

DO THE WORK | Don't Call Me An Oreo: Tomi and Alex

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): Okay. Close your eyes. I'm going to describe a person to you and I want you to imagine what they look like. You ready?

Okay. This person is intelligent, well-educated. Maybe they even went to an Ivy league school. They are beautiful, with an attractive figure. And they're successful. They dress well, drive a fancy car and live in a nice house.

Can you see this person in your mind?

Now, I'm curious, this person you've imagined: What is their race?

You're listening to "Do the Work," a show that untangles the uncomfortable, offensive, and sometimes downright racist moments that happen in our personal relationships.

I'm your host, Brandon Kyle Goodman.

Far too often in our culture, words like intelligent, successful or attractive are seen as synonyms for white. Do you have an "American-sounding" name? Do you dress "respectably" like you could fit in at a country club? How well do you speak English? So much of what our culture values as good or desirable is rooted in white folks being seen as the standard that the rest of us must live up to.

But what happens when a friend levels those standards or stereotypes against us?

On today's show: Tomi and Alex and how it feels to be a person of color in a world in which your greatness is measured in whiteness. That's after the break.

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BKG: First up, I'm going to introduce you to Tomi.

Tomi's a Black woman. Her parents are originally from Nigeria, but she and her two sisters were born in Tulsa, Oklahoma. When she was around five years old, Tomi's family moved to a suburb outside of Baltimore, where there's a large Nigerian community.

TOMI: It's very common to go into a grocery store and I can hear some kid being told off from his mother in, you know, my native language.

BKG: Maryland actually has the second largest population of Nigerian immigrants in the country, right behind Texas. Living in a Nigerian community was a big plus, but it's not the only reason Tomi's parents moved them to Howard County. It also had great schools and is what Tomi describes as the quote "type of place you'd want to raise your kids."

TOMI: It's what I call the epitome of East Coast suburbia. It's very boring at times. It is a place where you have a lot of opportunities to grow, to connect. So it's very middle class, upper middle class.

BKG: And it's in this idyllic suburban community that Tomi met Alex, who is white. Here's how Alex remembers it:

ALEX: We were in most the same classes. They were advanced placement classes mostly, or just gifted and talented classes.

BKG: It was freshman year of high school, and at the time they were two high-achieving students, with similar academic goals.

TOMI: We had the same sort of mentality to strive, and we both wanted to be doctors at the time. So it was it was pretty fast, we were pretty much friends from the start.

BKG: But that wasn't all they had in common. They each did a lot of the same activities: Theater, student government, and band. I remember doing the same thing — honey, I was a theater kid! I always loved musicals. Anyway, they were so nerdy, two girls after my own heart. They even participated in history competitions.

TOMI: You would choose the topic from history and you would have to interpret that in your own way

BKG: As part of the competition they had to dress up as a historical figure and perform in a skit.

TOMI: She was Elizabeth Cady Stanton and I was Susan B. Anthony. It could've been reversed.

ALEX: We dressed up in our actually our band uniforms, which are long black dresses, because at the time of women's suffrage, women would not be wearing anything other than long sleeve long dresses

TOMI: And it was actually pretty successful.

BKG: They came in first place in the state of Maryland, but they didn't win the national championship.

ALEX: I think that we were maybe a little cocky from the first two rounds and they were like, "No, there's a lot of stuff missing here."

TOMI: We went through kind of the history of getting the 19th Amendment ratified and added to the Constitution. There's you know, there's more complex history than what we really covered.

BKG: See? I told you they're nerdy in a good way. I love it! So, one of the things Alex really respected about Tomi was her high academic achievement, even if at times it meant that Tomi outshone her.

ALEX: She was very, very smart, well-spoken. She was known for being one of the smartest people in our school. She would do well on the tests. She would. She was just good at things. In a way, I guess I was often a little bit jealous of her just because she always did so well and everything. And she dressed kind of preppy. Which was different than me. I dressed pretty much in sweatpants

BKG: Their sense of fashion wasn't the only difference between Tomi and Alex. There was also another more obvious one. Can you guess it? I mean, you're listening to the podcast, honey, so it's their race. And that is at the heart of a moment between the two friends that still bothers Tomi to this day.

