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**Reni Eddo-Lodge**

**WHY I'M  
NO LONGER  
TALKING  
TO WHITE  
PEOPLE  
ABOUT  
RACE**

Includes a  
new chapter,  
AFTERMATH

B L O O M S B U R Y

## A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

RENI EDDO-LODGE is a London-based, award-winning journalist. She has written for the *New York Times*, the *Voice*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Stylist*, the *Pool*, *Dazed and Confused*, and the *New Humanist*. *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* is her first book.

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WHY I'M NO LONGER  
TALKING TO WHITE  
PEOPLE ABOUT RACE

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BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING  
LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING  
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc  
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK

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First published in Great Britain 2017  
This ePDF edition published 2020

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Extract on pp.158–9 from *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*,  
by bell hooks © Gloria Jean Watkins 1981

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Parts of this book have previously been published in *New Humanist*  
magazine, the *Voice*, [telegraph.co.uk](http://telegraph.co.uk), [openDemocracy.net](http://openDemocracy.net), [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com),  
[renieddodge.co.uk](http://renieddodge.co.uk), and *Inside Housing* magazine.

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication data has been applied for  
add where a UK originated single-ISBN edition for which we own US rights

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4088-7055-6; TPB: 978-1-4088-7056-3; PB: 978-1-4088-7058-7;  
eBook: 978-1-4088-7057-0; ePDF: 978-1-5266-3392-7

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by NewGen Knowledge Works (P) Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



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## PREFACE

On 22 February 2014, I published a post on my blog. I titled it ‘Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People about Race’.

It read:

I’m no longer engaging with white people on the topic of race. Not all white people, just the vast majority who refuse to accept the legitimacy of structural racism and its symptoms. I can no longer engage with the gulf of an emotional disconnect that white people display when a person of colour articulates their experience. You can see their eyes shut down and harden. It’s like treacle is poured into their ears, blocking up their ear canals. It’s like they can no longer hear us.

This emotional disconnect is the conclusion of living a life oblivious to the fact that their skin colour is the norm and all others deviate from it. At best, white people have been taught not to mention that people of colour are ‘different’ in case it offends us. They truly believe that the experiences of their life as a result of their skin colour can and should be universal. I just can’t engage with the bewilderment and the defensiveness as they try to grapple with the fact that not everyone

experiences the world in the way that they do. They've never had to think about what it means, in power terms, to be white, so any time they're vaguely reminded of this fact, they interpret it as an affront. Their eyes glaze over in boredom or widen in indignation. Their mouths start twitching as they get defensive. Their throats open up as they try to interrupt, itching to talk over you but not really listen, because they need to let you know that you've got it wrong.

The journey towards understanding structural racism still requires people of colour to prioritise white feelings. Even if they can hear you, they're not really listening. It's like something happens to the words as they leave our mouths and reach their ears. The words hit a barrier of denial and they don't get any further.

That's the emotional disconnect. It's not really surprising, because they've never known what it means to embrace a person of colour as a true equal, with thoughts and feelings that are as valid as their own. Watching *The Color of Fear*<sup>1</sup> by Lee Mun Wah, I saw people of colour break down in tears as they struggled to convince a defiant white man that his words were enforcing and perpetuating a white racist standard on them. All the while he stared obliviously, completely confused by this pain, at best trivialising it, at worst ridiculing it.

I've written before about this white denial being the ubiquitous politics of race that operates on its inherent invisibility. So I can't talk to white

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people about race any more because of the consequent denials, awkward cartwheels and mental acrobatics that they display when this is brought to their attention. Who really wants to be alerted to a structural system that benefits them at the expense of others?

I can no longer have this conversation, because we're often coming at it from completely different places. I can't have a conversation with them about the details of a problem if they don't even recognise that the problem exists. Worse still is the white person who might be willing to entertain the possibility of said racism, but who thinks we enter this conversation as equals. We don't.

Not to mention that entering into conversation with defiant white people is a frankly dangerous task for me. As the heckles rise and the defiance grows, I have to tread incredibly carefully, because if I express frustration, anger or exasperation at their refusal to understand, they will tap into their pre-subscribed racist tropes about angry black people who are a threat to them and their safety. It's very likely that they'll then paint me as a bully or an abuser. It's also likely that their white friends will rally round them, rewrite history and make the lies the truth. Trying to engage with them and navigate their racism is not worth that.

