A WOMANIST DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE COMEDIC DISCOURSE OF JACKIE “MOMS” MABLEY

By

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Americans and Comedy</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginalization of African American and Women Comedians</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Thesis</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF JACKIE “MOMS” MABLEY</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Frameworks</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functions of Humor</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Culture and Race Theory</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist Theories</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Feminism/Womanism</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview of the Research on Humor</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Functions of Humor</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physiological Benefits of Humor</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Benefits</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approaches to Examining Humor</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Humor</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Studies</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution of this Study</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Discourse Analysis</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of the Historical Context</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design and Procedure</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Context</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Rights under Kennedy</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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A WOMANIST DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE COMEDIC DISCOURSE OF JACKIE “MOMS” MABLEY

By

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Over the past few decades, comedy has been a major source of information for how people view current events. Thus, media researchers concerned with the genre’s ability to reveal certain truths about society and the way it is structured that normally wouldn’t have been able to be told, have begun taking a more serious look at it.

This thesis attempts to document comedienne Jackie “Moms” Mabley’s discourses on race, class, gender and sexual orientation and compare them to the major events of her times, demonstrating the interplay between the two. In so doing, it provides insight about the culture and era in which the comedy was created and performed.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the ideologies and discourses of race and gender in the stand-up comedy routines of the black female comedienne, Jackie “Moms” Mabley. There are several reasons why this topic is important to mass communication studies and feminist studies. By using a womanist analysis, this thesis will add to the discourse on race, class, and gender. It will discern the ways in which the construction of “the Black female experience” by this comedienne challenges and resists the process of hegemony by providing a voice which is critical of the economic, political, social, and cultural status quo in America. It will explore the role of communication in constructing, disseminating, and maintaining the values and norm systems that serve the dominant patriarchal class interests. It will explore the role of humor as a social learning tool and show the genre’s utility in addressing pertinent social and political issues as well as ways to recognize those discursive practices which cripple the work of activists.

By providing a historical context this study will allow one to see Mabley’s comedic discourse through what Kates and Shaw-Garlock (1999) call textual shifters, which are historical and cultural influences, such as the women’s and civil rights movements, around which the discourse was created.

African Americans and Comedy

The media’s tendency to cast African Americans in comedic roles has been well documented (Bogle, 2001). During the last 30 years there has been a proliferation of black characters in situation comedies (Bogle, 2001; Zook, 1999) many of whom had
their start in stand-up comedy. African-American stand-up comedians have garnered both critical and commercial success, as evidenced by the careers of Eddie Murphy, Chris Rock, Chris Tucker and Whoopi Goldberg. The 2001 theatrical tour *Queens of Comedy*, which was headlined by four African-American females, demonstrated the genre’s potential to challenge the status quo on specific issues, e.g., female body weight.¹

Throughout the years, the creative responses of African-American humor has adapted to the historical and social context of their environments (Watkins, 1994; Williams, 1995), manifesting itself in four distinct types: the plantation survivalist, accommodationist, in-group satirist, and integrationist² (Williams, 1995).

The first type, plantation survivalist, can be traced back to the days of slavery when it was developed as a mechanism to deal emotionally and psychologically with the effects of slavery and used as satire against the injustices and dehumanization of the “peculiar institution” (Watkins, 1994; Williams, 1995). The plantation survivalist was essentially the slave trickster who used his wit “as barter for some advantage or gain” (Williams, 1995, p. 13). In tales the plantation survivalist, or slave trickster, was often symbolized by the rabbit. In these tales the rabbit as trickster would often feign weakness, practice deceit, or simply outwit his opponents (Williams, 1995, p. 12).

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¹ It must be noted however, that a majority of the discourse impedes the progress of blacks or at least does nothing to advance a black agenda and continues to proliferate negative images of women.

² In Elsie Williams, *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African American Comedic Tradition*. New York: Garland, 1995. “A plantation survivalist was essentially the slave trickster whose humor expressed an ingenuity endemic to the survival of enslaved people. Whereas survivalist humor was developed by the slaves a survival tool, accommodationist humor was first initiated, directed by the slavemasters themselves, and later appropriated and claimed by the slaves. In-group satirist humor had two functions: conflict and control. It meant poking fun at the white oppressor, by shedding the victim’s mask and appropriating the stereotypes. And integrationist humor was similar to in-group satirist humor, except that it including Blacks laughing at themselves, poking fun of others, addressing controversial subjects—all in front of an integrated audience.
By the 1820s, the plantation survivalist form transformed into the accommodationist and was appropriated and commercialized through minstrel shows’ creation of “Jim Crow,” a racist caricatured portrayal of Blacks by whites in “blackened” faces (Foxx & Miller, 1977; Watkins, 1994). Although “Jim Crow’s” appearance was reviled by many Blacks it was commonplace by the 1840s (Watkins, 1994) and became one of the most systematically demeaning and damaging depictions of Blacks (Jones, 1963). Later, blacks attempted to shed the victim’s mask and appropriate the stereotypes (Watkins, 1994). And by the start of the 1960s, particularly during the height of the Civil Rights movement, African American comedians made efforts to use humor as social commentary on many of society’s ills (Watkins, 1994; Williams, 1995). This is termed the integrationist stage.

It is this fourth stage/type of African American humor developed in the 1960s that this paper will depart. Although as the paper will point out, elements of each type of humor is present in Mabley’s humor, this paper will focus on those elements which are specific to the fourth stage and those which help the efforts of black and women activists.

**Marginalization of African American and Women Comedians**

While there has been considerable research on the contributions of stand-up comedians (Adler, 1986; Arce, 1979; Berger, 1976; Burns, 1980; Coleman, 1984; Gregory, 1972; Maltan, 1978; Sochen, 1991; Watkins, 1994) the contributions made by African Americans and women has remained marginalized. Of the little research that has focused on African American humor (Foxx & Miller, 1977; Schecter, 1970; Watkins, 1994; Williams, 1995) only Foxx and Miller (1977) devoted a chapter specifically on black comediennes.
Despite the accomplishments of comedienues such as Jackie “Moms” Mabley, Lucille Ball, Carole Burnett, Whoopi Goldberg, Roseanne Barr, Margaret Cho and Mo’Nique, just to name a few, the majority of scholarship on stand-up comedians, has largely ignored or limited the contributions of women, particularly women of color.

In a majority of the above-mentioned research the contributions of black women are noticeably absent, except in that of Sochen (1991), Watkins (1994), and Foxx and Miller (1977). Of these, only Sochen (1991) attempted to situate women’s humor in their proper social and historical contexts and used their comedic performances as satirical protests against the traditional roles relegated to women. There has been a recent trend to recognize the contributions made by women (Dance, 1998; Sochen, 1991; Williams, 1995). Of these, only Dance (1998) and Williams (1995) focused solely on the humor of African-American women, particularly as it relates to their use of the genre as a resistance and empowerment tool.

In conclusion, few scholarly studies have analyzed the way these comedienues have used humor to critique and mock the hegemonic practices which continue to oppress them. While there is some literature on the physical, social, and psychological functions of humor and the analysis of jokes, there is a gap in the literature as it relates to the discursive practices of the genre.

This thesis focuses on liberationist humor, which uses satire as a means to poke fun at and question the ideas of the dominant patriarchal system, providing a psychological and captive opening for progressive political action (Holtzman, 2000).

**Organization of the Thesis**

The purpose of this thesis is to document the contributions of Jackie “Moms” Mabley to the national dialogue on race, class, gender and sexual orientation. The
biographical chapter summarizes the life and career of Mabley. The literature review examines major theoretical approaches to analyzing her work. The research methodology chapter summarizes the methods used to analyze her work. The historical context chapter examines the political, social, economical, and cultural context of her time, the 1960s. It highlights the significance of major pieces of civil rights legislation, chronicles the harsh economic conditions faced by blacks and recaps the discrimination, prejudice, and violence blacks endured as a result of their race and class.

In the analytical section, the actual discourse of Mabley is examined. This section is arranged topically and Mabley’s four major discursive themes are analyzed. In the final section, conclusions are drawn regarding the implications of her discourse. There is also a discussion of the implications of this research. It concludes with some reflections on modern black female comedians Whoopi Goldberg and Mo’Nique and speculates on the discursive reasons for their respective successes.
CHAPTER 2
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF JACKIE “MOMS” MABLEY

Jackie “Moms” Mabley was born Loretta Mary Aiken in the 1890s—she professed not to know the exact date—in the small town of Brevard, North Carolina, overlooking the Blue Ridge Mountains. She was one of five children born to James P. and Mary Aiken, an ex-slave (Williams, 1995, p.41). Growing up was not easy for Mabley. Before she reached the age of 13, she had lost her father to a tragic accident and been raped twice, the first time by an older black man and the second time by the white town sheriff (Williams, 1995, p.42). One source reports both of these rapes resulted in pregnancies and the children were given away. (Bennetts 1987). Whereas another contends the babies were stolen and Mabley didn’t see them again until they were grown (Brown 1975). Although she never disclosed specific details of her life in interviews, Mabley did admit to being “raped and everything else” in one of her stand-up routines. Heeding the advice of her grandmother, who told her to go make something of herself, Mabley left home at the age of thirteen. She held fast to the spiritual beliefs instilled by her grandmother, who always stressed the importance of God as the only power who could move mountains in peoples’ lives. Believing that faith could help her overcome the mountains in her life, both literally and figuratively, Mabley left to earn a living.

Barely three decades shy of slavery herself, Mabley realized the opportunities available to black women were limited but she was determined to succeed. In general, opportunities for blacks were slim during this era but they were especially lacking for black women. As Michelle Wallace noted in *Black Macho and the Myths of the*
Superwoman, slave women were restricted to four roles: excellence in physical labor, serving the sexual desires of masters, mammy, or providing special house skills such as laundresses, weavers, or spinners. In contrast, notable careers such as artisans, mechanics, drivers, butlers, and coachmen were accessible to black men. And while the opportunities were limited for women, Lerner (1972, p.15) found that their workload was greater. In Black Women in White America: A Documentary History, Lerner found that although they worked alongside men in the fields black women’s gender afforded them no special treatment. This same fate awaited them in film as Bogle (1973) detailed their continued relegation to subservient roles as mammies and servants while males enjoyed a little more diversity. While slavery confined black women’s work to four primary domains, vaudeville and minstrelsy seemed to improve their prospects. So much so, that Jones (1963, p. 93) credited both vaudeville and minstrelsy with providing additional professional opportunities for black women. Thus, they now had more opportunities available to them than that of mammy, servant, or whore.

Mindful of these improved prospects, Mabley packed her bags and left home at the age of thirteen. She joined the Theater Owners Bookers Association (TOBA) and connected with the husband and wife team of Susie and Butterbeans in Houston, Texas (Moritz, 1975, p. 262; Williams, 1995, p. 43). The majority of her time in show business was not easy as she struggled to care for her family and pursue a career in a male-dominated profession. Her struggles reflect the plight African American women experienced, as they were doubly burdened by their race and gender. During the Jim Crow era, which lasted from the 1890s to the 1950s, race presented a major burden to Mabley as well as other black entertainers as they often struggled to find work.
Explaining the challenges her race presented, Mabley remarked, “I don’t care if you could stand on your head; if you was colored, you couldn’t get no work at all [outside the segregated black nightclub and theatrical circuits]” (Moritz, 1975, p.262).

It was in these segregated black nightclubs and theaters, like the Howard Theater in Washington D.C. and the Apollo Theater in New York, that comedians like Mabley found employment and acceptance. These segregated theaters provided not only steady employment for emerging black performers but it also granted them acceptance frequently denied them in other venues. Fox (1983, p. 7) reported that they felt so accepted almost all of the entertainers that he interviewed for his book insisted “the Apollo was home.” Scoey Mitchell, who was quoted in Fox’s book, *Showtime at the Apollo*, echoes this sentiment in his statement about what the Apollo meant to black entertainers:

> If things weren’t going well, you just stayed there---went into the dressing room and went to sleep. I’m sure a lot of white performers wanted to know what it was that was so special about this place. It was a coming together, a community of what we all had there. (as quoted in Fox, 1983, p. 7).

These black theaters temporarily abolished the social caste system that existed among blacks and whites, especially in D.C. A *Washington Post* columnist underscored this sentiment in his remembrance of the Howard Theater as “the one place in Washington where blacks and whites, school teachers and domestics, doctors and laborers, mingled as equals” (Gilliam, 1986). And finally, these black theaters served as training grounds for comedians like Mabley and Dick Gregory to sharpen their acts before taking their messages to integrated audiences (Williams, 1995).

While performing on the vaudeville circuit, Mabley became known for her caring personality and her tendency to look after others. Regarding her as a motherly figure,
friends like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong (Moritz, 1975, p. 262) bestowed the moniker “Moms” on Mabley. And from the 1920s until her death she used this moniker and granny persona, which was most likely modeled after her maternal grandmother, whom she claimed hipped her. While it is known how she earned the moniker “Moms” the source of her stage name, Jackie Mabley, is a little less clear. One version contends she met a Canadian, became engaged, and then changed her name. It was also said that she chose the name Jackie because of her affinity for it and because it was the Canadian’s surname (Williams, 1995, p. 2). In another more humorous version, which can be heard on many of her albums, Mabley insists that it came from her boyfriend Jack who took so much off of her that the least she could take was his name.

