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70's "Miscegenation" and Blaxploitation: Fran Ross's Interracial *Oreo*, and
the Super Bad Blaxploitation Hero

Corrine Esther Collins

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

70's "Miscegenation" and Blaxploitation: Fran Ross's Interracial *Oreo*, and the Super Bad Blaxploitation Hero

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Fran Ross's only novel, *Oreo*, explores the nature of multiethnic American identities through an empowered female character that embarks on a Theseus-like journey. Ross devotes significant portions of the novel to the introduction of *Oreo*'s family and individual character, in order to carefully outline her interracial and multiethnic upbringing as an African-Jewish American girl. In order to understand *Oreo*'s political and aesthetic sensibilities, this thesis explores the cinematic representations of interracial relationships during the time that *Oreo* was written, and argues that Fran Ross's main character is in direct conversation with the predominant 70s black movie and political culture of blaxploitation and Black nationalism.

Blaxploitation cinema's rise during the early 70s was facilitated by a burgeoning literary genre depicting an urban black experience aligned with Black nationalist ideologies, to which Fran Ross responds with her interracial protagonist. While not all Black nationalist leaders and supporters felt that blaxploitation movies furthered the revolution, the politics of the movement were still present in the movies, especially in regard to interracial relationships. Black nationalist ideologies regarding interracial relationships positioned sexual relationships between black people and white people as counter-revolutionary, because they did not result in the propagation of the black race, and were reminiscent of the rapes that occurred during the slave period and beyond.

In contrast with these cinematic depictions, *Oreo* is a desexualized, witty, and athletic mixed raced female, who challenges the stereotypes of black cinematic culture and the politics of Black nationalism. As *Oreo* was written at the end of the blaxploitation genre's height (1974), its politics appear to be in direct dialogue with the representation of blackness in the movie genre. Ross even goes as far as rewriting scenes and stereotypes from blaxploitation movies, positioning *Oreo* as a critique of the Blaxploitation genre, and the genre's Black nationalist political agenda surrounding interracial relationships.

Keywords: Fran Ross, *Oreo*, Blaxploitation, *Shaft*, *Superfly*, *Foxy Brown*, *Coffy*, Interracial, Hybridity, Racial Identity

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70's "Miscegenation" and Blaxploitation: Fran Ross's Interracial *Oreo*, and
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1. Introduction

The early 1970s saw a huge shift in the cinematic representation of African Americans and the influence of black film on mainstream Hollywood production. While, historically, blackness was limited to a cinematic minority that functioned as a set of stereotypes, early 70s cinema saw a significant shift in the characterizations of African Americans and blackness, as black actors played more autonomous, complex characters and roles. Critical attention paid to the burgeoning black presence in 70s cinema focuses almost entirely on Hollywood's exploitation of the black film industry,¹ which earned the movie genre's name "blaxploitation."² However, these movies were a popular 70s cinematic experience for black and white audiences that generated money for the African American community,³ and the term was considered controversial by those involved in the movies' production.⁴ The Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, and a rising literary genre depicting urban African American life in part facilitated this shift in cinematic culture.

African American novelist Fran Ross wrote her first and only novel *Oreo* (1974) at the zenith of blaxploitation movie culture in 1974. In it, she explores the nature of multiethnic American identities. In order to understand *Oreo*'s political and aesthetic sensibilities, this thesis explores the cinematic representations of interracial sexuality during the blaxploitation period, comparing this often segregationist and stereotypical narrative of interracial sexuality to the seamless hybridity of *Oreo*, and the failed but loving interracial relationship of *Oreo*'s parents. Fran Ross positions *Oreo* as a critique of the blaxploitation period, by not only creating a

character that directly contrasts the stereotypical heroes and heroines of the time, but also by rewriting stereotypes and scenes from the movies, placing her interracial protagonist at the center.

Extant or existing criticism on the blaxploitation genre's depiction of interracial sexuality and the permutations of white and black bodies in congruence within a movie culture that reflects Black Nationalist ideologies of racial purity, especially in an America where interracial marriage was newly legal, is almost nil or non-existent. As such, Ross's *Oreo* is pioneering in her dialogue with blaxploitation and popular culture, as she addresses interracial relationships and interracial children directly. Poet Harryette Mullen places the novel within its cultural context in the book's foreword as she claims that *Oreo* "is notable for its satirical response to the racial and sexual politics of the 1970s" (Foreword xvii); however, Mullen does not discuss the specific filmic representations of interracial romance in popular culture. As blaxploitation provided audiences with some of the earliest scenes of interracial sexuality, and the Black nationalist movement opposed interracial relations, Ross's interracial heroine is in direct dialogue with these political and cultural conversations.

By conducting this rewriting of blaxploitation cinema with an interracial feminist heroine, Ross argues that racial equality comes through cultural hybridity, rather than separatism. *Oreo*'s satirical nature positions this critique of 70s black politics as a witty drama, reflecting not only her well-adapted protagonist, but also Ross herself. Formally, the text functions as a hybrid canvas on which Ross writes her knowledge of multiple language and cultural traditions, as she combines both African American vernacular speech and Yiddish into the text seamlessly. Mullen notes that the novel "like it's eponymous heroine, ... is a hybrid, a product of racial and cultural miscegenation" (Foreword xix). While there is limited information about Ross's life, it would

appear that Oreo (the character) is a literary manifestation of Ross the cultural hybrid, who is able to navigate both African American and Jewish cultural traditions. As Gabrielle Foreman and Michelle Stein-Erers note, “*Oreo* is full of in-jokes that show Ross’s familiarity with a multiplicity of places and cultures” (36), and the text itself is thus a “hybrid structure” (36), displaying Ross’s own adept ability at blending two cultures.

The effortless hybridity with which Ross’s Oreo is able to construct racial and cultural identities testifies of the author’s own hybridity. In fact, Foreman and Stein-Erers say that Ross “has to be Jewish” (36); however, Haryette Mullen notes that as a child Ross “often heard Yiddish spoken” (Foreword xiv), and attended a high school “where the student body at the time was predominantly white and Jewish” (Foreword xiv), placing Ross’s cultural hybridity in childhood experiences within a polyglot, multiethnic, and multiracial community. As a result, Ross modeled her novel after the type of hybridity she wished for America: it combines Greek myth, foodways, folklore, African American and Jewish vernaculars, math, movies and other cultural artifacts to construct a text that questions how we navigate an inevitably hybrid American cultural space. As a result, readers are led to ask: “Was she satirizing the sheer messiness of how we acquire exclusive but not mutual identities?” (Foreman and Stein-Erers 36).

Naming the novel *Oreo* might be an answer to that question, as the word “Oreo” has been, and still is, used to mock black people that have not behaved according to certain stereotypes, some of which are seen in the blaxploitation genre. The naming of *Oreo* is clearly a commentary on how Americans appear to require mutually exclusive racial identities for people that are not only racially hybrid, but culturally also. Although Oreo is of black descent, she is not fully black, and Ross further complicates the discussion of multiethnicity by making Oreo a mix of two minority cultures: African and Jewish American. However, as Mullen notes, “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 favourite cookie'" ("Apple Pie" 108), and the significance of Oreo's name is not only in the cookie's mixture of black and white, but as a representation of, and response to, American popular culture and blaxploitation's separatist politics. As "America's favourite cookie" hybrid, Oreo is able to navigate variegated cultural experiences through hybridity, suggesting that America's need for mutually exclusive racial and cultural identities is grossly miscalculated.

