

## DO THE WORK | Meet the (White) Parents: Erik and Daniella

### TRIGGER WARNING:

Hey y'all it's your host Brandon here with a little heads up. "Do the Work" is a show that deals with heavy and at times traumatic moments around race and racism. So, if you don't have the emotional space to hear these discussions right now, that's okay. You can always come back to this episode whenever you are ready. We hope you take care of you.

Oh, and one more thing: Sometimes we use adult language in this podcast. So, if you've got kids nearby you might want to grab your headphones. Alright, now let's get started.

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**BRANDON KYLE GOODMAN (BKG):** I want you to think back to a time when you started dating someone you really liked. Do you remember that feeling of butterflies in your stomach? How excited you got when you saw their name show up on your phone? The electricity you felt when you got together?

The energy of a new relationship can be intoxicating. But for people of color there's a whole other layer of... uh let's call it energy... to wrestle with when we're dating someone who is white. Now, I know that race doesn't determine love — uh, uh, honey, my hubby is white! But when you add in this extra layer, things in a relationship can get complicated. Especially when we throw in-laws into the mix. It might lead you to have discussions like this...

**ERIK:** You cannot let your mom say that stuff, especially around our children. If she ever says anything like that around our children, I don't know what I'll do.

**BKG:** You're listening to "Do the Work." A podcast that untangles the uncomfortable, offensive, and sometimes downright racist moments that happen in our personal relationships.

I'm your host, Brandon Kyle Goodman.

On today's show: Erik and his wife Daniella, and how to be an ally in an interracial marriage when your in-laws just don't get it. We'll get to know them after the break.

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**BKG:** Alrighty, let's meet our couple.

Erik and Daniella are both L.A. natives who grew up in the San Fernando Valley. And like something out of a Hollywood movie, they probably spent years unknowingly crossing paths before they actually met.

**DANI:** It's funny cause we'll be like, oh, yeah, we both went to that Blockbuster!

**BKG:** That's Daniella, or as Erik calls her, Dani. The community that Erik and Dani grew up in had both suburban developments and cultural icons, like Universal Studios. It's a place where celebrities work and play, honey!

Dani's childhood was pretty typical for a white kid from The Valley. But Erik says he sometimes felt out of place. Erik identifies as mixed race — so he's half Japanese and half white. So his mixed-race identity, his "uniqueness" — his Asian-ness — was brought up often. His peers would tease him for liking things like sushi. Here's how Erik remembers it...

**ERIK:** I'm sure that other kids like sushi. But I was picked out for liking it, you know? And so a lot of that was how I developed that sense of, like, otherness attached to my, my Asian identity.

**BKG:** We're 'gonna hear more from Erik about that feeling of "otherness" in a bit, but first, I want to tell you about how Erik met Dani, because it's one of the cutest romantic stories I've ever heard!

So they were both recent college graduates trying to navigate their social lives after moving back to the West Coast. One weekend, a group of mutual friends were out, and both Erik and Dani were invited. After having a few drinks, the group eventually found their way to a late-night diner — my favorite thing after drinks! — and that's where Dani and Erik really connected.

**DANI:** I wanted to sit next to him because I thought he was nice. He was being really nice to me when I didn't really know anyone else.

**BKG:** They shared a slice of cherry pie. Then Erik asked for Dani's number, and she gave it to him. When he called her up later to ask if she wanted to go to dinner and maybe see a movie, she said yes. But when Erik went to pick Dani up for their night out, it turns out there was a bit of a misunderstanding.

**DANI:** I didn't think it was a date and realized in the car that it was a date.

**ERIK:** She informed me that she did not think that this was a date.

**BKG:** Ooooh. That hurts! But despite the confusion they did have a nice evening. And because Erik really liked Dani he thought he'd give it one more shot.

**ERIK:** I contacted her again and asked her more directly, like, would you like to go on a date? And she said oh, I'm not really interested in dating anybody right now so sorry, but this isn't going to happen.

**BKG:** You see, Dani had just gotten out of a relationship — and she wasn't ready for another one. So instead, the two formed a friendship, which eventually blossomed into something more.

