

Danitra Vance's Cabrini-Green Jackson and the Performance of Black Girlishness

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Through analysis of comedienne Danitra Vance's 1986 Saturday Night Live sketch performances of a 17-year-old character named Cabrini Green Harlem Watts Jackson, this paper argues that performances of Black girlishness can explicate that Black girls are indeed girls, and that while anti-Black and sexist violence and domination suggest that white people do not perceive Black girls as children, there are indeed telltale indicators of Black girlishness. Educators, artists, and scholars who seek to understand and defend Black girls have made the claim that since Black girls are not perceived as children, they do not have girlhoods, and this paper's argument complicates that claim. From Vance's diction to her movements and sartorial choices, Cabrini Green represents the paradox of perceived innocence and perceived waywardness and womanishness, an age-old characteristic of African American girlhood as a set of experiences and as a set of ideas.

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In 1985, Danitra Vance, an African American comedienne born in Chicago, starred on *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) in her own sketch series, named after the character she invented and then embodied: a 17-year-old Black girl named Cabrini Green Harlem Watts Jackson. The Cabrini-Green Homes, a housing project in Chicago, Illinois, was often used as an avowed metonym for perceived Black American dysfunction during the latter end of the 20th century. One had only to say the name "Cabrini-Green" to inspire among some Americans a sense of frustration with how Chicago could ignore the needs of some of its poorest residents.

Cabrini Green's four sketches on SNL highlight the concerns of "teenage mothers, just-about-to-be-mothers, and don't-want-to-be-mothers," as she says in one sketch (NBC.com, 2015).

I am analyzing this Black woman's performance of a Black girl to think about some perceived telltale characteristics of Black girlhood and specifically, what it means to perform Black girlishness. I ask, What parts of Vance's performance make Cabrini Green recognizable as a girl, and not a woman, even though Vance, a woman, embodies her role? In *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance*, Uri McMillan analyzes the ways Black women subjects make themselves into art objects, and terms these objects "avatars" (McMillan, 2015). Embodying an avatar, according to McMillan, is a "strategy" for Black women artists to make Black feminist arguments about themselves or the world around them (McMillan, 2015). Cabrini Green is a Black girl, who is Danitra Vance's avatar. Vance embodies the avatar of Cabrini Green to make the argument that girls, especially Black girls, need reproductive liberty, not judgment or shame, for having active sex lives.

Vance's performances are significant in the discourse on Black girlhood for multiple reasons, and I demonstrate two. First, they make clear the distinctions between girl and woman in that Cabrini Green can be identified (by herself, by the audience) as a *girl* character, and not necessarily a woman character, even though a woman plays her. The second is that, as Cheryl Wall acknowledges, as Black girl characters do in novels during the 1970s and 1980s (Wall, 2005), Cabrini Green demonstrates moralistic critiques about the roles of sexism and racism in her life. Vance "worries the line" (Wall, 2005, p. 8) by adopting controlling images of poor and working-class Black girls and by using the voice of Cabrini Green—a young girl—instead of her own adult woman's voice to make claims about reproductive justice and the need for sex education. As Jessyka Finley argues, Vance embodied the character Cabrini Green to remark that there was a dearth of sex education for young Black girls and little reproductive liberty for Black girls and women who were mothers (Finley, 2016a). By daring audience members to scoff at the reality that some Black girls are indeed sexually active, Cabrini Green reminds them that the stakes are too high to pretend as though Black girls do not have sex or are not curious about sex, in an attempt to disprove stereotypes. She is leaning into what Saidiya Hartman identifies as "waywardness":

Waywardness: the avid longing for a world not ruled by master, man or the police. . . . Wayward: the unregulated movement of drifting and wandering sojourns without a fixed destination . . . the everyday struggle to live free. . . . Wayward: to wander, to be unmoored, adrift, rambling, roving, cruising, strolling, and seeking. (Hartman, 2019, pp. 227–228)

Cabrini Green Jackson re-appropriates waywardness to ask: *If I am indeed a fast-tailed Black girl, a potential Jezebel, then what? How will you look beyond that categorization to be sure that I am able to live in my waywardness in ways that are self-determined and safe?*