Donning an old frumpy housedress, a floppy hat, and clodhopper shoes, Mabley wowed her audience or “children”, with topics ranging from fairy tales to operettas. This maternal identity proved successful and served Mabley well throughout her career, endearing her to blacks and whites. For the black community it established an almost immediate bond. As Williams (1995, p.48) observed, using this persona allowed Mabley to draw on the reverence and adoration bestowed upon the elderly in black communities. And as Levine (1977, p. 366) observed, by using the mask Mabley, “dealt with her audience not as a professional entertainer but as a member of their community.” Using this matriarchal character licensed Mabley to speak the truth without fear, granted her protection, and permitted some artistic freedom in the male-dominated profession. For example, according to Stoddard (1975) evoking the granny persona allowed Mabley to draw boundaries between her and her audiences in a profession that was long thought to be a man’s world. Evoking the granny persona allowed Mabley to draw boundaries
between her and her audiences (Williams, 1995, p. 49) which meant certain things, such as violence and direct verbal assaults, were prohibited. Like her counterparts Ma Rainey (Gertrude Pridgett), Big Mama Blues (Lillie Mae Glover), and the last of the Red Hot Mamas (Sophie Tucker), Mabley capitalized on the nickname (Williams, 1995, p. 49). Mabley effectively used this matriarchal persona as a refuge to address political topics, race relations, and sexual relations---issues women normally avoided. Interestingly, while Mabley discussed some taboo topics, Stoddard (1975) maintains that she still did so through a form endorsed by our patriarchal society. According to Stoddard, “Before the most recent wave of the women’s movement, the cultural taboo on women being funny in public kept a firm hold on the number of female comics who existed and who received national attention; those who did receive attention generally engaged in a humor that was acceptable to a patriarchal society—the depiction of women in socially sanctioned roles” (Stoddard, 1977, p. 14).

As Williams (1995) noted, if black audiences loved her because she was like a member of the family then white audiences cherished her as she reminded them of a figure/role with which they were most familiar and comfortable with, the black woman as mammy. Besides how could they get mad at a character that was so endearing?

Mabley made more than 25 recordings, with her first album, *Moms Mabley: The Funniest Woman in the World*, selling more than 1 million copies. (Williams, 1995, p. 51; Moritz, 1975, p. 262). Although her career spanned more than 60 years, Mabley didn’t experience the same commercial success as that enjoyed by her white and black male colleagues. In her good-humored way Mabley had this to say about her late found success, “Wouldn’t you know it? By the time I finally arrived at the big money, I’m too
old and sick to enjoy it” (Schiffman, 1984, p.121). And in another tone she said, “I try not to be bitter; I would like to have gotten my chance earlier, but that’s the way things were in those days…better times are coming” (Jacobson 1974). And she was right as better times arrived in 1961 when she earned $1,000 for one engagement at the Apollo (Schiffman, 1984, p. 121). By 1962 and 1963 she had upgraded to headliner status and commanded $5,000 per week, which was a far cry from the $85 beginning salary she received in the 1930s and 1940s (Fox, 1983, p. 96). After appearing on the Merv Griffin show, her rates exceeded $5000 per week (Sasso as cited in Williams, 1995, p. 52). And after a 10-day stint in 1968 with B.B. King in Chicago’s Regal Theater in 1968 she grossed $91,000 (Williams, 1995, p. 52)

Towards the latter part of her life her career began to take off. She appeared on the Smothers Brothers, Comedy Hour, Merv Griffin, Bill Cosby Show, Mike Douglas, Ed Sullivan, Garry Moore, and Flip Wilson shows. She also performed at the Kennedy Center, the Playboy Club, Carnegie Hall, and Copacabana (Moritz, 1978, p. 263). She performed on black and white college campuses, was invited to the White House Conference on Civil Rights in 1966 and she even visited the governor’s mansion in Georgia to talk with the then-governor Jimmy Carter (Williams, 1995, p. 50).

Foxx and Miller (1977, p.98) maintain Mabley was the first female to emerge as a “single stand-up act.” And although black and white women went into the profession at about the same rate, black women were mostly unable to transcend the fat black mammy and Aunt Jemima stereotypes and roles. Feminist scholars have argued that one of the main reasons that women weren’t successful in the field of stand-up comedy is the aggressive factor that’s typical of most stand-up humor. For example, Stoddard (1977)
contends that while aggressive behavior is acceptable for men it is not for women. One must remember that the dominant roles for women have always been that of a virtuous woman or whore.

In spite of this Mabley was able to make it. Perhaps how she made it may lie in a quote by Johnny Carson (as quoted in Williams, 1995, p. 69) in which he said it required a lady not being a lady for a little while to make it in show business. While it was probably a combination of stratagems that resulted in her success, Mabley found the formula and was able to succeed, comparatively speaking. But although she received a considerably larger salary than when she started, she never earned the same amount as her male colleagues. It is her legacy that Mabley made it on her own negotiated terms and paved the way for contemporary black comedians like Whoopi Goldberg, Marsha Warfield, and Mo’Nique.

In 1974, Mabley realized a long-time career goal when she starred in the motion picture Amazing Grace alongside Slappy White, Moses Gunn, and Rosalind Cash (Williams, 1995, p. 52). While on the film set she suffered a heart attack, and shortly after the film’s completion she died, on May 23, 1975. Her popularity and lasting influence were evidenced by the hundreds who paid their final respects to a woman who had nursed their crying souls.¹

¹ Although other resources were consulted, the author of this research relied heavily on the material, organization, and structure contained in The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley written by Elsie Williams to compile the biographical sketch. Given the difficulty in following the life of a historical figure like Mabley, the bibliography and discography in Williams’ book proved invaluable.
CHAPTER 3
LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Frameworks

To explore the research questions presented in the introduction, this study integrated several theoretical frameworks. The first group of theoretical frameworks, referred to as humor theories, explain the social, physical, and psychological functions of humor. In addition, this review incorporates two theoretical frameworks that explicate the marginalization of African-American women based on the “double burden” of their race and gender: critical culture and race theory and womanist theory.

Functions of Humor

According to humor theories, humor usually functions at three levels: physical, psychological, and social. Some of the physical functions of humor include an anesthetic effect (Cousins, 1979), exercise for the cardiovascular and respiratory systems, tension relief in muscles, opiate release into the blood system, and laughter (Fry & Salameh, 1986). The psychological functions cited by Freud include humor as ego assertion and as a mechanism of aggression and displacement (cited in Brill, 1938), encouragement, empowerment, and balance (Klein, 1989). Finally, the social functions of humor have chiefly been explained in terms of intergroup conflict resolution and social control (Burma, 1946; Haig, 1988; Obrdlik, 1942). Understanding these functions explains how black women have used its physical (laughter instead of crying), psychological (empowerment), and social (control and resistance) functions to cope with and transcend the oppression caused by institutional sexism and racism.
While the academic community has been hesitant to regard comedy as a “serious discipline,” several sociologists have persisted in studying this “disreputable” research topic because it shows its possibility of revealing certain truths about society and human existence (Davis, 1993).

What truths? Humor reveals the truth about the way individuals order themselves into communities. As noted by sociologist Joyce Hertzler in the text, *Laughter: A Socio-Scientific Analysis*, the study of humor can serve “as a kind of sociocultural index of the culture or society, the groups and population segments, the communities or localities, and the eras in which it occurs.” Hertzler goes on to argue that “what a people laugh at at any given time can reveal what they perceive socially, what they are interested in, concerned about, amused by, disgusted with, preoccupied with” (1970, pp. 58-59).

Yet despite its ability to tell us about society’s values and social relations, the study of humor as a “serious” discipline has stirred quite a debate. Critics contend it is an unsuitable academic topic and thus feel time and financial resources would be better spent on other subjects. However, proponents maintain that researchers “can use the way humor deconstructs the social world to comprehend more precisely how people have constructed it” (Davis, 1993, p. 313).

**Critical Culture and Race Theory**

Critical race theory suggests that we live in a society that privileges whiteness (Omi & Winant, 1998) and makes whiteness the societal framework whose goal is to maintain existing power relations between the races (van Dijk, 1993). Critical race theorists view the mass media as not only a powerful source on ideas about race but also “a place where these ideas are articulated, worked on, transformed, and elaborated” (Hall, 1981). Because one of the ways that the racist system maintains social control is through
omission of voices that are critical of racist ideology, it is important to explore the discourse of these critical voices in the mass media.

Our racist capitalistic society uses the mass media to disseminate information and to normalize whiteness and everything else as “otherness.” This normalization results in two things: a belief of entitlement to certain privileges for whites in the United States and a justification for exploitation and violence toward nonwhites (Kivel, 1996). Critical race theorists have argued that racist ideology is used as a technique to obstruct nonwhites’ power (van Dijk, 1993)

Included in much of the critical theories of race is the concept of hegemony. Hegemony is the process by which the dominant group gains and maintains power over the subordinate classes (Lull, 2003) and normalizes race relations and views of people of color. Hegemonic racism helps explain the purpose of the racist ideology (to keep nonwhites out of power as well as to serve the dominant group’s economic interests) and media’s use of racist ideology (to serve and preserve the dominant classes since they own it). The concept of hegemony and counterhegemony, or its resistance, are particularly helpful in exploring and explaining black comedians’ approach to white supremacy and oppression.

**Feminist Theories**

Feminists contend that we live in a patriarchal society that privileges males and makes maleness the yardstick against which women’s behaviors, bodies, and abilities are measured (Tavris, 1992). They also maintain that our patriarchal society uses this male privilege to maintain power relations between the sexes. Feminist theorists argue that the media construct and disseminate gender ideology and thus are a major socializing agent (van Zoonen, 1994).
Like the critical race theories, included in much of the feminist theories is the concept of hegemony. The concept of hegemony and its counterpart counterhegemony is the process by which the dominant group secures the consent of the socially subordinated to system to the system that oppresses them (Gramsci, 1971). These power relations are naturalized and made to appear almost common sense through institutions like religion, education, and the media and thus overt force from institutions like the police isn’t necessary (Dines & Humez, 2003, p.731). Although Gramsci didn’t include gender in his model of hegemony, his concept of power relations is helpful to feminist studies in explicating male domination over females and helps to explain the purpose of sexist ideology.

Another concept important to understanding feminist theories and to understanding how hegemony works is the notion of ideology. Ideology works to reproduce systems of domination and subordination (Kellner, 1978; Kellner, 1979) by what Hall (2003, p. 89) says are “images, concepts, and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand, and “make sense” of some aspect of social existence.” Because ideology is essential in reproducing hegemony, both concepts will be particularly helpful in examining and explaining black women’s negotiation of dominant discourses on race and gender.

Feminist theory is comprised by the two key constructs of gender and power (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 4) which are critical to the analysis of this paper. Gender can be thought of as both a social concept and a type of discourse. According to the definition offered in the glossary of Gender, Race, and Class in Media gender is what “society defines as “masculine” or feminine” one particular set of characteristics and behaviors,
and then socializes children (or adults, author’s note) accordingly” (Dines & Humez, 2003, p. 730). The definition goes on to explain that these characteristics are not fixed and they can vary across time and between cultures and even within cultures (Dines & Humez, 2003, p. 730). Contemporary scholars have even proposed that gender and its extension, sexual identity are best understand as occurring along a continuum, rather than as being binary (Nanda, 2000; Schwartz & Rutter, 1998).

As a discourse, gender can be thought of “a set of overlapping and often contradictory cultural descriptions and prescriptions referring to sexual difference, which arises from and regulates particular economic, social, political, technological and other non-discursive contexts (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 33).

**Black Feminism/Womanism**

While there are many typologies of feminist theory, this paper will use a black feminist/womanist approach because according to Collins (2000) it allows black women to use an alternative epistemology to interpret their own oppression and to rearticulate black women’s standpoint through authorities validated by them as opposed to what she calls the Eurocentric masculinist process (Collins, 2000).

Although there have been debates with the academy surrounding the distinctions between womanism and black feminism (Collins, 1996) in this paper the terms will be used interchangeably. As Barbara Omolade noted, “black feminism is sometimes referred to as womanism because both are concerned with struggles against sexism and racism by black women who are themselves part of the black community’s efforts to achieve equity and liberty” (Omolade, 1994, xx).

Developed out of their frustrations with not having their needs adequately addressed by either the feminist movements or the black liberation movements, black
women decided developed their own “voice” or standpoints about black womanhood in the 1980s and 1990s (Collins, 1990). Thus, they developed their own standpoint to define themselves and articulate their life experiences. Defining themselves was critical as Audre Lorde noted, “it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment” (1984, p. 45). Following Lorde’s notion that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (1984, p. 112) black women began using their self-defined standpoint as a tool and started “talking back” against the dominant discourses about them and black womanhood (hooks, 1989).

According to Alice Walker, who coined the term, womanist derives from “womanish,” a word used by Black women to describe the boldness of some black girls. It refers to a “black feminist or feminist of color.” Also, it can be used to reference “a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually,” or someone who is “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.”

This thesis seeks to combine Walker’s (1983) multiple definitions of womanism with the Afrocentric feminist epistemology suggested by Collins’ (2000) to analyze and rearticulate the everyday experiences and oppression experienced by black women as expressed in humor from the period of 1960-1971. Although this study will use the discourse of Jackie “Moms” Mabley to narrate the era, it is assumed that it embodies other black women’s struggles, given the shared experiences of black women.