Things were going well, but it wasn't always easy dealing with Dani's family. You see, Erik was the first person of color who Dani had dated and brought home to meet the parents. And things could get a little awkward, to say the least, especially with Dani's mom.

**DANI:** My mom was always really curious about Eric's heritage and being Japanese.

**ERIK:** Probably a couple months into dating, and I went over to Dani's house and Dani's mom and dad were both in the kitchen and they were kind of just doing a little get to know me and like, talking to me and asking questions. And I think that they asked something probably relatively stereotypical about me being Japanese. And it came out as, oh, you must like such and such. You're oriental, right?

**BKG:** Erik managed to brush off these occasionally awkward moments and after years of dating, Erik decided to propose to Dani. But first, he wanted to get her parents' blessing.

**ERIK:** I did the traditional thing of asking her parents if they would be okay with me doing that. I wasn't 100 percent sure how comfortable they were 'gonna be with it – up until that point they were still referring to me as oriental. When I took her father and mother out to brunch to ask, after I had told them what I was doing, they both said, "Oh, thank god. I thought you were going to ask us for money."

**BKG:** Whoa, whoa, whoa, ah, ah, no, no, no, no, no! If that stopped you in your tracks, you're not alone. Having your girlfriend's parents suggest that you're hitting them up for money is offensive in its own right. And on top of that, they repeatedly called him oriental? Listen up everybody, it is never ok to describe an Asian person as "oriental." It is a racial slur. Period. We'll talk about that more a little later in the show, but for now let's get back to Erik and Dani's love story.

Ultimately Erik did get Dani's parents' blessing, and on Christmas morning, he popped the question. Dani was overjoyed.

**DANI:** Yeah, I was very surprised. I think maybe we kind of talked about it a little bit, but I really didn't see it coming. I just started crying, like he proposed, and I was just crying the whole time. I don't even know what he said. I'm a big crier. I cried during our whole wedding, too. I was just crying all the time. [Laughter]

**BKG:** Erik and Dani have been together now for almost 12 years. They're in their mid-30s and are making plans to start a family. And you can tell they really love each other. But these challenges with Dani's parents, and especially her mom, still come up all the time. Sometimes, Erik shrugs off these incidents, but there was one moment that really cut him to the core.

**ERIK:** I remember that moment really distinctly because it was definitely one of the more defensive moments I've had. And that sort of really is this kind of like confrontational white supremacy that I just I cannot I can't abide.

We were standing in our kitchen together cooking, Dani and I, and her mother was in the other room and she was asking questions about my family, my heritage.

**BKG:** Erik told his mother-in-law that his dad is of European descent. That he got his freckles from him. He also told her that his dad has blue eyes.

**ERIK:** Then she immediately cut us off and said, oh, so that means if you and Dani have a child, that means that child can have blue eyes? Oh, wouldn't that be so nice if they had blue eyes? I wish that they were, they would have blue eyes. I really hope that they get that gene. That's they'd be so nice. And I immediately, immediately started feeling anger and frustration and just sort of a kind of discomfort. I think it was also one of those things where I don't think she realized that that was a hurtful comment. That it was a you know, a dangerously racialized comment.

**BKG:** Meanwhile, Dani remained silent.

**DANI:** Honestly, I didn't even realize that it was a trigger for Eric.

**ERIK:** Like, I often. I don't, I don't always want to have to sort of tell my mother-in-law what is the matter? And I often feel like I'm not being heard because she's focusing on whether I speak Japanese or not, not whether or not it's hurtful, and if I do say something, I'm not always sure that I'm being heard. So, I would want sort of a greater chorus of voices

**BKG:** Coming up: If you're a white person in an interracial relationship, how can you be an effective ally to your partner? And if you're a person of color, how do you build that chorus of voices? We'll bring Dani and Erik together to talk about learning to navigate these tough conversations with Dani's mom, and with each other.

Plus, we'll talk to Adrian De Leon, a professor of American and Ethnic Studies at the University of Southern California, on the deep historical roots of racism against Asian Americans.