Amid every conversation about Nice White People feeling silenced by conversations about race, there is a sort of ironic and glaring lack of understanding or empathy for those of us who

have been visibly marked out as different for our entire lives, and live the consequences. It's truly a lifetime of self-censorship that people of colour have to live. The options are: speak your truth and face the reprisal, or bite your tongue and get ahead in life. It must be a strange life, always having permission to speak and feeling indignant when you're finally asked to listen. It stems from white people's never-questioned entitlement, I suppose.

I cannot continue to emotionally exhaust myself trying to get this message across, while also toeing a very precarious line that tries not to implicate any one white person in their role of perpetuating structural racism, lest they character assassinate me.

So I'm no longer talking to white people about race. I don't have a huge amount of power to change the way the world works, but I can set boundaries. I can halt the entitlement they feel towards me and I'll start that by stopping the conversation. The balance is too far swung in their favour. Their intent is often not to listen or learn, but to exert their power, to prove me wrong, to emotionally drain me, and to rebalance the status quo. I'm not talking to white people about race unless I absolutely have to. If there's something like a media or conference appearance that means that someone might hear what I'm saying and feel less alone, then I'll participate. But I'm no longer dealing with people who don't want to hear it, wish to ridicule it and, frankly, don't deserve it.

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After I pressed publish, the blog post took on a life of its own. Years later, I still meet new people, in different countries and different situations, who tell me that they've read it. In 2014, as the post was being linked to all over the Internet, I braced myself for the usual slew of racist comments. But the response was markedly different, so much so that it surprised me.

There was a clear racial split in how the post was received. I got lots of messages from black and brown people. There were many 'thank you's and lots of 'you've articulated my experience'. There were reports of tears, and a little bit of debate about how to approach the problem, with education being rated highly as a solution to bridge the communication gap. Reading these messages was a relief. I knew how difficult it was to put that feeling of frustration into words, so when people got in contact and thanked me for explaining something they'd always struggled to, I was glad that it had served them. I knew that if I was feeling less alone, then they were feeling less alone too.

What I wasn't expecting was an outpouring of emotion from white people who felt that by deciding to stop talking to white people about race, I was taking something away from the world, and that this was an absolute tragedy. 'Heartbreaking' seemed to be the word that best described this sentiment.

'I'm so damn sorry you have been made to feel like this,' one commenter wrote. 'As a white person I'm

painfully embarrassed by the systemic privilege we deny and enjoy on a daily basis. And painfully embarrassed that I didn't even realise it myself until about ten years ago.'

Another commenter pleaded: 'Don't stop talking to white people, your voice is clear and important, and there are ways of getting through.' Another one, this time from a black commenter, read: 'It would be such a painstaking task to persuade people, but we should not stop.' And a final, definitive comment read simply: 'Please don't give up on white people.'

Although these responses were sympathetic, they were evidence of the same communication gap I'd written about in the blog post. There seemed to be a misunderstanding of who this piece of writing was for. It was never written with the intention of prompting guilt in white people, or to provoke any kind of epiphany. I didn't know at the time that I had inadvertently written a break-up letter to whiteness. And I didn't expect white readers to do the Internet equivalent of standing outside my bedroom window with a boom box and a bunch of flowers, confessing their flaws and mistakes, begging me not to leave. This all seemed strange and slightly uncomfortable to me. Because, in writing that blog post, all I had felt I was saying was that I had had enough. It wasn't a cry for help, or a grovelling plea for white people's understanding and compassion. It wasn't an invitation for white people to indulge

in self-flagellation. I stopped talking to white people about race because I don't think giving up is a sign of weakness. Sometimes it's about self-preservation.

I've turned 'Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race' into a book – paradoxically – to continue the conversation. Since I set my boundary, I've done almost nothing but speak about race – at music festivals and in TV studios, to secondary-school pupils and political party conferences – and the demand for this conversation shows no signs of subsiding. People want to talk about it. This book is the product of five years of agitation, frustration, exhausting explanations, and paragraph-long Facebook comments. It's about not just the explicit side, but the slippery side of racism – the bits that are hard to define, and the bits that make you doubt yourself. Britain is still profoundly uncomfortable with race and difference.