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1 According to Collins, Afrocentric epistemology is knowledge that accounts for the blacks’ shared experiences as a result of colonialism, imperialism, slavery, apartheid, and other forms of racial domination. And feminist epistemology is knowledge of women’s shared history of patriarchal oppression which transcends race, social class, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity. And as Collins noted, because black women have access to both of these standpoints it only seems logical that they combine them to reflect their own viewpoints of their oppression.
Overview of the Research on Humor

There has been much research conducted on humor (Barron, 1950; Brill, 1938; Burma, 1946; Coleman, 1984; Dance, 1974; Davis, 1993; Hertzler, 1970; Haig, 1988; Leveen, 1996; Middleton, 1959; Stephenson, 1951; Obrdlik, 1942; Watkins, 1994; Williams, 1995). This research has spanned the disciplines including communications (Potter & Warren, 1998), counseling (Goldin & Bordan, 1999; Sluder, 1986; Herring, 1994; Herring & Meggert, 1994), folklore studies (Dance, 1978; Abrahams, 1970a; Abrahams, 1970b), psychology (Brill, 1938; O’Quin & Aronoff, 1981) and sociology (Barron, 1950; Burma, 1946; Obrdlik, 1942; Stephenson, 1951). Other studies have explored the physical, psychological and social functions of the genre (Burma, 1946; Cousins, 1979; Fry & Salameh, 1986; Haig, 1988; Obrdlik, 1942).

Social Functions of Humor

Studies examining the functions of humor have documented its use as a social tool used for control and resistance. For example, Watkins (1994) documents how African Americans have used it in various ways like for survival during slavery to criticizing bigotry and racial discrimination, particularly during the civil rights movement. Williams (1995) documents how Mabley used it to challenge and even resist society’s double standards regarding women’s roles and behaviors.

Physiological Benefits of Humor

Whereas earlier studies documented the presence of humor in various literary forms, such as folklore, (Dance, 1978; Abrahams, 1970a; Abrahams, 1970b), with focuses on an analysis at the joke level and its social functions such as control. However, there has been a recent trend to highlight the physical and psychological functions of the genre, specifically as it relates to health (Bruehl, Carlson, & McCubbin, 1993;
Since Cousins (1979) published *Anatomy of an Illness*, noting its physiological benefits, researchers have been hypothesizing on the relationship between humor and health. Martin (2000) suggested humor has various aspects including physiological, emotional, social, and psychologically. Fry (1994) found that laughter increases the production of endorphins which acts as a pain reliever, serves as a muscle relaxer, and helps stimulate circulation. Other researchers have suggested it improves the body’s immunity (Stone et al., 1987), generates positive emotions which enhance pain tolerance (Bruehl et al., 1993), and combats the cardiovascular consequences of negative thinking (Frederickson, 1998).

**Psychological Benefits**

Researchers have also noted its psychological benefits, particularly as it relates to counseling. (Goldin & Bordan, 1999; Sluder, 1986, Herring, 1994; Herring & Meggert, 1994).

Sluder (1986) studied the use of counseling among elementary students. The researcher found that humor can be used to build rapport, self-disclose information about one’s own imperfections to put the child at ease, and as a coping mechanism by the children. And Herring (1994) and Herring and Meggert (1994) studied the way humor has been used as a strategy in counseling Native American children. Herring and Meggert (1994) suggested that while Native Americans differed among groups and individuals in what was perceived humorous, activities such as story telling, story reading, images, puppets, games, tongue twisters and rhymes could be used to convey
emotionally-laden messages which might otherwise be unacceptable if directly acknowledged.

Goldin & Bordan (1999) studied the diagnostic and therapeutic uses of humor in the client-counselor relationship. The researchers relate through transcripts of counseling vignettes the ways in which a counselor uses humor in variety of ways (i.e. to convey understanding, assess depression, identifying the humor in a patient’s situation, etc). They found that when humor is utilized in counseling, the counselor offers an alternative frame to the client’s reports of his or her experiences, which is meant to have therapeutic value. And they found this value of humor benefits both the counselor and client--it allows the counselor to strengthen the rapport with the patient and makes light of very painful experience for the patient.

**Approaches to Examining Humor**

The majority of the research reviewed for this paper attempted to approach the study of humor from one of three approaches: a humor function perspective (Burma, 1946; Cousins, 1979; Fry & Salameh, 1986; Haig, 1988; Obrdlik, 1942), a correlational lens, and/or an experimental approach across various disciplines. Research from the humor function perspective tends to highlight the social, physical, and psychological functions of the genre and spans across disciplines such as communications, sociology, psychology, and counseling as highlighted in the previous section. Martin (2004) maintains that studies that have focused on sense of humor and health have usually used an experimental design or what he calls a “correlational” approach in which subjects use scales to self-report sense of humor and perceived pain. Of these three approaches, empirical evidence for the benefits of humor continues to be the weakest (Martin, 2004).
Using an experimental design, Cogan, Cogan, Waltz, & McCue (1987) tested whether laughter is a pain antagonist. In the first experiment, the researchers conducted tested their subjects’ thresholds for pressure-induced discomfort after having them listen to an audiotape that was either laughter-inducing (Lilly Tomlin), relaxation-inducing, audiotape, a dull narrative, or no audiotape at all. They found the discomfort thresholds increased for subjects in the laughter and relaxation-inducing conditions. In the second experiment, they again tested their subjects’ thresholds for pressure-induced discomfort. However, this time they sought to determine whether it was the laughter itself or simply the distraction associated with attending to humorous materials that leads to reduced sensitivity to discomfort. So this time participants either listened to a laughter-inducing audiotape (Bill Cosby), an interesting narrative (Edgar Allan Poe), an uninteresting narrative, or completed a multiplication task, and one group received no treatment at all.

They found that laughter, and not simply distraction, reduced a subject’s sensitivity to discomfort. Thus, suggesting the potential to use laughter as intervention for easing discomfort.

Their research concluded that because laughter is naturally-occurring and doesn’t require training to be effective, it might be a useful technique in decreasing pain sensitivity.

Citing it was difficult to draw a firm conclusion that humor has an advantage over a boring stimulus condition from the conducted by Cogan et. al (1987), Weisenberg, Tepper, & Schwarzwald (1995) conducted their own study. Using an experimental design also, Weisenberg et al. (1995) sought to find out whether humor was superior to other methods of distraction when the interest level was comparable. They contrasted
humor with a repulsive and neutral stimulus which was controlled for interest level. Although the stimuli were distracting, they did not possess what they called the unique aspects of humor. They used four groups where three were shown a film which was either humorous, repulsive, or neutral. The fourth group was not shown a film. They found that when compared to the other groups, both the humor and repulsive groups showed a significant increase in pain tolerance. They concluded that on a theoretical level, besides merely being a distraction, humor doesn’t hold any special advantage in pain tolerance. The researchers agreed that any conclusion about humor should be regarded as preliminary.

African American Humor

Research by Watkins (1994) and Williams (1995) demonstrates that the creative responses of African American humor were adapted throughout the years to the historical and social context of their environments and manifested through four types: the plantation survivalist, accommodationist, in-group satirist, and integrationist. The first type, plantation survivalist, can be traced back to the days of slavery when it was developed as a mechanism to deal emotionally and psychologically with the effects of slavery and as satire against the injustices and dehumanization of the “peculiar institution” (Watkins, 1994; Williams, 1995). This type of humor, which was primarily used by the slaves to direct their course of life in a hostile environment, was later used by

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2 In Elsie Williams, *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African American Comedic Tradition*. New York: Garland, 1995. A plantation survivalist was essentially the slave trickster whose humor expressed an ingenuity endemic to the survival of enslaved people. ” Whereas survivalist was developed by the slaves a survival tool, accommodationist humor was first initiated, directed by the slavemasters themselves, and later appropriated and claimed by the slaves. In-group satirist humor had two functions: conflict and control. It meant poking fun of the white oppressor, by shedding the victim’s mask and appropriating the stereotypes. And integrationist humor was similar to in-group satirist humor, except that it included Blacks laughing at themselves, poking fun of others, and addressing controversial subjects—all in front of an integrated audience.
slave masters for their own amusement during the *accommodationist* stage. Although later appropriated by blacks, humor during the *accommodationist* stage was initiated, directed, and shaped by slavemasters. Donning blackened faces and performing in outlandish costumes, white performers appeared onstage singing popular songs while enacting racist caricatured portrayals of blacks. (Foxx and Miller, 1977; Watkins, 1994). With these minstrel shows, whites had ushered in a form of entertainment of blacks as a comic figure that permanently etched in the minds of America. Later, black entertainers working the minstrel shows attempted to shed the victim’s masks and appropriate the stereotypes (Watkins, 1994). Although reviled by many blacks, these minstrel shows, which were commonplace by the 1840s, provided job opportunities and social status, not available elsewhere during the period, for many black entertainers.

The third type of African American humor, *in-group satirist*, was popularized on the segregated vaudeville circuits. The comedians during this stage used the liberty afforded by the segregated audiences to not only sharpen their humor against outsiders but also as a form of internal control to keep the black community in check.

In contrast to the comic antics, funny costumes and folk speech used by the in-group satirists, comedians during the *integrationist* stage performed their satiric material for integrated audiences (Williams, 1995, 25). Performing during the height of the Civil Rights movement, the comedians of the 1960s provided social commentary on many of society’s ills (Watkins, 1994; Williams, 1995). The third and fourth stages are the focus of this study.

**Cultural Studies**

Because humor serves as a “kind of sociocultural index of the culture, groups or populations, and the eras in which it occurs (Hertzler, 1970, pp. 58-59), using the way it
“deconstructs the social world can help one better understand how people have constructed it” (Davis, 1993). As Kellner (2003) observes, one way to fully grasp this relationship between discourse (comedic discourse) and culture is through the use of a cultural studies approach. This study deploys cultural analysis with discourse analysis to explore the meanings of the text in cultural context.

This multifaceted method, when applied to the study of mass communication, looks at how mass communication functions within culture and how it helps to produce and reproduce the ruling class’s social domination through the establishment of social ideologies, norms, values, and representation of “Others.” It also shows how communication enables resistance through subversive cultural work (Kellner, 2003). Key to cultural studies, as well as this thesis, is a critical theory approach which highlights the dominant role of culture in shaping individual responses to social systems.

**Contribution of this Study**

Because of the scant literature on the contributions of black female comedienes, their contemporary commercial success, and their performances critical of the dominant patriarchal system, I will use this study to examine how Mabley, a major exponent of this group, used humor to defy society’s rules in what has traditionally been a male-dominated field. This examination of Mabley’s work informs our understanding of how black women articulate their beliefs and experiences to combat the “double burden” of their oppression.

The field of stand-up comedy is male-dominated and as a result the endeavors of female comedians, in general, and black females in particular, have been overlooked. Although my study examines the functions of humor as a social tool, it does so in novel manner. Not only will its primary focus be the work of black comedienes from a black
female perspective, it will show the genre’s utility in advancing pertinent social and political issues as well while interrogating those discursive practices which cripple its effectiveness.
CHAPTER 4
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This thesis will use critical discourse analysis and analysis of the historical context to explore the following research questions:

1. What are the prevalent themes of comedienne Jackie “Moms” Mabley?

2. What range of representations does this comedienne offer to her audiences? Which elements and themes are excluded?

3. What is the economic, political, social, and cultural function of these themes and ideas in American society and in particular for women and blacks in America? Are they hegemonic or counter-hegemonic in their ideology? How?

4. How are the comedic performances (i.e. dress, behavior, language) influenced by the social, cultural, and historical context during which they were created?

The goal of this methodological approach is to elucidate how the comedic discourse of Jackie “Moms” Mabley constructs, disseminates, maintains and/or resists the values and norms that characterize our white, male, supremacist, capitalist culture.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Before discussing the details of a discourse analysis, it is important to first describe what discourse means. Although the term discourse is slippery, elusive and often difficult to define (Henry & Tator, 2002), the following succinct definition offered by Henry & Tator (2002) will be used to form my theoretical approach:

A discourse is a way of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic or practice: a cluster or formation of ideas, images, and practices that provide ways of talking about forms of knowledge and conduct associated with a particular topic, social activity, or institutional site in society. (Henry & Tator, 2002, p. 26)

Although most discourse is dominant and serves the particular interests of those in power not all discourse articulates the ideology of the dominant class. As Lull (2003, p.
observed “expressions of the dominant ideology are sometimes reformulated to assert alternative, often completely resistant or contradictory messages.” It is these resistant or counterhegemonic tendencies of communication that are the focus of this thesis.

So what exactly is critical discourse analysis (CDA)? van Dijk (2001) defines it as a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analyses takes explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality (p. 352).

This approach extends beyond highlighting dominance and power abuse by seeking to show ways this dominance can be resisted (van Dijk, 2001). It also goes beyond the abstract language to see how meaning of discourse is made in the economic, political and social order in which it circulates.

Critical discourse analysis was the best method to analyze the comedic discourse presented in this paper for two reasons. First, it allows the researcher to address the two major problems in analyzing talk, positionality and evidence, as identified by Barker and Galasinski (2001, p. 22). Barker and Galasinski’s concept of positionality, or the belief that knowledge is never neutral but instead a reflection of the social position of the speaker, the audience, and the purpose, is accounted for by a rigorous analysis.

This rigorous analysis will consist of the three levels on which most discourse occurs as identified by Fairclough (2000): (a.) the actual text (micro level) (b.) discursive practices (intermediate level) and (c.) the larger social context which influences the text and discursive practices. McGregor’s (2004) definitions of the terms actual text, discursive practices, and social context were used for the analysis. The actual text is the transcript of the audio recordings of Jackie “Moms” Mabley and as McGregor (2004)
noted “often involves the presentation of facts and beliefs, the identities of participants discussed in the communication, and the strategies that are used to frame the message.” Discursive practices refers to those “rules, norms, and mental modes of socially acceptable behavior in specific roles or relationships” which are used in producing, receiving and interpreting the message (McGregor, 2004). According to Alvermann, Commeyras, Young, Randall, & Hinson (1997) these codes of behavior govern the way individuals learn to act, think and speak.

Finally, the larger social context refers to the settings where the discourse occurs (i.e. comedy club, segregated audience, the segregated society)—each with a set of rules and obligations that governs what individuals occupying these places are permitted and expected to do (McGregor, 2004).