**ADRIAN:** They became dehumanized. It became exoticized. And this is part of why, you know, the term oriental is so demeaning because it falls under the same logics that all you Asians are the same to me.

**BKG:** And we'll hear from our in-house educator, Debby Irving. That's next.

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**BKG:** Welcome back. Before we bring Erik and Dani together to talk about their situation with Dani's mom, I want to put some of the offensive comments Dani's mother made into a, let's call it a wider context.

One comment that stuck out to me was when she called Erik “oriental.” Now, like I said before, it is a racial slur used against Asian folks. But it also has a complicated history, which a lot of people, including myself, don’t know about.

That’s why my producers called up Adrian De Leon, a professor of American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. Adrian is Filipino Canadian and his expertise is in Asian American studies.

I really wanted to hear what he had to say about the history of the word oriental.

Full transparency, between y’all and me, my relationship to oriental, when I was growing up, was that it was used to describe rugs. And then I started hearing it being used to describe my Asian peers, and then I remember being told that that wasn’t OK — that it was offensive. But I didn’t know why.

And even though this is an offensive term, let’s make that very clear, it’s actually still used in a lot of places. So this one’s gonna be a bit of a deep historical dive — which y’all know I live for — but I hope you will also stick with me. I really think it’ll be worth it.

So here’s Adrian...

**ADRIAN:** The issue with how insidious anti-Asian racism has become is that you can find it in everyday objects, that it has become mundane, every day, quotidian and boring. Right, to talk about oriental goods, oriental spices. These sort of racial objects that has everything to do with anti-Asian as well as other kinds of racism have become reduced to spices and everyday goods to the point that when you call them out, you were called overly sensitive, or you are called out for not realizing that this person was just appreciating your culture.

**BKG:** Okay, so THAT’S why the word oriental is so hard to pin down as problematic. It’s become a part of our everyday vocabulary to describe quote “Asian” things. But how did it come to mean that in the first place.

Adrian says that starting as far back as the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the British Empire, other European countries, and then later, The United States, saw the East as an exotic, less developed, foreign land that needed to be conquered and civilized. They called this part of the world The Orient -- The mysterious, exotic place that lumped Asia, the Middle East, the Pacific, and all of their diverse people and cultures into one. And the main thing they wanted from The Orient? Goods and labor.

**ADRIAN:** So you on one hand, you have what they kind of called exotic, cheap, desirable labor for plantations, railroad building, things like that. But also all these sort of coveted, art pieces, quaint porcelain pieces that became a sort of hallmark for British and American elites and upper middle class people to collect. Right.

So Asia for a long time, whether it's through tea silk, spices was the sort of coveted golden land for, you know, luxury goods, luxury items, luxury markets for European and American empires who were trying to tap into new places to gain wealth gain access to.

So, so oriental things, like people, like goods and commodities and food became sort of collectible items, which is a sort of dehumanizing logic.

And this is part of why, you know, the term oriental is so demeaning because it falls under the sort of same logic that all you Asians are the same to me.

**BKG:** And the dehumanization went even further. To conquer the Orient, Europeans and Americans waged war. There were the Opium Wars in China, the Spanish-American War in the Philippines and Guam, and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan.

Adrian says that today in the United States, Americans are trying to forget about this history, to leave it in the past. Mm, that sounds like Americans, honey. In 2016, President Obama even signed a bill to remove the word oriental from federal law.

But it's not an easy history to forget.

**ADRIAN:** The United States wants to continue to sort of move forward towards this. Imagined and impossible ideal of racial paradise, but you can't do that without literally talking about the history behind these words, these terms and these violent histories. You've got to talk about the fact that the United States bombed the hell out of Japan and the Philippines.

**BKG:** And that's why the word oriental is a racial slur. It's a loaded term that has been used for centuries to dehumanize Asian people and justify the destruction of Asian countries and the killing of millions of Asian lives.

**ADRIAN:** For me personally, I would love to see oriental not ever be used ever again. It needs to be well known where this term comes from, not only why continues to hurt today, but how it has everything to do with colonialism and the impoverishment of many Asian countries in the wake of European and American warfare.

