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Author(s): Harryette Mullen

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# “Apple Pie with Oreo Crust”: Fran Ross’s Recipe for an Idiosyncratic American Novel

Harryette Mullen  
UCLA

An elderly Jew, riding in the subway, saw a Negro reading the *Jewish Daily Forward*.

The Jew watched, spellbound, as the Negro read sedately on. Finally, unable to contain himself, the old man asked, “Excuse me, mister. I don’t want to be rude—but I have to ask it: Are you Jewish?”

The Negro lowered the paper in disgust: “That’s all I need *noch!*”

A Jewish matron dialed a number and asked, “Hello, Mrs. Weiss?” No, ma’am,” came a melodious voice. “This is the *shvartzeh*.”<sup>1</sup>

Leo Rosten, *The Joys of Yiddish* (265, 377)

In Fran Ross’s 1974 novel *Oreo*, the Greek legend of Theseus’ journey into the Labyrinth becomes a feminist tall tale of a young black woman’s passage from Philadelphia to New York in search of her white Jewish father.<sup>2</sup> This satirical novel explores the heterogeneity rather than the homogeneity of African Americans. As slang for a black American who is perceived to be culturally inauthentic, “oreo” and similar terms like “cookie,” “Afro-Saxon,” and the more recent “wannabe” and “incog-Negro” belong to a popular discourse regarding the divergence of racial identity and genetic heritage from cultural behavior, class identification, and political attitudes, a divergence that results from the genetic and cultural hybridity, class mobility, and political diversity of African Americans. “If a black person says, ‘John is very black,’ he is referring to John’s politics, not his skin color” (Ross, *Oreo* 5). Ross’s *Oreo* is not a culturally whitewashed, deracinated, or “wannabe white” character who has assimilated European American cultural styles

in order to escape the supposed inferiority of African American culture or to be more acceptable to the mainstream. Rather, she offers an intimate view of two of the diverse minorities that create American culture. With *Oreo's* adventures, Ross depicts a complex negotiation of identity within a racial, ethnic, sociocultural, and linguistic heterogeneity that extends beyond the black and white of "America's favorite cookie."

A satire on relations between African Americans and Jews, as well as a topsy-turvy treatment of racial and ethnic shibboleths and stereotypes in American popular culture, *Oreo* is a formally inventive picaresque novel written as a series of language games, quips, quizzes, comic translations, and bilingual wisecracks. Initially published in an edition of five thousand, *Oreo* was a rare find for collectors and scholars rummaging in used bookstores before its recent reprinting by Northeastern University Press. Although remarkable for its satirical response to the racial and sexual politics of the 1970s, it failed to find a larger audience, possibly because, in the process of commingling two ghettoized vernaculars, African American and Yiddish, the novel also draws on material that both black and Jewish readers might find offensive or perplexing. Ross's double-edged satire includes: a Jewish immigrant who retains a voodoo consultant named Dr. Macumba; a reverse-discrimination tale of an all-black suburb where a local ordinance is selectively enforced to keep white people from moving into the neighborhood; a black radio producer's script of an advertisement for Passover TV dinners; a joke about the heroine's odds of inheriting sickle-cell anemia and Tay-Sachs disease; and a fight in which *Oreo* beats a predatory pimp to a pulp while wearing only a pair of sandals, a brassiere, and a *mezuzah*.<sup>3</sup>

What makes this quirky novel accessible is its appropriation of popular culture genres, including jokes, riddles, cartoons, graffiti, advertising, palmistry, cookbooks, and dream books. Ross borrows as freely from such popular sources as she does from the culture of high literacy represented by classical literature and "great books." Just as *Oreo's* journey alludes to the Theseus legend, her catalogue of popular culture, especially her inventory of jokes, alludes to conventional codes of clichés and stereotypes. In *Oreo*, stereotypes are often made more conspicuous by an unexpected twist or inver-

sion, forcing into consciousness the underlying assumptions of jokes about sex, race, and ethnicity.

This essay’s epigraph juxtaposes two “ethnic” jokes from Leo Rosten’s entertaining Yiddish-English glossary. Each is a joke within a joke: an inter-ethnic joke about African Americans wrapped inside an intra-ethnic joke about Jews. They are models of the humor that informs the style and structure of *Oreo*. Rosten’s jokes contextualize Yiddish words the author defines for readers who may include non-Jews as well as assimilated Jews and other non-Yiddish-speaking Jews. In both jokes, the humor lies in the unexpected linguistic competence of African Americans. Their humor also depends on awareness that both Jews and African Americans are minorities viewed as outsiders to “mainstream” America. Like Ross’s *Oreo*, the jokes highlight two possible sites where the black outsider acquires knowledge of Jewish culture and/or a degree of linguistic competence in Yiddish: the cross-cultural literacy afforded by print media to any curious reader with the will to decode and comprehend a “foreign” language or culture; and the knowledge acquired by black workers whose employment takes them to Jewish households or businesses owned by Jews. In *Oreo*, Ross fuses these two possibilities, adding yet a third conceivable site of cross-cultural knowledge: Jewish African Americans, whose existence is briefly considered in one of Rosten’s jokes. Like the hyperliterate black man on the subway, *Oreo* suggests the potential, if often missed, opportunity for mutual empathy and political solidarity of two historically oppressed minorities. Like the black woman performing domestic work for a Jewish employer, *Oreo* confronts the differential status of African Americans and white ethnic Jews, which often works against empathy and solidarity.

