ then, calls into question the politics of respectability as

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189 For more on Dick Gregory’s testy relationship with the NAACP, see Lorts, “Black Laughter/Black Protest,” 89-112.
effective activism. Mabley subtly undermined the power structures of white entertainment industry standards and the respectability agenda of the NAACP by staying true to how she perceived the publicized events of the “Civil Rights Movement.” Thus far, this project has incorporated Jackie Mabley into the narrative of black humorists; this chapter builds on her importance to the modern black freedom struggle as a black humorist operating within an expanding media culture.

To date, historians have made scant mention of Mabley’s contributions as a comedian to the struggle. Lawrence Levine identified ‘Moms’ as one that kept black folklore in the public theater, passing down oral traditions to the next comic and audience. Elsie Williams categorized the ‘Moms’ persona as a fool, trickster, and a woman of words, using humor and gender theory to draw her conclusion. In his study of black comedy and black politics, Justin Lorts included Mabley as a comedian that participated in the political comedy scene of the 1960s. He, however, did not argue for her political significance in the same light as Dick Gregory. Her exclusion from the conventional civil rights narrative and the NAACP despite the similarity of her humor to comedian Dick Gregory points to the inherent value placed on masculinity in the civil rights work conducted by large organizations. This chapter asserts Mabley’s non-violent direct activism by detailing how she 1) brought visibility to the civil rights cause; 2) informed people about government policies and world events that affected the modern black freedom struggle in an ironic, humorous way that garnered wide listening; and 3) used her privileged position in the entertainment industry to make incendiary jokes that prompted consideration of contemporary civil rights issues. Mabley got the word out about the movement. By the 1960s, thanks to her successful negotiation of expectations policing the entertainment industry, the world of comedy, and black politics, her platform for
this message expanded beyond the stage to include mass distributed and consumed LPs and national television.

This chapter examines the political impact of Mabley’s comedy and visibility through the 1960s. To best showcase the mobile and physical humor of ‘Moms’ Mabley with both its vaudeville touches and its biting social criticisms, I will analyze her jokes thematically. First, I detail Mabley’s jokes concerning segregation and notions of the South in light of her take on civil rights events. The premises of her jokes were rooted in incongruity and reversing stereotypes, but Mabley also used fairy tales just like old trickster tales did to give thinly veiled criticisms of major white segregationists. It is also necessary to compare her performances to other forms of activism and activist organizations in order to measure the potential strengths and dangers of supporting black comedians during the 1950s and 1960s.

Civil rights organizations and activists paid careful attention to representation of blackness as U.S. culture rapidly became more visual-centric and visual media diversified. In particular, better televisions drove consumer demand for programming and vice versa. Americans put televisions in their home incredibly quickly. In 1950, televisions—which had been introduced in 1946—were in only 10% of American households. Just five years later, that figure jumped to 64.5% of all households. By the early 1960s, there were 52 million television sets in the United States and almost nine out of ten American households boasted a television. 191 Television theorists and historians describe television in the 1950s as a more immediate experience. Like LPs, television brought a far away experience into America’s living rooms. As commercial advertising took off, television networks could afford to broadcast more kinds of entertainment to an almost national audience. Television placed a

premium on the visual image and connected the country in a national way as thousands of people could witness the same events, which affected black civil rights politics, as well as black comics.

Mabley rise to stardom in the early sixties corresponded to the moment when the “Civil Rights Movement” matured. Civil rights activists’ use of non-violent direct action had provoked protest spectacles that put the “Civil Rights Movement” and its organizations in the national spotlight by way of national publications such LIFE and Time and in motion on the evening news. While ‘Moms’ took to the stage and told her “children” about “how good they had it” compared to the old days, images came out of Birmingham, Alabama that captured protesting black youths attacked by policemen with their water hoses and dogs. Mainstream civil rights organizations, including the NAACP, Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee (SNCC), articulated precise goals of the movement, including achieving first-class American through the procurement of racial, social, political, and economic equality. Given the media attention the movement was then receiving, it is not surprising that in articulating the path to these goals, these organizations repeatedly expressed concerns over media representations of African Americans. For example, the NAACP activists representing the “Little Rock Nine” instructed the nine black students attempting to integrate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas to “dress modestly, neatly, as if going to church” so that news media coverage of these violent incidents would portray respectable, stoic students in contrast with violent, barbaric white protesters. Along

192 For other studies of the politics of respectability, see Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent, 245. Higginbotham coined the “politics of respectability” as a strategy of the black Baptist churchwomen during the early twentieth century. See also Chappel et. al, “Dress modestly….” and Feldstein, “I wanted the whole world to see.” Both articles discuss the importance and enactment of the politics of respectability in the modern black freedom struggle.
these same lines, the NAACP organized African Americans in protest of against disrespectful portrayals of black culture on television in shows like the adventures of *Amos 'n' Andy*, which depicted black men as lazy and scheming and black women as emasculating shrews.\(^{193}\) Andy of the 1930s-1950s hit radio show *Amos and Andy* suffered from Kingfish's (Tim Moore) zany plans to get out of work but shiftily earn money.

Moreover, as Mary Dudziak has argued, Cold War concerns created spaces for African Americans entertainers as U.S. representatives. In the early Cold War years, the state department sent black entertainers around the world as cultural ambassadors meant to offset negative scrutiny regarding U.S. race relations and anti-black racism.\(^{194}\) Given their propagandist role, the image these black entertainers put forth was under greater examination. However, while the state department was keenly interested in how black entertainers appeared in public, perhaps no one was more concerned with the propaganda value of black entertainers than black political thinkers and organizations. As black entertainers gained global recognition, they had the power to implement or negate civil rights agendas and respectability.

It is important to remember that Mabley conducted her career within a capitalist society and market economy. She made jokes that would sell tickets and records. There are jokes that many modern feminists would find distasteful or indicative of Mabley’s regressive politics. If a joke had a certain resonance with the crowd, she was bound to use it again and again, much like vaudevillian comedians that defended their use of blackface as just another


When Mabley made jokes about the men in her life beating her, the audience laughed at how she told those particular details before she even reached the punch line. In one bit, Mabley described a confrontation with “the old man my father forced me to marry,”

When I first cum up here, my first job was just for the devil. Well at the time my boyfriend was mean, you know, he was mean to me. He was. One night he walked in and knocked me down for nothing. [Audience laughs.] What did you hit me for? He said “On general principle.” I know he’s lying because I hadn’t seen general principle in about 12 years. [Audience laughs harder]

The audience laughed at the fact that Mabley was struck, though perhaps out of surprise or discomfort, before her punch line. In similar jokes, Mabley described her husband hitting her with a lamp “because he couldn’t lift the table to save his life,” at which the audience laughed heartily. Mabley supported women working outside of the domestic sphere and being in control of their own destinies, but her humor also reflected and even trafficked in gendered stereotypes of her era. Mabley, and other comedians, were able to offer new perspectives on their culture, but still had to provide recognizable, applicable humor through contemporary metaphors.

Mabley, Segregation, the South, “It’s rough down there.”

