

Moms Mabley and the Civil Rights Movement

Sarah Michelle Wolk

**California State University, San Marcos
Department of History
© 2012**

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY SAN MARCOS

THESIS SIGNATURE PAGE

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULLFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF ARTS

IN

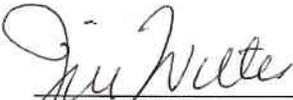
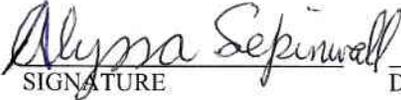
HISTORY

THESIS TITLE: **Moms Mabley and the Civil Rights Movement**

AUTHOR: **Sarah Michelle Wolk**

DATE OF SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE: **May 17, 2012**

THE THESIS HAS BEEN ACCEPTED BY THE THESIS COMMITTEE IN
PARTIAL FULLFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

Jill Watts		5/17/2012
_____ THESIS COMMITTEE CHAIR	_____ SIGNATURE	_____ DATE
Jeff Charles		5/17/12
_____ THESIS COMMITTEE MEMBER	_____ SIGNATURE	_____ DATE
Alyssa Sepinwall		5/17/12
_____ THESIS COMMITTEE MEMBER	_____ SIGNATURE	_____ DATE

Abstract

Moms Mabley's comedic performances during the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement are historically significant because she publicly highlighted the struggles of African Americans and women while simultaneously criticizing the marginalization and inequality these groups faced. Her commentary on gender, race, and politics demands scholarly attention because her comedy was shaped by her personal experiences as a black woman and because she provides important insight into the attitudes and experiences of African Americans, particularly black women, during the twentieth century. Mabley's comedy operated as a form of social protest because of her commentary on social issues like racism, her political criticisms, and her commentary on gender and female sexuality. Her work was unique and set her apart from her contemporaries, like male comedians Dick Gregory, Godfrey Cambridge, and later Richard Pryor, because she was dealing with gender as well as race. This intersection of gender and race paralleled the struggle of African-American women. Jackie "Moms" Mabley used her comedic performances to covertly protest racial and gender inequality in the United States during the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement. She used the platforms of the stage and comedy recordings to criticize the marginalization of African Americans and the exploitation of women, and did so for integrated audiences. Yet as a mainstream entertainer, whose performances were consumed by black and white audiences, Mabley was unable to explicitly challenge racism and sexism. Instead, she mediated her most subversive messages of protest through humor, song, and the use of the double-voice device.

Keywords: Moms Mabley, Comedy, African American, Gender, Civil Rights Movement

Contents

Acknowledgements	4
Introduction.....	5
Chapter One	22
Chapter Two	55
Chapter Three.....	87
Conclusion	117
Bibliography	123

Acknowledgements

I am incredibly humbled by and grateful for the support I have received while completing this master's thesis. I would first like to thank my committee members, Jeff Charles and Alyssa Sepinwall, for their enthusiasm, flexibility, and helpful insights. My thesis advisor, Jill Watts, has been an invaluable source of inspiration and encouragement. Professor Watts, thank you for compassionately pushing me throughout this process and for always knowing what I was capable of, even when I was less sure. Your influence will be present in my work far beyond this project. I thank my family for always believing in me, and for their love and support. Lastly, I would like to thank Bryan for his patience and love, and for always taking a genuine interest in my work. You have been a sustaining presence throughout this process.

Introduction

This thesis will provide an analysis of comedienne Jackie “Moms” Mabley and her performances during the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement. Moms Mabley was an African-American performer most commonly known for her stand-up comedy, with a career spanning the period from the 1910s until her death in 1975. She began working in vaudeville and toured on the Theater Owners’ Booking Association (T.O.B.A.), the theater circuit for African-American performers and audiences in the 1910s and 1920s. On the T.O.B.A. she eventually evolved her role as “Moms” and established herself as one of the earliest examples of a black woman doing standup comedy in America.¹ The work of Moms Mabley provides an important example of popular culture’s relationship with the Civil Rights movement because of her outspoken commentary on social and political issues, and because of her widespread popularity and influence on other entertainers.

While Mabley’s career spanned roughly six decades, this project will focus on her work in the period from 1960 to 1975 in order to highlight the significance of her commentary on civil rights and women’s rights. Although the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement spanned a greater time period, the years I will focus on are significant for my research because 1960 marked her transition from solely performing on stage to recording spoken word albums, first with Chess and then later with Mercury

¹ Elsie A. Williams, *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African American Comedic Tradition* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), ix.

records. Additionally, during this era, she commenced her television career, which expanded her popularity and provided her with more mainstream exposure. Furthermore, beginning my analysis in 1960 will allow me to focus on Mabley's commentary at a time when the movement was gaining momentum, particularly with the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, which outlawed major forms of discrimination against African-Americans, including segregation.²

Moms Mabley's comedic performances during this period are historically significant because she publicly highlighted the struggles of African Americans and women while simultaneously criticizing the marginalization and inequality these groups faced. Her commentary on gender, race, and politics demands scholarly attention because her comedy was shaped by her personal experiences as a black woman and because she provides important insight into the attitudes and experiences of African Americans, particularly black women, during the twentieth century. Mabley's comedy operated as a form of social protest because of her commentary on social issues, particularly racism, her political criticisms, and her commentary on gender and female sexuality. Her work was unique and set her apart from her contemporaries, like male comedians Dick Gregory, Godfrey Cambridge, and later Richard Pryor, because she was dealing with gender as well as race. This intersection of gender and race paralleled the struggle of African-American women.

Mabley acknowledged the serious nature of her comedy in a 1960 interview when she insisted that "the way the world's going now, it's funny. It is, it's comedy. And

² Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 79.

especially the truth. The things I record, very few of them are jokes.”³ Her insistence that she was simply observing the world around her and speaking the truth sheds light on her intentions as a performer, and highlights the historical significance of her work. Mabley’s blunt evaluations of American society, particularly race and gender relations, provide an important source for historical analyses of the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement.

My project will intersect with three different historiographies: the history of the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement, history of African-American comedy, and history of Jackie “Moms” Mabley. The historiography of the Civil Rights Movement is arguably the most developed of the three and falls into three main schools, as outlined by Steven F. Lawson in his article “Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement.”⁴ Scholars writing about the movement in the 1960s and 1970s approached the subject at the national level by focusing on major leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. They emphasized the political history of the movement and focused on judicial and legislative advances. In the 1970s and 1980s, scholars shifted the focus to the local level, and highlighted the importance of grassroots activities. This historical focus moved beyond emphasizing the political and legal components of the movement by highlighting the importance of social activism and change. Lawson refers to David J. Garrow’s *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement* as an important source for Civil Rights historiography up to this point. The third school combines the two approaches outlined above by attempting to unite the grassroots, social

³ Studs Terkel, *The Spectator: Talk About Movies and Plays With the People Who Make Them* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 281.

⁴ Steven Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement" in *The American Historical Review* 96, no. 2 (1991): 456-471.

components of the historiography with the national political components. This third direction relates most closely to my project because of the nature of Mabley's work in relation to the Civil Rights movement. Her comedy spoke to the social aspect of the movement by reflecting the everyday struggles of those advocating for change. She also commented extensively on national politics.⁵

However, my project will also shift away from the historiographical approach of this last school. As Lawson asserts in his article, there are still areas of the Civil Rights movement history that need more exploration. One of these areas is the involvement of women. While there has been some historical research on the topic, there is room for considerable expansion. The work that has been done is generally specific and focused on individual activists, such as Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ella Baker, but not on female 'cultural workers' like Mabley. According to Lawson, "any definitive analysis of gender relations in the movement awaits basic research on female participants, leaders, and followers."⁶ Since the publication of Lawson's article in 1991, some works have addressed the need for historical analysis of women's involvement in the Civil Rights movement. The reader *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* and *Sisters in the Struggle*, a compilation of essays, discuss the variety of ways women were involved in the movement and aim to present their perspectives.⁷ These texts focus on national leaders like Parks and Hamer, local leaders like Septima Clarke and Modjeska Simkins, and also provide an overview of the

⁵ Ibid., 457.

⁶ Ibid., 467.

⁷ Vicki L. Crawford et al., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin, *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

experiences of female activists. *Women in the Civil Rights Movement* argues that the involvement of black women in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was a continuation of a long-standing tradition of black women playing significant roles in the struggle for African-American freedom and equality. The text also discusses the cultural significance of song in the freedom struggle, the contributions of the Free Southern Theater, and the role of women as transmitters of culture. *Sisters in the Struggle* explores black women's involvement in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and asserts that this involvement impacted their social and political consciousness, especially in relation to gender. *Hands on the Freedom Plow* is a compilation of personal accounts of SNCC activists and focuses primarily on leaders and local activism. The authors assert that women comprised the majority of Civil Rights movement participants; *Hands on the Freedom Plow* fills in gaps in the Civil Rights historiography by focusing on first-hand accounts of female Civil Rights activists, and this approach demonstrates the breadth participation in the movement.⁸ *At the Dark End of the Street* shifts the focus of Civil Rights movement historiography by making black women's resistance to sexual violence the central issue. The author asserts that the sexual exploitation of African-American women at the hands of white men is central because this exploitation was a tool used to maintain institutionalized racism, and black women's protests against this exploitation inspired "larger campaigns for racial justice and human dignity."⁹ Focusing on Mabley's work will contribute to this historiography because of Mabley's commentary on gender and sexuality. *At the Dark End of the Street* is especially relevant to Mabley because she

⁸ Faith S. Holsaert et al., *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

⁹ Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance-A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Knopf, 2010), xix.

was likely a victim of sexual abuse. Her performance work provided a critical response to this issue, and was a site of resistance to sexual dominance.

Finally, my project will contribute to the existing historiography because of my emphasis on culture. While *Women in the Civil Rights Movement* does include some discussion of culture, it is limited and locally focused. The Civil Rights movement historiography has traditionally focused on the politics and social aspects of the movement and presents the cultural aspect of the movement at best as secondary. Daniel Widener has shifted this perspective in his book *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* by emphasizing the centrality of culture in the Civil Rights movement.¹⁰ Richard Iton emphasizes the importance and centrality of culture to the Civil Rights Movement, and to black politics in general, in his book *In Search of the Black Fantastic*.¹¹ He asserts that culture provides a space for black politics, and that it has lent a voice to African Americans when they had been historically marginalized in all other arenas of American life. I intend to continue the shift that these scholars have initiated by focusing on mass culture in my study of the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement.

The current historiography on African-American comedy is not as extensive as the historiography on the Civil Rights movement. There are not yet any major scholarly debates on the subject, and much of the current historical discussion of African-American comedy is grouped as a component of literary analysis. Examples of this approach can be found in Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Consciousness: Afro-American Folk*

¹⁰ Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹¹ Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics & Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Thought from Slavery to Freedom and Roger D. Abrahams's *Singing the Master: The Emergence of African American Culture in the Plantation South*. Levine's text argues that it is impossible for scholars to understand the history and culture of African-Americans without examining black folk sources. He uses these sources to demonstrate the shifts that took place in African-American expressive culture after Emancipation. Levine asserts that African-Americans had to alter their verbal creativity once they were free, but that this newfound freedom also inspired new creative energies.¹² Abrahams's book analyzes the antebellum corn-shucking ceremony of southern slaves to demonstrate how African-Americans used the event as a platform to create a sense of community and express social commentary. He uses this example to argue that black cultural forms have historically emerged in the midst of oppression.¹³

However, the historiography on African-American comedy is growing and comedy is slowly gaining attention from interdisciplinary writers. Mel Watkins's extensive study of black comedic traditions in his book *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying* is an example of this development. He discusses Mabley's comedy and identifies her adoption of the older woman persona as a guise that enabled her to suppress public resistance to a black woman doing a single comic routine. He also identifies Mabley as "one of the pioneers of social satire at the Apollo."¹⁴ In his work, Watkins examines the relationship between the public and private expressions of African-American humor, and the changes over time these traditions have exhibited. My

¹² Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

¹³ Roger D. Abrahams, *Singing the Master: The Emergence of African-American Culture in the Plantation South* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992).

¹⁴ Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying-The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, From Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 391.

project will provide an example of Watkins's observations because the content of Mabley's comedy changed over time, and in relation to the changes taking place in America. The historiography on African-American comedy is largely in agreement about the ability to historically trace African-American comic traditions to the era of slavery, and back to African roots.

The historiography on Jackie "Moms" Mabley is the least developed of the categories outlined above, and there are not any significant scholarly debates about Mabley or her performance work. No major books have been written about her in the field of history, or in any other scholarly field. Elsie A. Williams's dissertation about Mabley titled *The Humor of Jackie "Moms" Mabley: An African American Comedic Tradition* is the most extensive work on Mabley. Williams provides biographical information about Mabley and analyzes her work from a literary perspective, with an emphasis on rhetoric. Her text focuses on Mabley's role as a storyteller in the African and African-American traditions. She argues that Moms Mabley's comedy and her use of traditional cultural roots are a reflection of African-American culture and history since slavery, and that the longevity of her career provides context for assessing black humor. According to Williams, Mabley represents the adaptive nature of black comedy using four categories: "the plantation survivalist, the accommodationist, the in-group social satirist, and the integrationist."¹⁵

Aside from Williams's coverage of Mabley in her dissertation, Mabley is also discussed in a few articles published in scholarly journals and African-American publications. These articles provide biographical information about Mabley, as well as brief discussions about her comedy, commentary, and influence on other entertainers.

¹⁵ Williams, *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley*, 7.

“Contemporary Negro Humor as Social Satire” by Nancy Levi Arnaz and Clara B. Anthony discusses the historical ability of African-Americans to laugh through suffering and heartbreak since slavery, and argues that “laughing to keep from crying” has characterized the African-American experience. The authors outline three distinct stages in the history of African-American humor: the first and earliest is characterized by oral tradition and uses in-group humor, the second stage is public and uses half-truth caricatures found in images like blackface. The third stage is also public, but is self-conscious, image-creating, and uses social satire. The authors identify Mabley’s usage of social satire to critique racial inequality and to highlight the absurdity of the race issue.¹⁶

“Comic Views and Metaphysical Dilemmas: Shattering Cultural Images through Self-Definition and Representation by Black Comediennes” by DoVeanna S. Fulton analyzes the work of black comediennes in more recent years and focuses on the performers of “Def Comedy Jam.” She argues that these women are drawing on the tradition established by Mabley when they present themselves as nonthreatening and familiar, even when the content of their performances may be risqué, explicit, and critical.¹⁷

“Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival” by Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson asserts that Mabley’s comedy draws on folk sources, such as soul food and her motherly appearance, to create a kinship bond with her audiences.¹⁸ In Trudier Harris’s article “Moms Mabley: A Study in Humor, Role-Playing and the Violation of Taboo” the author

¹⁶ Nancy Levi Arnez and Clara B. Anthony, “Contemporary Negro Humor as Social Satire,” *Phylon* 29, no. 4 (1968): 339-346.

¹⁷ DoVeanna S. Fulton, “Comic Views and Metaphysical Dilemmas: Shattering Cultural Images Through Self-Definition and Representation by Black Comediennes,” *Journal of American Folklore* 117, no. 463 (2004): 81-96.

¹⁸ Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson, “Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival,” *American Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1985): 81-97.

identifies Mabley's process of living a fiction by creating a stage character and blurring the line between her art and her reality.¹⁹

While these articles do discuss her relationship with the Civil Rights movement, there has not been very much in-depth analysis about the significance of her commentary. Furthermore, a major issue present in the current historiography is the inconsistent and incomplete coverage of Mabley's biographical information, particularly in regard to her early life and her initial entry into show business. In addition to what has been written about Mabley specifically, she is given third level mention in a variety of texts discussing other African-American comedians and entertainers. When she is mentioned in this way, it is usually for the purpose of providing historical background for black comedy and context for the featured artist's predecessors or contemporaries. Her inclusion in this manner highlights the importance of Mabley's contributions to African-American comedy.

This project makes a unique and significant contribution to the current historical literature on the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement, on African-American comedy, and on Jackie "Moms" Mabley. This study will make popular culture central in the discussion of the Civil Rights movement, rather than a secondary component. Culture has been given a centralized focus in Widener's text *Black Arts West*. However, Widener does not examine mass culture, which is what my thesis focuses on by analyzing Mabley's recorded stand-up comedy. Furthermore, I am moving beyond what has been written about Mabley by illustrating how the Civil Rights movement was central to her comedy. Her performance work is significant because of the insight it provides in regard

¹⁹ Trudier Harris, "Moms Mabley: A Study in Humor, Role Playing, and the Violation of Taboo," *The Southern Review* 24, no. 4 (1988): 765-776.

to people's experiences in the Civil Rights movement, especially black women, and because she reflected the frustrations and concerns of the grassroots social and political movements that were addressing the issues of African Americans and women in the 1960s and 1970s. By focusing on Mabley and her performance work, I intend to expand our current historical understanding of the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement and the role of popular culture, race, and gender in the movement.

Jackie "Moms" Mabley used her comedic performances to covertly protest racial and gender inequality in the United States during the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement. She used the platforms of the stage and comedy recordings to criticize the marginalization of African Americans and the exploitation of women, and by the 1960s did so for integrated audiences. Yet as a mainstream entertainer, whose performances were consumed by black and white audiences, Mabley was unable to explicitly challenge racism and sexism. Instead, she mediated her most subversive messages of protest through humor, song, and the use of the double-voice device. Mabley used the double-voice to uphold racist and sexist stereotypes and play to white audiences' expectations, while simultaneously challenging them. She also used the double-voice to give her performances multiple meanings. This approach resulted in messages of protest and anger layered under humorous anecdotes about things like her pursuit of younger men, her attempt to claim political rights, and her role as a presidential advisor. Taken at face value, her stories could be seen as absurd and elicited laughter among both black and white audiences. However, the deeper messages of her comedy held the true value of Mabley's performance work. These deeper messages of protest often worked as in-jokes

with her black audiences, who were undoubtedly more familiar with the double-voice technique and its basis in the larger African-American tradition of signifying.

Signifying is a complex component of black literary and vernacular culture. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. provides an analysis of the tradition in his book, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. This tradition is complex and self-reflexive, and incorporates the use of figurative and indirect speech and language, implication, contradiction, innuendo, repetition, and revision. Signifying devices can be found in black literature and vernacular, and play an important role in African-American comedy.²⁰ Moms Mabley utilized signifying in her comedic performances, particularly the double-voice device, which injects multiple meanings into a speaker's statement and layers humor over messages of protest and resistance.

Gates's text provides historical background on the tradition of signifying and its role in African-American expressive culture. He traces the roots of signifying to West Africa, and makes connections between the signifying traditions of African and African-American cultures. Gates's analysis focuses on two main figures that embody this tradition: Esu-Elegbara from West Africa, who later appears as "the signifying monkey," which Gates argues provides the basis for African-American oral traditions.²¹ These are trickster figures, and variations of these characters can be found across black societies. While these figures go by different names in their respective regions and cultures, they represent a unified concept of the double-voiced trickster. Gates identifies two main forms of signifying: motivated and unmotivated. Unmotivated signifying draws on pastiche, works to create unity within a culture, and is often used by artists to pay homage

²⁰ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

²¹ *Ibid.*, xx.

to other artists. Motivated signifying, which is the mode of signifying that Mabley typically utilized in her critical commentary, is based in parody and sarcasm.²²

Gates references folklorist Roger D. Abrahams's definition of signifying as it "refers to the trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo...it can mean to talk about a subject, never getting to the point. . ." ²³ He also identifies signifying as an indirect argument that works through persuasion and the language of implication. Signifying relies on figurative speech, rather than literal speech and language.²⁴ The African-American stories of the trickster who uses signifying can be paralleled with Mabley's (often implicit) criticisms of racism and sexism in her comedy routines. In the story of the Signifying Monkey, the Monkey demystifies the Lion's self imposed status as King of the Jungle.²⁵ According to Gates:

Motivated signifying is the sort in which the monkey delights; it functions to redress an imbalance of power, to clear a space, rhetorically. To achieve occupancy in this desired space, the monkey rewrites the received order by exploiting the Lion's hubris and his inability to read the figurative other than as the literal.²⁶

This description heavily applies to Mabley's performance work. She is the embodiment of the trickster, while the Lion represents the system of racist white patriarchy. As a black woman, Mabley remains part of a marginalized group. However, just as the trickster uses rhetoric to challenge the power of the Lion and create a space for himself, Mabley injects trickster rhetoric into her comedy to challenge the power of white racism and sexism while creating empowering spaces for herself and the groups she

²² Ibid., 4.

²³ Ibid., 54.

²⁴ Ibid., 75.

²⁵ Ibid., 56.

²⁶ Ibid., 124.

represents. These spaces are fictional, but work as foundations of protest. Finally, just as the trickster takes advantage of the Lion's blind pride and his inability to identify the true meaning of the trickster's rhetorical attacks, it can be assumed that the deeper meanings of Mabley's criticisms were often lost on her white audiences. The fact that despite her criticisms of white society Mabley enjoyed mainstream success among integrated audiences suggests that her jokes were most likely taken at face value by many white audiences who were untrained in the black tradition of signifying. The trickster figure, which can also be identified as the clown figure, was an important part of Moms Mabley's performance persona and technique. Like the classic trickster, Mabley reinforced the expectations of her white audiences while she simultaneously challenged and protested these stereotypes.

The tradition of blues music in the United States was born out of signifying, and also informed Moms Mabley's performance work. Although Mabley was primarily a comedienne, she began her entertainment career on the T.O.B.A. circuit and was undoubtedly influenced by the blues. Mabley revealed in multiple interviews that when she first began performing, she included singing and dancing in her routines. She also performed with blues queen, Bessie Smith, on multiple occasions.²⁷ Blues music, in general, has historically served as a form of protest against racism and classism in the United States. Female blues musicians have taken this protest a step further by using the art form to criticize sexism and patriarchy at the hands of black and white men. Angela Y. Davis explores the unique role of blues women in her book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. She argues that there are multiple black feminist traditions, and that the music

²⁷ Studs Terkel, *The Spectator: Talk About Movies and Plays With the People Who Make Them* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 281.

of early blues women allows scholars to examine a “historical feminist consciousness that reflected the lives of working-class black communities.”²⁸ In her work, Davis aims to move away from black social consciousness being over-determined by race, and instead looks at the intersection of class, race, gender, and feminism presented in the music of early blues women. She argues that the literature on black feminism focuses on middle-class women and excludes poor and working-class women. Blues music provides a site for these excluded women to be represented. Unlike the more conservative approach of middle-class black feminist intellectuals, who relied on written texts, the blues women used oral texts and incorporated sexuality into their protests.²⁹

According to Davis, women’s blues, and the working-class feminism it represented, was significant because it was addressing multiple levels of marginalization. This brand of feminism challenged the assumptions that the origins of feminism are white and middle-class, and that race takes precedence over gender in black communities’ fights for equality. While blues music challenged racism, women’s blues also “contested patriarchal assumptions about the women’s place both in the dominant culture and in African-American communities.” It also “affirmed women’s capacities in domains assumed to be the prerogative of males, such as sexuality.”³⁰ Mabley’s performance work draws from this feminist blues tradition and adapts it to the realm of stand-up comedy. Like the blues women Davis discusses in her text, Mabley’s forms for protest were the stage and her oral texts. Mabley’s performance work was also similar to the blues women because of her use of humor, her unabashed assertion of her sexuality, and

²⁸ Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), xv.

²⁹ Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, xi.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

her assertion of power in the face of male dominance. Finally, like the blues women, Mabley's protest against racism was part of her larger attack on sexism and against the exploitation of women. Mabley effectively translated the tradition of blues women to stand-up comedy, which was a space that excluded women-especially black women.