Since I wrote that blog post in 2014, things have changed a lot for me. I now spend most of my time talking to white people about race. The publishing industry is *very* white, so there's no way I could have got this book published without talking to at least *some* white people about race. And in my research, I've had to talk to white people I never thought I'd ever exchange words with, including former British National Party leader Nick Griffin. I know a lot of people think he shouldn't be given a platform for his views to be aired unchallenged, and I agonised over the



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interview on page 123. I'm not the first person with a platform to give Nick Griffin airtime, but I hope I've handled his words responsibly.

A quick word on definitions. In this book, the phrase 'people of colour' is used to define anyone of any race that isn't white. I've used it because it's an infinitely better definition than simply 'non-white' – a moniker that brings with it a suggestion of something lacking, and of a deficiency. I use the word black in this book to describe people of African and Caribbean heritage, including mixed-race people. I quote a lot of research, so you will occasionally read the phrase black and minority ethnic (or BME). It's not a term I like very much, because it conjures thoughts of clinical diversity monitoring forms, but in the interests of interpreting the research as accurately as possible, I have chosen to stick to it.

I write – and read – to assure myself that other people have felt what I'm feeling too, that it isn't just me, that this is real, and valid, and true. I am only acutely aware of race because I've been rigorously marked out as different by the world I know for as long as I can remember. Although I analyse invisible whiteness and ponder its exclusionary nature often, I watch as an

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outsider. I understand that this isn't the case for most white people, who move through the world blissfully unaware of their own race until its dominance is called into question. When white people pick up a magazine, scroll through the Internet, read a newspaper or switch on the TV, it is never rare or odd to see people who look like them in positions of power or exerting authority. In culture particularly, the positive affirmations of whiteness are so widespread that the average white person doesn't even notice them. Instead, these affirmations are placidly consumed. To be white is to be human; to be white is universal. I only know this because I am not.

I've written this book to articulate that feeling of having your voice and confidence snatched away from you in the cocky face of the status quo. It has been written to counter the lack of the historical knowledge and the political backdrop you need to anchor your opposition to racism. I hope you use it as a tool.

I won't ever stop myself from speaking about race. Every voice raised against racism chips away at its power. We can't afford to stay silent. This book is an attempt to speak.



# 1

## HISTORIES

It wasn't until my second year of university that I started to think about black British history. I must have been about nineteen or twenty, and I had made a new friend. We were studying the same course, and we were hanging around together because of proximity and a fear of loneliness, rather than any particular shared interests. Ticking class boxes for an upcoming term found us both opting to take a module on the transatlantic slave trade. Neither of us knew quite what to expect. I'd only ever encountered black history through American-centric educational displays and lesson plans in primary and secondary school. With a heavy focus on Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman's Underground Railroad and Martin Luther King, Jr, the household names of America's civil rights movement felt important to me, but also a million miles away from my life as a young black girl growing up in north London.

But this short university module changed my perspective completely. It dragged Britain's colonial history and slave-trading past incredibly close to home. During

the course, I learnt that it was possible to jump on a train and visit a former slave port in three hours. And I did just that, taking a trip to Liverpool. Liverpool had been Britain's biggest slave port. One and a half million African people had passed through the city's ports. The Albert Dock opened four decades after Britain's final slave ship, the *Kitty's Amelia*, set sail from the city, but it was the closest I could get to staring out at the sea and imagining Britain's complicity in the slave trade. Standing on the edge of the dock, I felt despair. Walking past the city's oldest buildings, I felt sick. Everywhere I looked, I could see slavery's legacy.

At university, things were starting to slot into place for me. In a tutorial, I distinctly remember a debate about whether racism was simply discrimination, or discrimination plus power. Thinking about power made me realise that racism was about so much more than personal prejudice. It was about being in the position to negatively affect other people's life chances. My outlook began to change drastically. My friend, on the other hand, stuck around for a couple of tutorials before dropping out of the class altogether. 'It's just not for me,' she said.

Her words didn't sit well with me. Now I understand why. I resented the fact that she seemed to feel that this section of British history was in no way relevant to her. She was indifferent to the facts. Perhaps to her, the accounts didn't seem real or urgent or pertinent

to the way we live now. I don't know what she thought, because I didn't have the vocabulary to raise it with her at the time. But I know now that I was resentful of her because I felt that her whiteness allowed her to be disinterested in Britain's violent history, to close her eyes and walk away. To me, this didn't seem like information you could opt out from learning.

