

DOIN IT FOR THE GRAM  
AN EXPLORATION OF BLACK WOMEN COMEDIANS ONLINE VERNACULAR

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In partial fulfillment of  
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Masters of Arts

In

Communication Studies

by

Aliyah Khadijah Shaheed

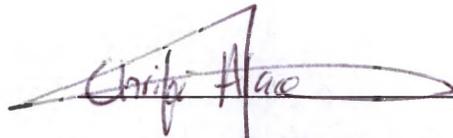
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Fatima Zahrae Chrifi Alaoui, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor



Karen Lovaas, Ph.D.

Associate Professor



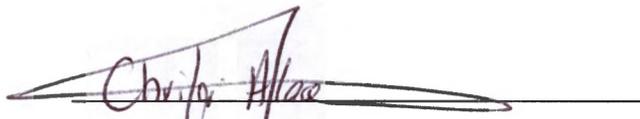
Javon Johnson, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor

## ABSTRACT

Comedian Mo’Nique’s use of Instagram to engage in a critical vernacular about the racist and sexist discrimination that she encountered, spoke to the contemporary relationship that Black women have to labor. As cultural critics, Black women comedians work often accounts for the ways that the intersections of race, class, and gender shape their lived experiences and their ability to participate in their livelihoods. While Mo’Nique spoke to her experiences as a Black woman comedian and actor, I argue that the struggles she articulated are a microcosm of the historical and ongoing relationship that Black women have to labor. Her criticism of these realities are key to understanding the ways that Black women comedians as cultural critics can engage in Black feminist practice through their use of vernacular and how social media sites like Instagram function as an emerging platform for these world making discourses to be expressed.

I certify that this abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.

  
Chair, Thesis Committee

5/23/19  
Date

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*To*

*My Friends*

*My Family*

*My Committee*

*My Thesis Writing Crew Julie and Bri*

*Myself*

*Black People \*clap clapclap clap\**

*Black People \*clap clapclap clap\**

*Thank you for sticking with me through this process, the encouragement and support was necessary. This journey wasn't easy, this kind work never is. I uncovered many gems during this research process, and one thing I learned is that this work will never be done, at least not in my life time. Still I write, in hopes that one day my little thesis, will be the gem for another meandering student, scholar, and learner, to stumble upon.*

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It was the early 2000's, and video home systems were a presence in my household. These bulky cassettes contained films that could be viewed over and over again. By this time in my life, I had grown weary of watching the Disney classic, *The Lion King*. It was one of the only kid friendly movies in my household, and my curiosity got the best of me. After rummaging through my mom's dusty collection of work out videos, grazing over the likes of Tae Bo and Richard Simmons, I stumbled across *The Queens of Comedy*, my introduction to stand-up. Four Black "Queens" graced my television screen, telling jokes about topics I was far too young to understand. Put simply, it was definitely no *Lion King*. Though a lot of the humor went over my young head, their energy, style, and delivery resonated with me. One comedian that stood out to me at that time was Mo'Nique. Her comedy was one of the first times that I had heard someone speak about their fatness in a way that wasn't draped in shame. Though my eight-year-old self did not fully understand much of what was going on, that moment of empowerment resonated with me in a revolutionary way.

Since *The Queens of Comedy* days, Mo'Nique has gone on to do numerous comedy specials and tours. Outside of stand up, she has expanded her talents to include acting in film and television. One of her most notable acting roles was in the 2009 film *Precious*, where she earned numerous accolades including an Academy Award for best supporting actress. Despite her success, her experience in the entertainment industry has not always been a easy one. Returning to her stand up roots she expressed how she had been "white-balled by some black dicks who have no balls" (Sager, 2017). This joke was in reference to her relationships with directors Lee Daniels and Tyler Perry, who she

called out for blocking her ability to get acting opportunities after her role in the film *Precious* (Sager, 2017). While this is conventionally understood as blackballing, Mo’Nique used her comedy to criticize the ways that two Black men, queer or otherwise, used power traditionally earmarked for white men, to harm her as a Black woman. Though an overwhelming majority of people with real decision-making power in the entertainment industry are white men, this joke is an acknowledgement of the ways that marginalized people have the ability to internalize and perpetuate harmful power dynamics, often to the detriment of people who are a part of our own communities. In that moment, the joke created a space for the audience to think through that reality.

Being characterized as “difficult to work with” is a label too commonly designated for Black women. This characterization has plagued Mo’Nique’s reputation and ability to get jobs that recognize the value of her work (Sager, 2017). This all came to a head in January of 2018, when she took to Instagram to publicly express to her over 300,000 followers the ways that she had experienced racism and sexism during negotiations for a comedy special with the video streaming service Netflix. In her video post, she included a caption where she called for people to #BOYCOTT #NETFLIX in response to the discrimination she experienced.

Mo’Nique’s Instagram post demonstrates one way that social media has emerged as a growing platform where everyday people are able to communicate with others in order to exchange ideas and share information (Byrd, Gilbert, & Richardson, 2017). Social media is an important space to understand this work, because of how it allows for folks, including stand-up comedians, to engage in world-making and self-making through their social media posts. Instagram is one social media site where users are able to share

content primarily through posting photos and videos. When someone makes an Instagram post, users are able to like, comment, and share the post with others. In addition, people are also able to send direct messages to each other as a means of communicating. In each post, people can choose to include a caption, and they can also utilize hashtags (#) in order to make their post searchable on the site. One of the benefits of social media sites such as Instagram, is how accessible it is to marginalized folks, due to the fact that many people are able to access the internet through their cell phones. On Instagram alone, an estimated 48 percent of all Black people online use this social media site to create and engage with content (Luckie, 2016). Outside of those statistics, my own experience of spending far too much time scrolling through “the ‘gram,” has contributed to my interest for engaging in this particular area of research.

In the earliest Instagram days there was another social media site called Vine. On Vine users could post six second videos that played on a continuous loop. In 2014, a viral Vine video showed a young Black girl as she was called to “do it for the vine” to which she responded, “I ain’t gone do it” (S.K. Slime, 2014). This moment of call and response demonstrated how refusal is one of the most magical Black girl orientations. During that vine, the little Black girl refused to do, for a social media conglomerate that does not have her interest. That same Black girl refusal is the sentiment that Mo’Nique embodied in her call for people to boycott Netflix on Instagram. On “the ‘gram” Mo’Nique refused to maintain her silence about a reality that she and so many others that look like her experience. She too refused to do, to act like everything was okay on social media when it clearly was not.

Being a part of an online community has allowed me to identify the ways that

Black folks utilize and create different forms of media to communicate and express ourselves. On social media platforms, people can reach audiences who may not have access to other forms of media. Social media sites like Instagram are understood to have a low barrier of entry meaning that there are more people who can participate, produce, and circulate knowledge within these online spaces (Harris, 2017). Unlike formal news channels, social media sites allow for people who may not be media professionals, to be experts and commentators on their lives, current news, and cultural happenings. In that regard, social media challenges the ways that traditional media platforms limit and control how information flows in the public sphere (Harris, 2017). Because of the everydayness of social media sites, vernacular becomes a useful framework for understanding the ways that people communicate on Instagram.

Vernacular is the language and discourse of marginalized folks. Vernacular not only challenges the norms that shape hegemonic rhetoric, but it also challenges the respectability politics that exist and uphold these limiting beliefs as beneficial (Farred, 2003). Hegemonic rhetoric includes the stereotypes and ideologies that exist in order to support the marginalization of oppressed people. Ideologies are the beliefs that reflect the interest of a particular group of people. This includes the ways that racist and sexist ideologies exist to the degree that they seem natural, normal, and inevitable (Collins, 2000, p. 5). One example of this, is how hegemonic rhetoric constructs Black women as being overly sexual with controlling images like the Jezebel (Collins, 2000). Black comedians such as Adele Givens, challenge these understandings through describing herself as “such a fuckin’ lady” within her stand-up comedy (Fulton, 2004). This use of vernacular discourse functions as a demonstration of her agency and ability to control the

narrative surrounding Black women's sexuality through her own stand-up performances (Fulton, 2004). The people always resist and vernacular functions as a useful way of understanding the discourse of resistance.

Research focused on Black women's participation in comedy has remained limited (Finley, 2014; Fulton, 2004; Wood, 2014). As Finley (2014) eloquently stated, “[B]lack women humorists are “ghosts in the machine” of [B]lack expressive culture [who have] often [been] ignored, devalued, or discredited” (p. 10). Some of the more recent work that I found on Black women in comedy was published several years ago and included a piece written about Mom’s Mabley comedic performances and how her comedic legacy is remembered (Wood, 2014). Other scholars wrote pieces that focused on understanding Black comedy as a form of literacy (Finley, 2014).

While there are many mediums through which comedians practice their comedy (i.e. television shows, movies, books, etc.) stand-up comedy is one specific space that was examined within a lot of the research (Fulton, 2004). This thesis is focused on the position of Black women as comedians, a profession, and what those experiences reveal about how Black women are generally valued as laborers. While standup is an important element to examine, this thesis is focused on Black women's relationship to the workplace, through the profession of a comedian. Since comedians are positioned as cultural critics, understanding the ways Black women comedians critique their own professions through their own vernacular is key. It is also important to understand how those criticisms relate to Black folks’ relationship to the work place collectively. Through this research, comedy can be understood as both a profession, as well as an avenue for Black women to voice their lived experiences in the world.

Mo’Nique’s social media post is exemplary of the ways that Black feminist discourse can give voice to the irritations and aspirations that many Black people have. Mo’Nique’s experiences as a comedian, navigating structures of anti-Blackness and her expression of these experiences online, make her Instagram post’s a useful place for understanding the ways that Black women comedians function as cultural critics, whose criticisms transcend their comedic performances. Her use of Instagram shows how Black women are continuously positioned on the defense of their lives and livelihoods. This includes a struggle to articulate our value within a structure that thrives off of the ways we are devalued. Instagram post such as Mo’Nique’s are relatable struggles that Black women face navigating work spaces collectively.

In the VH1 documentary titled *All Jokes Aside: Black Women In Comedy*, comedian Amanda Seales discussed the ways that “social media has...been a great help to Black women in comedy, because it [has] allow[ed] us to write in our own voice and create our own content” (Lima et al. & Parker, 2017). Because of its everyday accessibility, social media has been integral to the ways that Black comedians engage with their craft and it is also a space where Black women have been able to curate and produce comedic content while subverting traditionally white, male comedic gatekeepers within standup. While spaces like All Def Comedy, and BET Centric Comedy have both contributed to Black comedic representation, they have been historically male dominated spaces created by Black men, with very few Black women in positions of power where they can control the ways that their images are produced.

As Audre Lorde (1984) reminded us:

Each of us is here now because in one way or another we share a

commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us. (p. 37)

In a world where anti-Black violence continues to exist, this work of reclaiming Black women's work does not end because Black women have been speaking truth to power. This project is a necessary continuation that cultivates understandings of Black women's expression and communication, in a world comfortable with continuing to silence us. There are far too many instances where our work, labor, and contributions are ignored, misrepresented, and devalued (Collins, 2000). Black women have been denied the ability to tell our own stories and make sense of our own lives (Collins, 2000). This thesis adds to conversations that attempt to change and re-theorize the ways that Black women are understood in larger social and cultural contexts, because it is exhausting to constantly have to defend yourself against continuous dehumanizing experiences.

This work is also rooted in an epistemological understanding that, "people of color have always theorized, but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract knowledge" (Christian, 1987, p. 52). Our knowledge production is not limited to books, our knowledges are passed through music, dance, stories, poetry, food, and comedy. bell hooks (1991) also described the ways that naming, and theorizing is a privileged act that often overlooks the ways that everyday people may, "practice theorizing without ever knowing/possessing the term" (p. 3). I think about the gems of so many Black women, regardless of educational background, that were instilled into me. Through examining the experiences of Black women comedians we are able to understand the ways that Black women theorize and name their lived experiences. This is

important towards reclaiming Black women's modes of expression and creating moments of agency through self-definition.