Mabley also adapted the structure and form of the blues to her comedy performances. Blues music is often improvised and free flowing in form, which conveys a sense of immediacy and emphasizes the importance of the performer's message. This approach was exhibited in Mabley's frequent use of ad-libbing³¹. Blues traditionally relies on the twelve-bar, three-line AAB pattern where the first two lines are repeated (often with slight variations) and rhyme with the third line. Mabley would often utilize this repetitive structure to emphasize the punch lines of her jokes. She also included songs in her comedy monologues, which further illustrates her blues influence.³²

The methodologies I am using in my project are archival research and content analysis of textual and audiovisual evidence. Moms Mabley performed in the media of television, film, and stage. This project primarily focuses on her stage performances and analyzes recordings of those that took place between 1960 and 1972. These recordings are the best available source on Mabley's performances, but it is important to note that they have most likely been impacted by what record producers and record labels chose to issue. These recordings offer only a sampling of Mabley's performances, but they provide important insight into some of her comedy and how it changed in the 1960s and early 1970s. In addition to analyzing Mabley's commentary in these performances, I

³¹ Allan Moore ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Blues and Gospel Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 20-22.

³² Paul Oliver *Broadcasting the Blues: Black Blues in the Segregation Era* (New York: Routledge Press, 2006), 3.

have utilized interviews, public records, and magazine and newspaper articles on Mabley to better understand her views on gender, race issues, and contemporary politics.

This thesis is divided into three main chapters. The first chapter provides a brief biography on Mabley and an analysis of her performance persona. Chapter one will then outline Mabley's commentary on gender and sexuality and her use of the stage to resist male patriarchy and the sexual exploitation of women. Chapter two focuses on Mabley's commentary on race, segregation, and Jim Crow traditions. Her commentary in this chapter reflected the shifts taking place in the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement, and reflects her message of protest against white racism. The third chapter will analyze Mabley's commentary on American politics during this time period, and the role politics played (and failed to play) in civil rights progress for African Americans. Taken together, these three chapters work to provide an historical understanding of Mabley's comedy and its relationship with the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement.

Chapter One

Moms Mabley, Gender, and Sexuality

Moms Mabley used her comedy performances to challenge the marginalization and exploitation of women, particularly African-American women, during the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement. Her commentary on gender and sexuality was consistent throughout her comedy recordings from the 1960s and 1970s, which can be attributed to the overwhelming popularity of Mabley's jokes about men and sexuality, as well as to the fact that the oppression of women during this time remained consistent. It can also be attributed to the fact that women's issues were at the forefront in the 1960s with the rise of post-war feminism. Furthermore, Mabley's attacks on white male patriarchy informed her commentary on race and politics. The main site of Mabley's protest against sexism was her frequent assertion of her sexual desires. She displayed this assertion by expressing her desire for younger men and her disdain for older men. Similarly, Mabley presented herself as a sexually desirable woman in order to protest ageism directed at older women like herself. Additionally, Mabley highlighted her economic independence and success as an entertainer in order to reject male control of women. Mabley's blues-inspired, working-class feminism informed her commentary on gender and sexuality, as well as her performance persona.

Mabley's carefully crafted performance persona was a critical component of her comedy and commentary. In order to understand and appreciate the development of this persona, a reader needs to know about Mabley's personal history. Many of her

biographical details are contradictory, fictional, or untraceable, which makes her life's story vague at points. However, the information that is available is revealing and significant. Jackie "Moms" Mabley was born Loretta Mary Aiken in Brevard, North Carolina on March 19, 1897. According to Mabley, she was of mixed black, Cherokee Indian, and Irish ancestry.³³ Her family was well off, and her father owned several businesses in Brevard and was financially successful. He was also a volunteer firefighter for the community, and when Loretta Mary was eleven years old he was killed when the fire truck he was riding in overturned. There have been multiple variations of Mabley's story following her father's death, but most sources indicate that she was raped at the age of eleven by an older black man and again at age thirteen by the white town sheriff. Mabley verified this fact when she said in an interview "I was raped and everything else."³⁴ Both rapes resulted in pregnancies for the teenaged Mabley. She left the children in the care of two women, and the women subsequently disappeared with them. She was not reunited with the children until they were adults.³⁵ While some sources say she left Brevard when she was fourteen, North Carolina birth records indicate that she had a baby near her hometown when she was sixteen.³⁶ Mabley insisted in one interview that she left home when she was fifteen.³⁷

Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact year that Mabley left Brevard, all sources agree that she left home to pursue a career in entertainment when she was a teenager. Most indicate that she did not get along with her stepfather, George Parton.

³³ "Moms Mabley," *Current Biography*, January 1975, 28.

³⁴ Geoffrey F. Brown, "Moms Mabley Didn't Die; She Just Chuckled Away," *Jet*, June 12, 1975.

³⁵ Richelle B. Curl, "Moms Mabley," in *Black Heroes of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jessie Carney Smith (Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1998), 451-452.

³⁶ "North Carolina, Birth Index, 1800-2000," index, FamilySearch.

³⁷ Studs Terkel, *The Spectator: Talk About Movies and Plays With the People Who Make Them* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 277.

Some suggest that he was the one who forced her to marry an older man, one whom she would later joke about on her comedy records. No evidence so far indicates a marriage for the young Mabley, but this does not rule out the possibility that she was forced into an undocumented arrangement. Nonetheless, it is clear that she moved to Cleveland as a teenager to live with a minister's family. It was during this time that she met Bonnie Bell Drew, an entertainer who became her mentor. Drew invited Mabley to go with her to Pittsburgh, where Mabley began performing on the T.O.B.A. circuit for \$12 a week.³⁸

Mabley was brought into the "big time" in the early 1920s by the successful comedy duo, Butterbeans and Susie. They included her in their sketch, "Rich Aunt from Utah," and she followed them to New York City where she began performing at Connie's Inn in 1923.³⁹ According to Mabley, after moving north she did not return to the South for another thirty years.⁴⁰ This avoidance of the South, and her participation in the Great Migration (the massive exodus of southern blacks to cities in the Northeast and Midwest beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century) influenced her later commentary on race during the era of the 1960s.⁴¹ Mabley regularly rejected the South and its racism on her comedy records of the 1960s and 1970s, and her personal history undoubtedly informed this rejection.

Moms Mabley's debut at Connie's Inn led to performances at other popular venues like Club Harlem and the Cotton Club, establishing her as a part of the Harlem Renaissance. It was during this time that her brother expressed embarrassment about his

³⁸ Curl, "Moms Mabley," 451-452.

³⁹ *Current Biography*, 29.

⁴⁰ Mark Jacobson, "Amazing Moms," *New York Magazine*, October 14, 1974, 46.

⁴¹ Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South From Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 456.

sister working in show business. In response, she adopted the name of a boyfriend, Jack Mabley, and became Jackie Mabley. According to Mabley, “he took a lot off me, the least I could do was take his name.”⁴² She reportedly earned her stage name, Moms, because of her compassion and willingness to help her fellow performers. Her earlier performances consisted of singing, dancing, and comedy skits with other performers, but she eventually became known for her comedy.⁴³ During this time, Mabley began to develop the monologue routines that would hereafter define and dominate her performances.⁴⁴ In addition to her performances in black clubs, Mabley also worked on Broadway during the 1920s and 1930s and appeared in *Fast and Furious*, *Swinging the Dream*, and *Blackbirds*.⁴⁵ Her growing popularity also led to movie roles; she appeared in *Emperor Jones* (1933), *Killer Diller* (1947), and *Boardinghouse Blues* (1948).⁴⁶ In 1939 she began a regular stint at Harlem’s Apollo Theater that would last into the 1960s. During this period, she appeared at the Apollo Theater more frequently, and eventually for a higher salary, than any other performer.

Up until this point, Moms Mabley was virtually unknown to white audiences as a result of segregation. However, she began to enjoy mainstream success among integrated audiences after releasing records of her comedy performances through Chess, and later beginning in 1964, Mercury records. Her first record, *Funniest Woman in the World*

⁴² *Current Biography*, 29.

⁴³ Curl, “Moms Mabley,” 451-453.

⁴⁴ Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying and Signifying: The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 390.

⁴⁵ Richelle B. Curl, “Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley,” in *Notable Black American Women* ed. Jessie Carney Smith (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1992), 689.

⁴⁶ Elsie Arrington Williams, “Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley,” in *Facts on File Encyclopedia of Black Women in America: Theater Arts and Entertainment* ed. Darlene Clark Hine (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1997), 136.

(1960), went gold after selling over one million copies. This insured her crossover success and exposed new audiences to her unique and critical humor.⁴⁷

Mabley enjoyed major success in the 1960s and 1970s, but she was a controversial performer and experienced criticism as well. The nature of her comedy limited her performances to party records, which were intended for adult audiences. This relegation, along with the criticism she received, suggests that she was not entirely embraced by the black community. According to Mel Watkins, she was limited in her earlier career because of her type of humor. He explains that she was excluded from films until the forties because her humor was “aggressively irreverent” before this type of African-American comedy was acceptable. “Her brand of humor was therefore probably too risky, perhaps even risqué, for Hollywood’s early sound films,” he argues.⁴⁸ Watkins also asserts that she was initially bypassed for integrated stand-up comedy shows in the 1950s for this reason.⁴⁹ The *Chicago Defender* reported a similar response to Mabley in 1946, when the audience at Atlantic City’s Club Harlem complained that she didn’t “jibe” well with the classy show.⁵⁰ Mabley also received criticism from the opposite end of the spectrum. According to Elsie A. Williams, “in the revolutionary sixties, Mabley’s egalitarian and fraternal philosophy netted the accusation from some African Americans that ‘Moms was an Uncle Tom,’ a throwback to the accomodationist era.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ Darryl Littleton, “Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley,” in *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How African-Americans Taught Us to Laugh* (New York: Applause Theater & Cinema Books, 2006), 79.

⁴⁸ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 225.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 493.

⁵⁰ *Chicago Defender*, August 10, 1946.

⁵¹ Elsie A. Williams, *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African American Comedic Tradition* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 129.

Moms Mabley was very secretive about her private life, which largely explains the vague nature of her biography. One possible reason for her secrecy was to avoid discussing her painful past. She also kept her personal life a secret in order to maintain a barrier between herself and her audiences, and to maintain a position of authority. This was crucial for the development of the “Moms” persona. Mabley began cultivating this persona when she was in her twenties, largely as a form of protection. It was unusual and largely frowned upon for a woman to be doing stand-up comedy when she started her career, so she created a guise. According to Mel Watkins, “the guise provided the buffer or intermediary necessary to quell resistance to a woman doing a single comic routine.”⁵² This buffer allowed Mabley to freely broach subjects and voice opinions that were controversial. Her stage character was originally inspired by her great-grandmother, an important role model for the young Loretta Mary Aiken.⁵³ However, over time this persona would become more complicated and would serve as a site for Mabley’s protest.

Part of Mabley’s persona was built on her assumed role as a community elder, and drew from the revered “Mother Dear” character in black culture. “Mother Dear” is a very positive concept, and “represents the highest qualities of womanhood: brilliance, strength, courage, compassion, and charity, among others.” “Mother Dear” serves as the central matriarchal figure in black families and communities.⁵⁴ The concept of “Mother Dear,” which originated in working-class black families, “represents the family, and thus

⁵² Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 391.

⁵³ Laurence Maslon, *Make ‘Em Laugh: The Funny Business of America* (New York: Twelve, 2008), 329.

⁵⁴ Gary L. Flowers, “Madea vs. Mother Dear,” *BlackPressUSA.com* <http://www.blackpressusa.com/op-ed/speaker.asp?NewsID=18327>.

is communal in nature.”⁵⁵ It was from this authoritative maternal position that Moms Mabley would claim black and later white audiences as her children, and level criticisms at political leaders in her comedy routines.

Mabley also incorporated the archetype of the Mammy into her persona. The Mammy stereotype evolved during slavery, and was a product of white racism. It originally referred to real women whose jobs were to live in the slave master’s house, perform household duties, and care for the white children. They were often unable to care for their own children and were forced to leave them behind in the care of others. The archetypal image of the slave Mammy long out-lived the women it supposedly represented. The Mammy has been presented as dim-witted, asexual, non-threatening and as a faithful servant--“happy in her subordination.”⁵⁶ However, she is also endearingly gruff and bossy as a disciplinarian of white children. The physical image of the Mammy is one of an unrefined black woman, “the antithesis of desirable white femininity.”⁵⁷ The Mammy character usually has a full figure, wears unflattering, mismatched and drab clothing, and is advanced in age. The Mammy image has played a powerful role in maintaining racist fantasies and has “confined Black women to a restricted and subordinated sociopolitical space.” This image also “contributed to the stability of white male domination by portraying an ideal type of the Black female slave in her relationship with her master.”⁵⁸ This problematic image has worked to subordinate

⁵⁵ Pearlie Mae Johnson, “African American Quilts: An Examination of Feminism, Identity, and Empowerment in the Fabric Arts of Kansas City Quilters” PhD diss., University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2008, 45.

⁵⁶ Rupe Simms, “Controlling Images and the Gender Construction of Enslaved African Women,” *Gender and Society* 15 no.6 (2001): 882.

⁵⁷ Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁵⁸ Simms, “Controlling Images and the Gender Construction of Enslaved African Women,” 882.

and keep black women “on the periphery of society,” its negative impact lasting beyond Emancipation.⁵⁹ It was this grotesque image of black women that Mabley projected while at the same time consistently attacked on the stage during her comedy performances.

Moms Mabley presented her own version of the Mammy in order to combat the racist image. She would shuffle onstage for her performances in a frumpy, flowery house dress, a floppy hat, droopy argyle socks and ill-fitting shoes. She finished off her signature look by performing without her dentures. The toothless, unattractive, non-threatening character that resulted from this combination pandered to white racist expectations, but the content of Mabley’s performances provided a strong contrast to the Mammy archetype. By sardonically presenting the Mammy image, and countering it with her wise observations and unapologetic sexuality, Mabley fought back against racist stereotypes by challenging the supposed boundaries of black womanhood.

The unapologetic sexuality that Mabley expressed was linked to another negative stereotype—the hypersexual black woman. Like the Mammy, this image also has a long-standing history in the United States and dates back to the colonial era. The stereotype of the hypersexual black woman was created by racist white men and women in order to justify and rationalize the sexual exploitation of black women during and after slavery. Black women have expressed a long-standing resistance to this stereotype in America. One response, mainly employed by middle-class and educated African American women, has been to “deal with this hypersexual image by adopting a sexually conservative rhetoric as a political strategy.” Mabley rejected this approach in her resistance to the

⁵⁹ K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 4.

stereotype. Instead, she adopted the approach of working-class black feminists and blues women by publicly embracing her sexuality. She embodied the negative stereotype of the hypersexual black woman while she simultaneously challenged it by exaggerating the image and making it appear absurd.

Moms Mabley's commentary on gender and sexuality operated as a form of protest against male patriarchy and its role in the exploitation and marginalization of black women. Her comedic persona was a vital component of this protest because she combined the white stereotype of the black Mammy, traditionally an asexual character, with the image of the hypersexual black woman. By incorporating both of these caricatures into her act, she was able to challenge and negate these racist and sexist stereotypes through satire, as well as protest the sexual exploitation of women. Mabley's appropriation of these two stereotypes in her act was also an example of her role as a trickster because she reinforced the expectations of her white audiences while she simultaneously challenged and protested these stereotypes. Finally, Mabley's decision to construct her stage persona and to take Jack Mabley's name, a male name, both illustrate the feminist foundation that would inform her commentary on gender and sexuality.

Moms Mabley also utilized a clown mask to intentionally make herself unattractive for her comedic performances by wearing ill-fitting, mismatched clothing and performing without her dentures. Mabley created this image to add humor to her proclamations about men, and to make her subversive message about pursuing young men easier for her audiences to accept. This mask, and the barrier it created, was important because Mabley was discussing topics that were taboo. She was tackling issues that most other women were not, such as her protest against ageism and her

mockery of the male sexual ego. Mabley's combination of the Mammy, the hypersexual black woman, and the clown was significant because it allowed her to get away with saying things her male counterparts would not have been able to.

Moms Mabley's personal life, as well as the biographical details of her fictional stage persona, informed her commentary on gender and sexuality. As mentioned earlier, she was a victim of sexual abuse as a young woman. Mabley never referred to this in her comedy records, but she frequently discussed the arranged marriage to an older man that her father forced on her as a teenager. While this arranged marriage may have been fictional, the anger and resentment that she expresses in regard to this marriage can be seen as a response to the exploitation she experienced as a young woman. The topic of rape and physical abuse was not something Mabley could directly discuss in her comedy, so she created a somewhat fictional biography that she could share with her audience. Her figurative life story was also used to synthesize the experiences of all black working-class women in order to share their history with a larger audience and to voice her protest against racism and sexism more generally.

Moms Mabley's great-grandmother and grandmother were former slaves, and their influence on the comedienne during her youth played an important role in her later commentary. Mabley was born into a relatively well-to-do family, but her stage persona and commentary reflected the experiences of poor and working-class black women. During an interview with Studs Terkel, Mabley insisted that she had been a wet nurse at the age of fourteen. She cared for a sick baby, and she claimed she would often have to deny milk to her own child for this reason.⁶⁰ This story may have not been true, since Mabley's family was so financially secure. However, she used the story to illustrate the

⁶⁰ Terkel, *The Spectator*, 278.

hardship and responsibility that black women have historically faced since slavery and asserted that “the mother of a Negro family didn’t want to do some of the things she did, it’s because she was forced to do it...the mother, the Negro mother, is the rock in her family, because the Negro mother in one sense has had more opportunity than the Negro father. He was denied manhood.”⁶¹ This statement illustrates the strength Mabley attributed to black women, and the fact that she saw black men as weakened by white racism. Her comedic performances, particularly her interactions with her black male presenters, further demonstrate this belief.

Moms Mabley also used positive influences in her personal life to inform her comedy and gender commentary. Her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother were strong role models for her, and she claimed they encouraged her to be ambitious and independent. According to Mabley, when she expressed a desire to pursue a stage career her mother said “she’s too much like me, let her do what she wants”⁶² and told Mabley “you’re too much like me not to be something.”⁶³ Information on her mother is limited, but based on what Mabley said about her, it can be inferred that she was independent and influenced Mabley at a young age. Mabley’s great-grandmother inspired her in a similar way. Her “granny” was born into slavery and, according to Mabley, lived to be one hundred and eighteen years old. She was an important source for Mabley’s religious inspiration, and encouraged her to be ambitious and to move beyond the small town in which she was born. When she was young, Mabley’s great-grandmother told her “you’re gonna see the *world* like your granny never did” and to “put God in front and go

⁶¹ Ibid., 277-278.

⁶² Charles Witbeck, “Moms Day,” *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, February 28, 1968.

⁶³ Morton Cooper, “Moms Mabley Loves Everybody,” *Chicago Defender*, January 5, 1963.

ahead.”⁶⁴ Mabley took her great-grandmother’s advice to leave, and the religiosity she inspired in the young Loretta Mary was present throughout the comedienne’s life. Mabley was “sincerely religious” and an active member of Adam Clayton Powell’s Abyssinian Church in Harlem until her death in 1975.⁶⁵

Mabley also said in interviews that her granny was the inspiration for her stage persona.⁶⁶ Part of this influence stemmed from her great-grandmother’s supposed penchant for men at an advanced age, which Mabley heavily incorporated into her stage act. In one performance, Mabley told her audience about a conversation she had with her great-grandmother when she was one hundred and six. “One day she sittin’ on the porch... ‘how old woman get before woman don’t want no more boyfriends?’ She said ‘I don’t know, ask someone older.’”⁶⁷

Moms Mabley’s best remembered jokes were about her disdain for old men, and her lust for young men. On the surface these assertions were silly considering her age, and elicited laughter from audiences. They also reinforced the dominant culture’s perceptions of age and gender, as well as black women’s sexual prowess. However, Mabley was utilizing the double-voice comedic device when she made these assertions. Underneath her humorous declarations was a message of protest against the marginalization and exploitation of women. She would frequently mock the male sexual ego, which was something most female comics did not do during her time.⁶⁸ One way she would voice this mockery was by talking about the fictional old man she was

⁶⁴ Jacobson, “Amazing Moms,” 49; Curl, “Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley,” 688.

⁶⁵ “Black America’s ‘First Lady of Laughter,’” *The Ebony Success Library*.

⁶⁶ Jacobson, “Amazing Moms,” 46.

⁶⁷ Moms Mabley, “Backhanded in Church,” *The Funny Sides of Moms Mabley*, Chess LP1482, 1964.

⁶⁸ Elsie A. Williams, “Moms Mabley and the Afro-American Comic Performance,” in *Women’s Comic Visions*, ed. June Sochen (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 163.

supposedly forced to marry when she was young. During a 1961 performance, she told her audience, “somebody ask me today what is it like being married to an old man. I said honey I don’t know how to describe it, you know. I don’t know what to say. The best I can explain it, it’s just like trying to push a car up a hill with a rope.”⁶⁹ She joked about her old husband’s impotence again that year when she proclaimed, “I ain’t gonna stay with that old man. NO! Cuz when we got married and the preacher said . . . he said I will, I found out he couldn’t. And I ain’t lookin’ for no memory.”⁷⁰

After her husband died, Mabley claimed she had him cremated. She explained, “I made sure he was dead and had him cremated. I burn him up. I determined he gonna get hot one time anyhow.”⁷¹ While these jokes were humorous and elicited laughter on one level, the deeper message that Mabley conveyed was one of anger and protest at the exploitation she, and other black women, experienced. On her album *The Youngest Teenager* (1969) she talked about her late husband’s obsession with Pepsi:

And honey, I never seen a man so crazy about Pepsi Cola.
He loved Pepsi Cola. Ordered four to five cases a week. I
said, “next time I see that old man bring some I’m gonna
see what he’s doing with it” . . . Old man went in there and
locked the door. I got footstool from the kitchen and put it
up and peeped over . . . There he was sitting in tub of Pepsi
Cola singing, “come aliiiiive.”⁷²

By ridiculing male impotence in her comedy performances, Mabley was protesting the exploitation of the female body through role reversal because men had traditionally exerted control over the female body. Mocking male impotence also highlighted her sexual desire and power as a woman. She reversed the traditional gender roles in sexual

⁶⁹ Moms Mabley, “Talking About Old Men,” *Live at the Apollo*, Jewell Records, 1994. (*Live at the Apollo* is a compilation of Mabley’s performances in the 1960s.)

⁷⁰ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club*, Chess LP1460, 1961.

⁷¹ Moms Mabley, “Good Old Days,” *Live at the Apollo*, 1961.

⁷² Moms Mabley, *The Youngest Teenager*, Mercury SR 61229, 1969.

relationships and moved away from the popular comedic trope of women denying their sexuality with statements like “not tonight dear, I have a headache.” By presenting herself in this way, Mabley challenged the convention of men being the sexual decision-makers whose sex drive controlled relationships and who were empowered as a result.

In addition to mocking the male sexual ego with references to her late husband’s inability to perform, Mabley also frequently ridiculed his advanced age and his resulting physical and mental deficiencies. On *Live at the Apollo* she told her audience “aw that old man I don’t even like to talk about him honey. Oh he was so near death you know? And I was so young just fifteen and him eighty-four you know? Oh and weak, he was so weak and he didn’t know nothing and his mind was leaving or had gone.”⁷³ She also highlighted their age difference and his undesirability when she explained,

I was a child fourteen going on fifteen and just as cute as I wanted to be . . . And this oooooold dead puny moldy man. I mean an old man. Santa Claus look like his son, he was older than his mother . . . My daddy liked him, I had to marry that old man. My daddy should have married him, he was the one who liked him. The nearest thing to death you ever seen in your whole life . . . Oh I thought he never would die. I shouldn’t talk about him though. He dead, they say you shouldn’t say something about the dead unless it’s good. He’s dead, good!⁷⁴

This passage also illustrated her frustration with being forced into marriage with the old man when she said her father should have married him. Her arranged marriage was an example of men making decisions about sex and relationships, and the unfair nature of women being subjected to this control. The bold anger Mabley consistently expressed in regard to this control was reminiscent of women’s blues, and the unabashed self-assertion

⁷³ Moms Mabley, “Talking About Old Men,” *Live at the Apollo*, 1961.