TOMI: So the way that I remember it is it was during our freshman year, so just couple weeks after we had met and I feel like we were sitting in a car outside of her house...

BKG: Alex was talking about how smart Tomi was, how well she did in school. And Alex said...

TOMI: You're Black, but you're not really Black. You're white, actually. She used the term Oreo.

BKG: Oof. Oreo. Meaning that Tomi, a Black woman, was somehow different from other Black folks. That she had more desirable qualities, which are "white" qualities, which made her better. It implies that Black people aren't as smart, or well spoken, or as put together. But Tomi was, and so in Alex's mind she was basically like a white person. Alex didn't think the term was offensive. In fact, it was a word she had heard used many times before.

ALEX: It was something I've heard from my friends. They've said it as well. I think even my parents had said something similar. And it was just something that at the time I didn't realize was an issue. I didn't realize that it was disrespectful. I didn't realize that at all.

BKG: And although it was jarring for Tomi in the moment, it was also not her first encounter with the term Oreo. But it still hurt.

TOMI: It's odd because when you're called an Oreo, I feel like it almost erases the possibility that there could be Black people or people of color who speak the way I do, who act the way I do, who are educated. So it's uncomfortable. It is at its core is very uncomfortable because I'm not trying to portray myself as someone different. This is just who I am. This is how I grew up. And I don't want others labeling me like I'm trying to be something that I'm not.

BKG: Hearing the word Oreo from a stranger is one thing, but when it comes from a friend it has a particular kind of sting. It's a cocktail of confusion mixed with betrayal.

TOMI: It was just very confusing and it was just hard for me to really articulate what those feelings were until I was much older. So, I kind of just let it go. And we continued on our day.

BKG: Tomi may have let it go, but of course those feelings didn't go away. She's still frustrated by this moment.

TOMI: When you say Oreo, it tells me that you value me because I have quote unquote "white qualities" and that I am and other. Like you're Black, but you're not really like one of those Blacks and meaning that I'm a quote unquote good one. I fit that model minority. But that's it's harmful.

BKG: After the break, we talk with Dr. Kira Banks, a professor at St. Louis University, who studies the psychology of racism and how it affects Black folks. We'll discuss the term "Oreo," where it comes from and why it's harmful.

KIRA: You're trying to, as a white person, to use that term it's like you're trying to police someone's Blackness, and you don't get to do that.

BKG: Then later we'll bring Tomi and Alex together for a conversation about that Oreo comment.

ALEX: It has been something I thought about over the years. And the words that I said were hurtful.

BKG: Stay tuned.

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BKG: Okay! We're back. Now I don't have to tell y'all, but racism and discrimination can be a lot to wrestle with, both emotionally and mentally. And after a while, these microaggressions, like being called an "Oreo", can add up to what feels like a million paper cuts. So, what can we do?

KIRA: We've got to talk about the ways in which our language and our actions are perpetuating harm so that we can stop it.

BKG: That is Dr. Kira Banks. She's a professor of psychology who studies how discrimination impacts mental health, and she's a Black woman. She's also a co-founder of the Institute for Healing, Justice and Equity at St. Louis University. She is incredible. I called her up because I wanted to talk to her about Tomi and Alex's story, and we started our conversation by putting the word that Alex used — "Oreo" — into a broader context.

KIRA: Yes. The term Oreo is often used to, to suggest that someone is of color on the outside by appearance but on the inside white and what it suggests is that whiteness equals talking proper. And what I want to just name is that it suggests that being Black is monolithic, that there's only one way to be Black. And that's typically.

BKG: Right. Right.

KIRA: Yeah. That's typically how it's used to be like, oh, wait, I expect because you're Black that you'll talk a certain way, but because you don't, I'm going to call you an Oreo because you look and appear Black. But you're talking like I expect a white person to talk.

BKG: Right, right, you're right. I always like to say Black people are not a monolith. Everyone has to be reminded of that often. So now the word Oreo is used for Black folks. But there are similar words that are used to describe other people of color.