With the rapid advancement in technology transforming how we live – leaps and bounds being taken in just decades rather than centuries – the past has never felt so distant. In this context, it's easy to view slavery as something Terrible, that happened A Very Long Time Ago. It's easy to convince yourself that the past has no bearing on how we live today. But the Abolition of Slavery Act was introduced in the British Empire in 1833, less than two hundred years ago. Given that the British began trading in African slaves in 1562, slavery as a British institution existed for much longer than it has currently been abolished – over 270 years. Generation after generation of black lives stolen, families torn apart, communities split. Thousands of people being born into slavery and dying enslaved, never knowing what it might mean to be free. Entire lives sustaining constant brutality and violence, living in never-ending fear. Generation after generation of white wealth amassed from the

profits of slavery, compounded, seeping into the fabric of British society.

Slavery was an international trade. White Europeans, including the British, bartered with African elites, exchanging products and goods for African people, what some white slave traders called 'black cattle'. Over the course of the slave trade, an estimated 11,000,000 black African people were transported across the Atlantic Ocean to work unpaid on sugar and cotton plantations in the Americas and West Indies.

The records kept were not dissimilar to the accounts of a modern-day business, as they documented profit and loss, and itemised lists of black people purchased and sold. This human livestock – these 'black cattle' – was the ideal commodity. Slaves were lucrative stock. Black women's reproductive systems were industrialised. Children born into slavery were the default property of slave owners, and this meant limitless labour at no extra cost. That reproduction was made all the easier by the routine rape of African women slaves by white slave owners.

Profit and loss also meant documenting the deaths of 'black cattle', because it was bad for business. The vast slave ships that transported African people across the Atlantic were severely cramped. The journey could take up to three months. The space around each slave was coffin-like, consigning them to live among filth and bodily fluids. The dead and dying

were thrown overboard for cash-flow reasons: insurance money could be collected for those slaves that died at sea.

The image of the slave ship *Brooks*, first published in 1788 by abolitionist William Elford, depicted typical conditions.<sup>1</sup> It shows a well-packed slave ship: bodies are lined up one by one, horizontally in four rows (with three short extra rows at the back of the ship), illustrating the callous efficiency used to transport a cargo of African people. The *Brooks* was owned by a Liverpudlian merchant named Joseph Brooks.

But slavery wasn't just happening in Liverpool. Bristol, too, had a slave port, as well as Lancaster, Exeter, Plymouth, Bridport, Chester, Lancashire's Poulton-le-Fylde and, of course, London.<sup>2</sup> Although enslaved African people moved through British shores regularly, the plantations they toiled on were not in Britain, but rather in Britain's colonies. The majority were in the Caribbean, so, unlike the situation in America, most British people saw the money without the blood. Some British people owned plantations that ran almost entirely on slave labour. Others bought just a handful of plantation slaves, with the intention of getting a return on their investment. Many Scottish men went to work as slave drivers in Jamaica, and some brought their slaves with them when they moved back to Britain. Slaves, like any other personal



property, could be inherited, and many Brits lived comfortably off the toil of enslaved black people without being directly involved in the transaction.

The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, which was founded in London in 1787, was the idea of civil servant Granville Sharp and campaigner Thomas Clarkson. Sharp and Clarkson formed the society with ten other men, most of whom were Quakers. They campaigned for forty-seven years, generating broad-based support and attracting high-profile leadership from Members of Parliament – the most famous being abolitionist William Wilberforce. The public pressure of the campaign was successful, and an Act of Parliament declared slavery abolished in the British Empire in 1833. But the recipients of the compensation for the dissolution of a significant money-making industry were not those who had been enslaved. Instead it was the 46,000 British slave-owning citizens who received cheques for their financial losses.<sup>3</sup> Such one-sided compensation seemed to be the logical conclusion for a country that had traded in human flesh.

Despite abolition, an Act of Parliament was not going to change the perception overnight of enslaved African people from quasi-animal to human. Less than two hundred years later, that damage is still to be undone.

After university, I was hungry for more information. I wanted to know about black people in Britain, post-slavery. However, this information was not easily accessible. This was history only available to people who truly cared, only knowable through a hefty amount of self-directed study. So I actively sought it out, and I began by looking into Black History Month.