The second reason critical discourse analysis is the best research method is its compatibility to the cultural studies approach. Critical discourse analysis is ideal to use with cultural studies as both are concerned with language and power, or ideology and hegemony (Barker & Galasinski 2001)

While critical discourse analysis can focus on body language, symbols, visual images and other forms of semiosis, this thesis will be limited to analyzing the talk text with a womanist critical perspective as the main perspective.

Analysis of the Historical Context

In addition to the recordings of the comedienne’s performances, this study used primary and secondary sources to learn about the past and to develop a context of the economic, social, and political environment from the period of 1960-1971. To do this, the researcher used commentaries, reviews, newspaper articles produced during the period, and reference materials, including but not limited to, biographical dictionaries and
chronologies to obtain facts about the key figures and major events of the period (1960-1971). These sources helped the researcher summarize the historical and political context. The *History of American Life* series edited by Schlesinger and Fox and James Trager’s *The People’s Chronology* were consulted for descriptions and assessments of the nation’s social and cultural environment during the period, which included the influence of events such as the Women’s and Black Liberation movements.

Finally, to provide a context of the economic environment, income statistics and indices for the quality of life, crime and cost of living of U.S. cities were obtained from various sources.

Using this information as a framework, the researcher was able to critically interpret Mabley’s discourse in regards to the contemporary social and political conditions of her times, including the limitations and barriers faced by black comedians in general and black female comedienne in particular. It also allows us to more justly measure Mabley’s professional achievements and commercial success in light of the era’s standards for women’s, particularly black women’s, behaviors and roles.

**Data Collection**

The researcher analyzed and extracted data from seventeen comedy albums recorded by Jackie “Moms” Mabley. Photographs and descriptions from *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African American Comedic Tradition*, were viewed and used to describe the comedienne’s physical comedy, dress, nonverbal behaviors and to compile the biographical sketch.

**Design and Procedure**

This study analyzed Mabley’s audio recordings between the years of 1960 – 1971. Over a four-week period, the researcher transcribed each album, then listened to the
albums while reading the transcript to ensure accuracy. The researcher listened to the albums a total of three times in an effort to ensure all words were deciphered correctly. If after three times the word or phrase was still unclear, the word or phrase was labeled inaudible by the researcher.

To analyze the data, the author initially went through the texts line by line and marked those chunks of material that suggested a category. For example, using the above-mentioned example from the critical discourse analysis the excerpt was coded into the category of “Shortage of living quarters for blacks.” After all categories were identified, a codebook was created that listed all of the categories, the code names for each category, the number of incidents coded, and the location of the incident in the data records.

Using the coding process developed by Banks et al. (2000), the following questions were asked to assist in grouping the data into categories: 1) “what appears to be the meaningfully cohesive topic unit?” 2) “What does the unit of discourse describe or what is the subject described as doing?” 3) “What is the underlying principle of this expression?”

Next, connections were made between the categories. And finally, new categories or themes that connected several categories were created. These two processes were repeated until the categories were “theoretically saturated”, or until new categories added little value to the themes or concepts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.110). Finally, richly detailed excerpts were quoted as supporting evidence to answer the initial research questions.
Historical Context

To understand the comedic discourse of Jackie “Moms” Mabley it is necessary to look back at the 1960s, a time when African American comedians used their humor to challenge the status quo and advance social and political issues pertinent to the black community. This was a tumultuous decade in which the nation was forced to scrutinize its fundamental beliefs and institutions regarding issues of race, class, gender roles, and political philosophy.

When the decade began, a wave of energetic optimism permeated everything. But few sensed the dramatic changes that were about to occur. President Kennedy’s idealistic promises for a 'new frontier', the creation of a new birth control pill which heralded a new freedom for women, and the civil rights movement which blacks and whites supported—all seemed to signal a new age. However, the early optimism couldn’t be sustained and by the decade’s end, despair began to set in among many of the groups that were fighting for social justice. While the civil rights movement won many legal and political battles, economic and social equality was still far from reality for blacks, particularly those residing in urban ghettos. Frustrated by the pervasive racism which affected their housing and employment prospects, urban blacks began rioting. The assassination of national leaders John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X brought disillusionment for African Americans and the country as a whole. Furthermore, the United State’s involvement in the costly (both in dollars and deaths) Vietnam War began destroying the Americans’ confidence in the nation’s economic and moral fitness.

Civil Rights under Kennedy

Initially, Kennedy was reluctant to address the civil rights issue because he feared the political clout of southern Democrats, many of whom had helped him win election in
1960. Before long, however, he was forced to confront the issue. In 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) sent a group of black and white “freedom riders” to the Deep South to test the court ruling which banned segregation on buses and trains (Tindall & Shi, 1999, p. 1511). When whites in Alabama assaulted the freedom riders, Kennedy sent in federal marshals to protect them.

In the fall of 1962, Kennedy again sent the federal marshals when Governor Ross Barnett and an angry mob of students attempted to prevent James Meredith, a black student, from enrolling at the University of Mississippi (“Crisis in Mississippi,” 1962). Despite opposition, black activists and white supporters continued to challenge the Jim Crow system that was prevalent in the South.

In 1963, the centennial anniversary of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, Martin Luther King, Jr. led a series of nonviolent demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama. At the local level, King wanted to desegregate the downtown businesses. However, the overarching goal was to secure federal enforcement and new legislation by provoking racists to display their hatred and violence publicly (Tindall & Shi, 1999, p. 1512). King believed that nonviolent protests would force the president’s hand. Television and newspaper coverage of the young demonstrators being hosed by water and mauled by dogs galvanized support for King and the movement throughout the nation.

In June of 1963 Governor George Wallace literally stood in the doorway, blocking the entrance of Vivian Malone and James Hood as they tried to register for classes at the University of Alabama (Sitton, 1963). Determined not to have a repetition of what happened at Ole Miss, Kennedy mobilized the Alabama National Guard who asked
Wallace to step aside. Wallace eventually left and the students were able to ‘integrate’ the campus. The recalcitrance of a public official of Wallace's stature as well as the horrifying images of black children being attacked by dogs in Birmingham provoked Kennedy to draft a comprehensive Civil Rights legislation. Also, Kennedy was concerned about how these images might affect America’s image abroad, particularly since the United States was promoting democracy.

On the same night (June 11, 1963) of the incident at the University of Alabama, Kennedy addressed the nation about the state of race relations and announced his plans to draft legislation that would guarantee equal rights for blacks (Kennedy, 1963). Later that night, after Kennedy’s address, NAACP field secretary of the Mississippi branch, Medgar Evers was killed as he returned home in Jackson, Mississippi (Perlmutter, 1963).

In support of this legislation, more than 200,000 blacks and whites gathered in Washington, D.C. on August 28, 1963 and listened as Dr. King gave his “I Have a Dream" speech which spoke optimistically about racial harmony. Known as the “March on Washington," this was the largest demonstration in history on the nation's capital (Franklin & Moss, 2000, p. 537).

Two weeks after the march it became painfully evident that the country was far from achieving racial brotherhood when a bomb exploded in a Birmingham, Alabama church, killing four black girls as they made their way to Sunday school (Sitton, 1963). A month later on November 22, 1963, President Kennedy was killed in Dallas, Texas, filling blacks with more despair.

Civil Rights under Johnson

When President Lyndon Johnson assumed office he made it known his strong support for Kennedy's civil rights program. In January of 1964, Congress ratified the
Twenty Fourth Amendment to the Constitution, outlawing the poll tax in federal
elections, long a means to disenfranchise blacks in federal elections. And in June of 1964,
Johnson pushed the Civil Rights Act through Congress. The most far-reaching and
comprehensive legislation in support of racial equality, this act prohibited discrimination
in voting, education, and the use of public facilities (Franklin & Moss, 2000, p. 539).

**Illusion of Equality and Urban Unrest**

For many urban blacks living outside of the South, the civil rights movement
brought little tangible improvements or benefits. For example in 1963, the
unemployment rate for blacks was 114 percent higher than that of whites. And where
blacks were employed, more than 80 percent worked in the lowest paid menial jobs as
compared to only 40 percent of employed whites. In 1964, the unemployment rate
among blacks was 9.6 percent versus 5.4 percent among whites. Five years later, in
1969, the median income for blacks with eight years of schooling was $4,472 whereas it
was $7,018 for whites with the equivalent amount of schooling. (Franklin & Moss, 2000,
p. 545). Racial discrimination combined with labor union discrimination and meager
opportunities for apprenticeship training limited blacks’ chances for moving up (Franklin
& Moss, 2000, p. 545).

**The Black Power Movement**

In the mid-1960s, the nonviolent phase of the civil rights movement began to
fragment and the new “Black Power” phase began. On August 11, 1965, less than a week
after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, riots broke out in Watts the poor and
predominantly black neighborhood in Los Angeles (Bart, 1965). When the rioting ended,
there were thirty-four dead, almost 4,000 in jail, and property damage exceeding $35
million (Tindall & Oshi, 1999, p. 1532). But this was just the beginning. In the summer
of 1966, Chicago, Cleveland, and forty other cities experienced racial riots. And the next summer Detroit and Newark burst into flames. About 70 percent of America's black population lived in urban areas that had been bypassed by postwar prosperity (Tindall & Shi, 1999, p. 1533). These areas were characterized by high unemployment, poor schools, police brutality, inadequate housing, a lack of access to health care and chronic poverty.

A special Commission on Civil Disorders noted that unlike earlier race riots which were caused by white perpetrators, blacks instigated these riots which reflected their frustrations with the racism embedded in American society.¹ Just one month after the report appeared in 1968, Dr. King was assassinated and the riots resumed.

By 1966, “Black Power” had become the rallying cry of blacks. Radical members of the SNCC who had risked their lives to increase voter registration became disillusioned with the slow pace at which blacks were gaining their equality. And under the leadership of Stokely Carmichael, they began insisting that “black power” must be used to combat “white power” which had subjugated blacks for years (Franklin & Moss, 2003, p. 547). H. Rap Brown, who succeeded Carmichael in 1967, urged blacks to “get you some guns” and “kill the honkies” (Tindall & Shi, 1999, p. 1533).

Meanwhile, on the west coast, a group of young black militants under the leadership of Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale organized the Black Panther Party. The organization called for full employment, decent housing, black control of the black community and an end to every form of repression and brutality (Franklin & Moss, 2000, p. 553).

One of the major proponents of black nationalism and its most articulate spokesman was Malcolm X. Malcolm was a convert to the Black Muslims (Nation of Islam) which was led by Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm didn’t believe blacks could achieve full status as citizens by integration and thus he encouraged a separation of the races and he motto for achieving this was "by any means necessary" even it meant violence. He wanted blacks to be self reliant and have their own community in the United States. By 1964, Malcolm had broken with Elijah Muhammad and began to moderate his stance and embrace the concept of racial cooperation. Muslim assassin killed him in early 1965.

**Women’s Liberation**

Inspired by the successes of the early civil rights movement and the antiwar protests, women began launching their own movements to redress perceived wrongs. Frustrated with their marginalized treatment organizations like the SNCC and the Black Panther Party and the ubiquity of messages urging them to be stay-at-home mothers like June Cleaver of the popular television show *Leave it to Beaver*, women began to form their own organizations. Betty Frieden’s *The Feminine Mystique* urged them to break free from the domestic role and do something more than marry and have kids.

The Commission on the Status of Women, authorized by Kennedy and chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt documented the discrimination that women faced in the workplace and helped to legitimize public debate over women’s roles and rights (Davis, 1991, pp.34-38). Sylvia Plath (*The Bell Jar*) and Mary McCarthy (*The Group*) were instrumental in raising awareness about the unhappiness with which women lived in their “domestic roles” and resisted the image of the happy mother and housewife prevalent in the 1950s. And feminists Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan (*The Feminine Mystique*) began to pave the
way for the feminist movement. Black women writers like Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker Alexander contributed to the movement by writing about black women’s experiences regarding race and gender.

**Youth Movement**

The youth movement of the 1960s sprang from the college-age population who finally free from the responsibilities of family and career could now experiment with their minds and bodies in ways that usually shocked and enraged the older generation (Isserman & Kazin, 2000, p.150). Although, it is probably best remembered for its focus on sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll, some of the participants engaged in political action such as protests and sit-ins. Hugh Heffner’s *Playboy* magazine marketed female nudity to them. Lenny Bruce’s comedy shocked censors that allowed violence in films but forbid depictions of sexual intercourse and in her book *Sex and the Single Girl*, Helen Gurley encouraged women to have sex whenever “her body wants.” As a result, many gays and lesbians “came out” to their family and friends during this period. (Isserman & Kazin, 2000, p. 151).

Leading the political arm of the movement was the Students for a Democratic Society founded in 1962. The SDS aimed to create a ”New Left” movement throughout the U.S. which endorsed “leftist” goals such as increased spending on social welfare programs, decreased spending on military, and civil rights legislation (Isserman & Kazin, 2000, p. 169). Throughout the decade they sat-in, marched, protested the Vietnam War, among other things. In April 1965, they sponsored an antiwar march in Washington, D.C. that attracted 20,000 to protest U.S. involvement in Vietnam. (Isserman & Kazin, 2000, p. 170).
Cultural Scene

On the cultural scene, musicians, artists, and comedians, were using their artistic talent to offer commentary on the events of the decade. For example, comedians Jackie “Moms” Mabley and Dick Gregory used humor as social commentary on issues ranging from society’s double standards for gender roles and racial relations. Folk musician Bob Dylan’s album *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* which was released in May of 1963 had clear messages of political outrage, particularly, “Blowin’ in the Wind” and “Oxford Town” which is about white Mississippians who rioted to prevent integration of state university (Isserman & Kazin, 2000, p. 96). Writers like Harper Lee wrote about race relations in a small town in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

As the decade drew to an end, the Vietnam War was costing hundreds of lives per week and American communities were in racial conflict. The political and cultural gap also seemed to be widening as Americans grappled with issues like religious and moral values and homosexuality.
CHAPTER 5
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Using a discourse analysis, the researcher analyzed the topics of the comedic texts of Jackie “Moms” Mabley. The discourse analysis included 17 comedy albums that were recorded from 1960-1971. The purpose of this study was not only to explore the topics and themes of Mabley’s discourse, but also to evaluate whether there were any counterhegemonic tendencies in her texts.