These analyses ultimately complicate the popular claim that since Black girls are not perceived as children, they do not have girlhoods. Educators, artists, and scholars who seek to understand and defend Black girls have made this claim. Christina Sharpe posits that Phillis Wheatley did not have access to girlhood because of the way she was inspected and then sold (2016). She then explains that Black children are not perceived as children because white supremacist domination robs them of the opportunities to be perceived as such. Sharpe does not literally mean Black children are not children, but rather, in the “afterlife of slavery,” Black children are not perceived as children. Sharpe calls this the anagrammatical construction of the term “Black” when it is attached to a word such as “girl.” I do not intend to suggest that Sharpe’s claims are false or even that they are incomplete. I rely upon her work, since she illustrates that girlhood, for Black people, is less an age-based category and more an indicator of how one experiences themselves and how the world experiences them. The concept of American childhood has rejected Black children of all genders, and, as Robin Bernstein (2011) demonstrates, modern American childhood hinges on innocence—the idea that someone is so pure and untouched by the world’s ills that they are incapable of any real moral bankruptcy. The assumed deviance and lack of innocence, when applied to Black girls, is laden with assumptions about sexual immorality and mischievousness. In 2017, the Center on Poverty and Inequality at Georgetown Law published a report by scholars Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia Blake, and Thalia González, who were interested in the differences in disciplinary practices and why Black girls often received harsher punishments than white girls. They found that what they called the “adultification” of Black girls was to blame—educators not only believed Black girls needed less comfort and nurturing, but they also believed Black girls knew more about “adult” topics such as sex (Epstein, Blake, & González, 2017). One of the studies responsible for the most recent attention to the ways Black girls are perceived, the report demonstrates that this “adultification” is indeed harmful—even violent.

However, analyzing performances of Black girliness can explicate that Black girls are indeed girls, and that while anti-Black and sexist violence and domination suggest that white people do not perceive Black girls as children, there are indeed telltale indicators of Black girliness. If there were not, audiences would not be able to read and recognize Danitra Vance, an adult Black woman performing as a Black girl. This is significant because it allows us to see how Black women artists have made space for acknowledging the unique aspects of Black girlhood.

Cabrini Green Jackson's hairstyle, braids gathered into two ponytails, one on each side of her head, is a hairstyle that indicates Black girlishness. Braids are a time-honored style for Black girls' hair. Jessyka Finley describes Cabrini Green's sartorial performance: "Clad in jeans, a 1950s style letterman sweater, wearing micro-braid pigtailed with bangs, Cabrini Green expresses the stylistic elements of bricolage in her costume, representing the confluence of old and new imagery, the mechanism that makes the Welfare Queen identity intelligible" (Finley, 2016a, p. 244). In addition to Finley's reading, this blend of old and new also indexes part of what it means to be a Black girl and to perform Black girlhood—to represent not only who one is in the moment, but also to bespeak who one might become. Cabrini Green wears hair accessories that have shiny balls on each end—colloquially called "ball balls" or "bobos" by Black girls and women—to hold her ponytails of braids. While SNL's intended audience was not predominantly Black, Cabrini Green's "ball balls" would have been easily recognizable to Black women as Black girl hair accessories. Vance's performance of Black girlishness is both Cabrini Green's youth and a representation of a figure that might be perceived as future Jezebel or a "welfare queen" controlling image. This combination of old and new clothing cements the character Cabrini Green's intelligibility as a Black *girl* whose aesthetic rests upon waywardness. If, as Marcia Chatelain posits, "girlhood is a culturally created and constantly shifting category shaped by culture, religion, and family structure" (2015, p. 5), then it is important to emphasize that, culturally, definitions of Black girlhood are created and recognized in part by Black women, not just by the logics of anti-blackness and white supremacy. Cabrini Green would have been culturally recognizable as a Black girl to Black women.

Danitra Vance's performance of Black girl "attitudes" also marks her avatar as a Black girl. Performing in ways that are read (and often misread) as aggressive or "having an attitude" is a performance of Black girlishness that makes Cabrini Green legible as a Black girl. In *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*, sociologist Monique Morris describes how widely recognizable Black girl "attitude" is:

It's infamous, that attitude. Even as you read this—no matter your race, background, or ethnicity—your mind is likely floating toward an image of a brown-skinned young woman with her arms folded, lips pursed, and head poised to swivel as she gives a thorough eye-reading and then settles into either an eye roll or a teeth-sucking dismissal. Or maybe you imagined her head tilted, her eyebrows raised, and her hands on her hips. (Morris, 2016, p. 58)