2. The Black Body and the White Gaze

The underlying assumptions of Hollywood's depiction of interracial relationships have their origins in colonialism. In Elise Lemire's *"Miscegenation": Making Race in America*, she notes that anti-miscegenation legislation originates in the white construction of the black hypersexual body, and the belief that racial attributes had biological determinates, and vice versa. According to Lemire, the first American discussion of interracial sex was "sparked by a report published in Richmond, Virginia, in 1802, that the author of the Declaration of Independence was having sex with one of his slave women" (1): 19th century images of interracial sex were often used as propaganda for the anti-abolitionist cause,⁵ even though interracial rape occurred throughout the slave trade and, generally, as black female slaves being raped by their more powerful enslavers. These concerns were exacerbated by anxieties over the Civil War, and the suggestion that freeing slaves would result in cultural and racial intermingling. This positioned interracial sex as biologically unacceptable for whites,⁶ even though, conceptually, whiteness predated the negative perception and signification of black bodies.

The consequence of this "union," the biracial child, quickly complicated black-white sexual interactions, and according to Naomi Angel, "The first American statute explicitly

forbidding inter-racial sex was passed in Maryland in 1661, making [consensual] unions between white women and black men a criminal act” (242). It is important to note that this legislation prevented interracial sexual activity, consensual and not (on both parts), between black men and white women only, as the fear of interracial sexuality lay not only in the disintegration of the pure white race, but also the birth of technically free biracial children to white mothers. The passing of this legislation not only ensured that biracial children were slaves, as white women were prohibited from having sexual relations with black men, but also, as Angel states, “[allowed] white men to engage in sexual relations with, or rape, black women” (242). After African Americans were declared free with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, Jim Crow laws⁷ were established to govern black behavior in white society, and were reflected in popular culture movies like D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).⁸ Such movies provided white audiences with enabling narratives of white superiority while demonizing black masculinity as sexually rapacious.⁹

African American leaders and scholars readily responded to the acceptance of white superiority and the mainstream’s rejection of self-defined black identities. W.E.B Du Bois offers an excellent example in his now classic collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), in which he addresses the construction of black American identity and the trauma of slave history. Du Bois relates his personal experience as a black man in America, and describes it as “double consciousness”: a “sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others ... two warring ideals in one dark body” (9), positioning blackness as a negatively defined societal construct that has been assimilated into the black American psyche. That this twoness also creates divisions within the African American throughout the early 20th century, and specifically in the community and on the silver screen, is exemplified by the intraracial politics of stock characters

like those played by Stepin Fetchit (Lincoln Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry) and the obedient Uncle Tom, a throwback to the obsequious behavior of Harriet Beecher Stowe's protagonist in her classic 19th century novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).

Du Bois' twoness is related to the destruction of the African American family and the rape of female slaves. Du Bois describes this trauma as "The red stain of bastardy, which two centuries of systematic legal defilement of Negro women had stamped upon his race . . . threatening almost the obliteration of the Negro home" (13). While Du Bois treats only the narrative of black women being predated, the rape of black men adds another count to black male emasculation, and I would argue that beyond the continued emasculation of black men is another twoness regarding interracial sexuality's acceptability in the free world. This twoness is reflected in the blaxploitation genre as a response to previous on-screen depictions of interracial relationships, and its promotion of black-white sex as an act of predation or power. This dualism, I maintain, also puts the movies in conversation with Ross's *Oreo* because, as Mullen notes, "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" ("Apple Pie" 126). In sum, Ross questions Black nationalism's separatist politics and blaxploitation's dismissal of interracial romance. Ross's text does not in any way incorporate these narratives of corrupted interracial sexuality, but instead presents a progressive vision of interracial America without anti-miscegenation law.

In 1967, seven years before Ross published her novel, anti-miscegenation laws were expunged from American law books with the *Loving v. Virginia* case.¹⁰ However, while the legality of interracial unions changed, societal expectation was still informed by previous cultural narratives. As Naomi Angel writes, "concerns about the offspring of these unions

remained at the forefront of race discourses” (245), and these considerations were especially important in relation to the protection of the white race.

3. Blaxploitation and Black Nationalism

Like those of pre 70s movie culture, some of the most influential literary depictions of the lives of African Americans were limited to stereotypes of blackness, and were written by white authors.¹¹ One particularly significant work, written by Iceberg Slim, is one of the first urban African American novels that dealt with the gritty underground of urban African American culture.¹² *Pimp: The Story of my Life* (1969), Iceberg’s “street novel,” as the genre is called today, met the expectations of the white and black readerships as it presents black stereotypes along with empowered black males and disempowered black women, and was arguably the catalyst for black urban life’s metamorphosis into cinematic culture.¹³ As a result, *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971), which scholars argue is the first blaxploitation movie,¹⁴ provided the groundwork for the creation of over two hundred blaxploitation movies within a four-year period,¹⁵ all featuring the same strong, virile, black men that are present in Iceberg Slim’s novels.

Blaxploitation cinema’s rise during the early 70s complicit with, and critical of, Black nationalist ideologies. The Black nationalist movement, also called the Black Power Movement and associated with Malcolm X, functioned as a political ideology powerhouse for the African American community through the 60s and 70s, and Larry Neal described it as the “Spiritual Sister” of the Black Arts Movement (29) as it placed certain expectations on black artists. While plurality existed in the Black nationalist movement,¹⁶ a single common thread of advancing and perpetuating the black race appeared to run through all groups, and as F. James Davis notes, “the growth of national pride ... apparently [became] an important deterrent to sexual contact and

marriage with whites” (74). The necessity of preserving and perpetuating the black race cast interracial relationships as counterrevolutionary.

However, while some Black nationalist leaders, such as Elijah Muhammad the founder of the Nation of Islam (the Black Muslims), were very vocal about their opposition to interracial mixing,¹⁷ some leaders were married to white women themselves. Social scientist William Barry Furlong remarks in his 1972 notes on Black Power rallies that “none of the major speakers ... ever appear with their white wives ... and leaders seem to realize that they would jeopardize their positions by dating or marrying white women” (126). Even though multiple black leaders were married to white women, in the interests of the movement they did not actively involve these women in their politics. As such, it could be argued that *Oreo*'s hybridity is a direct response to this secrecy within the Black nationalist movement, and as Mullen notes, *Oreo* “articulate[s] astute critiques of America's hypocrisy about race” (Foreword xii). LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), one of the architects of the Black Arts Movement, was a major critic of black and white union, although, ironically, he was once interracially married. In his play *Madheart*, the black female characters directly say that black men will “walk around white ladies breathing their stink, and lose seed, [their] future to them” (583), positioning white women as temptresses for black males, and obstacles to the perpetuation of the black race. These are also the major themes of his best known plays *The Dutchman* and *The Slave*.