Characteristics of the Comedic Texts

Coding categories for the discourse analysis included topics such as integration, segregation/Jim Crow, sexual innuendo, women’s sexuality, sexual organs, civil rights, homosexuality, gender identity/sexual orientation, hard times (which included a recession and the Depression), lynchings/hangings, male sexual incompetence, international community, general criticisms of government, people, etc, older women/younger men relationships, and manner of speech with authority figures. It is important to note that these categories are descriptive of Mabley’s work as a whole. While there were hundreds of topics, these were identified as the major ones.

Mabley’s Discourse on Race and Segregation in Historical Context

Mabley’s discourse on race and segregation spoke to African Americans’ discontent with the government’s “with all deliberate speed” stance in granting them full civil rights and its broken promises to live up to its ideal. Her discourse condemned racism and the marginalization of blacks and articulated the hardships they faced as an
oppressed group. Before exploring this discourse, a brief summarization of the incidents that informed the heated 1960s debate regarding segregation is included.

Throughout history, many legal battles were waged as America struggled with the crucial issues of equality and civil liberties for blacks. One of these famous battles occurred in 1896, when the Supreme Court upheld the “separate but equal” doctrine in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. This ruling had far-reaching implications and for more than seven decades affected almost every aspect of American life. It legitimized the system of segregation known as “Jim Crow” and justified whites’ antipathy toward blacks. In *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that segregation of public schools was unconstitutional. Although this ruling was a sign of hope, blacks were not overly ecstatic, as they were all too familiar with the broken promises of white America. Despite its narrow ruling, the decision signified progress and provided blacks with legal a remedy to combat segregation.

Several of Mabley’s texts present a construction of segregation from the viewpoint of blacks. One of these jokes unfolds from the perspective of a black Congolese male who is refused a hotel room.

One 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.” He say, “No, you misunderstood me. I don’t want it for myself. I want if for my wife. She’s your kind” (Mabley, 1960).

This passage illustrates what critical race theorists describe as the “normalization” of their own race by whites, whereby everyone else is seen as the ‘other.’ The white antagonist in this joke perceives himself and the Congolese as belonging to two different
species. His word choice (*kind*) underscores his belief that he and by extension, the white race, belong to the “normal” human species while the Congolese and other blacks belong to a different *kind* of species. This belief that blacks and other nonwhites are the ‘other’ and inferior is central to the racist ideology which legitimizes the dominant group’s rule over the ‘other.’

Representing blacks as the “Other” has had, and continues to have, serious implications. First, defining blacks as subhuman provided the rationale for the legitimacy of segregation. And this in turn fostered ideas of caste and inferiority as Justice Harlan prophetically said it would in his dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). And as Holtzman (2000, p. 174) contends “once the steps are taken to see other humans as inferior, all of the potential for racism and subsequent dehumanization and violence becomes possible” One need not look far, as the tumultuous events of the 1960s particularly as it relates to the civil rights movement, provide extensive evidence. This hegemonic racism reared its ugly head in the Alabama church bombing which killed four little black girls (“Connor holds court,” 1963 and justified public safety commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor’s order to firefighters to turn their fire hoses on young black demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama (“The Major Events,” 1963).

Continuing the analysis of this joke we are told the protagonist’s ethnicity is African, which here signifies dark skin, when the narrator says, “One them Congo men walked up to the desk in Little Rock.” (Mabley, 1960). Given the history of whites’ preferential treatment of light-skinned and mulatto blacks (as they were easier for whites to identify with), the Congolese’s darker hue and ethnicity (he’s not even American) becomes significant as this increases white antipathy toward him.
Closer inspection yields an interpretation of the joke as an act of resistance and self-empowerment by the Congolese. Aware of his social status as a second-class foreign visitor, the Congolese attempts to maintain some dignity by challenging this ideology with a reference to miscegenation by saying, “No, you misunderstood me. I don’t want it for myself. I want if for my wife. She’s your kind” (Mabley, 1960).

Given that simply speaking to or maintaining eye contact with a white woman could be used as grounds for lynching (Chafe & Korstad, 2001), this is interpreted as a bold act of defiance. Frequently subject to harsh beatings and other forms of cruel treatment, humor provided blacks with a means to cope with everyday forms of oppression and allowed them to somehow chart their survival in a volatile environment (Williams 1995). Finally, the fact that the “Congolese” resorts to using his white wife as a bargaining chip in negotiating for a hotel room by appealing to white sensibilities points to how shrewd black people had to be in order to survive Jim Crow laws and practices and challenge white inhumanity.

In another joke Mabley parodies the Jim Crow institution by stressing its absurdity. For example, she extends the institutions’ illogical reasoning to running a traffic light. Mabley describes being stopped in South Carolina for running a red light. When asked why she ran the red light, she tells the officer, “I thought the red light was for us” (Mabley, 1961). Mabley uses the metaphor of the red light to emphasize that blacks were so often blocked from achieving their goal by whites, that it would seem normal for blacks to believe that “stop” lights were intended exclusively for them.

While Mabley’s humor served as a form of resistance, she also used it as a tool to attack issues, like white’s resistance to integration and voter disenfranchisement to the
political forefront. For example, in her “operas,” which were usually sung to a medley of popular tunes, Mabley sounded off on issues like segregation, integration, and ghetto life. In one of her operas, which showed her consciousness of current events, she recounted the opposition James Meredith encountered when he integrated the University of Mississippi. In the first stanza of the opera she sets the scene by referencing the places and institutions Jim Crow affected:

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! (Mabley, 1962b).

Holding true to the womanist tradition, Mabley displays guts when she invites the cowardly Ku Klux Klan to a confrontation and dares them “to come out from behind them sheets and face me like a man.” (Mabley, 1962b). In the second stanza she details Mississippi’s opposition to the integration of Ole Miss as she sings:

And you know why, “cause it took the marshal, the army too, JFK and I don’t know who

Every law and every rule
To try to get one boy in the Mississippi school (Mabley, 1962)

Here Mabley describes the scene as Meredith walked onto the campus. Historians deemed this event, which resulted in a riot, two deaths, and the National Guard being dispatched as one of the most violent and dramatic efforts to prevent integration (Franklin and Moss, 1988, p. 443).
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 1962b)

Mabley’s description not only shows the physical opposition Meredith faced from
the lead pipes, black jacks, and pistols but it also describes whites’ opposition laws
mandating integration in then-Governor Ross Barnett’s statement, “To hell with the
congressional rule days!” (Mabley, 1962b).

Another point of interest in this opera is Mabley’s critique of the U.S. government.
Invoking the spiritual aspect of womanism, Mabley plays on the nation’s founding
principle of a belief in God and the often-cited Biblical scripture which condemns as liars
those who “love God whom they cannot see, yet hate their neighbors whom they can
see.” Thus in a similar vein, she too questions the nation’s spirituality by asking “How
can we pretend we love our foreign friend, when they can plainly see what kind of fools
they’ve been?” (Mabley, 1962b). In other words the United States was hypocritically
professing to love its foreign friend while dehumanizing its black population. This
statement is significant as it probably also reflected international sentiments toward the
United States. According to legal scholar Mary Dudziak (2000), the United State’s foreign policy during this time focused on containing communism and promoting democracy. Yet, stories and images frequently showed blacks living in substandard housing and living conditions. (Dudziak, 2000) Nevertheless, these incriminating reports of racial inequity tarnished the United States’ integrity and undermined the democratic ideal it espoused.

To summarize, black comedians like Jackie “Moms” Mabley entered the debate by lampooning race relations with non-threatening humor. Comedy, both a public and popular form of entertainment--which was also accessible to most people--became a forum where African-American comedians debated social issues like race and class. Similar to other entertainment professions, stand-up comedy provided blacks with steady employment (Watkins, 1994) and granted them freedom to voice their dissent against racial discrimination without fear of punishment. Mabley used this genre as a tool of resistance, like her ancestors did during slavery, to challenge oppression.

**Social Construction of Africans**

While Mabley pushed the envelope on hegemonic racial and gender norms in a majority of her work, her perspectives on Africans, and helped perpetuate the dominant ideology. Through stereotypical representations, Mabley’s dialogue constructs a disparaging image of these groups that undermines their struggles for liberation.

To inform the analysis of Mabley’s discourse on Africa and its meaning, several things must be pointed out. First, while most Americans have never visited and will probably never visit Africa there is already an image of Africa in the American mind (Hawk, 1992, p. 3). This image is derived from school textbooks, the media, church missionaries, the entertainment media, family, and friends. Of these sources, the media is
most important, as it is ubiquitous and it’s the place where most individuals look to be informed.¹ These images paint Africa as an uncivilized and barbaric region where half-naked people run around dancing in leaves (McCarthy, 1983).

Defining Africa in this manner had and continues to have several functions. First, we must remember that defining others helps us to define ourselves. Thus Europeans’ characterization of Africans as subhuman, inferior, and dumb is telling of how they viewed themselves, which was essentially the opposite of how they defined Africans: human, superior, and intelligent. Thus, Africans represented the antithesis of Europeans. Second, this classification of Africa as the uncivilized “Other” provided justification for Europeans’ slavery and colonization of Africa and persons of African descent.

According to McCarthy (1983), these images of Africa were widely accepted by blacks and whites. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries a majority of black Americans subscribed either consciously or subconsciously to these dangerous and fallacious ideas of African identity. One of these black Americans was none other than “Moms” Mabley.

In Mabley's discourse on Africa, which always elicited laughter from her predominantly black audiences, she constructs a view of Africans based on her perception of their dietary habits, languages, and conflicts. For example, on her Youngest Teenager album Mabley talks about returning from a trip to the United Nations in her role as “adviser” to President Kennedy. In one of her jokes she talks about being on the

¹ While an argument can be put forth about the purposes of different kinds of media, i.e. the news media inform and entertainment media, just that entertain, I would argue differently. Whether it is news media or not, most people get their information, particularly about racial groups with whom they are not familiar from the media. So whether the information is factual or not, people see the images as authentic representations of those it portrays.
plane with an African representative to the United Nations. When the flight attendant asks the African diplomat what he would like for dinner, he replies, “Bring me the passenger list” (Mabley, 1969). Through this comment by the African representative, Mabley paints an image of Africans as cannibals.

On her 1963 album *I Got Somethin’ to Tell You!* Mabley again references Africans’ dietary habits when she talks about returning from a mission trip to the Congo. She says she has to have a lunch prepared before her departure because she says, “I can’t eat that stuff like they eat over there. I ain’t used to it” (Mabley, 1963). She continues by saying Africans eat “crocodile dumpling, you know, and lizard casseroles and things like that” (Mabley, 1963).

These descriptions of Africans’ diet reflect racist attitudes of them as “Others” who feast on crocodiles, lizards, and even humans. This discourse interprets the consumption of these foods as deviant behavior because the items aren’t the “normal” delicacies consumed by westerners like chicken, cows, and pigs. The comment that she “ain’t used to” these types of foods not only reinforces the notion of Africa as the “Other” compared to Europeans but it also alienates the continent from African descendants in America (Mabley, 1963).

Mabley’s word choice—*they* and *over there*—suggests a desire to detach herself from Africa. Further evidence of this detachment is seen in the comment, “I’m born here. I’m American…Damn it if I don’t know nothing about *over there* (italics is Mabley’s emphasis) (Mabley, 1969).

This practice whereby African-Americans deny or distance themselves from their African heritage and any thing Afrocentric is a manifestation of internalized racism. This
internalized racism is defined by Holtzman (2000, p. 161) as “the taking in of negative messages of overt and covert racism, superiority and inferiority, and white privilege.” Holtzman maintains internalized racism is a reaction to racism and therefore can only be eliminated when society ends racism.

Mabley’s discourse in the opera communicated insensitivity to the sounds produced by African languages and minimized Belgium’s role in the Congo crisis of the 1960s by couching the conflicts in racial terms. For example, Mabley said Tshombe told her, “Vinga vagabondo what's the matter with the Congo” (Mabley, 1963). Here Mabley mocks the sound of African languages as she hears it. When Mabley says “vinga vagabondo” she gives the impression that Tshombe’s talk is more like “noise” than intelligible speech (Mabley, 1963).

Mabley further derogates the continent and its peoples with one of her famous operas to Moise Tshombe, then-President of the Katanga province of the Congo Republic. The main message of the opera is that the United States and the UN are there to help save Africa from the fighting and killing caused by Tshombe and more importantly communism.