*Oreo* embodies a possible unity of two groups that share common concerns about their place in American culture. Both Jewish Americans and African Americans have experienced a marginal or “outsider” status while making significant contributions to “mainstream” American culture. They have regarded one another as strangers or enemies, as possible allies, or as competitors in the American marketplace. Beyond the intended humor of the jokes themselves, the reader might appreciate an additional paradoxical thought that in the examples selected from Rosten’s text, it is the

black speaker who illustrates correct usage for readers including Jews who lack linguistic competence in Yiddish. Both examples rely on a conventional device of “Borscht Belt” comedians who, in performances for multi-generational Jewish audiences, often signaled their own and their community’s cultural hybridity as Jewish Americans in the process of assimilation by telling bilingual jokes in English and Yiddish, a device that African American novelist Fran Ross borrows frequently in *Oreo*.

For Rosten and Ross, the bilingual joke demonstrates the interaction of assimilation and diversity in the construction of American identities and the creation of American popular culture. The diversity of American dialects has been a perennial source of popular humor and entertainment. Of course the exodus of Yiddish-speaking Jews from Nazi-controlled Europe, like the Middle Passage of Africans imported as slaves to America, is the antithesis of comic material, yet Jewish Americans and African Americans have excelled as comedians and entertainers. This is in part because until recently, with the self-imposed constraint of so-called “political correctness,” American popular audiences have long delighted in ridiculous and often demeaning stereotypes of ethnic minorities, and in the minority comedian’s performance of self-deprecating ethnic humor (see Watkins).

Rosten and Ross exploit the double-edged humor of jokes incorporating Yiddish in particular and of “ethnic humor” in general. On one hand, Yiddish is popularly associated with a certain brand of “Jewish humor”; on the other hand, Yiddish as a language of foreigners, immigrants, or ghettoized Jews may simply “sound funny” to non-Yiddish speakers. Both authors show that ethnic humor is a significant aspect of the serious business of constructing American identities amid a mainstream culture that rejects some while appropriating other aspects of diverse ethnic groups. As the insider humor of a minority group crosses over into popular culture, becoming ethnic humor, it allows some members of the marginalized community to make a living by lampooning what makes an ethnic group seem “funny” or strange or incomprehensible to others. As often happens, a minority ethnic group can also be pitted against another when one group is comically portrayed or caricatured by the other. Ross satirically examines such scenarios by departing from the cultural script with a wise-cracking heroine

who feels free to claim or discard whatever she wishes of African American, Jewish American, and “mainstream” American cultures.

Ross plots Oreó’s comic escapades as amusing permutations of Theseus’ heroic deeds. Like Theseus, a prototype of modernist self-fashioning, Oreó contemplates the mystery of identity, the quest for a self defined in part by the accident of birth or family origin and in part by the deliberate choices and acts of the individual. In *Oreó*, the cultures of old worlds are destroyed or remixed in the making of Americans, as the impure offspring ultimately chooses between reproduction or extinction of the patrilineal heritage. Oreó’s parodic adventures provide a context for Ross to mix high and low culture, an appropriate mixture, considering that both the Greek hero Theseus and the monster he destroys are products of mixed couples.

*Oreó* is a ludic text of verbal puzzles, but there is a practical aspect to her heroine’s playful wrangling with language. The Labyrinth was a kind of game created by Daedalus for King Minos of Crete, but the maze served the serious purpose of corralling the violent Minotaur. In certain Greek myths, solving a riddle is a test of the hero’s ingenuity, suggesting that life itself is a game of wits. Oreó’s journey is not merely a whimsical comic adventure, but also a quest for self-knowledge. As she seeks to answer the riddle of her origins, the heroine entertains herself on her solo journey with word games. She keeps her wits sharpened for verbal duels with characters she encounters in the urban landscape, who correspond to the villains that Theseus slays on his overland journey from Troezen to Athens.

Oreó’s tongue-in-cheek mimicry of the Greek hero underscores Ross’s cheekiness as an African American woman who takes on the Western literary tradition. Ross’s clever parody is wildly irreverent, drawing parallels between the Greeks’ macho hero Theseus, who cleared the roads of bandits and is credited with the invention of wrestling, and her militantly feminist heroine Oreó, who uses verbal wit and martial arts to dispatch male adversaries. Theseus defeated the Amazons in battle and took one of their captive leaders as his wife or concubine. In a satirical reversal typical of this text, Ross invents a gang of violent women who terrorize men, a modern urban equivalent of the Amazons as well as a rough parody of radical feminist manifestos (122). Like other black women

writers who emerged in the same decade, Ross creates a feminist heroine whose strength is tested through conflict with male antagonists, sexual predators as well as negligent or oppressive father figures. While offering opportunities for heroic action, Oreó's fight with a pimp might be inspired by 1970s novels of gritty ghetto life by such black male authors as Iceberg Slim, a former pimp who helped to create a market for Hollywood's "blaxploitation" movies. Oreó, whose risky adventures include camping overnight in Central Park, is aware that she has entered an urban space controlled by aggressive males, just as Ross and other feminist writers of the 1970s entered a literary arena in which women's writing was devalued.