**BKG:** Okay, so now that we've learned from Adrian De Leon about the racist history behind the word oriental, I wanted to chat with Debby Irving, our in-house educator. Oriental is still used today as a microaggression against Asian Americans by folks like Erik's mother-in-law. And when I mentioned this to Debby, she wanted to take a moment to break down the word microaggression and what it actually means.

**DEBBY:** So whenever the term was invented, I thought it meant little, little offenses such as, you know, you're pretty for a black girl or-

**BKG:** Yes.

**DEBBY:** You know, kind of could even be someone could think that's a compliment in a warped way, but it does not land that way.

**BKG:** They do, they do think it is, which is wild.

**DEBBY:** I actually learned recently that the micro part of this word does not mean little. It means it's happening between individuals as opposed to macro at a systemic level.

**BKG:** Ah! Wow!

**DEBBY:** And yet, I think now for the former understanding has taken on a life of its own. So, I like to have it in both ways.

**BKG:** Yes, I was going to say that there is no microaggression. It's all racism is all macro. But that makes more sense. It's like this idea that micro is happening between us as opposed to happening on a systemic global level on our bigger stage. But it's still painful and harmful. And I think that what I what I hate about the word microaggression is because it sounds small it seems like it should be something that you can get over quickly. Right. When I'm at the job interview and the employer says, "You're so articulate!" Right, for that, like white people, traffic in micro aggressions all day, every day. But because they're not holding a noose, because they're not saying the N-word, they don't think that there's anything to correct. And there's no consequence or a repercussion for that behavior. In my experience, why people associate racism with the KKK or something overt, macro. And it's not of them. And I think what a microaggression if we can kind of pull the micro out, it's an aggression. And that is of you. If you're saying to a black girl that she's pretty for a black girl, that isn't some overt thing happening in some small southern county with pitchforks. That's happening down the block on La Brea here in L.A. You know what I'm saying.

**DEBBY:** By good people.

**BKG:** By quote, unquote "good people." And that's the shift. White people have to know that they traffic in micro aggressions and that it's not micro. It's actually extremely painful and extremely hurtful to be on the receiving end of that aggression. And quite honestly, aggression feels like a light word. It doesn't explain the pain to be a 13-year-old little black girl and see no images of yourself on TV or in magazines, to never see your beauty represented. And then a white person who you are taught is what beauty is says to you you're beautiful for a black girl, that's not small, that stays with you until you're able to have the tools to unpack it. For me personally, like so much self-hate, I had to unpack so much self-hate from the micro aggressions that I would experience in my life.

**DEBBY:** It's almost like cumulative aggression, cumulative traumas. You know, I think one of the things about microaggressions is the person who micro-aggresses is raising a red flag that says, I haven't done the work. I don't have any racial consciousness. And I

don't care enough to learn. I'd rather this conversation just went away. And so, it makes it makes that person unsafe.

**BKG:** Debby will be back at the end of the show with some takeaways from Erik and Dani's story that we can apply to our own live, which we always, always, always love to do here.

But up next, Erik and Dani come together to talk about how he really feels about these incidents with her mother, and what Dani can do to better support him.

That's after the break.

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**BKG:** Hey y'all, I am so happy you stayed with me. Now before we bring our couple together for a conversation, I want to remind you of where we left off in their story. Erik and Dani are in their mid-30s, and they're making plans to start a family.

Erik is concerned that the offensive comments that Dani's mother makes, you remember, like calling him oriental or talking about how beautiful blue eyes are, well, he's concerned those kinds of comments could one day be directed at their future child. And he wants to see more forceful allyship from his wife.

But Dani is struggling to figure out how to stand up for her husband, and still have a good relationship with her mother. And here's the thing about Dani's mom – despite the offensive comments she makes, Erik and Dani both want to maintain a relationship with her.

**ERIK:** I am in her eyes a son. I mean, we do love her and she is a part of our family. And it's not a person that we're going to cut out of our lives.