As Black nationalists were trying to build a black nation, they believed it necessitated the regulation of black female bodies; they often demanded that black women be subsumed for the good of the movement.¹⁸ However, this continued historical reading of interracial sexuality did not entirely prohibit interracial sex in the minds of all leaders, and as Shane Trudell Verge notes, “Eldridge Cleaver in his book *Soul on Ice*, for example, encourages black men to rape white

women ... That is, Cleaver asserts that black males should rape white women because they have been castrated and because they must exercise revenge ... against the loss of their power as men” (104). Cleaver casts interracial rape as black masculinity reasserting itself, and also supports that black men should rape black women also; this is a more than adequate example black leaders requiring the needs of black women to be subsumed for the good of the movement. While blaxploitation does not generally depict black characters raping white women, I would argue that their characterization of interracial relationships functions along the same vectors as Cleaver’s rape counsel: to regain power. In a climate where interracial relationships were taboo on both sides of the color line, sex with white women displayed a complete indifference towards the white mainstream, and it both conformed to and contradicted the standards of Black nationalism. *Oreo*’s characterization of these putatively illicit interracial relationships positions the novel as a societal critique of Black nationalist and white supremacist ideologies, and as Tru Leverette notes, “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” (82). In sum, Ross complicates Black nationalist racial ideologies and the cinematic representations of race during the blaxploitation period.

Showing on-screen interracial relationships was new in late 60s and 70s cinematic culture, even though the trope of the “tragic mulatto” had been widespread throughout early 20th century cinema.¹⁹ In fact, until *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967), a motion picture directed and produced by Stanley Kramer, was released, there were almost no presentations of interracial relationships, and any resulting biracial children were shown as vehemently undesirable.²⁰ While *Guess* has been praised for its revolutionary politics, at a time when the legalization of interracial sexuality was being written into federal law, it has also been heavily critiqued for desexualizing

the interracial relationship to satiate white audiences. Ed Guerrero describes blaxploitation's response to this white washing as "black dissatisfaction with the Sidney Poitier 'star' image and its integrationist film narrative" (*Framing Blackness* 70). In addition, Clifford Mason's famous article, "Why Does White America Love Sidney Poitier So Much?" describes Sidney Poitier as "a good boy in a totally white world, with no wife, no sweetheart, no woman to love or kiss, helping the white man solve the white man's problems" (21), directly addressing Poitier's desexualized on-screen persona.²¹ The tension between Sidney Poitier's image and the black community's perception of an adequate black star lead to blaxploitation's images of hypersexual masculinity; however, both Poitier's roles and blaxploitation stars conformed to stereotypes of the obedient tom and the aggressive buck.

Historian Robin Kelley describes pre blaxploitation movies as "White commentators ... chronically exoticizing urban communities for mainly white and middle-class consumption" (20), especially as these movies often depicted jobless black youths drinking on street corners. While the these movies attempted to depict the gaps between "authentic" black culture and white culture, black audiences became increasingly frustrated with the proliferation of the passive black male, even if that male was the often professional and well-mannered Sidney Poitier.²² Eithne Quinn positions the movie *Super Fly* (1972), a movie directed by black film maker Gordon Parks, as a direct response to this malaise: Quinn describes the blaxploitation genre as the black community's "own less passive version of ghetto masculinity that catered primarily to black appetites" (92). This cinematic shift placed blackness, as depicted by the black community itself, on the center stage. Movies like *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), *Shaft* (1971), *Superfly* (1972), *Coffy* (1973), *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), and *Foxy Brown* (1974) also presented superheroes that spoke to young generations of black men and women, and expressed what

Guerrero terms, “the rising political and social consciousness of black people ... which translated into a large black audience thirsting to see their full humanity depicted on the commercial cinema screen” (*Framing Blackness* 69). This thirst for the black experience came as a direct response to Hollywood race movies of the past, and the on screen personas of Sidney Poitier, whose typical audience was 70% white.²³

However, despite the popularity of blaxploitation movies, the genre came under attack from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for reducing the black experience to glorified scenes of violence, drug abuse, stereotypes, and misogyny, as well as an effort to mock the Black nationalist movement.²⁴ Film historian and scholar Daniel J. Leab describes the genre as being “filled with sadistic brutality, sleazy-sex, venomous racial slurs, and the argot of the streets. Social commentary of any kind was kept at a minimum” (qtd. in Briggs 28); nevertheless, scholars and historians note that even though blaxploitation movies depicted black stereotypes, these productions also provided work for black people in a limited industry. Movies like *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, *Shaft*, and *Superfly* had either all, or mostly, black production crews, and both *Sweet Sweetback* and *Super Fly* were produced independently and funded by black businesses. Thus, while blaxploitation profited white Hollywood, it was also, in reality, putting money in black pockets.

Although blaxploitation’s treatment of interracial relationships aligns with Black nationalist politics, many of its central characters have altercations with Black nationalist ideologies. In *Super Fly* and *The Mack* both heroes, Priest and Goldie, dismiss the tactics of the movement and suggest that their personal wealth is more important. As Priest interacts with a Black nationalist who tries to convince him to quit hustling, he says “you go get you a gun and all those black folks you keep doin’ so much talkin’ about. Get guns, and come back ready to go

down, then I'll be right down front killin' whitey. But until you can do that, you go sing your marching songs someplace else. Now we're through talkin'" (*Super Fly*). Similarly, Goldie has multiple interactions with his Black nationalist brother who questions him for being a pimp. In justification of his lifestyle Goldie says, "Being rich and black means something, man, being poor and black don't mean shit ... It's sick when you got a chance to get out of a rat-infested ghetto and you don't" (*The Mack*). Goldie's explanation implies that any rich black man is a victor over the system, even if he predares women and men to do it.

These interactions between blaxploitation heroes and Black nationalists show the twoness blaxploitation directors and writers had about the movement, and echo what Haryette Mullen notes about *Oreo*: "Ross satirically notes the pimping of creativity that capitalist cultural production requires" ("Apple Pie" 122). The "pimping" that Mullen mentions is reflected in the term blaxploitation itself, especially since black directors had license with their creative direction but ultimately had to make movies that white Hollywood would purchase. In addition to this critique, it is important to note that while *Super Fly* and *The Mack* present Black nationalists negatively, in *Coffy*, *Cleopatra Jones*, and *Foxy Brown* Black nationalists help these women overcome their white enemies, and avenge black deaths and rapes. It appears that when interracial rape and murder are involved in female-led blaxploitation movies, Black nationalism enacts an historical revenge, but since all the interracial sex in male-led blaxploitation movies is consensual and occurring between white women and black men, there is no need for Black nationalist revenge and nationalists are instead mocked.

It is clear that to Ross this cinematic response is inadequate for the racial tensions between black and white communities. As she creates a novel like *Oreo*, with a mixed race, female, virginal protagonist, she defies the expectations of the political, cinematic, and literary

climate by removing the power from the masculine and placing it with the feminine, focusing on hybridity rather than separatism. Tru Leverette describes *Oreo* as a novel that was “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” (80); Leverette’s positioning of Black nationalism in discord with the novel is a reflection of the divergent, complex, and multifaceted ideologies of the movement, and Ross herself. Leverette acknowledges that *Oreo* “embodies Civil Rights ideologies of integration in an historical and textual setting of Black nationalism and separatism” (82), but responds to them with a hybrid female character that completely undercuts these narratives. As Leverette also notes, “[the Black nationalist movement was] an age when women often were seen as bodies in service to the movement” (87), making *Oreo*’s maintained virginity a statement about what the woman’s place should be in revolution: not on her back.