In some respects, despite its verbal audacity and its treatment of risqué and taboo subject matter, Ross's text betrays certain puritanical concerns when contrasted with the legend of the cross-dressing Greek warrior and ravisher of maidens. Like Theseus, when Oreó comes of age, she sets off to find an absentee father who has left behind clues to the "secret of her birth" and tokens of a paternal legacy, "sword and sandals," traditionally passed from father to son (8, 79-80). Unlike Theseus and the Minotaur, who owe their existence to the perverse promiscuity of gods and aristocrats, Oreó is the legitimate offspring of a middle-class couple who happen to be of different races and religions. While lusty Theseus is of royal but illegitimate birth, Ross insists on her heroine's legitimacy and celibacy. Once she leaves the protection of her Philadelphia family, Oreó is homeless, living on the streets of New York; yet her virginity remains intact despite encounters with pimps, muggers, and rapists who accost her. If Theseus' entry into the Labyrinth suggests the masculine hero's return to the womb followed by the rebirth of a new self through the feminine agency of his guide Ariadne, Oreó's quest to meet her deadbeat dad suggests a feminist daughter's claim to self-knowledge as well as her determination to challenge patriarchy and to contest the phallic power of the male. Although Ross stirs racy jokes and spicy sexual innuendo into the mix of *Oreó*, it is perhaps because of conventional strictures on the sexual expressiveness of black women that Ross prefers to demonstrate her heroine's physical and intellectual prowess in martial and verbal arts rather than in erotic adventures such as those of Erica Jong's Isadora Wing in *Fear of Flying* or

Rita Mae Brown’s Molly Bolt in *Rubyfruit Jungle*, two feminist novels published in the previous year.

Each member of Oreó’s family has a different idiosyncratic relationship to language, thus contributing to Oreó’s semiotic competence and opening the text to a variety of verbal experiments and variations on the spoken and written word. James, Oreó’s grandfather, is speechless following an immobilizing stroke that occurs minutes after hearing that his daughter “was going to wed a Jew-boy” (3). Her grandmother Louise speaks an almost incomprehensible southern dialect. Helen, Oreó’s mother, speaks standard English sprinkled with Yiddish she learned from her father, who before his stroke ran a mail-order publishing business selling religious books and pamphlets to an exclusively Jewish clientele. Oreó’s younger brother expresses himself with a secret musical language of his own invention, similar to jazz vocalists’ scat, and prefers to sing rather than speak:

Oreó recognized the value of Jimmie C.’s cha-key-key-wah language over the years. For her, it served the same purpose as black slang. She often used it on shopkeepers who lapsed into Yiddish or Italian. It was her way of saying, “Talk about mother tongues—try to figure out this one, you mothers.” (42)

Ross explores the possibilities for expression, humor, self-defense, intellectual stimulation, and aesthetic pleasure in the various mother tongues or invented languages that Oreó can claim as her own, from the almost unrepresentable dialect of her African American grandmother to the code-switching “Yidlish” that is the *lingua franca* of several relatives on both sides of her family. In addition to the vernaculars of her own blood kin, Oreó can also claim fluency in the salty street talk of hustlers, pimps, and prostitutes, as well as the obscure erudition of cranky scholars.

In a discussion of Oreó’s grandmother’s southern speech, Ross embraces black vernacular English as an expressive medium and a variety of language with its own distinction, subtlety, and complexity, while also refusing to privilege it as a badge of African American authenticity:

Louise Clark’s southern accent was as thick as hominy grits. No one else in the Philadelphia branch of the family had such an accent. Her



mother and father had dropped theirs as soon as they crossed the Pennsylvania state line. Her husband could have been an announcer for WCAU had they been hiring [black people] when he was coming up. While all about her sounded eastern-seaboard neutral, why did she persist in sounding like a mush-mouth? One reason: most of the time her mouth was full of mush or some other comestible rare or common to humankind. . . from time to time, her dialogue will be rendered in ordinary English, which Louise does not speak. To do full justice to her speech would require a ladder of footnotes and glosses, a tic of apostrophes (aphaeresis, hyphaeresis, apocope) and a Louise-ese/English dictionary of phonetic spellings. A compromise has been struck. Since Louise can work miracles of compression through syncope, it is only fair that a few such condensations be shared with the reader. However, the substitution of an apostrophe for every dropped *g*, missing *r*, and absent *t* would be tantamount to *tic douloureux* of movable type. To avoid this, some sentences in Louise-ese have been disguised so that they are indistinguishable from English. (11-13)

This passage demonstrates one of Ross's favorite devices, elaboration of extended metaphors and similes in order to highlight and bring into the reader's conscious an awareness of their figurative and literal significance. As she does so, Ross also shares with her reader the difficult choices the author confronts as she attempts to represent the diversity of her characters' speech and to create a heteroglossic novel.

The description of Louise Clark's accent begins figuratively with the simile, "as thick as hominy grits." The term "mush mouth" is both figurative and literal when applied to Louise, who retains a southern accent and who is constantly sampling her own cooking.<sup>4</sup> This account of her persistent regional dialect mocks and parodies pseudo-scientific and racist linguistic theories that biologized black speech as defective due to the supposedly inferior genetic characteristics of Africans. "Louise-ese" cannot be explained, for instance, by recourse to such physiological attributes as the "thick lips" associated with people of African descent. It is possible that someone like Louise, who could pass as white, might choose to retain her southern speech as a marker of African American identity.

Similarly, the phrases "a tic of apostrophes" and "*tic douloureux* of movable type" point to a visual metaphor that describes the conventional orthography employed to represent African

American dialect in literature, the effect of which has often been an implicit comment on the presumed deficiencies of black speech. Ross makes explicit her dilemma as an African American writer who wishes to season her text with the flavor of vernacular black speech without representing it as defective English. However, she is aware that not only do the conventions for the representation of black speech on the page implicitly encode its difference as a non-standard variety of English, but also that historically such conventions have encoded it as substandard and defective. The orthography of black dialect not only represents and continues a difference in the linguistic habits of Americans of different races and classes, but also preserves the sociolinguistic effects of a painful history of slavery, segregation, and discrimination, as well as unequal access to formal education and literacy.<sup>5</sup> Despite the neutrality of technical terms such as “aphaeresis,” “hyphaeresis” and “apocope,” which counters assumptions of black speech as pathology, the medical metaphor “*tic douloureux* of movable type” indicates the nervous disorder Ross attributes to a text that may cause readers to wince as it cringes with each contraction.