Black comedians performing in the South in any era before the 1970s occupied dangerous spaces. One black comedian, Nipsy Russell, lent humor to the real danger beyond the Cotton Curtain, “I had a sensational run in Alabama, quite a following in Tennessee. I opened in Montgomery; they had a little club there called the Swinging Noose. They wanted

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196 Mabley, At the UN.
to hold me over but I didn’t want to hang around there…” Russell’s joke made light of a real threat of violence against people of color, a danger magnified by the public nature of his career. This joke also classified the South as an enemy by comparing to the Communist nation of Russia, a common theme in Mabley’s humor as well. The presence of black entertainers in segregated spaces was perceived as inherently political due to their skin color. In spite of the potential for violence, comedians like Dick Gregory and Jackie Mabley drew attention to their blackness in their comedy. The familiar jokes of survivalist humor were changing to become “comedic activism.” These kinds of jokes subverted respectable relations between men and women and people of different races to create assertive black political identities.

Mabley’s jokes about violence constitute one of the many ways that the American public was exposed to the violence in the South surrounding integration. Her jokes about violence contained elements of the trickster elements of black humor, as she tells stories about the weak outwitting the strong, while also suggesting that the weak were not weak, the strong were just stupid. Mabley’s jokes that insinuated violence toward other people were couched in support of nonviolence and usually posited a nontraditional victim within the premise of the joke. These nontraditional victims usually included her staple routine of poking fun at the uselessness of “old men.” A large majority of her records and television appearances begin with, or at least include, her bit about old men, “Ain’t nothing an old man can do for me, except bring me a message from a young one!” with new iterations of the old joke sprinkled throughout the years.

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199 Williams, Jackie Moms Mabley, 91.
Mabley wrote and performed songs that commented directly on events in the “Civil Rights Movement”, such as the struggle for James Meredith to enter the University of Mississippi in 1963 or the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968.\(^\text{200}\) Songs that combine a catchy tune with social criticism made her politics easier to digest, since a song both repeats a political message over and over and the humor of her lyrics reinforce her likeability as a person. As noted before, likeability is one of the factors that kept Mabley safe while she made barbed comments about racism in public forums. One song, titled “Dream of a Southern Governor” had lyrics that described Mabley as a Southern governor awaking to the “nightmare” of Martin Luther King, Jr. as the United States President. Her exaggerations of the dangers of prospective black leadership mixed with a whimsical tune made Southern racism seem ever more incredulous and infantile. For example, on the 1969 record The Youngest Teenager in the World: What generation gap? Mabley sings a song to the tune of “Down by the Riverside.” In both the beginning and five minutes from the end with the lyrics altered to praise King and urging her audience to “pray, things will get better day by day/practice brotherhood/down by the riverside.” But this jovial song, during which the audience can be heard singing and clapping, bookends satirical songs about “Tiptoeing through the Tulips” with your “switchblade” to protect herself from an attacker. The combination of lighthearted and humorous satire with dark topics all presented by an authoritative yet unassuming mammy figure gave Mabley more leeway to comment directly on media events in the “Civil Rights Movement” than other female activists. Mabley reduced the intimidation of segregationist ideologies and their brutal responses to integration, creating a space for her audiences to laugh and engage in a dialogue about these legitimate civil rights struggles.

Mabley discussed violence as an inherent truth in the South, but usually presented it in singsong, lackadaisical formats like operatic satires. In Mabley’s rendition of “Georgia on my mind,” she changed some of the lyrics to express her disdain for the South. After telling a story of suddenly getting whisked into court, Mabley sang:

‘Moms’ you’re next
and there I stand with a rope around my neck.
In Georgia
til I catch a plane north and blow Georgia out my mind.
Ray Charles can have it, you hear me?\footnote{Mabley, \textit{Young Men Si.}}

The song described an assertive ‘Moms’ who had wandered throughout Georgia voting and entering white spaces as she pleased. By the end of the song, her life is endangered, but Mabley comically belts this line and the audience laughed in recognition of a harsh reality for the grandmother bumbling around the South. Mabley placed her character in danger in the context of her song, playing on her audience’s adoration for her to create a narrative that advocates for her personal protection as an American citizen. Despite how this joke victimized Mabley as a nonviolent protestor, Mabley discussed violence in terms of how the black characters in her jokes used it offensively as well.

In 1963 at the State Theater in Philadelphia, Mabley recorded another Chess Records Long Play, \textit{The Funny Sides of ‘Moms’ Mabley}. Philadelphia’s African American population had burgeoned in the previous two decades to this recording as white flight to the suburbs opened up space in the once segregated white neighborhoods. Additionally, Philadelphia was home to one of the largest and longest enduring chapters of the NAACP.\footnote{Jackie Mabley, \textit{The Funny Sides of ‘Moms’ Mabley} (Philadelphia: Chess Records LP, 1963). When Mabley recorded a performance there, we can reasonably expect that her jokes played to an audience
savvy in civil rights issues. One particular joke illustrated ‘Moms’ ability to combine violence and humor at the expense of the white upper class.

I went down to Atlanta to do a health show. Got caught in an electric storm. We had to refuel in Little Rock. This little white couple got on our plane. I was sitting right behind them (you know that’s where I was sitting)…

We’re flying over Memphis and he says ‘I’m a throw out a one dollar bill and make someone very happy.’ His wife say back ‘Why don’t you throw out one hundred dollars and make one hundred people very happy?’ I say, ‘Why don’t you both throw yourselves out and make everybody happy?!”

In this joke, Mabley placed herself in a position of power and financial stability since she was being flown around in planes to do shows in the South. She then contextualized the joke by referencing the Montgomery Bus Boycotts and that particular phase of the “Civil Rights Movement” with the comment “(you know that’s where I was sitting).” She addressed the audience has her equal, assuming that they would be able to relate to her witty reference to sitting at the back of the bus behind white people. The punch line came when Mabley told the white couple that their white guilt and charity was unappreciated and they would be better off to die. In a review of her 1965 album Now Hear This, one critic noted that, “‘Moms’ couches her material in a corny, slambang, homespun style, but behind the slangy approach there is an earnest message to her race to stand-up straight, live right, fight hard, and not blame every personal failure on the white man.” Even as some of her jokes placed upper class whites as the punch line, ticket sales and the extent of her tour indicate that Mabley’s comedy was in demand across the color line. Mabley had provided the satire to entertain both black and

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203 Mabley, The Funny Sides.
205 “Review of ‘Moms Mabley, Now Hear This’,” Hifi Stereo Review, December 1965.
white members of her audience for decades and now had a stage to comment on national civil rights events.

Despite the lack of NAACP endorsement, Mabley freely used the organization’s prevalence as context for her jokes, recognizing their efforts as activists. In one story that characterized the danger and racism of the South, Mabley used the NAACP and CORE as markers for a morally good, if doomed, African American man in Mississippi:

Colored fellow down home died. Pulled up to the gate. St. Peter look at him, say, “What do you want?” “Hey, man, you know me. Hey, Jack, you know me. I’m old Sam Jones. Old Sam Jones, man, you know me. Used to be with the NAACP, you know, CORE and all that stuff, marches, remember me? Oh man, you know me.” He just broke down there, “You know me.” He looked in his book. “Sam Jones,” he say, “No, no, you ain’t there, no Sam Jones.” He said, “Oh yes I am; look there! I’m the cat that married that white girl on the capitol steps of Jackson, Mississippi.” He said, “How long ago has that been?” He said, “About five minutes ago.”

