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# Traveling Identities: Mixed Race Quests and Fran Ross's *Oreo*

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## The Frontier: Where Two Come Together

Traveling to my grandmother's funeral during my first marriage, my white husband and I walked down the narrow plane aisle toward our seats. In front of me was a black woman who stopped the line when she reached her row and asked the white man in the aisle seat to excuse her as she settled herself into the window seat. As she seated herself, the man looked at me and asked, "Are you two together?" I said no and proceeded past him and his bewildered look.

My husband scoffed, loudly enough for the man to hear, "That was an interesting assumption, huh?"

"Yeah," I replied. "But you know that happens to me all the time."

And, indeed, it does. People readily assume I "belong" with any other people of color in the vicinity, and rarely, if ever, do they assume that I "belong" with my husband. Reflecting on the incident now, I wonder how effectively I could have articulated my sense of place if I'd answered the man's question affirmatively, though unexpectedly: "Yes, I *am* two together."

Because I see myself as both black and white, I, like many other persons born to parents of different races, sometimes think of myself as moving in the space that unites the two, as traveling from one shore to another given certain contexts, and other times as sailing the river that forms the meridian between two shores. Such metaphors of movement, travel, and cruising are not uncommon in explorations of mixed race identity; in fact, the metaphor of border-crosser has been taken up readily and used to suggest a mobility and indeterminacy that may not be as easily accessible as the metaphor suggests. Mixed race identity often has been considered a "frontier" in race relations, if I can extend the travel metaphor into the realm of quest.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the anecdote with which I began this essay fittingly exemplifies the role of movement, travel, and quest in explorations and definitions of mixed race identity. Alternatively, the anecdote may invoke Denise Riley's suggestion that identity "is more accurately conceived as a state which fluctuates for the individual" (6). The notion that various components of identity come into the foreground and recede in differing situations may be more useful in interrogating the workings of identity than that of the border crosser. We may imagine individuals traveling with identities whose components are variously enacted or shelved without imagining that these individuals are completely liberated from the constraints of identity, as if their ability to cross borders were a ticket into every

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desirable community and a ticket out of every undesirable situation.

These introductory comments regarding travel and quest are important to the following discussion of *Oreo*, the recently republished novel by Fran Ross. This novel explores the possibilities within mixed race identity as it attempts to assert a utopian sense of racial harmony and wholeness and to grapple with the theoretical and philosophical questions of mixed race and gender. Its metaphors of traveler and quester concur with discourses of mixed race that theorize such individuals in terms of the past—as outcasts who seek an acknowledgement and understanding of their origins—and in terms of the future—as pioneers whose existence may foster the racial harmony of utopian visions. In keeping with other discourses of mixed race identity, the novel prioritizes questions of history and origins as well as future possibilities for imagining race. Within *Oreo*, the personal utopia sought also connects to the longing for a national utopia that would rectify the racial discord of the period in which it was written—during the Black Nationalist Movement of the 1970s. Originally published in 1974, Ross's novel was not well received since it both literally and figuratively plays with the ideologies of race and gender that were being debated at the time. One January 1975 review describes the novel as “experimental, intelligent, and even funny in places. The dialogue, however, is a strange mixture of Uncle Remus and Lenny Bruce, and quite often unintelligible” (Salassi 146). This initial review offers a striking contrast to one following the novel's reprinting in 2000, when it is heralded as “a true twenty-first century novel.” According to this review, the novel's “wit is global, hybrid and uproarious; its meditation on language is simultaneously irreverent, appropriative and serious” (Foreman and Stein-Evers 36). This latter review, however, problematically champions “the goodness of ambiguity which leads everywhere,” asserting

that “the triumphant chameleon [Oreo] goes unnoticed wherever it chooses.” Such claims of liberty and unobstructed movement display precisely the dangerous assumption inherent in notions of the border crosser as they are often articulated. *Oreo* by no means suggests that the dualities of identity make it possible for one to escape the realities and constraints of racism, sexism, and oppression. Rather, the novel suggests that dualities allow one to *play* (both literally and figuratively) with the structures of identity, allow one to manipulate boundaries and seek agency in arenas where these structures might seem rigid and inaccessible, respectively.