**BKG:** So, Dani's mother is here to stay. But Erik and Dani don't know how to do the work with her. They can't just, hope it goes away. So, what can they do?

Well, my producers brought them together for a conversation in early September to talk about how to change the dynamic with Dani's mom. They were both hunkered down at home in Los Angeles, as the wildfires raged outside.

They hopped on a call with us, and we started out by asking them both to talk about the moment that really shook Erik. Y'all remember — it was when Dani's mom just gushed about how she really hopes their future child has blue eyes — eyes like Erik's white father.

**ERIK:** It lit me on fire pretty, pretty fast because it did, it really had sort of hit soft spots for me. And those are: One, my father, who I really, really, really don't get along with, and he is the side of my family where obviously the blue-eyed gene would come from. And then second, it's a value judgment that I am deeply familiar with that really boils down to mixed race identity being a form of eugenics. That basically you can white gene

the Asian out of me. It's a painful kind of suggestion because it feels like trying to take the child away from me in a way.

**BKG:** For Dani, that moment had been eye-opening too.

**DANI:** I had no concept that that comment could cause such a fire, I guess, in Erik. It was just kind of like being woken up. I mean, being like, "Ohhhhh!" And then just completely understanding and seeing where it comes from.

**BKG:** Erik, in particular, has a lot of angst about how their future kids will navigate being mixed race, and how comments from Dani's mom might shape their identities or perceptions of themselves.

**ERIK:** My fear for them is that they will have to live through the same kind of discomfort with their physical and emotional identity that I had to for a lot of my life. Being aware that you are different and that being associated with something negative is, I think, a difficult thing to overcome. I mean, it's impossible to overcome who you are. You can't be anybody but who you are. And if you're uncomfortable with that, then that's, that's a hard road to walk. And I don't, I don't, you know, I don't want that for our child.

**DANI:** Of course, I don't want that either. I would never want to, for someone that I love in my life to cause unforeseen angst or pain in their future.

**BKG:** Ooof. Baby. This is a tough situation to be in. Dani and Erik clearly love each other, deeply. They want to do what any family wants to protect the people they love from hurt. But what can they do if that hurt is coming from another family member?

**DANI:** There is no way we can fully change my mom and her ways entirely. I do think there is more educating that we can do. But, yeah, you know, she's older. She's lived her whole life this way. It's, it's 'gonna be challenging. It's definitely 'gonna be challenging.

**BKG:** So how do they overcome these challenges? Dani usually talks to her mom alone after she makes a hurtful comment towards Erik, which, let's be real, hasn't proven effective when it comes to waking her up about race. But they've recently made a change. They've started talking to Dani's mom together about what's been going down.

**DANI:** Obviously Erik has these past experiences that I don't have that he can draw from to show my mom what he actually experienced, which is a bit more powerful than me trying to explain it to my mom. I think one lesson that I learned through this was that Erik and I are a couple together and that we can handle, we can handle my mother's racism together, that it's not just my responsibility to, to take it on myself. I think that was something that I didn't necessarily see before.

**ERIK:** She's very protective of me.

**DANI:** Me?

**ERIK:** Yes. [Laughter]

**DANI:** I am very protective of you.

**BKG:** And they're making progress! Since we first talked with Erik and Dani earlier this summer they have started having conversations with Dani's mom about race. And Erik has even shared some really personal stories with his mother-in-law, like how he was bullied at school for his Asian heritage.

**ERIK:** So I kind of tried to take that opportunity to explain to her, I think subtly, I don't know, maybe not subtly, but what microaggressions were. She really had a like, "Oh, no. Oh." Like a very concerned, like a motherly kind of "ooo's and awww's" you know?

**DANI:** And I mean when I think back to that conversation, that's sort of what I cling on to more because of how upset my mom got by the idea of child Erik, little Erik being made fun of for his race or being bullied like she really did not like that. That really upset her.

**ERIK:** I feel like the conversation that we had with Dani's mom was just was a huge step. And like it really — I really, really did see a lot of compassion in her and her reaction to what she heard.