In thinking beyond common tropes, such as “laugh to keep from crying”, I explore the ways Black women comedians use online spaces to produce understandings of the world and Blackness outside of white supremacist constructions. In an anti-black world, Black women are always positioned on the defense. In order to articulate this defense, Black women comedians have used their vernacular online to share their experiences as Black women, in the work place. These realities are connected to how Black women are valued. Although there is a lineage of work that has been done in relation to Black people in comedy, that field of research shrinks when contextualized to gender, and is nonexistent in relation to the content that Black comedians create online. It is important to understand that the lives and livelihoods of Black comedians are inseparable because of the ways that Black comedy is often based on the lives that the comedians experience. There is a necessity to think about comedy beyond the ways that Black women perform on stage as standup comedians, because Black women comedians are positioned as laborers within a racial capitalist system. In the context of that reality, the primary research question that grounds this thesis is: In what ways does Mo'Nique, engage in vernacular discourse online to support and defend Black women's value?

### **The Layout of the Thesis**

In the following section of this thesis, I examine the existing research and literature on Black women in comedy in order to contextualize the importance of looking at the emerging ways that Black women comedians engage in self-expression. While there is limited scholarship on Black women comedians specifically, what has been

written about them has focused a lot on the ways that Black women, through their performances on stage are able to resist dominant power structures and their attempts to constrict Black expression through things such as stereotypes, caricatures, and racialized tropes. I also examine the literature surrounding the relationship between comedy and online spaces in order to understand the evolving spaces in which Black women comedians exist in, outside of the stand-up arena.

In section three of this thesis, I theoretically ground my research in Black Feminist thought and Theories of the Flesh in order to contextualize the work that Black women do as comedians. Both of these theories are based on the necessity to understand the ways that marginalized folks, especially those who have been historically excluded from academic spaces, create knowledge and empowerment for themselves and their communities through their everyday lives. These theories help us think about the ways that Black women in comedy are both creators and communicators of knowledge in a manner that subverts attempts to undermine, devalue, and silence Black women. In that regard, vernacular, or the language of those who have been oppressed, become an important framework work to understand how Black women comedians construct their rhetoric in ways that are resistant to, and at times reinscribe oppressive power structures. A critical vernacular discourse analysis is the method that I utilize in order to study these elements. This method is justified, through how Black women's comedic, and social media content are based on everyday interactions and the use of vernacular. This method is also beneficial for understanding how Black women comedians use online platforms to defend themselves.

Section four is the actualization of my method, incorporating Black feminism and

Theories of the Flesh to provide insight on the ways that Mo’Nique utilized social media as a comedian to construct rhetoric about Black women’s value and the struggle to have that value recognized. In order to do this, I examine an Instagram video posted by Mo’Nique where she makes a plea to her followers, to boycott Netflix for racial, and gender discrimination. I also examine a follow up interview she did with fellow comedian Steve Harvey, where they discuss the effectiveness and the outcome of her call to action. From these two moments, I conclude this thesis with exploring what possibilities and limitations exist for Black women whose modes of self-expressions to the public are no longer limited to formal media outlets, as well as thinking through places to build in the future.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of what has already been written and researched about Black women comedians has focused on stand-up performances. While that research has been important to understanding Black women comedy, the primary focus of this literature review is on understanding Black women as comedians, the profession, rather than just a singular of focus on their comedy. This focus on Black women's role as comedians creates the space to understand the conditions that make up Black women's comedic performances, and how these conditions are situated in relation to other Black women professionals. This understanding is key to grasping the ways that Black women comedians utilize their voices and comedy to defend themselves against the damaging images and ideologies constructed against them, as well as understanding how these beliefs manifest into material consequences that devalue the work that Black women comedians do. With an awareness of how social media is a growing influencer within U.S. culture, and how we interact with each other, this review examines social media's contributions to the ways that Black folks are able to communicate and express ourselves through online platforms.

### **Black Comedians as Cultural Critics**

There are several important themes in the literature that I explore in order to ground my research. One of the primary themes, is the role of Black comedians as cultural critics who theorize at the intersections of race, gender, and class (Bailey, 2012; Fulton, 2004; Haggins, 2007; Jacobs-Huey, 2006; Koziski, 1984). Haggins (2007) work on Black comedians impact on U.S. culture, primarily focused on the experiences of stand-up comedians and actors attempt to "cross-over" to different audiences. The term crossing-over describes a Black comedian's ability to perform for and entertain non-

Black audiences. One of the main arguments that Haggins (2007) made is that Black comedians function as cultural critics who have unique insights into the “African American (and American) experience” (p. 6). This unique insight is connected to what Fulton (2004) describes as a triple consciousness that Black women comedians have. This triple consciousness is both “struggle and laughter” because of the positionality of Black women with in balancing societal expectations, community expectations, and our own consciousness (Fulton, 2004, p. 82). In that regard, Black women comedians work is not just limited to their own needs, but also connected to a responsibility for the needs of others.

This argument adds nuance to the insider/outsider position that Haggins (2007) situated the Black comic in and brings into question what happens when in-group humor is performed for audiences from different cultural context (Bailey, 2012). This insider/outsider role is also connected to early Black comedic actors who were tokenized and situated as “representatives of their race” to larger white audiences, while still not being fully accepted within these same white spaces (Haggins, 2007, p. 99). White people were comfortable with the presence of Black people only to the extent of our ability to entertain them. This demonstrates the difference between laughing at and laughing with. The role of Black comedians as a cultural critic means that Black comics are not only positioned to celebrate and commemorate Black culture. Their comedy also provides criticisms that allow us to better understand the cultural, social, and political conditions that we operate within (Haggins, 2007).

In a comparative analysis between the role of comics and the role of anthropologists Koziski (1984) argued that comedians can be understood as cultural

critics because of the ways that comedians are able to position themselves slightly outside of one's culture in order to analyze it. One of the major differences that the author articulates between anthropologist and comedians is their relationship to the culture they analyze as comedians often exist within the cultures that they deconstruct. Through their work, both comedians and anthropologists are able to look for cultural patterns, meanings, and values by conducting observations of everyday life (Koziski, 1984). Comedians and cultural anthropologist are able to make visible the everyday behaviors that are often invisible and unproblematized (Koziski, 1984). In that regard, Koziski (1984) also argued that comedians and anthropologist should be understood in relation to each other because of the ways that they study living cultures in order to reveal the ways that culture functions and exists. This includes understanding the habits and thoughts that undergird one's culture (Koziski, 1984, p, 61). While Koziski did this comparative analysis of the two, it is important to note that her analysis seemed to prioritize the role of the anthropologist over the role of the comedian, because of the ways that the anthropologist is legitimized as a cultural critic by the academy.

Though Haggins (2007) argued that Black representation is becoming more inclusive, Black humor still continues to “carry an inherent critique of cultural and racial inequalities” that is rooted in the very real social conditions that Black people experience (p. 129). In discussing the ways that cinema shaped Black comedic expression, Haggins (2007) described how cinema was not a space created for or by Black people which is evident in the ways that we have been represented and reduced to caricatures. In the VH1 documentary titled *All Jokes Aside: Black Women In Comedy*, comedian Amanda Seales described this phenomenon in reference to the show *Friends* stating, “from Monica, to

Rachel, to Phoebe...those are three very different white girls alone” (Lima et al. & Parker, 2017). This example that Seales drew from, demonstrates how white characters have always been written to include a multitude of perspectives. However, when it comes to Black representation, there is often very limited nuance in the ways that we are portrayed, and our identities are often reduced to racialized tropes.

Through their performances, Black comedians have been able to critique both hegemonic and intracultural elements due to how, “black humor and laughter have long provided African Americans with a means to critically reflect on in-group practices and ideologies” (Jacobs- Huey, 2006, p. 72). This analysis of Black comedians as cultural critics was also researched and described in the context of Black hair, another everyday element of Black culture. Within her analysis, Lanita Jacobs-Huey (2006) demonstrated how Black comedians performances construct “gendered, political, and other symbolic meanings of Black hair” (p. 71). In this case, comedy functioned as a site to understand and articulate the cultural significance of hair for Black people. Jacobs-Huey (2006) described how:

As dialogical performers, comics actively engage African American audiences as co-participants through their use of in-group cultural knowledge and cultural discourse styles such as call and response or the dozens. (p. 72)

Black comedians are not just cultural critics speaking at or to audiences, rather their criticisms rely on their audience's ability to both interpret culturally specific jokes, and possess communicative competence (Jacobs-Huey, 2006, p. 72). This co-participation is traditionally demonstrated through heckling, laughter, silence, and claps. As Finley (2013) explained:

Audiences are created in the moments of laughter... the joke makes the audience, if only at the mundane level at which those who do not “get” the joke is not the audience for the joke. (p. 18)

One specific standup performance that Jacobs-Huey (2006) drew her analysis from is Laura Hayes who, during her performance on *The Queens of Comedy*, takes off her own wig while telling the story of when she defended her sister during an incident of domestic violence. Jacobs-Huey (2006) argued that this move was a radical gesture, not only in the ways that it incited laughter, but also because of how it breached, challenged, and critiqued both societal and communal standards about how one should present their hair and themselves, especially during a critical moment of defending oneself. This is one specific example within the academic literature of the ways that Black women critique cultural norms through their comedy.

Finley (2013) reminded us that “humor facilitates feminist politics and performance...stand-up comedy [is] a renegade space in which [B]lack women move literally and figuratively from outrageous comics to become audacious thinkers and potent social critics” (p. 12). Thus, standup breaches the mindset that knowledge cannot be found in everyday experiences that people have and that our stories cannot be a source of education. This is specifically important for Black women who have been excluded from so many traditional academic spaces. While Black humor in the U.S. context may have its roots as a means of survival and resistance to the egregious conditions that Black people have been subjected to, it has also manifested itself as a means of “social, cultural, and historical development and transmission” (Finley, 2013, p. 7). Black humor can be understood as a method to entertain, educate, and transmit culture, meaning that Black

people have been and continue to do things that are not solely reliant on structures of whiteness.

### **Black Humor as Response and Resistance to Dominant Ideologies and Stereotypes**

Another theme present in the literature was the ways that Black women comedians utilized humor as a response, and means of resistance to dominant cultural, and social constructions of race, gender, class, and sexuality (Bailey, 2012; Fulton, 2004; Wood, 2014). Bailey (2012) argued that in order for work around Black humor to be truly social justice oriented, our focus as scholars should not just attempt to understand the text, or comedic performances in front of us. Rather it is our jobs as scholars to understand the “moments of resistance” that are produced through the performances (Bailey, 2012, p. 254). In thinking beyond what and who the audience is being asked to laugh at, and with, we should understand that there are the multiple meanings within these discourses because humor often “play on and play off long established stereotypes” (Weaver, 2010, p. 33). Black culture exists beyond the context of these stereotypes. This is demonstrated through the ways that Black comedians often push against those boundaries through their comedy. In that regard, stand-up comedy can also be understood as a rhetorical discourse that not only entertains but also persuades people to think differently about the world.

One historical example of this is “Moms” Mabley, a Black woman whose comedic performances during the 1950’s and 1960’s pushed against dominant stereotypes and cultural constructions of race and gender (Wood, 2014). Her adaptation of the persona “Moms” is one that can also be read as queer because of the ways that it has allowed her to engage with gender and sexuality in a public setting outside of dominant white

heterosexual constructions of identity (Wood, 2014). Though these resistances were not always well documented and archived, Mabley's performances, and the ways that she used her comedy, often disrupted dominant cultural constructions of race, femininity, and sexuality. Her embodiment of Black feminist resistance during her career is often reduced to a motherly caricature. Still, her comedy created dialogue around white supremacy, class, gender and sexuality. While very few texts reference her sexuality, through a queer reading of her comedic persona, Wood (2014) argued that we are able to better understand the ways she was able to express and perform outside of white heteronormative restrictions at a time when she may have not always been able to openly express her identity publicly. Comedians are often able to say the things that are "too dangerous for everyday people to say" which is apparent through the ways that cultural criticisms without humor are rarely easily received (Bailey, 2012, p. 260). Because of this, through her "quare iteration of grandmother," Mabley expressed a certain level of "brashness and bossiness" that was not culturally accepted for Black women at that time (Wood, 2014, p. 92).

Mabley's performances were in many ways groundbreaking for Black women comedians. In the 1960's, Mabley outsold many Black men comedians including Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor. Despite the success she experienced, she has not been held with the same recognition as the latter comics. Black women comedians who have come after her have continued to struggle to gain the same financial and artistic recognition as their male counterparts (Leeson, 2014). These struggles are mirrored in Mo'Nique's Instagram post.

