Acting Like a Lady: Turning Femininity Off and On within Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*

The idea of what constitutes as male and female calls to mind stereotypical labels that have dominated society standards for many years. Breaking from the strict male/female molds is something that is just now beginning to become accepted and embraced. Long before people were celebrated for their differences, they were strongly encouraged if not coerced to conform to either one or the other gender identities. Crossing gender identity lines or playing with them in the past was unspeakable, but is something that was necessary for survival for some individuals. Throughout Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* Cora fluctuates her femininity and masculinity levels for various circumstances.

While there is a traditional sense of what a female should be, “emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” Cora doesn’t quite fit the mold perfectly (Tyson 81). She also fails to exhibit purely male, “rational, strong, protective, and decisive” characteristics (Tyson 81). By not fitting snugly into either mold, Cora finds a way to develop between the polarizing two. Cora never fully grasping what it means to be strictly male or female finds a way to develop an identity that is more circumstantially adaptable than anything else.

Being abandoned at a young age by her mother, Cora lacked a set role model to base her own growth and development from. Cora’s mother may have had her own wobbly sense of
identity, but it would have given Cora a better grasp on how to develop her own. It could be argued that even if Cora’s mother had been around, her identity would still have been an issue, because slavery denied slaves key developmental stages. One article discussing slave narratives noted that slavery would have, “destroy[ed] the victim’s voice, his/her ability to express him or herself in words; in doing so, it also destroys ‘the contents of the consciousness,’ or the victim’s sense of self” (Elaine Scarry qtd in Drake 91). Cora wouldn’t have been able to develop a sense of self or look to her mother for guidance because she too lacked any idea of how to construct one.

Cora not being taught the correct ways to behave like a traditional female allowed her to develop into a nontraditional hybrid who accesses stereotypical female and male mannerisms. The first instance of Cora exercising more masculine-like habits comes early into the book when she reclaims her plot, “She stood there, heaving, both hands on the hatchet. […] Regardless of perspective, what was important was the message imparted by one through posture and expression and interpreted by the other: You may get the better or me, but it will cost you” (Whitehead 20). Within the second half of the quote when Cora’s looks are vaguely described during the event there is a clear sense of her seeming manlier. It is easy to picture Cora in a wide-legged stance, chest heaving, with wild threatening eyes that ward off the others from approaching. The message here is done purely through nonverbals, but they are strong enough to set a clear boundary for the others. Cora is later tagged as crazy when fabricated stories begin to float around simply because she didn’t bow to male power (Whitehead 21). Traditionally females getting physical, whether in a fight with a man or destroying a man’s things, was unladylike and unacceptable. Cora expresses her indifference about what is deemed proper and willingly showcases her more masculine side to make a point to people threatening her way of
life. In that moment Cora too is accepting not only her place as an outsider to the slave community, but also embraces the duality of her sense of being.

Cora’s hacking down of the dog house becomes a challenge to all the other slaves on the Randall plantation, but it was originally focused on one man. Blake’s efforts to try and control Cora by taking away her family’s garden plot is also fueled by the hope that he can force her closer to him. Blake taking the plot is in a way him trying to claim Cora as a woman, but due to her not being a traditional female she bends against his will. Adrienne Rich in an article notes that traditional social standards place men in higher regard that tries to manipulate women into believing that they need them, and that women who go against this, “must be condemned to an even more devastating outsiderhood” (116). Cora rejecting Blake’s attempt to make a claim on her, as mentioned before, she accepts her placement as an outsider. The difference here in outsideness is that before the doghouse incident Cora was just an outcast for having no family, but now she’s an outsider for rejecting her traditional gender role expectations.

It is sad to note that Cora’s exhibition of more masculine-like power when chopping apart the dog house does little to prevent men from robbing Cora of her innocence later (Whitehead 21). It could be argued that those men raping Cora helps prove Adrienne Rich’s point about women being forced to conform to the strict patriarchal view by becoming, “the emotional and sexual property of men, and that the equality of women threaten the family, religion, and state” (108). Men being deemed more superior will do as they please whether their attention is wanted or not, and this puts both traditional females and nontraditional ones at risk.

Being raped forces Cora to realize this fact and continue to adapt her way of expressing female and male mannerisms. Cora retains the ability to be a softer more delicate person, but as
the book progresses her grip on masculine characteristics becomes firmer and more readily accessible even if done subtler.

Judith Butler discussed identity within an article stating:

In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause.

(86)

Taking Butler’s words into account it could be argued that, Cora’s ability to call forth male characteristics while still maintaining a femaleness is, in a way, her working toward merging the two halves into a more singular identity that she wants. Flipping between the two identities, especially when going from female to male, Cora on some level finds exhibiting male attributes more appealing to better protect herself. If this is the case, then it is easier to see how she has difficulty fitting strictly into the traditional female roles expected of her. While Cora’s initial time within North Carolina helps her become more in tune with traditional female traits, by being assigned a caretaking role, it fails to strip away her ability to access masculine traits. When the North Carolinians recognize Cora’s inability to conform strictly to only a female role, they relocate her to a position that requires, “a special kind of girl” (Whitehead 109). Being given the job of museum worker has Cora placed in a controlled environment that helps steer her gender identity a bit more. “Her African costume is a colorful wrap; her sailor outfit made her look like street rascal, with a tunic trousers, and leather boots” (Whitehead 112). The whites of North Carolina allow Cora to embrace her duality by having her dress as both halves of herself, first as a female with a wrap and later as a male with trousers.
The act of dressing up in either more male or female clothes helps Cora recognize the two sides of herself and figure out a way to better manage them. Dressing up in what might have been traditional African female attire helps Cora achieve two important things about the female half of her gender identity. The first is that Cora becomes more in tune with her female side by donning a dress. Secondly, she earns a better grasp on her possibly long-lost African roots. The dress being colorful helps capture the vibrant side of African culture and seems to help empower Cora to take pride in the African female side of her identity. By dressing as a sailor boy with pants and boots Cora gets to wear her masculine identity more. The boots, tunic, and hat represent a more “civilized” African and help Cora gain a better hold on how to be part of American society. This overall celebration of sorts that allows Cora to freely shift between male and female characteristics continues to craft how she develops as a person.