What Morris describes is a particular performance of Black girlishness, which is both pieced together by the logics of anti-blackness and misogyny as well as distortions of real characteristics within Black girl cultures. That Morris describes it

as “infamous” here is telling because it is apparent when a person, such as Danitra Vance, is performing Black girlishness. A performance of Black girlishness that utilizes this “infamous” characteristic might be walking the fine line between mockery and sincere portrayal. Ethnomusicologist Kyra Gaunt (2006), explains that Black girls’ hand games and double Dutch jump rope songs are what many would consider “sassy.” One song that Gaunt analyzes goes as follows:

Let’s get the rhythm of the head, ding dong
 We got the rhythm of the head, ding dong
 Let’s get the rhythm of the hands, [clap clap]
 We got the rhythm of the hands, [clap, clap]
 Let’s get the rhythm of the feet, [stomp, stomp]
 We got the rhythm of the feet, [stomp, stomp].
 (Gaunt, 2006, p. 95)

The movements that coincide with the song include moving one’s head from side to side in a sort of neck-rolling, and clapping and stomping, which are, in other contexts, read as Black girl attitude. Movements and gestures while speaking are telltale characteristics of Black girlishness, even if not all Black girls behave this way. For Gaunt, it is a playful Black girl cultural phenomenon—the hand game. Black girls are not generally celebrated in mainstream cultures for performing in ways that are associated with Black girlhood—like having “attitude”—and Danitra Vance performed Black girlishness in this way in front of a national audience.

With the performative gestures of “Black girl attitude,” Danitra Vance chose to perform Black girlishness in a way that might have been considered negative in order to make such a critique. In *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture* (2018), Raquel Gates observes that scholars have abandoned descriptions of representation of Black people in popular media as “positive” or “negative,” but that they have mostly still categorized representations that way without using the terms positive or negative. Gates argues that not only should we lean into these categories, but as long as Black people are oppressed and images of Black people are exploited, representations will still be largely categorized as positive or negative. I do not seek to read Cabrini Green as a positive or negative performance of Black girlhood, though I believe Gates when she says we cannot evacuate these categories. Yet reading this wayward performance as a Black feminist critique might fall into the attempts at evacuating the category of positive that Gates warns against. This “negative” performance of Black girlishness as Cabrini Green might be considered “blue humor,” which is how Jessyka Finley understands Black comedienne’s uses of satire to subvert expectations of respectability. Blue humor, according to Naomi Zack, whom Finley agrees with, is humor that traverses boundaries and jokes about situations that would ordinarily be taboo (Finley,

2016a). Finley claims that Black comediennes of the 1990s participated in blue humor when they made sexually explicit jokes, despite (or because of) the risks that they would be stereotyped and flattened to the Jezebel trope. Jessyka Finley argues that this is a site of resistance that Black women should engage in, while Zack argues that it is too risky for Black women to do so. Finley claims that arguments like this do not consider Black comediennes who make sexually suggestive jokes because they are too concerned with middle-class values and displays of respectability (2016a).

One example of this “blue humor” is in Cabrini Green’s sketch titled “Aspirin,” in which she advises the audience on what to avoid while pregnant. She presents a pack of Kool brand cigarettes, and explains:

Now this is a really bad habit for anybody, but it’s a really bad habit for a baby, because you have to think—the baby might be down there coughing and gagging from the smoke the way you cough and gag when you’re out dancing on the weekend actin a fool. Now maybe you don’t care about yourself, but you gotta think about the baby. The baby has a cardio vernacular system too. You have to ask yourself [as she presents another pack of cigarettes] does the baby like Kool, or Kool Lites?” (NBC.com, 2015)

At the risk of being perceived as a confirmation of the stereotype of the Black American mother who is simply either too careless or too clueless to have a healthy pregnancy (Roberts, 1997), Cabrini Green’s joke relies on the audience knowing that *all* cigarettes are dangerous to unborn babies and their mothers—that this information is or should be obvious at this point in the public’s consciousness regarding reproductive safety. She satirizes the ways this information is posited to poor and working-class Black American women¹—condescending and heavy-handed, with punishments such as jail time being handed down to women who are addicted to stigmatized drugs such as crack (Roberts, 1997). The joke is that Black girls and women are perceived as uninformed, while there are myriad environmental detriments to pregnant Black people that are exacerbated by poverty and medical racism. Later in the sketch, Cabrini Green says, “My doctor said you can’t even take aspirin, you have to think, do the baby have a headache?” (NBC.com, 2015). Vance parodies doctors’ disregard for the health and wellness of mothers, while claiming to advise in the best interests of the baby. Many of the dialogues about reproductive justice, especially for poor and working-class mothers who struggle with addictions, asked whose life was more important—the baby’s or the mother’s—and to what extent pregnant people should be held accountable (and criminalized) if their babies did not survive labor or were born with poor health (Roberts, 1997). The “blue humor” in this case is a joke that reminds the audience of the literal life-or-death condition of pregnancy for some expecting

parents. Vance's joke tests the limitations of feminist political conversations that took place during this time that had very real stakes for all pregnant people—especially Black women.