Despite having moved away as a teenager, Mabley referred to the South as “down home” in the above joke, even if she declared in 1960 that she would never go below the Mason Dixon line again. But even if Mabley would not return, ‘Moms’ had more authority to comment on Southern violence if she identified with the South as her home and a common point of origination for African Americans. Mabley exercised her skill as a trickster once again with the above joke. The characterization of Sam Jones as a respectable activist who was “old” indicates that he was a good man that had perhaps died from old age after a lifetime fighting for civil rights. But at the end of the joke, ‘Moms’ twisted the situation to Sam Jones a recent “criminal” in the South as a man who committed miscegenation. Regardless of Jones’s civil rights work, he died at the hands of the men in Jackson, Mississippi who resisted integration

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206 Mabley, The Funny Sides.
207 Williams, Jackie Moms Mabley, 34.
at all costs. Despite subversive quips, Mabley’s jokes about the verbal violence and physical threats she received from angry white audiences serve as evidence of the lived experiences of herself and her peer entertainers.²⁰⁸

In the first segment of her record Young Men Si Old Men No, Mabley told a string of jokes about her time in Arkansas, highlighting the foolish yet witty aspects of her ‘Moms’ persona. In one joke, she spends a minute animatedly describing how much she wants a piece of cheesecake in the window at a bakery. Mabley’s guttural moans and excited screeches render her an almost grotesque stereotype of a “darky” figure. Upon entering the bakery, Mabley described the clientele as “looking at me like tha-a-a-t,” provoking the audience to laugh empathetically. Mabley then finished with the punch line, “I said, what you lookin’ at me for? I don’t wanna go to school with you, I just want a piece of cheesecake!” Here, Mabley publicized the events of Little Rock Nine in the “Civil Rights Movement” in a way created ironic, political commentary with a clear, yet subliminal, opinion on which party is in the wrong.

Jackie Mabley, delivered jokes with the same comedic premise as the tricksters and stereotype reversal as the baby joke noted in the first chapter. On her record, Moms Mabley at the UN (1961), ‘Moms’ discussed how busy she was working at the United Nations and listed off all of the diplomats she had met, including

All them men from the Congo. Some of them was late getting there, you know. Because they had plane trouble you see and had to be grounded in Arkansas, Little Rock. One of them Congo men walked up to the desk in Little Rock and said, “I’d like to reserve a room please. The man said, “We don’t cater to your kind. The man replied, “No you misunderstand. I don’t want it for myself; I want it for my wife. She’s YOUR kind.”²⁰⁹

²⁰⁹ Mabley, At the UN, 6:01 minutes.
A volley of applause, laughter, cheering, and whistling can be heard from the audience on the record. By establishing herself as a UN diplomat, Mabley undermined a stereotype: old black grandmothers did not serve the United Nations. But Mabley pushed the envelope even further, taunting the white racist in her story by dangling miscegenation in front of him. Her choice of Little Rock for the setting escalated her political satire further, since it was the site for the violent protests against the high school students integrating Central High. Her audience would have been aware of the highly publicized struggles over school integration there.

Mabley’s jokes contributed to the SNCC narrative of Civil Rights that focused on the South’s segregation and racism. In another joke, Mabley describes a time she drove a car in South Carolina. A police officer pulled her over, telling her she ran through the red light. Mabley responded with “All of you people were driving on the green; I thought the red was for us!” Here again, Mabley asserted ‘Moms’ as an independent, mobile person, a space historically precluded to black people in the South. Most people were and continue to be inclined to believe this narrative that isolated the South as the necessary region for civil rights action given SNCC’s photograph stories aimed at white and black northerners and the history of Jim Crow laws in the South. These photography narratives were printed in national newspapers and black magazines, effectively rallying African Americans and northern white liberals against the segregationists in the South.

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210 Williams, Jackie Moms Mabley, 23.
Mabley’s jokes gave timely critiques and provided a way to “laugh to keep from crying” when race riots and Southern backlash against integration continued to affect lives across the nation. In 1967, while appearing on the Merv Griffin show, a typically saucy ‘Moms’ made the host visibly uncomfortable on live television. One of his questions was whether people in the El Salvador called her Jackie or ‘Moms’. She replied with a drawn out story, asking Merv Griffin, “What the name of that cowboy’s horse was?”

Griffin: Trigger.
‘Moms’: Ohhh yeah. They were always yelling ‘What’s up Trigger?’ ‘Where ya goin’ Trigger?’ [pause] Or at least that’s what I think they was sayin’. 212

Mabley gave black audiences an “insider” joke and presented white members of her audience a contradiction to consider while cushioning the critique in a foolish mammy figure that could barely remember the name of Roy Rogers’s famous palomino horse, Trigger. She made herself the injured party and the butt of the joke, but forced the white host to respond to her circumstance.

Mabley performed in television specials in the late 1960s and interacted with white audiences. She became popular on shows with white hosts such as the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour, The Merv Griffin Show, Mike Douglass Show, the Ed Sullivan Show, and the Garry Moore Show. Mabley usually performed choice bits of her routines or participated in interviews with the host, as remains to be common practice for special guests on variety hours. Her success on these shows eventually translated to performing in sketches on The Flip Wilson Show, one of the premiere comedy variety hours. 213 During its first two seasons, The Flip Wilson Show’s Nielson ratings indicated that it was the second most watched show

212 Goldberg, Moms Mabley.
These sketches combined Flip Wilson’s satire with Mabley’s persona. In one sketch, written by star Hollywood writer Hal Goodman, that never aired, Mabley was supposed to participate in a “new commercial about minorities.” Flip Wilson would have introduced the segment alongside white comedian Artie Johnson with these lines:

Hey… have you noticed how all the television commercials are beginning to use minorities? If you look quick, you’ll see one of us here or there. Usually it’s a pretty girl… on the light side… in the back of the commercial. But things are getting better… especially if you’re a pretty girl on the light side. A little black humor there!

In the satirical commercial itself, Mabley played a plumber named Josephine that came to help a housewife with her broken sink. After fixing the sink with the new cleanser, Josephine bragged that the cleanser could turn all but one thing white again. The housewife’s surprise at Josephine’s comment poked fun at the new ‘colorblind liberalism’ made popular by Richard Nixon and providing a common subject for television in the late 1960s and early 1970s as the entertainment industry attempted to assuage tension over integration. Her persona enabled Mabley to put her political barbs on national television while still being safe enough to garner the gig in the first place. In the face of the serious civil disobedience implemented by civil rights leaders and activists, a fool grandmother character was selected to perform on television variety hours and late night specials.

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217 “Flip Wilson Show Final Draft Script,” Hal Goodman Papers, (UCLA Special Collections, box 30, folder 12), taped October 6 1970, aired November 26, 1970. The show featuring Jackie Mabley can also be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p0bNKRFOZCY.
While members of the NAACP sought to present black people as a, normal, respectable and valuable American citizens, ‘Moms’ exposed audiences to variations and differences among African American populations—not all of them normative or respected. The NAACP collaborated with ‘respectable,’—or so they thought—comedians. For example, Dick Gregory was courted as a poster boy for the “Civil Rights Movement”, even though certain members of the NAACP held reservations about their ability to control Gregory’s reputation as a respectable supporter of integration. Outside of the NAACP, other segments of the entertainment industry sought out ‘Moms’ for collaborative performances because she could speak for and relate to so many different African American populations. In

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the 1960s, black and white television producers alike sought Mabley for her fame, talent, and ability to entertain a variety of audiences. Without the advances of the “Civil Rights Movement”, Mabley may have never gained this national fame and platform. The funding for these kinds of television shows materialized when the individuals behind liberal television production saw a political value in putting these entertainers on television to help integrate the United States.\footnote{Williams, Jackie Moms Mabley, 50.} She individually impacted the politics of the modern black freedom struggle as a crossover artist that could appease white audiences and while publicizing racism. She brought the two groups into the same space, if only through her comedy.\footnote{Williams, Jackie Moms Mabley, 50.}