*Oreo* is a rewriting of the mythological story of Theseus, and it casts the black/Jewish mixed race heroine as the traveler, the individual on the quest for self as she searches for the secret of her birth by trying to find her father. Additionally, the title character manipulates the boundaries of gender in interesting ways; in fact, *Oreo* moves beyond limited notions of the feminine in her ability to travel, cross borders, and manipulate boundaries. Counter to traditional notions of the feminine, she is completely active and never passive; she is mobile rather than static, multiple rather than singular. I take care, however, not to read *Oreo* as the typical border crosser, given the problematic nature of that metaphor. Although Gloria Anzaldúa's theories of mixed race identity as a borderland shed light on Ross's novel (*passim*), *Oreo*—as traveler, translator, and mediator—moves beyond prevalent uses of the border crosser. Indeed, rather than existing on the borderlands, in some indeterminate limbo, *Oreo* constantly embodies movement and change and, like a mythical hero, actively participates in a quest for her origins and, by extension, in a quest for herself; unlike Theseus, however, *Oreo* explores more fully the frontiers of her own identity in terms of racial and gender mixtures, exploring the various possibilities of being two together.

Additionally, Ross's novel invokes and questions other American ideologies such as myths of pioneers and the frontier, the latter long understood as the meeting point or dividing line between disparate, and often oppositional, entities: civilization and wilderness, socialization and savagery, known and unknown. This dichotomous thinking is clearly problematic in discussions of race and gender. If race, for example, is constructed as oppositional and hierarchical, what might it mean to live on the border of race or, conversely, to embody that border? Again, the limitations of the border-crosser metaphor become clear when we imagine an individual adept at crossing boundaries while at the same time we imagine her as representative of those boundaries; in this way, movement and ontology struggle in counter-productive ways. A more useful question may be: What might it mean to travel into and between the realms that racial and gender borders both divide and unite, to foreground and recede characteristics of identity traditionally associated with opposing sides of those borders? Ross's *Oreo* allows an exploration of this question through its questing protagonist.

As much literary scholarship has noted, the quest motif is prevalent within American literary history.<sup>2</sup> The utopian language in which this motif is cast has been adopted by many within the context of mixed race identity discourse. As suggested by the title of Joel Williamson's *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States*, many consider mixed race individuals to be "new people," though the reality of race mixing is hardly novel, and literary portrayals of mixed race have often highlighted these individuals' distance from their origins and, consequently, their quest for them. Whether imagined on a personal or a national level, this quest motif embodies utopian longings, and in each case, the relationship between the national and the personal as well as the personal and the historical is one that, though elided,

cannot be eradicated.<sup>3</sup> Of course, the idea that people can exist without history is precisely what is implied by misnomers such as Williamson's "new people." Despite the fact that they are said to be forging a new race, mixed-race individuals can be viewed as doing so only by laying claim to a certain history, one that traditionally has been denied them. As Naomi Zack asserts, "Since mixed race does not exist in a biracial system, individuals who are of mixed race, or who would be if black and white racial categories had rational foundations, have an interesting identity problem: Either they can create identities of mixed race for themselves, in opposition to the biracial system, or, they can eschew all racial identities" (6). A third option, one that has been advocated for generations, has been that of hypodescent—whereby individuals identify with the minority side of their ancestry. The final option, which has been problematized by reifications of hypodescent, has been "passing" into the majority race, an option available only to those of mixed race with phenotypes resembling the majority's.<sup>4</sup>

### Traveling Beyond the Boundaries

Ross's text challenges traditional notions of race as well as those of gender; it questions the significance of individual histories to collective understandings of race and gender and offers a vision that allows play within identity. Additionally, within its present moment of racial conflict, it searches the past in order to offer possibilities for racial harmony. *Oreo* confronts the meaning of origins in terms of identity since notions of history and ancestry are complicated in discussions of mixed race, with traditional definitions of race requiring individuals to deny portions of their ancestry.<sup>5</sup> The idea that one might sidestep these complexities and define oneself apart from

one's family, history, and society is intrinsic not only to notions of hypodescent but also to the American quest motif, which privileges individualism and self-sufficiency.<sup>6</sup> Obviously, such notions of self-definition are problematized by race-based and feminist theories that challenge the prototypical American quest motif, and assert the importance of personal history and community to individual identity, racial and otherwise. As feminist inquiries have shown, women-centered searches for identity often take into account the individual's history and origins. *Oreo* conforms to this tradition, even though its model is not representative of a feminist literary canon.