Fulton (2004) also discussed the ways that Black women's comedic performances

resist cultural stereotypes. Gary Alan Fine's "folklore diamond" paradigm one way to understand the strategies Black women in comedy use, in order to construct their own identities outside of white cultural understandings. One of the tenets of this paradigm is the social structures or the ways that race and gender make up the "landscape in which [Black] women's humor reside" (Fulton, 2004, p. 82). This cultural landscape includes the racist images that are embedded into U.S. culture that many Black performers have historically been forced to adapt on stage through things such as minstrel performances. Mo'Nique is mentioned as an example of the ways that Black comedians are able to use on stage personas in order to break down gendered stereotypes that uphold limitations on how Black women should be and perform in the world (Fulton, 2004).

Another way Fulton (2004) argued that cultural stereotypes are resisted is through personal imperatives, which take into consideration all of the "personal self, unconscious motives, mood states, and rational choice[s]" that frame Black comedians performances (2004, p. 85). More specifically many of the comedic performances critiqued patriarchal conceptualizations of gender which made for space for Black women to define themselves "against patriarchy and outside of mainstream feminism" (Fulton, 2004, p. 89). Through these performance Black women are able to be "sexually at home in [their] bod[ies]" by adding to the conversation the ways that gender and sexuality are constructed for Black women outside of dominant culture (Fulton, 2004, p. 89). Some of the content of the performances included critiques of sexual commodification, the constructions of gender within American culture, and the ways that notions of womanhood often exclude Black women from the conversation (Fulton, 2004).

## **Rationale**

In looking at the academic literature surrounding Black women as comedians, it became apparent the places where the literature seemed to be absent. Though much of the research done deconstructed the meaning behind specific comedic performances, the politics that shape how those performances come to exist is a space the research did not examine. A lot of the literature written did not deeply consider the professional barriers that Black women comedians face when trying to participate in their profession. While understanding the joke is important, understanding the context and conditions that the joke is told in is also an important space that the research was lacking in.

While the literature did point to how Black women comedians engaged in resistive tactics through their comedy, the presence of their voices outside of their comedic performances was virtually non-existent in the research. This absence in the research is an opportunity to understand Black women comedians work and listen to their experiences in their own words and voices. A chance to explore the growing role of social media is also created because comedians can now directly talk to their audiences, without having to navigate traditional media avenues. Considering the conditions that shape Black women comedians ability to make content, is also important to understanding Black women's collective experiences as laborers and the barriers that exist for us.

### CHAPTER 3: THERORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Mo’Nique’s call for people to #BOYCOTT #NETFLIX is a significant Black cultural moment to reflect and build on because of the ways that it spoke to the experiences that Black women have while navigating the labor force. Black feminism and Theories of the Flesh both help contextualize the ideologies and beliefs that shape these workplace experiences. Specifically, these theories contribute to understanding how Black women comedians experiences shape the vernacular that they utilize while participating in their livelihoods. Similar to many contemporary Black activists, Mo’Nique utilizes social media as a digital medium to reach her audience and advocate resistive ideologies. In that regard Black feminism, Theories of the Flesh, and Black vernacular theory become key to understanding the political and social implications of her use of vernacular online. This section explores each of those theories in order to theoretically ground the research.

The application of Black feminist theories to Mo’Nique’s advocacy is done with an understanding of the many ways that Black folks collectively make use of Black feminist practice, without ever naming it. Naming is an important element to consider because of the ways that labels are often an incomplete descriptor of the things that Black folks do. In explaining her decision to use the label of Black feminism, Collins encouraged us to think beyond labels, by arguing that, “we should think through the reasons Black feminist thought exist in the first place” (2000, p. 22). Britney Cooper (2018) expanded on this concept through expressing the ways that, “the boundaries and labels matter so much less when you get down to the real work of what it means to love Black women in a world that hates us all” (p. 22). Like Theories of the Flesh, Black

Feminist Thought is “a politic born out of necessity” based in the need for Black women to have their lived experiences articulated in a way that is both for them and by them (Moraga & Anzaldua, 1983, p. 23). While it is important to consider and understand the ways that we theorize Black feminist practice, the methods through which these practices become embodied, are even more important.

### **Black Feminist Thought/Theories of the Flesh**

In order to understand the role of Black women comedians, it is important to understand the ways that comedians do not produce content only as a form of criticism, and entertainment, but also as a form of labor. Historical Womanist Theory (HWT), offers a specific contextualization of Black women’s unique relationship to labor that situates Black women as a unique racialized and gendered laboring class, in order to understand the ways that capitalism affects Black women comedians. One cannot discuss Black women's relationship to labor in a U.S. context, without thinking through the ways that chattel slavery has shaped that relationship. Black women's bodies have both been reduced to what we can produce, while simultaneously pathologized, and criminalized for how we produce. This includes being characterized as “bad mothers,” “lazy,” having a lack of work ethic, a lack of moral values, and being labeled as difficult and loud when outspoken (Rousseau, 2013). These factors shape how Black women exist within a unique and distinct laboring class (Rousseau, 2013).

Black feminism existed in practice long before it was ever named. In a U.S. context, Black feminism goes as far back to the Black holocaust also known as slavery. Black folks relationship to gender, sexuality, race, and class have historically been molded through our ability to produce for the plantation society. These relationships have

never been normative anyway. Under the conditions of the Middle Passage Black folk's bodies were reduced to flesh that could be quantified, rather than understood solely as raced and gendered subjects. This logic continued onto the plantation where Black women were required to work as hard as men (Hartman, 2016). At the Ohio Women's Convention during a discussion about gender inequity, Sojourner Truth, an emancipated Black woman, posed the question, "Ain't I a woman?" (Mohdin, 2018). This question functioned as a rhetorical move to bring to light the reality that Black folks have never had traditional relationships to our bodies or to gender. Black folks, regardless of gender, were expected to labor and produce for the plantation all the same.

Hartman (2016) argued that "the material relations of sexuality and reproduction defined black women's historical experiences as laborers" (p. 166). Through this logic it is important to understand that while many mothers in the context of slavery were understood to be women, the ways that kinships for people who were enslaved functioned were often in non-heteronormative ways. Black folks relationship to labor have made apparent the ways that Black family's structures do not conform to gender norms and functionally challenge the patriarchal nuclear family (Hartman, 2016). Still, reproduction was the literal site that the future of slavery depended on, and Black women were positioned to bear a lot of the physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental demands of that reproduction. Black feminism has had to encompass the ways that Black women have and continue to navigate a world where our value is limited to how we can keep the system in place.

With the establishment of the thirteenth amendment, slavery continued to exist in all but name, and to this day exists through our current prison industrial complex. Though

many laws barred white folks from forcing Black people to work for free, white supremacy reigned and Black folks continued to be economically exploited through the reconstruction era. Many Black folks were still confined to harsh labor conditions that mirrored slavery such as sharecropping. Black folks who found work outside of the fields faced struggled to secure stable employment. In the less rural north, Black women worked in greater numbers, for less pay in comparison to their white counterparts. Though Black women worked more than their white counterparts, Black family's average income in the 1870's amounted to less than 60 percent of white family's income (Jones, 2010, p. 117). Even with changes in marital status and the birth of children, many Black women remained on the workforce due to the reality that Black folks were paid less and confined to economically exploitive work conditions. Black women were also more likely to work for the majority of their adult lives in comparison to white women at the time who would often stop working because of changes in marital status or the birth of children (Jones, 2010, p. 117). In a study of Black women wage earners, all of the Black women between ages 20 to 24 were wage earners in 1900; this number was still at 66 percent for Black women over the age of 55 (Jones, 2010, p. 117). Thus, Black feminist practices have always been reflective of that economic reality.

While Black feminism has always been centered around the marginalization and liberation of all Black people, feminism centered around white women has operated on the belief that struggles around gender should be prioritized over struggles around race. Feminism centered around white women has both silenced and disregarded the ways Black women experience oppression intersectionally. Intersectionality is a theory coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) that includes the ways that race, gender, and class

oppression are experienced concurrently. When it comes to how these elements intersect with power, one aspect cannot be separated from the rest. While this theory originated to understand how the law uniquely affects Black women, it has been adapted by many feminists scholars to understand oppression in a more nuanced way. Intersectionality allows us to grapple with the unique forms of discrimination that Black women face in the workplace and the role of race gender, and class in shaping those experiences (Jones, 2010, p. 25). It is also a theory that has allowed us to recognize the ways that oppression is dynamic, and contextual not just to identity, but to time and space as well. In that regard, intersectionality can be utilized as a mode of analysis to understand how conversations and discourse about oppression should not be understood as singular or monolithic. This has been a continuous element of Black feminism as scholars like Lorde (1984) have spoken about how “there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (p. 138). This is another acknowledgment of the multifaceted identities that Black women have and how these identities also exist in relation to each other.

For feminism centered around white women the privileging of gender equality above all other forms of oppression was an inconceivable move that Black women have never been positioned to make. Intersectionality has been a necessary theory in contextualizing feminism due to the ways that white feminists have utilized their whiteness to advance their agenda of equality while leaving Black women and other people of color behind. From the early days of the suffrage movement, white feminists felt that struggles around gender should be prioritized over struggles around race. Leaders of this movement were committed to preventing the progress of Black folks if it meant

that white women were not going to reap the immediate benefits (Davis, 1983). Consequently, when it seemed that Black men were going to secure the right to vote before women, white feminists moved to advocate for their right to vote through promoting the notion that only white people should have access to political change (Davis, 1983). Despite their own relationship to the patriarchy, white feminists easily alienated Black women during some of earliest movement building efforts surrounding the right to vote. This continuous alienation has contributed to the necessity of Black feminism.

Due to the exclusionary history of white feminist movements, women of color feminist have pushed the boundaries of feminism in order to prioritize the needs of marginalized people. The intersectional relationship that Black women have to race, gender, sexuality, and class give Black women a unique position and collective standpoint within society that is based on these lived experiences (Collins, 2000). Collins (2000) notes that, “All African- American women share the common experience of being Black women in a society that denigrates women of African descent” (p. 155). There are several tenets that Collins (2000) highlights that make up the foundations of Black feminist thought. The first tenet focused on the ways that Black women's work experiences, as well as our relationship to family, are constructed through oppressive conditions. This is especially timely in thinking about the particular work experiences that Black women have and the realities that shape those experiences.

Another tenet in Black feminist thought is the ways that Black womanhood are established through the use of controlling images that are based on stereotypical portrayals of Black womanhood. While the realities of Black women often don't fit into

these stereotypes, controlling image becomes a useful way of understanding how Black women are perceived. One way that Black folks have attempted to resist these controlling images is through an embrace of respectability politics. Evelyn Higginbotham (1993) described this as conforming to dominant society norms, manners, and morals with the hope of distancing oneself from the negative stereotypes and beliefs that exist about Black people. She wrote how “the politics of respectability emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relation” (Higginbotham, 1993, p. 187). This belief pushed the idea that if Black folks act in a way that embodies the values of white people, then maybe we will be valued and treated with the same respect and dignity that they seemingly reserve for each other. This assimilation may have also provided access to better opportunities and more survivable lives as well. While on one hand, this tactic allowed for Black women to have the agency and will to define themselves outside of racist discourse it also created a false sense of security that existing in a particular way, will result in better treatment. Conforming will not counter the effects of controlling images, when it is our literal Blackness that is constructed as deviant. From the way our hair naturally grows, to how we speak, to simply how we look, no amount of conforming has been able to resist that reality.

Black resistance does not just happen in formal political capacities, but also through everyday tactics that challenge how “structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power work together to produce particular patterns of domination” (Collins, 2000, p. 203). One of the ways that Black feminists practice resistance and agency is through defensiveness. Nash (2019) wrote how “despite

evidence that the attachment to the defensive position is toxic, the attachment persists because it offers the sense of collective world-making, and because it is the exertion of a certain form of agency” (p. 27). Thought defensiveness is a tactic of agency, it is also one that is always in response to the conditions that are imposed onto us. This brings to question things like what it means to constantly defend our right to exist in toxic spaces that were never built for us or by us, and why we continue to invest our energy into participating in systems and institutions that continue to fail us. It also pushes us to think about the possibilities of Black feminist praxis in imagining and actualizing ourselves outside of the confines of the status quo.