**BKG:** So Erik and Dani are making progress with Dani's mom little by little. And Dani has also been taking the time to educate herself on race and racism.

**DANI:** I'm sort of coming at it from this place of books and literature as a starting point, which I think is really great. And in doing that, I've had some conversations with Eric. Eric's read a bit more about all that than I have. And that's been nice. It's like our own little like mini book club that's about race in a way.

**BKG:** And as cheesy as it may sound, they're able to do this work together because they're coming from a place of love.

**ERIK:** We talk about, you know, what the ideal presentation of allyship might be or the way that allyship might engage, but ultimately, I think that the best allyship is the love that Dani and I have for each other. The understanding that we care for each other and that we want the best for each other and to listen, always, always listen to what the other person in the room wants and to what the other person in the room is asking for. And I think that our love for each other is that is listening to each other and hearing what, what we need and want.

**DANI:** Awww Erik. You're a sweetie. [giggle]

**BKG:** Wooo y'all. That's a Hallmark moment if I ever heard one!

So before I let y'all go, I want to bring back our in-house educator Debby Irving. She has a few thoughts on how Erik and Dani can deal with Dani's mom going forward and also what Dani can do, as a white woman, to prepare herself to one day raise a mixed-race child.

**DEBBY:** I put the burden on Dani. You know, this is the person who she's chosen to spend her life with. And isn't it always our job when we choose to spend our lives with someone to really understand that person?

**BKG:** Right.

**DEBBY:** Hopefully they'll be raising a child together. And one of her jobs will be to protect that child from racial harm and or educate that child so the child is prepared to go out in the world and navigate racial harm. So she's going to have to learn how to talk about, navigate conversations about race. And I think she's going to have to set some boundaries with her mother.

**BKG:** Yes.

**DEBBY:** And because racism can be so invisible and we aren't taught about it in schools or movies or books, the burden is going to be on Dani to get herself educated about how it works so that she can show up in the way Erik is going to need her to show up and eventually that child is going to need her to show up. It's also really helpful to get into a group of white people who is doing this kind of work. And those groups exist all over the country, actually, in Los Angeles where Daniella is. There's an incredible group called Aware L.A.

We need to educate ourselves and we need to get active. Getting active before education is not helpful. So education is the first step.

**BKG:** Debby is right. We all need to be pairing education with activism on a regular basis. And that education can start right in your home with the people you know and love. Before we close out the show today, I want to let you know that we did reach out to Dani's mom for comment but did not hear back. Erik and Dani have talked about this episode with her, and we hope they can all continue to move forward in a positive way together.

"Do the Work" is a Three Uncanny Four Production. The show is hosted by me, Brandon Kyle Goodman. Our in-house educator is Debby Irving.

Our senior editor is Amy Eason. Our senior producer is T. J. Raphael. Our associate producers are Rahima Nasa and Sherina Ong. Katherine Shoemaker is our development producer, and Jenny Kim is our production manager.

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Ava Ahmadbeigi is our fact checker and Elisheba Ittoop created the theme.

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Or, better yet, tell somebody about us, honey!

And if you have a question or comment or want to have your own story featured on the show email us at [dothework@threeuncannyfour.com](mailto:dothework@threeuncannyfour.com) — that's with the numbers spelled out. So [dothework@threeuncannyfour.com](mailto:dothework@threeuncannyfour.com).

I now hope y'all are taking care of yourselves as we deal with these heavy conversations. One self-care tip from me is skin care honey! Take care of that skin! Get yourself a nice face wash, a serum, a scrub, an exfoliant. There is truly nothing like washing your face at the end of the day and feeling that delicious glow. Pamper yourself, you are worth it, trust me.

Oh, and one more thing, we're putting some handy resources on our website in case y'all want to do some reading up on the topics we talk about in the show. So, you can find that at [dotheworkpod.com](http://dotheworkpod.com).

For Three Uncanny Four, I'm Brandon Kyle Goodman. Until next time, you can find me on the 'gram [@brandonkgood](https://www.instagram.com/brandonkgood). Thanks for listening.