In another line Mabley says, “You got brother fighting brother and they killing one another and that stuff's got to go (Mabley, 1963). Hawk (1992, p. 9) argues that phrasing African conflicts in terms like black-on-black violence or in this case “brother fighting brother” serves the purpose of dehumanizing the conflict and casting it in racial terms (Mabley, 1962). It also ignores the complicated colonial history of the Congo and absolves Belgium of its role in the republic’s political situation at that time.
While Mabley and her audiences may have had the opinion that these jokes and gross depictions were merely for a good laugh, in truth they’re harmful and have important implications as the joke continues to be on Africa. First, these images, which are often accepted at face-value, influence others’ perceptions and treatment of Africans. Second, these depictions sanction prejudice, discrimination, and even violence. And finally, the implications are alarming when we consider their potential to influence policy, as it is the media (whether that be news or entertainment) where policymakers look for their information. A perfect and appalling example of this is the 1994 Rwandan genocide. In the span of one hundred days an estimated 800,000 Rwandans were slaughtered (“Rwanda: How the” 2004). And although this catastrophe could have been prevented with aid from the United Nations’ peacekeepers, no help was dispatched because the victims were black. Finally, and what may be the most serious implication, is that these depictions and this type of discourse impede and thwart African nations’ efforts to become economically independent. Although he was referring to journalism or news media specifically, another more serious implication was pointed out by Smith (1980) when he said:

The struggle to escape from our bad image of the Third World is an essential stage in its struggle for independence. In this sense the journalism of the West is helping to arrest the historic process of development, and if there is any point at which the vicious circle of dependence can be broken, it is there, in the intractable issue of information. (p. 110)

As black racial pride was gaining momentum, Mabley detached herself (at least through her "Moms" persona) from the Motherland. Although it seems odd that Mabley
would engage in a hegemonic discourse which could be used to denigrate her ancestors’ birthplace, a couple of explanations will be offered. One explanation sounds something like this: “I may be a black but at least I’m not African.” Although it sounds preposterous, many blacks subscribed to this rationale, both consciously and subconsciously, and used it for social mobility and leverage and to cope psychologically with their perceived inferior social status. Denying their African heritage placed African-Americans on a higher social status of at least one group (even if this group included their own ancestors). So African Americans simply appropriated the psychology they learned from their colonizers and used it to subjugate another group. Mabley’s adoption of these hegemonic racist views regarding Africa illustrates the powerful effects colonization continues to have on the colonized no matter how progressive or revolutionary they appear to be. It shows the behaviors an oppressed “outside” group engages in as it tries to assimilate and become a member of the normal “inside” group. It also underscores the subtle, hegemonic ways in which the media obtains the consent of those it marginalizes and subjugates.

Another possible explanation for Mabley’s complicity in propagating this ideology is the argument that she was simply a historical figure who spoke the dominant discourse and adopted an unquestioned ideological position (Kates & Shaw-Garlock, 1999) that presented Africans in her comedic texts as the “Other.” As Stuart Hall (1982, p. 88, italics added) noted “ideology is a function of the discourse and of the logic of social processes, rather than an intention of the agent” (emphasis as it appears in text)
While her reasons for portraying Africa in this light aren’t clear, what is apparent is Mabley’s cognizance of the stigma and inferiority associated with blackness in general and an awareness of the comparatively higher status of blacks here in the U.S.

**Social Construction of Gays and Transgender**

Mabley’s depictions and social construction of sexual orientation, particularly gays and transgenders, perpetuate the hegemonic ideology of them as “Others.” An examination of these representations found narrow depictions of sexuality which were often stereotypical in nature. Three jokes which best reflect this ideology have been chosen for this analysis.

In one of Mabley’s jokes, two men are walking down the street when they happen to meet another fellow. This fellow says to the first, “Hi fellow” (Mabley, 1962a). Then he says to the other fellow, “Hi Queen (Mabley, 1962a). The man addressed as "Queen" gets mad and punches the third man who calls him this. He then tells the other fellow with whom he was walking, in a high-pitched voice, "Now, when he come through, tell him I'm no queen. And tell him my mother and father are still living. I'm a princess” (Mabley, 1962a).

This elicits laughter from the audience which suggests either the character or his behavior (high-pitched voice) was deviant. The text implies that either this is an effeminate heterosexual male or an effeminate gay/transgender male. However, given the narrow understanding of sexuality during this period and Mabley's recurrent talk about gay males, whom she referred to as fairies, the character in this joke is probably a gay male. The most important elements in this construction of gay males are the referent word “queen” and the high-pitched voice. Here "queen" is an example of Mabley’s use of double entendre. Not only was “queen a street term for an effeminate gay male it was
also a referent for woman. Thus, the combination of the high-pitched voice, which is usually associated with a female and the notion of femininity, and the visual imagery evoked by the word “fairy” and all its connotations—is essentially a social construction of gay males for Mabley’s audiences. It is also a narrow, controlling perspective on gender. Thus, under this classification of gender, masculine males aren’t allowed to have feminine traits such as high-pitched voices. For if they do, they are deemed less-manly, or fruity, and even run the risk of being labeled a homosexual.

As noted in the theoretical framework section, gender and sexual orientation are both social constructions that are best understood as being fluid or occurring along a continuum rather than being bipolar. And the characteristics that belong to gender and sexual orientation can vary tremendously over time and between cultures.

In another joke, a fairy or gay male walks and sits down in the back of the church. We are told he is ashamed and puts a $100 bill in the offering plate. We are led to believe this shame is the reason he takes a seat in the back of the church and gives so much money. To show the church's appreciation of the fairy's large donation, the usher tells the fairy that the choir will give (sing for) him any hymn he wants. To which the “fairy” replies, “I want him and him and him and you” (Mabley, 1961). The audience laughs.

The key tools of construction of sexual orientation and the accompanying heterosexist views in this joke are the “fairy” image, the concept of shame, and religion, which is represented by the church. Fairy was a colloquial term used during the 1960s to refer to a homosexual male who usually assumed the feminine role or had effeminate qualities (Wentworth & Flexner, 1975, p. 176). This metaphor appealed to the
audience’s pre-existing notions of gay males. The word fairy also functioned as a code to indicate to Mabley's audiences that something was different and perhaps even abnormal about this guy. Another thing about the word "fairy" which might be the most significant is that it is an example of the use of a female referent to deride a man, particularly a “deviant” man. This is a perfect illustration of how our language reflects and conveys the interests of the dominant group—which in this case is heterosexual males. A linguist once wrote of the English language: “Emotive words acquire their connotations by reflecting the sentiments of the dominant group in our society---in our case white Anglo-Saxon males” (Strainchamps, 1971, p. 252). Thus heterosexual males’ sentiments about women---that they are inferior and the blame for everything----is extended to homosexual males in this joke. Through the exploitation of a female referent, women are made the scapegoats and a connotation between female traits, decadence, and homosexuality is established. Although the original denotative meaning of “fairy” was associated with positive images like Disney and the tooth fairy, those in power co-opted the word and gave it the connotative meaning conveyed in this joke. This co-opting of female words is not new however. As Hazou (1990, p. 22) noted other female referents like nymph, bitch, dame, and broad--which previously had no negative connation are now used to denigrate women. That there aren’t as many male equivalents applied to describe deviant individuals further suggests that we live in a society which privileges “maleness.” As underscored in the methodological chapter of this paper, language reflects the ideology of the ruling class. And although Mabley has an affinity for presenting alternative readings of the dominant ideology, this particular discourse endorses patriarchal views of women and sexual orientation.
The second and third key elements in this joke are the concept of shame and the institution of religion, which is symbolized by the church. Since religion is central to the homosexuality debate and religious institutions teach that homosexuality is a sin and an abomination, which essentially makes homosexuals feel shame the two will be discussed together.

**The Black Church and Homosexuality**

Let’s examine the institution of the church, particularly the Black church\(^2\), as it has a vital function in the black community. Given that Mabley’s audience was predominantly black it only seems appropriate. Although the church’s function in the black community has evolved throughout the years from being an institution where escape routes were discussed during slavery to being a political agent during the days of Martin Luther King, it has always been a place of moral instruction (Dyson, 2004). And more important than religious instruction has been its role as a center of social interaction. This becomes particularly important as homosexuals are not only chastised for moral reasons but they are also alienated from the social community and social activities---which is a lifeline for most people. While there’s no difference in the teachings against homophobia between black and white churches, the influential role that the church plays in the black community may be why homophobia is more of a taboo (Boykin, 1996, p. 126). In other words the church has the power to not only give moral instruction but it also influences one's social life and thus support systems. Although some critics like bell hooks challenge the assumption that homophobia is more of a taboo

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\(^2\) While it is common for people to talk about the Black church as if it is one unified entity, it is not. Rather it is composed of a variety denominations including, Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal which serve various African-descendant communities. Instead, by Black church I am making a direct reference to the notion of church (religion) and its importance in the black community. Consequently, black is just an adjective used to describe the membership.
in black communities than in other communities (hooks, 2000, p.68) “there are few areas where the dread and condemnation of homosexuality is more noticeable than in black church settings” (Griffin, 2000, p. 110).

Holtzman (2000, p. 293) outlines four positions the church can take on homosexuality.3 Of these positions the Black church takes the rejecting but nonpunitive position which essentially hates the "sin" or act of homosexuality, and not the “sinner” or the person.

Mabley’s joke makes the following association: homosexuality is a sin for which one should feel shame. Referring back to the joke about the gay male in church, we are explicitly told he is ashamed and that he makes large offering we might infer that there is a correlation between this shame and the amount of the offering. We might conclude that the large offering was an attempt to atone or as the Biblical expression says “cover his sins.” Ironically, despite his shame the "fairy" acknowledges his affinity for men when he says, “I want him and him and him and you (Mabley, 1961).

On another level this entire exchange between the "fairy" and the ushers and deacons, can be seen in church can be seen as a metaphor for the paradoxical relationship that exists between homosexuals and the Black church. As noted by Dyson (2004) the black church is known for its open denunciation of homosexuality, yet simultaneously its choir and music director can be led by an openly gay male whose performance receives applause and from the congregation. It’s easy to see why the Black church would

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3 The rejecting and punitive position holds that homosexuality is a sin explicitly prohibited in the Bible. The rejecting but nonpunitive position separates the act of homosexuality from the person, essentially condemning the “sin” but not the “sinner.” The qualified acceptance position holds heterosexuality as superior and maintains that gays and lesbians are born with that sexual orientation and thus shouldn't be condemned for something they have no control over. And the full acceptance position is based on the idea that there is a rich diversity of creation which homosexuality is a part.
participate in such contradictory behavior—it has openly stated its position, which allows it to condemn the sin, yet exploit the sinner for his talent. But why would gays participate in signing their own demonization? One reason goes back to the importance of the church in the black community, particularly in one's social life. Many black gay males may feel they want and need the support of their communities and want to be included in the social activities, so they tolerate the weekly messages condemning their sexual orientation, as it is worth the benefit. Another reason might have something to do with what Boykin describes as homosexuals' *multiplicity of identities*. Multiplicity of identities implies homosexuality is only one part of a person's identity and therefore things like race and class are other aspects of a person’s identity. Thus for black gays and lesbians' their racial identity might be more salient than their sexual orientation in certain situations like church settings which would explain why they tolerate homophobic attitudes in church.

In another joke, a black man named Willie from Harlem has the job of driving a white woman home after she gets drunk. When they reach the door she tells him to pull off her coat. He does it. She then tells him to pull off her dress. Willie pulls off her dress. She then tells him to pull off her girdle. After he pulls that off, we hear the punch line when she tells him, “And never let me catch you with ’em on again you understand.”

4 The audience’s laughter at the punch line confirms cross dressing as deviant behavior. Until the punch line is delivered the audience is titillated by the possibility of a sexual taboo act between a black man and white woman. However, by the joke’s end we see a construction of a transgender male who wears dresses, girdles, and women’s jackets. The

4 Mabley, *Now Hear This*
only thing the audience is told about this male character is he wear’s women’s clothing. There is no mention of the word “fairy” or any others which might indicate we are to assume this is a female character such as a high pitched voice, thus we have to consider the male to be transgender. This was yet another denigration of an effeminate male.

The analysis of Mabley’s jokes on sexual orientation found a narrow range of depictions of sexual orientation. And all of the representations were of effeminate gay or transgendered males. Mabley's discourse offered no representations of lesbians. This omission, especially when viewed with the unsubstantiated rumor that Mabley herself was a lesbian, might be explained by a desire not to bring attention to her sexual orientation. Or it could be read as her struggle to reconcile her strong religious beliefs with her sexual orientation.

**Women’s Sexual Needs and Desires and Males’ Inability to Fulfill Them**

In one joke Mom uses a conversation between a man and a widow to contest the belief that widows should remain celibate and alone after their husbands died. When the widow says she has had another child the male responds by saying, “Your husband’s been dead 20 years.” (Mabley, 1960).

This statement is typical of the prevailing social attitudes regarding widows. He not only questions that she has had another child he seems to be surprised at even the possibility that she could be with someone else. Mom's response, “He’s dead. I ain't,” is a classical womanish response (Mabley, 1960). Considering the era this was not only courageous of Moms to say but it also shows her willful behavior in that she was going to do what she wanted to do. Women were not expected to be with anyone other than their husbands and certainly not expected to have sexual relations with anyone else. Because widows are usually older, unless an untimely death happens, on another level this joke
makes a comment concerning older women’s sexuality. Mabley’s “I ain’t” response expresses her belief that she's still living so why shouldn't she have fun. In other words, just because her husband's dead doesn't mean her life, particularly her sexual life, has to stop. Here the widow is seen as having power because Mabley wants to challenge the idea of what women are expected to do.

In another joke, Mabley takes a feminist position and challenges society’s double standards which had allowed men to date younger women but frowned when females exercised this freedom.

Let me tell you girls something. George took me home to the other night and kissed me. My big toe shot up in the air, just like that. My big toe shot up in the air, just like that (Mabley, 1960).

Mabley is bold in this joke and takes her feminist approach a step further when she says her “big toe shot up.” Restricted by the era and her gender to make direct sexual references, Mabley uses the “big toe” as an allusion for sexual arousal and to suggest that the job was done.

Another analysis of this joke is to consider it from the “boldness” perspective of which Walker also defines as womanist. Considering Mabley was in her 60s and her on stage granny persona, just the mention of her sexuality would be considered a daring statement. Especially since there’s the notion by some that age adversely affects or at least hinders one’s sexual desires.