⁷⁴ Moms Mabley, “Good Old Days,” *Live at the Apollo*, 1961.

reflected in the genre. On *I Got Something to Tell You* (1963) she told her audience about how she wanted her husband to die:

That man was really so weak until I don't understand him living. And I tried to poison him. Rat poison agreed with him . . . One evening sitting at home. He said will you please cross my leg for me? I slammed his leg so hard I tried to break it. He looked at me and pitiful and said [singing] "you mean to me, why must you be mean to me. Oh honey can't you see that I'm really trying." I said "you old and bent and down to your last cent and that don't make no sense and you know it . . . You are wrecked beyond compare and damn you show it . . ." ⁷⁵

Even though Mabley's fictional persona was forced into the marriage with the old man, she refused to portray herself as a victim. On one level, describing the insults and physical abuse she leveled at her husband lent humor to her story. But it also expressed rage that gave her strength in a situation where her power had been taken away. The strength and protest that she portrayed in the situation was a response to the exploitation she and other black women faced as a result of male exploitation.

The topic of her elderly husband frequently reappeared in her comedy and over time her audiences even expected to hear about it. On *Her Young Thing* (1969), Mabley's discussion about her old husband was complemented by her audience encouraging her to talk about him. She responded:

That old man I married? The one that's dead? The one that was so cheap, looked like six o' clock, blow his nose and half his brains come out. How old was he [egging on from audience, response]. He was so stingy he'd go out in the evening and catch lightning bolts to save electricity. He kept telling me that's alright, when I die if I thought you weren't gonna be true to me, I'd turn in my grave. I buried him, next decoration day I couldn't find him. Rolled all the way down. ⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Moms Mabley, *I Got Something to Tell You*, Chess LP1479, 1963.

⁷⁶ Moms Mabley, *Her Young Thing*, Mercury SR61205, 1969.

In addition to insulting him for being old and stingy, Mabley again asserted her sexuality in this statement. She implied that rather than being “true” to her late husband and mourning him the way he wanted, she took advantage of his death to pursue her sexual liberation. On the surface, the revelation that Mabley was untrue to her late husband after his death was humorous and the imagery of him rolling in his grave was absurd. However, the underlying message in the story was one of protest. She used the negative stereotype of the hypersexual black woman to challenge her husband’s control and to assert her newfound freedom.

Moms Mabley’s fictional elderly husband was not the only old man subjected to her verbal attacks. She voiced her disdain for old men in general in order to emphasize her desire for young men; but that disdain also had a deeper meaning. For Mabley, old men represented the tradition of male control and exploitation of women, while young men represented a new generation and new values. Mabley claimed to love youth and to relate better to young people than to people her own age. The prospect of an old man pursuing Mabley angered her for this reason. She expressed this anger on *Moms Mabley at the U.N.* (1961) “You know Moms’ rep of liking young men, and I’m guilty. Old man can’t do nothing for me but bring me a message from a young man. No longer last night some old man...mildewed man. Had nerve enough come back to ask me could he see me home. ‘Damn you can’t see period.’”⁷⁷ She had a similar response on *Moms Mabley Breaks it Up* (1962) when she said, “Some old man had nerve to wink at me. Eye closed

⁷⁷ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the U.N.*, Chess LP1452, 1961.

and couldn't open; stayed like that all night. Older than that old husband I used to have and he was so weak he got out of breath picking his tooth."⁷⁸

Moms Mabley rejected the elderly in general, but her most of her criticism was directed at old men. On *Young Men Si, Old Men No* (1963) she explained,

Old man and old lady having fiftieth anniversary party. I don't go, don't like to be around old people. Especially old men. Crippled up . . . ain't nothing the matter with old women but old men. Talking about "well, been with him this long stay with him for respect." I ain't gonna exchange regret with respect you can believe that! . . . They can't do nothing, ain't gonna let you do nothing.⁷⁹

Mabley differentiates between old men and old women in order to highlight that old men were the problem, in her opinion. She rejected conventions that forced women to stay with an old man out of "respect" and instead asserted her right to live her life following her desires. This assertion was an important component of the blues- inspired working-class feminism that Mabley employed in her comedy because she was expressing her independence and rejection of traditional male control and patriarchy. In addition to rejecting the loyalty mandated by men of women, Mabley also expressed an aversion to old men pursuing younger women. On *Moms the Word* (1964) she tells her audience,

One time an old man was dying. Somebody told him to go out, he was eighty-four and this girl was nineteen. Someone told him to go out with her. Had idea he was young, ain't it funny how old men get these ideas? Ain't got no business with 'em, I don't know how they get 'em. Ain't old men a nuisance?⁸⁰

This statement is ironic considering Mabley's incessant pursuit of younger men. She was asserting that she had a right to behave this way, and older men did not. Her argument

⁷⁸ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley Breaks it Up*, Chess LP 1472, 1962.

⁷⁹ Moms Mabley, *Young Men Si, Old Men No!*, Chess LP1477, 1963.

⁸⁰ Moms Mabley, *Moms the Word*, Mercury MG 20907, 1964.

was significant because she was reversing traditional gender expectations, since it was at the time acceptable for an old man to date a younger woman, but older women were prohibited from enjoying younger men. This role reversal allowed Mabley to challenge the power of men to be the sexual decision-makers. For Mabley, it was important to challenge this power structure because it was this power structure that enabled men of both races to exploit and abuse women.

Moms Mabley's dislike of old men connected to her rejection of the concept of the "good old days." She was optimistic about the future and felt that the changes in the 1960s and 1970s were an improvement in regard to gender relations and sexuality. For Mabley, the past represented the older generation of men and their ideologies that promoted the marginalization of women. She argued against idolizing the past and said,

Let Mom tell ya what happened to me in the good old days. You couldn't do nothing you wanted to do . . . Everything your parents pick for you to do. Who you love, go out with, marry. Make no difference what condition it was in, if Daddy said so that was it.⁸¹

She reiterated this opinion in a 1974 interview with *Jet* magazine when she said "I tell them don't let the old folks tell you about the good old days. I was there. Where were they at? The best time is now when you can go out with who you want, love who you want and as many as you want."⁸² She elaborated on this during a performance on the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (1968) when she quipped, "I married very young, and passed up my youth. Missed it, so I'm trying to catch up now."⁸³ For Mabley, the gender relations of the 1960s and 1970s presented her with an opportunity to celebrate gender

⁸¹ Moms Mabley, "Good Old Days," *Live at the Apollo*, 1961.

⁸² M. Cordell Thompson, "Moms Mabley Raps About Old Women, Young Love," *Jet*, January 3, 1974.

⁸³ Charles Witbeck, "Moms Day," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, February 28, 1968.

equality and a sexual freedom that she did not have when she was young. Although this sexual freedom was largely fictional and the 1960s and 1970s was still a problematic time for women's rights, she presented the comparison in order to reject the way women were treated in the past.

Moms Mabley embodied the rejection of the "good old days" most strongly when she asserted her desire for young men. She utilized the double-voice device in these assertions because on the surface level, her audiences saw her pursuit of younger men as funny because it was so unlikely. However, Mabley was also challenging gender norms and sexual exploitation when she made these jokes. When pursuing young men, she reversed the role of the sexual decision-maker, who was traditionally male, and empowered herself. This reversal was another example of Mabley's blues influence, because blues women consistently challenged the supposedly defined boundaries of "a woman's place."⁸⁴ Furthermore, by consistently asserting her sexual desires, Mabley challenged the objectified position of women. She told her audience about one of her young lovers on *Moms Mabley at the U.N* (1961): "let me tell you girls something. George took me home the other night and kissed meeee . . . he's a nice boy though. Goes to bed every night at nine o'clock, gets up at four and goes home."⁸⁵ Mabley's unabashed discussion of her sexuality, as evidenced in the preceding comment, also demonstrated the influence of the blues on her performances. Sexuality was not privatized by blues women, and it certainly was not privatized by the outspoken comedienne. This openness in regard to sex was rooted in the blues-inspired, working-class feminism that Mabley

⁸⁴ Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 120.

⁸⁵ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the U.N.*, Chess LP1452, 1961.

was drawing on in her commentary. This approach was a far cry from the buttoned-down, scholarly middle-class feminism taking hold during this time.

Moms Mabley would often make her emcees and accompanists, who were young men, the objects of her desire as well as the butt of her jokes. On *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Conference* (1962) she told the emcee, “I love you darling. I mean in a sensible way . . . after all let’s look at it sensible. You gonna get a young woman, I’m gonna get a younger man. I ain’t gonna get mad at you.”⁸⁶ She protected herself from being rejected by the younger man by maintaining a barrier and explaining that she loved him in a “sensible” way and was not overly attached. She acknowledged that he would want to be with a younger woman, but one-upped him with her own pursuit of a younger man. She then went on to talk about how she liked the young man playing the drums and used the signifying devices of innuendo and double-entendre to express her sexual desire. “I like the way he beats that drum. I got an old beat up drum maybe he can kinda [gestures, audience laughter] my toes start to getting stiff I can’t stop . . . I can dream can’t I?”⁸⁷ In the last statement, Mabley acknowledged the outlandish nature of her romantic assertion. However, while Mabley could acknowledge her advanced age, she did not want anyone else to. She appeared bothered by the music the band played and said, “I don’t appreciate what they was playing. What was that? Old rockin’ chair’s got you. Old rocking chair’s got who? Oh Counti Countie. [Referring to the emcee] You know better than that.”⁸⁸ By acknowledging Mabley’s age, the band was undermining her challenge to male dominance-and she resisted it. She set up this exchange as part of her act in order to make this rejection public.

⁸⁶ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Conference*, Chess LP1463, 1962.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Moms Mabley alluded to her sex life in different ways to emphasize her rejection of male dominance and her assertion of feminine power. Again, these references relied on the double-voice technique to encourage laughter from her audiences while simultaneously challenging gender expectations in regard to feminine sexuality. On *I Got Something To Tell You* (1963) she told her audience, “talk about somebody being scared. Picked up the paper yesterday morning and seen where Jackie gonna have another baby. Scared me to death, thought they were talking about me, cuz I been takin’ them pills you know?”⁸⁹ Telling her audience that she took birth control pills to avoid pregnancy indirectly referred to her having sex for pleasure rather than reproduction. Furthermore, by expressing concern that she might be pregnant, Mabley appeared to disregard the fact that she was beyond a childbearing age.

In reality, Mabley’s advanced age was almost always part of the joke, and lent humor to her sexual assertions and her pursuit of young men. In this pursuit, Mabley would reject a suitor when he became too old for her taste. This rejection paralleled the similar treatment that men displayed toward women. In one performance she presented her accompanist as a new boyfriend: “Luther! My new boyfriend, Luther, that’s the piano player. Yeah me and Brooks [popular singer Brook Benton] broke up. He had a birthday the other day, he was twenty-nine. Too old for me honey! Anytime you see me with a man over twenty-two he’s one of my relatives.”⁹⁰ Rejecting a man because of his age enabled Mabley to display her ability to make choices about her romantic and sexual relationships. She referred to her love triangle with Brook Benton and Luther on *Moms the Word* (1964): “Woman came after me, was I kidding about me going with Brooks? . . .

⁸⁹ Moms Mabley, *I Got Something to Tell You!*, Chess LP1479, 1963.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Nothing to kid about, no man, ain't nothing to kid about. Me and Luther is alright too. Brooks is over in Japan . . . and time rolls on. And I ain't got that much to spare."⁹¹ While she did refer to her age to justify being disloyal to "Brooks," the point of the anecdote was to further assert Mabley's feminine power. She went beyond having a young boyfriend by having two boyfriends to further challenge male dominance of women, and the double-standard. She also reinforced the stereotype of the hypersexual black woman, an image Mabley was contesting in her performances by layering it with the Mammy image.

Moms Mabley was defensive about her right to date younger men, and rejected challenges to this right. On *Out on a Limb* (1964) she proclaimed, "If I wanna go with Brooks Benton that's my business. I married an old man when I was a child and he was dead as a doornail."⁹² She unabashedly confronted speculation about her dating life when she said, "now I'm old and they accusing me of liking young men. And I'm guilty. And I'm gonna get guiltier, just as soon as I make me some more guilt."⁹³ Her unapologetic attitude was an expression of the blues-inspired working-class feminism that rejected male dominance and embraced feminine power and pride. This statement further strengthened her rejection of male exploitation of women. Her argument for dating younger men was also emphasized in a 1974 interview with *Jet* magazine. She was set up on a blind date with a college student for the interview, and she discussed the benefits of older women dating younger men. According to Mabley, "an older woman can understand a young man better than a younger woman." She also argued that, unlike old

⁹¹ Moms Mabley, *Moms the Word*, Mercury MG20907, 1964.

⁹² Moms Mabley, *Out on a Limb*, Mercury SR60889, 1964.

⁹³ Moms Mabley, "Children," *The Funny Sides of Moms Mabley*, Chess LP 1482, 1964.

men who lose their manhood as they get older, “a woman is a woman as long as she lives.”⁹⁴ This statement also reversed assumptions about men and women as they aged.

In addition to asserting her desire for young men, Moms Mabley also presented herself as desirable to young men in order to challenge the ageism that was directed at older women like her. One of the ways she made this presentation was by accusing young men in the audience of looking up her skirt when she was onstage. She told one young man “I’m gonna turn this way just to keep you honest. Old but clean you know? Don’t pay it no mind it don’t mean a thing. I saw everyone else wearing one [lace undergarments] I thought it was the style. I got one too.”⁹⁵ This assertion relied on the double-voice device because on one level she was making her audience laugh by presenting herself as sexually desirable, despite her advanced age and clown-like appearance. On a deeper level, she balanced her assertions of feminine sexuality with modesty to further emphasize that she made a choice in her sexual and romantic relations. The double-voice device allowed her to challenge the victimization of women by asserting control over her own body while eliciting laughter from her audience. This joke suggests that Mabley expected this victimization to present itself at any opportunity and that she felt the need to guard against it.

She also presented herself as desirable during a fictional goodwill trip with Jackie Kennedy. She related to her audience about how when she and the first lady got off the plane:

We looking so good they didn’t know which Jackie to grab.
So old Naru grabbed me. He said I want to take you for a
nice camel ride. I didn’t wanna be a square. I knew what
he meant . . . I climbed on up and went out in lovers’ lane.

⁹⁴ M. Cordell Thompson, “Moms Mabley Raps About Old Women, Young Love,” 60-62.

⁹⁵ Moms Mabley, *Funniest Woman in the Word*, Chess LP91556, 1961.

Stopped the camel, I said “what’s the matter?” He said
“Camel run out of water.” I was used to that jive out here,
guys running out of gas . . . put that sheet back on.⁹⁶

Mabley compared herself to Jackie Kennedy, who was famous for her beauty and style. When Naru took her on a camel ride to lovers’ lane and pretended his camel ran out of water, Mabley knew he was attempting to seduce her. However, she asserted her feminine power through her ability to make a choice in regard to sex and told him to put his sheet back on, rejecting his sexual advances. In this passage, rejecting a man served a similar purpose as pursuing a man did. Both scenarios allowed Mabley to lay claim to her body and decide whom she would be intimate with. This assertion was significant for challenging the traditional power structure between men and women and for rejecting male exploitation of women.

The challenge Mabley presented was two-fold, because she was also protesting the control of black female bodies at the hands of white men. She protested this control consistently on her albums. Danielle L. McGuire talks about this control in *At the Dark End of the Street*. According to McGuire, rape and exploitation of black women by white men has historically and systematically played a central role in the maintenance of racism and white patriarchy in the United States.⁹⁷ By laying claim to her body and her sexuality throughout her comedy performances, Mabley directly challenged and rejected this system of white patriarchy. These challenges were especially significant when one considers that she was performing for integrated audiences that included white men in the 1960s and 1970s. She was careful with the way she presented these challenges, however.

⁹⁶ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley Breaks it Up*, Chess LP1472, 1962.

⁹⁷ Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance-A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Knopf, 2010), xviii.

She only flirted with black men and created an imaginary affair with Brook Benton, a popular African-American musician. She avoided crossing the racial line, which made her jokes easier for her audiences to accept. But when she referred to “men” in her performances more generally, she did not mention race. Her commentary could then be applied to white men. Mabley undoubtedly claimed control of her own body during her comedy routines in black clubs, but claiming this control and expressing anger about exploitation in front of white men was especially powerful because of the long-standing history of white men abusing black women in the United States. In a sense, she was confronting the attackers head-on.

Moms Mabley’s performances at the Playboy Club were particularly important for this reason. The integrated Playboy Club in Chicago was where she became a “mainstream” performer in 1961. While the Playboy Club was marginal because of its suggestive nature, her exposure there led to her popularity with audiences of all races across the country. The sexually charged environment of the Playboy Club may have seemed like a perfect fit for Moms Mabley and her ribald humor. However, her work at the Playboy Club was also subversive because she was assailing male dominance and sexism while being completely surrounded by reminders of it. While Mabley was onstage, the men in the audience were being entertained and served drinks by scantily clad “bunnies.” Challenging female exploitation by asserting her own sexuality and control in this type of environment was radical and illustrates the strength of Moms Mabley as a performer and as a social commentator. It also highlights her role as a trickster because she was making the men who participated in a ritual of demeaning

women unwittingly laugh at themselves. At the same time, she mediated her rebellion with her elderly persona, outrageous clothing, and seemingly endless joking.

Mabley again asserted control over her body in a 1974 interview with *Ebony* magazine. The interviewer explained that, “she firmly believes that contemporary young people ‘need more character.’ When she was young herself, Moms declares, ‘you didn’t meet me today and go to bed with me the next night the way children do today.’”⁹⁸ On one level, Mabley was showing how she exercised control over her body and her sexuality, and reserved her right to make choices in regard to sex and romance. However, this statement also reversed and contradicted her earlier position on sex and dating, especially her love triangle with Brook Benton and Luther. Mabley was exhibiting a classic trickster technique in this statement by being appositional and moving between extremes. She was telling her audience not to be promiscuous, but her sexual assertions onstage consistently contradicted this statement.

Moms Mabley also illustrated her ability to make choices in her relationships and her control over her body when she rejected physical abuse at the hands of men. Although she never directly referenced her personal experience with rape in her routines, rejecting abuse enabled her to protest men’s physical dominance of women. On *Moms Wows* (1964) she sang about a man she loved, but her love had its limits. For Mabley, “...when he talk about going upside my head, damn he got to go . . . Leaving that man of mine. And when he goes away it’s a lovely day. But when he comes back he sure to find that he’s no more mine.”⁹⁹ Mabley’s pursuit of younger men was not to be confused with desperation. She made it clear to her audience that if she was mistreated, she would leave

⁹⁸“Moms Mabley: She Finally Makes the Movies,” *Ebony*, April 1974, 90.

⁹⁹ Moms Mabley, *Moms Wows*, Chess LP1486, 1964.

a man. This assertion was supported by her comments during a 1974 interview with *Jet* magazine. Mabley explained that older women and younger men were compatible and understood each other, but advised older women to “let him know that you might be old, but also let him know that you don’t intend to be abused.”¹⁰⁰ Mabley was drawing on the female blues tradition in her rejection of abuse, which was a common theme in women’s blues. This rejection was a major part of the protest voiced by working-class feminism.

Moms Mabley’s image and persona also reflected her success and independence, which further strengthened her rejection of male dominance and control of women. She enjoyed economic success as a result of her growing mainstream popularity in the 1960s and 1970s. According to Chicago’s *Daily Defender* she “set a record at Regal with \$91,000 gross for a ten day stint during one of the worst winters in Chicago’s history. Her very first album earned her a gold record.”¹⁰¹ She also had various real estate investments in Washington D.C., North Carolina, and Florida.¹⁰² Mabley was well aware of her value to performance venues as a result of her popularity, and during an interview with the *Daily Defender* she bragged, “Oh I’ve been everywhere. I worked at the Club Harlem in Atlantic City for nine years and in six years time I made a half million dollars for that place.”¹⁰³ She proudly displayed her success and the wealth that resulted from it. For example, a 1962 article in the *Daily Defender* proclaimed, “Moms Mabley has finally reached her goal. She’ll roll up to her Regal theatre stage engagement Jan. 26 in a

¹⁰⁰ Thompson, “Moms Mabley Raps About Old Women, Young Love,” 62.

¹⁰¹ “Moms Mabley at Kelly’s Tonight,” *Daily Defender*, August 12, 1974, 9.

¹⁰² Ted Watson, “Recalling the Smiles of Moms Mabley,” *Daily Defender*, May 27, 1975, 17.

¹⁰³ Cooper, “Moms Mabley Loves Everybody.”

spanking new white Cadillac Limousine complete with uniformed chauffeur. It's Moms anniversary gift to herself to celebrate 45 years in show biz."¹⁰⁴

Moms Mabley incorporated her economic success into her commentary on gender relations. One way she did this was by portraying her younger love interests as economically dependent on her. On the surface, these arrangements seemed unlikely and elicited laughter from her audiences. However, underneath the surface she was challenging gender norms by presenting a role reversal from the traditional rich older man and younger woman pairing. When talking about her young boyfriend, George, Mabley told her audience, "that's one thing I like about George, he don't take my money. No he don't honey! George don't take my money. He borrows it . . . come here George, I own you . . . Likes to have something and I like to give it to him."¹⁰⁵ Mabley highlighted George's economic dependence on her when she talked about him borrowing money, and when she claimed ownership over him. She used double-entendre to talk about how she bought material goods for George while simultaneously referring to their supposed sexual relationship.

Mabley emphasized the necessity of having money when pursuing younger men on *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Conference* (1962). While preparing to travel overseas, she explained, "I went over to the mint to pick up a couple bales of money because I was going to foreign countries . . . young men you know? Money, old men, young women, old women, you know how it goes. Got me a plane and stopped in Paris."¹⁰⁶ She made a direct comparison between older men using money to attract younger women and older women like her using money to attract younger men. She talked about using money to

¹⁰⁴ Al Monroe, "So They Say," *Daily Defender*, January 22, 1962.

¹⁰⁵ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club*, Chess LP1460, 1961.

¹⁰⁶ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Conference*, Chess LP1463, 1962.

attract men later on the album when she told her audience “do you know, I remember when I was young all I had to do was peep on my pocketbook and smile and I could get any man I wanted. But now, I have to have the pocketbook open with the money showing.”¹⁰⁷ However, for Mabley the necessity of using money to get young men did not seem to bother her. Rather, she appeared to be proud of the fact that she could create this kind of power structure in her relationships. On *Young Men Si, Old Men No* (1963) she told her audience, “yeah I still like young men, will like young men till I die. Still going with Brook Benton, that’s still my dependent.”¹⁰⁸ She took pride in her ability to take care of her young boyfriends, which was exemplified on *I Got Something to Tell You* (1963) when she told her audience about how she broke up with Brook Benton and replaced him with a new man. “So now it’s Luther. Don’t he look nice? Ain’t I got him looking good?! Man that’s a silk suit he’s got on. He ain’t even had a silk shirt before much less a silk suit. He cute as he wants to be.”¹⁰⁹ On the surface these statements were humorous, but Mabley’s use of money to empower herself in romantic relationships was really a challenge to the traditional gender roles that placed men in positions of economic power. Challenging the economic power of men was a crucial component in Mabley’s protest against the exploitation and marginalization of women.