Cora’s time in North Carolina was arguably the most influential in helping nurture the fragmented sense of self that she had been developing up to then. Cora was given the chance to learn her letters, which according to one writer is a massive turning point for ex-slaves. It is noted that, “The ability to utilize language, […] is also portrayed by many ex-slaves as crucial to their quest for freedom, a freedom which in large part is the ability to allow the consciousness to develop without restriction (Elaine Scarry qtd in Drake 92).” Through learning how to write Cora can better put into words whom she thinks she is and can break free from the slave stigma that’s controlled much of her life. Breaking free from slavery seems most complete as Cora learns to properly address who she is and whom she wants to be. In fact, the more time Cora spends acknowledging the different parts of herself she eventually nails down an identity, that by today’s standards is that of a strong independent woman. Cora’s development from a scared woman trying to hide her duality eventually becomes a strong fearless woman who embraces it.
By the time Cora accepts her duality to its fullest and begins to hone the skill of adjusting it she is still in North Carolina working in the museum. Fear of being different lacks its paralyzing hold on Cora’s life to the point that she, “One day decided to retaliate against a red-haired white woman who scowled at the sight of Cora’s duties ‘at sea.’ […] Cora stared into her eyes, unwavering, and fierce, until the woman broke” (Whitehead 129). Cora by this point has accepted herself on the fullest level, and her fear of whites or being different is gone. Cora challenging the white woman is much like her challenging the others back on the Randal plantation; she is daring someone to try to threaten her way of life. When Ridgeway comes along to do just that, threaten her way of life, Cora takes her new sense of self and exercises it to its fullest extent.

On Randall, on Valentine, Cora never joined the dancing circles. She shrank from the spinning bodies, afraid of another person so close, so uncontrolled. Men had put a fear in her, those years ago. Tonight, she told herself. Tonight I will hold him close, as if in a slow dance. As if it were just the two of them in the lonesome world, bound to each other until the end of the song. She waited until the slavecatcher was on the third step. She spun and locked her arms around him like a chain of iron. (Whitehead 308).

Cora glides from being the expected feeble female, who is terrified of what Ridgeway could do, to acting as a female exhibiting male level determination to stop Ridgeway. It is important to note the juxtaposition between the notion of dancing and wrestling with Ridgeway in the above scene.

Dancing is often considered a delicate more feminine activity, but within this context it is linked to an aggressive act. Cora’s plan to “hold [Ridgeway] close, as if in a slow dance” serves to do two things (308). First, audiences get to see Cora’s character development at its height,
because she is the one initiating physical contact. The idea of boundaryless physical contact no longer frightens Cora and she can now endure it to the point that she “locked her arms around [Ridgeway] like a chain of iron (308). Cora has finally acknowledged her past fears and has overcome them. Secondly, this act of getting close to the enemy with a more hostile end goal expresses, once again, Cora’s mastery of her ability to flow between feminine and masculine actions. The concept of dancing and holding Ridgeway close, almost like a lover, starkly contrasts with holding him inescapably tight to crash down the steps with. This stands to be yet another example of Cora’s two differencing sides that have finally begun to form seamlessly together. Where the transition between the two halves in the beginning was jerky it is now smooth and second nature for Cora.

The previous blockquote also illustrates an important reflection made by Cora. In the lines, “On Randall, on Valentine […] Men had put a fear in her, those years ago” audiences can pick up on Cora’s disgusted tone over the memory because she realizes how far she’s progressed. Cora in that moment also acknowledges that while those men raping her permanently changed her, the event allowed her to become more self-reliant.

Cora’s ability to flow between strict traditional gender identities was present since a young age and was furthered by the trauma of being raped. Cora growing up to be a person that never fit perfectly into any one mold granted her a freedom that many others lacked. It gave her the opportunity to experience the creation of a unique identity that wasn’t already socially constructed. Throughout Colson Whitehead’s book The Underground Railroad Cora, while starting out as a female, combined male characteristics into her identity to develop a new sense of self that was entirely of her own making. Cora lacking guidance as a child and failing to develop a molded traditional female identity was arguably the best thing that could have
happened to her. Developing an identity that fit Cora rather than her developing an identity that fit into society freed her on several levels. Even though Cora lacking a sturdy sense of identity created several challenges throughout her life, it granted her time to look inwards. Unlike most other females and males who accept their gender identity, and who simply follow their expected gender roles, Cora got to question things. There is nothing more freeing than being able to question a historically accepted notion and rise above it to usher in a new way of being.

Works Cited