Oreo’s mixed racedness—she is both black and Jewish—further problematizes Black nationalist thoughts and demands. As Wilfred D. Samuels and Erik Ludwig outline in their paper “Crossing Racial Boundaries in Fran Ross’s Satirical Novel *Oreo*,” *Oreo* deviates from the expectations of the Black Arts Movement, as the protagonist does not embody the legitimate blackness that Amiri Baraka desired of black artists. In his poem “Black Art,” Baraka “caustically derides and denigrates Jews and their culture, particularly their role as urban merchants and vendors—‘owner-Jews’—who sell their goods in the black ghettos but do not live there, or hire blacks who do” (Samuels and Ludwig 1).²⁵ This places Ross’s choice of a mixed race, half Jewish, half black, female protagonist in direct conversation with, and a subversion of, the Black Arts and Black nationalist movements.

In order to explore these notions of racial separation Ross presents race as a fluid, and perhaps non-existent, concept by using images and charts to discuss the spectrum of the varying

skin colors of her characters. These graphs and charts further engage *Oreo* with the cultural climate of the time by representing the hilarity, offensiveness, and insidiousness of racial stereotypes. As Ross describes Helen's parents (Oreo's grandparents), she builds a connection between the text and Baraka's concern about "owner-Jews," as Helen's father's occupation is described as a "mail-order business" whose clientele were mostly Jewish, and "whom he overcharged outrageously" (6). This connection between Baraka and the text exposes two-way prejudices between the black and Jewish communities, positions Oreo as a hybrid who is able to bridge those differences, and Helen as a woman who sees beyond the expectations of her anti-Semitic father. As Helen tells her father, James, about her impending marriage to Shmuel Schwartz, he is described as croaking "one anti-Semitic 'Goldberg!' before he turned to stone, as it were, in his straight-backed chair, his body a rigid half swastika, discounting, of course, head, hands, and feet" (4), and Ross provides the reader with an image of the scene:



As Ross incorporates the figure of the half swastika the reader is informed of James's anti-Semitism, especially as she mentions the Holocaust in reference to his "death." However, important to note here is Ross's "killing off" of an older generation whose subscription to stereotypes rage against the marriage of Helen and Samuel. The interracial relationship renders Helen's father incapacitated, and Samuel's mother dead; it is necessary for them to be removed from the text so that the failure of Helen and Samuel's relationship is not attributed to the racial or cultural differences and expectations of their family, but instead to individual incompatibilities.

Ross's engagement with racial stereotypes is also presented in the way she introduces her characters: according to their racial characteristics. As Ross begins to describe the members of the Clark family, she constructs a table of skin color with both numbers and a physical description.

Colors of black people			
white	high yellow (pronounced YAL-la)	yellow	light-skinned
1	2	3	4
light brown-skinned	brown-skinned	dark brown-skinned	
5	6	7	
dark-skinned	very dark-skinned	black	
8	9	10	

The table provides the reader with a general scale of “blackness,” operating under the assumption that her audience would care what skin tones the characters were, or are at least supposed to care. By doing this, as Mullen argues, “Ross’s novel calls attention to the hybridity rather than the racial or cultural purity of African Americans” (Foreword xii-xiii). This, again, relates to the political climate and the permutations of racial separatism and anti-miscegenation culture. The prohibition of interracial sexuality makes the biracial child an undesirable output of interracial relationships, and emphasizes the phenotypical manifestations of race. Ross addresses and debunks both with her color chart.

When Ross introduces James and Louise Butler (Oreo’s maternal grandparents), she is careful to note that they are on opposite ends of the color spectrum: “In the DNA crapshoot for skin color, when the die was cast, so was the dye. James came out nearest the color of the pips (on the scale opposite, he is a 10), his wife the cube. Louise is fair, very fair, an albino *manquée* (a just-off-the-scale -1)” (4). Ross’s introduction of the characters reveals some of her ideologies regarding race and interracial relationships. As Ross describes skin color as a “crapshoot,” she gestures that the supposed phenotypical manifestations of race are in fact random, especially as

Louise is whiter than white, and James is a 10, jet black. Constructing Oreó's maternal grandparents as phenotypically interracial contributes to the irony of Helen and Shmuel's situation as an interracial couple: even though James' wife looks white, he is unwilling to de-essentialize race and support his daughter's marriage to a Jewish man. Ross's "killing off" of James then becomes a removal of not only an anti-Semite, but also a man who overemphasizes the significance of race, even though he is himself a cultural hybrid.²⁶

Similarly, when Samuel's mother, Frieda Schwartz, is informed of her son's marriage to a black girl, she dies on the spot. However, Ross does not simply give us the image of Frieda's death, but also Frieda's visualization of Samuel and Helen's relationship: "the blood souged and staggered in all her conduits as she picture the chiaroscuro of the white-satin *chuppa* and the *schvartze*'s skin ... she let out a great *geshrei* and dropped dead of a racist/my-son-the-bum coronary" (3). Ross provides the readers with this image *before* she establishes Helen's place on the color scale of blackness, but it is interesting to note that, again, the older generation appears to be concerned with the appearance of skin colors mixing, rather than the culturally hybrid world they all participate in. As readers are introduced to Helen Clark, she is positioned as a 4 on the color scale, or a "light-skinned" woman (5), directly contrasting Frieda's image of her, and before the color of her skin is mentioned, she is described as a "Singer, pianist, mimic, [and] math freak" (5), placing her skin as not even secondary, but quinternary to her identity. Ross is yet again de-essentializing race in order to establish an environment where Oreó can be born and raised as a cultural and racial hybrid, a theme that puts her in direct conversation with blaxploitation.

4. The Black Buck

In the following three sections I will discuss the three most common black stereotypes present in the blaxploitation genre and how Ross treats them in the novel: the black buck, the exploitative pimp, the violated female. Donald Bogle describes the blaxploitation period of the early 70s as “*the age of the buck*, a period when a band of aggressive, pistol-packing, sexually-charged urban cowboys set off on a heavy rampage” (232), and the characters of Sweetback, Shaft, and Priest certainly fit these stereotypes. In *Sweetback*, *Shaft*, and *Superfly* sexual virility and violence are the establishing narratives of the black male, but while trying to avoid Poitier’s asexual tom narrative, the movies “fell ... into the trap of presenting the wildly sexual man” (Bogle 240). However, blaxploitation movies do adapt these narratives of blackness by creating endings where the black heroes remain unscarred, unharmed, and unpunished for their actions, unlike the reality of African American life.

In *Shaft* and *Superfly* black masculine autonomy is illustrated through Shaft and Priest’s disregard for social constructions of interracial sex. Ed Guerrero comments that Priest’s white girlfriend as “mandatory” and “eager” (*Framing Blackness* 95), and in contrast, that Shaft’s black girlfriend “[satisfies] the expectations of cultural nationalism” (*Framing Blackness* 93). Guerrero’s description of the nature of Shaft and Priest’s relationships reflects the filmic representations of these women, and suggests that blaxploitation does not deal with interracial sexuality adequately. From the very opening of the movie *Shaft*, John Shaft is presented as a strong, autonomous, stylish, and sexy black man. Before we have any real dialogue Isaac Hayes further introduces Shaft in his lyrics/or praisesong as “the black private dick that’s the sex machine to all the chicks”; Shaft is immediately hypersexual not only because of this introduction, but also his name, which references the phallus. This narrative of black male sexuality continues throughout the movie, especially in Shaft’s interactions with white people.