KIRA: Yes, so I've heard people talk about being a banana or a Twinkie. And so that means if somebody who's Asian-American who in terms of being a banana like you might be, quote unquote, yellow on the outside, but white on the inside.

BKG: Woof, woof, woof, woof, woof. Oh god.

KIRA: Right? And Twinkie similarly. But they all have in common that whiteness gets centered literally in those examples.

BKG: Yes.

KIRA: Right. Like, it assumes that white people have a lock on speaking a certain way or acting a certain way or being a certain way. So it just it flattens folks rather than allows them to be fully who they are. And so it's, it's just it's narrowing. And it's dismissive. So it's offensive for all those reasons. And I want to be really clear that if you speak Ebonics, I don't think that that's a negative thing. But I also get to be Black and speak proper English. Right? So it's about like you're trying to, as a white person to use that term it's like you're trying to police someone's Blackness, and you don't get to do that.

BKG: Yes, police someone's Blackness and then choose what we value and what we don't value. I love that you say that it's OK to speak Ebonics because there's this, you know, conditioning that there's one right way to speak, which is the white way, as opposed to like you speak however you speak, your language is your language. It doesn't determine your intelligence or your capability or your skill set or your race. It's

just it's part of who you are and what your makeup is. So, as we're talking about Oreos, you know, I'm sure it wouldn't surprise you that I've been called an Oreo in my day. But I know that you have your own personal experience with this term as well. And it involved your son. Do you mind talking to us about that moment and your reaction?

KIRA: Yeah with my son, he came home from school one day and basically told me that someone said he was an Oreo and I was like, tell, tell me more. Trying to keep my cool. Tell me more about that, the psychologist mom in me. And so he told me more. And he basically went on to say, well, dad's Black, but like, you're white cause you're smart and you're a professor.

BKG: Woooof [laughter] OK!

KIRA: And I was like, oh, cut me with a knife, why don't you child? Right? Like, ouch.

BKG: Right, right, right. Let's unpack that son.

KIRA: Right. But, you know, dad is Black because he might, whether it's like music that he listens to that he assumes that I don't, things that he'll say. And so I think wrapped up in what he was saying, like I said there was some class stuff, there was some education stuff, there were some, some narrowing of Blackness that was happening. And we had to have a real conversation, like, yeah no, I'm all the way Black. And, and, no, there aren't a lot of professors that are that are Black. But you can't make being smart synonymous with being not Black.

BKG: Right. Right.

KIRA: That's problematic.

BKG: That's hurtful and it ends up, well, I think what happens, too, is that when you were called Oreo or you're called banana, especially at a young age, you kind of take that on, and then you end up narrowing yourself in the same way the person is narrowing you. But I think the real harm is that you end up narrowing your own kind of trajectory because you're like, oh, I can't be this because I'm this or whatever that kind of breakdown is in a child's mind.

KIRA: So we call that internalized oppression. Oppression tells you lies about who you are and who you aren't. And when you believe those lies, whether they are messages of superiority or messages of inferiority, psychologists call that internalized oppression. I have been adopting the phrase appropriated oppression. And I've used it because I think if we can talk about it as appropriated, something that we appropriate or pick up. So I pick up this myth or lie that I'm less Black because I speak proper English, that I'm an Oreo. And so I pick up this lie that that makes me somehow better, somehow more acceptable, but it's problematic because that's a myth and a lie that I that, I that, that my Blackness is less than because I speak a certain way or act a certain way. Right? And I

like appropriated because you can figure out how you can pick up and put down easier than you can think about how to take something external that's internal.

BKG: I love that, yes. I mean, it may not be as easy to drop, but the idea is that you can drop it as opposed to it's forever ingrained inside of you. Which I love because I was in, I've talked about this waking up at like 20 years old and going to my therapist and saying something like, "No matter how attractive or handsome I might be, I would never be as attractive as a white person." And then in that moment — see y'all can't see this but Dr. Banks just took a real big breath because it's so painful, because that is appropriated oppression. That is, you know, that is internalized and integrated. And I had to learn how to drop that.