In addition to the economic power Mabley had over her young boyfriends, she also claimed a higher status in her relationships. Luther, her piano player, was subjected to this display when Mabley would threaten to fire him during her stage performances. On *Young Men Si, Old Men No* (1963) she reacted to him playing the piano too loudly when she wanted to sing an opera. She exclaimed “too loud, too damn loud Luther! The

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Moms Mabley, *Young Men Si, Old Men No!*, Chess LP1477, 1963.

¹⁰⁹ Moms Mabley, *I Got Something to Tell You!*, Chess LP 1479, 1963.

boy is simple, I don't know if he been with me too long or ain't gonna be with me much longer . . . too loud . . . you don't know nothing."¹¹⁰ By insulting Luther and threatening his employment with her, Mabley exerted her power over him. She made a similar threat on *Out on a Limb* (1964):

Wait a minute Luther, Luther! I never said I wanted to shout, I said I wanted to sing an opera. I don't know if he's been with me too long or won't be with me much longer. But someone's gotta go and it ain't gonna be me. But you can kinda tell by his name he's not well. Luther. Anybody can say that drunk just open your mouth and it'll come out-Luther.¹¹¹

Mabley was using the ritual of insult in her exchanges with Luther, a component of signifying. This ritual dates back to slavery, and was used to strengthen young black people, especially men. The ritual of insult was an example of the of in-group humor that characterized signifying in black communities. So while she was using these insults to empower herself, she was also utilizing a tradition that was intended to strengthen the victim of her verbal attacks.¹¹² She also used a young man to make herself look powerful during a fictional White House visit. She described her entrance, when she “went down them steps like a Maltese kitten with a nineteen year old boy hanging on Moms.”¹¹³ In this scenario, Mabley was mirroring the power display typically employed by men who have young trophy girlfriends by presenting herself with a young trophy boyfriend.

The majority of Mabley's commentary on gender and sexuality was focused on herself and her personal relationships. However, the message of this commentary applied to black women in general. For this reason, she occasionally included other women in her

¹¹⁰ Moms Mabley, *Young Men Si, Old Men No!*, Chess LP1477, 1963.

¹¹¹ Moms Mabley, *Out on a Limb*, Mercury SR60889, 1964.

¹¹² Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 52.

¹¹³ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the White House Conference*, Mercury MG21090, 1966.

commentary. On *Moms Mabley at the U.N.* (1961) she told her audience about a woman who was asked, “how old is your oldest child?” She responded, “fifteen.” The man questioning her said “Your husband ain’t been dead but twenty years,” to which she responded, “He dead, I ain’t.”¹¹⁴ The woman was unapologetic about having an active sex life outside of marriage, further emphasizing Mabley’s blues-inspired message about women being empowered and assertive in their sexuality.

She used this sexual assertiveness to protest male exploitation of the female body in her story about the old woman who was assaulted. “Like old maid was, she was attacked. Police lineup. She says ‘I’m not sure, I think it was that great big strong tall man right there. Not sure, could I try again?’”¹¹⁵ Like most of Mabley’s jokes, this one had multiple layers and utilized the double-voice device. On the surface, the story was humorous because the old woman’s response was unexpected and absurd. However, underneath the surface, Mabley combated the victimized position of the woman who had been attacked by portraying her as making a choice in “trying again.” She was also employing the trickster tradition through contradiction because on one level, the woman was expressing her power to choose in regard to sex. On the other level, however, Mabley made the woman look weak. She was complying and going back to her attacker for more abuse. This joke can be seen as somewhat shocking when one considers the fact that Mabley was most likely a victim of sexual abuse as a young woman, but it may have been her way of addressing the issue of this abuse and dealing with the pain.

Mabley also argued for the power of women beyond matters of sex and relationships. When she was threatening to fight Nikita Khrushchev on *Moms Mabley at*

¹¹⁴ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the U.N.*, Chess LP1452, 1961.

¹¹⁵ Moms Mabley, *Moms the Word*, Mercury MG20907, 1964.

the Geneva Conference (1962), she included women in the challenge: “Maybe my boys can’t woop your boys, but women of America can woop your women.”¹¹⁶ This statement suggested that women were as strong as (if not stronger) than men, and protested their exclusion from political matters. Mabley felt that she should be consulted in political issues, and this statement suggested that she thought other women should be included as well. The statement also rejected the idea of men being more powerful than women in general, which was important for Mabley’s central challenge to the exploitation and marginalization of women.

Moms Mabley used her comedic performances to comment on and criticize the exploitation and control of women. Rather than directly address the issue of exploitation of women, Mabley used humor and the comedic device of the double-voice to challenge gender norms and expectations. She frequently proclaimed her disdain for old men and her desire for young men in order to assert her sexuality and role as a sexual decision-maker. She also presented herself as sexually desirable in order to challenge and negate the ageism that was directed at older women. Finally, Mabley promoted her economic independence and success in order to challenge male control of women. She strengthened her commentary by including stories and anecdotes about other women in order to make her challenge more widespread. Mabley’s performance persona also strengthened her messages of protest because she appropriated the masks of the Mammy and the hypersexual black woman simultaneously. By utilizing these negative and contradictory stereotypes together, Mabley was able to reinforce racist white stereotypes while at the same time challenging these harmful images of black women. She also contested these stereotypes by presenting them together. Moms Mabley’s commentary

¹¹⁶ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Conference*, Chess LP1463, 1962.

on gender and sexuality, and the working-class feminism that influenced this commentary, provided the groundwork for her commentary on race and politics. As the following chapters will illustrate, her attack against white patriarchy extended to these other realms.

Chapter Two

Moms Mabley and Racism, Segregation, and Jim Crow

Moms Mabley used the stage to comment on race relations in the United States extensively during the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement. Her working-class feminism was the driving force behind her commentary because she was using the accessibility of her comedy performances to boldly protest white male patriarchy and the marginalization of African Americans. Mabley's commentary on gender and sexuality was consistent throughout the 1960s and 1970s, but her commentary on race exhibited clear shifts that paralleled the changes taking place in the Civil Rights movement. In this way, the Civil Rights movement played a central role in Moms Mabley's comedy and influenced her performance work. Mabley's commentary is historically significant because of the way she publicly represented the changes taking place in the Civil Rights movement. She was affected by these changes and, although her experiences were unique, they resonated with the experience of others which allows scholars to gain a more intimate look at these changes and their impact on African Americans. She continued her usage of signifying in her comedic treatment of race issues during this time, and relied on the double-voice device, sarcasm and satire, song, and role-playing to humorously present her messages of protest. Using these devices, as well as her comedic persona, Mabley got away with voicing her pointed criticisms in front of integrated audiences.

In the period prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Mabley's attitude about race relations and equality for African Americans was largely pessimistic.

Her attitude began to shift in 1964, while the act was being passed. During this period, she exhibited increasing optimism and became more assertive in her demands for equality. This trend continued after 1964 as Mabley remained largely optimistic and advised her black audiences to take advantage of their new rights. But her commentary on race and civil rights experienced yet another shift following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, and she discontinued her discussion about race relations on her later albums. This discontinuation paralleled what many historians refer to as the breakdown of the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement.¹¹⁷ While the shifts in Mabley's performances were loosely tied to the changes taking place in the Civil Rights movement and can be seen as reflections of these changes taking place, her shifts were not concrete. Moms Mabley often embodied the trickster character, and the classic trickster is often appositional and even contradictory in his or her messages. So even when Mabley was expressing optimism, there was almost always a layer of pessimism underneath her message--and vice versa.

Moms Mabley used her comedy performances to express her anger and protest in regard to racial inequality and marginalization of African Americans in the 1960s and 1970s. Her comedy records that were recorded and released prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 were especially critical of white racism and often expressed feelings of negativity. One of the major ways her performance work operated was by making a spectacle of segregation and racism. Nonviolent protest movements have historically utilized the act of making a spectacle of violence and oppression in order to

¹¹⁷ Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 103.

draw public attention to the violence being used against them and their cause.¹¹⁸ This technique allowed protestors to powerfully illustrate their message without yielding to the violence they were being subjected to. According to Richard Gregg, who historian Joseph Kosek credits as “the first American to develop a substantial theory of nonviolent resistance,”¹¹⁹

The spectacle of a non-violent resister submitting himself voluntarily to bodily suffering for the sake of his cause would rouse in the onlooker sympathetic emotion and a sense of kinship . . . There seems to be a social as well as an individual sub-consciousness, through which such feelings would function . . . the voluntary, long-sustained, steady, disciplined suffering of a non-violent resister acts as a powerful suggestion of human unity.¹²⁰

The Civil Rights activists taking part in the Freedom Rides, marches, sit-ins, and other peaceful protest actions benefitted from the power of the spectacle in their confrontations with police and other authority figures who were trying to maintain segregation and institutionalized racism.

There are numerous historical images of the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement that speak to this occurrence. The infamous film footage of Bull Connor’s police force using dogs to attack peaceful protesters and firefighters using powerful fire hoses to subdue the demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama are examples of this type of spectacle. The violent actions of the racist authority figures created a strong contrast against the peaceful protesters who did not fight back, and did only what was minimally

¹¹⁸ Joseph Kip Kosek, “Richard Gregg, Mohandas Gandhi, and the Strategy of Nonviolence,” *The Journal of American History* 91 no. 4 (2005): 1320.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1318.

¹²⁰ Richard Bartlett Gregg, *The Power of Nonviolence* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1960), 40.

necessary in the way of self-preservation.¹²¹ Film footage of the sit-ins taking place at soda fountains in the South is another example of the spectacle of violence. The student activists sitting in at the soda fountain had prepared for the violence they would face by taking part in workshops before the sit-ins. In these workshops, the students practiced remaining nonviolent while their colleagues would hit them, shove them, yell profanities at them, and attempt to remove them from their seats. These practice scenarios mirrored what the students faced during the actual sit-ins when local racists attacked them. These confrontations were filmed; the footage of the extreme contrast between the behavior of the protestors and that of the people aggressively trying to remove them from their seats provides a spectacle of violence.¹²²

In addition to placing a spotlight on the violence being perpetrated, the spectacle of violence also leads to questions of logic and morality. The images of violent white supremacists attacking nonviolent Civil Rights protesters looked not only shocking but absurd. These images made the cause of the aggressors appear questionable both morally and logically. The concept of integration was presented by white supremacists as threatening to the status quo and something to be feared. However, the images of those peacefully demonstrating for integration in contrast to the violence of reactionary white supremacists contradicted their popular trope. The image of the Civil Rights activists being attacked while demonstrating for integration and equality weakened the rational ground of the white supremacists and lent strength to the Civil Rights cause.¹²³

¹²¹ Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 67-68.

¹²² Henry Hampton, "Ain't Scared of Your Jails (1960-1961)," *Eyes on the Prize*, Blackside, 1987.

¹²³ Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 59-60, 67-68.

The comedic performances of Jackie “Moms” Mabley worked in connection with these images to turn segregation and racism into a spectacle. Mabley did not submit herself to physical violence like the nonviolent protesters previously discussed, but her comedy, based both on the verbal and visual, did have the potential to rouse sympathy and awareness among her audiences and her humor created a sense of unity and kinship. Just as the images of violent white supremacists made their case look weak, Mabley’s comic treatment of segregation and racial inequality belittled their racist traditions and institutions, and did so for public consumption. Lawrence Levine identifies Mabley’s comedic style as “the humor of exposure and absurdity.”¹²⁴ While throughout her career Mabley’s comedy performances were consistent in creating a spectacle of racism and segregation, the approach is most apparent on her earlier records. On *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club* (1961) she joked about traffic lights in the South. After running a red light in a small town in South Carolina and being pulled over by an officer, she responded, “I saw all the white folks driving on the green light; I thought the red light must have been for us.”¹²⁵ By reducing the notion of “separate but equal” to its most basic meaning, Mabley illustrated the illogical nature of segregation. The fact that this joke was performed in front of blacks and whites is important in illustrating the power of her performances in creating a public spectacle out of segregation and racial inequality. This spectacle was the result of taking a practice so commonly accepted in the South and simplifying it to the point that it appeared irrational and absurd.

In a similar vein, Mabley belittled school segregation on *Moms Mabley Breaks It Up* (1962). She talked about an occasion when she wanted cheesecake and went into a

¹²⁴ Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 364.

¹²⁵ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club*, Chess LP1460, 1961.

restaurant advertised as “for whites only.” After everyone in the restaurant stopped eating and stared at her, she explained “I don’t want to go to school with you, I just want a piece of cheesecake--that’s all I want.”¹²⁶ She made the white patrons’ reaction appear petty when comparing the situation with school segregation, which was a hotly contested issue at the time. Mabley was using absurdist humor which is “rooted in paradox and irony,” to totalize the situation in the restaurant and take it to its ultimate, yet outlandish, conclusion.¹²⁷ Her comparison elicited laughter because of the difference in magnitude of the two situations. However, the joke’s true power came from her ability to put the practice of segregation as a whole into perspective. Denying an old woman a slice of cheesecake seemed extreme. Logically, segregation in schools and other institutions was equally outrageous because it was based on the same principle. Mabley also drew on absurdist humor in this depiction because “the absurdist often falls into the category of ‘laughing in order not to cry.’” Rather than expressing the frustration and humiliation she most likely felt as a result of the situation, Mabley made a joke out of segregation by turning it on its head and exposing it as an illogical practice.¹²⁸ This joke also illustrated the pessimism that characterized Mabley’s comedy prior to the passage of the Civil Rights act. While she acknowledged that segregation was absurd, she also made the pretense of not challenging it in her joke. Rather, she purported to accept it and even tried to reason with the white patrons. This accommodationist approach may have indicated Mabley’s belief that race relations were unchangeable, and this belief was the source of her pessimism.

¹²⁶ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley Breaks it Up*, Chess LP1472, 1961.

¹²⁷ Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say About the Jews* (New York: Harper Collins 1998), 55-56.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

Mabley was especially critical of racial inequality on another record, *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Conference* (1962). She used absurdist humor again when she talked about the literacy test given to African Americans as a prerequisite for voting. She told the story of a young black man attempting to cast his vote:

The lil' boy happened to be a college graduate . . . so he went up to the desk, the man say, "Let me hear you say the Constitution backwards." [In a mock white Southern accent] He said the Constitution backwards. Say, "Let me hear you say the Old and New Testaments-forwards and backwards . . ." He said it to them forwards and backwards. He then give him a Chinese newspaper. Say, "Let me hear you read that paper." Fellow looked at him, he say "What did it say? What did it say?" The fellow say, "It say it makes no difference what I do, you ain't gone let me vote no how."¹²⁹

While this joke was more direct in its criticism of legal racism than the previous examples, it still used indirect humor to present the illogical and absurd nature of the literacy laws. The main source of humor in the joke lies in the outrageous requirements of the literacy test. While she was totalizing in her portrayal and exaggerated these requirements, her description was not that far off. Literacy tests were applied unequally to white and black voting populations, and were unreasonably difficult. The questions they asked did not work to prove whether or not the test-taker was capable of voting; they merely served as a barrier for African Americans to keep them from voting.¹³⁰ The fact that a college graduate was being subjected to the literacy test before being permitted to vote illustrated the irrationality of the practice. The tradition of institutionalized racism was so ingrained in society that the fact that the man was educated proved to be irrelevant. Since he was black, he needed to prove he was literate in order to vote. This

¹²⁹ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Conference*, Chess LP1463, 1962.

¹³⁰ Philip A. Klinkner, *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 93-94.

scenario, as presented by Mabley, created a spectacle of literacy tests by highlighting their blatantly unsound logic behind the legal tradition. This joke again reflected Mabley's attitude of pessimism prior to the Civil Rights act, especially the last part. The young man attempting to vote gave up after being asked to read a Chinese newspaper because he saw white racism as entrenched in society, and resigned himself to it.

Mabley frequently utilized the technique of role-reversal for comic effect as well. The scenarios she portrayed through this technique worked to make a spectacle of the situations she was criticizing. In one such scenario, she mocked George Wallace, the pro-segregation governor of Alabama who famously stood in front of the entrance of the University of Alabama to block black students from enrolling.¹³¹ Mabley often joked about running for president, and in one such routine she asserted, "You know the first thing I would do if I was President? I would give a *certain* Southern Governor a job as Ambassador to the Congo and let him go crazy looking for a men's restroom with *WHITE* on it."¹³² At the time of its delivery, the audience knew the joke was about Wallace. The image of George Wallace, a strong proponent of segregation who promised "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever" in his inaugural speech, personally experiencing segregation was undoubtedly powerful.¹³³ Subjecting the governor to segregation appeared far-fetched, but paralleled the experiences and treatment of black people, including leaders and diplomats. By creating a parallel between the outrageous scenario of Wallace in the Congo and the everyday lives of black

¹³¹ George C. Wallace, "Governor George C. Wallace's School House Door Speech," *Alabama Department of Archives and History*, 1963, http://www.archives.state.al.us/govs_list/schooldoor.html.

¹³² Moms Mabley, *I Got Something to Tell You!*, Chess LP 1479, 1963.

¹³³ George C. Wallace, "The 1963 Inaugural Address of Governor George C. Wallace," *Alabama Department of Archives & History*, 1963, http://www.archives.alabama.gov/govs_list/inauguralspeech.html.

people experiencing segregation in the United States, Mabley effectively created a spectacle out of the institution, as well as solid ground to reject it.

Mabley also used the signifying devices of satire and sarcasm to portray her criticisms against racism and Jim Crow traditions. In her routine, she followed her joke about Wallace with a concession when she said “but they ain’t so bad down there. They getting better. Sheriff pulled over a colored boy, said ‘I’m gonna take care of you, give you a break, make sure you get a good lawyer and a fair trial, then I’m gonna hang you.’” [spoken in a mock white Southern accent]¹³⁴ The humor of this joke was based on Mabley’s story taking an unexpected turn. She started out by presenting the South positively, and suggested that conditions were improving. The Southern sheriff appeared to be acting fairly toward the African American man, which was a departure from Mabley’s other portrayals as well as common practice at the time. However, after telling the young man that he’ll be treated fairly, the sheriff unabashedly revealed the man’s true fate. The shift in the story supported the common theme in Mabley’s comedy that presented the South as a cruel and unjust place for African Americans. This portrayal revealed the seriousness of Mabley’s performances and provided an example of Mabley’s claim that she simply told the truth in her performances, and that very few of the things she recorded were jokes.¹³⁵ Mabley did not find violence against African Americans to be humorous. Rather, her portrayal was intended to expose the problem and express her anger regarding this violence. While Mabley was expressing her anger regarding the situation, she was also suggesting that racism was unchangeable. Although she was

¹³⁴ Moms Mabley, *I Got Something to Tell You!*, Chess LP 1479, 1963.

¹³⁵ Studs Terkel, *The Spectator: Talk About Movies and Plays With the People Who Make Them* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 281.

exposing this racism, she was also accommodating it by portraying it in this way. This again highlighted her negativity prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

She also used sarcasm when discussing integrated schools on 1963's *Young Men, Si, Old Men, No!* when she told a story about visiting a friend in her home state of North Carolina:

I went down in North Carolina to a University concert last Friday. Friend in Chapel Hill; stayed with them. Little boy, six years old. Asked me to go to school with him, going to integrated school you know? Yeah North Carolina swinging. And . . . little colored boy in this school . . . little suit and tie. Teacher said tell white boy spell cat, tell white boy spell rat. Little colored boy, spell chrysanthemum. Johnny say white or pink. She said pink. He said p-i-n-k.¹³⁶

Her reference to North Carolina as “swinging” was sarcastic, because she used the word to imply that this area of North Carolina was especially liberal and open-minded for integrating their schools. This representation was ironic because her anecdote presented a situation in which a young African-American boy was subjected to racism when he was singled out from his white classmates and given an unreasonably difficult word to make him appear unintelligent. While he was allowed to attend the integrated school, he was not treated equally. Adding to the irony of Mabley’s representation was the fact that the Brown vs. Board Supreme Court decision of 1954 declared segregation in public schools illegal. Based on this, an integrated school in 1963 should not have been seen as “swinging,” but schools in the South resisted enforcing integration and many schools remained segregated for years after the decision.¹³⁷ Mabley’s sarcasm highlighted the resistance of Southern schools to integrate and reflected the frustration of African

¹³⁶ Moms Mabley, *Young Men Si, Old Men No!*, Chess LP1477, 1963.

¹³⁷ Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 39-40.

Americans. The African-American child in Mabley's story utilized trickster rhetoric to outsmart his teacher in order to spell an easier word-pink. This injected a layered message of resistance into her story as the African-American child outsmarted a white adult.

On the same album, Mabley used sarcasm and humor in a similar fashion to illustrate the violent history African Americans have been subjected to in the United States. She opened her performance with:

Two men rob a bank, a white man and a colored man.
killed . . . wounded . . . sentenced to be hung. White fella
sit in cell crying, 'I don't wanna be hung.' . . . Black man
said 'face it like a man...' White man say that's easy for
you to say cuz you used to it . . . ¹³⁸

This joke referred to the tradition of lynching African Americans in the United States, which was especially prevalent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century but continued during the era of Mabley's performances in the 1960s. Lynching worked as an extralegal process of punishing individuals accused of a crime. A large mob of people conducted the process and the murder victim was often hanged and subjected to torture as well. While lynch mobs worked outside of the law and replaced the role of the legal system in trying the accused, it was common for prominent members of the community to participate, such as political and business leaders. Public lynchings were practiced on the pretense of punishing the victim for a crime, but were really used as a ritual of social control and as a fear tactic directed at African Americans.¹³⁹ Mabley's joke directly referenced the tradition of lynching in the United States and also illustrated the more generalized violence directed at African Americans. Mabley's album received wide

¹³⁸ Moms Mabley, *Young Men Si, Old Men No!*, Chess LP1477, 1963.

¹³⁹ Phillip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), vii-xii.

circulation among integrated audiences, and she also performed this joke on the often controversial Smothers' Brothers Comedy Hour in 1967, a show that encouraged the raw, politically savvy elements of comedy.¹⁴⁰ By performing this joke on television as well as on her earlier record, Mabley exposed a large audience to the violence African Americans have historically been subjected to as a result of white racism. This awareness on the part of the general public was important during the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement. Mabley's reference to the violence directed at black Americans again highlights the serious nature of her performances, and illustrates that her intentions went beyond simply making her audience laugh. Mabley's medium was comedy, but her humor was almost always layered with sadness and anger. Her message in this joke was sorrowful and contemptuous, and was characteristic of her comedy in the years prior to 1964.

Mabley also referenced the violence directed at African Americans on her 1961 album *Moms Mabley at the U.N.* when she discussed her attempt to vote in Georgia:

Let me tell you what happened to Moms week before last.
I was way down in deepest Georgia right here at election
time. A whole row of folks with me at the end of the
line...Don't you know they got mad at me when I said I
was sent there by NAACP. Every time I got to front of line
I got pushed back in the rear. From the mean look on they
face I said damn, what am I doing here?
[singing]

I said "Please Martin Luther King. I don't want to vote, ooh-ooh."
I said "Please Reverend King, please don't make me vote woo-ooh.
I had a dream last night I asked for my equal rights.
Somebody said Moms your next, and there I stood with a rope around my
neck.
"Please Congressman Powell, I . . . don't let me vote. Woo-ooh."

¹⁴⁰ David Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny: The Uncensored Story of the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (New York: Touchstone, 2009).

I said "Listen Reverend Adam Clayton Powell. Damn if I'm gonna vote woo-ooo."
They arms reached out for me. They must want me desperately.
But if I can just break free, they seen the last of me,
In Georgiaaaa, Georgiaaaa no peace will I find till I catch a plane . . . and
Georgia out of my mind.
Ray Charles can have it you hear me? Oh yaaaaa.¹⁴¹

Mabley expressed the frustration and fear of many southern African Americans who attempted to vote, as well as those who were unwilling and discouraged to vote because of the violence and aggression they faced. While history often celebrates the undaunted courage of Civil Rights activists and leaders fighting for equal rights in society and politics, the larger story includes many African Americans in the South who were unwilling or afraid to take part in the voting process. For many southern blacks, particularly those who were uneducated and based in rural communities separated from American political culture, taking advantage of their right to vote resulted in violence and death. Mabley used humor and song to reflect this fear and unwillingness to her black and white audiences, as well as the dire circumstances blacks faced.