As Sergeant Tom Hannon asks Shaft where he is going, Shaft responds, “To get laid, where the hell are you going?” and when Vic Androzzi asks Shaft what information he has on the case, Shaft responds, “I got laid.” It is clear that Shaft is more than willing to present himself as the stereotypical hypersexualized black man, and that his sexuality helps him establish superiority over his white counterparts.

When Shaft meets Linda, a white woman, at a bar and takes her home, Shaft is shown to further disregard whiteness. As Linda wakes up and gathers her clothes, Shaft tells her to leave and to close the door behind her, without any real comment on their night together. Linda responds: “Hey, close it yourself, shitty.” Shaft’s treatment of this woman reflects the expectation that white women who partner with black men are prostitutes who can be dismissed,²⁷ and presents interracial relations as transient. After Shaft’s sexual prowess is established, his actions constantly reinforce narratives of a stereotypical blackness that uses and disposes of white women. Unlike the white woman who is dismissed as a transient in Shaft’s sexual milieu, Shaft’s black girlfriend, Ellie, is presented as his long-term love interest, even though Shaft is unfaithful to her, and their sexual interaction is shown in a prolonged sex scene backed by Hays’s musical score. In this sense, intraracial relationships are shown to be the desirable norm for black men.

Similarly to Shaft, *Superfly*’s Priest is also introduced as a sexually potent black buck, but interracial sexuality is more directly confronted by director Gordon Parks Jr. When Priest is introduced to the audience he is shown sitting up in bed, topless, and snorting coke, which immediately signals him as a sexual black body who clearly belongs to culture of Iceberg Slim’s pimp and drug novels. As the shot pans out, Priest’s white girlfriend, Cynthia, is shown lying beside him naked. Cynthia’s nudity positions her as vulnerable, while Priest’s partially clad body

signifies his dominance; he remains in control throughout the scene by barely even acknowledging her existence. As Priest prepares to leave, Cynthia asks him twice if he will be back soon and both times he does not answer. The scene cuts to Priest driving away, empowered by his identifiable role, looks, skin color, clothing, jewelry, and Rolls Royce. Cynthia is persona non-grata. Priest, the black buck, fulfills his entire purpose for being with Cynthia—to satiate his lust, be seen by those around him, and his need for conquest, while Cynthia is dismissed, much like a prostitute. Her position in the film is a device to establish Priest's disregard for, and way of signifying on, whiteness.

While there are only two scenes in the movie depicting Priest and Cynthia's relationship, they sandwich multiple interactions between Priest and his black girlfriend Georgia. The audience is introduced to Priest and Georgia's relationship as they sit in a bath together. In stark contrast to his exclusion of Cynthia, Priest tells Georgia that he will get them both out of the drug scene, making her a long-term presence in his life, and afterward they are intimate. Donald Bogle describes this scene as, "more graphic and lingering than any such scene in white movies of the time, and it looked as if it had been inserted simply to play on the legend of blacks' high-powered sexuality" (240), and while it has been argued that these prolonged sex scenes were attempts to heal the heterosexual pair,²⁸ it is clear that they pander to stereotypical notions of black hypersexuality. However, particularly important to note is the absence of explicit interracial sex—a filmic choice that does not defy convention in the revolutionary way blaxploitation films supposedly functioned. Instead black bodies are put on display.

As the movie continues, Priest and Cynthia's relationship is revealed to be a business decision on Priest's part. As Cynthia sits down next to Priest she says, "Those friends of mine wanna buy a pound of coke," and he responds that while she is not directly involved in the

business she is the best dealer he has. She answers by questioning his motives for being with her, and again Priest does not answer her directly, suggesting his motives are not out of genuine romantic interest. At this point in the movie, Cynthia is firmly established as Georgia's foil. This is made even clearer when Priest talks to Cynthia about his childhood. He states, "This whole number is summin' I thought I wanted ever since I was a kid. My hall, my vines, that wine you drinkin', and a woman like you," casting his desire of her as a way to achieve what he felt was impossible for black men to achieve in a predominantly white world. Yet, when Cynthia asks him if he does not want this dream anymore he says that he doesn't know. This interaction fully illustrates blaxploitation's use of white women to establish supersexual, empowered black men that fight against white society.

While Ross does not spend much time discussing the nature of Oreo's parents' (Helen and Samuel's) relationship, she is careful to establish, through her killing off of James and Frieda, that their relationship was not fully interfered with by family. Unlike the cinematic representations of the pre-blaxploitation period, Ross is not afraid to intimate that an interracial relationship involved sex, and unlike the blaxploitation period movies, Ross constructs a relationship that is serious and involves children. However, Leverette argues that "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" (84). In response to this criticism, I would suggest that Ross does plenty to establish the viability of Helen and Samuel's relationship, as it is Samuel's personal greed that ultimately causes it to fail.

On their first encounter, Helen is constructing a mathematical equation in her head while singing in the University choir. Ross describes their first meeting in terms of religious mysticism, comparing Samuel's reaction to Teresa of Avila's sensual, mystical experiences: "[Samuel] was seized with an emotion that mystics have often erroneously identified as ecstasy-*cum*-epiphany ... the hots. His accounting books fell to the floor" (7). Samuel's first encounter with Helen is immediately established as both a physical attraction and an emotional connection, as his reaction is presupposed with Helen being religiously connected to divinity. However, Ross is careful to also establish that Samuel and Helen do have a physical connection; nevertheless, their relationship is not entirely based on their sexual attraction, like the interracial relationships in the blaxploitation genre movies.

Ross's emphasis on the physical nature of Samuel and Helen's relationship responds to both Sidney Poitier and blaxploitation genre's depictions of interracial sexuality. By comparing Samuel's feelings to a religious experience Ross invokes the divine as an influence in Helen and Samuel's relationship, but by relating Samuel's feelings to Theresa of Avila, she is careful not to allow godliness to remove it from the sensual. Ross furthers this emphasis by placing literal emphasis (italics) on a specific word with sexual connotations. Her italicization of "*cum*" in "ecstasy-*cum*-epiphany" (7) functions as a signal that Helen and Samuel's relationship is sexual, and ultimately constructs this interracial couple as a response to the cinematic traditions that would position them as solely sexual, or solely platonic.

Ross's careful presentation of Samuel and Helen's relationship ensures that their joining through love is emphasized, and that their biracial children were never the unexpected or unwanted side effects of an illicit interracial relationship. In fact, Ross goes to great lengths to demonstrate how much Samuel and Helen wanted a child, as neither Oreo nor Jimmie C. were

conceived naturally. Although Oreó's version of her parents' relationship story appears a bit more sinister than the narrator's version, it appears that Helen and Samuel wanted children so very much that they were willing to use scientific aids: artificial insemination. While Oreó positions this aided pregnancy as having "had two fathers – Samuel at room temperature and Samuel frozen" (206), and constructs a more lustful version of her parents story, "Helen and Samuel meet in college, lust after each other ... In a moment of calm (while the sheets are being changed), they determine to give the world human evidence of their endearment" (204), it is clear that Helen and Samuel have created an intelligent, adaptable, beautiful, and culturally hybrid daughter, who can adequately negotiate the modern world. This positions their relationship, whether entirely lustful or otherwise, as a successful interracial romance.