While Oreo, an accomplished code-switcher, is as capable of speaking vernacular black English with her grandmother as she is able to *shmooz* with her mother in Yiddish-inflected English, Ross is aware that to represent either of this family’s vernaculars is to encode their otherness. On the one hand, the orthographical apparatus supports the supposed inferiority of black dialect as “broken” English; on the other hand, italicizing Yiddish words underlines their unassimilated foreignness. Like “monsoon,” a word of Arabic origin that Oreo considers and then rejects when composing an essay assigned by her teacher, Yiddish may strike the ears of some *goyim* as “too exotic” (84). Even without the visual cue of italicized words from Yiddish and other foreign languages allowed to enter the English text, Oreo, like any native speaker, is able to detect in the speech of immigrants “the little things that give a foreigner away,” as when Mrs. Schwartz admonishes her children, “‘If I have told you once, I have told you thirty-two and five eighths times’. . . She probably says ‘Vanzetti and Sacco’ too” (180), Oreo thinks to herself. The mention of the two Italian-born anarchists, who were executed in 1927 following a sensa-

tional murder trial, suggests the dangers that the native born sometimes associate with the foreign ideas of immigrants.

Oreo's linguistic heritage is as much a product of her hyperliteracy as it is a legacy of oral culture. "Oreo did not go to school" but instead received an unusual education with a private tutor funded by her anti-Semite grandfather's backlist of Judaica, her grandmother's winnings from playing the numbers with the aid of a dream book, and her mother's earnings as a musician (45). The following passage sums up the pedagogical relationship and its effect on Oreo's linguistic prowess:

Oreo became adept at instantaneous translations of the professor's rhizomorphs. "Mr. Benton is worn out by childbearing. Of course, his paper was an ill-starred bottle. I don't wonder he threatened to sprinkle himself with sacrificial meal."

"You mean," said Oreo, "that Benton is effete, his paper was a fiasco, and he wanted to immolate himself."

The professor was impressed but not struck dumb. "I am phonofounded," he said logodaedalyly. (47)

Claiming as her own a Western tradition, she goes back to her linguistic roots, digging up buried puns and resurrecting long dead metaphors that lie below the surface meanings of words in the substratum of language.

Nor is Oreo's literacy limited to decoding literal texts. In Paulo Freire's expanded definition of literacy, her skills encompass "reading the word and the world." She is adept at reading the body and interpreting its signs, from the "rigid half-swastika" of her grandfather's stricken body, assuming the shape of his "straight-backed chair" to the "demanding digit" of a would-be rapist (3, 156). Playing the numbers, her grandmother interprets everything from her own dreams, to her grandchild's early babbling, to her disabled husband's enigmatic facial expressions (15-17). Oreo's self-confidence may be enhanced by her practice deciphering cryptic clues of incommunicative males, as well as the rhythms and cycles of her own female body (77-78).

With the formal education she receives from the moonlighting linguist, plus the informal tutelage of an opinionated milkman and the neighborhood nymphomaniac, Oreo acquires both book knowledge and street savvy. Not only can she compete in any contest of

verbal wit, but she also practices her own brand of martial art to protect herself from physical assault. Her defining qualities of verbal and physical assertion converge in her personal motto, “*Nemo me impune lacessit*: ‘No one attacks me with impunity’” (54-55, 125, 207). Oreo’s ability to speak and communicate with a diverse cast of characters is a skill she cannot take for granted. Her grandfather is silent for much of the novel; her grandmother speaks a southern dialect alien to the northeast; her brother sings a secret invented language, a cross between baby talk and the ooga-booga lingo of natives in old Tarzan movies. Their mother communicates mostly by writing, in the epistolary chapter “Hellenic Letters.”<sup>6</sup> An acquaintance spends entire days speaking English with the accent, inflection, and syntax of different foreign languages (131-37). In another episode, Ross puns on the words “couple” and “couplet” when Oreo meets a diminutive couple who complete each other’s sentences while speaking in rhymed couplets (115-25).

Given such influences, Oreo’s sense of language is idiosyncratic. With her fondness for recycling common idioms and conventional metaphors into the fresh images and punning descriptions that drive her narrative, Ross effortlessly tosses off such clever quips and verbal sight gags as: “two ink-blot Dalmatian puppies rorschached on the *New York Post*.” Here and elsewhere Ross riffs on black-white combinations, from zebra stripes, Dalmatians, ink blots, and newsprint to black-and-white milkshakes and photographs, as Oreo prepares to meet her father. Underlying such comic references to Oreo’s biracial heritage, however, are religious rituals of purification that underscore the association of whiteness with purity and blackness with impurity. Ross is also aware that Orthodox Judaism stresses the ritual uncleanness of menstruating women. In traditional Jewish culture, a conflicting symbolism of white and black—to suggest the opposition of purity and impurity, devotion and defilement—includes colloquial references to “white days,” the time before and after a woman’s menstruation; and the definition of *shvartze* as the neutral Yiddish word for “black,” including dark skin (although it has acquired offensive connotations for African Americans); as well as the metonymic use of *shvartze* to describe devout religious observance (from the black clothing worn by strictly observant European Orthodox Jews).