Mabley's presentation of the voting issue was crucial because it complicated the subject for white audiences (and maybe even assured some of these audiences) by suggesting that not all African Americans were aggressively fighting for equality and political power. Furthermore, this presentation was important for educating audiences on the violence and resistance southern blacks faced when attempting to take advantage of rights granted to them by the federal government. Finally, Mabley's willingness to stop her challenge after she is pushed to the back of the line provides a balance with her more aggressive commentary on racial inequality. This balance likely allowed her to appeal to moderate audiences who may have been turned off by a more consistently aggressive

¹⁴¹ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the U.N.*, Chess LP1452, 1961.

stance. Mabley's professed rejection of voting was also significant for black audiences. In addition to her ability to highlight their struggle to a general audience, the ability to joke and laugh about the challenges black voters faced was cathartic.

However, Mabley was using the double-voice device in this presentation. On one level, she was expressing an attitude of moderation in regard to voting and saying that she was willing to give up on this right. She was pandering to white racist audiences' expectations and desires. But this assertion was layered, and the other side of the joke was her message of protest. She was simultaneously arguing that she should be allowed to vote in her home region, and that it was illogical that she could not. During the joke, delivered in part as a song, she sang about the issue using the tune of a traditional work song or "field holler," which has historically been a tool of resistance among African Americans toiling under white oppression.¹⁴² The use of this musical style strengthened her message of protest. Using the double-voice device allowed Mabley to comment on and criticize the violence facing African Americans without being overly explicit.

While Moms Mabley was critical of racism in the United States prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and often expressed it with pessimism, she sometimes balanced this with a message of hope, which was largely rooted in her professed Christian beliefs. She expressed this religiosity in an interview when she said, "I was raised with God-fearing parents and I always prayed to God." Her great-grandmother was also influential in her religious upbringing and the hope it inspired. She describes her experience in slavery: "They prayed, they trusted. They knew that some day it would happen. And all of the things that are happening, Granny would tell me, and

¹⁴² Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 246-247.

she told me years ago.”¹⁴³ Mabley’s spiritually based hope balanced with her more critical observations, making her performances appealing to both radical and moderate audiences. Although she expressed this hope to her audiences, she also urged them to have faith and be patient, which exemplified the accommodationist approach that characterized the pessimism of her comedy prior to 1964. However, since Mabley embodied the oppositional trickster, this was often layered with protest, which sometimes resulted in Mabley expressing mixed messages in her commentary. On her 1961 record *Moms Mabley at the U.N.*, Mabley sang a song urging her audience to stay positive, have faith, and not to fight:

When this old world seems dark and gloomy, and you’re filled with fright.
All you got to do is sing hallelujah. Everything is gonna be alright.
Even though you feel mistreated, ain’t no need to fight.
Just talk to the man up above and everything gonna be alright...
Just have faith in your God and country and keep on singing this song...
Keep singing over and over everything’s gonna be alright...
Just knock that door will open, seek and you will find.
But if you try to solve your problems, you’re sure to lose your mind...
Everything’s gonna be alright...
Listen to me I’m talking to the Congress it’ll be alright, everybody listen
to me...
I want you to hear me too Mr. Kruschev it’s alright...
Way down low I got to talk to everybody...
House of Representatives is alright, awww the Pentagon...
Oohhhh and my boy that I love so much listen Mr. Kennedy.
Alright son it’ll be alright. Trust in it.
Everything’s gonna be alright.
Honey, walk with him, talk with him, hallelujah.¹⁴⁴

On the surface, Mabley’s song came across as hopeful, moderate, and even accommodationist. She urged her audience to be patient and not fight for their rights, but she was using a double-voice. Mabley was part of the Great Migration, and her personal

¹⁴³ Studs Terkel, *The Spectator: Talk About Movies and Plays With the People Who Make Them* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 276-278.

¹⁴⁴ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the U.N.*, Chess LP1452, 1961.

solution for dealing with racism was to leave the South. She also consistently rejected the South on her records and told her audiences to leave the region. This complicated the optimistic message above and suggested that she was being sarcastic and layering a message of protest. When she said “but if you try to solve your problems you’re sure to lose your mind” she was highlighting the dire circumstances facing African Americans, which made this sarcasm more apparent. This was consistent with her often fatalistic message regarding racism and segregation prior to 1964.

On her 1963 album *Young Men Si, Old Men No!* Mabley balanced a blatant criticism of southern racism with an expression of hope in the same song. The song discussed the resistance to James Meredith enrolling at the University of Mississippi and asked, “what kind of a school is this, the school they call Ole Miss? I know that sticks and stones will break our bones but this is ridiculous. How can we pretend we love our foreign friends when they can plainly see what kind of fools they been?”¹⁴⁵ In the same breath, Mabley changed her tone and sang, “so take me out to the ball game, to the campus. And if we don’t win it’s a shame but when I trust in the Lord and the National Guard well get in just the same. Keep on knocking, they’ll open that door after a while.”¹⁴⁶ Again, she was using the double-voice. She began her song with critical commentary on the situation at Ole Miss. She then seemed to shift and express the optimism inspired by her great-grandmother, but this can also be seen as sarcasm and as a way to cover her true emotions regarding the subject, which were negative. Additionally, Mabley was using the signifying technique of revision by singing the tune of a popular,

¹⁴⁵ Moms Mabley, *Young Men Si, Old Men No!*, Chess LP1477, 1963.

¹⁴⁶ Moms Mabley, *Young Men Si, Old Men No!*, Chess LP1477, 1963.

light-hearted song, “Take Me Out to the Ball Game,” and then injecting her own unique message.

Moms Mabley’s comedy displayed a shift in 1964 as the Civil Rights Act was being passed. During this time, she became less pessimistic in her commentary and was also becoming more assertive in her demands for equality. She frequently advised her audiences to take advantage of their new rights, q prior to 1964. The change in Mabley’s attitude was very likely a response to the passage of the act, and may have been due to the fact that she saw the race situation changing and was more hopeful. However, it may have also been due to the fact that she changed record labels in 1964. Prior to 1964, Mabley’s comedy albums were released through Chess Records, which mainly catered to African-American audiences. The label was founded and run by Leonard and Phil Chess who, as Jewish immigrants from Poland, could relate to the experience of being marginalized in America. In 1964 Mabley moved to Mercury Records, which was a mainstream label. Mercury had a much larger distribution than Chess, and catered to black and white audiences. The label produced recordings from a wide variety of genres, including R&B, soul, jazz, classical, country, and pop. Mercury also represented a diverse listing of artists, such as Count Basie, Brook Benton, Chuck Berry, Johnny Cash, Herbie Hancock, Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, Sarah Vaughan, Dinah Washington, and Ethel Waters.¹⁴⁷ Mabley’s move to Mercury was symbolic of the changes that were taking place in American society during this time as a result of integration. However, of all the popular black comedians during this time, Mabley was the safest one to bring over to the Mercury label. Mabley may have mediated her comedy in response to the change

¹⁴⁷ John Broven, *Record Makers and Breakers: Voices of the Independent Rock n Roll Pioneers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

in her audience, and Mercury's record producers or the company head may have also played a role in the selection of what parts of Mabley's routines made it on to her comedy albums.¹⁴⁸

On *Moms the Word* (1964) Mabley talked about when she went to the White House to help Lyndon B. Johnson. She said, "Ladybird opened the back door but I told her it wasn't like that. Cause Caroline always opened the door for MOMS!"¹⁴⁹ The Caroline she was referring to was Caroline Kennedy, the daughter of Johnson's predecessor, John F. Kennedy, Jr. This exchange provided an example of Mabley's shifting attitude that began in 1964. She may have seen the passage of the Civil Rights act as a sign of change, and consequently felt empowered to continue pushing for racial equality. Mabley's bold demand for equality and unabashed assertion of herself in a realm that was almost exclusively limited to whites was an example of Mabley adapting women's blues to her stand-up routines. While this statement was relatively straightforward, she was again utilizing the double-voice device. She was demanding equal treatment, but voicing these demands in a fictional scenario at the White House and directing them at the First Lady seemed absurd. This absurdity elicited laughter from her audiences, but layered underneath the joke was a demand for equality that was real, and went beyond the back door of the White House. She was also voicing a suspicion that the Johnsons, as southerners, would abide by white southern racial codes.

During this time, she also urged her black audiences to take advantage of their voting rights in order to improve conditions in the United States. The shift in her message reflected new feelings of hope and paralleled the passage of legal protections for

¹⁴⁸ Nadine Cohodas, *Spinning Blues Into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records* (New York: MacMillan, 2000).

¹⁴⁹ Moms Mabley, *Moms the Word*, Mercury MG20907, 1964.

African Americans in the form of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Additionally, as her popularity grew she may have become sensitive to her responsibility as a performer as well as an adopted mother-figure for her audiences, rooted in her combination of the “Mother Dear” and Mammy archetypes in her performance persona. On *Moms the Word*, released in 1964, Mabley sang about the voting issue and told her audience “so get out and cast your vote we’ll have old Jim Crow by the throat so just remember what Moms say. It’s your right so don’t abuse it. It’s no good unless you use it on the next Election Day.” She created a direct correlation between voting and eliminating racist Jim Crow practices, which highlighted the power of the vote for obtaining and maintaining civil rights for African Americans.¹⁵⁰

After the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Mabley became even more optimistic about progress for African American equality. She continued to urge African Americans to exercise the franchise and frequently argued that her audiences should take responsibility for their actions and put their new rights to good use. As a result of playing as if her audiences were her children, no one was immune from her criticisms and stern suggestions. Just as Moms Mabley used the stage to level criticisms against white racism, her African American audiences were also the recipients of her strong-worded advice. Her 1965 album *Now Hear This* was a response to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. She voiced a strong message of self-help when she sang:

Now that the job is done, Congress in Washington, say that we gonna have
a new day.
No more sweat and strain, all chances are the same, I thank God I lived to
see this new day.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

Why from Maine to California, let me warn ya, you got your rights. Use em'.
 Don't feel left out...
 Since Congress passed the ...practice rule, you can be a hustla', or a scholar or a fool.
 It's up to you.
 Hitch up your wagon to any star, cuz brother now you're to blame for whatever you are.
 It's up to you...
 Ain't nobody to blame for what you do but you...
 Just get off your, and get off relief, that's all.
 It's all up to you.¹⁵¹

A few verses later, she highlighted the problems of cities in the North in contrast to the South. She sang:

But should you come up to New York to be free,
 Here some of the hurtin' things you are liable to see.
 There they go, throwin cans and bricks, breaking out the windows,
 stealing just for kicks.
 A bunch of stupid people, acting like a jerk, and too damn lazy to go to work.
 Why here we are, just fightin' for the cause. There they go, breaking all the laws.
 A bunch of wild children just actin like a fool. And too damn dumb to stay in school.
 Now please don't get offended at what Moms say.
 I love you, just don't wanna see you acting that way.
 Not while we are climbing freedom's ladder, children we are climbing freedom's ladder. We are climbing freedom's ladder...
 We're soldiers for a good cause.
 Everybody now don't you want to climb freedom's ladder...¹⁵²

Mabley repeatedly expressed her opposition to the tactic of violence, but she balanced her stern criticisms with an expression of pride in civil rights progress. On *Moms Mabley at the White House Conference* (1966), she sang about civil rights accomplishments:

In this world changing day-by-day, hard to say what will happen. Still people down there . . . crying out loud for the

¹⁵¹ Moms Mabley, *Now Hear This*, Mercury MG21012, 1965.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

world to hear that it'll never happen down there . . .
"They'll never ride the front of our bus and take a seat right
next to us [white southern accent]." They said it wouldn't
happen, but it did. They said "No simple-minded colored
fool will enroll in an all white school." They said it won't
happen, but it did. They said . . . "When we gave them the
right to vote it was like putting a knife around our
governor's throat." They didn't want it to happen, but
didn't it? And that ain't all that happened down there . . .¹⁵³

Mabley used her authoritative position to celebrate African Americans' accomplishments as well as chastise those she saw as detrimental to Civil Rights progress. A few verses later she again expressed her frustration with African Americans who were rioting and, she felt, detracting from the progress being made. She even compared rioters with the Ku Klux Klan:

But we got some other people in our land. Just as harmful
as the Ku Klux Klan . . . Got a few words I gotta say to
them. I'm talking about people who hate people. Most
disgustingest people in the world . . . fools, letting all their
foolish fun undo all the good we done. Imagine children,
delinquent children, the most awful children in the world.
Instead of civil rights children they just simple-minded
looters and using the least excuse for their own selfish use.
They are not people trying to help people. We must be the
unluckiest people in the world. Cuz after we overcome . . .
they set them back 50 years. They're the craziest people in
the whole world.¹⁵⁴

Mabley's comparison of urban rioters to the Ku Klux Klan exhibited a conservative bend on her part and pandered to white audiences. This comparison was rooted in her rejection of violence used by blacks as well as whites. Mabley's stance on civil rights activism aligned with Martin Luther King, Jr. and his principle of nonviolent protest, and she repeatedly denounced those who reacted violently and took part in riots and other types

¹⁵³ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the White House Conference*, Mercury MG21090, 1966.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

of disturbances. Mabley likely felt they detracted from the progress being made by nonviolent protest movements and federal and state legislation.

Moms Mabley's commentary on race and the Civil Rights movement exhibited shifts that were reflective of the changes taking place in the movement. However, despite these shifts, she was consistent in her criticisms directed at the South throughout the 1960s. While she acknowledged that racism and Jim Crow traditions were a problem all over the country, she frequently utilized the South as a symbol of America's race problem. A major reason for her consistent rejection of the South was her personal experience as a former southerner and as a participant in the Great Migration. Mabley left the South as a young woman in order to escape, in addition to family pressures, the racism and segregation that was so prevalent in the region, and this experience heavily influenced her views on the South for the rest of her life. Mabley referred to the South as a foreign country and separate from the rest of the United States in order to reject its racist traditions and highlight its practices as distinct from the rest of the nation. On *Moms Mabley at the U.N.* (1961), she began to tell a story about her experience in Miami and corrected herself by saying "I mean Theyami."¹⁵⁵ On *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club* (1961) she said "I meant to tell you about this fella. He joined an integrated church in one of them foreign countries down there, I think its Alabama or Mississippi or one of them foreign churches down there."¹⁵⁶ Mabley remained consistent over the years in her references to the South as foreign, and hence, not American. This presentation excluded the South from American traditions like democracy, liberty, and equality.

¹⁵⁵ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the U.N.*, Chess LP1452, 1961.

¹⁵⁶ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club*, Chess LP1460, 1961.

Mabley's presentation of the South as a foreign land was especially significant in light of America's foreign affairs in the 1960s while the nation was engaged in the Cold War and the Vietnam War. She addressed this parallel before the passage of the Civil Rights Act on the 1963 album *I Got Somethin' to Tell You!* when she talked about going to the Congo as a diplomat during the Congo Crisis. "Then we got back to America and, as soon as we got back to America, there was trouble happening in another part of the world they call Mississippi."¹⁵⁷ This parallel suggested that Mississippi was just as foreign, and just as troubled, as the war-torn Congo.

She made similar parallels after the passage of the Civil Rights Act on 1965's *Now Hear This* and 1966's *Moms Mabley at the White House Conference*. On *Now Hear This* she told her audience about her recent trip to Selma, Alabama. She opened the story by saying, "now hear this. Mom just got back from down there. Behind the scorched curtain, Selma."¹⁵⁸ On *White House Conference* she referred to the South as "behind the impossible curtain."¹⁵⁹ These references used the signifying techniques of parody and pastiche to parallel the concept of the "Iron Curtain," the symbol of the Cold War boundary created in Europe. By referencing the Iron Curtain in her discussion of the South, Mabley built on the American ideology regarding communism and the Soviet Union at this time. Just as the United States viewed these entities as foreign and threatening, Mabley portrayed the South as a foreign and threatening place. She also equated it to what was perceived as totalitarian and repressive, further distancing it from the American tradition.

¹⁵⁷ Moms Mabley, *I Got Something to Tell You!*, Chess LP1479, 1963.

¹⁵⁸ Moms Mabley, *Now Hear This*, Mercury MG21012, 1965.

¹⁵⁹ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the White House Conference*, Mercury MG21090, 1966.

Mabley's reference to the Jim Crow South as foreign was also significant because of her avowals of patriotism and pride in being an American. She made this claim in a 1963 interview when she said "I love everybody. I love America. I love our President."¹⁶⁰ She voiced a similar sentiment on *The Youngest Teenager* (1969) when she told her audience, "I love my government...I'm an American, you know? I'm from the United States."¹⁶¹ On the surface, these statements may have seemed humorous because they were so obvious since Mabley was born in North Carolina and had a southern accent. However, Mabley was using the double-voice device to protest her exclusion from American society as a black woman, and the treatment of African Americans as second-class citizens. By clearly asserting that she was American and laying claim to her citizenship, she was resisting this marginalization.

The Jim Crow traditions of the South were not representative of the America that Moms Mabley envisioned as her home, so she used her power as a performer and community elder to reject it. Her ability to use the stage and her records to voice her blatant rejection of the South and the degrading treatment African Americans received there was significant at a time when African Americans were marginalized in American society. Through this rejection, Mabley provided a public image of a strong black woman who could mock and belittle the culture that historically dehumanized African Americans. This bold and powerful image drew on Mabley's blues influence, and challenged and resisted the second-class citizen status African Americans were forced into, particularly in the South.

¹⁶⁰ Morton Cooper, "Moms Mabley Loves Everybody," *Chicago Defender*, January 5, 1963, 10.

¹⁶¹ Moms Mabley, *The Youngest Teenager*, Mercury SR 61229, 1969.

While still maintaining her symbolic portrayal of the South as a foreign place, Mabley was more specific about her disavowal of the region on 1964's *Moms Wows* and made it clear to her audience that she avoided the region specifically. She explained:

I been going everywhere I been going . . . all my life. Except one place. I used to ride the train when we had to ride in the back with the engine . . . I was on my way down to one of them foreign countries and I had learned a little Spanish. Thought I could get by a little better. I got on the wrong car and forgot my Spanish. All I could think of was sí. I sied all the way from Norfolk to Georgia. That's a nice place. But don't get Moms wrong, it ain't no disgrace to come from the South, it's a disgrace to go back down there.¹⁶²

Mabley pointed out to her audience that she had traveled and moved about freely for her entire life, with the exception of the South. The South was singled out in this anecdote as distinct from anywhere else because it was the one place she avoided. She emphasized what she believed to be the foreign nature of the South by suggesting that a foreign language was spoken there. Mabley recalled the practice of segregation on public transportation, and explained that she had to sit in the Jim Crow car while traveling in the South. However, after accidentally getting on the wrong car (presumably the car designated for white travelers), she experienced such fear that she forgot how to speak Spanish, a language newly learned in preparation for her travels to foreign lands. All she could remember how to say was sí, the Spanish word for yes. This was a reference to the Jim Crow South's expectation of how African Americans should address whites, with a deferential "yes'm" or "yes sir." Her allusion to this fear indirectly illustrated the violent and hostile nature of race relations in the South. Finally, by suggesting that coming from the South was acceptable but returning to the South was not, Mabley

¹⁶² Moms Mabley, *Moms Wows*, Chess LP1486, 1964.

provided agency to black Americans. Again, she was drawing on her experience in the Great Migration. Mabley affirmed her right to determine the boundaries of her movement and asserted that African Americans should claim that right as well. She refused to be a victim of the racist traditions of the South, and expected other black Americans to act in the same manner. Her rejection of the South was extended to other African Americans in her insistence that they avoid the region as well. This viewpoint was garnered by the fact that in other performances she explained that she was too smart to go to the South.

While Moms Mabley often used symbolism to level her criticisms against southern racism, she did not shy away from using more straightforward commentary as well. She would directly tell her audience that she was unwilling to travel to the South. When she did discuss trips to the region, it was usually on the premise of visiting family or some other necessity. An analysis of Mabley's touring patterns for her performances also indicates that she avoided performing in the South almost entirely during the period from 1960 until her death in 1975.¹⁶³ *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club* (1961) featured Mabley expressing her unwillingness to perform in the South when she said "and now they want me to go down to New Orleans. It'll be Old Orleans before I get down there. The Greyhound ain't gonna take me down there and the bloodhounds runnin' me back I'll tell you that."¹⁶⁴ On the same album she sang about a possible trip to Alabama:

¹⁶³ For a sampling of Mabley's appearances, see: *Chicago Defender*, January 27, 1960; *Chicago Defender*, April 15, 1961; *Variety*, June 7, 1961; *Variety*, February 14, 1962; *Chicago Defender*, May 8, 1962; *Chicago Defender*, January 2, 1964; *Chicago Defender*, April 20, 1964; *Chicago Defender*, April 12, 1966; *Variety*, March 29, 1967; *Chicago Defender*, November 22, 1967; *Variety*, January 7, 1971; *Variety*, February 3, 1971; *Variety*, September 10, 1971; *Variety*, July 26, 1972.

¹⁶⁴ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club*, Chess LP1460, 1961.

I was Alabamy bound. I had little piece of land in one of them little towns.
And I know I had the back of the NAACP and also Mr. Kennedy.
But what I needed was immortality.
I got a letter from Martin Luther King, yes I did.
He said that the Klu Klux Klan don't mean a thing, but you know I know better than that.
Tell you the truth, I'm scared of the son of a gun [the Klan], and baby I'm too old to run.
So I ain't Alabamy bound . . . You know Moms is too hip for that.¹⁶⁵

In this passage Mabley asserted that, even with the support of the NAACP, the President of the United States and Martin Luther King, Jr., going to the South would be foolish. She would need immortality, which highlighted the impossibility of ever safely visiting the South. A woman as outspoken and controversial as Moms Mabley would presumably not be safe in Alabama. Mabley's consistent rejection of the South indicated her awareness and acknowledgement of the resistant intent of her comedy.

Her 1962 album, *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Conference*, featured Mabley challenging Nikita Khrushchev to fight the United States. She exclaimed, "Alabama, Mississippi or any other foreign country you wanna fight in we'll fight ya!"¹⁶⁶ Offering the South as a battleground to potentially be destroyed by war further emphasized her aversion to and rejection of the region. On the same album she included the people of the South in her denunciation when she told her audience "I meet so many foreigners in my travelin'. I went down, met some foreign people. Met some Georgians, Alabamians, Texasses . . ." ¹⁶⁷

On her album *I Got Somethin' to Tell You!* from 1963, Mabley provided a straightforward rejection of the South, this time again addressing James Meredith's

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Conference*, Chess LP1463, 1962.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

enrollment at the University of Mississippi and the resulting backlash the event caused.

She sang about her conversation with Meredith to a cheerful blend of “Dixie,” a

traditional African-American spiritual, and “Over the Rainbow”:

A young man was grieving his heart out, because he couldn't understand.
I said “what's a matter son?” He said “Mom I don't want to give up law...
But just to save my hide I think I'll be better stay outside.
I shoulda quit school the night they shot it sis,
Mom you don't know what kinda place this is.
I can't study law no more.
I'm way down here in the land of cotton civil rights is still forgotten,
Get away, get away, get away from Dixieland.
Now mom you may think that I'm just joking but...
I wish I could leave Dixie . . . When I was born I don't see why I have to
die in Dixie.
Poor me, I want a degree but its tough to get in Dixie . . .
I said . . . “I don't know why they won't let you stay in.”
He said, “Mom all that is true but every time I do they make me stop
before I begin.”
I said, “Well my advice then,
Is somewhere over where there's no Jim Crow, you must fly.”
Because if the Supreme Court can't fix it so you can stay there,
How in the how can I?”¹⁶⁸

Setting the conversation to such a cheerful tune allowed her to infuse satire into her commentary on the situation at the University of Mississippi. She utilized the signifying devices of reversal and revision by setting sad and sorrowful lyrics against a cheerful tune. Her music choice also worked as a double-voice device because she was layering “Dixie,” a song that represented the South's racist past, with a traditional African-American spiritual.