In *Oreo*, Ross rewrites the Greek myth of Theseus, who, longing to know the secret of his birth, embarks on a quest to find his father, a journey that challenges Theseus mentally and physically and takes him into the Minotaur's labyrinth. Additionally, his journey involves Theseus's betrayal of a woman, his lover and guide Ariadne, which raises a question about Ross's use of this white patriarchal model for her story of racial and gender resistance. Yet, according to Suzanne Bost,

Many cultures have worked out their racial anxiety through a legendary woman. Often, like Pocahontas or La Malinche, this woman is positioned between cultures, translating between the colonized and the colonizer, mediating the process of colonization. Both Pocahontas and la Malinche became lovers with one of the conquering men and have thus assumed symbolic responsibility for fusing the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized. They represent both sides of the colonial conflict and the crossings between sides. The women's bodies are targeted as the source of new mixed races. (59)

In the case of *Oreo*, however, the legendary protagonist is also a virgin; she

becomes not the source of new mixed races but the source of new possibilities for imagining mixed race—and, consequently, race in general—during a time of heightened racial anxiety and opposition.

Ross's use of a mixed-race character during this time of racial struggle and interracial turmoil and anxiety is not surprising since historical analysis demonstrates that, during moments of racial crisis, discourses of mixed race emerge within the national

***Oreo* becomes a source of new possibilities for reimagining mixed race—and, thus, race in general—in a time of heightened racial anxiety and opposition.**

consciousness. During those historical moments when racial tensions and anxieties are most severe, mixed race becomes centralized in public forums. For example, after the slave trade was abolished in the United States, the racial identity and social status of so-called mulattos became increasingly important. During the antebellum period, the tragic mulatto motif became more widespread in North American abolitionist literary narratives as an emblem of the evils of slavery. Similarly, during Reconstruction and the period of Jim Crow, "mulatto" characters emerged as literary representatives of W. E. B. Du Bois's Talented Tenth, theoretically called to lead the African American masses out of oppression. Mixed-raced individuals and characters become increasingly visible in moments of racial crisis, perhaps because the "notion of 'pure blood' always rests on the possibility and the reality of 'mixed blood' " (Sollors 4).

Ross's use of a mixed-raced character is in keeping with the tradition of the heightened visibility of mixed race in times of racial conflict. Interestingly, Ross uses a character who is representative of the inclusiveness of Civil Rights struggle at a time when the achievements of that struggle were being criticized as too few and too limited.<sup>7</sup> Neither Ross's historical context

nor her textual setting is the Civil Rights era; instead, Ross uses a protagonist who embodies Civil Rights ideologies of integration in an historical and textual setting of Black Nationalism and separatism.

Additionally, she models her heroine's quest after one from the canon of white, patriarchal western civilization.

According to Harryette Mullen,

Oreo'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. . . . 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. . . . [Oreo] 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. ("Apple Pie" 112)

Although Ross recenters white patriarchal models of literature and the quest for identity and self-knowledge, she simultaneously subverts these models through both content and form, adapting the typical white male quest to specific feminist purposes and racial uplift. Her use of humor and her variations of genre, too, represent distancing from the white patriarchal classical norm, signaling the limitless possibilities for artistic, racial, and gender expression while including a privileged literary ancestry. In this way, Ross's own writing mimics her character's mastery of and subsequent moves beyond the limitations of pre-existing texts.<sup>8</sup> Thus, her novel plays not only with race and gender identity and with the meanings of being two together but also plays with language, genre, the quest motif, and even western literary history.

Ross's retelling is, in the words of Mullen, "a linguistically riotous feminist tall tale of a young black woman's journey from Philadelphia to New York in search of her Jewish father" (Foreword xix). Neither the Greek

myth of Theseus nor the journey of Oreo upholds the traditional American quest motif of a lone, male individual wandering into the wilderness in search of himself through solitude. Rather, both the myth of Theseus and Oreo's story revolve around the protagonist's journeying into the unknown, encountering others instead of solitude, in order to find answers about themselves by finding their fathers. These quests, then, are rooted in community and ancestry, rather than solitude and a forward marching trail toward a new self that ignores that self's origins.<sup>9</sup> In both cases, identity cannot be divorced from history; rather, one's ancestry and origins are crucial to an understanding of the self.

Like Theseus, Oreo begins her quest when her mother notices that she is ready: emotionally mature, intellectually adept, and physically capable. At this point, Oreo's mother, Helen, gives Oreo a list of clues left by her father, Samuel, and tells Oreo that if she is capable of lifting a boulder under which her father has left a sword and sandals, she is indeed ready to find her father and learn the secret of her birth.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the boulder in the tale of Theseus, however, the boulder in *Oreo* is really a huge mound of Silly-Putty collected by Oreo's brother Jimmie C. Once this obstacle is removed, Oreo discovers nothing beneath it. Instead, absent-minded Helen takes Oreo inside to a loose floorboard where the heroine is disappointed to find "a mezuzah on a thin chain and a pair of bed socks. 'This he calls sword and sandals?' " (80) Oreo asks.