Mabley starred on ABC’s 1968 television special *A Time For Laughter: A Look at Negro Humor*. The show was part of an ambitious series, ABC Stage 67, which aired anything from live science fiction movies to full-length original musicals. This particular episode was produced by singer and actor Harry Belafonte, and featured several other comedy giants like Redd Foxx, Dick Gregory, Godfrey Cambridge, and famous comic actresses like Diahnn Carroll. Belafonte’s episode was both social satire and self-parody of the comics listed.\footnote{Williams, Jackie Moms Mabley, 50.} As seen in the picture headlining this section, Mabley played an irritated maid for a suburban couple (Godfrey Cambridge and Diana Sands) that pretended to be white. As Cambridge and Sands fretted over whether the neighbors would find them respectable and members of the upper class, Mabley kept offering to do her old chores, like “cutting up your watermelon, just the way you like it!” Mabley’s wry, no-nonsense attitude throughout the episode, emitted from the perspective of the “traditional black role” of the maid, provided the politically relevant punch lines for most of the episode. Although Mabley emphasized her “mammyish” characteristics in this episode, her social satire voiced a
dialogue against the limiting politics of respectability that many African Americans agreed
with in the late 1960s.

By the time Mabley was on television, she was untouchable as a celebrity figure. She
was beloved by so many audiences that shaming her, especially as an actual old woman,
would have been harmful to civil rights activists. Evidence of the strong emotions ‘Moms’s
comedy could produce on both sides of the debate, are visible in this letter to the editor
section of SEPIA Magazine in 1975. Sergeant Leon Brown of the Air Force wrote to the
editor complaining about an article on ‘Moms’ Mabley.

In the January 1975 issue of SEPIA under black humor, there was
some of Moms Mabley’s humor. Now really, isn’t it about time black
publications quit romanticizing the sick utterances of corrupt and
depraved people like Moms Mabley? Decent black women should declare her an insult and an enemy of
black womanhood. The acceptance of the Moms Mabley mentality
could be an indication of just how demoralized we are becoming as a
people. We are probably the only race of people on the face of the earth
that could laud such a perverted critter. There are many decent black
people, men and women, who would enjoy articles on decent black
women like Eartha Kitt, Cicely Tyson, and many, many others.222

Brown was certainly an advocate of the politics of respectability. Brown juxtaposed Mabley
with Eartha Kit and Cicely Tyson, the star of Roots, and considered to be one of the most
respectable black female actresses dedicated to preserving the integrity of the African
American experiences that inspired her roles.223 Individuals like Brown who were not
directly involved with the NAACP were concerned about Mabley’s throwbacks to the

222 “Soul Publication Records,” (box 36, folder 12, Special Collections) University of Los Angeles.
223 Feldstein, “So Beautiful in Those Rags: Cicely Tyson, Popular Culture, and African American History
in the 1790s,” from How it Feels to Be Free. Roots was a miniseries released in 1977 based on Alex Haley’s
book bout his ancestors in West Africa. The series documented the history of African Americans from slavery
to the decade after the Civil War. Some 135 million Americans watched the series, and Roots producer David
Wolper estimated that 120 million of them were “curious white Americans.”
mammy era. In the very next month, another reader of *SEPIA*, Jimmie Thompson from the Bronx, responded with another Letter to the Editor:

“I was appalled and completely outraged when I read those sarcastic remarks Sgt. Leon Brown made in reference to Moms Mabley. This perverted critter, as he called her. I'll have him know, was in this world for a number of years, for many of those years was an inspiration to the downtrodden citizens of this inequitable society. The fact that Miss Mabley was out there making noise, good or bad, only means that this was one brave black lady who stood up for what she believed. Her endurance through all hardships made her name a household word and the simple fact that she did it was outstanding. Thank you *SEPIA* for being so informative and may you always be as black and beautiful as you are.”

This individual chastised Brown for limiting Mabley’s contribution to civil rights work. To Thompson, she was an inspirational activist for “downtrodden citizens of this inequitable society.” These differing opinions illustrate the degree to which the politics of respectability and narratives of racial uplift determined how people interpreted the humor of black comedians. In spite of public pressure, Mabley continued to broach all cultural subjects and peoples, exposing lifestyles beyond respectable middle class African Americans.

Importantly, Mabley did not shy away from blue humor or the sexuality of gays, lesbians, and drag queens. These jokes elevated queer people to the same level of consideration as segregationists, women, old men, and everyone else Mabley chose to include in her comedy routines. ‘Moms’ Mabley discussed sex and sexuality throughout her career. Her jokes about the impotence of old men subverted traditional masculinity.224 By starting out so many of her sets with an assault on old, impotent men, she immediately subverted a cultural hierarchy of respect and inserted herself in the void. When ‘Moms’ joked about cross dressers, she often tricked the audience by setting up a story’s context that

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appeared hetero-normative and then flipping it on its head. For example, she described a
drunken date that ended with her asking to be taken home. Then she drew out the story for
her audience: “Pull off my dress, William. Now pull off my girdle, I’m too drunk. Now pull
off my bra.” Then, once the stupefied audience silently acknowledged the potential for rape
in this story, she whipped out the punch line: “And don’t let me ever catch you wearing them
again!” With this joke, she inverted the expectation for the man in control of the situation
while exposing his subversion of traditional masculinity. Mabley teased people regardless of
color or creed, allowing her humor to relate to multiple “in groups” at once.

Mabley used gay men both as protagonists and the butt of her jokes throughout her
career. Mabley feigned a high voice quite different from her own to characterize the queens
in her jokes. For example, in her recording Young Men Si, Old Men No, Mabley told a joke
about a man who was nervously robbing his first train. After stuttering multiple times, the
thief raised his gun and yelled that if nobody complied with him, he would shoot all the
women and rape all the men. As one of the people on the train questioned him, “Don’t you
mean shoot the men and rape the women?” another man, a person whom ‘Moms’ labels as a
“queen,” squeals “Lawd almighty, please let this man rob this train!” At other times, she
asserted the queen to be a self-sufficient person while reaffirming his identification with the
effeminate man identity. In another story, Mabley told of two men were walking down a
street when they sighted a queen and called him such. The queen then proceeded to punch the
heckler unconscious. As he walked away, [‘Moms’ put on her high voice again] the queen
stated, “Now when he wakes up, you tell him both of my parents are still alive! I’m a
PRINCESS!”

‘Moms’ tricked her audience; first suggesting that “queen” was the insult
because it implied the homosexuality of the flamboyant man, but instead revealing an

incongruity in that the real insult was that the queen was not old enough to be a queen, but instead a princess.

Mabley’s comfort and deft ability to openly joke about cross dressers and queens may have been related to her lesbianism, which was significantly withheld from her biography. Mabley engaged in relationships with women for the majority of her life, despite a narrative of sexual relations with young men and male celebrities. She created a distinct contrast between her fashion presentation on stage as an older woman and offstage as a butch lesbian in traditionally male clothing. Moreover, her authority as an “elder” and as a desexualized sexual being gave her the authority to joke about all kinds of audiences and minorities other than herself, which became a true asset in her integrationist activism in the late 1960s and 1970s.