The existence of Black History Month in the UK is relatively recent. It wasn't until 1987 that local authorities in London began putting on events to celebrate black contributions to Britain. Linda Bellos was born in London to a Nigerian father and a white British mother, and it was under her leadership that a British Black History Month came to exist. At the time, she was leader of south London's Lambeth Council and chair of the London Strategic Policy Unit (part of the now defunct Greater London Council). The idea for Black History Month was put to her by Ansel Wong, chief officer of the Strategic Policy Unit's race equality division. 'I said yes, let's do it,' she explained to me from her home in Norwich.

'I thought Black History Month was a great idea. What I wasn't going to do was make it like the American one, because we have a different history . . . There's so many people who have no idea – and I'm talking about white people – no idea about the history of racism. They don't know why we're in this country.'

Ansel organised the first Black History Month, and Linda hosted the event. It was a London-wide affair. The decision to hold it in October was largely logistical, the United States have held their Black History Month in February since it began in 1970. 'Our guest of honour was Sally Mugabe,' Linda explained. 'It was insufficient time to invite [her]. If we'd done it two weeks [later], then we wouldn't have got the people we needed.'

'We were more inclusive,' she added. 'Black was defined in its political terms. African and Asian.'<sup>4</sup> We only ran it for two years, because Thatcher was cutting all our budgets. It would have been an indulgence.'

After two years of central funding and leadership from the London Strategic Policy Unit dried up, Black History Month continued in Britain, albeit sporadically. Today, Black History Month is firmly established in Britain, and has been running for thirty years. It tends to consist of exhibitions of work from artists from the African diaspora, panel events debating race, and softer cultural celebrations, like fashion shows and food festivals. Speaking to Linda, it felt like she was sceptical of the values of current-day Black History Month activities. When I asked her why she wanted Black History Month in Britain, she said it was to 'celebrate the contribution that black people had made in the United Kingdom. It wasn't about hair . . . it was history month, not culture month. There had been a history, a history that I had been aware of, from my own father's experience.'

The history of blackness in Britain has been a piecemeal one. For an embarrassingly long time, I didn't even realise that black people had been slaves in Britain. There was a received wisdom that all black and brown people in the UK were recent immigrants, with little discussion of the history of colonialism, or of *why* people from Africa and Asia came to settle in Britain. I knew vaguely of the Windrush Generation, the 492 Caribbeans who travelled to Britain by boat in 1948. This was because they were the older relatives of people I knew at school. There was no 'black presence in Britain' presentation that didn't include the *Windrush*. But most of my knowledge of black history was American history. This was an inadequate education in a country where increasing generations of black and brown people continue to consider themselves British (including me). I had been denied a context, an ability to understand myself. I needed to know why, when people waved Union Jacks and shouted 'we want our country back', it felt like the chant was aimed at people like me. What history had I inherited that left me an alien in my place of birth?

On 1 November 2008, at an event marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Institute of Race Relations, the institute's director Ambalavaner Sivanandan told his audience: 'we are here because you were there'. That phrase has since been absorbed into black British

vocabulary. Wanting to know more about what it meant, I reached back, searching for evidence. The first answer I found was war.

Britain's involvement in the First World War wasn't just limited to British citizens. Thanks to its rabid empire building, people from countries that weren't European (apart from colonisation), were caught up in the expectation of dying for King and Country. When, in 2013, the British Council asked people about their perceptions of the First World War, they found that most Brits didn't have an understanding of the international impact it had, despite the moniker 'world war'. 'Because of the reach of empires,' the council's report reads, 'soldiers and labourers were enlisted from all over the globe.'<sup>5</sup> Of the seven countries<sup>6</sup> the British Council surveyed on the First World War, the vast majority of respondents thought that both western and eastern Europe were involved. In comparison, an average of just 17 per cent thought that Asia was involved, and just 11 per cent of respondents identified Africa's involvement.

It could be that this misconception about exactly who fought for Britain during the First World War has led to a near erasure of the contributions of black and brown people. This is an erasure that couldn't be further from the truth. Over a million Indian soldiers – or sepoy (Indian soldiers serving for Britain) – fought for Britain during the First World War.<sup>7</sup> Britain had