Finally, the importance and power of self-definition is a crucial tenet of Black feminist thought that that rejects external definitions and controlling images of Black womanhood (Collins, 2000). Black feminist thought is based on maintaining the importance of understanding and foregrounding embodied knowledges. This includes the ways include the ways that we understand and define ourselves and our lived experiences (Collins, 2000). Audre Lorde (1984) articulated the importance of self-definition by stating:

If we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others — for their use and to our detriment. The development of self-defined Black women, ready to explore and pursue our power and interests within our communities, is a vital component in the war for Black liberation. (p. 39)

These embodied knowledges are also discussed in the context of “a theory in the flesh” in which Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983) conceptualize “the flesh” or the body as the site of experiences, knowledge, and understanding for women of color. This work is

done with an understanding of the intersectional experiences that women of color have with oppression, and the ways that those experiences organize our bodies into modes of survival. Theories of the flesh maintain the importance of “naming ourselves and... telling our stories in our own words” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983, p. 23). This further highlights the importance of “naming” because of the many ways that women of color are silenced by oppression through stereotypes in an everyday sense as well as through institutions and systems of domination. The act of naming one's experience allows for women of color to “bridge” together their experiences and break the ongoing silence around their lived experiences because far too many Black women do not ever share our stories (Lorde, 1984; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983).

In thinking about the ways that Black feminists theories have grown, it is also important to understand that Black feminism is an intergenerational theory that both borrows from our elders and generations past while simultaneously lending itself to the future (Gumbs, 2016). This theory has continuously grown to encompass the ways that Black folks identities exist outside of limited heteronormative understandings of race, gender, and sexuality. Through her studies of the archived the work of Black feminists including June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Lucille Clifton, and Toni Cade Bambara, Gumbs articulated a theory of queer mothering (2016). This view of mothering exists outside biological determinist understandings and shifts us to approach mothering in the non-normative, queer context of “creating, nurturing, affirming, and supporting life” (Gumbs, 2016, p. XV). Queer in this context is not only an identity, but it is also an orientation based on that which does not reproduce norms.

To love Black folks in an anti-Black world defies normative ways of being

(Cooper, 2018; Gumbs, 2016). Love can then be understood “as a way forward” and a “utopian site of Black feminist possibility” where folks are able to imagine and move towards a world a little more survivable (Nash, 2019, p. 113). Love is a form and praxis of vulnerability and accountability that is committed to the reality that our survival is tethered to each other and our ability to coexist as a community (Nash, 2019). Black women are collectively positioned as “outsiders-within” who witness and name the forms of violence that others cannot recognize from their own vantage points (Nash, 2019, p. 119). This understanding of Black women’s positionality deepens the potential of theories like intersectionality, as Nash (2019) wrote how:

This act of witnessing, for self and for others, for naming what others seek to ignore or normalize, is, Black feminists assert, a practice of love, of tenderness, and of political world-making. (p. 119)

Witnessing then exists as a tactic of “self- calculated disclosure” that reveal the ways Black women experiences and lives are rendered invisible except in the moments where we are able to choose to share (Nash, 2019, p. 119). Though Nash (2019) primarily described agency in the context of defensiveness, perhaps love is another way of thinking through Black feminist agency and the possibility for building new worlds and ways of being.

Collins (2000) described the ways that Black feminist thought is rooted in fighting injustice as well as “creating imaginative responses to injustice characterize the core of Black feminist thought” (p. 12). These “imaginative responses” can be understood beyond hardship and injustice and understood in relation to Black joy. Johnson (2015) theorized the ways that:

Black joy is more than a method to endure... black joy allows us the space to stretch our imaginations beyond what we previously thought possible and allows us to theorize a world in which white supremacy does not dictate our everyday lives. (p. 180)

In that regard, Black joy becomes a place to explore and understand joy (joy as is, joy as a politics, joy as a resistance strategy) what possibilities exist within those moments. The everyday spaces that we occupy such as families, churches and community organizations can be understood as key locations where safe discourses have the potential to occur “sometimes in sorrow, but more often in genuine joy” (Collins, 2000, p. 101).

Black feminist thought is also based on the understanding that knowledge and intellect can come from everyday people and people outside of academic space. In fact, Black feminist thought “involves challenging the very terms of intellectual discourse itself” (Collins, 2000, p. 15). In that regards Black women’s intellectual tradition is embedded in non-traditional sources, everyday spaces, and from non-academic Black women which means that it challenges white epistemological logic that prioritizes academic knowledge that has often excluded Black women’s perspectives (Collins, 2000, p. 16). Through a focus on vernacular discourse we are able to examine the intellectual work that is done by everyday Black women, and the ways that intellectual work allows for Black women comedians to define themselves and their experiences through their rhetoric.

### **Black Vernacular Discourse**

In the demand for a kind of feminism that is both inclusive of the realities of Black women, and engaging with the new generation of activist, vernacular discourse

studies is a beneficial tactic towards making feminism more intersectional. Vernacular is the everyday language, and voice of the marginalized that subverts, disrupts, and resists dominant discourse (Farred, 2003). Vernacular is both ideologically and politically opposed to dominant culture and rhetoric. Farred (2003) noted that “no minority or anti-colonial struggle can be sustained if it does not contain in it a cultural element” (p. 1). Thus, vernacular functions as a cultural element that resistance is articulated through. Farred (2003) argued the specific ways that celebrities with marginalized identities use their celebrity platform as vernacular intellectuals in order to speak to the realities of the communities they are a part of. Because of the history of marginalized people being shut out of formal political processes, social advocates have been found in ministers, social movement activists, athletes, actors, and comedians. Black artists in particular have played an important role in creating and maintaining critical social and political spaces. Black folks have been overly represented within popular culture and simultaneously disenfranchised from formal political processes. Consequentially “informal politics has continued to play a major role in mobilizing and shaping...Black politics” (Iton, 2008, p. 4). People like Fannie Lou Hamer, Nina Simone, Dick Gregory, and Muhammad Ali are just a few individuals who have used their celebrity platform to advocate against social and political issues. Farred (2003) described these individuals as vernacular intellectuals who articulate themselves with an understanding that dominant discourse is not oblivious to the protest and resistance of marginalized folks. Thus, through their communication they consider “where they speak from, to whom they speak, who hears them, and how they are heard” (Farred, 2003, p. 8). All of these elements contextualize vernacular discourse.

One way that Black activists utilize cultural elements in their discourse is through the use of African American Vernacular English, also known as AAVE or Ebonics. AAVE is an important Black oral tradition, often utilized during in group communication among Black folks. Much of Black culture has been transmitted through oral traditions. Griots, the storytellers in some pre-colonized African societies, were well respected elders who transmitted knowledge and culture through the use of stories. Orality as a communication style includes the use of metaphors, body gestures, tone, imagery, and other nonverbal nuances (Hamlet, 2011). These oral traditions transcended slavery and have continued to permeate Black culture in a variety of ways.

One example has been through call and response, which can be understood as a verbal exchange between both the speaker and listener (Hamlet, 2011). The sender of the messages' call, often demands a response from the receiver of the message. Another example of Black oral traditions is signifyin', which is a form of wordplay that engages in the double meaning, and double voice that language has for Black folks (Gates, 1988). When signifyin', Black speakers adapt ambiguous language to express hidden messages (Gates, 1988). Similar to "getting a joke," there needs to be a high level of cultural competence because of the multiple layers of communication and wordplay that are involved in signifyin' as a vernacular practice. One of the emerging spaces that many of these vernacular practices have also shown up is on social media platforms.

### **Social Media and Vernacular Discourse**

One important element to consider is the ways that social media sites exist are cultural platforms where people can communicate and express humor (Brock 2012; Florini, 2014; Sharma, 2012). Much of the research that discussed Black humor in online

spaces focused on Twitter. In contextualizing Black humor in an online setting, race can be understood in the ways that it is structured within online spaces (Florini, 2014). Brock (2012) conducted a critical discourse analysis in order to understand and theorize the ways that Black people perform and mediate cultural interactions on Twitter. Within his analysis of user generated content, he found that Black Twitter users online displayed a level of cultural competence that relied on specific social and cultural understandings usually present during embodied interactions (Brock, 2012). In the context of humor, call and response was one vernacular practice that users engaged in through the use of hashtags. When circulated on Twitter, hashtags function as a call, that draws out a response from other online participants. This feature on Twitter allows for cultural conversations to happen between users across the site. Within this space, Black users often respond to culturally specific humorous content by giving their own humorous response to the call of the hashtag (Brock, 2012).

Sharma (2013) continued this line of research through a focus on the ways that Black oral culture is employed online and how online racialized identities are materialized. Through examining particular hashtags, which was dubbed “Blacktags,” Sharma (2013) was able to describe the ways that Black people engage in vernacular expression through the use of humor and social commentary. Specifically, Sharma (2013) argued that the linguistic elements of “Blacktags” mirror that of humor practices like the dozens. The 140-character limit on Twitter necessitates displays of wit because of the limits in expression. This wit often occurs in the form of signifyin’ that produces humorous content that makes race visible in online spaces (Florini, 2014). While signifyin’ on Twitter often functions as a social critique, there are also instances in which

this practice functions as “a ritual of insult” which is another humorous practice within Black culture that happens online (Florini, 2014). Rooted in the vernacular practice of the dozens, these “rituals” online can foster connections between Black users in online spaces (Florini, 2014). While Twitter is the primary online space that has been researched in the context of Black culture, it is important to understand that Black people are present across many online spaces. The performance of online identities is structured differently according to the site and the unique user interface. This allows for Black people to engage in online spaces in many dynamic ways. Black feminism, theories of the flesh, and an understanding of Black vernacular studies, help situate the usefulness of a critical vernacular discourse analysis.

## CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Critical rhetorical studies have challenged traditional understandings of rhetoric by thinking of texts as unfinished, fragmented artifacts that can be understood in the context of other events and text. This contextualization becomes key to in understanding the full meaning of the text (McGee, 1990). McGee (1990) explained how “Critical rhetoric does not *begin* with a finished text in need of interpretation” instead texts should be considered within the larger social and cultural context (p. 279). McKerrow (1989) argued that the goal of critical rhetoric is to engage in a process that “demystif[ies] the conditions of domination” by focusing on the rhetoric of the oppressors and those in positions of power (p. 91). This occurs through a critique of domination or a critique of freedom in which the critic attempts to understand the ways that discourse of power and how they affect the ability for social change to happen.

One of the limitations of this approach to the study of rhetoric, is how it completely ignores the everyday expressions of people who are disempowered. Many critical rhetorical studies either focus on the rhetoric of the oppressors, or they essentialize Black rhetoric by focusing primarily on Black men activists and leaders, neglecting the rhetorical contributions of Black women and everyday Black folks (Davis, 1998). Like its Black feminist roots, Black women’s rhetorical tradition is grounded in doing the work to make for a better future for the those to come. Davis (1998) described this when she wrote:

The rhetorical critic locates her work between the past and the present lives of Black women and how they responded dialectically and dialogically to oppression in order to liberate, transform, redefine, and re-claim the distinctive rhetorical

tradition of intellectualism of Black womanhood for future generations of thinkers within and without the academy. (p. 81)

As for Black women, who come from a history where learning to read and write defied the limitations of how Black women could express ourselves, doing these things became acts of resistance to the ways that our survival has never been guaranteed (Lorde, 1984). Not just our bodies in the physical form, but also the ways that our stories, and personal accounts of our lived experiences were never meant to be documented and told by us. Part of what has continued to drive Black women's rhetoric, is the necessity to establish dignity, respect and personhood for Black folks collectively (Atwater, 2009).

In order to study the rhetorical strategies that Mo'Nique uses as a Black woman comedian online, I utilize a critical vernacular discourse analysis. This method is a form of rhetorical criticism that focuses on the "rhetoric of the oppressed" in order to understand the ways that marginalized people engage in everyday vernacular in relation to power (Ono & Sloop, 1995, p. 19). Studying vernacular discourse, through analyzing the online expressions of Black women in comedy, allows for a deeper understanding of the everyday vernacular that Black women comedians utilize to support and defend their value. Once the sample was collected, I analyzed the use of pastiche and cultural syncretism within Mo'Nique's vernacular in order to answer my research question. Cultural syncretism includes the ways that vernacular discourse both constructs its own rhetoric while simultaneously protesting hegemonic discourse (Ono & Sloop, 1995). On the other hand, pastiche includes the ways that "members of vernacular communities often use fragments or "scraps" from hegemonic discourse to construct subjectivities" (Ono & Sloop, 1995, p. 24). Thus, on one hand marginalized people are using their own

cultural elements to counter hegemonic rhetoric, while they are also repurposing elements of hegemonic culture, for our own benefit and survival.