Thus begins Oreo's "journey" or, to quote the title of the section in which this journey begins, her "meandering." Her journey allows her encounters with a pickpocket with a fake limp on the subway, a family of dwarves who speak only in rhymed couplets and who sell dog treats in Central Park, a young actor who speaks English in the syntax of other languages. Oreo's absurd encounters offer entertaining

revisions of the Greek myth, but they also become part of a playful yet important critique of race, gender, and even language use. According to Mullen, "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 power 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" (Foreword xxi).<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, the novel presents biting critiques of both the dominant (white) and the alternative (Afrocentric) ideologies of its time. It presents a character who both upholds and denounces Black Nationalist ideologies; Oreó is smart, capable, and proud of her heritage(s), yet she is also smart and capable in ways that demonstrate her independence from men, allowing her to anticipate the burgeoning strength of women within the black power movement. Oreó additionally returns to the familiar motif in texts of mixed race as its female protagonist searches for her identity through her father. Although Oreó's mother and grandmother influence her developing identity, she still lacks knowledge of her father; it is he who holds the "secret of her birth," although Oreó's mother could not be unaware of this secret, having herself been present at Oreó's conception. Regardless of Helen's awareness, Oreó must seek full self-knowledge through her father. Unlike many other fictions of mixed-race heroines, however, the absent father in *Oreó* is white instead of black. *Oreó* does not problematize the historical and present dilemmas of black patriarchy; rather, it acknowledges a history in which mixed-race individuals were conceived through the sexual liaisons of white men and black women. In this case, it is important to note, the liaison is not due to the rape of an enslaved black woman by a white master—historically the most common occurrence; instead, Oreó's

parents are depicted as a couple married just subsequent to the legalization of interracial marriage and during the initial years of the Black Nationalist Movement, when relationships between black women and white men faced strongly denunciation.<sup>12</sup> The text resists the separatism that was often a prominent part of Black Nationalist thought, encouraging in many ways an integrationist view more in keeping with the Civil Rights movement than with Black Power. At the same time, however, Ross exposes ambivalence about the potential for success in interracial romance, as Samuel and Helen's marriage ultimately fails and Samuel subsequently marries a white woman. Of course, the text also acknowledges that Samuel is financially pressured by his father to abandon his initial marriage, suggesting that social pressures bring down interracial romances.

Oreó resists easy categorization, reflecting in form what it also demonstrates in content: a questioning of the codes typically used to construct one's own or pinpoint another's identity. In the same way that *Oreó* questions ethnic, race, and gender identities, it also invites questions of its representation of the 1960's Black Power, Civil Rights, and Feminist movements. Simultaneously, it forces questions regarding what makes a text a *representative* of each of these movements. *Oreó* both resists and is implicated by the various ideologies circulating during the time it was written, demonstrating that we literally may not judge a book by its cover.

Thus, Ross's novel diverges from the Black Nationalist ideology prominent in the 1970s, when many of the movement's members had grown weary of the techniques used by Civil Rights activists in the 1960s to free African Americans from racialized oppression. As William Van Deburg has noted, Black Nationalists were a diverse group favoring a variety of often competing strategies for achieving African American autonomy. Van

Deburg highlights two fundamental ideologies of the Black Power Movement: pluralism and nationalism, both of which were essentially separatist in their stance toward African American and Caucasian interactions (120). Disillusionment with the integrationist tendencies of the Civil Rights Movement caused many Black Nationalists to assert the necessity of black separatism in struggles for racial autonomy.

Ross's use of a black/Jewish female protagonist, then, is significant during this time of heightened Afrocentrism and separatist ideology. This choice is yet another reminiscent of the more integrationist Civil Rights movement, when many African Americans and Jewish Americans struggled together against racial oppression. Of course, there have always existed separatist ideologies; by no means was the Civil Rights movement itself an interracial utopia. By the time *Oreo* was written, however, the aims of Black Nationalism and the presence of white paternalism had fractured more fully the solidarity among many blacks and Jews. Thus, Ross's depiction of Oreo as an individual of mixed black/Jewish heritage challenges both ideologies of separatism and historical realities that include black anti-Semitism and Jewish anti-black racism. As Cornel West writes, the Civil Rights era cooperation between blacks and Jews is often minimized by blacks and idealized by Jews:

