

### **Further praise for *The Race Conversation***

“Ellis invites us to tune into our cognitive and physiological triggers in conversations about race, so that we can listen and understand our own and others’ experience and move away from cycles of defensive and fearful discourses towards a more informed, open and ethical dialogue ... an enriching resource for trainers, therapists, educators and anyone who wants to develop the compassionate awareness that offers hope for meaningful change.”

*Therapy Today*

“This timely, moving book captures in an accessible and practical way the essence and depth of the trauma and psychodynamics of race. Over eight chapters the book maps the construction of race through the centuries, the language and social constructivism around race, the nature of embodied trauma and how it manifests in the here and now.”

*New Psychotherapist*

“Whether you consider yourself informed in this area, or new to cross-racial conversations, this book will have much to offer. It speaks to all forms of oppression ... I cannot recommend it highly enough.”

*The Transactional Analyst*

“This fascinating read dives into a world of new vocabulary coined to initiate conversations around race ... If creative language, thought-provoking theories, and an honest breakdown of how we can all participate in race conversations is what you're after, then this is the read for you. Its forward-thinking narrative aims to normalise conversations about race, highlights the significance of historical oppression, and proposes different solutions to healing from race-related trauma”

*Aaliyah Harris, The Canary*

“This is a beautifully written and highly accessible book on one of the most challenging subjects in modern discourse. It is superb in its cultural sensitivity and succeeds in taking us beyond familiar places in the race conversation, keeping the reader’s mind open and encouraging a sense of curiosity. Ellis, a gifted psychotherapist, guides us through the immense pain of racial injustice and offers a solution nested in human experience and the growth of knowledge. This is a brilliant book, and the message is in the title. It is indeed an essential guide.”

*Professor Peter Fonagy, OBE*

“This book has been written to help us take an honest look at who we really are. It is here to help us dig deep. It is here to heal the nation. I’m no psychotherapist, but I get it. After years of experience on the front-line helping people like me, Eugene has written a book that I believe can change the way we relate to each other, and the way we relate to ourselves. He writes in a logical, accessible way, and makes *The Race Conversation*, our conversation.”

*Benjamin Zephaniah*

“Launched from his personal and professional experience as a therapist, Eugene Ellis presents an insightful and empirical text. He addresses rage, vulnerability and trauma across racial minds and creates a pathway to the understanding of racial dialogue. The book emphasises the multi-faceted positions of racism, mindfulness and body connections that trigger ‘racial arousal’. Language with a slight bite and examples of dialogue prompt further understanding and unravel ‘race construction’. ... This book is an important contribution to keeping the race conversation alive.”

**Isha Mckenzie-Mavinga**, psychotherapist and author of  
*The Challenge of Racism in Therapeutic Practice*

“In this comprehensive text, Eugene Ellis describes a pathway to racial understanding, speaking to both the history of racism and the psychology of race relations, interwoven with a mindfulness-based, somatically-informed model for addressing the effects of this history on all of us. He leaves us with much to converse about!”

**Janina Fisher**, Ph.D., author of *Transforming the Living Legacy of Trauma and Healing the Fragmented Selves of Trauma Survivors*

“Eugene Ellis has powerfully captured the nuances and fractures of trauma, where our minds and bodies have been dehumanised for far too long, and takes us towards reclaiming our sanity and positive growth. This is a ‘must have’ book for all therapists working with people of African and Asian diaspora heritage who want to understand the impact of historical and modern-day racism on the Black British psyche.”

**Patrick Vernon**, OBE, social commentator and  
co-author of *100 Great Black Britons*

“It would be impossible to exaggerate how important this book is for our times. Written, as it was, in the wake of Brexit, the election of Donald Trump and of Black Lives Matter, it tells of the damaging way that conscious and unconscious ideas of race are woven into society. ... Race is a construct with a terrible history that is held deep within the body of individuals and in communities, both white and non-white. Eugene Ellis brings both personal experience and psychotherapeutic insight into this, often fraught, area with compassion, thoughtfulness and rigor.”

**Judy Ryde**, author of *White Privilege Unmasked: How to Be Part of the Solution*

“How the mental construction ‘race’ affects the inner life, the very bodies, of individuals is little recognised and less explored. *The Race Conversation* is a groundbreaking and timely study that brought me, a white English Buddhist, new awareness of my own inner experience and has already benefitted my participation in the ‘race conversation’ through greater understanding of how the construction of race impacts on the psychic and somatic experience of people of colour.”