James Meredith attempted to enroll at the university and was denied twice in 1961. The NAACP brought the case to the Supreme Court, which ruled in their favor. After eventually being able to enroll in 1962 despite Governor Ross Barnett attempting to block his enrollment, Meredith found that white students opposed to integration resorted

¹⁶⁸ Moms Mabley, *I Got Something to Tell You!*, Chess LP1479, 1963.

to rioting at the school. This led the Attorney General Robert Kennedy to call in the U.S. Marshalls to maintain control. In Mabley's song, Meredith described his difficulty and frustration and told Mabley that he wanted to leave the South. In reality, Meredith remained at the University of Mississippi and finished his degree, despite consistent hostility from many of the white students at the school.¹⁶⁹ By using Meredith, Mabley highlighted the danger facing African Americans who challenged white racism in the South. She was able to continue her rejection of the South in this presentation by showing Meredith as fearful and herself as superior because he talked about wanting to leave, and she advised him to leave the South.

This song was unique because it was one of the rare examples on Mabley's records where she admitted she was powerless and unable to fix a situation. This contrasted with her frequent discussion of advising presidents and other leaders. She admitted that if the Supreme Court could not protect Meredith and guarantee his enrollment, neither could she. By limiting her own power, Mabley illustrated how big the problem really was at the University of Mississippi, and in the South in general. However, she also implied that she had power over Meredith as a community elder by giving him the same advice that her great-grandmother gave her. She presented migration as a solution for him, which was consistent with her attitude about the South.

Mabley also illustrated the violence African Americans were subjected to in the South on *Moms Mabley at the White House Conference (1966)*. She told this story:

Colored fella down home died, went to gate. Saint Peter
said "Who are you?" "Sam Jones. You know me,
NAACP, CORE, marches. Look in the book, I'm there."
"No you ain't here." "I'm the cat that married that white

¹⁶⁹ Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 65.

girl on the Capitol steps in Jackson, Mississippi.” “How long ago?” “About five minutes ago.”¹⁷⁰

Interracial marriage, illegal and extremely taboo in the South, was frequently met with violent punishment. The humor in Mabley’s joke rested in the suggestion that the punishment for such an offense was so swift that Saint Peter had not even had time to record it before Sam Jones was at the gates of heaven. Furthermore, by highlighting his involvement in civil rights activism in the South, Mabley argued that marrying a white woman was even more dangerous than challenging the racist status quo in Mississippi through organized action, which was often met with violence.

Moms Mabley’s commentary on race and civil rights exhibited shifts in the 1960s that reflected the changes taking place in the Modern Civil Rights Movement. However, after she released *Moms Mabley at the White House Conference* in 1966, this discussion slowly disappeared from her comedy records.¹⁷¹ *The Best of Moms Mabley* was released in 1968, and featured highlights from her earlier performances.¹⁷² *The Youngest Teenager* was released in 1969 and its commentary on race relations made up a much smaller portion of the record than her earlier albums.¹⁷³ *Her Young Thing* (1969) was also limited in its discussion of race and segregation.¹⁷⁴ Her commentary on race relations completely disappeared from her comedy records in the 1970s. *Live at Sing Sing* (1970), *Live at the Greek* (1971) and *I Like ‘Em Young* (1972) did not offer any discussion of civil rights, racism, segregation, or Jim Crow.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁰ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the White House Conference*, Mercury MG21090, 1966.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Moms Mabley, *The Best of Moms Mabley*, Mercury Mercury MG21139, 1968.

¹⁷³ Moms Mabley, *The Youngest Teenager*, Mercury SR 61229, 1969.

¹⁷⁴ Moms Mabley, *Her Young Thing*, Mercury SR61205, 1969.

¹⁷⁵ Moms Mabley, *Live at Sing Sing*, Mercury SR61263, 1970; Moms Mabley, *Live at the Greek*, Mercury SR61360, 1971; Moms Mabley, *I Like ‘Em Young*, Partee PBS2402, 1972.

Because Mabley had been performing for integrated audiences since the beginning of 1960s, the absence of any discussion of race cannot be attributed to Mabley mediating her comedy for a changing audience. Rather, the difference can be attributed to changes in society and politics. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in 1968 signaled a change in the Civil Rights movement, and historians commonly consider the time following his assassination as a period of breakdown and backlash.¹⁷⁶ Mabley was a strong supporter of Dr. King and was undoubtedly saddened and disillusioned after his death, so his assassination may have made her unwilling to talk about civil rights and race issues. Furthermore, Black Power was gaining momentum at this time and dominating the later years of the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement. The viewpoints and attitudes of the Black Power movement were greatly divergent from Moms Mabley's, especially in regard to nonviolence and self-defense. Mabley's neglect of race issues on her albums in the 1970s suggests that she may have been disillusioned by the changing approach of the Civil Rights movement. Perhaps she felt distanced from the movement that had had been so central to her performance work. However, just as Mabley's change to the Mercury label may have influenced the content of her records in 1964, the label may have also played a role in this new shift. Like the rest of the entertainment industry, Mercury may have been responding to the civil rights backlash that was taking place by mediating Mabley's discussion of race issues on her records. Whether or not it was Mabley's choice to limit her discussion of race at this time, the disappearance of the issue was reflective of society's turn away from the Civil Rights movement.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 101.

¹⁷⁷ David Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny: The Uncensored Story of the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*.

The mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement played a central role in Moms Mabley's comedy, and her commentary exhibited shifts that reflected the changes taking place in the movement. She began recording party albums in 1960, which enjoyed mass consumption and topped the Billboard charts throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. By capitalizing on her popularity, Mabley was able to highlight the struggles of African Americans in attaining equality while criticizing the racism black Americans experienced. She used a variety of signifying devices to layer messages of protest into her comedy, and utilized her comedic persona and assumed role as a community elder to chastise and empower her audiences. The shifts that Mabley displayed in her discussion about race and the Civil Rights movement were also reflected in her commentary on politics in the United States.

Chapter Three

Moms Mabley and Politics

Moms Mabley used the stage and her comedic performances to criticize racism and segregation in the United States. Her commentary on race issues shifted to reflect the changes taking place in the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement. These shifts were also present in her discussion of American politics. Race was a key aspect of politics during this time, especially in the African-American community, and separating the two in an historical analysis of the period can be difficult for this reason. This chapter will focus on Mabley's commentary on politics, which grew out of her commentary on race, and will also discuss her commentary on broader political issues of the 1960s and early 1970s. Moms Mabley used the comedic devices of the double-voice, satire, and role-playing to create a fictional space for herself in American politics and to protest the exclusion of African Americans and women from the government and American society more generally. Her protest was also aimed at the leaders who enabled racial exclusion to dominate American life. While presenting herself as a government spy, diplomat, and advisor to American presidents effectively demonstrated this protest, Mabley further strengthened her argument when she recreated herself into a presidential candidate. These scenarios were so far-fetched in the 1960s, at a time when women as well as African Americans were heavily underrepresented in politics, that the possibility drew laughter. However, underneath Mabley's jokes was a challenge to the status quo. By fictionally projecting herself to positions of political power, Mabley protested the

marginalized position of African Americans, particularly black women. Mabley was utilizing the signifying tradition described by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. by “achiev[ing] occupancy in [a] desired space” and by “redressing an imbalance of power” between the strong lion character (in this case the white establishment of politicians and politics) and the seemingly weak trickster, who she embodied in these fictional exchanges.¹⁷⁸

Mabley’s political commentary also drew on the spoken blues form and the working-class feminism that informed the genre because, like the blues women Angela Y. Davis discusses, Mabley “contested patriarchal assumptions about [the] women’s place in the dominant culture and . . . affirmed women’s capacities in domains assumed to be the prerogative of males,” such as politics.¹⁷⁹

Moms Mabley frequently utilized the comedic device of role-playing in her political criticisms. She built on her persona of the maternal figure to create a position of power where she could advise and criticize American presidents and other world leaders. The humor of these fictional interactions was largely rooted in the unlikely nature of them. As an African-American woman, Mabley represented a marginalized group in American society with limited influence on politics and government. By creating a fictional central role for herself in the government and presenting herself as an advisor to U.S. presidents, Mabley drew attention to this marginalization while simultaneously rejecting it. On her 1962 album, *Moms Mabley Breaks it Up*, she told her audience about her recent task in assisting the Kennedys:

But Moms been away again since I saw you children. I
been gone on government business again. I don’t work on

¹⁷⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 124.

¹⁷⁹ Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 120.

the government, but they call me when they wanna dig something too deep for them, you dig? . . . I got a call from the White House from John's Secretary of State, want speak to me. "What you want son?" "Defense department wants you to come to Washington to go on a trip with Jackie. They don't think its safe for her to go." . . . I better go with her. Me, her, John sitting in East Room talking it over. . . "what my duties, where we going?" "Jackie going to India. . . you going on goodwill tour."¹⁸⁰

Mabley portrayed herself as a central and integral part of American politics by suggesting that leaders needed and asked for her help. This was especially true in regard to foreign relations and diplomacy. On *I Got Something to Tell You* (1963) she presented another scenario where President Kennedy asked for her help overseas:

Moms has been away. A lot of people think I work for the government. They only send for me when they need advice. Sometimes U.N., sometimes White House . . . I just completed a mission to the Congo. They had some trouble over there with someone name Tshombe. I thought it was a name of a dance . . . I called him [John F. Kennedy] and said "Listen son, lend me your plane. I want to go to the Congo and I want you to send your plane up here cuz they been droppin . . . I don't want nothing to drop with me..."¹⁸¹

On *Out on a Limb* (1964) Mabley insisted to her audience that her imagined work for the government kept her busy and sometimes barred her from performing. She portrayed herself as responsible for mediating global conflicts:

I been all over the world since I got here. You wonder how come Moms don't come home and play at home sometimes. Carnegie hall, gold records and stuff. Government have me going all over the world, so much trouble in the world. I go straighten out this, straighten out that. You know what I mean?¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley Breaks it Up*, Chess LP1472, 1962.

¹⁸¹ Moms Mabley, *I Got Something to Tell You!*, Chess LP1479, 1963.

¹⁸² Moms Mabley, *Out on a Limb*, Mercury SR60889, 1964.

Mabley was using the double-voice device because on the surface, the thought of her playing a central role in the government was humorous since it was so unlikely. But beneath the surface, presenting herself as a central political figure was a way to protest and expose the inequality facing African Americans. Mabley was speaking for all African Americans who were voiceless and excluded from politics. Fictionally inserting herself in governmental affairs was the comedienne's way of saying that she, and black people in general, should be consulted about political issues.

Mabley extended her central political role to other black cultural icons in order to further protest the political exclusion of African Americans by white political leaders on a larger scale. She frequently condemned Alabama Governor George Wallace in her comedy routines and used him to personify institutionalized racism in the United States. On *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Conference* (1962) she presented a fictional nightmare he had:

Had a nightmare that Martin Luther King was elected president . . . it seemed all Congress was colored.
But you ain't heard nothing yet, the Supreme Court judge wasn't readin the law. He was sitting up there reading Jet.
I rushed over to the Capitol, and this is an honest fact
I started in the front door and Roy Wilkins made me go around to the back. I asked to see the Head of State. And then let out a howl when in his place with a smile on his face was Adam Clayton Powell. He gave my nose a nasty tweak and said "I can't help you son. Take your problem to the head of foreign affairs, Miss Dinah Washington." So I ask her, "please Miss Washington what does all this mean?" She said, "I don't know what you talking about honey. From now on just call me Queen." I went to see the chairman of the board of ways and means. Louis Armstrong sitting there eating ham hocks and collard greens. He said "Greetings gate, you're just in time to graze. Wrap your chop around this soul food while I put your mind at ease."¹⁸³

¹⁸³ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Conference*, Chess LP1463, 1962.

Wallace's fears of black leadership provided the backdrop for Mabley's fictional portrayal of the United States government. She relied on the signifying devices of parody and revision in order to reimagine the landscape of American politics and included black leaders and entertainers to further emphasize her protest and mockery of the exclusion and inequality African Americans faced. She also used familiar components of black culture to extend her argument. *Jet* magazine was a popular and well-circulated African-American publication, while ham hocks and collard greens brought in examples of soul food. Mabley combined the black leaders and symbols of black culture in her portrayal to create an image of a fictional government that greatly contrasted reality in 1962. Like the previous example, this contrast worked to protest and expose the racist status quo during this time.

Mabley used a similar approach for comparable effect on *Live at the Apollo* when she told about the time when "I was standing on the White House lawn talking to Ike the other day. Me and him and Adam Clayton Powell and Governor Faubus and Bo Diddly and Big Maybelle . . ." ¹⁸⁴ While these portrayals were fictional and provoked laughter, Mabley's presentation was also intended to highlight America's inequality and to push her audience to question the current state of affairs. Adam Clayton Powell, Bo Diddly and Big Maybelle were, like Mabley, marginalized in American society. She was again using the double-voice because on the surface, the thought of these figures all standing together talking on the White House lawn seemed preposterous. It was this unlikelihood that made this and her other fictional portrayals nonthreatening to white audiences. However, layered beneath the humor was Mabley's message of protest and resistance.

¹⁸⁴ Moms Mabley, "White House Lawn," *Live at the Apollo*, 1961.

While Mabley was consistent in her critical treatment of American politics, the way she approached American presidents in her comedy differed. These differences provide insight into Mabley's views on the leaders and how they were handling their responsibilities. The shifts in her approach also reflected the changes taking place in the Civil Rights movement and in American race relations. On *Funny Sides of Moms Mabley* (1964) she shared the story of when she discussed child rearing with President Eisenhower and told her audience, "I asked Ike a simple question. I said 'listen boy.' I said 'how old you said a child should be before you hip it?' He said 'when it gets school age.'"¹⁸⁵ She then criticized Eisenhower for waiting too long to educate a child. She referred to the president as Ike and also called him "boy" to diminish his power and elevate her own in the exchange. Referring to a white male leader as "boy" was especially subversive during this time because that moniker had historically been used to disrespect and belittle African American men. Furthermore, by calling him Ike, Mabley created a fictional personal relationship with the President in which he was no longer her superior. But she also reinforced the Mammy image when she criticized him, which lent humor to what she said and made it seem harmless. Yet covertly, she was also expressing her frustration with Dwight D. Eisenhower. This frustration can be attributed to his limited contributions to civil rights for African Americans. While he did propose and sign the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960, he held an overall conservative approach in regard to the federal government enforcing civil rights. Civil rights progress was limited and slow while he was in office, and the pessimism Mabley felt regarding

¹⁸⁵ Moms Mabley, *The Funny Sides of Moms Mabley*, Chess LP1482, 1964.

both race and politics during this period in regard to this limited progress was reflected in this exchange.¹⁸⁶

Moms Mabley's presentation of her fictional relationship with John F. Kennedy was more complicated than that of Dwight D. Eisenhower. Kennedy was undoubtedly her favorite president during the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement, but even he was not immune to being chastised by Mabley when she felt he deserved it. On *Moms Mabley Breaks it Up* (1962), telling of the Goodwill Tour with First Lady Jackie Kennedy, she insisted Kennedy remarked:

“Gonna take a jet and remember you haven't paid your income tax yet.” I said “what income? You pay your debts and I'll pay mine brother! I don't owe nobody nothing. I paid my taxes I know that. You pay your debt.” “What debt?” “Civil Rights Bill.” He said “I thought Eisenhower paid that.”¹⁸⁷

Mabley chastised Kennedy and held him accountable for protecting civil rights for African Americans. She paralleled his responsibility in regard to a Civil Rights bill with her responsibility to pay her taxes, and both were seen as a debt to America. By presenting Kennedy as saying that he thought Eisenhower paid the Civil Rights Bill “debt,” Mabley suggested a lack of accountability on the part of America's presidents when dealing with civil rights during this time. On a deeper level, Mabley was also highlighting the debt of unpaid labor from slave times. The anger she expressed in the conversation and the bold and forthright manner in which she demanded Kennedy pay his civil rights debt illustrated the influence of the women's blues tradition on Mabley.

Moms Mabley's later presentations of her relationship with John F. Kennedy were

¹⁸⁶ Robert Fredrick Burk, *The Eisenhower Administration and Black Civil Rights* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984).

¹⁸⁷ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley Breaks it Up*, Chess LP1472, 1962.

much more positive. She was so supportive of Kennedy that she would frequently portray herself as part of his family. On *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Conference* (1962) she told her audience:

I was fixing to go to Chicago, that's why I didn't get here. Gonna go to Playboy but at 2:30 in the morning got a call from John and Jackie. At that time to get a long distance call to scare me to death. Thought for sure something wrong with Caroline, my grandchild you know. They wanted me to go over there since you are the only one who can do anything with that fool at the UN, see if you can get him to stop busting and killing people. And of course I had to go. That's the reason I didn't come here. Right away, ran over to Pentagon to see my legal advisor Bo Diddly and his secretary was there, Big Maybelle singing "All of Me, Why Not Why Not All of Me" . . . And after that I went over to the mint to pick up a couple bales of money because I was going to foreign countries.¹⁸⁸

In addition to emphasizing her imaginary central role in politics, this passage highlighted the familiarity Mabley had with John F. Kennedy and his family. She referred to the President and First Lady as John and Jackie, which was not intended to belittle them but rather, to illustrate a close and familiar relationship with them. In this scenario, Mabley went beyond her popular persona as an adopted mother to her audiences, and actually claimed the Kennedys as kin. She again placed black cultural leaders, in this case Bo Diddley and Big Maybelle, in positions of political power to extend the inclusion that she bestowed upon herself. Finally, she outlandishly emphasized her power and influence by saying that she was able to get bales of money from the mint for her foreign travels.

She again asserted her familiar relationship with the Kennedys in a 1963 interview with the *Chicago Defender* when she said, "I love everybody. I love America. I love our President. I love Adam Clayton Powell and my church. I'm crazy about

¹⁸⁸ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at Geneva Conference*, Chess LP1463, 1962.

Caroline Kennedy . . . I'm Caroline's grandmother, you know."¹⁸⁹ In both statements asserting that Caroline Kennedy was her granddaughter, she said "you know" to further emphasize her point and to make it sound like common knowledge. Projecting herself as a part of the Kennedy family suggested Mabley's support for his presidency, but it also put her in a better position to criticize the president and his policies when she saw fit. However, she also ironically appropriated the image of the mammy when she discussed her relationship with the Kennedys by embodying the black mother who was more concerned with the white family, of which she is never really a part, than her own. By pandering to white racist stereotypes, the challenge she presented when creating this space and using it to criticize the president could be seen as harmless. Her ability to use this device made her unique from black male comedians, who could not play this type of role and get away with criticizing the government as she did.

On *Moms Mabley at the White House Conference* (1966), Mabley was explicit in her support for Kennedy when she argued with a man rushing her to view the unveiling of a statue of Abraham Lincoln. He told her that Lincoln was the man who freed her, to which she responded, "Lincoln didn't free me, John F. Kennedy freed me!"¹⁹⁰ With this statement, Mabley argued that true freedom for African Americans did not come with the end of slavery, but rather with the passage and enactment of Civil Rights legislation. Although the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, when Lyndon B. Johnson was president, John F. Kennedy was often publicly credited for the bill. This public credit can largely be attributed to Lyndon B. Johnson, who upon filling the presidency after Kennedy's assassination proclaimed, "no memorial oration or eulogy could more

¹⁸⁹ Morton Cooper, "Moms Mabley Loves Everybody," *Chicago Defender*, January 5, 1963, 10.

¹⁹⁰ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the White House Conference*, Mercury MG21090, 1966.

eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the Civil Rights Bill for which he fought so long.”¹⁹¹ However, Kennedy was actually very hesitant when it came to passing legislation for civil rights. In fact, “most civil rights advocates saw the Kennedy administration’s response to the struggle for black equality as inadequate. Above all, Kennedy refused to take on Congress . . . by asking for a major civil rights law.” He reluctantly began to support a comprehensive civil rights law in 1963 after images of Bull Connor and George Wallace opposing integration became public because he was concerned about America’s global image during the Cold War.¹⁹² However, like others in the American public, Mabley attributed civil rights achievements to John F. Kennedy. While she was still pessimistic during this time about civil rights progress, she was optimistic about Kennedy’s presidency.

Moms Mabley’s support and admiration for John F. Kennedy combined with her generally critical attitude toward America’s leadership in the 1960s largely determined her comedic treatment of Lyndon B. Johnson, Kennedy’s successor. Her 1964 album, *Moms the Word*, was recorded soon after Kennedy’s assassination as Johnson filled the presidency. She reflected the sentiment of many Americans in her performance when she asked, “LBJ are you all they say? Are you just a front or are you really ok? They all mean well so they say but this is one thing, Moms prays God send us another JFK.” Mabley was skeptical about Johnson, and this skepticism can partly be attributed to his Southern roots. Mabley’s rejection of the South extended to white southerners in politics. However, Johnson was actually more instrumental than Kennedy in promoting civil rights legislation. Once he assumed office, he made it a priority to push the Civil Rights

¹⁹¹ *New York Times*, November 28, 1963, 20.

¹⁹² Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 31-32.

Act through Congress without major compromises that would weaken the legislation.¹⁹³

His support for civil rights was acknowledged by Roy Wilkins, who asserted that “of all the men in American political life, I would trust to do the most about civil rights, . . . it would be Lyndon Johnson.”¹⁹⁴ However, Mabley’s statement about John F. Kennedy freeing her and the absence of any acknowledgement of Johnson’s role in her stage performances or in interviews suggests that Mabley did not entirely trust Johnson. During this time, she was becoming more optimistic about African Americans attaining civil rights, but she was less optimistic about having Johnson in office. Her later commentary on President Johnson supported this observation.

On her 1965 album *Now Hear This*, Mabley offers President Johnson some advice:

Talking about the astronaut. Them men came back the other day, the astronauts. Them riding up Broadway with all that ticky tape and people flyin at ‘em you know? Was going to the war and all. And of course I was down there in the crowd cuz I’m always around a crowd from being in the government, you dig what I mean? Doing a little LYIN and SPYIN’, ya dig? So I was standing there and watching the expression on some colored men’s face. I split, went straight to the airport, got me a plane and went to Washington. Walked up to the White House lawn . . . I said “Hey Lyndon! Lyndon! Son, Lyndon! Come here boy. I say get something colored up in the air quick. Quick son hurry up and do it, I’m telling ya, before Martin Luther King digs it, and he be marching on your buns.” He said “Moms I’m so glad you told me. I don’t know what to do. What would I do without ya? I hadn’t thought about that. He said where can I get the biggest crowd of men together in a hurry?”

This fictional scenario was consistent with Mabley’s fictional depictions of her central and powerful role in the government. Furthermore, her ability to walk on the White

¹⁹³ Ibid., 111.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 26.