It is downplayed by blacks because they focus on the astonishingly rapid entrée of most Jews into the middle and upper classes . . . an entrée that has spawned both an intense conflict with the more slowly growing black middle class and a social resentment from a quickly growing black impoverished class. Jews, on the other hand, tend to romanticize this period because their present status as upper middle dogs and some top dogs in American society unsettles their historic self-image as progressives with a compassion for the underdog. (106)

Ross, in fact, points explicitly to the lack of empathy and solidarity among many blacks and Jews. Oreo's black

grandfather, James, earned his living conning Jewish customers out of their money with items catering to their religious practice. When he learned of his daughter's intention to marry a Jewish man, "he managed to croak one anti-Semitic 'Goldberg!' before he turned to stone, as it were, in his straight-backed chair, his body a rigid half swastika. . ." (3). Similarly, when Oreo's Jewish grandmother learned her son would marry a black woman and that he was dropping out of school, she "dropped dead of a racist/my-son-the-bum coronary" (3).

This tension among black and Jewish communities complicates questions of race for individuals of mixed black and Jewish heritage. Ross's choice to create her protagonist as the daughter of an African American woman and a Jewish man, then, is significant and offers opportunities to question the meanings and experience of blackness, Jewishness, and black/Jewish mixture as well as the ideological underpinnings of the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements, when the one-drop rule still prevailed to identify those of mixed race heritage. Accordingly, Oreo may be viewed by many as a black girl since her mother is not Jewish and Jewish heritage is matrilineal. Although her father is Jewish, Jewishness for Samuel Schwartz is merely a nod to his culture of origin and a religion he does not practice. However, Ross clearly questions such easy identifications by making Oreo well versed in both African American and Jewish American cultures, cuisines, and languages. Through Oreo's satirical performances of blackness and Jewishness, Ross seems to uphold the notion of race as social construction, yet at the same time, she allows Oreo access to Jewishness merely through paternity—which does not make Oreo Jewish at all. Additionally, the father through whom Oreo makes this claim does not perform Jewishness himself, suggesting that, again through racial performance, Oreo may be more Jewish than her father.



## "She Got Womb"

In her choice of a protagonist who is two together, both black and Jewish, Ross confounds normalized racial boundaries and plays with the meanings of racial identity and identification. Through her choice of a distinctly unconventional *female* protagonist, Ross similarly plays with the boundaries of gender, creating a young woman who challenges stereotypes of female intellectual, physical, and emotional potential. By the age of three, Oreo demonstrates her linguistic expertise by writing backwards a note to her mother, who has for years sent elementary letters to her children during her business travels. Held in front of a mirror, Oreo's letter would read: "dear mom cut the crap" (24). Additionally, Oreo is mathematically brilliant, entertaining herself with complex calculations and speculations on "how many people in, say, Denver, Colorado, were at that very moment making love" (91). Finally, 11-year-old Oreo is physically unconquerable and emotionally unflappable, having developed a self-defense system she calls WIT (Way of the Interstitial Thrust), "based on an Oriental dedication to attacking the body's soft, vulnerable spaces, or *au fond*, to making such spaces, or interstices, where previously none had existed. . . ." Thus, "Whether he was big or small, fat or thin, well-built or spavined, Oreo could, when she was in a state of extreme concentration known as *hwip-as*, engage any opponent up to three times her size and weight and whip his natural ass" (55).

Given her superior mental and physical abilities and her parallels with the Greek hero Theseus, Oreo clearly disrupts traditional gender roles. At a time when black women were expected to work behind the scenes in nationalist groups dedicated to racial uplift, Ross presents a young minority

woman who will not be silent.

Moreover, writing in the era when Stokley Carmichael suggested that the best position for women in the movement was prone, Ross dares to offer a female character who is deliberately and defiantly active. Constantly in movement and in celebration of her body, Oreo takes pleasure in herself and for herself. Consciously choosing to remain a virgin, Oreo nonetheless toys with men who mistake her for an easy sexual target, turning the tables on them in ways that reveal their ignorance and subject them to sexual manipulation. For example, when Oreo receives an obscene phone call, she does not allow herself to be victimized. Instead, she subtly controls the conversation, tricking the caller into a situation where he becomes the victim of the neighborhood nymphomaniac.