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226 Fats Waller as quoted in Goldberg, Moms Mabley, “I gotta tell ya, ‘Moms’ Mabley was the first woman I ever saw wearing men’s clothes.”
‘Moms’ Mabley and Cold War Politics: Creating a New Us vs. Them

Figure 3.3. The cover jacket for Jackie Mabley’s 1966 record, *Moms Mabley at the White House Conference*. Recorded at the Apollo Theater, New York, New York. Source: Mercury Records.

In the 1960s, the United States was in the middle of a Cold War with the Soviet Union and was in the process of exerting its influence on countries throughout South America, Africa, and Asia. At a time when the United States was working to both establish and maintain its global position as the “Leader of the Free World”, black activists and media outlets exported photojournalistic images like those coming out of Birmingham as evidence of extreme anti-black racism. These pictures made the United States and American democracy vulnerable to international criticism. Thus, Cold War politics created spaces for African Americans in the entertainment industry because the American government suddenly had an added incentive to keep activists happy and out of the street. Some activists, like Walter White, had gotten their foot in the Hollywood door before World War II. Other organizations drew their power from collective action and protests to pressure the United States government directly. These actions were photographed, which continued to cultivate
an image of the United States almost in civil war. Foreign policy makers struggled to present a unified, equitable United States. Activists in the “Civil Rights Movement” then had the opportunity to play up this global pressure to their advantage. If the United States needed to project a positive image of itself to the world, how better than to limit images and film leaving the country that disclosed the nation’s struggle with violence and racial segregation? Comedians like Jackie Mabley and Dick Gregory used this opportunity to tie together the South as an enemy, akin to the Communist regime on the other side of the world.

Mabley was part of a cohort of comedians commenting on civil rights. Dick Gregory, the poster boy for the NAACP, participated in several marches in the early 1960s to use his fame as a field and add more nuance to his political barbs in his stand-up comedy. On her records ‘Moms’ Mabley at the White House Conference, ‘Moms’ Mabley at the Geneva Conference, and ‘Moms’ Mabley at the UN, Mabley narrated ‘Moms’ experiences in her ‘other jobs’ as a chief advisor to the White House and a United Nation diplomat. Mabley used her ‘Moms’ persona to grant herself the authority to speak on Cold War issues as an person who could never realistically hold a position in the United Nations or serve as an advisor to President Kennedy. The locations and audiences varied, from the Playboy Club in Chicago to the Regal Theater in Washington DC. When ‘Moms’ told jokes or sang songs about her “affairs” at the White House, she called the Presidents and their wives by their first names or nicknames, but always voiced characters in her story deferentially addressing her as “Ms. Mabley.” The humor she employed was already absurd because a woman, let alone a

227 Martin Luther King commented on the power of visual media in Letters from Birmingham Jail: “the brutality with which officials would have quelled the black individual became impotent when it could not be pursued with stealth and remain unobserved. It was caught – as a fugitive from a penitentiary is often caught – in gigantic circling spotlights. It was imprisoned in a luminous glare revealing the naked truth to the whole world.

228 Jackie Mabley, ‘Moms’ Mabley at the White House Conference (New York: Mercury Records LP, 1966); Mabley, ‘Moms’ Mabley at the Geneva Conference.
black grandmother, in this historical context would hardly be advising the federal
government. Mabley then capitalized on the potential for absurdity by elevating ‘Moms’
status relative to politicians, even to the President of the United States. In an operatic
ballad on her record The Youngest Teenager in the World, What Generation Gap? ‘Moms’
sang a rhyming story about a meeting President Richard Nixon called with her. After she [in
song] had demanded that “Dick” come visit her, given her old age, her Nixon expressed fear
for his safety if he travelled to Harlem. Her response was:

I said no son I live in White Plains
Don’t let that fool ya, the community’s black
So if you’re coming to my house
[whispers] would you mind coming round the back?!

The audience on the record roared with laughter at the implication that the President
would have to endure the shameful secrecy that black people, and occasionally white people,
had to endure when traversing outside of their respective boundaries. She redefined her
personal political boundaries in her jokes, which both fed political consciousness about
activist work in the modern black freedom struggle and empowered black women by
extension.

Mabley used insult comedy on world leaders like Fidel Castro and Soviet premiere
Nikita Khrushchev to create and expose communities as a black comic with a white
audience. Instead of us (black citizens) versus them (white citizens), her humor became us
(Americans) versus them (Communists). She updated her trickster tales and black folklore
humor to suit the context of US politics. Just as Mabley ridiculed the South using long-
standing stereotypes, Mabley denigrated Russian political leaders using stereotypes about
African Americans as strengths. On her 1962 record Moms Mabley at the Geneva
Conference, she praises African American women by declaring to Prime Minister Khrushchev: “[to Khrushchev] We women of America can whip your women… cause the women over there don’t know anything about no razor blades. And throwin’ that can of lye.” Importantly, Mabley does not mark these woman as black women, but American women. In making Communism the common enemy, Mabley worked to put white and black people on the same team.

The Cold War, and the global political scene that accompanied it, aided civil rights organizations in keeping their activism in public media. The United Nations declared 1960 to be the “Year of Africa,” intending to capitalize on the optimism of African liberation. The UN made this decision in the wake of the Sharpeville Massacre in South Africa, in which white South African police opened fire on a nonviolent protest of 4,000 black marchers. The world could no longer ignore the growing knowledge of the apartheid regime there. The United States government would not officially interfere with the inhumane regimes in South Africa. It was argued that the South African government was an anti-communist regime whose existence could provided a foothold for democracy in Southern Africa, protests and criticisms rang throughout United States. Many civil rights organizations and entertainers like Harry Belafonte of the NAACP fundraised and cosponsored Africa Freedom Day celebrations. These celebrations featured speeches from black leaders from Thurgood Marshall to Malcolm X. Struggles of African nations also provided rallying points to inspire marches and protests. But even as civil struggles against white supremacy became global in nature, the African American population had diverse conceptions of Africa.

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231 Feldstein, How It Feels to be Free, 56.
232 Ibid, 57.
233 Feldstein, How it Feels to be Free, 54.
Mabley’s humor was indicative of the diverse array of opinions about Africans, and she occasionally used her humor to further unite African Americans with white Americans with their common national identity. In fact, Mabley’s jokes and the raucous laughter that follow them on her records indicated the negative conceptions of Africa held by some African Americans. On her record The Youngest Teenager in the World (1963), Mabley made a string of jokes about the fact that President Nixon asked her to serve as a diplomat in the Congo. The majority of her jokes about citizens of African nations were that they were cannibals.\textsuperscript{234} Mabley’s ignorant jokes about African were always accompanied by laughter on her records. With jokes that facilitated community among African Americans, Mabley inadvertently pinned more violent and inhumane qualities on Africans.

Shortly after the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed, the unifying goal of changing legislation fell away. Suddenly, the singular goal that had unified people with diverse opinions had been obtained. “Separate but equal” was illegal, but unfortunately these legal battles turned out to be only another step toward progress in the modern black freedom struggle. In spring of 1966, President Lyndon B. Johnson orchestrated a second White House Conference on Civil Rights. This conference was intended to highlight his contributions to the “Civil Rights Movement”. A mixture of civil rights groups, grassroots organizations, state and local officials, business leaders, labor, federal officials, religious, and women’s groups received invitations to the Conference. However, the 519 news reporters accredited to the conference suggests that the appearance of the conference was more important that its content.\textsuperscript{235} As argued in historian Kevin Yuills’s “The 1966 White House Conference on


Civil Rights,” the mid 1960s revealed a very different attitude toward the “Civil Rights Movement.” The same problems persisted: school districts refused to integrate, violent backlash within communities across the country, and racism in the hearts and minds of individuals continued. Nonviolent civil disobedience successfully prompted civil rights legislation, but it had failed to eradicate the racist sentiments behind segregation and Jim Crow laws. After integration efforts sponsored by respectable proponents of racial uplift agendas appeared to have “failed,” more radical separatist activist groups gained prominence in mass media.