Social media sites like Instagram have been a growing platform for nuanced and complex representations of Blackness that are often not found in traditional media spaces. Social media sites such as Instagram are spaces where people engage in everyday vernacular interactions. Understanding how these online expressions by Black women comedians play out is key to grasping how we value Black women in ways that both help, and hinder, Black women collectively. Comedians work is often centered around everyday lived experiences and finding the funny in them. This method is appropriate for studying Mo’Nique’s call to action as she is talking about an everyday experience using her vernacular.

### **Description of Data Selection**

On Friday, January 19th, 2018, Mo’Nique posted a video on Instagram to openly discuss a deal that she was offered from the video production and streaming company Netflix. In this video she discussed, how she was offered drastically less than her white and male colleagues. She pointed out how she, “was offered a \$500,000 deal last week to do a comedy special; however, Amy Schumer was offered \$11 million, Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle \$20 million” (Barrie, 2018). Due to this unfair treatment, she called for viewers to, “stand with [her] and boycott Netflix for gender bias and color bias” (Barrie, 2018).

In response to this video, comedian Wanda Sykes tweeted that she was offered less than half of what they offered Mo’Nique and that she decided to go elsewhere to do her special. As a result of this response, Mo’Nique posted another video two days later on

Sunday, January 21st, 2018 where she brought up Sykes response and once again asked viewers to “make sense” of how they could both be offered so little in comparison to their non-Black woman counterparts. Mo’Nique followed up with a third post, where she included the details of her Netflix deal. In the terms offered, Netflix would own the rights to her comedy special and she would not be able to do any other comedy special until after a twelve-month time period passed. Additionally, she would not be able to perform the content from the special anywhere else without permission from Netflix until after at least a 24-month time period (Judge, 2018). The terms of the Netflix deal sparked her to speak out on Instagram about her experiences as a Black women comedian and the process of pay negotiations.

Mo’Nique’s Instagram video came during a time where there was a surge of conversations about the ways that marginalized people are disempowered in many spaces. Movements such as “me too” were brought to the forefront as everyday people, and celebrities alike opened up about the culture of silence, that exist about sexual violence. Originated by activist Tarana Burke, the “me too” movement’s focus has been on empowering Black women, and girls that they are not alone in their experiences. “Me too” speaks to the ways that violence are experiences collectively and challenges the shame and culture of silence that exists around sexual violence. The movement’s focus has always been to support Black women, as it was started by a Black woman. Since its creation, it has gained recognition in many spaces and among celebrities, who have utilized the hashtag #metoo in order to bring to light the normalized violence and harassment that they have experienced within the entertainment industry.

Following the popularization of the “me too” movement, the Time's Up initiative

also joined the conversation in order to focus on the specific experiences of women in film, television, and theater and their experiences with workplace harassment. In the initiative, Time's Up spoke to the collective experiences that women have in workplace settings, and how different intersections contribute to those experiences. Both of these movements help us contextualize the social, political and cultural climate that Mo'Nique's initial Instagram post existed in. Nearly a year after Mo'Nique's initial Instagram post, she went onto the Steve Harvey talk show to discuss her call to boycott Netflix, as well as why she felt the need to speak up in the first place. Within this exchange, Harvey represented some of the response that she got as a result of her initial video. Their dialogue served as an example for how we can understand how conversations about Black women's value play out in an intracultural and intercultural context.

To develop my themes, I examined each video and wrote down moments where pastiche and cultural syncretism were present. When noting these moments, I also included what was said, and done at the time. After identifying moments of pastiche and cultural syncretism, I utilized my research question to understand if, and in what ways each moment helped Mo'Nique defend her value. From those answers four major themes emerged from my research. Within Mo'Nique's initial video the theme of intersectionality was the most apparent. The majority of the video focused on the "color and gender bias" that she experienced, and she cited examples specific examples of how she experienced this. The second theme that was apparent was the theme of Black love. I used the phrase Black love to capture both the self-love and advocacy that she demonstrated as well as the value of community love that Mo'Nique articulated

throughout all of the videos. The next theme that I examined was the role of controlling images and respectability politics. This theme was most apparent in Mo'Nique's interview with Steve Harvey, in which he represented the dominant response to her call to action and was also dismissive of her experiences. Lastly, I examined the overall role and importance of social media in conveying Mo'Nique's message in order to understand if social media was an effective tactic.

## CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS

The major themes that were the most apparent within the research include the Black feminist concept of intersectionality, the role of respectability politics and controlling images to borrow from Collins (2000) and Higginbotham (1993), Black love, and the impact of social media as a tool for world making. Each of these themes showed up through-out the artifacts and highlighted how Mo’Nique was able to communicate her message and the implications and meaning in her doing so.

### **Culturally Syncretic Intersectionality**

Mo’Nique’s vernacular demonstrates the role of intersectionality in understanding how Black women’s value is perceived. The intersections of race, gender, and class have played a role in shaping her experiences as a Black woman, and her relationship to power. Mo’Nique spoke about her experiences in a culturally syncretic way through using elements of Black culture in order to defend herself against the larger rhetoric surrounding outspoken Black women. One of the cultural elements that Mo’Nique used is “receipts.” Receipts is a Black vernacular term used to describe more than just the piece of paper you get after a financial transaction. The term also describes concrete evidence and examples that one has in order to support and strengthen the position or argument one is making. In her initial Instagram video, Mo’Nique specifically asked her audience to boycott Netflix because of the discrimination that she experienced on the basis of gender and color. In order to support her position, she out “pulled out the receipts” to demonstrate how she experienced racism and sexism. To her viewers she explained:

I was offered a five hundred thousand dollar deal last week to do a comedy special; however, Amy Schumer was offered 11 million dollars, Chris Rock and

Dave Chappelle 20 million dollars. Then Amy Schumer went back and renegotiated two more million dollars because she said “I shouldn't get what the men are getting, they're legends, however, I should get more” and Netflix agreed. When we asked Netflix to explain the difference, why the money was so different, they said well we believe that's what Mo'Nique will bring. (Mo'Nique, 2018)

In order to support her argument, Mo'Nique specifically cited several highly publicized examples of Netflix negotiations in which fellow comedians were paid amounts of at least ten times more than what she was offered. Using these examples were necessary for her, because there is a culture of disbelief and doubt that surrounds Black women when we speak up about things such as discrimination. Our experiences of dealing with anti-Black racism and gender discrimination are commonly thought to be elements of the past that no longer plague U.S. society and culture. Even when Black folks do have “receipts” outside of our own narratives, our claims are often dismissed. This is demonstrated through the continuous documentation and dismissal of Black folks dying at the hands of police. Dismissal is exactly what Netflix did in their response; they dismissed the possibility that anti-Black racism and sexism could have played any role in negotiations. Instead they pushed forth a narrative that the reason she was offered so little is because that is what they thought her comedy special would bring in relation to profit. Mo'Nique explained how:

When we asked Netflix to explain the difference, why the money was so different, they said well we believe that's what Mo'Nique will bring. We said what about my resume? [Netflix] said, “we don't go off of resumes”. (Mo'Nique,

2018)

However, the Netflix deals that comedians Chappelle, Rock, and Schumer secured proved that there are ways that race, and gender intersect, and manifest in the form of pay inequity. Chappelle and Rock are two Black men comedians who received 20 million dollars each for their Netflix specials. Schumer, a white woman comedian, was initially offered 11 million dollars. When she found out what Chappelle and Rock were paid, Schumer, too, felt Netflix wasn't being fair, and was able to renegotiate for 13 million after her own criticisms of gender pay inequity. Her claims and tears were taken seriously, and Schumer was able to secure more money as a result. Mo'Nique's final offer was 500 thousand dollars from Netflix. In her contract she would not be able to tour any of the content from the special for at least two years, limiting her ability to make money outside of the Netflix special. This public knowledge of how much her peers were compensated empowered her to inquire about why she was offered so little given her history and experience as a comedian.

In referencing Schumer's highly publicized negotiations as an example of how other comedians have been compensated, Mo'Nique brought to light the role that intersectionality has in how Black women are valued in the work place. Though women on average get paid less than men, that wage discrepancy becomes more apparent when race is factored in. Collins wrote how, "Black women's paid work is organized within intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender" (2000, p. 45). This is connected to a history of economic exploitation that continues to permeate Black women's work experiences. Understanding the ways that Black women's activism is organized to address these realities includes understanding the significance of how these oppression's

are organized.

Intersectionality provided a framework for understanding Mo’Nique’s work experiences within the labor market. Although Mo’Nique specifically called out several people in positions of power, it is important to understand structural power and, the ways that social institutions are organized to reproduce Black women's subordination over time. Netflix’s response highlighted while there may not be a specific policy in place that outlines who gets paid what, in the context racial capitalism, organizations and bureaucracies are run in ways that are inherently racist and sexist. Foucault wrote how bureaucracies have effective ways of reproducing oppressions while masking their effects (1979). This masking is done in the form of unfair working practices, with justifications as to why the practices are fair. The goal is to discipline and create quiet, docile, populations of Black women, who are afraid to speak out about their experiences. Power is maintained is through the creation of commonsense logics, used to rationalize its position. This is demonstrated when Netflix told Mo’Nique that the reason they offered Schumer 25 times more in pay is because, “she sold out Madison Square Garden twice and she had a big movie over the summer” (Mo’Nique, 2018). That is the seemingly common-sense logic that is used to support their position. It just makes sense that if Schumer has “proven” to make money in the past that she would be valued more, in the present. But when this commonsense is contextualized to reality, Mo’Nique’s history and accolades are not given as much value.

In his discussion of Blacks folks’ relationship to capital, Cedric Robinson (1983) coined the term racial capitalism to discuss the ways that capitalism and racism are not new phenomena, but rather a continuation of a system dependent on the violence of

slavery, imperialism, and genocide in order to exist. The ending of chattel slavery marked a transformation for many Black folks from being capital to laborers. Within his work Robinson also discussed the rebellions that Black folks have always had to the conditions of racial capitalism which he described as the Black radical tradition (1983). While he did not specifically address the unique social position of Black women, intersectionality helps to contextualize this theory to the position of Black women, while understanding the role that class played in Mo’Nique’s call to action. Mo’Nique acknowledged how for many working-class folks, the conversation she is having about pay could be framed as “rich people problems.” The reality for many working-class people is they will barely see a percent of what Mo’Nique is asking for in a year of work. However, Mo’Nique’s experiences are just one example of the everyday pay inequities that so many Black folks deal with.

Mo’Nique’s experiences also demonstrate that it is often not a question of if the corporations have the money. Black women are just the economic scapegoats, nicked and dimed for the benefit and profit of everyone else. There has to be a Mo’Nique being paid 500 hundred thousand, in order for a Rock, Chappelle, and Schumer to make their millions. Black women’s subjugated position is maintained because our subjugation is beneficial to everyone but us. In thinking through the context of racial capitalism, it is important to understand that in order for there to be a hierarchy with a top, there has to be someone beneath, exploited to the benefit of others. Someone who works harder so that others do not have to work as hard. Someone paid less so that others can be paid more. Far too often arbitrary justifications are used to keep Black women in those positions. Vague labels such as being “difficult” function as racialized and gendered rationales for

the treatment of Black women in workplace settings. Understanding interconnectedness in the struggle against anti-Blackness and its many manifestations is an important acknowledgment.

Racial differences between laborers in the working class continue to be exploited in contemporary times in order to make it more difficult for the working class to organize against their laborers (Robinson, 1983). When Schumer, Rock, and Chapelle all get paid massive amounts more than Mo’Nique, the likelihood of them vocally rallying in support of her is slim because they do not want to jeopardize their own livelihoods despite the fact that they are getting paid more than her for the same labor. In fact, they might even use Netflix’s justification to rationalize their own decisions to not publicly defend Mo’Nique. The ways that Black women get exploited in the workplace, because of our social positions, make it even more difficult to defend ourselves and for people to come to our defense.