This scene, although demonstrative of Oreo's reversal of sexual oppression, represents a significant flaw in this novel of female empowerment and subversion of patriarchal culture. In fact, this scene and another in which Oreo must pretend to be a prostitute reveal important tensions in the text's feminist narrative, which falters when confronted with the reality of female sexual desire and prostitution. The novel characterizes Betty, the woman who helps Oreo trick the obscene caller, with malice and contempt. She is depicted as a woman so sex-crazed that she feels slighted when she cannot fulfill her desires with the obscene caller. In fact, it is clear from her characterization that Betty shares none of Oreo's indignation with the man's attempt to molest women over the phone and in person; additionally, she is characterized singularly in terms of her body and her physical desires, a mindless entity, the "Half WIT" of the section's title. After Oreo punishes the caller and elicits his promise to cease his molestations of "innocent young women," Betty asks, "But what about me?" Oreo's response is scathing and at odds with her previous champi-

oning of women: "Your father will be home any minute now. Do what you usually do in these circumstances. Fuck him" (61).

Oreo treats other women, prostitutes specifically, with similar disdain. In each of these instances, the text's feminist narrative appears to slip, not allowing its protagonist to enact its feminist ideologies in support of women who are depicted as highly sexual beings or as women who choose or are forced to choose a life of prostitution. The text explicitly questions the loyalties of these women when Oreo wonders "how many of these women would fight for Parnell [their pimp] once she made her move and started pushing and shoving him all over this room? Would she have to rack them all up?" (155). The text is uncertain where to position itself in regard to prostitutes and women who flaunt their sexuality, women it sees as upholding patriarchal culture whether through choice or unfortunate circumstance; interestingly, this text that makes a mockery of boundaries and that challenges conventions is uneasy with women whom it cannot definitively place within the matrix of patriarchy. In fact, the repeated reference to Oreo's virginity suggests the text's elevation of women who are untainted by sexual contact with men; Oreo's extraordinary nature may correlate with her sexual state: she may be a virgin because she is an exceptional young woman, or she may be an exceptional young woman because she is a virgin.

Despite this tension between the text's feminist discourse and its depictions of female sexuality, the protagonist is decidedly positioned as a strong young woman. As Oreo's uncle attests, "She sure got womb, that little mother. . . . I wouldn't want to mess with her when she gets older. She is a ball buster and a *half*" (53). Ross's reversal of the masculine-centered testament to power depicts *female* power as something not to be taken lightly. In many ways, then, Ross demonstrates wom-

en's power and self-determination in an age when women often were seen as bodies in service to the movement. At the same time, however, it sexualizes certain women as mere bodies, continuing the struggle over women's bodies and their autonomy. During the movement, as before it, black women's bodies were highly subject to regulation since the "building of the black nation within a diaspora context has always been seen to be contingent on the maintenance of a biologically determined and genetically maintained racial purity, inscribing the individual black body with the investments of a nation" (Ongiri 233). Given such nationalist ideology, Ross's Oreo is a revolutionary figure—a young, independent, intelligent, active, and capable woman. Yet, again, the fact that Oreo's sense of identity and origin relies on her father is testament to the iron grip of patriarchy on definitions of self; common among texts dealing with mixed race is this privileging of the father in negotiations of a daughter's identity. Additionally, though the novel highlights a number of strong women, including Oreo's mother and grandmother, Oreo's strength, intelligence, and wit are clearly conflated with masculinity.

Nevertheless, Ross's novel allows a broader understanding of identity, both racial and gender, than many other texts both during and after its time. Rather than being structured through traditional limitations, race and gender in *Oreo* become characteristics that the protagonist is free to explore beyond the boundaries of tradition, allowing her to move beyond the limited notions of womanhood defined for many minority women by the political ideologies of the 1970s, when the Black Nationalist Movement encouraged women to subsume their needs and desires to those of the race. In 1974, when Ross's novel was published, Elaine Brown became the first woman to lead the Black Panther Party. Although on the surface this suggests a

progressive attitude toward women, Brown notes in her autobiography that “women recruits were reminded that they might someday be called upon to deploy their sexuality as but another weapon against the enemy” (qtd. in Perkins 116). Moreover, Brown’s considerable power did not shield her from “reactionary gender expectations within the Black Panther Party” (qtd. in Perkins 121), and, as Brown’s autobiography seems to indicate, a woman’s most valuable asset was not her intelligence but her sexuality. Oreo is a character who subverts this ideology, as her intelligence is prioritized over her sexuality or, conversely, as her intelligence is maintained through the preservation of her virginity. Although both black women and black men have been sexualized in particular ways throughout history, and although both have been deemed as hypersexual, black women have been the objects of complex patriarchal quests for power.<sup>13</sup> As Brown notes, black women’s sexuality was expected to serve the movement, either through the reproduction of revolutionaries or through seductive attacks against the white enemy. Oreo, too, is depicted using her sexuality to advance her aims, yet her use does not extend so far as to compromise her virginity. She overturns the historical use of women’s bodies in service of men, using her body in service of her own quest.