The solemn, respectable tone of the “Civil Rights Movement” that had been carried by black men in suits marching throughout the nation in the 1950s gave way to radical appearances, such as afros, and radical ideas, such as black separatism. Martin Luther King, Jr. continued his strategy of nonviolent civil disobedience but began to speak out against the United States’ presence in Vietnam. Without the helpful specificity of a goal such as the passage of a law, the activists that held King up as a kind of prophet-hero-leader began to splinter. When King called for another March on Washington in 1968 to present his idea of the Poor People’s Campaign to build a multiracial “army of the poor” to overcome historical economic injustices from American capitalism. Members of the SCLC—his own organization—divided over this campaign; many of them considered this plan too broad and its goals unrealizable. This more radical, less patriotic, less “I Have a Dream” version of Martin Luther King, Jr. has since faded out of the public memory of the “Civil Rights

Movement”. His goals were no longer so clearly pro America and pro members of all races being equal citizens in the United States.\textsuperscript{238}

In the wake of King’s assassination, race riots took place across the country.\textsuperscript{239} It was in this volatile context of public race riots that the US government and white television producers alike took a special interest in reaching out to entertainers like Mabley to expedite the process of integration. Even before the added tension caused by King’s assassination, politicians were extending their reach to entertainers. Mabley’s homage, a throaty, tearful rendition of the song \textit{Abraham, Martin, and John} to Martin Luther King, Jr., President John F. Kennedy, and President Abraham Lincoln, was popular on television late night shows in the late 1960s. The solemn song contradicted her usual toothless smile and witty persona, creating an even greater magnitude of importance to this song in particular. It hit the number two spot on the national charts when Mabley released it as a single. Her raspy voice lurched with each line, and her dejected expression brought tears to audiences’ eyes. Mabley reflected the nation, suffering a collective grief, mourning the loss of three great civil rights heroes to assassinations.

Mabley’s career moved to television in 1967, following Stokley Carmichael’s coining of the phrase “Black Power” in June of 1966.\textsuperscript{240} That year, SNCC had dismissed him from the organization; his reputation as a rabble-rouser and instigator of social disobedience contradicted the nonviolent goals of the organization. His phrase “Black Power,” used during a charismatic speech, came to be ascribed to radical organizing efforts of activist associations like the Black Panthers. These separatist oriented activists challenged the tactics of current black leadership for their cooperation with white organizations and politicians that had yet to

\textsuperscript{238} Dudziak, \textit{Cold War Civil Rights}, 56.
\textsuperscript{239} Ibid, 58.
\textsuperscript{240} Clayborne, \textit{In Struggle}, 44.
make good on their promises of equality. In 1967, the Black Panther Party came to the forefront of public media. Although these more assertive forms of black separatism had existed for decades and notions of black feminism were articulated by entertainers like Nina Simone as early as 1960, these movements began occupying public media only in the late 1960s and early 1970s.²⁴¹

On the record Moms Mabley at the White House Conference, featured at the beginning of the section, Mabley described her fictional visit to the White House for the White House Conference. On the record Mabley told jokes about fictional conversations she had with Senator Johnson and Senator Adam Clayton Powell. The cover jacket itself includes the classic tropes of the ‘Moms’ persona: a short mammy hops out of her bright pink Cadillac, dragging a young man with her. President Johnson smiles fondly at her, expressing his welcome, which was reasonable considering ‘Moms’ addressed him as “son” in her jokes. Lady Bird Johnson looks less accommodating, digging her heels into the ground with shock and disapproval at the small black woman approaching the White House. With a smug smirk, Mabley marches into the foreground of the picture anyway. Along the perimeter of the White House fence stand the dozens of protesters fed up with the inefficacy of the Civil Rights Act. This drawing symbolically placed Mabley at the head of black activists, speaking for them from her privileged position as wise old ‘Moms.’ Mabley mocked the fact that although she was not invited to the real White House conference, all would have benefited from her presence and sage advice. Mabley unabashedly placed ‘Moms,’ in her vaudeville costume, at the head of politics and governance in the United States.

Mabley’s final contribution to the entertainment world in her lifetime was her only Hollywood feature film, *Amazing Grace* (1974). The trailer for the film presented Mabley as America’s “most talented, most beautiful, most exciting, most glamorous female superstar.” The film itself was an homage to all of the ‘good old boys’ in comedy, though producers created the film as a tribute to ‘Moms’ Mabley primarily, with Slappy White, Lincoln Perry, and Butterfly McQueen rounding out the main cast. The movie poster (above) included the tagline “It’s about time!” which reflected a popular sentiment regarding reports about Mabley’s deserved payoff after decades of dedication to show business. Anchoring Mabley to these notions of age and legacy contributed to the celebrity of

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243 Williams, *Jackie Moms Mabley*, 79.
her ‘Moms’ persona while adding further distinction and credibility to her authority on black humor. Like the stories surrounding Nina Simone’s impoverished childhood and heroic trek to Julliard, Mabley’s life story was heralded as a symbol of black pride and overcoming the odds. Mabley had a seemingly bulletproof persona.

‘Moms’ was still untouchable. Contemporary reviews both lauded ‘Moms’ for her acting skills and criticized the director and script for the lack of originality that failed to live up to the comedic legend of ‘Moms’ Mabley. Importantly, none of the newspaper sources ever blamed Mabley herself for any of the faults of the movie. Her legacy, post mortem, was to remain golden. Instead, most authors chose to highlight her final speech that charged the students in her town’s high school to “open their mouths and speak up.” After suffering a heart attack on set, Mabley’s health weakened and she passed away in 1975. Following her heart attack, Mabley gave one final interview to a film crew documenting behind the scenes. The interviewer, Tanya Hart, asked Mabley a series of questions about why she was interested in making the movie. Mabley stressed that she wanted to leave behind something for ‘her children’ to be proud of, meaning all of her audiences since the beginning of her career. Mabley also offered a quote loosely implicating Watergate and the Vietnam War: “It pains me now to see the condition my country is in… used to be so free from guilt, from the scandal that has marked other countries, and it hurts me. I’m an American, I’m not from Africa, I’m an American.” Her statement reinforced Mabley’s 1960s jokes that proffered an “us versus them philosophy” of all Americans versus their enemies. Although Mabley was

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245 Soul Publications, Inc Records, (Special Collections, UCLA), *Soul Teen*, July 1975. The exact quote from the article is “‘Moms’ Mabley is funny in spots in her first starring role in the recently released, but the movie is filled with many boring spots and it’s primarily due to the young black writer and director of the vehicle.”
considerably weakened by her heart attack, she seemed to characterize her career and role in the United States as an integrationist. When Hart asked Mabley about the role she thinks black women should be playing in America and loosely hinted at controversies surrounding Blaxploitation films, Mabley again reverted to an integrationist perspective characteristic of the politics of respectability. Concerning the role of black women in the current movement, Mabley stated “Not only black women, but white women, black women, all of em, I’m colorblind, I don’t know the difference, I only know you are a human being, and you’re my children.” Harlem newspapers quoted her funeral attendees and fans. They each reflected on her churchgoing habits and what a “wonderful woman she was.” Though she previously expressed bittersweet emotions about the decades she spent toiling in show business before receiving recognition through a Hollywood film, Mabley ended her interview with, “God put me in show business. I’m so lucky. Everybody love ‘Moms.’” The ‘Moms’ persona allowed Mabley to offer bitter satire targeted at anyone and everyone, but at the end of the day it was still an act. Mabley seems to have viewed her work as contributions to civil rights activism. She sought to better lives for African Americans and Americans as a whole.