KIRA: When it becomes fused with who we are, it can impact us. And that, I mean, — that is the harm of the Oreo statements. The, "Oh, you're pretty for a Black girl" or all those comments. Like, those are hurtful because they impact how we see ourselves and then make us question our value, ourselves and our identities.

BKG: Yes, I read somewhere, I think on Instagram or Twitter — I forget the, the educator's name. But she said if Black kids are old enough to experience racism, then white kids are old enough to learn about it. You know, so if Black kids are experiencing racism at three years old, four years old, five years old, then for sure white kids are able to learn about how they are being part of that, perpetuating that, and how to not do that or even how to step in when they see that and be an ally. Our favorite word in the last few months, how to be an ally for kids on the playground.

KIRA: Or even like Bettina Love talks about being an accomplice or a co-conspirator. Like an ally just stands by, an accomplice will get engaged with you, but a co-conspirator will, like, help and plan and work and really fight alongside you.

BKG: Yes. Co-conspirator. I'ma start saying that instead. I love that.

BKG: Woou. I hope y'all are taking notes, because I'm here scribbling away. I've adopted that last tip that Dr. Banks mentioned of wanting a co-conspirator, instead of an ally in my own life. See, I'm learning things from this show, and I hope you are too! Thanks so much again to Dr. Kira Banks. You can learn more about her research, and check out her workshops, and her podcast at raisingequity.org.

Coming up: We finally bring Tomi and Alex together for a conversation about that "Oreo" comment.

TOMI: It just frustrates me that people would attribute my, you know, my skills, my mindset, to just a white quality, it has to be white or Black.

BKG: And we'll hear from our in-house educator, Debby Irving. Stay with us.

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BKG: Welcome back, y'all!

Tomi and Alex may not have talked about race when they were kids, but they are going to talk about it here with us today. Just to remind you of where we're at in their story — back when they were freshmen in high school, Alex thought she was complimenting Tomi by calling her an "Oreo," by saying she was somehow different from other Black folks.

My producers brought them together using the magic of video chat on a Friday afternoon in late September. And we asked them to talk through that moment from when they were 14. We started out by asking Tomi if she would be willing to share with Alex how she felt now about that comment all these years later.

TOMI: You know, back then, when people called me "Oreo" I didn't say anything. But now that I'm older and I kind of see the way that our society has defined what it means to be intelligent or what it means to be smart or overachieving. It just frustrates me that people would attribute my, you know, my skills, my mindset, to just a white quality and just, you know, it's basically white or Black, like, quite literally as far as are you smart or you're not.

BKG: Then we asked Alex to reflect on the comment she'd made so many years ago. We wanted to know: Did she understand why it was so hurtful?

ALEX: It has been something I thought about over the years. And I've talked to Tomi like a couple times in passing about it. But, you know, this gave me the opportunity to unpack it, and to think about my actions and to think about pretty much everything I do with a little bit more detail and with a different perspective. The words I said were hurtful. But when we were kids, we didn't really know what they meant as much as they do now.

BKG: And that's a point I have thought about a lot with this story. Tomi and Alex were kids in high school when this happened. And that's a hard time in life, and you're learning a lot. Your body's changing, you're trying to decide about colleges or what you want to do after high school, and then the all-important social and dating scenes.

And Tomi and Alex? Well, they were band geeks, theater kids. Now of course, I think that's a fabulous thing — I was a theater kid too! And I also know kids like us weren't often part of the "super popular crowd." High school is hard enough on its own without having to navigate racial stereotyping and that's part of the reason Tomi didn't speak up at the time.

TOMI: It's that, again, that stage in your life where you just want to fit and you don't want to, you know, stir the pot. You just want to get your classes in, have your braces removed, maybe get asked to prom et cetera, you know, not bring too much attention to yourself because then, am I going to be ridiculed or you know, are rumors going to spread about me? Or are people 'gonna talk about me behind my back? And again, just

always feeling self-conscious having that spotlight on you when you're you know, you're in your teen years.