Despite the novel’s uneasiness regarding women’s sexuality, *Oreo* embraces feminist ideology, even to the point of critiquing degrading images that were mainly ignored by the feminist movement of the 1960s:

Helen’s letter went on to point out the implications of her formulation for the theory of the so-called black matriarchs: it tore the theory all to hell. In a later day, Helen might have gone on to add (with a slip of the pen owing to hunger): “There’s no male chauvinist pork like a black male chauvinist pork.” (54)

Using language that mocks much academic writing, Ross critiques the notion made explicit in the Moynihan Report (1965) that black women were responsible for the emasculation of black men and the poverty and hardships faced by black communities as a whole; thus, Ross is a precursor of such feminist critiques of black patriarchy as Michele Wallace’s *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979), refusing to ignore gender oppression not simply within the larger society but within the black community and Black Nationalist Movement as well. Critics such as Ross and Wallace resisted race and gender oppression from their positions as *black women*. The intricacies of black women’s lives and struggles were largely ignored by the larger feminist movement, as many of its proponents were white women who ignored the impact of racial difference on gender. Black feminists such as the members of The Combahee River Collective, which issued its “Black Feminist Statement” in 1977, struggled to include the interworkings of race within gender constructions. As the Collective’s statement attests, “disillusionment within these liberation movements [of white women and black men] . . . led to the need to develop a politics that was antiracist, unlike those of white women, and antisexist, unlike those of black and white men” (233).

Ross’s protagonist departs from limited notions of womanhood that would compel her to reproduce black revolutionaries, to use her sexuality to promote Black Nationalist aims, to ignore her sexuality, or to subsume either her interests as a woman or as a racial minority and person of mixed race in order to prioritize others’ political agendas. Oreo’s consciously chosen virginity; her comfort with her sexuality; and her strength, intelligence, and self-determination create new possibilities for women—whether they be mixed-race women, black women of various religions, or Jewish women of various racial heritages; the text offers

its mixed protagonist as a metaphor for individuals who travel between traditionally opposing shores—those of black and white, masculine and feminine, Jew and gentile. She embodies the point of contact and exists as two together: a successful combination of seeming opposites, a satisfying concoction of cookie and cream.

### Traveling in/as Twos

**O**reo clearly offers new possibilities of being—new possibilities for women and for individuals of mixed race—that embrace the knowledge that individuals, in many ways, are two together. In many respects, Oreó's racial heritage is taken for granted; it is not taboo, tragedy, or trophy. Yet it does contribute to new understandings of race and the possibilities and mobilities of racial mixture; additionally, it fits solidly within discourses of mixed race identity that seek utopian spaces of harmony and wholeness within individuals and, by extension, within society. Likewise, the novel seeks to understand these present and future possibilities of twoness by confronting the significance of personal and collective history and by grappling with the contradictions and tensions that this history causes in the present moment. *Oreo* offers space on the map of human existence for those normally fixed at the intersection of precise lines to travel, to trek beyond the boundaries of delineated categories, and to traverse the possibilities of mobile and multifaceted identities.

Yet given the utopian tendencies of the quest motif, it would seem that positing mixed-race existence as quest is problematic, suggesting as it does the impossibility of successful completion, the failure of attaining the desired utopia. Likewise, the notion of the mixed individual as traveler is equally problematic, since it attempts to leave

behind the conflict of the present moment and context, assuming the existence of a utopia in which the current crisis will vanish. As with all utopic longings, then, these metaphors of mixed-race identity as quest and the individual as traveler seek to displace the conflict and racial crisis of the here and now outside the realm of the unattainable utopia. After all, what is ultimately important to Oreó's identity has little to do with her predetermined utopian goal—finding her father and suddenly knowing the secret of her birth—which, after additional searching, she learns was the result of artificial insemination, again suggesting the text's difficulty in supporting the possibility of successful interracial romance. Through the secret of Oreó's birth, Ross ultimately problematizes the "extent to which identity, kinship, and heritage are constructed around race, culture, and economics," and questions "the 'natural' bond presumed to exist between parent and child" (Mullen, *Foreword* xxv).<sup>14</sup> In so doing, Ross also suggests what *is* important in constructing Oreó's identity: that Oreó is able to play with the boundaries of race and gender identity, to foreground different parts of herself in different contexts, and to enact each of these parts in various circumstances and for various purposes. She is a utopian character not limited by stereotypes of race or gender but one who, instead, offers new options for identity through an understanding of history and through broadened understandings of the present and future. She illustrates the problematic metaphors of mixed race identity that suggest such individuals are travelers to utopian spaces of racial harmony, pioneers who may lead society to a utopian future. Indeed, Ross's character is a precursor for postmodern imaginings of racial mixture; she is representative of metaphors that acknowledge an Oreó as made of both cookie and cream, that depict the mixed-race individual as two together, no matter where that one (or two-in-one) may travel.