This chapter explained the crux of Mabley’s importance to the modern black freedom struggle: she helped create a vein of stand-up comedy that remains a useful vehicle for identifying racism and supporting activist causes. We should view this kind of humor and its successive integrations of various comedy clubs as civil rights victories, for audiences and comedians themselves often did. Whether the occasion was Dick Gregory’s first performance for an all white audience at the Playboy Club in 1961 or ‘Moms’ Mabley appearing on the Merv Griffin Show, people were reading and watching these strides for equality.  

provided both narratives of black pride and a soothing call for patience during the volatile context for race relations in the 1960s. Throughout this case study of her rise to national prominence in the 1960s, we gleaned the significance of her ‘Moms’ persona as a tool to escape the confines of socially constructed gender and racial roles. She subtly undermined the power structures of both white entertainment industry standards and the respectability agenda of the NAACP to foreground her politics of equality and unity against racism. Her comedic activism provided her audiences with an opinion on civil rights issues and gender dynamics that they could identify with and trust.
By the 1970s, ‘Moms’ Mabley was a household name. The picture above of ‘Moms’ smiling mischievously at the viewer is from a 1972 advertisement in *Ebony*. Her placement in a famous, fulsome black magazine indicates her acceptance as a beacon of black culture and a trusted name. Not only could Americans buy and sell her comedy records, but she was also a celebrity figure that endorsed products like Kool Aid. ‘Moms’s voice and perspective was also featured in advice columns alongside authorities on black culture like Kenneth Gibson, Stevie Wonder, and Bill Russell.248 ‘Moms’ was the voice of the ‘good old days,’ though her jokes ironically stated that these good old days never existed. In these articles, she

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offered wry perspectives on how to make marriages work, despite having never been married herself. In addition to making the rounds on late night television specials and the 1973 Oscar’s Awards, Jackie Mabley finally starred in her own Hollywood film, *Amazing Grace.* She suffered a heart attack while on set and died a year later at the age of 81. Dozens of newspapers memorialized Mabley’s death with obituaries and tributes to her career. As audiences grieved Mabley, her successors in the entertainment world borrowed her persona to both pay tribute to her and profit themselves.

Though it is difficult to determine an exact number, the ‘Moms’ persona has been reprised in a variety of one-woman shows and impersonations in cities across the nation. These shows usually involve one actress impersonating the ‘Moms’ persona and performing her key routines. The homage to her comedy and legacy indicates that people have valued her contributions at the very least to the theatrical world and legacies of black humor. In a New York Times Letter to the Editor from 1987, reader Robert Vaughn described his reactions to a ‘Moms’ tribute by Clarice Taylor. He wrote “I, too, laughed many times during ‘Moms’s stints with Johnny Carson and/or Merv Griffin, but one particular night Moms also drove me to unashamed weeping with her astonishing and poignant rendering of the song “Abraham, Martin, and John.” Ten years after her death, the public was still moved by Mabley. These tributes sprung primarily from the theater world and reflect the trend for outspoken African American women to be reduced in the historical narrative of the modern black freedom struggle. Due to gendered biases and the limitation of the politics of

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249 I have found five stage tributes to Mabley, including Whoopi Goldberg on Broadway in the coming year; Josephine Howell in Seattle, 2013, Clarice Tyler in Philadelphia, 1988, in 1982 an Amsterdam movie theater played Boarding House Blues, marketing it under Mabley’s name and referencing *Amazing Grace,* and in Miami, 2004, under the title “‘Moms Mabley, More than a Leaden Stand-up.”

250 I was only able to access critical reviews and advertisements about these performances, but a future project should seek oral histories from these actresses.

respectability, women like the figurative Rosa Parks were memorialized over an assertive mammy delivering dirty jokes and critiques of segregation. As historians like Robin Kelley and Ruth Feldstein introduced cultural history into studies of political activism in the black freedom struggle, entertainers have begun to gain their rightful place in the civil rights narrative. Jackie Mabley deserves to be considered among Josephine Baker, Nina Simone, and Cicely Tyson for her contributions to civil rights work. As scholars begin to value her contributions to the modern black freedom struggle, the subsequent research has fueled more popular interest for Jackie Mabley once again.

Halfway through the drafting process for this project, Whoopi Goldberg released an HBO documentary on Jackie Mabley. Goldberg, like Mabley, started as a storyteller stand-up comic before forging a name for herself in Hollywood movies and on Broadway. Now Goldberg makes a living directing and producing films, most of which deal with the subject matter of black female representation. Goldberg cites Mabley as an inspiration for her comedy and mentioned Mabley’s legacy as a black female humorist taking control of her public image. Goldberg’s documentary marketed Mabley as a brave LGBT black comedian who paved the way for black and female humorists in the years to come. The film featured interviews with current comedians Joan Rivers, Arsenio Hall, Bill Cosby, and Kathy Griffin and each credited her for breaking ground in racial and gendered barriers to comedy performance. Most importantly, this documentary renewed my enthusiasm for my topic: seeing other comedians appreciating Jackie Mabley was a rewarding experience.

In review, this project first established Jackie Mabley as part of a long tradition of black humorists and social satirists in the United States. She joined the ranks of Zora Neale Hurston whose entertainment found popularity during the Harlem Renaissance, during which
both women challenged notions of respectable womanhood. Mabley continued to champion the black folklore that made her vaudeville routines so successful, despite the tendency of male comics to abandon it. These factors contributed to the birth and rise of the ‘Moms’ persona.

The persona itself, and the way that Mabley exploited it, sheds a more nuanced light on gendered conceptions about women in comedy beyond the philosophical and psychological explanations for gendered discrimination. White female comedians could be screwballs. Gracie Allen could present her classic ‘illogical logic’ and could play on the contrast of their visual beauty and their silly slapstick comedy. On the other hand, Mabley’s comedic performances were viewed through a prism of gender and race, so she exploited a Mammy-like figure, giving her a nonthreatening appearance. Her humor played on the contrast between the expectations for a foolish old Mammy and the highly sexualized and political jokes she delivered. Her exclusion from the conventional civil rights narrative and the NAACP despite the similarity of her humor to comedian Dick Gregory points to the inherent value placed on masculinity in the civil rights work conducted by large organizations.

Finally, Mabley’s comedy perpetuated black humor and increased its public, satirical nature. Her dedication to “the truth,” whether the subject was human nature or the silenced stories of black men and women, helped African Americans construct a vocabulary for politicized identities. The wide distribution of her Long Play records indicates how prolific her jokes and career were in the 1960s and 1970s, even though her story was largely forgotten in the decades following her death. From 1967-1973, Mabley was a national icon and one of the primary celebrities for black television shows that wanted to gesture toward a
“golden age” of black humor and white produced televisions shows that wanted to attract black audiences without alienating their more conservative white audiences. Through her refusal to moderate her comedy on mainstream television stations, ‘Moms’s stand-up comedy was nonviolent direct action and her comedic activism helped black communities become politically conscious through cultural experiences.