Ross's witty reconfigurations of hackneyed phrases are sometimes just for the fun of it, but frequently her visual-verbal puns and transliterated metaphors also expose and break down petrified stereotypes in the clichés and commonplaces of familiar expressions, as in the following example of socially conscious wordplay, in the section titled "Oreo at the laundromat":

On the next bench, a Chinese woman waiting for her take-out laundry nodded her head in time to the music she was reading. Every once in a while, she would laugh (scrutably enough, thought Oreo, who knew the score) at one of Mozart's lesser-known jokes, her lower lids pouching up under her epicanthic folds. . . a man stepped in. . . choosing a path. . . toward the table where the customers folded their dry towels and linens. A woman stood there now, the center of a sheet chinned to her chest, her arms rhythmically opening and closing.

(168)

This passage condenses an interlocking set of associative jests and puns connecting "Chinese laundry," "Chinese take-out," "inscrutable Orientals," a musical "score," "knowing the score," "sheets" of music, racially significant "epicanthic folds," and "sheets" that one "folds" in a laundromat. Like Oreo herself, this woman demonstrates a capacity for cultural work as well as domestic labor at the same time that she also exemplifies the non-European's mastery of Western traditions. While she folds laundry, either woman's mind might be occupied with the music of Mozart or with the unfolding of an argument in which she explicates the implications of ethnic humor. The mundane setting of the laundromat becomes a topos for the imagination, where Oreo is "lulled" by "circular seas of the washing machines" and "round Saharas of the dryers," as the people around her conduct their own imaginary tours and mental orchestras (168). Oreo's idiosyncratic education, mythic quest, and picaresque adventures, within the dialogic structure of this episodic novel, enable Ross to present a lively display of expressive styles. Oreo picks up the signals—whether communicated through orality, literacy, silence, laughter, or gesture—at the same time that she samples a diversity of languages, each of which contributes its own flavor to the American idiom.

While searching for her Jewish roots, Oreo meets a problematic figure who might be said to represent a two-dimensional cardboard

or cartoon version of African-American discourse. At “Mr. Soundman, Inc.,” Oreó encounters a man occupying the space between sound and ink, a man who, despite his disclaimer that he doesn’t “try to keep track of whitey,” is easily incorporated into an exploitative capitalist economy. He participates in the commodification of ethnicity, and his cartoon dialogue indicates a break separating both European literary and folk traditions and African traditions of speech and script from the racialized orality of African Americans:

Mr. Soundman, Inc., was in a renovated brownstone on Lenox Avenue. Oreó could hear the strange permutations of words speeded up and slowed down, rushed backward and whisked forward, the barbaric yawp of words cut off in mid-syllable (the choked consonants, the disavowed vowels), burdened with excessive volume, affecting elusive portent. Words were all over the floor. Words and time. What word was that there in the corner, curled up like a fetus? And this umbilicus of sound, what caesarean intervention had ripped it untimely from its mother root? (138)

Here black orality is stripped of context and complexity, curiously reduced by writing to a cartoon balloon:

An engineer in a desk chair wheeled among three machines—two tape decks and a master-control console—his ropy arms whipping about like licorice twists. Two pencils stuck out at forty-five degree angles from his hedgelike natural, pruned to topiary perfection and so bulbous that, along with his dark, chitinous skin and his sunglasses with huge brown convex lenses, he had the look of an undersized mock-up of a movie monster—the grasshopper that spritzed on Las Vegas. . . . So far neither of them had said a word. The engineer pointed to a chair next to a desk piled with a stack of oddly shaped cardboards. Oreó sat down. Since the man didn’t say anything but merely looked at her expectantly—or rather his glasses were turned toward her—she said, “I’m Christine Clark. Is Slim Jackson around?”

The man pointed to himself, then shuffled through the pile of cardboards next to him on the desk. He held one up. It was shaped like a cartoon balloon, and the message read: YOU’RE LOOKING AT HIM.

“Can’t you talk?” Oreó asked. He shook his head. After establishing that Slim was neither antisocial nor laryngitic but mute, Oreó asked

permission to look through his balloons so that she would know the range of answers he was prepared to give. (138-40)

Ross indulges her penchant for transforming puns and metaphors into literal images from which she improvises offbeat narrative details and generates unusual descriptions of characters and scenes, her zany episodes fleshing out the skeleton of the Theseus plot.

Besides setting up Oreó's eventual encounter with her unsound father, a struggling actor who makes a living doing voice-overs in radio and television commercials, this passage seems motivated by paradox and polysemy. First, there is the paradox of a silent radio soundman: a mute who controls the machinery of sound; who communicates entirely by means of a literal "sign" language representing a reduced and flattened black orality, a "cardboard voice" (141). Then the polysemy of "antenna" suggests the fantastical description of a chitinous insect as well as essential equipment for any radio station. Possibly the mute technician, with his "pencil antennas," who cuts and splices bits of words and sounds into a meaningful collage, but communicates entirely through a visual medium, also illustrates a visual pun based on the familiar statement that the artist is the antenna of society (138-39, 141).

Like the toothless Lucius Brockway, who controls the boiler room of the Liberty Paint Factory in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Mr. Soundman is an ambiguous figure of black influence on what Walt Whitman called America's "barbaric yawp." He seems to be in a position to control or shape the messages that are broadcast to a diverse audience, yet his own ability to express himself is severely limited, despite his technical literacy:

She saw that he had translated the typical cartoon asterisk-spiral-star-exclamation point-scribble as a straightforward FUCK YOU, YOU MUTHA. He had a pile of blank balloons and a stack of balloons with drawings: a cocktail glass with an olive followed by a question mark; a Star of David followed by a question mark; an egg-shaped cartoon character with a surprised look on its face (the "That's funny—you don't look Jewish" follow-up to the Star of David? Oreó wondered); an inverted pyramid of three dots and an upcurving line; the three dots again with a downcurving line; a clenched fist with the middle finger raised in the "up yours" position. (140)