House lawn, summon the president, and refer to him by familiar names all support Mabley's consistent display of her power in politics. Addressing the president as Lyndon, "son," and "boy" also suggest that Mabley was critical of Johnson, especially in light of the rest of the fictional conversation. This exchange also built on Mabley's theme of advising presidents. She alluded to Johnson's incompetence when he told Mabley that he would not know what to do without her, and that he had not thought about sending an African American astronaut into space. She was also presuming that Johnson would continue segregation. This strengthens Mabley's deeper argument, that she should have been consulted about politics because she was more reasonable than those in power. Johnson's reliance on Moms Mabley to help him in this situation empowered the comedienne, which was an important component of the political protest inscribed in her humor. Mabley was also embodying the trickster character and using the signifying device of reversal in this scenario. The black population was consistently under surveillance during the Civil Rights movement, and Mabley was referencing this fact. She projected herself in the spy position to turn this situation on its head while making it clear that African Americans *knew* they were being watched. She empowered herself and the black community she represented by reversing the situation and making herself the spy.

Moms Mabley's practice of criticizing American presidents continued with Richard Nixon, who took office in 1969. On her album from that same year, *The Youngest Teenager*, Mabley told her audience about a letter she received from President Nixon:

I got a letter from Nixon just the other night. He wrote me, he said, "Moms is everything alright?" I said "son you

doin' alright if you can just keep it up. You sure can say there's nothing wrong if you keep your big mouth shut." He said "Mom you the best. I would like to see you come to Washington, D.C." I said "son I'm getting old, can't do much running around you better come to see *me*." He said "well Mom, uh, do you live in Harlem? After all you know I'm white and not all the security in the world won't help my head at night." I said "no son, I live in White Plains but don't let that confuse you, the community is black. So if you come to my house, would you mind coming round the back?"¹⁹⁵

This exchange placed Mabley in a fictional position of power; she used this power to ask President Nixon to come through the back door when he visits her in the black community in which she lived. By using role-reversal to require a white man as powerful and President Nixon to go through the back when visiting her, Mabley highlighted and simultaneously mocked the unjust treatment of African Americans in the United States. This treatment was similar to the way she treated southern politicians like George Wallace, and it may have been a reaction to Nixon's southern strategy or a reflection of Mabley's early suspicions of Nixon's weak civil rights record. Her story continued with President Nixon fulfilling her request and visiting her at her home:

Well he come up we set down over plate of hocks and peas. I said "will you excuse Agnew from the room while we discuss foreign policy?" He said "Mom I want you to be my ambassador to Vietnam." I said "son you never heard me cuss but Richard, I'll be damned" . . . I said "no President, I serve my country best by staying here with you. If I got bummed out over there, who'd you have to run to? Listen, son, regarding our troops from Vietnam and from the Berlin Wall. You better hurry and get em back, cuz we might need em next fall."¹⁹⁶

The rhyming and repetition employed in this sequence borrows from rapping, a component of signifying. This device can be seen in the rhyming of "peas" and "policy,"

¹⁹⁵ Moms Mabley, *The Youngest Teenager*, Mercury SR 61229, 1969.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

“Vietnam” and “damned,” “you” and “to,” and “Wall” and “fall.” Mabley used rapping to empower herself in the exchange by displaying a mastery of the English language and by delivering cutting phrases to Nixon.¹⁹⁷ In this part of the passage, Mabley continued to assert power and influence over Richard Nixon. This influence can be seen in a detail as small as the food they ate--hocks and peas. The gesture of eating soul food, a food native to Mabley’s culture and foreign to Nixon’s, emphasized her fictional authority over Nixon and his deference to Mabley. She determined the course of the visit and made her position dominant when she asked Vice President Spiro Agnew to leave the room while she discussed foreign policy with President Nixon. Mabley’s central role in the government and her political power were demonstrated in Nixon’s request for her to be ambassador to Vietnam. However, Mabley presented herself as being in a powerful enough position to decline the request. She alluded to his incompetence, as she had with Presidents Eisenhower and Johnson, by explaining that if she went to Vietnam she’d be unavailable for the President to “run to,” presumably when faced with a situation that he couldn’t handle without her help. Finally, Mabley used her fictional political leverage to urge President Nixon to pull troops from Vietnam and the Berlin Wall. Mabley’s dialogue with Nixon was humorous because of its absurd and unlikely nature. By layering her commentary beneath this humor, she was able to take advantage of the fictional space she had created for herself to publicly criticize his administration as her audience laughed.

Moms Mabley’s fictional interaction with Richard Nixon in 1969 was critical in nature. However, her tone was also playful and somewhat moderate in comparison to her later comments on the president. She was much harsher when discussing Nixon in an

¹⁹⁷ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 44, 52.

interview for *New York Magazine*. The interview was printed on October 14, 1974, two months after Richard Nixon's resignation in light of the Watergate scandal and subsequent threats of impeachment. She said:

Even old Moms couldn't do nothing for that man, 'cept give him a few licks upside the head, that is . . . he was just too far gone. Only thing I got to say about him is, your sins will find you out. Like old Joe Louis says, "you can run but you can't hide."¹⁹⁸

The increased harshness in Moms Mabley's attitude toward Richard Nixon can certainly be attributed to the Watergate scandal. However, her change in attitude could also be an indication of Mabley's disappointment in Nixon's limited contributions to civil rights progress during his presidency. Richard Nixon was not a strong supporter of equal rights for African Americans, and the contributions he made to civil rights were countered by many setbacks and shortcomings. He signed voting rights amendments in 1970, equal opportunity legislation in 1972, and encouraged the development of Affirmative Action policies in the public and private sectors. However, he was also careful to avoid alienating the southern vote in his bid for reelection in 1972, an approach referred to as the "southern strategy." This strategy included nominating southern conservatives to the Supreme Court and opposing school busing to desegregate schools.¹⁹⁹ While Mabley did not directly mention these issues in her criticism, it was likely to have played a part in her opinion of Richard Nixon. Nixon was widely mistrusted on racial issues in the black community, and Moms Mabley reflected this mistrust.

Mabley's interest in politics continued until her death in 1975. This interest was exemplified in her comment regarding President Gerald Ford during a 1974 interview for

¹⁹⁸ Mark Jacobson, "Amazing Moms," *New York Magazine*, October 14, 1974, 48.

¹⁹⁹ Hugh Davis Graham, "Richard Nixon and Civil Rights: Explaining an Enigma," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 1, The Nixon Presidency (Winter, 1996), p. 93.

New York magazine. When asked about her opinion on Ford, Mabley responded “I hear, now mind me, I hear, he’s a godly man, but Moms is keeping her eye on him.”²⁰⁰

Mabley was easier on Ford than she was on Nixon, Johnson and Eisenhower, and it may have been because he was not a southerner. However, she was still skeptical, which was consistent with her earlier views on politics and America’s presidents. Her commentary on Nixon and Ford was voiced during the period of civil rights breakdown and backlash, and at this time Mabley was becoming disillusioned by the declining situation. This disillusionment was reflected in the way she discussed these presidents. Even though Ford was described as “godly,” a quality that would likely impress a religious woman like Moms Mabley, she was hesitant to place her trust in him. Furthermore, saying that she was keeping her eye on him built on the maternal persona Mabley employed to criticize and chastise politicians. Mabley’s skepticism and maternal supervision built on her long-standing critical attitude toward the government and its leaders. This attitude and her subsequent verbal challenges were used to humble political leaders in their positions of power while empowering herself and other African-American cultural icons. This symbolic power struggle operated as a public protest against the unequal treatment of African Americans and women, and the government’s role in enabling this inequality.

Moms Mabley leveled her criticisms at political policies as well as political leaders. The government’s emphasis on the space program was one such initiative that Mabley saw as problematic. She felt that focusing so much on being competitive in the realm of space travel was not practical for the United States government, and that it should have been focusing on its problems at home instead. Mabley’s criticisms of the space program date back to 1961, when she told her audience on *Live at the Apollo-White*

²⁰⁰ Jacobson, “Amazing Moms,” *New York*, October 1974.

House Lawn about a fictional conversation she had with President Dwight D.

Eisenhower:

Oh my goodness baby, we standing out there talking . . . about them spending so much money. You realize how much money they spending? Five million people out of work and you know how much they spend a week in . . . Florida? One billion dollars a week trying to get a bum in the air . . . I said “man what’s happening, what you trying to do, man?” He said “we trying to get to the moon.” I said, “but you messed things up down here, now you going on the moon to get in his business.”²⁰¹

Mabley’s criticism in this excerpt is two-fold. First, she was critical of the fact that the government was spending so much money on the space program when a large portion of its population was poor unemployed. Mabley connected the two issues, which implies that she felt the government should have been spending its money and effort on uplifting its citizens and alleviating the issue of unemployment instead of pursuing space travel. Second, Mabley criticized Eisenhower more directly when she said that he has “messed things up down here” and implied that he should not be causing trouble on the moon as well. This comment suggested that Mabley felt that President Eisenhower was responsible for many of the nation’s problems at this time. She used jive slang and referred to him as “man,” which was a very familiar and informal way to address someone. Her language, in addition to her criticism, signaled Mabley’s attitude toward Eisenhower. She presented him as her subordinate, rather than as a leader to be deferential toward. This presentation was rooted in Mabley’s attitude toward Eisenhower and his weak civil rights record, as well as in her maternal persona, which was always a mediating presence.

²⁰¹ Moms Mabley, “White House Lawn,” *Live at the Apollo*, 1961.

In 1966 Moms Mabley made a more general criticism of the United States government and its emphasis on the space program. She told her audience:

United States is a mess. See that out there we say its fog, comes from messing with up there [outer space] . . . and people dying like flies. Heart attack, backache, liver gone, everything gone. Poison coming down the air, talk about pollution. That's poison. Got to clean up your air.²⁰²

In this excerpt, Mabley argued for a connection between space travel and environmental pollution. This connection moved her criticism beyond seeing space travel as a waste of resources. For Mabley, sending astronauts into outer space was also triggering environmental problems, which were negatively impacting people's health. This connection led her to make the dismissive statement that the "United States is a mess." Her criticisms of the government's investment in space travel continued in 1969, when she said:

Everybody's crazy! . . . Sent three men up there the other day. I told them quit disturbing elements, sending people up there to find man in the moon. Messed things up down here, don't mess things up out there!²⁰³

Mabley prefaced her comment with the statement that "everybody's crazy," which strengthened her oppositional tone. She simplified the purpose of space travel as an effort to find the "man in the moon," thus presenting it as a silly, useless, and impractical. She also told her audience that she told "them" to stop traveling to outer space, "them" likely referring to governmental leaders. This comment built on her fictional assertion that she played a role in the government and suggested that she was in a powerful enough position to tell leaders to stop space travel. In this statement, she saw space travel as

²⁰² Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the White House Conference*, Mercury MG21090, 1966.

²⁰³ Moms Mabley, *Her Young Thing*, Mercury SR61205, 1969.

problematic because it was disruptive to the elements, and because she felt the government had made a mess at home, so they should not be creating problems in space as well. This statement had a tone of fatalism, and reflected Mabley's negative feelings at this point. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated a year earlier, the Civil Rights movement was experiencing a period of backlash and breakdown, the country was engaged in the Vietnam War, and Mabley did not trust President Nixon. She effectively used her criticism of the space program to maintain a humorous and lighthearted tone while she expressed her true feelings of disillusionment and frustration. Furthermore, NASA was representative of the larger government, and provided an outlet for Mabley to make fun of and criticize the government without being direct.

Moms Mabley was opposed to America's involvement in the Vietnam War. This opposition was likely rooted in Mabley's version of Christian values as well as her connection with America's youth, who played a disproportionate role in military combat. In a 1968 interview with the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* she said she would like to go to Vietnam because "I've got a lot of children around and I want to see them so bad . . . maybe it's a little rough over there for Moms, but if the government let me I'd go."²⁰⁴ She sang about the issue and tried to boost morale on 1969's *The Youngest Teenager*:

Now that I'm old and gray, I'm glad I'm here to say,
If we all pray things will get better day-by-day.
That is if we be good, and act like we should and practice brotherhood.
Then we can lay down our burdens, down by the riverside.
Down by the riverside. (repeat)
Study war no more. Well I ain't gonna study war no more. (repeat)"²⁰⁵

This song directly criticized the American government and its involvement in the war, and made Mabley's anti-war message clear. The context of the song also clarified her

²⁰⁴ Charles Witbeck, "Moms Day," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, February 28, 1968.

²⁰⁵ Moms Mabley, *The Youngest Teenager*, Mercury SR 61229, 1969.

message, as Mabley told Nixon to bring home the troops during their fictional conversation on the same album. Mabley's opposition to the Vietnam War further explains why she was critical of President Johnson and President Nixon, since Johnson escalated the war and the war effort continued while Nixon was in office.

Mabley also voiced her opposition to the Vietnam War during a 1972 interview with the Memphis Press-Scimitar when she revealed, "I've shed many a tear over those boys [fighting in Vietnam]. I wanted to go over there...but the government said I was too old...But if I'd gone over there I'd have said, 'come on children, let's go home.'"²⁰⁶ This statement contributed to her other political criticisms and offered an additional example of Moms Mabley opposing the American government's policies. She used her popularity to voice her support for the young troops, as well as her desire for the war to end and for them to come home. Her concern also connected to the well-known fact that black working-class youth were being disproportionately drafted to fight in combat units, and were more likely to be wounded or killed than middle-class white men. The burden of the war fell on young African-Americans.²⁰⁷

Moms Mabley was critical of American politics, especially when she felt that the government was contributing to or enabling unjust and unequal treatment of African Americans. However, she also expressed an attitude of patriotism. As discussed in chapter two, her expressions of patriotism also contained a message of protest. As an African-American woman, and as the granddaughter of a former slave, Moms Mabley represented a heavily marginalized group in American society. By expressing her patriotism, Mabley was protesting the treatment of African Americans, and especially

²⁰⁶ "Moms Mabley," Stax: Museum of Soul Music, <http://www.staxmuseum.com/about/artists/view/moms-mabley>.

²⁰⁷ Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion*, 98.

black women, as second-class citizens who were often excluded from American society. It was very likely that Mabley was not as patriotic as she came off, but was expressing patriotism in order to claim a space for herself in American society. She took this approach a step further when she would defend the United States against foreign enemies in fictional interactions. On the surface, these exchanges were humorous and absurd, and made her sound moderate. However, she was using double-voicedness in these scenarios and when she would fictionally confront foreign enemies in defense of America, she was really protesting her marginalized role as a black woman. Fighting communism was one way she claimed a space for herself. Nikita Khrushchev, the communist leader of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, was a frequent victim of Mabley's verbal attacks. Some of her barbs were light-hearted and intended to mock and humble, like when she told her audience about seeing "Khrushchev standing up there looking like Mr. Clean" at a United Nations meeting.²⁰⁸ However, on her album the following year, Mabley was more direct in her criticism of the leader. She told her audience about going to the Geneva Conference:

Then I grabbed the plane and went all over to meet Khrush
. . . Talking about America this United States this. I said
"come here fool. Do you wanna fight us?" He comes
talking about how many he had on the stratosphere, how
many on the moon. I said "don't matter how many we
have up there we gonna fight down here! Alabama,
Mississippi or any other foreign country you wanna fight in
well fight ya! I ain't scared a you . . . You ain't nothing but
a little sawed-off bald headed F.B.I. Fat, bald and
impossible."²⁰⁹

Just as she addressed American presidents by nicknames or other familiar titles, she shortened the leader's name to Khrush to humble him and lessen his powerful stance.

²⁰⁸ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the U.N.*, Chess LP1452, 1961.

²⁰⁹ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Conference*, Chess LP1463, 1962.

However, her treatment of Nikita Khrushchev was much harsher than that of any president because of his enemy status. She called him a fool and threatened to fight him, insisting she was not scared of him. She cited the space program again when she asserted that it did not matter how advanced the Soviet Union's program was because they were going to fight on Earth. This statement seems to further highlight the impractical nature of the "space race," in Mabley's opinion. Mabley finished off her attack with a final insult when she called Khrushchev "fat, bald and impossible." Considering the heightened tension between the United States and the U.S.S.R. during the Cold War, it was a logical approach for Moms Mabley to make Nikita Khrushchev a frequent victim of her verbal attacks in order to display her patriotism. In addition to displaying this patriotism, which was consistent with Cold War conservatism, Mabley's encounters with Khrushchev also worked to empower her and created a fictional central role in the government for her.

While Nikita Khrushchev was the leader most consistently chastised by Mabley, she was also aggressive in other fictional interactions with foreign leaders. On 1963's *I Got Something to Tell You*, she addressed the Congo Crisis and the leader of the secessionist Katanga province, Moise Tshombe:

[singing]We went over to the Congo. I met Tshombe and I said to him,
"We were sent here to the Congo to try to talk to you.
You got everybody worried, what the hell you trying to do?
We got to get home, because we got trouble there too. So let's get through
with you."
And Tshombe said to me, "Bengon bango bango, what's the matter with
the Congo?" "That's what I want to know...brothers fighting each
other...
Straighten up and fly right cuz you know you ain't prepared to fight.
Now if you wanna do right, cool down pop or we'll blow your top.
And another thing: Someday, someday, yes you're gonna be sorry,
Of what you do, and what you say . . .

You're a smart guy and I can't see why
that you'd let Khrushchev sell you a lie . . .²¹⁰

This exchange referred to the civil war and related turmoil that took place in the Congo, and the subsequent involvement of the U.S.S.R. This involvement angered the United States, who feared a communist takeover in the Congo. In this fictional exchange, Mabley presented herself as a powerful diplomat representing the United States as she convinced Tshombe not to fight, and not to side with Khrushchev and the U.S.S.R.²¹¹

She represented the United States in another fictional Cold War confrontation on *Young Men Si, Old Men No* (1963) when John F. Kennedy sent her to Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis:

I was down in Cuba, John sent me down there. Try to see if I can do anything with that fool cuz we had the boats in the water . . . Khrushchev laughing at him, gonna send him three or four firecrackers and he's pointing at us. And we'd have made him think that the Korean War was a lawn party. Come here fool, ain't you got no sense at all . . .²¹²

The fool she was referring to was Fidel Castro, the socialist leader of Cuba. Her story suggested President Kennedy sent her to Cuba to reason with Castro during the crisis, which threatened to bring the United States and U.S.S.R. into nuclear conflict during the Cold War. By being given this crucial responsibility by Kennedy, Mabley was presented as powerful and as playing an integral role in American politics and foreign diplomacy. Mabley was also expressing a message of nihilism in regard to the Cold War and the Cuban Missile Crisis. She was reflecting the anxiety and helplessness that Americans felt

²¹⁰ Moms Mabley, *I Got Something to Tell You!*, Chess LP1479, 1963.

²¹¹ Carole J.L. Collins, "The cold war comes to Africa: Cordier and the 1960 Congo crisis." *Journal Of International Affairs* 47, no. 1 (1993): 243.

²¹² Moms Mabley, *Young Men Si, Old Men No!*, Chess LP1477, 1963.

as the United States and the U.S.S.R. came terrifyingly close to nuclear combat by casting herself as a savior to the world. The thought of Kennedy sending a diminutive old woman, with limited rights in her own country, to intervene in the Cuban Missile Crisis and prevent a nuclear holocaust was outlandish and funny on one level. However, it sent a fatalistic message that reflected the sense of doom that Americans felt during this time since she obviously could not prevent nuclear war. Mabley was also referring to the fact that Khrushchev had belittled and insulted Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs incident, something the president was trying to fight against. Her spoken blues sensibilities were reflected in the fact that she was not afraid to bring up an embarrassing issue for Kennedy and American foreign policy.²¹³ The aggressive, violent tone that Mabley employed in her fictional interactions with foreign leaders may have been her way of projecting the rage she felt in regard to domestic issues. Although Mabley reflected anger about these issues, it was much more suppressed less harsh than the anger she directed at foreign enemies. She may have been using foreign policy issues to express her displaced anger in a way that was safe and acceptable during the Cold War.

Moms Mabley also used patriotism on her later albums. On 1969's *The Youngest Teenager* she told her audience:

I just wanted to read you all a letter I got from the president. As you all know I'm in the government and I'm a spy. I'm the only known spy that'll own up to it. I'm a spy, for my government. I love my government. I'm an American. I don't know anybody else . . . I'm an American, you know? I'm from the United States and I work for my government. I don't know nothing about over there . . .²¹⁴

²¹³ Richard J. Walton, *Cold War and Counterrevolution: The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), 105-135.

²¹⁴ Moms Mabley, *The Youngest Teenager*, Mercury SR 61229, 1969.

On the surface, this declaration seemed to reflect Moms Mabley's patriotic attitude and loyalty to the United States. However, her statement was layered and beneath the expression of loyalty and the humorous portrayal of Mabley as a spy is a message of protest. Mabley was defying white racist traditions and the status quo that historically insisted that African Americans and women were not citizens. Declaring her American citizenship enabled her to lay claim to the rights and protections that were denied to her enslaved ancestors, as well as to the rights and protections that were still being denied to African Americans and women in the 1960s. The fact that she had to continue to affirm this fact five years after the Civil Rights Act had passed revealed America's lack of progress.

Moms Mabley strengthened the fictional role she created for herself in American politics when she talked about running for president on her comedy records. Her assertion that she should be President of the United States was consistent throughout the 1960s. In 1961, on *Live at the Apollo-White House Lawn*, she urged her audience to:

Vote for me to be president . . . I can't make it no worse. If
Elizabeth can run England I can run America. What's she
got that I didn't use to have and where can I get it again?
That's what I wanna know.²¹⁵

This statement followed her criticism of President Eisenhower and the government spending too much money on the space program while many Americans were unemployed. She suggested that she could more effectively run the country, and also alluded to the incompetence of the current leadership by saying that she could not make things worse. Comparing herself to Queen Elizabeth, England's monarch, provided an

²¹⁵ Moms Mabley, "White House Lawn," *Live at the Apollo*, 1961.

example of a government run by a woman to highlight the gender inequality in America's leadership.

She presented the idea again in 1963 on *I Got Something to Tell You* when she said:

I don't see why children that you all don't let Moms be president anyhow. Want you to vote for Moms to be president. [Applause from audience] Would you like that? [Yeah! From audience] Wonderful, I'll tell John when I call him up again to get over. You know the first thing I'd do if I was president? I'd give a *certain* Southern governor a job as ambassador to the Congo and let him go crazy looking for a men's restroom with white on it.²¹⁶

Mabley used the form of call and response, traditionally used in African-American music, and especially in black church music, to challenge her audience to vote for her and presented the idea as their choice. This exchange lent an interactive tone to her performance, and included the audience in her message of protest by allowing them to voice their desire to see Mabley in the White House. She built on the fictional rapport she had with John F. Kennedy when she referred to him by first name and framed her phone call to him as a recurring event. Portraying herself as someone who had the ability to not only call the President personally, but to insist that he surrender his position to her, strongly contrasted with reality. This contrast provided the humor for Mabley's joke, but it also highlighted the exclusion Mabley actually faced as a black woman. Rather than acknowledge this exclusion, Mabley protested her position and the position of the African Americans she represented by placing herself in positions of power. Finally, she used her fictional power to seek revenge against Governor Wallace, a common foil in her routines. She made him Ambassador to the Congo and put him in a position where he

²¹⁶ Moms Mabley, *I Got Something to Tell You!*, Chess LP1479, 1963.

would be unable to maintain segregation, and where he would experience being a minority.

Moms Mabley presented the fictional scenario of being elected president in order to clearly portray what she would change about the government and American society.

On 1969's *Her Young Thing* she painted a picture of her election:

Moms was elected on a landslide write-in vote . . . I stood proudly on the capitol steps, and this is my inaugural address: "The first duty as chief just to get you on the right track. The White House has been white long enough, I think I'll paint it black . . . There'll be equal rights for black and white and green and red, and if anyone votes against it I'm going upside they head . . . Four years from now you'll look around, you'll see all smiles and not a frown, cuz there'll be soul in the government as long as Moms is president . . . Ain't gonna be no such thing as school closing and things. Keepin' my children out of school."²¹⁷

Acting as president in her comedic performances allowed Mabley to clearly protest what she saw as America's biggest ailment-the race problem. Painting the White House black after being traditionally white symbolized the people who inhabited the White House and controlled the government. By proclaiming that "the White House has been white long enough," Mabley protested the exclusion of African Americans from politics and used her election to signal a change to the status quo. She made equal rights for all races a priority, especially in public schools. During this time many schools, primarily in the South, were shutting down in response to the enforcement of integration. Mabley promised to put a stop to this practice so children would not be denied access to schools.