Mo’Nique experiences with Netflix also demonstrate how dominant power only recognize Black women’s achievements in a symbolic way, with very little materialization of the recognition. Netflix’s told Mo’Nique that they recognized that she was a comedic legend. In response to this recognition she posed the rhetorical question, “why shouldn’t I get what the legends are getting?” (Mo’Nique, 2018). Her rhetorical questioning pushes viewers to think about what it means for Black women to be recognized as a great, given numerous accolades, but still not paid equitably. This question highlighted the ways that Black women are often gaslighted in the workplace through celebrations of our contributions and work ethic, while simultaneously not compensated or valued. We are affirmed and told that our work is important and in this

case “legendary” with the hopes that we continue to produce and create for the very institutions that do not value us yet benefit from the work that we do. This subjugation is a continuation of the cycle of Black women overrepresented in low wage positions. Through devaluing our success, dominant society is able to justify Black women’s disadvantaged position at all economic levels.

Mo’Nique’s interview with fellow comedian and day time television host Steve Harvey became an example of the intercultural vernacular that exist amongst Black people. Approaching the nearly one-year anniversary of her initial boycott, Mo’Nique went onto Steve Harvey’s daytime talk show to discuss the outcome of her actions. She and Harvey sat side by side, on their respective chairs, and brought forth their perspectives to an overwhelmingly non-Black live audience. During this conversation between the two, Harvey asserted that being in the entertainment industry is not:

The Black man’s game. This ain’t the white man’s game, this the money game.

We in the money game. And you cannot sacrifice yourself. The best thing you can do for poor people is not be one of them. You cannot help them Mo’ (Harvey, 2019).

Through Harvey’s vernacular he maintained individualist, colorblind ideologies. In the context of Harvey’s claim, when it comes to money, the merits behind how the money gets distributed are not important enough to discuss. His position also assumed that everyone operating within said “game”, has access to the same opportunities and the same ability to profit off of their talents. He ignored how this “game” is set up to the exploitation and detriment of marginalized folks. Through his vernacular, Harvey also promoted individualist ideologies that prioritize one’s personal needs over the needs of

the community. He did not suggest one could sell out for the benefit of the community, rather he suggested that Mo’Nique should focus on herself and her wellbeing because, “the best things you can do for poor people is not be one of them” (Harvey, 2019). This moment demonstrated not only ideological differences that exist within Black spaces, but also the ways that different epistemological perspectives shape these conversations. This moment does not just provide us with an understanding of class, but also an example of how Black elitism gets maintained. Capitalism, the need to obtain and consume more, is grounded in Eurocentric epistemologies that prioritize individual, over the collective needs of a community. Black feminist epistemology is grounded in beliefs that connect the needs of the community to the individual while highlighting that the two have a reciprocal relationship with each other (Collins, 2000). Harvey’s perspective suggest that Mo’Nique play into a level of tokenism, where her docility, and silence will be rewarded.

Mo’Nique went on to argue that there is no nice or easy way to have the kinds of conversations that she is attempting to have. The rewards for “playing the game” are not guaranteed, and it comes at the cost of integrity (Mo’Nique, 2018). Mo’Nique challenged the narrative that Black women should be accepting and happy about the scraps we are given by responding “we in the money game, but let me tell you before the money game it’s called the integrity game, and we lost the integrity worrying about the money” (Harvey, 2019). Her value is more than just money, Mo’Nique constructed her own value of integrity by choosing not to be another entertainer willing to do anything to gain status and wealth.

This publicly displayed intracultural dialogue reveals two competing schools of thought that exist when thinking about the ways Black folks ought to respond to the

conditions we exist in. Harvey's school of thought was grounded in the notion of coonery. Coonery is a racialized term for a sell-out or someone who puts their individual needs and desires over that of the collective. Being a coon is the antithesis of Black feminist praxis, because that position willingly disregards what Black folks need as a collectively. It is a push for Black folks to "shuck and jive" in order to get and protect our financial gains. It is a willingness to do many things, including sacrificing the collective benefit of one's own community for personal benefit.

Harvey responded to Mo'Nique by saying "I cannot, for the sake of my integrity stand up here, and let everybody that's counting on me crumble so I can make a statement" (2019). This reasoning suggests that Black folks can be bought, that our integrity, as a people, and to the struggle has a price. It also perpetuates the notion that for the right price, Black folks should be willing sell out, for their own individual gain. By telling Mo'Nique she should play 'the money game', he publicly undermined the value of Black women labor and encouraged her to act a certain way, in order to appease those with power. Mo'Nique's school of thought is an example of Black feminist praxis that understands that no one is free until we all are free. While she could "play the game," she understands that the game is rigged to keep Black women in a subjugated position and that her advocacy isn't just about herself but also about future generations not having the same struggles as she did. Mo'Nique realizes that playing the game, being quiet, not speaking her truth will not save her, which is why she is not willing to sacrifice her dignity to do so.

Gumbs (2016) described this work as mothering, writing how:

Mothering [is] an investment in the future that requires a person to change the

status quo of their own lives, of their community and of the society as a whole again and again and again in the practice of affirming growing, unpredictable people who deserve a world that is better than what we can even imagine. (p. 115)

This kind of work is deeper than the label of motherhood, it is a commitment to the intergenerational work of making spaces less hostile and more affirming, especially for Black women and girls. Harvey's comments about playing "the money game," and never criticizing the power structures we get the money in, were grounded in upholding western, capitalist ideologies and operates out of fear of backlash, fear of losing access to money, and the power that comes with it. He was ultimately saying that in this anti-Black world, we as Black people should be thankful to be getting the little access we have, and we shouldn't question it. Harvey's perspective did not consider Audre Lorde (1984) wrote about how:

The machine will grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and ourselves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid. (p. 42)

Those powerful words challenge Harvey's position, while defending the importance of integrity as something that cannot be bought.

Harvey also demonstrated a "don't bite the hand that feeds you" logic". What he has ignored is how the hand that is doing the feeding is anti-Black and they are feeding us, subjugation, Mo'Nique's position is that we should always question these elements and speak our truth in relation to them. At times this means sacrificing our position in the money game because the money game is always rigged against us. What Harvey fails to

grapple with is that even within the money game, Black women are dealing with the intersections of race, gender, and class, that drastically impact our position within this game. While Harvey told Mo’Nique to not advocate for herself, and play the money game, he also contributed to her position within the money game and affecting her ability to be valued for her talents. Her choice to not be silenced was used to justify her value within her profession.

### **Respectability Politics and Controlling Images**

From the start of their interview, Harvey’s disdain with Mo’Nique’s tactics were apparent. He began the interview by introducing her to the audience as a comedian in a rather weary tone. In response to his tone, Mo’Nique joked back, “baby he be sayin’ it, like I’m a problem,” to which he quickly responded, “oh, you have been a problem” (Harvey, 2019). This initial exchange was an example of the ways that Black women get labeled as difficult or in this case “a problem” when we choose to speak out. Our anger is pathologized by being read as a problem, and this perception of Black women has contributed to the angry Black woman trope, which is one controlling image that far too many Black women get reduced to (Collins, 2000).

Harvey’s dismissal of Mo’Nique as difficult, was easily done because of the stereotypes that exist about Black women. These stereotypes justify oppression and make it seem like a natural, normal, and inevitable everyday experience (Collins, 2000, p. 69). Mo’Nique has been vocal about her experiences being blackballed and navigating an industry where people have constructed a narrative about her, while dismissing the narrative by her. Black women are otherized and objectified because, “as objects, one’s reality is defined by others, one’s identity created by others, one’s history named only in

ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject" (hooks, 1989, p. 42).

Through voicing her own experiences, Mo'Nique asserted her right to, "define [her] own reality, establish [her] own identities, and name [her] history" (Collins, 2000, p. 72). This assertion is a form of resistance to objectification.

The angry Black women trope is one stereotypical portrayal of Black womanhood that demonstrates how power operates (Collins, 2000). This trope defines Black women's responses and voice as irrational and emotional, and pathologizes the ways that Black women use our voices. The existence of this trope demonstrates the ways that society doesn't actually value Black women's voices and perspectives, because those in power benefit from minimizing them. In the context of intracultural dialogue, Terrion Williamson described this phenomenon as the protections mode within stereotype discourse in which "the angry black woman is a problem because she makes black folks, particularly black women, look bad" (2017, p. 26). Harvey chastising Mo'Nique for being a problem contributed to a larger discourse that dismisses the nuanced and intersectional contextualization of Black women's anger. His vernacular promoted the ideology that our anger and frustration is unnecessary and that there is no room for it, especially on public platforms where we are making demands about how we should be treated.

Controlling images also effect spaces where Black folks have positions of power where they can seemingly challenge these ideologies. When asked by Harvey about how she got to be labeled as difficult, Mo'Nique pointed out:

The difficulty came in when people that look like me, like Oprah, Tyler, Lee Daniels, and I gotta put my brother Steve on the list. Y'all knew, I was not wrong.

Each one of you said to me, “Mo’Nique, you’re not wrong.” And when I heard you go on the air, and you said, “my sister done burned too many bridges, and there is nothing I can do for her now.” Steve, do you know how hurt I was?

(Harvey, 2019)

Within this moment, Mo’Nique was critical of the ways that Black people both internalize and perpetuate controlling images and ideologies in ways that are not beneficial to Black folks collectively. She utilized this moment to hold Winfrey, Perry, and Daniels accountable for their actions, and discussed with Harvey the impacts of his actions in being dismissive of her struggles. While dialogue can foster new understandings and knowledge, in the context of a Black feminist standpoint one must always be accountable for their knowledge claims (Collins, 2000). Within their dialogue, Mo’Nique used a rhetorical question to point out how hurt she was by Harvey’s actions. This use of rhetorical device was about more than her feelings; it also functioned as a criticism about how his vernacular contributed to the public discourse of the difficult Black woman. This hurt her ability to fight against that very limiting narrative and maintain her value in her workplace. One of the ways that dominant discourse has been used to devalue and discredit Mo’Nique is through blackballing her and labeling her as difficult to work with and this discourse was supported through Harvey’s vernacular.

The framework of controlling images demonstrates the limited ways that Black women are represented and how these limitations impact how Black women are perceived. Often when we violate the limitations that have been imposed, backlash follows in the form of racialized tropes that attempt to minimize us. The “angry Black woman” is a trope that has been assigned to many outspoken Black women, when they

push against the grain of the status quo and speak up and out about their experiences.

This is a label given to Black women who refuse to embrace the ways that society does not care about us. Mo’Nique articulated the ways that Black women inherently learn to deal with tropes, when she explained:

I think what happens though is, I’ve had to understand how to agree, to disagree, without being upset and that’s the thing. I disagree with my brother, I’m not upset with you, I love you. I disagree with the way that Oprah, Lee, and Tyler did it. But I love them. (Harvey, 2019)

In attempt to distance ourselves from these tropes, Black women in workplaces learn to minimize our feelings of anger because we know our words will get dismissed if we don’t. Mo’Nique constructed her vernacular in response to the angry Black woman trope that already exists. She is aware of how she gets perceived, which means she has to articulate herself in a way that challenges that perception because any negative perception might take away from the overall message that she is trying to send about Black women's value. The label of being an “angry Black woman” is a silencing strategy because of the negative connotation that it has in society. The label is an attempt to stop Black women from being honest about the realities that we experience. Not only are Black women not valued, our feelings, including our anger is not valued as well. Black folks anger is seen as a threatening, and it is. It threatens complacency in a world built on not caring about us, only caring about what we can do for the benefits of others.

Black women are expected to be manageable, especially in workplace settings. Stereotypes such as being angry, lazy, or difficult are assigned to us when we exist in a capacity outside of our work. Mo’Nique challenged this subordination through talking

back. Talking back challenges the ways that surveillance imposes itself a set of norms that those who are being surveilled are expected to follow. As a comedian, actress, and person on social media her actions are being monitored, and constantly criticized. During a stand-up bit Mo’Nique told Winfrey, Perry, and Daniels to, “suck [her] dick if [she] had one,” while referencing her experiences being blackballed and also being asked to work without pay by those individuals (Sager, 2017).

