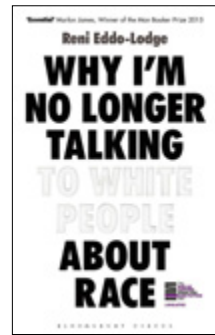


Book Review

Why I'm No Longer Talking To White People About Race



Author: Reni Eddo-Lodge

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Reviewed by Flight Lieutenant Sabrina Sheikh

Introduction

Why I'm No Longer Talking To White People About Race is a Sunday Times and New York Times Best Seller and the first book written by a black British author to top the British book charts. A 2018 Academic Book Week poll named it the most influential book written by a woman. In 2014, Reni Eddo-Lodge made the declaration that she had 'had enough' of talking to some types of people about race, in an attempt at self-preservation, which then catalysed the authoring of this book.

Reni Eddo-Lodge is an award-winning journalist, author and podcaster, listed as one of the best of 2018 by Apple Podcasts, whose involvement in feminist activism began whilst studying English literature. Listed in the Top 100 of the most influential people in the UK of African/African-Caribbean descent according to the Powerlist 2020 and 2021, Reni Eddo-Lodge continues to work on multiple platforms as an influential public voice.

In this self-declared paradoxical continuation of her conversation with white people, Reni Eddo-Lodge discusses Britain's relationship with Race and Racism. At a time when sensitivity around language such as, 'white people' and 'privilege' exists, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* convincingly calls out defiance, complacency and denial, with zero attempt to make the ugly content palatable.

Over a series of chapters, the book provides a distressing and important narrative of Britain's history that penetrates the present environment. Reni Eddo-Lodge analyses overt racism

through the centuries including the World Wars and the decades since, whilst also illustrating the links to present day with the addition of covert racism infiltrating all aspects of our environments and the enduring impact on the life chances of people of colour.

This book explores Britain's integral role in the exponential growth of the Slave Trade and persistent belief that people of colour are lesser, as witnessed in the contemporary treatment of black families, through multiple socioeconomic examples and case studies, including analysis of the Steven Lawrence investigation, education system, policing, social housing, and the weaponising of rhetoric.

This book explains 'White Privilege' and structural inequality. It also confronts the phenomena of racism in feminism over history and the disparities in gender equality work in practice -that primarily benefits white women- and does not live up to the inclusive intentions of feminist theory striving for equality across multiple issues beyond gender alone.

Reni Eddo Lodge explains that 'it is not all white people' and that she does not want to prompt 'White Guilt', but instead calls on white people to speak with other white people to help them recognise the prevalence of racism, accept their privilege, and leverage it to advocate for non-white causes. She provides a clear call to action, challenging those who want to contribute to race equality, to do it incrementally, privately in everyday actions and not for short term public acclaim, accepting that it is a long haul, it is messy -not binary- and it is uncomfortable.

RAF personnel are adept at stepping into unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory. However, this challenge does not wear the soles of our boots, but rather test our agility in the conceptual and moral components as a matter of leadership and resilience at every level, all genders, and all social and educational backgrounds. The subject matter challenges us to reflect on our blind spots, recognise normalised behaviours and an organisations' vulnerability to systemic inequality. Reni Eddo-Lodge unapologetically lifts the veil and helps the reader understand what structural racism is and where it is spawned from.

'Structural' is often the only way to capture what goes unnoticed... the implicit biases, snap judgements made on perceptions of competency... it is not just about personal prejudice, but the collective effects of bias'. (p. 65)

Resistance to acknowledging structural racism is commented on with recognition that her audience may not wish to be alerted to a system that benefits them at the expense of others.

Serving in the military is not to live in a vacuum immune to the issues discussed in this book. It may be useful to acknowledge that we continue to be influenced and influential within our work environments as well as our domestic and social circles.

The **Wigston Report** 2019 was a useful step toward recognising the disparities that exist within our Service. There is a level of discipline and integrity required to wear a uniform, and to an RAF audience the challenge of Racism can be viewed as an opportunity to once again step up to a task that others may feel is *just a bit too difficult*. There is a consensus in race equality literature that it is no longer enough to be 'not racist', we must be 'anti-racist'. In a 2020 address to the RAF BAME Network Air Chief Marshal Sir Mike Wigston, Chief of Air Staff stated that:

'It isn't just about zero tolerance of the perpetrator of inappropriate and illegal behaviour, it's also about zero tolerance for bystanders and it starts with us and the cultures we work in'.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Mike Wigston, Chief of Air Staff 2020

This book will help inform the readers reflections on why the lived experience of people of colour is different and not equal to white people. In the wake of the Wigston Report there has been greater attention toward the sharing of lived experience to improve understanding of the issues and develop empathy for those who feel the effects, from those who do not. Throughout the text Reni Eddo-Lodge expertly navigates the multiple roles: as insider researcher critiquing the data, translating history and illustrating her own lived experience. She states that:

'Amid every conversation about nice white people feeling silenced by conversations about race, there is a sort of ironic and glaring lack of empathy' (p. xi)

She goes on to describe how she is asked by white people as how to fix it and non-white people how to cope. Acknowledging that racism is exhausting, Reni Eddo-Lodge empathises with the desperation of non-white people seeking change, and the difficulty and discomfort to think about how 'whiteness has silently aided' people in life (p. 221).

Empathy is not only important in leadership, but a useful ingredient to reaching understanding and acceptance that change is needed. Change management theory teaches us that there is an element of grieving involved in the journey toward change, and that grief includes feelings of anger, disbelief, and denial, which are themes consistently visited throughout the book.

Reni Eddo-Lodge comments on 'White Denial', by people who are defiant and those who have been taught not to acknowledge colour, describing the bewilderment and impatience to talk, rather than listen to the person of colour. In chapter 3 she describes a scenario conversing with her friend's French white girlfriend, and the shared beliefs that swiftly turned to differences anger and defensiveness 'like every word I've ever heard before' and then an assessment of the social implications of being accused of causing an atmosphere, being a 'reverse racist' and no longer welcome (p. 90-91). She talks about an emotional disconnect & communication gap between white people and people of colour and convincingly illustrates that they do not enter

conversations about race from equal positions, stating that for people of colour 'it is truly a lifetime of self-censorship' (p. xii).

'Entering the conversation with a defiant white person is frankly a dangerous task for me...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... it's likely that their white friends will rally around them... trying to engage with them and navigate their racism is not worth that'. (p. xi)

This is the most important book you will read, whether you are interested in diversity & inclusion, confused by it, angered by it, or have any other feelings about Britain's relationship with racism - read this book. It will lift the veil of mystery for those who are struggling to see the issues and/or what to do about them. It puts into words what many seeking equality struggle to express and calls readers to action.

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