In a novel that is notable for its heroine's ability to tune in to the language that surrounds her, the soundman is the second black male character who is literally voiceless. Slim Jackson's mute presence reiterates the silence of her black grandfather, as Oreo comes closer to tracking down her white father, whose voice is his main source of income. However, unlike Oreo's immobilized grandfather, who can no longer speak or write, Slim has at hand an alternate method of communication, although his repertoire of repartee is slim indeed. His standard questions and predictable replies indicate the narrow range of ordinary conversation as well as the conventional limitations of stereotypical discourse. Like Ross's glosses on "Louise-ese," the inventory of Mr. Soundman's cartoon balloons offers a satirical comment on popular representations of black speech, such as the formulaic tag-lines of deejays and rappers. With the science-fiction undercurrent of her description of the soundman, Ross seems to anticipate hip hop culture's technologies of sampling and distorting sound as well as the postmodern construction of culturally miscegenated media cyborgs, those mute and dubbed chimeras of the recording studio and music video.

Like the black singer dubbed on the soundtrack of a Hollywood musical as the vocal double of the white movie star in Julie Dash's independent film *Illusions* (1983), Oreo lends her voice and fluent pronunciation of Yiddish words to a radio character that personifies an essentialist post-Holocaust Jewish identity. "She did another take. This time her p's were popless, but Slim ballooned: A LITTLE MORE JEWISH, PLEASE" (143). Before she leaves the studio, to resume her quest, the soundman pays the popless and fatherless Oreo to read and record a pitch for "Tante Ruchel's Kosher Kitchen." The advertising copy caricatures the stereotypical speech of Jewish women at the same time that it offers an oblique comment on the reality that in traditionally ethnic families the burden of keeping a kosher household falls mainly on the women. Disowned by her Jewish grandfather, who required his son to sire "kosher *kinder*" (205), but following in the footsteps of her father, who played the burning bush in a detergent commercial, Oreo performs a parody of ethnicity.

At the very moment that she is searching for her Jewish roots, tracing her father through the brothels and sound studios that are his accustomed haunts, Oreo's double take replays her father's



sold-out commercialism, even as her performance in the radio commercial calls into question the whole idea of authentic ethnic identity. With the close proximity of commercial recording studio and “house of joy,” Ross satirically notes the pimping of creativity that capitalist cultural production requires. Significantly, both establishments are located in Harlem, where Oreo’s father sells his talent to buy time with black prostitutes and to provide his wife with domestic help, also black women. A satirical effect of the novel is to contrast the heteroglossia of America’s diverse vernaculars with the conventional stereotyping of ethnicity in popular culture. As producer and actor collaborating in the making of the commercial, Mr. Soundman and Oreo are both complicit in this process.<sup>7</sup>

Oreo acts as a stand-in for her father, whose career doing voice-overs allows him a range of roles, from tactful wife to patriarchal God, to the voice of a new cola drink. Yet with his “curly, almost kinky hair” and “noble-savage nose and cheekbones” (182), Samuel’s looks might not be “white” enough for significant parts in major productions. Just as Oreo is directed to be “a little more Jewish” as “Tante Ruchel’s niece,” Samuel Schwartz has become a little more “black” through his marginalization as an ethnic type and his attraction to Harlem’s darkness. The satirical force of Ross’s parodic inversions relies on the reader’s awareness of historical roles in which African Americans and Jews have been cast in the making of popular culture. Oreo’s passable impersonation of a Jewish housewife inverts such popular culture scenarios as Al Jolson’s performance in *The Jazz Singer* as the son of a Jewish cantor who sings “jazz” in blackface in the first major Hollywood film to incorporate synchronous sound. Oreo’s mimicry also brings to mind the radio production of *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, in which characters speaking a comical black vernacular dialect were played by white actors. The roles of Slim Jackson and Samuel Schwartz invert the more typical relations of white producers and managers of black talent before the 1960s. Ross reverses a familiar stereotype with another black man who, like Oreo’s grandfather, derives income from the exploitation of Jewish culture.

Ross aims her satire at the commercialization of culture that tends to produce reductive and often degrading caricature while it deprives many Americans of a richer, livelier linguistic heritage.

Although Oreó has an appreciation of the vernacular, she is also aware of the power of the stereotype, which she manipulates to her own tactical advantage. The closer Oreó comes to unraveling the clues that will enable her to find her father and discover “the secret of her birth,” the more she relies on her talent for improvisation and mimicry. She moves from her parodic performance of Jewishness as the niece of “Tante Ruchel” to an equally stereotypical performance of blackness as a spy in her father’s house. At one point she impersonates a domestic day-worker in order to glean insider information about the Schwartz family, pumping their black housekeeper for juicy details as they gossip together like *yentas*. Later, impersonating the family’s trusted factotum, Oreó confronts an officious medical professional. She adopts a pose that combines a synthesized African American vernacular with body language borrowed from Hollywood’s stereotypical black servants, in a calculated ploy to dig deeper into the Schwartz family’s business and discover the secret withheld by her father.

He slit open the envelope, read the letter, and subjected Oreó to un- toward scrutiny. She tried to look dull-normal when he said what she had expected someone to say.

“I’ll have to verify this with Dr. Resnick.”

Oreó replaced dull-normal with sullen-hurt, the look of the congeni- tally insulted. “He jus’ gib me de ‘scription. Say fill it.” She had decided to use [the housekeeper’s] economical sentence structure with Louise’s down-home accent. (203)

Oreó’s cynical manipulation of stereotypes underscores Ross’s in- creasingly biting satire as the heroine enters the Schwartz house- hold, not as a long-lost daughter, but as a trickster in the guise of a domestic servant. At one point a friend of her father’s even mis- takes her for one of Samuel’s “harlots of Harlem” (182-84).