## Notes

1. Cf. Root.
2. According to Groover, "The notion of spiritual quest as a quintessential American experience is central to both American mythology and literature. . . . Early Puritan texts depict the English colonists' literal sojourn in the New England wilderness as a spiritual descent into the wilderness of the soul. . . ." (1). Elaborating upon this idea, Groover turns to the work of R. W. B. Lewis, who wrote that "The 'authentic American' . . . derives from the Biblical Adam, 'a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history' " (3).
3. As Nina Baym contends, quest motifs enforce a common myth about the individual's relationship to society:  
The myth narrates a confrontation of the American individual, the pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances, with the promise offered by the idea of America. The promise is the deeply romantic one that in this new land, untrammelled by history and social accident, a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition. Behind this promise is the assurance that individuals come before society, that they exist in some meaningful sense prior to, and apart from, societies in which they happen to find themselves. The myth also holds that, as something artificial and secondary to human nature, society exerts an unmitigatedly destructive pressure on individuality. (qtd. in Groover 3)
4. Bost argues, "Only a few African-Americans who successfully manipulated, subverted, or masked racial identity succeeded in overcoming those (in)visible [racial] barriers" (35). Thus, she suggests that those who pass are really blacks in disguise, rather than whites or something between the two poles.
5. As Zack has remarked, "the American problem of mixed race creates crises of personal identity if personal identity must be based on individual family histories." Zack elaborates:  
If designated black Americans are not racially pure . . . then individual attempts to identify the self on a foundation of family history, where the individual identifies with black forebears, will be seriously frustrated by the presence of oppressive white forebears. Designated black Americans who are racially mixed and who identify with their white ancestors will face a different problem of accepting as part of their identity black ancestors who have been devalued by white ancestors. (65)
6. "This image of the mature, fully developed person as one who has successfully separated and differentiated from others recalls [R. W. B.] Lewis's description of the mythic American Adam, 'untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling' " (Groover 4).
7. Jewish participation in the modern US Civil Rights Movement is widely documented. Indeed, as Azoulay and others have noted, many similarities exist between African American and Jewish identities, allowing the possibility of solidarity in political movements.
8. As a final school assignment, Oreo rewrites a "standard treatise" in her own words, paying attention to only the sound—and not the sense—of her diction. "Thus a typical sentence in *Fallow*: 'Wheat farm B showed a declining profit-loss ratio during the harvest season,' became in Oreo's manuscript: 'Oat ranch wasp played the drooping excess-death proportion while a crop pepper' " (84).
9. Theseus, however, does spend 20 years on his quest—years that absent him from his wife and the son he's never seen. It can be said, then, that Theseus does ignore community even though his quest is one to seek out ancestry.
10. In keeping with the novel's subversions of logic, the list of clues that Oreo's father leaves actually predict the experiences of Oreo's journey in search of her father—events that Samuel could not have known beforehand. In many instances, the novel calls on readers to suspend their disbelief; however, these instances often read less like flaws than as examples of Ross's literary playfulness and challenge of conventions.
11. The novel's prominent gender and race critiques make it a radical statement for its era; as Mullen also notes, the novel's "title, plot, subject matter, and irreverent satire must have been at odds with the cultural nationalism of other works published by black writers in the 1970s, not to mention the works of established Jewish authors such as Saul Bellow. . ." (*Not* par. 9).
12. In 1967, the Supreme Court declared anti-miscegenation laws to be unconstitutional in *Loving vs. Virginia*.
13. Of course, black women and men have been stereotyped by white supremacist ideology as both hypersexual and nonsexual throughout US history and for particular reasons. As West notes, "The dominant myths draw black women and men either as threatening creatures who have the potential for sexual power over whites, or as harmless, desexed underlings of a white culture" (119).
14. The presence of artificial insemination may suggest artificiality within race mixture. Conversely, it could be read as a comment on the *diminished* importance of the father's presence, not only after birth but even at conception.

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