

From the soon-to-be-released book

TALKING WHITE

14 Ways to Cope with Thoughtless Remarks

“My Life as an Oreo”



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Preface

My Life as an Oreo

“Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” So they say.

Have you ever been referred to as an edible object? I have. In fact, I have even been known to lovingly call an adorable baby or small child either *pumpkin*, *lambchop* or *cupcake*. I say *sweet pea* from time to time as well. (I think that name is my favorite.) My husband and a childhood friend are both known as *chou chou** by their loved ones and I have been called *sugar* and *honey* by many a waitress. Believe it or not, I have even been called *dumpling*, *sugar drop* and *sweetie pie* by guys who were sweet on me. What I find ironic, however, is that I have also been called *oreo*, but those who used the term were most certainly not trying to be loving or kind.

I really do not remember the first time someone called me *oreo* although I believe the name calling started when I was in elementary school and escalated in high school and college. I do, however, remember exactly how it made me feel. First, I felt confused; then I felt hurt; and then I felt *terribly* different...and not in a good way. More importantly, I felt like a bit of an outcast...which is something I carried with me all the way through college and often carry with me even to this day. No matter how confident or self-assured I feel, I never really quite fit in.

As racial slurs go, “oreo” (black on the outside, white on the inside) is one of the slurs that is right up there at the top of the list along with “coconut” (brown on the outside, white on the inside) and “banana/twinkie” (yellow on the outside, white on the inside) that are meant to cause harm by the user. “You talk White” and “You act White” have the same effect and make just about as much sense. Even though it is almost comical (I said *almost*) to be compared to a color, a cookie, a fruit or any other edible item, the emotional effect on the person being bullied is still the same; he or she is likely to experience anger, pain, resentment, frustration and confusion. And so it goes without saying (doesn't it?) that racial slurs are an intentional infliction of emotional distress, an expression you might have heard on your favorite court TV show. Yep, some people can be cruel.

One Friday, I was talking to a parent about signing up her 12 year old daughter for an OBG Adventure Camp program. She told me she thought her daughter

– a good student - might not be interested in attending camp because she was having such a tough time (socially) at school. In fact, her mom had even transferred her daughter from one school to another because she was being bullied. As a result of the bullying, nothing seemed to motivate this A student. Her daughter's fear, according to her mother, is that she would be in yet another social situation where she would be ostracized and bullied for...get ready...“talking too White”...as if there is such a thing. I immediately flashed back to my very own experiences. In my young life, “talking too White” and “oreo” were usually used in the same sentence when it was my turn to be bullied. At an age where self esteem issues are prevalent, fitting in was tough.

During my last year of elementary school and junior high school, I took the school bus to schools outside of my integrated residential neighborhood. Like many other mothers, my mother wanted me to get the best education possible and sent me to schools with an excellent reputation that had a relatively small number of students of color. I believe I was still in my first year of junior high school when “it” happened. The school bus driver – let's call her Mrs. B. – would pick me up every day from the same bus stop where I quietly waited for the bus. I was a tall, clean, neat, quiet, independent and confident only-child with a nice pair of corny eyeglasses. When I took my seat, I wasn't invited to sit where the popular kids sat. (In hindsight, I realize that the bus route started in a part of Los Angeles with a less advantaged socio-economic community than my own and I was not looked upon with favor.) One day, I was sitting quietly on the bus staring out of the window when I heard Mrs. B. clear her throat to make an announcement to everyone. “There's an oreo on the bus. One of those Black girls trying to be White,” she said. “If any of you [students] decide you want to hit her, I won't hear a thing.” I silently panicked; waiting for what was next.

The first slap to the back of my head was a timid slap. How uncertain and titillated those kids must have felt to be given permission to behave with violence. The second slap was a little more aggressive and I decided I needed to act fast before the situation got out of control. After another few smacks to my back and my head, I stood up and yelled in my loudest childish voice: “Get the hell off of me!” Mrs. B. then announced that she was going to give me a citation for using profanity. I will never forget that day.

Because of the trauma and the sobbing, my proper use of English was of no help to me as I tried to articulate to my parents what occurred. The principal of the school called my mother as soon as I arrived at school to tell my mother that I had been using profanity. (It appears that Mrs. B. was trying to cover her

tracks by reporting the incident before I got home from school.) My young parents did their best to “take care of it,” but I was back on the same bus on my way to school by the following week, and yes, Mrs. B. was still at the helm. My fantasy, of course, was that she had been fired. It would have been the right thing to do.

It has been a long time since I have heard the word *oreo* used - to my face – and no one has slapped me or hit me since that traumatic day. Unfortunately, use of the phrases “you talk White” and “you act White” are still used all too often, whether socially, on the Internet or in the media. In the 2008 presidential election, Ralph Nader said that the then-presidential nominee Barack Obama was trying to “talk white” and “appeal to White guilt.”** When will it end?

It is important to note that my point of view and the point of view of those that have been quoted in this book are in no way meant to attempt to identify what “talking White” or “acting White” means. Both are absurd phrases and a waste of precious time to pick apart. I have traveled enough to know that my use of proper English is accented by a Southern California lilt and dialect; just like my girlfriend Wendy’s proper use of English is accentuated by a New Orleans accent. Even my grandmother, who took elocution classes, spoke English with precision, but at home her speech patterns were more relaxed and she spoke with a mixture of both a Bajan*** and New England accent.

I am not a sociologist or a cultural anthropologist (although a PhD in Cultural Anthropology is on my long list of Things To Do), but I am a person with an experience similar to many others I have spoken to about the subject of “talking White.” I have written this “how to cope” book because – to use a popular colloquialism – I am over it. I am annoyed by racial slurs and the thoughtlessness of those who use name calling and ridiculous phraseology as a way to identify a person and/or simply to be mean.

This book is my gift to the young people who need to find a way to cope with the thoughtless remarks of others without taking any shame upon themselves. This book is for the adults that have tried unsuccessfully to sweep away those years of bullying and the underlying pain. And this book is for the people who use “talking White” or “acting White” as a way to describe the way a person speaks or behaves. Besides the fact that there is no actual truth in either statement, words really do hurt.

Tracey
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Tracey Friley is the creator of **OneBrownGirl.com®** and will author a book entitled: **Talking White: 14 Ways to Cope with Thoughtless Remarks**. Tracey has facilitated an online focus group called "Talking White" and continues to gather data, all of which will serve as inspiration and research material for this much needed how-to-cope book. OneBrownGirl.com® can also be found online [here](#), as well as on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

* A French term of endearment that literally means cabbage.

** <http://blogs.abcnews.com/politicalpunch/2008/06/nader-obama-try.html>

*** A person from Barbados.