Though the Schwartz household is hardly kosher,<sup>8</sup> Oreó pokes her way into their apartment as a “Jew’s poker” or *Shabbes goy*, a Gentile who performs labor which observant Jews are forbidden to do on the Sabbath. Her presence echoes Biblical relationships, such as that of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael, and her performance, which includes a “jive story” about providing “maid service” as a “mother’s helper” parodies a typical contemporary role of black women working in bourgeois Jewish households (172-76, 196-

201). The term “Jew’s poker” may refer to observant Jews’ traditional prohibitions against lighting fires or cooking on the Sabbath (see Katz). Use of the outsider term rather than the Yiddish insider term suggests Oreó’s increasing alienation from Jewish culture as she enters the Schwartz household as a black servant and observes the unorthodox lifestyle of her secular father. Although her servant disguise is a common device of classical heroes, her presence, as a *Shabbes goy*, as one of her father’s *trayf* offspring, and potentially as a “Harlem harlot,” is evidence of his violation of traditional Jewish religious and cultural taboos.

Oreó fears that, like the escaped pig killed in a traffic accident at the door of a synagogue (137), her presence, through no fault of her own, represents a transgression against Orthodox belief. She anticipates that she might be perceived by her white Jewish kin as ritually, socially, or literally “unclean” as a woman, as a Gentile, as a black person, and also as the “impure” offspring of her father. Although the Schwartzes and the Clarks are *mishpocheh*, or extended family, they are estranged due to the racism of Oreó’s white Jewish relatives and the anti-Semitism of her black Christian relatives. Oreó approaches the Schwartz family cautiously, aware that she and her brother are not their father’s *kosher kinder*, but reminders of his taste for *trayf* and his sexual appetite for “dark meat” (141).

Earlier in her journey, Oreó’s desire to meet her father inspires a conscious attempt to explore her Jewish heritage. Her efforts to present herself favorably to her father include wearing her *mezu-zah*, eating kosher food from a Jewish delicatessen, and purifying herself according to practices of Orthodox Judaism, with overtones of Protestant baptismal rites: her improvised *mikvah* is a sauna run by an “itinerant gospel singer,” a black man named Jordan Rivers (169-70). However, she abandons her role as a dutiful daughter as she soon realizes that her deadbeat dad is a shamelessly prodigal son with a mercenary motive for abandoning his black wife and children. While Oreó emulates her father in the sense that performance has become a family business, she comes no closer to an intimate relationship with him, precisely because he is too preoccupied with his business, family, and extramarital affairs to confide in her the family business on which the novel’s entire plot depends: the promised “secret” of her conception: “He patted her

hand and gave her an actor’s look of fake sincerity or sincere fakery—she did not know which” (184).

Although the not-so-dark secret Oreó learns after Samuel’s death might be viewed as one more potentially embarrassing item in the list of his shortcomings as a father, Helen’s artificial insemination with his banked sperm is proof of their determination to have children together. Technology allowed them “to give the world human evidence of their endearment” despite his low sperm count (204). Possession of her father’s frozen “deposit” gives Oreó leverage to negotiate the terms of her relationship to the Schwartz family patriarch whose obsession with genetic purity drove a wedge between her parents. The complex interaction of identity and economics may be the ultimate lesson of Oreó’s quest, as Ross questions the “natural” bond presumed to exist between parent and child.

*Oreó* displays Ross’s appreciation for the diverse influences that contribute to America’s cultural heterogeneity and its linguistic heteroglossia. An approximate anagram of “hero,” “Negro,” and “error,” Oreó’s nickname results from mishearing (39-40), demonstrating a possible pitfall of orality but also the uncontrollable dissemination of meaning itself.<sup>9</sup> In the Theseus story, the death of the hero’s father results from a confusion of black and white signals. Ross shows how an impoverished code impairs our ability to articulate a more complex reality in which individuals and groups negotiate identity through everyday encounters. With her formidable gifts of verbal wit, critical interpretation, and cross-cultural translation, Ross demonstrates that communication and comprehension are deliberate acts of cognition and collaboration. Such acts require shared knowledge, concerted effort, and skills acquired through practice, in order to overcome the likely possibility of misreading, incomprehension, silence, and miscommunication whenever different individuals and groups interact with one another. Thus *Oreó* is as much a cautionary tale of misunderstanding as it is a recipe for mixing and blending diverse American cultures.

## Notes

1. The Yiddish-language newspaper *Jewish Daily Forward* was founded in 1897 by Abraham Cahan. An English-language *Forward* was launched in 1990 by Seth Lipsky. *Noch*: again, another, one more thing. *Shvartzeh*: a black female. The word for a black male is *shvartzer*.