Ross further inverts traditional narratives, as Leverette points out, because Oreó's absent father is Jewish, not black: "Unlike many other fictions of mixed-race heroines, however, the absent father in *Oreó* is white instead of black" (84). In addition to this, as far as we are aware, Samuel is never unfaithful to Helen, which subverts the blaxploitation narratives of male insatiable sexuality; however, Oreó does discover that her father is a patron of whorehouses and, as his soundman Slim describes, "LIKES DARK MEAT" (141). Although Ross does not say that Samuel is unfaithful to Helen, Oreó finds out that he does cheat on his second wife, which brings an interesting twist to Samuel as an absent father. While Samuel isn't represented as the stereotype of the traditional delinquent black father, he does embody some aspects of the blaxploitation buck. Although we do not know if infidelity was also a source of marital malaise between Helen and Samuel, we are mindful of the fact that Samuel's sexual appetite and selfishness had the potential to ruin their relationship, not its interracial nature.

5. The Sexploitative Pimp

The blaxploitation pimp and the hero often cross paths, and sometimes blend into one another, again showing the ways in which the political climate subsumed the needs of women. The pimp's presentation depicts the continued predation and enslavement of black women by black men and, as Guerrero states, "The devaluation of black women in blaxploitation was definitely aided, with few exceptions, by the figure of the sexexploitative pimp" (71). In addition, Harryette Mullen positions Iceberg Slim's pimp narratives as a major contributor to the blaxploitation genre's naissance: "Oreo'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" ("Apple Pie" 112). The pimp is present in many blaxploitation movies, and is both vilified and celebrated by different actors and directors.

While *Superfly* and *Shaft* do not present specific images of black female sexual subjugation, other than the main character's infidelities, the suggestion of this sexexploitation is definitely apparent in *Superfly*. As Priest threatens Freddie for not paying his debts, he says, "If you don't get that money to me tonight, I'm gonna put that young girl of yours out on whores' row," to which Freddie responds, "Priest, that's my wife you talkin' about." Priest's disregard for Freddie's wife as more than a "girl" or sexual object reflects his general lack of concern for black womanhood, honor, and fidelity, which contrasts Black nationalism's emphasis on the construction of strong black family unity.

The pimp narrative is further explored in *The Mack*, another blaxploitation movie that confronts the grittiness or urban life, but from the point of view of a pimp. As Goldie discusses his pimping operation with a more experienced pimp he is given the following advice about keeping his prostitutes in line, "Anybody can control a woman's body, see, but the key is to control her mind." Throughout the movie we see Goldie putting these words into practice as he

emotionally and physically abuses the women that work for him. In a scene where a prostitute explains that she has lost her night's wages because someone tried to kill her, he simply instructs her to go back out onto the street to re-earn what she has lost, exemplifying the individualistic, misogynistic attitude that consumes women, both black and white. In addition to his relationships with prostitutes, Goldie also develops an interracial romance, which is not received gladly. As Goldie sits in a restaurant with his white girlfriend, one of his black prostitutes says, "Here I am working my ass off, and he spending my money on some trashy white bitch!" Outside the restaurant two white police officers also comment on this relationship: "Sitting with that nice, white, pretty lady, and my buddy and I are out here freezing our asses off to protect people like you." From both of these comments we can see that Goldie's interracial relationship is looked down upon inside and outside of the black community. Nevertheless, the economy of black bodies in this movie is not entirely presented as the pivotal issue: although Goldie has scenes in which his Black nationalist brother tries to convince him not to predate black women, Goldie is ultimately positioned as the hero as he defeats his rival pimp and still remains a rich black man.

A similar pimp figure is also seen in *Coffy*, but unlike Goldie he is not presented as a hero. The movie opens with a man talking to a pimp about a woman (Coffy) who is waiting for him in his car; he responds, "I got plenty of tail, I got more than I can handle. I even got white tail." His assertion that he has white women is another demonstration of status; however, when he sees Coffy he is immediately transfixed and she is ultimately able to use her sexuality to lure him into a vulnerable position where she can kill him for making her sister a drug addict. Later in the movie Coffy encounters the eminent pimp King George and again uses her sexuality to infiltrate his call girl program to get him killed. Coffy's first client is an Italian friend of King George's

(Arturo Vitroni), who she tries to kill. As Coffy is preparing for their sexual act, she unzips Vitroni's pants and says, "Are you sure you're not just a little black?" which invokes the stereotype of the well-endowed black buck. As Vitroni and Coffy continue to interact, Coffy says, "Let me have your precious white body just this once" as she play-acts as the inferior but oversexed black woman. However, this reflects the intraracial racism we see within the pimp characters that value white women above black women: Coffy is playing the pathetic black woman who believes that white people are superior to black people.

The pimp figure is also present in Ross's novel as the brutal Parnell, who Oreo ultimately embarrasses and defeats more than once; as Mullen notes, Parnell is most likely Ross's reworking of a blaxploitation pimp ("Apple Pie" 112). When we are introduced to Parnell, he is described as having "ten prostitutes, five white, five black, in alternating colors" (146), and gliding his way down the street with the women in tow. Parnell's clothes are described in detail, and appear to be outrageously luxurious and attention grabbing: "He was fledged in a suit of pearlescent pink velvet, a soft dawn-gray shirt, a blushing-rise string tie" (147). Although slightly different, Ross's description of Parnell matches *The Mack's* Goldie, who walks around in an ochre velvet suit with matching hat and cape, and *Superfly's* Priest, who is always seen dressed in a matching suit and hat. Parnell is firmly linked with the blaxploitation pimp.

Oreo's first altercation with Parnell is a reaction to his public, prostitute-shaming, shoe-shining routine, after which Oreo devises a plan to publicly humiliate him. While Oreo succeeds in defying the pimp—she challenges his authority—she does not go as far as killing him as does Coffy. When Parnell encounters Oreo he considers her a potential prostitute, and focuses on her physical appearance; however, unlike the women of the blaxploitation genre, Oreo deftly deflects this attention and does not sexualize herself in order to enact her plan. When Parnell remarks that

Oreo is “big stuff,” she looks at his crotch and says, “Hello, *no* stuff” (159), emasculating him by signifying on the size of his phallus and masculinity, especially in relation to the blaxploitation pimp and the black buck that are supposedly well endowed. When Oreo drops a ten-dollar bill onto the floor to distract Parnell, she embarrasses him in the name of empowered womanhood: “She switched her grip and instead gave him a grand-slam clout across the ass. If his howl meant anything, it meant that he was now the only person on the block with four cheeks to sit on. Parnell staggered and fell into the gutter ... Parnell’s suit was ruined” (149-50). Oreo does not only verbally humiliate Parnell, but also physically beats him, ruins his prized suit, and smears his public reputation. This display of physical and verbal ingenuity, without extreme violence, rewrites the blaxploitation pimp narrative by removing the pimp’s hero status, and shows that extreme violence is not always needed to enact defeat.

