

Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race by Reni Eddo-Lodge review – 'racism is a white problem'

White people avoid discussing race, and when discussions are had, they fail to meet the reality of black experience



Tired of 'playing nice' ... Reni Eddo-Lodge.

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Ignatius Sancho, whose parents died on the slave ship on which he was born, had the good fortune later in life to receive a classical education courtesy of the Duke of Montagu. As an adult, Sancho was feted as an African man of letters who, entering into a correspondence with Laurence Sterne in 1766, beseeched the author to use his authority to intervene in the plight of enslaved Africans. So for hundreds of years black writers in Britain have sought to engage white people on the subject of race. But not any more – at least as far as Reni Eddo-Lodge is concerned.

Yet the title of her book, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* – it was first used in a widely read blog she posted in 2014 – is surely ironic. Eddo-Lodge no more means to disengage from white people

than Toni Morrison, who has said unapologetically that she is primarily writing for black people.

It seems Eddo-Lodge is tired, as many black people are, of “playing nice”. They are apparently supposed to have the good manners to shut up and overlook the structural racism that still exists in Britain and elsewhere. Her original blog resonated with those just as irritated as she is with white compatriots whose take on racism (rarely more, in any case, than an intellectual exercise) fails to meet the reality of her lived experience. Every black person I know shares the sentiment that white people would rather not talk about race – and that they inevitably try to frame the terms of debate: discussions about racism are often led by those who are largely unaffected by it.

Eddo-Lodge’s weary title is a provocation, born of years of frustration with a deep and general lack of understanding on the part of white people. Early on, she highlights white fears of a rising tide of people of colour, which extended to objections to the casting of a black actor in the role of Hermione in the play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*. “White fans,” she writes, “couldn’t imagine little black girls as precocious, intelligent, logical know-it-alls with hearts of gold” because “blackness in their heads is stuck in an ever-repetitive script, with strict parameters of how a person should be”.

Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race follows in the tradition (stronger among African American than black British writers) of angry warnings to an ignorant white readership. Writing on black life in Britain has long been the poor relation of its African American equivalent, not least because, in the hierarchy of suffering, the daily slights endured by black Britons do not bear comparison to the existential threat to African American lives. The gold standard example, James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, still hits home with a sense of urgency, even though its warning of the racial conflagration that could engulf American cities was written in the 1960s. Penitent white readers found their way to race-awareness books as audiences might to a horror movie, with the expectation of being scared.

White privilege is a manipulative, suffocating blanket of power that envelopes everything we know, like a snowy day

Reni Eddo-Lodge

But Eddo-Lodge accurately takes the temperature of racial discussions in the UK. In seven crisp essays, she takes white British people to task for failing to accept that “racism is a white problem”. “White privilege,” she writes, “is a manipulative, suffocating blanket of power that envelopes everything we know, like a snowy day.”

She's strong on the pervasive racial marginalisation of black people, for example in the depiction of the working class that still so often comes with the prefix "white". Instead of framing the working class as "a white man in a flat cap" she suggests "a black woman pushing a pram". She has a clear eye for the assumptions that underpin racism: it's striking that the discourse on race today is stronger in tone than in the 70s suburban world in which I grew up, where British people were (usually) polite to the point of rudeness; the stakes are higher now.

Eddo-Lodge aims also to interrogate how we got here. But the sections on the murder of Stephen Lawrence and other seminal moments in race relations are, perhaps inevitably, too brief. This kind of book is not designed to delve beyond the headlines in order to draw lessons from the past, as Raoul Peck has attempted in fusing civil rights with **Black Lives Matter** in his documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*. Based on a posthumously published and unfinished Baldwin essay, the documentary warns not of the fire next time, but of now. It is also tricky for the book to match the immediacy and passion of the initial blog; Eddo-Lodge's wit and mischief are admirable at first but become attenuated.

The original blog ended with the assertion that she would not talk about race with white people, who "don't want to hear it ... and frankly don't deserve it". She makes an exception for former BNP leader Nick Griffin, whom she portrays as an extreme, unreconstructed everyman. Also featured are her disagreements with white feminists. The suggestion that racism might exist in feminist circles fuelled much resentment, Eddo-Lodge writes, as certain women seem to cling to the belief that "British feminism was a movement where everything was peaceful until angry black women turned up".

She has put us on notice that we talk about race by not talking about it. We reframe and deflect the argument with spurious notions of "reverse racism" and "positive discrimination". She paints a confused and scary picture. In my experience, white people play the "race card" by baiting black people to call them out on race, knowing the social and legal near impossibility of doing so. Equally, however, there are risks to individuals in going through life on amber alert, with antennae quivering to pick up instances of racism, real or imagined.

Eddo-Lodge invokes Martin Luther King Jr: incarcerated yet again in 1963 after a peaceful protest, King expressed his grave disappointment with white moderates who, alarmed by the unrest heralded by civil rights, were "more devoted to 'order' than to 'justice'". The quotation needs context, however. At the end of his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail", King imagined a future where he would nonetheless engage with infuriating white moderates in welcoming a time "when the dark clouds of racial prejudice will pass away

and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities”. Despite her reservations about talking to white people about race, Eddo-Lodge would likely say amen to that.

- Colin Grant is the author of *A Smell of Burning: The Story of Epilepsy. Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* is published by Bloomsbury.