The colloquium “suck my dick” is typically used as an offensive insult and response to a perceived wrongdoing. In many professional settings, there are certain respectability politics that exist that limit the use of this kind of vernacular. Frustrations in workplace settings are often masked through professional rhetoric and norms. For Black folks, a certain level of code switching occurs in professional settings that is used in order to maintain one's position in the workplace, especially while calling out certain unfair practices. Amanda Seales discussed this in her stand-up special where she described the ways that Black women get ignored in the workplace. While we really want to ask, “why you not readin’ my shit,” we instead use more professional etiquette such as “per my previous email” to get our point across (HBO, 2019). Unlike more traditional professional settings, standup is a space where comedians can challenge those norms, so long as they are funny. Things that would not traditionally be said in a professional setting, are joked about on stage as laughter is often a gateway past respectability. Still there are larger politics at play, that comedians have to consider when making a joke, because of the potential backlash they might experience from offending another party.

During their interview, Harvey chastised Mo’Nique for “talking back” to Winfrey, Daniels, and Perry. Harvey’s main criticism of Mo’Nique was not only her

decision to speak out about her experiences, but specifically the manner in which she chose to do so. The notion of respectability politics problematizes that reasoning because even if Mo’Nique would have done differently or said things differently, there is no guarantee she would have experienced a different outcome (Higginbotham, 1993). The one thing that is for sure, is that her silence wouldn't have changed anything (Lorde, 1984).

While discussing that moment with Harvey, Mo’Nique defended her choice to make that joke as she responded:

What I am not gonna do Steve, I’m never ever going to waver from my comedy show on that stage. That’s my gift, and that’s my freedom. And what happens is when you allow people to start taking your freedom and your gift and making it become what makes them comfortable, we then lose. (Harvey, 2019)

Because of the norms that exist as laborers we often limit public criticism of the workplace. These limitations are rooted in a fear of backlash, being labeled as difficult, having their passions and livelihood threatened. The repercussions are real, and that fear disciplines people into silence. bell hooks described talking back as speaking to an authority figure as an equal. It is an acknowledgement of the way that power operates, and a choice often from a place of necessity to defy it, dare to disagree and have an opinion of your own (hooks, 1989). Mo’Nique dared to defy the authority, the gatekeepers who have some power and control on how she exist in mainstream spaces as a comedian.

When Harvey chastised Mo’Nique for “talking back” to Winfrey, Daniels, and Perry during her stand-up comedy performance, she defended her choice. This moment

demonstrated and defended the legacy of Black comedians using the space of stand-up share, joke about, and unpack their lived experiences dealing with things that they may not be able to discuss in other spaces. Comedy has existed as a space where people are able to speak truth to power and discuss social and political issues in a way that is open and receptive. Comedy counters respectability politics and the notion that one has to act and speak a certain way in order to exist and survive. When constraints are put on such spaces, to echo Mo’Nique, “we then lose” (Harvey, 2019). As marginalized folks we lose our voices, we lose our integrity, and we limit our ability to have real conversation and organize real actions around the realities that we as Black folks collectively face.

### **Black Love**

Throughout Mo’Nique’s message, the theme of Black love was present in a few different ways including Black love as a form of community praxis and the specific love that Black men and women have between each other. Mo’Nique emphasized love as the guiding tenor for her actions in several ways. Though at first glance her boycott may appear to be solely an individual advocacy, she talked about the larger context that her call to action has for other black women and girls. When speaking about why she decided to boycott and publicly share her treatment with Netflix she said it was, “because there is a little girl who is not here yet, and she is depending on us, to make sure she doesn’t have the same battles that we have right now, as the women that came before me” (Joplin & Cornejo, 2019). These words spoke to a specific kind of intergenerational love that both values the importance of the work of those who came before us, while simultaneously thinking about how we can make the spaces we exist in better for ourselves and the generations to come. This is a love built on the understanding we might plant trees,

knowing we will never bear the fruit, but we plant anyways. A love in a Black feminist mothering kind of way. A kind of love that also has an orientation to both the past, present, and the future This demonstrates the both/and conceptual framework that Black feminist thought exists in (Collins, 2000).

Mo’Nique and Harvey’s exchange about the “money game” is one demonstration of the specific love that Black women and men have. During this exchange, Mo’Nique briefly interrupted Harvey, saying “this is why I love my brother” (Harvey, 2019). Her being able to speak on the love that she had for her brother in one breath, and calling out how his problematic reasoning, was dismissive of her experiences is another demonstration of the “both/and conceptual stance in Black feminist thought” (Collins, 2000, p. 152). This stance challenges binary thinking and how we understand difference, because difference is always measured based on our relationship to that which is not ourselves. Instead of completely dismissing him, Mo’Nique was able to both articulate her love for Harvey and hold him accountable, despite his ignorance on the impact of his complacency through his vernacular. Within Black feminist epistemology this is understood as an ethics of personal accountability where people are expected to be responsible and accountable for their knowledge claims (Collins, 2000).

Both the tensions and attachment between Black women represent a rejection of binary thinking and an acceptance of the both/and conceptual stance in Black feminist thought. Exploring the tensions between Black men and women has been a long-standing theme in U.S. Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000, p. 151). This tension was evident in when Harvey described Mo’Nique as difficult from the start of the interview. Though she laughed it off, she also spoke to how this characterization as difficult has contributed into

the larger narrative that justifies blackballing her. She told Harvey, “what I would have loved, what I would’ve appreciated from my brother, was had you picked up the phone before you went on the air” (Harvey, 2019). In this moment she explained to him what having love for Black people, even in the context of “the money game” can look like. Instead of publicly calling her out, Harvey could have called Mo’Nique in, and given her guidance, support, advice, and criticisms in order to help her to be able to thrive in this space. His declaration that Mo’Nique had “burned too many bridges” contributed to her public ostracization and diminished any support that he may have shown her behind closed doors (Harvey, 2019).

In all of her videos, Mo’Nique used phrases like “hey my loves” and “I love us for real.” This brought to question what does it mean to love Black folks “for real” (Mo’Nique, 2019)? “For real” is a Black colloquialism that means business, it is another way of saying that you mean what you say, that you are serious, being honest and truthful. The real is the embodied. The ways that our words and actions are aligned in a truthful manner. One way that Mo’Nique’s “I love us foreal” is demonstrated is through her willingness and determination to place herself at the forefront of very important conversations about value, despite the potential repercussions she might have to deal with, because there is no easy or nice way to have these conversations. Love can be understood as a political act of resistance grounded in actions that are motivated towards making spaces better for Black people. A world easier for us to navigate, and easier for those who will come after us. Saying I love you isn’t the same as loving actions. Mo’Nique putting her experiences at the forefront of a much larger conversation, despite the potential backlash, is a demonstration of self-love that is a form of communal love.

Love and community are deeply intertwined elements within Black culture, in fact, love is the basis that community exists on. Self-love is a part of what helps communities thrive and allow for empowerment and social change to happen (Collins, 2000). June Jordan talked about how love begins with self-love and self-respect (1985). This kind of love can propel Black women toward the self-determination and political activism essential for social justice. Collins described love as, “active, dynamic, and determined,” always moving towards a community love (2000). The conversation that Mo’Nique is having in which she reminds us of the love that she has for our community, is an active and dynamic conversation, in a social media setting, in the public sphere where everyday people are able to respond to, participate, and change the conversation. In Mo’Nique loving herself enough, as a Black woman, to publicly take a stand against unfair treatment, she created a ripple effect that makes it even just a little easier for people to acknowledge that this is an issue that exists and need to change. She mentioned that “I want us to love each other foreal. It makes us funnier” (Joplin & Cornejo, 2019). This moment reorients us to think about comedians as more than cultural critics, but also people who are also responsible for moving with love for our communities so that we can laugh with each other, and not at.

### **Social Media as Pastiche**

The use of social media has been an empowering tactic for Black women to represent our thoughts, experiences, and lives in ways that mainstream media fail to include. Mo’Nique’s utilization of Instagram is one example of how online spaces can subvert a culture of silence that exist around the experiences of marginalized women, particularly in workplace settings. Her call to boycott Netflix came at a time when

#MeToo and #TimesUp were trending hashtags, connected to movements, focused around creating spaces for disempowered folks to share the hushed experiences they have had to deal with in the face of power. Through the hashtags, each movement created communities online, where people who shared these experiences could connect, relate, and feel empowered to speak.

Pastiche can be understood as a remixing, or taking of something from mainstream culture, adding in your own elements, and making it into something new. Similar to the way that Black Twitter appropriates Twitter to have dynamic discussions about uniquely Black topics, Mo’Nique’s initial Instagram post utilized the platform Instagram in order to have a very specific conversation about issues pertaining to Black women. By taking the space of Instagram, a space created two white men intended for people to share digital content, Mo’Nique remixed it and used it as a tactic to create and build a social movement.

In her initial video, Mo’Nique stood in front of a plain wall with a very calm, yet intentional demeanor. Through the video her voice remains steady, as she described her experiences with a level of specificity and precision. She used loving phrases like “my loves” and “I love us” as a way to reaffirm the intention of her video, and her connection with the audience. Her tone remained steady and never at any point did she elevate her tone or move away from the warmth in her voice. She looked directly into the camera as she spoke and retained eye contact for the duration of the video. In thinking about the ways that Black women’s objections are perceived, a level of awareness of one’s body is necessary in a moment like this. This is especially true when you are an outspoken, fat Black woman. Simple objections are interpreted as unjustified burst of anger, and

ungratefulness.

This element of her gaze is one that could be easily overlooked; however, given the history of Black women's relationship to the gaze it is an important element worth unpacking. There is a history of Black folks having to be continuously mindful of where and how we look at all times. In her work, Simone Browne (2015) described this in the context of the hypervisibility that Black women laborers experiences, particularly as low wage, domestic workers who worked in close proximity to white people. Surveillance is normalized to the point that it exist in ways that are not always visible (Browne, 2015). Black women are hyper-visible to the point that we become invisible because of the ways that whiteness only interprets Blackness through the controlling images and stereotypes that have been constructed, despite the fact that we exist outside of that context.

As neoliberalism continues to play a role in the ways that counterpublic spaces are constructed, local coffee shops and bookstores are increasingly being replaced by corporate retailers that disrupt the ways that communities exist (Hill, 2018). That, coupled with the growing presence of online communities, demonstrate how community spaces are being transformed, organized, and embodied in different ways. On Instagram, community is commonly formed through the use of hashtags or "Blacktags" as dubbed by Sharma (2013). These Blacktags are racialized hashtags specific to Black culture that contribute to the existence of online communities like Black Twitter. On Instagram this functions a little differently because the user interface is different, but it still remains a space where Black folks are able to circulate experiences and stories about things that are specific to our lived experiences. One function of "Blacktags," is that they tap into an already existing online community and get people to actively participate in a timely

conversation. While Mo’Nique’s post isn’t a community in itself, her use of hashtags and the content of her narrative allowed her to tap into an already existing digital counterpublic, who are able to engage with and respond to her call of action. Hill (2018) defined a digital counterpublic as any space that is constructed to activity resisting hegemonic power and narratives while engaging in critical dialogues. Hill critiqued the limitations of Habermas public sphere theory by pointing out how marginalized folks have been and continue to be excluded from the public sphere (2018).

Social media posts can also help foster dialogue about subjects that are important to Black women. After Mo’Nique called for her boycott, fellow Black woman comedian Wanda Sykes tweeted back, thanking Mo’Nique for speaking out, while pointing out how Netflix offered her even less. She also encouraged Mo’Nique to try and find other avenues for presenting her special, a decision that Sykes made when she felt undervalued by Netflix. This example is an important one because it brings to light the ways that other Black women comedians have been impacted by the same politics that Mo’Nique was critical of. Sykes, as a queer Black woman, being offered even less than Mo’Nique forces us to consider the how race, gender, and sexuality shape ones experience. This moment also brings to question what ways other Black women comedians, who are not a part of this specific conversation, are affected.

This solidarity tweet was one example of how Mo’Nique’s use of social media to share her message provided a platform to connect people who related to her experiences, while being able to share their own. These shared experiences strengthened the overall narrative about the unfair treatment of Black women within entertainment, by demonstrating how it is not isolated incidents, but rather collective experiences. The

solidarity tweet from Sykes was more than just a cosign of everything that Mo’Nique said, it was also an act of humanizing speech that challenged and resisted domination by contributing a counter narrative about Black women's value (hooks, 1989, p. 131).