6. The Violated, Supersexual Female

The depiction of interracial relationships in *Foxy Brown* does not deviate from historical narratives of black sexuality. While Yvonne Sims categorizes characters like Foxy Brown and Cleopatra Jones as offering an “alternative image of Black femininity” (14), and Jamaica Kincaid says that “they are the only films to come out of Hollywood in a long time to show us a woman who is independent, resourceful, self-confident, strong and courageous” (53), I would argue that while they are more autonomous than previous black female characters, their presentation operates according to the supersexual black female stereotype. The title of the movie, which is taken from black vernacular, establishes Foxy as a sexual, desirable, enticing, and attractive presence, which is signified by a topless Foxy when she is first introduced to the audience. The further objectification of Foxy as simply a black female body is presented during the mandatory intraracial sex scene with the background music that features a chorus singing “coochie

coochie.” This lyrical choice continues narratives of black female objectification, and the literal reference to female genitalia (“coochie”) establishes Foxy’s value for the men she encounters in the movie.

As Foxy infiltrates a call girl operation she flaunts her sexuality to the prostitute ringleader Miss Catherine, and Miss Catherine’s lover Mr. Steve. Foxy’s overt sexuality feels particularly disturbing as black slave women, who were considered hypersexual beings, were blamed for their own rapes. As Foxy flaunts her body, the audience is presented with the image of a hypersexual black body, and ultimately, her white captors use this as a justification to sexually enslave her, saying that she is so sexual she would probably enjoy being raped. As Foxy and her partner Claudia, another black woman, arrive at the judges’ hotel room for their date, their blackness is instantly objectified as supersexual. One of the men comments, “I see Your Honor likes the dark meat,” and another says, “That’s an awful lot of chocolate for one man,” suggesting that black female sexuality has the ability to overpower white masculinity. However, instead of having sex with him, they tease the judge about his penis, and ultimately embarrass him in front of other hotel patrons. This move to humiliate the judge again resonates with the narrative of the supersexual black buck, as Claudia and Foxy mock the judge because he does not meet the myths and stereotypes about the size of the black male phallus.

In addition to establishing the black buck stereotype in contrast to sexually inferior white masculinity, *Foxy Brown* positions white masculinity as a force that continually prevents the reconstitution of the black family, through the sustained enslavement of the black female. As Foxy is captured and sent to the ranch to be brutalized, her body is presented as a sexual attraction that white men cannot resist. The narrative of black female exploitation is fulfilled when one of her captors drugs and takes advantage of her. Ultimately, Foxy enacts a symbolic

revenge on white masculinity as she castrates Mr. Steve, and presents his genitals as a gift to Miss Catherine. This castration symbolizes not only revenge for the figurative and literal castrations that black men suffered during and after slavery in the prevailing lynching culture in the South, but also black womanhood's emancipation from white male domination.

In contrast to Foxy's hypersexual black body, Oreo is consistently positioned as a virgin, even though she becomes involved in various sexual situations. Oreo's virginity is even preserved in overtly sexual situations where her sexual integrity is threatened. When Oreo attacks Parnell, and he captures her to take his revenge, Ross intertextualizes her narrative with a scene from the movie *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971); however, she rewrites it. In *Sweet Sweetback*, director Van Peebles has a room full of prostitutes and white patrons watching a live sex play between Sweetback and a black woman. Similarly Ross places Oreo in a room surrounded by prostitutes that are ready to watch her be raped. Unlike Foxy Brown, however, Oreo is able to wound and defeat her white rapist and his patron before she is violated.

The theme of rape is common in the blaxploitation genre, especially in movies with a female heroine, and *Sweetback* conforms to the genre standards as it chronicles the protagonist's, Sweetback's, sexploits from his childhood rape by an older woman onward. However, Oreo never undergoes such sexual predation, as she is able to adequately defend herself. As Parnell prepares to have the well-endowed Kirk rape Oreo, she inserts a metal hymen into her vagina, and Kirk is impaled. What's particularly interesting about this scene is that Ross's description of Kirk is similar to Van Peebles' description of his hero, especially when it came to their phallus; they are both well-endowed men: "Kirk's stallion was a horse of another collar, of such dimensions that he could have used a zeppelin for a condom" (157). Sweetback is given the nickname Sweetback as a young boy by the prostitute who rapes him, and he continues with this

name throughout adulthood. As heterosexual, hypersexual black men, Kirk and Sweetback share the same profession: they have sex for money. In other words, like the women prostitutes they are thus enslaved. While Parnell enslaves Kirk, Sweetback is enslaved by the white society.

However, Ross disarms the narrative of the hypersexual black body that enslaves Sweetback and other Blaxploitation heroes. When Oreo prepares for her encounter with Kirk, Ross fetishizes Kirk's white body, rather than Oreo's brown body. As Kirk is introduced to the group, Ross takes care to describe his physical frame and the size of his penis. In fact, she describes his male member for almost a full page of the novel. By doing so she reverses the fetishizing white colonial gaze and turns it back onto the white body. Similarly to Kirk, Sweetback is revered for his ability as a lover, and the size of his penis is an implied reason for his prowess. Similarly, Superfly and Shaft are shown as equally gifted, adding to the narrative of the supersexual black male that is an excellent lover because he is well endowed. However, while Kirk and Sweetback are similar, Oreo is distinctly different from the blaxploitation heroines that existed at in the 1960's when Ross wrote her novel. When Parnell prepares to have Kirk rape Oreo, she tells him she is a virgin. He responds: "you prob'ly lying. At your age, looking like you do? No way" (157), suggesting that because Oreo is an attractive female, she must be currently, or have been, sexually active. Parnell is the perfect blaxploitation pimp, and he attempts to make Oreo the blaxploitation heroine that has to be sexually predated in order to overcome her enemies. Ross disallows this narrative, and instead has Oreo defeat her enemies before they are able to take her virginity.

Ross constructs Kirk as the well-endowed white man, but does not let him follow through with the rape, and Oreo's preparations for the impending rape do not focus on her body: "she had stripped except for her mezuzah, sandals, and brassiere ... Oreo reached into her handbag and

pulled out a protective device she carried with her at all times. She wedged it into her wedge. She was ready” (159). Ross does not dwell on Oreó’s nudity in her description, unlike the blaxploitation genre’s sexualization of the black body. However, she signifies on prevailing black masculinist thought when she does not let Oreó take off her bra. Oreó braggingly concludes that she was going to torture Kirk enough, and did not wish to add to his lust by his seeing her “perfect twin roes” (159). In *Superfly* we see both Georgia and Cynthia topless, and witness a long sex scene between Priest and Georgia in the bathtub. In *Foxy Brown* we are introduced to a topless Foxy in the first scene, and we see Pam Grier’s body at multiple moments throughout the movie; in *Sweetback* we see Sweetback’s buttocks and his topless conquests. Ross, in her treatment and characterization of Oreó disrupts and inverts the blaxploitation narrative of the hypersexual black body.

Throughout Parnell’s prepared torture of Oreó, Ross’s text maintains that Oreó is in complete control, and thus establishes her as physically and intellectually powerful. The following passage offers a perfect example of Ross’s proficiency with irony. Although Oreó is not especially angered by Parnell capturing her, or about the release of Kirk, she decides that she has had enough after Parnell touches her hair: “Oreó was furious. She had been monumentally forbearing so far, out of curiosity—letting Parnell twist her arm, call her ‘bitch,’ and in general dump on her—but now she had had it. She hated anyone to touch her soft, cottony hair without permission. She was having a shit fit” (158). Oreó is described as having a “shit fit,” and mentally preparing to make Parnell “the sorriest pimp in Harlem” (158). This display of Oreó’s self-confidence directly contrasts the trope of the “tragic mulatto,” and the submissive black women in the blaxploitation genre’s movies with male heroes. She is shown to be totally in control of the situation, to the point where she is playing along with Parnell out of curiosity.