2. Technically, Ross's heroine Christine "Oreo" Clark is not Jewish, not only because she is raised in a Gentile household (with an uncircumcised brother whose initials are J.C.), but also because her connection to Jewish ancestry is patrilineal rather than matrilineal. However, her mixed heritage provides an opportunity to contemplate similarities, differences, conflicts, and misunderstandings between Jews and Gentiles, as well as between African Americans and white ethnic Jews. Judaism, of course, is a religion practiced by people of diverse racial heritage, including people of African descent, notably the Hebrew Israelites of the United States and the Beta Israel (Falasha) of Ethiopia. Black Jews may belong to such communities or may be religious converts; other black people with Jewish ancestors may or may not be practicing Jews or consider themselves culturally as Jews (see Chireau and Deutsch). In February 2000, a documentary on the PBS program *Nova* looked at recent scientific research identifying the Lemba, a Bantu-speaking people of South Africa, as a possible "lost tribe of Israel" (see Parfitt). In the 1970s, as younger leaders of the Civil Rights movement turned toward a more radical struggle for Black Power, traditional political alliances of African Americans with Jewish liberals and progressives deteriorated. Since the publication of *Oreo*, a number of nonfiction books by authors of African and Jewish descent have appeared, including recent memoirs by Khanga, McBride, Walker, and a collection of personal essays by Jones. In Senna's 1998 novel *Caucasia*, the first-person narrator, the biracial daughter of an African American father and a WASP mother, passes as a Jew. Smith's 1991 performance piece *Fires in the Mirror* was created out of the real-life drama of a riot in Brooklyn's Crown Heights, when tensions between black and Jewish residents exploded.

3. Sickle-cell anemia and Tay-Sachs disease are genetically linked, respectively, to populations of African descent and to populations of Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry. A mezuzah is "a small piece of parchment inscribed with Biblical passages (Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:12-21) and marked with the word "Shaddai," a name of the Almighty. The parchment is rolled up in a container and affixed to a door frame as a sign that a Jewish family lives within. It may also be carried as an amulet" (*American Heritage Dictionary*). The verses in question stress the importance and power of keeping God's word, both in the sense of obeying the commandments and also in the sense of keeping the literal written word itself in an intimate relation to one's everyday life. Turning inside out a traditional artifact of Judaism, the inverted mezuzah that Oreo inherits from her secular father indicates his scrambled transmission of religious faith, as well as Oreo's hybrid Judeo-Christian tradition. Instead of a verse from the Jewish Torah (Christian Old Testament) rolled inside the container, Oreo's father leaves her a mezuzah

wrapped in paper inscribed with a message from the New Testament of the Christian Bible. With its verse from Hebrews 4:12, “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword,” Oreó’s mezuzah substitutes the word for the classical hero’s sword, thus encouraging her to fight in the arena of language, using the weapons of word and wit.

4. Here and elsewhere, the text suggests an analogy between food and language, through an implicit parallel of the similarly broad palates of Louise for everything edible and of Oreó for the “juice and pith” of words (11-14, 37). A five-page section of the novel, *La Carte du Diner d’Helene*, consists of a menu for the nine-course meal Louise makes to welcome Helen home, an international feast that includes Chinese, Japanese, Latin American, Spanish, French, German, and Italian dishes, along with recipes from Jewish, African American, and Anglo American kitchens, such as “Roast Chicken Golda Meir,” “Braised Short Ribs,” and “Apple Pie with Oreó Crust” (68-72).

5. Gates reads the production of African American literature as a process of creating a literary language representative of a distinctive “black voice” with its roots in the dialect of African American slaves.

6. Helen’s background mirrors that of the author, including her college education at Temple University after excelling in Philadelphia public schools with significant numbers of Jewish students.

7. Ross’s satire on advertising draws on her insider experience. After graduating from Temple University with a B.S. in journalism, communications, and theater in 1956, she worked in advertising as a copywriter, according to alumni association records. Later, in addition to editorial jobs at New York publishing houses, Ross was co-owner of a small educational media company. She also worked briefly as a writer for the short-lived 1977 *Richard Pryor Show* and submitted scripts for television situation comedies. A possible precursor of Ross’s novel is Robert Downey’s 1969 film satire, *Putney Swope*, which features a black executive who unexpectedly becomes the head of a mainstream advertising agency. Ross’s caricature of the mute Slim Jackson may be a satirical reflection on her own crucial yet “silent” role at Simon and Schuster, where she edited the first book of former New York mayor Ed Koch.

8. Apparently, for Samuel, shrimp is *trayf* (unfit for consumption by Jews who observe traditional dietary restrictions) only when it’s spoiled (183). *Trayf*: “An animal not slain according to the ritual laws and by an authorized *shochet* [Orthodox Jewish butcher]; any food which is not kosher. ‘Pork is *trayf*.’ ‘Ham is *trayf*.’ ‘Oysters and shrimps may taste delicious, but they are *trayf*’” (see Rosten). Colloquially, the opposition of *kosher* and *trayf* is also used to distinguish Jews from Gentiles or respectable versus shady characters. Some parents, hoping their offspring marry “kosher,” refer to Gentiles as “trayf” (see Mason).

9. According to Nabisco (acronym of National Biscuit Company) corporate legend, the origin of the cookie’s name might be English, French, or Greek. If the origin is English, then the name “Oreó” is a striking example of playful linguistic invention, a visual word puzzle emblematic of the cookie itself, a rebus representing the sandwiching together of “black” and “white”: the invented word

formed with letters from chOcOlate and crREam. Nabisco's official OREO web pages, linked to the "Nabisco Kids" website, include the following "Oreo History" on the "All about Oreo" page: "The OREO was born in 1912. Since then, we've eaten over 362 billion of them, making the OREO the most popular cookie in America. How it came to be: Legend holds that the OREO was named by taking the 'RE' out of cream and sandwiching it between the two 'O's from chocolate—just like the cookie. Others believe the name comes from the French word 'or' or gold, a color used on early package designs. It's also possible the OREO comes from the Greek 'oreo,' which means mountain. . . but we think it sounds pretty darn cool." In March 1999, Nabisco announced, "OREO is now available for anyone who wants to keep kosher," with detailed information on the "What's Up?" page, under the headline: "Purim Baskets Get An Extra Treat This Year: Certified Kosher Oreo Cookies To Debut This Month." [<http://www.oreo.com/index.html>]

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