For Black women, knowledge claims are usually developed through dialogue with other members of the community (Collins, 2000). Though many social media platforms, including Instagram have primarily been created by and for those with power, it also served as a platform for Mo’Nique to engage in a critical dialogue with her community of followers and the public about Black women’s value. For Black women who have felt that their experiences of being undervalued were singular or who felt like they did not have the ground and legitimacy to speak up, social media sites provided a platform to connect people who are far often disconnected. These actions also help to create a counternarrative, that challenges the belief of Black women not having value. In that regard, the hashtag #BOYCOTT #NETFLIX functioned as a call to people where they could then respond through actions such as sharing their own experiences, sharing the message, commenting, or taking up Mo’Nique’s call to action of boycotting Netflix in some way. Her use of hashtags tapped into a particular element of discourse within Black culture that is call and response. Like our language systems, call and response is an affirmation for Black folks that we exist. Call and response becomes one way that dialogue amongst Black folks takes place, and knowledge is generated (Jordan, 1985, p. 129).

Theories of the flesh are also an important way to understand how social media exist as a bridge for marginalized women to voice their lived experiences and mobilize around particular social issues such a labor inequality. The bridging work that Mo’Nique

does, exists through her ability to name her experience and tell her stories. Social media exist merely as a platform that allows for her story to be heard by whomever is listening. Mo'Nique also refused an "easy explanation to the conditions we live in" (Moraga & Anzaldua, 1983, p. 23). In fact, she chose to continue the dialogue she started by bringing up Sykes' response. In her follow up video, she posed several questions, including:

How is it, that when it comes to these two Black female comedians, that are still at the top of their game, after 50 plus years being in this business, be offered 750,000 dollars collectively? Make that make sense. (Mo'Nique, 2019)

In demanding that Netflix, and the public she was speaking to make those offers make sense, Mo'Nique pointed out the ways that Netflix's offer had no reasoning or logic to support it. This is especially true when contextualized to the tens of millions of dollars that other non- Black women comedians were offered. Mo'Nique refused the easy explanation that Netflix offered, and used social media to voice her dissent. Instagram in this case functioned as the metaphorical bridge between lived experiences and the ability to share those experiences with others. Within many communities of color, smartphones with internet access are the primary means by which people are able to access the internet. This is one way that social media exist as a site where vernacular is more present than traditional media outlets such as most media outlets.

While social media are often an empowering space for marginalized people to share their perspectives and lived experiences publicly, surveillance has become an ever-growing strategy used by hegemonic power structures to stifle radical actions and muffle radical voices. This reality means that we have to be strategic about how we communicate over these platforms and mindful that these sites weren't built by us or for

us. Surveillance is not a new happening, especially for Black folks, it can be understood a continuing strategy of white supremacy aimed at limiting and controlling the ways that Black folks communicate and exist. That understanding is key because silence is not an option. As Audre Lorde said “your silence will not protect you,” because “we were never meant to survive” and silence does not guarantee anything, including our lives or safety (Lorde, 1984, p. 44). Our voices are what empower us, and as people of a diaspora, our voices are spread far and wide, which is why online spaces provide us with a unique ability to be interconnected, when being connected in an embodied way is not always possible. Gumbs reminds us that “for women of color in particular, the purpose of writing, the sacred nature of writing, of self- expression via print, manifesta, collective testimony or theatrical script— [is] to witness heal, resist, and build another way” (2016, p. 196). Through herself expression, and testimony online Mo’Nique is able to “build another way” to have her livelihood actualized on her terms.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

The research question that I posed at the start of this thesis was: In what ways does Mo’Nique, engage in vernacular discourse online to support and defend Black women’s value? To my question, Mo’Nique defended her value the best way she knows how, by using her voice and social media to speak to her audience about her experiences. Through this research the notion of defensiveness is problematized because of what it means for Black women to constantly defend our right to participate in institutions, corporations, and spaces that will never recognize our value (Nash, 2019). Though defensiveness is a position of agency where Black women get to choose how it is that we defend ourselves, thinking about the possibilities of love is the place that current conversations about Black feminist praxis seem to be leading us (Gumbs, 2016; Nash, 2019). Love is another way of thinking through Black feminist agency and the possibility for building new worlds and ways of being. It is a driving force that pushes Black folks to not settle for the loveless world that we have been forced to inherit. Instead of trying to participate in things as they are, love exist in the form of refusal, the demand for respect, and the choice to not be silent. Because those moments create spaces where something better is able to exist.

While her value may not be recognized by some of the institutions that she attempted to do business with, Mo’Nique maintained a coherent narrative explaining why her treatment was unfair. In speaking out, she problematized some norms that exist in Hollywood that many people are too afraid to speak up on. Her voice is an important contribution to a cultural conversation about pay inequality and how it experienced across socioeconomic status. While Mo’Nique discussed money amounts that many Black

women cannot relate to, the reality is Black women make 66 cents to every white man's dollar (Nelson, 2018). From professors, to athletes, to actors, to sales associates stories of knowingly being paid less, are far too common among Black women. As Black women, our value is not tied to how much compensation we get for our labor; however, because we are not valued, we are constantly having to fight for things such as equitable pay.

This research is not without limitations, as Mo'Nique is not a perfect activist. Like all of us, she is a flawed person, with a reputation that has made a lot of people question, if some of rumors of her being a difficult person is true. In talking to people about my work, a conversation about Mo'Nique always ensued. Some folks agreed that she was fair in what she was asking for, while others used her less than perfect reputation as a justification for why she should not get paid more. Within these multifaceted perspectives, the general sentiment was always that she has a point; even if some people disagree with the way she chose to demonstrate her point or felt that she was being too extreme. She herself problematized this notion by asking, "but isn't inequality extreme?" (Harvey, 2019). This brings to question if there is a right or wrong way to make an objection to the conditions that we exist in. What is the right way to speak out against, racism, and sexism, when those things are normalized elements of the world we live in. Despite the limitations that exist, Audre Lorde (1984) reminded us that, "[Speaking] is never without fear; of visibility, of the harsh light of judgement, of pain, of death. But we have lived through all of those already in silence" (p. 14). Assata Shakur (1987) told us, "we have nothing to lose but our chains" (p. 52). These two are reminders of the importance of taking action, in a world that wants to confine us.

One criticism of Mo'Nique's initial boycott was that there was no clear organized

point of action. While I don't know if this would have made her boycott more effective, it might have made it more realistic for people to participate. Within her message, it might have been useful if she connected her experiences to other happening social movements at the time, such as the #timesup movement where Black actresses like Viola Davis were also talking about pay inequity. I also think that the way Mo'Nique presented the hashtag on Instagram as a separate #BOYCOTT and #NETFLIX might have had a different outcome, then if it was written as one #BOYCOTTNETFLIX. Separately, those hashtags bring up a variety of conversations about boycotts and Netflix that are not connected to the specific conversation that Mo'Nique was having. There was also a running joke that you cannot boycott what you don't have, connecting to the overwhelming number of people who share Netflix accounts, and have limited control over their ability to financially divest from Netflix. One place for future research to build on is the growing role of social media capital, and how that connects to value and pay. We live in a world where more followers online translates to a larger built in audience, and more profit. While a large social media following does not equate to talent and skill, this could be a reason why Mo'Nique's skill-set and accolades were not as valued to the perceived larger audience that folks like Schumer have.

As a comedian, Mo'Nique did not use comedy to make her point on Instagram. The lack of humor in her call to action, may have affected how people received what she was saying. Laughter opens people up, and makes them more receptive to receiving information especially if it is controversial. While she is having a more serious conversation about a real world issue, perhaps utilizing her comedic skill set, would have been a more persuasive tactic to getting people to support what is was that she was

advocating for.

As I studied my artifacts, I found the themes within my research to be interwoven into each other. That is because vernacular is messy, unclear, casual, and often more authentic expressions of everyday people. Vernacular discourse is more than just understanding the text, it also values the context. Though you can always elaborate, you cannot simply delete or undo what you say. Within my research there were moments where themes of love were more apparent, even during conversations about maintaining integrity. For Mo'Nique, her value is not just tied to her individual success, it is connected to those around her and those that will come after. Her truth is more important than her silence. Cultural syncretism and pastiche help us understand Mo'Nique's tactics and if they were an effective way of meeting her goals for equitable pay. While at this point, Netflix has not offered Mo'Nique more money for a special, she has gone on to become one of the first Black women to have a residency at the SLS Hotel in Las Vegas (Joplin & Cornejo, 2019). Despite all the criticisms thrown at her, most notably from other Black people in Hollywood, her actions demonstrated that it is okay to maintain your integrity in spaces designed to challenge it. That fear does not have to make one move from their values, even when it seems that standing by your beliefs are the road less traveled. Online spaces demonstrate the importance of having many platforms to counter hegemonic ideologies that attempt to normalize and diminish Black women's value. However, in a world where talking about issues pertaining to Black folks can get you blacklisted by the FBI as a Black Identity Extremist, we have to be mindful that these same spaces are constantly surveilled.

Through this thesis, a popular cultural moment, soon to fade from our larger social imagination is unpacked. As a comedian and a Black woman Mo’Nique is not alone in her experience, as it is connected to Black women as a collective. We live in a society that moves from headline to headline. Just as easily as people are outraged by the social issues of the world, is how easily we move on to the next story, the next tragedy, the next injustice without taking a moment to try and fully understand and digest what is going on and if/how we can remedy it. A thesis allows for a special moment for a scholar to examine something specific, and important. The reality is, being an academic, being a student worker, an educator, an athlete, and a comedian are all professions. And no matter what profession I, or any other Black woman chooses, the fight to have, to have our value recognized seems inevitable. Lorde taught us that our silences will not protect us, and hers did not protect her (1984). Black feminism reminds us, that we are not alone in our experiences, and that we can speak up and out about them when necessary. Even if we do not have the perfect words, or if we do not identify as social activist, our voices are enough to speak on our experiences.

This research also contributes to a deeper understanding of what it means to communicate as a Black woman in the context of racial capitalism, navigating the workplace. The main criticism that people had of Mo’Nique was not that she was saying anything wrong, but that the manner in which she chose to speak out affected how her demands were met. This means that elements like audience should always be considered. But as Black women, so much of our experience with communication is not just about audience, it is often about our own subject positions that we are speaking from that affect how our voices are perceived. The reality is for every outspoken Mo’Nique, attempting to

cause an uproar to create change, there are professionally speaking Black women, whose demands get ignored with the same swiftness. If that is the reality that so many Black women are operating in, then perhaps our jobs as communication scholars is not to solely focus on how Black women are sending messages, but rather to critically untangle why it is so easy for our communication to be disregarded, and the ideologies and beliefs that normalize that reality. This is one of the ways that communication studies can benefit from a Black feminist framework, because understanding vernacular is not just about understanding the language of everyday people. It is also about understanding the systems and ideologies that exist and affect the world that everyday people are constructing their language in. Whether this happens on social media, whether the conversation is about equitable pay, all of the communication interactions are contextual to who is doing the speaking and who is supposed to be listening. Lastly communication studies is an academic discipline where people are employed by universities as professors, lecturers, and graduate assistants, as a discipline this kind of work pushes us to question how it is that the labor of Black scholars, particularly Black women scholars are valued within academic settings.

Some of us are in positions right now where we know we are not being valued in our workplace, yet we have our reasons as to why we won't or can't speak up. Anytime a Black woman is able and willing to share their story with the culture, it provides us a community with a means of having an important conversation about issues pertaining to us to unpack where our own values lie. Perhaps these kinds of cultural conversations are necessary toward building community and seeing the value within each other. To once again echo Gumbs (2016), Mo'Nique at the very least demonstrates that we can "build

another way” (p. 196). We can have our livelihoods manifested on our own terms, and we do not have to settle for the blue prints that have been laid out for us. We can speak up and out if we feel so empowered to do so, not just for us, but to honor those who came before, and to make space for those who will come after.

### **Future Directions**

As much as this research focused on Black women through the lens of being a comedian, the next place where this research could grow would be a more ethnographic-based collection of narratives surrounding Black women’s experiences at work. One of the goals of this research would be to understand the multifaceted ways that Black women participate in advocacy and self-care in the workplace. I envision this kind of work functioning as a possible blueprint for Black folks, to take with them and try to implement into their respective workplaces. This research could provide a level of inspiration to not keep our experiences bottled up, for the sake of saving face, and to give meaningful tools to express ourselves, as a way of advocating for change and for the sake of sharing our experiences. Far too often Black women do not share our stories, and I think Mo’Nique demonstrates that it is okay for us to share this one.

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