Oreo is adept beyond compare, and does not have to compromise her virginity to get her revenge.

At the culmination of Oreo and Kirk's altercation, Oreo defeats both Kirk and Parnell in another display of her physical and intellectual prowess. While Foxy Brown ends up in a similar situation because she also challenges a pimp, she is brutalized, raped, and drugged by two white men before she kills them; these violent scenes provide moments to put Pam Grier's body on display. However, while Oreo is on the brink of being raped, at the behest of a black pimp, she is shown to be completely in control, and is able to physically defeat both of them. As Kirk prepares to rape Oreo, Ross describes the demeanor of the prostitutes that line the room: "The women shifted impatiently in their chairs, every once in a while casting at Oreo what she took to be Aristotle's glances of pity and fear leavened by De Sade's anticipation of unmentionable acts" (160). The prostitutes sympathize with Oreo because they do not understand her capability and strength.

Interracial rape does not happen in *Oreo*, which is also a way Ross breaks with the convention of the blaxploitation genre's heroine:²⁹ "[Kirk] threw the unresisting Oreo to the floor, stretched her legs wide in the ready-set position of a nutcracker, took aim, tried to jam his pole into her vault and—much to his and everyone else's surprise—met with a barrier that propelled him backward and sent him bounding off the nearest wall" (160). As shown at various junctures in the novel Oreo is comfortable with the idea of sex, she just has not experienced it, and Ross clearly has specific reasons in making sure she remains a virgin. Unlike the blaxploitation heroines, Oreo is not hypersexualized or harassed by white people; if she ends up in a compromising position, she does not become a victim at any point. By creating the scene alluded to above, Ross is rewriting a number of blaxploitation narratives, and reworking scenes

from blaxploitation movies, showing her engagement with, and response to, their representation of black politics of the time. The blaxploitation narrative of interracial sexuality, as it confirms to the narrative of Black nationalism, is not enough for Ross.

7. Conclusion

Oreo is an important novel in the milieu of 70s cinema and literature, as it is a critique of Black nationalist politics and their inclusion in blaxploitation movies, vis-à-vis interracial relationships, and their influence on burgeoning African American creativity. By constructing a character that seamlessly lives two historically conflicting cultural and ethnic identities Ross argues that cultural hybridity is not only achievable, but also desirable. Haryette Mullen is very specific about the ways in which *Oreo* and Ross complicate the construction of mutually exclusive racial and cultural identities when she says, “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 ... Thus *Oreo* is as much a cautionary tale of misunderstanding as it is a recipe for mixing and blending diverse American cultures” (“Apple Pie” 126). I would add that as much as *Oreo* is a cautionary tale of misunderstanding, it is a pioneering tale of racial hybridity through interracial relationships.

Ross’s pioneering act of taking on the dominant political and cinematic culture of the 70s with an interracial protagonist is still revolutionary in the 2000s. Today, very few movie directors tackle issues of interracial sex and interracial children.³⁰ Although written forty years ago, Ross’s text is pioneering as it deeply and adequately questions the construction of racial and cultural identity, and the multiethnic nature of America. Ross is able to undo a variety of damaging discourses on ethnic identity construction, the American nation state, national and international identity, as well as the narratives of racial essentialism that placed American

minorities in conflict with each other. As America's favorite cookie, Oreo is able to set forth a renovated future for race relations through her hybridity. In this sense, Ross presents the multiracial, multiethnic American as a healing figure who can transcend America's stymied racial architecture by crossing racial and cultural boundaries. As she lays claim on a variety of American cultures and identities, Oreo argues for an American melting pot that creates new American experiences from older ones, and she is thus able to successfully navigate a world full of blaxploitation heroes, villains, and stereotypes, to not only create a different dialogue about race in America, but about women also. Through Oreo Ross successfully argues that racial, ethnic and cultural hybridity, through interracial relationships, is not only possible, but also an integral part of the American experience.

Notes

¹ See Quinn, Guerrero, Semley, Briggs, Lyne, Henry, and Eshun.

² The term “blaxploitation” first appeared after the release of *Super Fly* in 1972, and was coined by Junius Griffin.

³ *Shaft* earned over \$7 million and *Super Fly* \$6.4 million according to Cohn. Quinn also notes that as there was no advance money for *Super Fly* so members of the black community fronted money; almost everyone involved in the project profited from the movie’s earnings after it was sold to Hollywood (89).

⁴ Fred Williamson states, “The term ‘blaxploitation’ means absolutely nothing. I can’t imagine who is being exploited...if they can call my films a black exploitation, then why didn’t they call Burt Reynold’s films White exploitation?” (qtd. in Sims 98).

⁵ Lemire notes that “Lithographed images of abolitionists in various forms of inter-racial embraces, as well as maritally coupling inter-racially, were everywhere” (2).

⁶ Lemire notes that “intra-racial desire was imagined, in other words, as an instinct to perpetuate what were imagined as distinct biological entities” (3).

⁷ Jim Crow laws were established to provide dictates on how black people could behave in white society, and were a continuation of the subjugation of African Americans. While also linked with notions of “separate but equal” these laws did not in any way dictate equal treatment between blacks and whites.

⁸ See Guerrero “From Birth to Blaxploitation” in *Framing Blackness*.

⁹ Elise Lemire comments on the nature of this in “*Miscegenation*”: *Making Race in America*, as she discusses postcards and anti-abolitionist bills in the 1800s, and the continuation of the hypersexualizing of blackness throughout history.

¹⁰ See Pratt.

¹¹ See Guerrero “The So-Called Fall of Blaxploitation” for further clarification on how blaxploitation “types” became “stereotypes” after *Sweet Sweetback*.

¹² See D.B. Graham.

¹³ See Mullen’s “Apple Pie with an Oreo Crust” 112 for the specific connection between Iceberg Slim and the blaxploitation genre.

¹⁴ See Guerrero “The So-Called Fall of Blaxploitation” 90.

¹⁵ See Briggs 24.

¹⁶ See Van Deburg.

¹⁷ See C. Eric Lincoln.

¹⁸ See Verge 104 and Leverette 87.

¹⁹ See *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Pinky* (1949), *Showboat* (1951), and *Sapphire* (1959), for specific examples.

²⁰ See Harris and Toplin 700-1.

²¹ Naomi Angel says that the limited treatment of sexuality in the movie was “an indication of the taboo nature of inter-racial sexuality” (252), demonstrating that while it attempted to discuss revolutionary ideas surrounding black-white interactions, it was limited by the confines of societal mores.

²² See Guerrero “The So-Called” 90.

²³ See Briggs 24.

²⁴ See Briggs 25.

²⁵ See *Black Fire*, 302-3.

²⁶ Ross notes that James “studied Torah and Talmud, collected midrashim, quoted Rabbi Akida – root and herb of all the jive-ass copy he wrote for the Christian-storm of flyers he left in Jewish neighborhoods” (6).

²⁷ See Furedi.

²⁸ See Guerrero “The Rise and Fall of Blaxploitation” in *Framing Blackness*.

²⁹ There are some movies where rape doesn’t occur, but the black women are almost always harassed.

³⁰ Naomi Angel notes in her article “The Missing Bi-racial Child In Hollywood” because the interracial child is largely missing from Hollywood movies.

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