As the joke continues again Mabley addresses the notions of what it means to be a proper lady:
He, he’s a nice boy though. Goes home, he goes to bed every night at 9:00. And he gets up at 4:00 and goes home. George makes me so mad. He knows I like him, you know. And he makes me so mad. I met, you know, I first met him, we was out West, you know (Mabley, 1960).

One gets the impression that George is a “nice boy” because he goes to bed at 9. Here playing on the “good girl, good boy” image, Mabley goes on to show how he’s not as good as we think he is because he goes home at 4 in the morning, implying he stayed the night at her house. Thus she is implicating them both, but especially herself, because during this era especially, but even now, a nice girl doesn’t stay overnight with a man who isn’t her husband. Thus without any apparent shame for her behavior Mabley is again challenging the notions of what it means to be a proper lady.

And finally by the joke’s end, Mabley manages to tackle another social taboo, cohabitation:

So he was going on his vacation. I said, “Baby, you gone take me.” He say, “Have gun, will travel.” I say, “Yeah, have knack and will shack, until gun gets back!” (Mabley, 1960).

Here the big toe is a connotation or reference to libido or sexual pleasure. And thus a signal for the job was done. Mabley’s comment that he’s a nice boy though would suggest that nice boys don’t have or give sexual pleasure to/with women. This contrast is put in to highlight the taboo of nice girls/guys having sexual pleasure. Mabley continues to draw on the good boy image by saying that he goes to bed at 9:00 which is a respectable hour. Thus, he's not out in the wee hours of the morning. Then she says he gets up at 4:00--she turns this “good” boy image on its head---4:00 in the morning is not an acceptable hour for a good girl/boy to be going home. The fact that he gets up suggests that he stayed overnight at her home. This overnight staying, especially
sleeping in the same bed with a man/woman to whom you were not married was highly frowned upon, particularly for women. Next, the guy says, “Have gun, will travel” (Mabley, 1960). To which Mabley responds, “Yeah, have knack and will shack until gun gets back” (Mabley, 1960).

It is important to make a note that he references a gun. This could be seen as a reflection of the measure some men would have taken to keep women in their place. Here the suggestion is that he would use a gun to control and keep her there while he traveled. She says have “knack”---the knack here is the tendency or ability for sexual relations. That’s why she says will shack. Here Mom has a female challenge this idea of women remaining faithful to men. Here she shows that she knew that the gun would be used and that she knew her place. But she insists that would still shack until the gun got back. In other words like the old saying ‘while the cat was away Moms would play.’

In another joke Mom uses a supposed misunderstanding of a word jaw (she heard it as drawers) to express sexual innuendo. Mabley retells the incident by saying the other passenger said, “Mom, drop your jaws. And I misunderstood her. I-I did. I-I did. (short pause) I caught a terrible cold. I did.” (Mabley, 1984).

We know it is drawers that she heard because she says she caught a cold. In order for her to catch a cold she had to not be wearing a particular clothing item. We know this code to be drawers (a slang term for undergarments). They sound alike. This joke is bold in the womanist way because Moms drops them without hesitation. Although she gets out of it by saying she misunderstood. If she couldn’t hear, why would she take off her underwear (that’s not going to solve the hearing problem), unless she wanted to. As the joke continues, Mabley has difficulties hearing due to air pressure and says to the
other passenger, “Honey do something. I’m dying. I can’t hear nothing.” (Mabley, 1984). This difficulty in hearing causes her to hear the word jaws as drawers, which is a slang term for panties. This is a malapropism which is often employed by comedians. Here the granny persona allows Mom to feign ignorance as an old lady with hearing problems while managing to use sexual innuendo. Sexual innuendo is suggested by her catching a cold because she wasn’t wearing any undergarments. Also Moms would be committing a taboo by taking off her undergarments in a public place.

While onstage, Mabley, in the granny mask, expressed her desire to sexually satisfy or “take care” of a young boy, when she says, “Let me take care of that little boy… I like the way that boy beats that drum. And I got an old beat up drum” (Mabley, 1962a).

Here Mabley challenges the perception of granny figures as sexually active. Not only does she proclaim her sexual active status she displays bravado and insists that she can still please a man, even a young one. Because Mabley often used double entendre “take care” could be interpreted as she would take care of him financially especially since wasn’t shy in telling her audiences she paid her younger boyfriends to be with her. This possible interpretation is ruled out when we consider her use of the word drum. Mabley used drum to signify her female organ, the vagina. And her use of the colloquial term “beat” which refers to some type of sexual act or penetration as in “beat her drum” we know that this joke is sexual innuendo.

In another joke, Mabley makes a direct reference to her husband’s inability to satisfy her sexually Mabley when admits, at his funeral, that she had him cremated when she says, “I burnt him up. I was determined he was gonna get hot one time anyhow” (Mabley, 1984).
The word “hot” is a connotation for sexual arousal. Mabley addresses this taboo topic of sex. Here she takes a direct jab at a male’s sexual inability to become sexually aroused and thus to please her. She also dealt a blow to males’ egos.

Mabley was stepping outside the expectations for her. The other female comedienne during this time often took puns at themselves or focused on domestic chores. But Mabley took a direct stab at males’ pride, egos, and sexual competence. This is a womanist attitude because of Mabley’s audacity to not only talk about a taboo subject but to also reference a man’s greatest pride, his sexual prowess. In this joke women are depicted in power. Mabley has the power to validate her late husband’s sexual competence. On the other hand, the male is shown to be powerless in the literal sense, not only because of his sexual incompetence but also because he is dead and can’t counter her claims. Mabley is exerting power to say that women have a say in evaluating male’s sexual incompetence. Also she is countering the belief that just because they say they are skilled in bed doesn’t mean it’s true. One must remember when evaluating this joke that Mabley was the lone black female comedienne in a field dominated by testosterone. Also this was the time during which the image of Mrs. June Cleaver was popularized and being circulated as the woman all others should emulate.
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As was stated earlier, there were two objectives of the present research. First, it sought to discover the ways in which the comedic discourse of Jackie “Moms” Mabley maintains and/or subverts the hegemonic values and norms reflected by our white, racist, patriarchal society. Second, it sought to identify the ways in which the discourse furthered or crippled the advancement of a progressive, liberationist agenda by activists.

Using a womanist perspective this thesis analyzed the comedy albums of Jackie “Moms” Mabley produced from 1960-1971 to identify the prevalent themes and the ways in which Mabley framed her discourse on race and gender. Ultimately, it sought to recognize the counter-hegemonic tendencies present in the texts and the ways in which Mabley used them to articulate her viewpoints on their everyday experiences with racism and sexism and how she ultimately subverted the hegemonic discourse to rearticulate her own identities. Identifying the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic elements present in her comedic discourse opens up a discussion about how its elements function to create, maintain and disseminate the values and norms of our dominant patriarchal racist system.

The findings of this study reveal that the comedic discourse of Jackie “Moms” Mabley was largely progressive in advancing a liberationist agenda/perspective for blacks and women. Mabley’s discourse had several strengths as it related to promoting a liberationist agenda for blacks. For example, one of the obvious strengths of her discourse is that it reflected the current social and political concerns of blacks during the 1960s and included discussions on topics such as unemployment, housing shortage,
An outgrowth of this strength is that it kept black issues on the national agenda and forced the nation to face them. Another strength of her discourse on blacks is that she went beyond espousing a progressive perspective about black issues and actually outlined an agenda for how black liberation could be achieved. In other words, she took the liberationist ideas about progression for blacks and summarized the areas in which improvement was needed and thus challenged blacks and whites to become social agents for remedying these problems or issues at hand. No doubt influenced by her faith in God and her country, she adopted an integrationist liberal perspective that was comprehensive in nature as it included political, economic, social and educational aspects. For example, in her discourse she frequently spoke about how education, suffrage (so that blacks could participate in the political process), employment and housing accommodations were needed to address the needs of blacks in addition to a call for a status for full citizenship and equality. Yet another strength of her discourse on race is she forced blacks to critically evaluate their own complicity in impeding their progress. Likewise, she revealed the absurdity of whites’ behaviors and attitudes on racism and toward blacks so they could evaluate their own prejudices, hypocrisy and the practices and institutions such as Jim Crow and the school system that were used to deny blacks equal rights.

Although Mabley’s discourse was largely strong in promoting a liberationist black agenda, it failed in her discourse on Africa. Essentially her discourse on Africa upheld the notorious colonial image of Africans as savages and effectively served to distance her from Africa and thus denied the strengths of her African heritage. This discourse indicated a lack of racial pride and is particularly important because it goes against one
the main principles of liberation theory which encourages individuals to embrace who they are and establish their own self-identity. Not only does this discourse hinder the social liberation of Africans it also has broader implications as it has the potential to hinder their economic liberation by reinforcing cultural images of blacks as incompetent buffoons. This discourse also undermines the connection between African Americans’ liberation and that of blacks across the Diaspora. Mabley undermines the black unity agenda through her decision to separate herself from over there, thus evoking an impression that she is not proud of her ethnic identity. This is a perfect illustration of the powerful effects of negative internalization and shows how agents of change themselves are affected by dominant culture racism.

Nonetheless, Mabley’s discourse on women advanced a liberationist perspective. For example, Mabley discussed topics such as women’s physical liberation from the restricting corsets, sexual liberation, and black women’s liberation from the mammy image. One of Mabley’s strengths in advancing a liberationist perspective for women was her mere presence in the male-dominated profession of stand-up comedy. Another strength was her consciousness–raising. She articulated and challenged society’s double standards regarding women’s behaviors. She encouraged women to explore their sexuality. Mabley’s discourse reflected the current of the emerging women’s movement which voiced the women’s dissatisfaction with their subordinate status and their gender roles. Mabley’s appropriation of the matriarchal character, which historically has been seen as a stereotypical representation of black women served as yet another strength. This matriarchal mask effectively allowed her to subvert the politics of race and gender.
On the other hand, her weakness lies in the fact that she never called for a course of action. However, given the mores, culture, and opportunities available to women, Mabley’s mere articulation of a liberationist agenda was a feat in itself because it really was forward thinking and very progressive behavior for the era.

Another strength of Mabley’s discourse is her total rejection of the mammy image. This was particularly important to the liberation of black women as it not only liberated black women from a stereotypical image but it also helped them to articulate a new self-identity.

Mabley’s discourse was weak in specifically addressing the topic of gender roles. While her career spoke directly to the issue of gender roles, it wasn’t specifically referenced in the discourse analyzed for this paper. Perhaps her total refusal to focus on such issues is a statement in itself on the limited acceptable roles available to women of her time.

Mabley’s humor reflected elements of all four stages/types of African American humor as identified in the introduction. However, it can mostly be characterized as in-group humor with an integrationist theme. Mabley’s humor was characteristic of the third stage of African American humor in that it was performed mostly for segregated audiences and included elements of conflict and control as identified in humor theories. Like the slaves, Mabley used her humor as a survival tool to overcome personal tragedies such as the death of her parents and rape. She also used it as an emotional tool to deal with the humiliating and often volatile circumstances that existed during Jim Crow. And she used her humor to barter for gain or advantage as in her example of avoiding a speeding ticket. Although, the accommodationist elements aren’t readily apparent in the
discourse analyzed here (and this may be due to the blacks insistence on condemning these practices and showing themselves in a new light), it can be assumed that if she performed on the TOBY circuit, her acts included some such elements. For example, her use of slapstick humor reflected the accommodationist stage as well as her use of comic antics, nonstandard English, and elements of conflict control reflect the third, in-group, stage of African American humor.

Using comedy as a vehicle, Mabley was able to enter the national dialogue on race relations and keep civil rights issues at the forefront of the American minds. Mabley presented her discourse on racism as one of absurdity.

However, the findings also indicate complicity with dominant ideology as it relates to the depictions of Africans and sexual orientation. Of the few examples where she did comment on homosexuality, Mabley offered very narrow depictions, choosing to only comment or give images of effeminate gay males. And there were no representations of lesbians. This seems somewhat of interest, that Mabley, who is rumored to have been a lesbian herself, chose not to even mention lesbians.

One possible explanation for her exclusion of lesbians in her discourse is that Mabley may not have wanted to “out” herself or bring undue attention to her sexual orientation. And she may have felt a sense of shame about her sexual orientation. She alludes to the shame some homosexuals may experience in her joke about the “fairy” attending church service where she comments “he felt shame you know.” Also, being that she was very spiritual as evidenced in her discourse, this may have been an area of her life where she may not have been able to reconcile her religious beliefs with her personal feelings. And finally, when one considers the racial climate and society’s
limited notions and constructions of homosexuality and gender during the era, Mabley’s race may have been more salient than her sexuality. Another study where information is collected about Mabley’s “private persona” is required to fully understand why Mabley wasn’t progressive or counterhegemonic on this topic.

**Research Questions Answered**

The findings of the research revealed that the themes of Mabley’s discourse reflect those articulated by Maria Stewart (cited in Richardson, 1987) as being characteristic of a black woman’s standpoint. These four themes were a legacy of struggle, activism, sensitivity to sexual politics, and a replacement of denigrating images with self-defined images through topics such as the civil rights movement. Mabley represented these themes through topics such as difficult economic times, the civil rights movement, and women’s sexuality.

The first research question asked about the range or representations offered in the discourse. The study found that Mabley offered a range of representations of black women, however, it was done so through her granny “mask.” For example, she depicted a nurturing matriarchal “mother” figure who defied culturally sanctioned notions of womanhood. In other jokes, she spoke about a granny figure who not only acknowledged but also enjoyed her sexuality through explicit talk. And she offered images of a “lady” advisor to the president who confronted world leaders and bigots on their policies and practices. Although these representations varied, they were consistent in defying the culturally-sanctioned behaviors and roles of the pious, pure, virtuous and submissive woman.