Moms Mabley fictionally asserted herself as a central component of American politics in her comedy performances, but she was also involved in politics in real life.

²¹⁷ Moms Mabley, *Her Young Thing*, Mercury SR61205, 1969.

While her actual political participation was much more moderate, and of course far more limited than her fictional involvement, the role she did play in politics demonstrated her dedication to seeking change for African Americans and women during the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement. One way Mabley contributed to social and political change was by performing at benefits that raised money and awareness for causes that worked to improve the lives of African Americans and women. On August 11, 1962, she performed at an Apollo Theater show sponsored by the U.S. National Student Association. The purpose of the benefit was to raise money for the Southern Students Freedom Fund, which provided “the means for those students in the South who have been expelled from school or jailed for their participation in civil rights activities.”²¹⁸ The following year, on August 23, 1963, she performed at the “Emancipation March on Washington Benefit,” also at the Apollo Theater. This benefit raised funds for the March on Washington, which would take place only a few days later.²¹⁹ She also used her own performances to raise money for civil rights activities, and on her 1965 album, *Now Hear This*, she told her audience that she was selling photographs in the lobby of the venue to raise money for Martin Luther King, Jr.’s march in Selma. In 1966, Mabley agreed to help Lena Horne in planning a National Council of Negro Women benefit to aid domestic cooperatives. On August 24, 1969, Mabley performed at a benefit for the New York Urban League, a nonprofit civil rights organization.²²⁰ Mabley also performed at a show

²¹⁸ “Top Jazzmen to Play N.Y. Civil Rights Benefit,” *Variety Magazine*, August 8, 1962.

²¹⁹ “Film Lures Due at Apollo in Harlem at ‘Emancipation’ Benefit on Aug. 23,” *Variety Magazine*, August 14, 1963.

²²⁰ *Jet*, August 7, 1969.

honoring the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1972. The proceeds from this concert went to the MLK Center for Social Change.²²¹

In addition to lending her comedic talent to benefit shows, Moms Mabley was also personally involved in politics. She was a member of the NAACP and attended the “White House Conference to Fulfill These Rights” in 1966. According to *New York Amsterdam News*, she received a special invitation to the event from President Lyndon B. Johnson. This event was especially significant to Mabley, who had told her audiences that one day she would have the opportunity to go to the White House. She told the press, “I’ve never been so proud in my life.”²²² Her visit to the White House impacted her comedy and inspired her album *Moms Mabley at the White House*, which was released in the same year. Despite his invitation, Mabley remained critical of Lyndon B. Johnson and expressed this attitude on her album.

She also used her popularity to influence political behavior, such as voting. In 1962 she worked as a “vote getter” for Robert Morgenthau when he ran for Governor of New York.²²³ She infused comedy in her political activity, and in 1967 she pledged support for A.W. Willis in his campaign for Mayor of Memphis while insisting that people “vote for a young man for mayor, ‘cause ain’t nothin’ an old man can do.”²²⁴ In 1972 she pledged her support for Shirley Chisholm’s presidential campaign when she attended “Stars for Shirley,” a campaign fundraising event.²²⁵ When promoting her 1974 film *Amazing Grace*, Mabley used the publicity to “spearhead a ‘get-out-the-vote’ drive

²²¹ “47,600 is Raised at King Memorial,” *Jet*, February 3, 1972.

²²² “Moms Mabley Going to White House,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 28, 1966.

²²³ Dorothy Kilgallen, <http://oldshowbiz.tumblr.com/tagged/Moms-Mabley> (source unknown), October 1962.

²²⁴ “A Willis Booster,” *Jet*, September 14, 1967.

²²⁵ *Jet*, June 1, 1972.

in New York City . . . [promoting] a non-partisan message reminding New Yorkers that it is their duty as well as privilege to vote.”²²⁶

Moms Mabley used her comedic performances to voice her political protest in regard to civil rights and equality for African Americans, as well as comment on more general political issues. She employed role-playing, the double-voice device and satire to highlight and criticize the exclusion of African Americans and women from politics by presenting herself as a central figure in the United States government. This fictional presentation also worked to empower Mabley and provided an outlet for the frustration she felt as a result of black exclusion. She relied on her well-established maternal persona to criticize and humble political leaders who she felt were ineffective in protecting the rights of black Americans, as well as to criticize policies that she saw as impractical or unjust.

²²⁶ “U.A. Sets ‘Amazing Grace’ Tie-Up WLIB,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, October 31, 1974.

Conclusion

Jackie “Moms” Mabley released her last party record, *I Like ‘Em Young*, in 1972. However, her career in entertainment continued until her death three years later. She continued to perform onstage at venues like Mister Kelly’s in Chicago.²²⁷ Mabley also regularly appeared on television after her first appearance on Harry Belafonte’s *A Time For Laughter* in 1967. She was a guest on popular shows like *The Merv Griffin Show*, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, *The Bill Cosby Show*, *The Flip Wilson Show* and *The Mike Douglas Show*.²²⁸ Mabley was also a presenter at the Grammy Awards in 1973, where she shocked audiences by taking out her false teeth on national television.²²⁹ Her fame hit its high point in 1974 when she had her first starring role in the feature film, *Amazing Grace*. Mabley played the title role of Grace Teasdale, a God-fearing and righteous old woman who discovered her next-door neighbor, who was running for mayor of Baltimore, had made a deal with corrupt politicians. Mabley’s character intervened and helped her neighbor run an honest campaign. The film received mixed-reviews, and one of the major criticisms of *Amazing Grace* was that the script did not allow Mabley to display the “wry humor” she was famous for.²³⁰ Nonetheless, the film exposed Mabley to an even wider audience base than her party records had. Mabley suffered a heart attack during production of “*Amazing Grace*” and had to have a

²²⁷ “Moms Mabley at Kelly’s Tonight,” *Daily Defender*, August 12, 1974, p.9, col.1.

²²⁸ C. Gerald Fraser, “Moms Mabley, 78, Comedienne of TV, Stage and Radio, Dead,” *The New York Times*, May 25, 1975.

²²⁹ Mark Jacobson, “Amazing Moms,” *New York Magazine*, October 14, 1974, 46.

²³⁰ “Black Power,” *Time Magazine*, December 16, 1974.

pacemaker installed. She recuperated and was back on set within three weeks. However, Mabley probably never completely recovered her health, and she died the following year.²³¹

Moms Mabley passed away on May 23, 1975 in White Plains, New York at the age of seventy-eight.²³² Thousands of mourners gathered at the Rodney M. Dade funeral home in Harlem to pay their final respects to the comedienne. Included among the mourners were some of Mabley's contemporaries and admirers like Dick Gregory, Dewey "Pigmeat" Markham, and Melvin "Slappy" White. There was also a memorial service held for Mabley at Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church, where she had been a member for twenty-five years. The church's pastor, Dr. Samuel Proctor, eloquently articulated Mabley's legacy to the congregants when he said, "she could take sorrow and disappointment and lift something out of it, to cause us to objectivize: to put it on a screen somewhere and sit back from it and have a hearty laugh to keep it from destroying us."²³³ Moms Mabley's comedy did just that-she effectively reflected the sorrow and disappointment of African Americans and women and injected her own unique humor in order to "laugh to keep from crying."²³⁴

Mabley's commentary on gender and sexuality challenged and protested the marginalization of women, particularly African-American women. Mabley's blues-inspired, working-class feminism informed this commentary. Some of her most popular jokes were about her fondness for younger men and her rejection of older men. Asserting her sexual preference in an outspoken and unapologetic manner was significant during

²³¹ Jacobson, "Amazing Moms," 48.

²³² "'Moms' Mabley Dead," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 29, 1975, A1.

²³³ "Memories Fill 'Moms' Funeral," *Daily Defender*, May 29, 1975, p. 12, col. 1.

²³⁴ Nancy Levi Arnez and Clara B. Anthony, "Contemporary Negro Humor as Social Satire," *Phylon* 29, no. 4 (1968): 339-346.

the 1960s and 1970s because she was reclaiming power that was typically reserved for men. By portraying herself as a sexual being, while remaining affable and loved by her audiences, Mabley questioned the gender expectations and limitations that were dominant in society. Mabley's commentary on gender and sexuality was consistent throughout the 1960s and 1970s, while her commentary on race and politics exhibited shifts that were reflective of the changes taking place in the Civil Rights movement and in American politics.

Mabley used her comedic performances to expose and challenge racism and the marginalization of African Americans during the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement. Her commentary exhibited shifts that were loosely tied to the changes taking place in the movement, and possibly to her change in record labels as well. In the period prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Mabley was often pessimistic in her portrayal of race relations. Her attitude exhibited a change during the time that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were being passed, and she became more optimistic about civil rights progress. Her hopeful tone lasted until the late 1960s. However, after Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968 and the Civil Rights movement experienced a breakdown, Mabley's comedy recordings slowly moved away from the discussion of race on her records. The topic completely disappeared from her records in the early 1970s. Mabley's commentary on politics expressed similar shifts to her commentary on race issues.

Moms Mabley commented extensively on American politics during the 1960s and 1970s on her comedy albums. Her discussion of politics grew out of her commentary on race and gender, but she also commented on politics more generally. Mabley used humor

to criticize the political exclusion of African Americans and women. One of the main ways Mabley expressed her political commentary and criticisms was through role-playing. She would insert herself into fictional scenarios in which she would advise American presidents on their leadership duties. Mabley also projected herself into the role of a presidential candidate in order to strengthen her political critiques. Her political commentary was primarily aimed at political leaders who allowed racism to dominate American life, but she was also critical of policies that she saw as frivolous in a society with so much discrimination and poverty, like the space program.

The mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement was central to Moms Mabley's comedy, and her performance work operated as a form of social protest. Moms Mabley's comedy during this time is historically significant because she publicly exposed the racism and marginalization African Americans and women were subjected to, while she simultaneously criticized the inequality these groups faced. An analysis of Mabley's work is important for understanding this time period because her comedy was shaped by her personal experiences as a black woman, and because she provided important insight into the attitudes and experiences of African Americans, particularly black women. Mabley's candid evaluations of American society, particularly race relations, provide an important source for historical analyses of the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement.

Moms Mabley drew on black folk culture and vernacular traditions like signifying and women's blues in order to layer her messages of protest under humor. She drew on numerous signifying devices in order to express these messages, including double-voicedness, satire, revision, parody and the embodiment of the trickster character. The

trickster, which can be found in the stories of many black cultures and societies, speaks indirectly through innuendo, figurative speech, and implied language. The trickster can also be contradictory and oppositional, which can create confusion. Mabley embodied the trickster and utilized signifying consistently in her comedy performances of the 1960s and 1970s in order to implicitly articulate her more subversive messages. Mabley's comedic persona was one way in which she embodied the trickster character because she combined the negative stereotypes of the Mammy and hypersexual black woman with the positive archetype of "Mother Dear." By combining these images and their different meanings into one performance persona, Mabley effectively pandered to white racist stereotypes while she simultaneously contested negative images of black women.

The women's blues heavily influenced Mabley's comedy as well. She adapted the genre to the stage and utilized the spoken blues form to contest male patriarchy through her comedy. Mabley fits in with the women's blues tradition because she refused to subscribe to mainstream society's notions of a "woman's place" or the proper way for a woman to act. Mabley was bold and unapologetic in the ways she expressed her sexuality, her defiance of gender norms, and her protest against racism, ageism, and sexism. Like the blues women, Mabley's medium for expression was the stage rather than the written text. This allowed for an accessibility that placed her work as part of the working-class feminism that inspired the blues.

Mabley's performance work also created a spectacle of racism, segregation, and Jim Crow practices by highlighting the unsound logic behind these racist traditions and making them appear absurd. Her comedy worked in conjunction with nonviolent protest movements and the activists who were subjected to violence at the hands of white racists

when attempting to challenge segregation. Although Mabley was not a victim of this violence, her comedic treatment of Jim Crow worked in conjunction with the spectacle these confrontations created because she was able to belittle the traditions white racists were violently trying to defend, and she did so for large, integrated audiences.

While this thesis focuses on the comedy performances of Jackie “Moms” Mabley, my guiding intention has been to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between popular culture and the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement.

Mabley’s comedy is an example of this relationship because the movement was central to her performance work. Most historical discussions of the Civil Rights movement focus on politics and activist work, and culture is looked at as a secondary component. I have attempted to use Moms Mabley’s comedy and commentary to provide a lens through which historians can gain an intimate look at the movement and how it affected people on the ground level. In this approach, I have built on the works of Daniel Widener and Richard Iton, who have both given culture a centralized role in their historical analyses of the Civil Rights movement. By focusing on a cultural worker like Mabley instead of civil rights activists or political leaders, I have attempted to expand our current historical understanding of the role of popular culture in the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights movement, and the impact the movement had on performance genre’s like black comedy.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Newspapers

“Became a Hit at Age 68,” *NY Amsterdam News*. June 2, 1962, 17.

Brown, Geoffrey F. “Moms Mabley Didn’t Die; She Just Chuckled Away.” *Jet*, June 12, 1975.

Chicago Defender, August 10, 1946.

Cooper, Morton. “Moms Mabley Loves Everybody.” *Chicago Defender*. January 5, 1963.

“Current Biography,” *NY Newsday*, January 1975.

Daily News. October 29, 1974, 49.

Fraser, C. Gerald. “Moms Mabley, 78, Comedienne of TV, Stage and Radio, Dead.” *The New York Times*, May 25, 1975.

“Harlemites Applaud ‘Moms’ For Last Time. *NY Amsterdam News*, June 3, 1975, A-1.

“Hit at 68.” *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 2, 1962, 11.

LA Sentinel. February 7, 1946-May 29, 1975.

“Memories Fill ‘Moms’ Funeral.” *Daily Defender*, May 29, 1975, p. 12, col. 1.

“Moms Day.” *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, February 28, 1968.

“‘Moms’ Mabley Dead.” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 29, 1975, A1.

“Moms Mabley Going to White House.” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 28, 1966.

“Moms Mabley at Kelly’s Tonight.” *Daily Defender*, August 12, 1974.

Monroe, Al. “So They Say.” *Daily Defender*, January 22, 1962.

New York Times, November 28, 1963, 20.

Washington Post. October 4, 1974, B-1.

Witbeck, Charles. “Moms Day.” *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, February 28, 1968.

Magazines

“Behind the Laughter of Jackie (Moms) Mabley.” *Ebony*. August 1962, 88-91.

“Black Power.” *Time Magazine*, December 16, 1974.

“Film Lures Due at Apollo in Harlem at ‘Emancipation’ Benefit on Aug. 23.” *Variety Magazine*, August 14, 1963.

Jet, August 7, 1969.

Jet, June 1, 1972.

Jacobson, Mark. “Amazing Moms.” *New York*, October 14, 1974.

“Moms Mabley: She Finally Makes the Movies. Night Club, Theater, Television Star Plays Lead in Film Comedy.” *Ebony*, April 1974.

“Stepin Fetchit, Moms Mabley Relive ‘Glory Days’ in Atlanta Interviews.” *Box Office*, September 9, 1974.

Thompson, M. Cordell. “Moms Mabley Raps About Old Women, Young Love.” *Jet*, January 3, 1974.

“Top Jazzmen to Play N.Y. Civil Rights Benefit.” *Variety Magazine*. August 8, 1962.

“Veteran Comedienne Spinning Toward Big Time.” *Jet*. June 8, 1961, 60-61.

“A Willis Booster.” *Jet*, September 14, 1967.

“47,600 is Raised at King Memorial.” *Jet*, February 3, 1972.

Audiovisual

Mabley, Moms. *The Best of Moms Mabley*. Mercury MG21139, 1968

____. *The Funny Sides of Moms Mabley*. Chess LP1482, 1964.

____. *Her Young Thing*. Mercury MG61205, 1969.

____. *I Got Somethin’ to Tell You!* Chess LP1479, 1963.

____. *I Like ‘em Young*. Partee PBS2402, 1972.

____. *Live at the Apollo*. Jewell JCD5018, 1994 (compilation of clips from the 1960s).

- ____. *Live at Sing Sing*. Mercury SR61263, 1970.
- ____. *Moms Mabley Breaks it Up*. Chess LP1472, 1962.
- ____. *Moms Mabley at Geneva Conference*. Chess LP1463, 1962.
- ____. *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club*. Chess LP1460, 1961.
- ____. *Moms Mabley at the U.N.* Chess LP1452, 1961.
- ____. *Moms Mabley at the White House*. Mercury 21090, 1966.
- ____. *Moms the Word*. Mercury MG20907, 1964.
- ____. *Moms Wows*. Chess LP1486, 1964.
- ____. *Now Hear This*. Mercury MG21012, 1965.
- ____. *(On Stage) Funniest Woman in the World*. Chess LP91556, 1961.
- ____. *Out on a Limb*. Mercury SR60889, 1964.
- ____. *The Youngest Teenager*. Mercury SR61229, 1969.
- ____. *Young Men, Si, Old Men, No!* Chess LP1477, 1963.

Miscellaneous

“Black America’s ‘First Lady of Laughter.’” *The Ebony Success Library, Volume II. Famous Blacks Give Secrets of Success*. Chicago, IL: Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., 1973.

Bonney, Jo, ed., *Extreme Exposure: An Anthology of Solo Performance Texts From the Twentieth Century*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2000.
(Performance Transcript)

Kilgallen, Dorothy. <http://oldshowbiz.tumblr.com/tagged/Moms-Mabley> (source unknown). October 1962.

“Moms Mabley,” Stax: Museum of Soul Music,
<http://www.staxmuseum.com/about/artists/view/moms-mabley>.

“Moms Mabley-Biography (For ‘Amazing Grace’),” *United Artists Corporation*. New York, NY.

“Moms Mabley Goes to the ‘Top’ Writer for Inspiration and Material,” *United Artists*

Corporation. New York, NY.

“North Carolina, Birth Index, 1800-2000,” index, FamilySearch.

Terkel, Studs. *The Spectator: Talk About Movies and Plays With the People Who Make Them*. New York: The New Press, 1999. (Interview)

Wallace, George C. “Governor George C. Wallace’s School House Door Speech.” *Alabama Department of Archives and History*, 1963, http://www.archives.state.al.us/govs_list/schooldoor.html.

_____. “The 1963 Inaugural Address of Governor George C. Wallace.” *Alabama Department of Archives & History*. 1963, http://www.archives.alabama.gov/govs_list/inauguralspeech.html.

Secondary Sources

Abrahams, Roger D. *Singing the Master: The Emergence of African-American Culture in the Plantation South*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.

Arnez, Nancy Levi and Clara B. Anthony. “Contemporary Negro Humor as Social Satire.” *Phylon* 29, no. 4 (1968): 339-346.

Barecca, Regina ed., *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy*. New York: Gordon and Breach, 1988.

_____. *The Penguin Book of Women’s Humor*. New York: Penguin, 1996.

Bianculli, David. *Dangerously Funny: The Uncensored Story of the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. New York: Touchstone, 2009.

Boskin, Joseph and Joseph Dorinson. “Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival.” *American Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1985): 81-97.

Broven, John. *Record Makers and Breakers: Voices of the Independent Rock n Roll Pioneers*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009.

Burk, Robert Fredrick. *The Eisenhower Administration and Black Civil Rights*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984.

Cohodas, Nadine. *Spinning Blues Into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records*. New York: MacMillan, 2000.

Collier-Thomas, Bettye and V.P. Franklin. *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

- Collins, Carole J.L. "The cold war comes to Africa: Cordier and the 1960 Congo crisis." *Journal Of International Affairs* 47, no. 1 (1993).
- Crawford, Vicki L. et al. *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.
- Dallek, Robert. *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Dance, Daryl Cumber, ed., *Honey, Hush! An Anthology of African American Womens' Humor*. New York: Norton, 1998.
- Davis, Angela Y. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1998.
- Dray, Phillip. *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*. New York: The Modern Library, 2002.
- Estell, Kenneth, ed., *The African-American Almanac, Sixth Edition*. Detroit : Gale Research Inc., 1994.
- Flowers, Gary L. "Madea vs. Mother Dear." *BlackPressUSA.com*
<http://www.blackpressusa.com/op-ed/speaker.asp?NewsID=18327>.
- Fox, Ted. *Showtime at the Apollo*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983.
- Fulton, DoVeanna S. "Comic Views and Metaphysical Dilemmas: Shattering Cultural Images Through Self-Definition and Representation by Black Comediennes." *Journal of American Folklore* 117, no. 463 (2004): 81-96.
- Gates, Jr. Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Graham, Hugh Davis. "Richard Nixon and Civil Rights: Explaining an Enigma." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (1996).
- Gregg, Richard Bartlett. *The Power of Nonviolence*. New York: Taylor & Francis, 1960.
- Hahn, Steven Hahn. *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South From Slavery to the Great Migration*. Cambridge: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003.
- Hampton, Henry. "Ain't Scared of Your Jails (1960-1961)." *Eyes on the Prize, Blackside*, 1987.

- Harris, Trudier. "Moms Mabley: A Study in Humor, Role Playing, and the Violation of Taboo." *Southern Review* 24, no. 4 (1988).
- Hine, Darlene Clark, ed. *Facts on File Encyclopedia of Black Women in America: Theater Arts and Entertainment*. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1997.
- Holsaert, Faith S. et al. *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010.
- Iton, Richard. *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics & Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Jewell, K. Sue. *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Johnson, Pearlie Mae. "African American Quilts: An Examination of Feminism, Identity, and Empowerment in the Fabric Arts of Kansas City Quilters." PhD diss., Kansas City: University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2008.
- Kantor, Michael and Laurence Maslon. *Make 'Em Laugh: The Funny Business of America*. New York: Hachette Book Group, 2008.
- Klinkner, Philip A. *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Kosek, Joseph Kip. "Richard Gregg, Mohandas Gandhi, and the Strategy of Nonviolence." *The Journal of American History* 91 no. 4 (2005).
- Lawson, Steven. "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement." *The American Historical Review* 96 (1991): 456-471.
- Levine, Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Littleton, Darryl. *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How African-Americans Taught Us to Laugh*. New York: Applause Theater & Cinema Books, 2006.
- Marable, Manning. *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007.
- McElya, Micki. *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- McGuire, Danielle L. *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance-A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. New York: Knopf, 2010.

- Moore, Allan ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Blues and Gospel Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Oliver, Paul Oliver. *Broadcasting the Blues: Black Blues in the Segregation Era*. New York: Routledge Press, 2006.
- Pendergast, Tom and Sara Pendergast, eds., *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture Volume 3*. Detroit: St. James Press,
- Simms, Rupe Simms. "Controlling Images and the Gender Construction of Enslaved African Women." *Gender and Society* 15 no.6 (2001).
- Smith, Jessie Carney. *Black Heroes*. Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1998.
- _____. *Notable Black American Women*. Detroit: Gale Reseach, Inc., 1992.
- Telushkin, Joseph. *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say About the Jews*. New York: Harper Collins, 1998.
- Walton, Richard J. *Cold War and Counterrevolution: The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy*. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972.
- Watkins, Mel. *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying-The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor That Transformed American Culture, From Slavery to Richard Pryor*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.
- Widener, Daniel. *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Williams, Elsie A. *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African American Comedic Tradition*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995.
- _____. "Moms Mabley and the Afro-American Comic Performance" in *Women's Comic Visions* ed. June Sochen, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991.