Embedded in Vance's third performance of Cabrini Green Jackson is a critique of her mother as well as of the schools that have failed to provide sex education. Cabrini Green engages storytelling to make this critique, which is in line with African American oral traditions. She says:

I was home, my mom was fixin some cornbread, black eyed-peas, neckbones, and Kraft macaroni and cheese. I said 'hi mama, you wanna hear a joke? I'm pregnant.' She said 'How did that happen?' I said 'How am I supposed to know how it happened? You never told me nothing about things like that. The school didn't teach nothin about things like that. You askin me how did that happen? How did that happen? How did that happen?' (Saturday Night Live, 2013)

The performance of Black girlishness to depict a conversation with one's mother, grandmother, or another elder Black woman is not unique to Cabrini Green's dialogue with her mother. In traditional depictions of mother-daughter dialogues, though, the mother gives advice or imparts knowledge, while Cabrini Green identifies that her mother failed to impart the necessary knowledge to teach her how children are conceived. Daryl Cumber Dance explains that girls are inundated with advice and admonitions about their conduct—namely, for girls to embody respectability by avoiding sexual activity (Dance, 1998). People give Black girls this advice so they do not shame their families, but also because Black girls are particularly unprotected from sexual violence, and some families attempt to protect them by telling them how to conduct themselves (Dance, 1998). Dance says that advice from mothers, grandmothers, and aunts are so often couched in euphemisms and innuendo that they become humorous, even if they are advising in earnest (1998). In a display of situational irony, Cabrini Green turns that norm on its head by telling her mother that she is pregnant as a joke, which would not ordinarily be a joke. Then, instead of her mother imparting information, she asks a question that Cabrini Green answers literally, pointing out her mother's failure to educate her. It might be easy to read Cabrini Green's mother, whom we do not get to know very well in this sketch or any other sketch, as the "controlling image," as Patricia Hill Collins (2009) would call it, of the lazy Black mother. As Jessyka Finley explains, the Black women in comedic sketches might appear to confirm stereotypes, but a more complicated reading of them can garner an understanding of the uses of humor to critique (2016b). Her mother may not have even asked the question literally.

I am interested in the use of the term "girl" because it is used for both girls and women, and my questions are aimed at Cabrini Green's legibility as a girl who

discusses issues that impact both girls and women. In one sketch, during which Cabrini Green is at a school assembly, she introduces herself as part of a group called S.T.O.P. (Standing for Teens Oppressed by Pregnancy), a riff on D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education), the program founded in 1983 to educate teens about the risks of drug use. After singing the group's anthem, "S.T.O.P. In the Name of Love" with two of her white male classmates, Cabrini Green gives an instructive speech to the "girls" in the audience on how to tell their boyfriends when they do not want to have sex. She addresses the audience as "girls," indicating informality and a conversational tone. Yet "girls," for African Americans, can either refer to girls or women, and can be intended for dual meaning in humor (Troutman, 2006). In this case, Cabrini Green actually means girls, since she is addressing her high school and junior high school classmates. Yet the audience of *Saturday Night Live* is likely women and is almost certainly not predominantly Black. Cabrini Green says:

Now you girls know, when you're in a situation with a young man, and you've already gone more than half the way, and he wants to go all the way, you can't say "no" without a really good reason, you know they have a name for girls like that, they tell all they friends, and then you can never get a date. . . . Now all you girls about 12 or 13 years old, can use the excuse that I used, in the future, and in the future of the future, just tell them what I used . . . [singing] I don't want a baby. (NBC.com, 2015)

Cabrini Green's performance of Black girlishness here is indicated in her diction and her advice. By giving advice about how to avoid sex, it initially appears as though Cabrini Green *is* an "adultified" Black girl, as Epstein et al. (2017) describe, or a "prematurely knowing" Black girl, as Nazera Sadiq Wright describes (Wright, 2016, p. 60). In other words, viewers might connect her election of herself as a spokesperson who can advise her classmates about sexual "situations" as affirmation of the stereotype that Black girls know more about "adult topics" such as sex than girls of other races know. When she adds that she is referring to girls who are 12 or 13 years old, so about 4 or 5 years younger than she is, it makes sense that she offers this advice because even if she is not an adult, she is older than they are.