It is significant that Mabley used the image of the caring maternal figure especially considering this image pathologized black women as being the cause of black families’
poverty and as the reason for a lack of black male leadership in the family. (U.S. Department of Labor 1965). This stereotype of black women effectively penalized aggressive women, stigmatized them as unfeminine, and in many cases causes their abandonment by black men.

Interestingly, however, she excluded representations of domesticity. This exclusion of the domestic sphere is noticeable for a couple of reasons. First, domesticity was considered “women’s territory” and thus deemed a suitable and appropriate topic for women to discuss in public. Second, Mabley’s counterparts such as Erma Bombeck and Phyllis Diller were using domestic themes in their routines. Mabley’s refusal to talk about domestic topics exemplifies her resistance and reflects her will to define her own career path.

Another topic that Mabley omitted was a discussion the Black Nationalist movement. This absence is conspicuous especially since she performed during the height of Malcolm X’s popularity. Also, for the years examined during this study the civil rights movement had ended and the rise of the counterculture black nationalist movement was the order of the day. A closer examination highlights the omission as somewhat odd and perhaps even intentional, especially being that many of her albums were performed in the Harlem, New York area. This is especially true as the paper has noted that Mabley was abreast of the current events as reflected in her material. One reason for this may be that because she was very spiritual, she may not have shared the views espoused by Malcolm X. Or it could be a reflection of the discourse that was allowed and that which was censored. Although Mabley’s discourse was certainly counterhegemonic, Malcolm’s
discourse was considered radical and even dangerous by many, particularly his call for
the separation of races.

The third research question asked what were the functions of these themes for
blacks and women and the ways in which they were hegemonic and/or
counterhegemonic. The study found that economically, it helped Mabley earn a living
and to make profits. This is important, as noted in the biographical sketch, the
opportunities for black women were very limited. Politically, it informed and
influenced the thoughts and perceptions of her audiences and indirectly the national
government as it challenged it to make true on its promises and it kept the important
political issues on national conscious. Thus she used it to criticize those in office and
their actions and then gives the black communities response. She usually attacked the
administration on policy or character (image). In terms of policy, she attacked the
administration in three areas, future plans, general goals, and past deeds. For example,
she often criticized the government about the delay in the passage of the Civil Rights Bill
and about its failure to live up its promise of 40 acres and a mule.

Culturally, Mabley’s humor exposed the double standards regarding acceptable
occupations and roles for women and to challenge the double standard regarding
women’s sexuality. It set new standards for how women and society viewed their
sexuality and the preconceived notions of women. Most importantly, it provided inroads
for black women to enter the profession on their own terms, or at least with a model that
they could emulate which did not follow the traditional role expected of them and gave
them a model of success and a model that challenged the cult of true womanhood.
The fourth research question asked how the comedic performance was influenced by the historical context during which it was produced. The study found that the events of her times definitely provided the material for her comedy as they were its main topics, particularly the civil rights movement. The limitations and restrictions placed on women were also evident in Mabley’s discourse. This helps explain why she made use of a lot of double entendre, as there were many things she could not say because of her sex. The attitudes of the day regarding race, gender and sexual orientation also spilled over in her material. For example, the limited thinking regarding sexuality and the social construction of gender was evident in the discourse analyzed.

Epilogue: Present-Day State of Black Female Comedy

Jackie “Moms” Mabley is probably the best known and most successful of African American stand-up comedienne. And while there exists no major national figure with which to compare Mabley, there are a couple of contemporary comedienne whose work is of a similar vein and thus deserves mention. These comedienne are Whoopi Goldberg and Mo’Nique Imes Jackson, better known as Mo’Nique, who like Mabley have struggled to find their voices and balance themselves against the constraints of mainstream society. And while trying to strike this balance, they like Mabley often give inconsistent messages that although intended to be counter-hegemonic, aren’t.

Comedienne Whoopi Goldberg has been on the scene and worked the comedy circuits since approximately 1975. In the womanist tradition, Goldberg draws upon the legacy of struggle. Goldberg, like Mabley, overcame poverty and used her past dependency on public assistance as material in her performances. Goldberg’s humor, unlike Mabley’s, is performed mostly for integrated audiences and her material often takes aims at mainstream social issues. Recently, however, Whoopi has alienated many
audiences with her strong political views during a stand-up comedy routine at Kerry-
Edwards fundraiser in which she allegedly made an off-color remark about President
Bush. Whoopi, like many blacks in her comedic career has struggled to find the balance
between artistic freedom and social responsibility to her gender and race.

Mo’Nique who had her own sitcom, The Parkers, on UPN and who was the
headliner of the Queens of Comedy Tour, has found outlets for her comedy mainly in
heavily-populated African–American venues. Like Mabley, she evokes the womanist’s
tradition through her defiance of society’s stereotypes of women through by aggressively
dismissing society’s preoccupation with thinness. It is evident in her comedic routines
that she embraces her “fatness” at every opportunity. During the summer of 2004,
Mo’Nique hosted the BET Music Awards. During this show, she made frequent
wardrobe changes, emphasizing her voluptuous body. Many of her jokes during this
show emphasized her pride with her body size. Currently Mo’Nique is hosting
“Mo”Niques Fat Chance” on the television station Oxygen, a beauty contest for plus size
woman. Mo’Nique’s subversive humor is at best when she talks about the emphasis
society places on thinness. Monique’s comedy works and finds an audience because of
her willingness to reject society’s ideology of the perfect woman’s body size. However,
the humor is double-edged in that she alienates those persons who are not as voluptuous
with her criticisms of “skinny bitches.” Instead of Monique’s material simply valuing
plus size woman, her preoccupation with “skinny bitches” and vulgar language,
effectively does the same thing to skinny women as society does to big women, e.g., it
discriminates against them.
Implications of This Study

The rising commercial success and increasing popularity of stand-up comedy performances as a source of information for Americans places a great responsibility on African American comedians to be mindful of the discourses and representations they transmit about the everyday experiences of blacks and women. This responsibility becomes even more significant when we consider many policymakers and elected officials rely on the media for information (Ebo 1992, p. 22). The nonchalant attitude of the producers of comedy shows like Black Entertainment’s ComicView, reflected in its negative, stereotypical portrayals of blacks and women and their issues does nothing to fulfill this responsibility. Comedic performances should not only reflect the social and political concerns of blacks and women but it should do so in a novel manner that pushes forth an agenda to remedy the situation instead of trivializing the matter.

Another implication of this study is the potential of comedic discourse to aid or impede the efforts of activists. The manner in which comedic discourse is framed either furthers activists’ efforts on behalf of blacks and women or undermines it, impacting the work of activists like the Reverend Jessie Jackson and the Reverend Al Sharpton, whose work some black comedians trivialize.

Another implication of this study relates to the discourse on Africa. Negative discourses about Africa have the potential to undermine positive public sentiments towards Africans and African nations, ultimately impacting efforts for African social, political, and economic liberation. As Smith (1980, p. 110) noted, “The struggle to escape from our bad image of the Third World is an essential stage in its struggle for independence.” In other words, more positive discourse about Africa is essential to African liberation. Said another way, it is necessary for Americans to shed their negative
image of Africa, particularly those images which portray it as dependent on foreign
capital and resources for its liberation. This perception becomes very important when
one considers the formulation of foreign policy regarding the continent as it dictates the
level of foreign intervention.

Mabley’s discourse on Africa also has important implications as it relates to black
identity and racial pride. If there is no reversal by current black comedians of Mabley’s
references where she disassociates herself from the continent, blacks will continue to
internalize this racism, deny their African heritage, and continue denigrating their African
brothers and sisters. And on a broader level, blacks may never understand the larger
connection between their oppression and liberation and that of their African brothers and
sisters.

One of the most frightening implications of this study is that a failure to recognize
how this discourse functions in marginalizing Africans could encourage the proliferation
of the negative attitudes towards Africa that permitted the Rwandan genocide in 1994.

A positive implication of this research as it relates to women’s issues is it shows the
potential of discourse to subvert the dominant ideological attitudes toward women. For
example, Mabley’s discourse on rape subverted the dominant ideology that makes
women complicit in their own rapes and places women in control of the situation
whereby they are no longer victims.

The final implication relates to the discourse on gays, lesbians, and transgenders
and their quest for liberation. Mabley’s comedic discourse perpetuates traditional notions
of what it means to be masculine or feminine, further reinforcing the stereotypes of gays
and lesbians and discourages the act of “coming out.” It also ignores the complexity of
sexual identity. Like other forms of entertainment media, comedy reinforces what is normal in our society. Therefore, Mabley’s representations of the deviant fairy who is ashamed when he enters church reinforces is a contribution to the dominant ideological beliefs that articulate heterosexuality as natural and homosexuality is unnatural.

**Limitations of This Study**

Because this study was limited to studying the text and its historical context, it was limited in its ability to account for audience use and response to the material. While this discourse analysis provided invaluable information, it isn’t sufficient, in and of itself, to substantiate the claims argued in this paper that the images and representations of blacks and women in comedic discourse both influenced societal perceptions of these groups and have important policy implications. As Lewis (1991, p.47, italics in original) argued, “If we are concerned with the meaning and significance of popular culture in contemporary society, with how cultural forms work ideologically or politically, then we need to understand cultural products (or “texts”) ‘as they are understood by audience.’ Thus, a study of audience reception would have been necessary.

Another limitation is the assumption that the audience is made up of passive members who are incapable of recognizing the patriarchal and racist workings of ideology on certain topics and resisting it. Active audience research criticizes this assumption (Lull, 2003).

Also, an analysis of video recordings of Mabley’s stand-up performances could have further enriched the analysis by an exploration of the impact the visual images had in the meaning-making making process of the performances.

Finally, personal interviews with comedians that performed in the same era as Mabley, may have offered additional insight into the historical context, the nations’
mood, and the limitations blacks, and particularly black women, encountered in the profession. Interviews with Mabley’s male counterparts’ might have shed additional insight into the perceptions of the comedienne’s effectiveness on black political consciousness and the discursive practices of her time.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

Analyzing the comedic discourse of Jackie “Moms” Mabley was extremely helpful as it provided an excellent reference for future scholars to do a comparative study. Whereas this study explored the comedic discourse of the 1960s, an analysis of the discourse of Whoopi Goldberg and Mo’Nique Imes-Jackson, probably the two most commercially successful, contemporary black stand-up comedienne, would allow researchers to observe the recent trends in the profession. For example, scholars could compare the performance styles, topics, themes, and functions of the discourse of Goldberg and Mo’nique with that of Mabley. It is suggested that with such a comparative study researchers could not only identify the trends but they could also act as agents of change by stimulating a discussion on the politics of the present-day discourse and how it advances or hinders the liberation of blacks and women.

In addition, a comparative study of the discourse of Mabley and, say, Dick Gregory would help reverse the gender bias of comedic research. This is important because Gregory has always been held as the great black satirist of the 1960s, with hardly a mention that Mabley performed during the same period. Addressing this is important because black women are always in the background and their contributions are rarely acknowledged, especially by black men. Comparing the two will also reveal the different performance styles used by women when discussing controversial topics so they could make it in this male-dominated profession.
Finally, future work should continue to present marginalized voices like Mabley’s and should continue to highlight the ways that black women are acting as their own agents of change, subverting the status quo and challenging the racist patriarchal system in which we live.
APPENDIX A
SELECTED WORKS OF JACKIE “MOMS” MABLEY

2. *Live at the Greek Theater*. Mercury, SR-61360. (c. 1971). *
12. *Moms Mabley: Now Hear This*. Mercury, MG 21012/SR 61012

* Transcripts of these performances were provided in the appendix of The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley by Elsie Williams, pp. 154-172. Although these transcripts were consulted, none of the actual texts were used in the analysis.

** All other albums were transcribed by the author of this paper.
APPENDIX B
WOMANIST DEFINITION

Womanist

1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious). A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health. Traditionally, univeralist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”


4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.

APPENDIX C
CODING SHEET

Name of Album:
Copyright Date:
Place of Recording:

First, go through the text line by line and mark those chunks that suggest a category, or topic, based on key words. Use the following questions to assist in grouping the data into categories.

1) What appears to be the meaningfully cohesive topic unit?
2) What does the unit of discourse describe or what is the subject described as doing?
3) What is the underlying principle of this expression?

Repeat this process until no new categories can be created. Then, after going through all of the texts go back and count the number of incidents, or times this category or topic appeared. Tally up the incidents and identify the major categories. Finally, read through data, make connections between the categories, and determine what major themes emerge from these categories.
APPENDIX D
CATEGORIES AND THEMES

Categories

1. Integration
2. Segregation/Jim Crow
3. Sexual Innuendo
4. Sexuality
5. Sexual Organs
6. Civil rights and the movement itself
7. Homosexuality
8. Gender Identity/Sexual Orientation
9. Hard times (financially)/ Recession/Depression
10. Discrimination/Treatment of Blacks in the South
11. Hangings/Lynchings
12. Male sexual incompetence
13. International Community
14. Dialogue with Authority Figures
15. Critiques of government, policies, people, etc.
16. Older Women/Younger Men
17. Miscegenation
18. Vulgar Language
19. Negro Spirituals

Themes

1. Legacy of Struggle
2. Activism
3. Sensitivity to Sexual Politics
4. Replacement of denigrating images with self-defined images
LIST OF REFERENCES


Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Natasha Patterson graduated with her Master of Arts in Mass Communication and a Graduate Certificate in Latin American Studies from the University of Florida in August 2006. She received her Bachelor of Arts in communication studies from Florida State University.