BKG: For Tomi, it's been a process to unlearn the stereotypes that were leveled against her as a girl — to put down, as Dr. Banks put it, the appropriated oppression that so many people of color pick up when we move through the world.

TOMI: Yeah, It definitely has taken me time to become comfortable with who I am and, you know, growing up, I would always want the hair of you know, the white girls class or the Asian girls in class. And then actually going to college, I would see so many beautiful Black women around and think I wasn't good enough either. So, I felt like I didn't belong quite anywhere, trying to fit this mold of what it means to be a Black woman, I just couldn't do it to my own taste. So it's taken me a while, really, to come to my own understanding, to stand on my own two feet and say I am my own individual. I am unique. I present the way I present. That's just who I am. And I'm not going to minimize that at all.

ALEX: So I first want to mention as Tomi was saying that I started to cry. I couldn't contain myself.

TOMI: Awww.

ALEX: I think that what I didn't realize as a kid is that it's very important to be able to find your identity and know who you are. And I basically, in a way, kind of took that away by saying that she was something that she wasn't something that wasn't who she defined herself as.

BKG: And Tomi and Alex have moved forward. Tomi's even attending Alex's wedding. In a lot of ways, they are stronger than ever.

ALEX: I've learned so much and I feel like I know her on a better level now, and maybe we're even closer friends.

TOMI: I think it's just another way to for us connect on a different level, on a deeper level.

BKG: Now before I let y'all go, I want to bring in our in-house educator, Debby Irving. She's the author of "Waking Up White: And Finding Myself in the Story of Race."

Tomi and Alex were kids when the "Oreo" comment happened. And as we discussed with Dr. Banks, if children of color can experience racism at a young age, white kids can surely be taught young how to stand up to it.

Debby is a white parent to white children, so I asked her to share some advice for white kids who may hear problematic language on the playground or in the hallways at their school. How can they address racist comments with other kids?

DEBBY: If I'm a white kid and I hear another white kid using it I would ask a question. A question is always more successful on ramp into fraught conversation. So I think I might ask something like, how do you understand that term? You know, where did you learn it? Are you open to hearing another perspective? You know, because the way I understand it is it's actually not a compliment. It's really pretty offensive.

BKG: If we want our children to do better we as adults need to teach them how to do it. Now I'm not a parent to a human child — You know, I've got a furbaby! So I also wanted to ask Debby what parents can do to teach their kids about anti-racism.

DEBBY: One of the most important things that parents can do is when your child asks a question, honor the question. You know, "That is such a good question! And I don't I don't know the answer, but let's figure that out together or let me let me, you know, do a little research and I'll get back to you," depending on what the child's age is. And then you learn together and you're modeling that grown-ups don't have all the answers. None of us. None of us have all the answers.

BKG: Yes, yes exactly. And breaking the cycle. You know, I think I think what's really challenging and what I want to acknowledge for a lot of people is that you are the person breaking this cycle, breaking the cycle of, of bad behavior ultimately, but of racism and prejudice and bias in your family. And by educating yourself and having those conversations, but also by your own actions, you are breaking the cycle and knowing that you will also have — whether it's your children or your nieces or your nephews or your, your chosen family, you get to pass on something new to them.

BKG: Thanks to Debby, our in-house educator, for reminding us that none of us have all the answers, but I believe, we can certainly make an effort to learn, to grow, to understand, to do the work to break the cycle.

"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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The show was mixed by Johanna Katcher at Nice Manners.

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

If you like the show head over to Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts and hit subscribe. And, hey, why not leave a rating and a comment while you're there. It really helps new listeners find the show.

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

And if you want to have your own story featured on the show email us at dothework@threeuncannyfour.com — that's with the numbers spelled out. So dothework@threeuncannyfour.com.

And now I hope y'all are taking care of yourselves as we deal with these heavy conversations. One self-care tip from me is buy yo'self some flowers honey! You don't need somebody to buy them for you! Get yourself some lilies, sunflowers, roses, something pretty to look at, something pretty to smell, honey.

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.

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.