One of the main facets of comedy is the exposure of power dynamics and how characters relate to each other within these power dynamics. An audience loves to watch a subordinate person gain status, especially at the expense of a character with high status. Once principle humor theory devised by linguists in the 1980s is Incongruity Theory. This theory is that all humor comes from a violation of our expectations, or a surprise. Therefore, one of the funniest things an audience can witness is a change of status for a character.\textsuperscript{252} The audience, by default, has the higher status at the beginning of the stand-up routine because it is on the onus of the comic to make them laugh. So when Mabley, an old black grandmother stepped onto stage, she challenged a white audience’s expectations for humor. Eliciting an audience’s laughter can be very easy when a joke does not appear to criticize the audience.\textsuperscript{253} Eliciting laughter is much harder if your audience is the one at fault, like white people during the era of Jim Crow. In this case, the social critique needs to be so accurate, so truthful, that the humor of the incongruity outweighs the potential offense. Mabley used her grandmotherly persona to tell the truth about the world, whether the audience was white or black.

The ‘Moms’ persona, alternating between a dominant mammy character, an artist of wordplay, and an ironic fool had an interracial crossover appeal in that it humorously

\textsuperscript{252} Gilbert, \textit{Performing Marginalization}, 14.
engaged the joys and tragedies of black life while welcoming whites into her humor “in group” through rhetoric that all of her audience members “were her children.” Mabley’s independent “trickster” persona allowed her to redefine and reconstruct the truths about racism and oppression in the United States. ‘Moms’ freely commented on the incongruities within communities wherever she found them. When contemporary newspapers, record jackets, and television programs constructed a life narrative for Jackie Mabley and her ‘Moms’ persona, they highlighted the parts of her life that reinforced her respectability, comedic prowess, and longevity as a performer.

In Mabley’s stand-up set from the film Killer Diller, when the audience doesn’t laugh at one of her punch lines, ‘Moms’ said “You’re gonna have to laugh a little louder honey, ‘Moms’ is hard of hearing.” By chiding her audience, Mabley subordinates them. On her record Live at Sing Sing (1960), which took place at one of her annual visits to the inmates at Sing Sing Prison, she again gained the respect of the audience by first teasing them when they did not laugh at her joke. She made the audience feel superior because of her visual presentation, but then dispersed truth maxims, small insults, or provocative suggestions. One of these truths was rooted in Mabley’s vendetta to get parents to start telling their children the truth. After complaining about the lack of actual “good old days,” Mabley instructed her audiences, “the next time a child gets big enough to ask you something, you be big enough to tell ‘em the truth about it.” Her persona gave credibility to her wisdom as an older woman.

The modern black freedom struggle changed form throughout the twentieth century to adapt to new social contexts, resources, technologies, and needs. However, this project joins in the analysis of Ruth Feldstein and Justin Lorts to suggest that while the struggle has

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254 Sochen, Women’s Comic Visions, 17.
255 Williams, Jackie Moms Mabley, 79.
256 Mabley as quoted in Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 301.
changed, the centrality of comedy and entertainment has not. As soon as African Americans had enough political freedom to begin advocating on their own behalf, the witty tricksters and slapstick screwballs emerged from the shadows to perform their comedy. Mabley and Gregory took up where Bert Williams left off, using their unique positions in the world to effect social change. Even if comedians put themselves in self-deprecating roles, in the way that Mabley adorned herself in raggedy clothes like a foolish person, they ultimately have control over their comedy. Before societal attitudes toward women humorists changed, Mabley exceeded the audience’s low expectations to then completely surprise them with her talents. Back in the early days of minstrelsy, white people that laughed at Bert Williams may have perceived him as a buffoonish coon, but they still paid him to perform. The audience offered their time and laughter, subconsciously giving Williams respect and circulating his jokes. He forged a place for black comedians in public consumer culture that the likes of Jackie Mabley, Dewey Pigmeat Markham, and Slappy White would come to fill.

One potential problem of this analysis is that it creates the tendency to throw all black female comedians’ work under the umbrella of politically significant. Race relations in the United States continue present a problem, and humor and comedic activism could play a role in alleviating these pressures. Yet, if every joke a female comedian makes is a political statement, then her humor is only important insofar as it relates to the dominant power structure. The same power structure that she limits the importance of when she pursues a career as a stand-up comedian. In historian Walter Johnson’s “On Agency,” he describes a similar re-institution of racism when scholars reduce the significance of an individual’s choices and lives to their resistance against an imposing institution. Therefore, I define Mabley was an activist because of the kind of work she did in the historical context she lived
in. Whether she was at the Apollo Theater or the Merv Griffin Show, Mabley performed the same insult comedy and satirical barbs, testing the censors and the audiences in the tense years after the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Current female comedians of color like Wanda Sykes use their own stand-up routines to advance a political agenda. Sykes likewise takes up sexuality in her jokes. In one more personal joke, she laughed about how it was harder for her to be gay than to be black in the circumstance of having to “come out” as gay to one’s family and acquaintances. In her HBO Comedy Special, Sykes posed the following:

I didn’t have to sit my parents down and tell them about my blackness. I didn’t have so sit them down… Mom, Dad, I got something to tell you, I hope you still love me. I’m just gonna say it. Mom, Dad, I’m black.
What?! What did she just say? Oh Lord, Jesus, she didn’t say black though, did she say black?!
Mom, I’m black.
Oh Lord, no, no, no! Anything but black! Give her cancer, Lord, but not black!
Oh no Mom, you don’t understand, I’m black and that’s the way it is.
Oh no it’s not! You know what, you been hanging around with black people! And they got you thinkin’ you black… What did I do? Was it Soul Train? I should never have let you watch Soul Train!257

Sykes identified parallels between the struggles of being black and gay with this joke, regardless of her diminishes her ability to ever truly overcome these socialized political perceptions about women of color. The definitions for what constitutes activism necessarily changes depending on the historical context of the activists. To accurately identify the activist qualities of a joke, it remains important to contextualize a comedian’s humor with the comedy world and the culture at large.

The influence of comedy as a compelling way to tell the truth to people continues to be effective in current day civil rights work. The struggle over representation for black men

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257 Wanda Sykes, “I’m’a Be Me” (HBO: Stand-up Specials, 2010).
and women endures to this day and is particularly visible in black humor. Though the
NAACP no longer seeks to dominate representations of black female sexuality in the media,
a host of online activists and bloggers express their opinions almost daily. Queer activists
appropriate Mabley as an important LGBT historical actor, now that her sexuality has been
widely confirmed in Whoopi Goldberg’s recent documentary. Black humor and its comedic
presentation have been adapted to current mediums of expressions, such as YouTube
channels, digital shorts, and of course the traditional arena of stand-up comedy. The visual
representation of black female humorists continues to be a problem, especially since a
‘Moms’ persona would arguably not be tolerated as a comic choice in the twenty first
century. For example, in 2014, the popular satire television series, Saturday Night Live on
NBC responded to critical bloggers and journalists who campaigned for more diverse
representations in the comedians they employ. In January of that year, NBC hired black
improv comedian Sasheer Zamata and two new female writers of color, LaKendra Tookes
and Leslie Jones. Social media activists were able to put enough pressure on the producers of
SNL to actually bring about change in representations of women of color on television. But
are Zamata, Tookes, and Jones necessarily comedic activists by the virtue of their new
employment? The answer varies, but just as the study of Mabley’s career illuminated aspects
of the 1950-1973 modern black freedom struggle, these current comedians are barometers for
American culture and the degree to which race relations determines it.
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