Vance's use of "girl" to address her classmates, while reminding viewers that she is indeed performing a girl—not a woman—marries both the girlishness she performs and hints at the blurred lines between Black girlhood and womanhood. While the dynamics that Epstein et al. (2017) and Nazera Sadiq Wright (2016) speak to, regarding adultification and the status of prematurely knowing Black girls, explore interracial consequences for these Black girls, it is well-known among Black girls and women that intra-racially, appearing as "fast-

tailed” or “womanish” is unfavorable. As Alice Walker notes, these controlling images inform widely known folk expressions for Black people. The following is Walker’s 1983 definition of a “womanist”:

From womanish. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) . . . From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” (Walker, 2004, p. xi)

Walker is signifying folk expressions that many African American girl and woman readers would be familiar with. Even womanish talk is a performance of Black girlishness; Cabrini Green avoids uttering the word “sex” during this sketch. Instead, she replaces the word sex with a sheepish “doing it,” a performance of youthful innocence, indicating that she is newly sexually active. I do not mean to naturalize the connection between girlish innocence and lack of sexual experience—rather, it is the performance of girlishness that naturalizes the two. She sings, “We do everything when we kiss and play, so there’s no need to go all the way” (NBC.com 2015) using language that youth use to delineate the sort of intimate physical touch that feels comfortable to them versus the sort of intimacy that feels more grown-up. Cabrini Green is situated here because she *is* sexually active, but approaches sex as someone who is a girl, not a woman. The performance of Black girlishness, and sheepishness when discussing the topic of sex, reclaims this Black girl as a *girl* and subtly demonstrates why the assertions that Black girls are viewed as younger Black women are accurate, but imprecise. Cabrini Green’s performance indicates that she does indeed embody the tidiness associated with the construct of American childhood (Bernstein, 2011), whether or not White supremacy allows her access to it in the same way it does for white children.

While Vance created a Black girl avatar to make pointed critiques of lack of reproductive liberty and the failures of sex education and instruction about consent, there are limitations to reading her performance on SNL to extrapolate large claims about Black girl performance. The audience for *Saturday Night Live* was not all Black, or even predominantly Black, but Cabrini Green signifies² for Black audience members and viewers in these sketches. That the show has a mostly white audience is one limitation, since many representations of Black girls by Black women artists and authors in the United States during the 1980s created Black girl and women counterpublics. Still, in Cabrini Green’s “Aspirin” sketch, as she explains that pregnant people should avoid alcohol, she says, “The baby got a little bitty nervous system, and a little bitty mind,” following up with the United

Negro College Fund (UNCF) mantra, “a mind is a terrible thing to waste,” and the audience members can be heard responding with an abbreviated chuckle (NBC.com, 2015). This suggests that she is likely talking to Black audience members and viewers. One reading of the use of this mantra is that Vance parodies the UNCF, an organization committed to financially supporting African American college students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. While there is no Black counterpublic here, Cabrini Green’s youth indexes hope.

One of the stakes of capitulating to the idea that Black girls do not have girlhoods is Black Girlhood Studies, one of Black feminism’s contributions to Black girls and to Black Studies. My encounter with Danitra Vance’s avatar Cabrini Green required a Black feminist lens to read her as a girl. There are indeed ways to read her as a woman, if one were committed to the narrative that Black girls are just younger women—for instance, Cabrini Green’s positionality as one who can offer her classmates sage advice about consent during a sexual encounter could indicate her status as a woman, or almost-woman. Christina Sharpe asks what we “make” of our encounters with Black girls in the archive. What I “make” of my “encounter” with Danitra Vance’s Black girl avatar Cabrini Green is space to approach Cabrini Green as a Black girl, who in some ways acts as a metonym for Black girls who had both the agency to determine what a self-determined sex life could entail for them and the vulnerability to rely upon elders and institutions for sex education and reproductive health services.

Notes

1. Not all pregnant people are women, but I use the term “women” here since my knowledge of the discourse about Black pregnancies comes from the text *Killing the Black Body* (Roberts, 1997), which centers on cisgender women, or people perceived as cisgender women.
2. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes signifying as African American authors’ way of verbal play, which evokes the trickster figure and suggests that words on their face cannot be trusted. It uses sarcasm, ambiguity, chiasmus, and irony (Gates, 1988).

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