**Subhuti**, member of the Triratna Buddhist Order,  
President of the London Buddhist Centre, and author of  
*Mind in Harmony: The Psychology of Buddhist Ethics*

# THE RACE CONVERSATION

An essential guide to creating  
life-changing dialogue

EUGENE ELLIS



# CONTENTS

About the author	ix
Acknowledgements	x
Preface	xi
CHAPTER 1	
<b>BEING COLOUR CONSCIOUS</b>	<b>1</b>
Everyday racism	2
Race, the body and the mind	13
A dance partner designed to trip us up	16
The language of race	17
The genetics and race question	20
Shared journeys	21
CHAPTER 2	
<b>BEYOND WORDS</b>	<b>31</b>
Our quest for safety	32
Being trauma informed	35
The non-verbal	40
Safety and danger	45
CHAPTER 3	
<b>WITNESSING THE WOUND</b>	<b>51</b>
Pause	52
The need to be heard	53
Hiding in plain sight	55
Are all white people racist?	58

vi CONTENTS

Whiteness and blackness	59
Mixed-race – walking the line	66
The race construct	74
Race construct shame and black rage	77
CHAPTER 4	
<b>INSIDE THE RACE CONSTRUCT</b>	<b>83</b>
Uncovering the reality distortion field	84
The cry of the Ancestors	86
The past and the present	90
Race and the law	99
Race, class and gender	102
History – the facts	110
The transmission of fear – intergenerational trauma	116
CHAPTER 5	
<b>BEING WITH RACE</b>	<b>129</b>
The problem of internal discomfort	130
Non-relational being	133
CHAPTER 6	
<b>FINDING YOUR VOICE</b>	<b>141</b>
Making a decision	142
Race construct arousal	150
Towards a race-aware paradigm	154
CHAPTER 7	
<b>BECOMING RACE CONSTRUCT AWARE</b>	<b>159</b>
Mind, body and heart	160
Mindfulness	161
Bodyfulness	175
Compassion	184
Getting ourselves resourced	193

## CHAPTER 8

<b>FEELING IT – NOT BEING IT</b>	<b>201</b>
A particular state of mind	202
Getting uncomfortable	204
Is it safe?	216
Lifting the veil	225
The call to action and speaking our truth	238
Staying at the contact boundary	247
Connecting oppressions	268
APPENDICES	271
Legal and ideological timeline for the organisation of the race construct	272
Race construct awareness diagram	274
BIBLIOGRAPHY	275
INDEX	285

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Eugene Ellis** is the Director and Founder of the Black, African and Asian Therapy Network (BAATN), the UK's largest independent organisation to specialise in working therapeutically with black, African, Caribbean and south Asian people. He trained as an integrative arts psychotherapist and has worked for many years with severely traumatised children and their families in the field of adoption and fostering. He has a special interest in body-orientated therapies and facilitating self-healing through the use of metaphor and the imagination.

Eugene has a particular interest in facilitating race conversations with the therapeutic community in the UK through articles and podcasts. He is also active in facilitating a dialogue around race as it relates to the body within organisations and in psychotherapy training.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I feel honoured to have had many fruitful race conversations with those who have given their permission to be featured in this book and thankful for their candidness and honesty.

Cathy Ingram, Gary Baron, Kam Sanghera, Maitrinita, Mickey Peake, Nandaraja, Patrick Harrison, Dr Phil Cox, Roshmi Lovatt, Ruth Calland, Sabina Khan, Sharon Beirne, Sujhayini, Tali Lernau and Warren Davis.

I want to thank BAATN members and attendees of BAATN trainings and forums over the years for their contribution to my thinking and process.

I am grateful to the BAATN Leadership Advisory team team who, for many years, helped me stay sane and process the many corridors of the race construct.

Carmen Joanne Ablack, Dennis L Carney, Dr Isha Mckenzie-Mavinga, Ian Thompson, Poppy Banerjee, Jayakara Ellis, Karen Minikin, Rotimi Akinsete and our beloved brother Arike who recently passed.

I am indebted to Manjusiha and George Bunting for their support with the manuscript and Catherine Jackson for her encouragement over many years.

Finally, I am thankful for the teachings and friendships within the Triratna Buddhist Community and my safe base within their POC Sangha.



## PREFACE

Since the publication of *The Race Conversation* back in March 2021, it has been heartening to receive numerous comments from individuals and institutions who have found the ideas within the book both accessible and impactful. In the many race conversations I have had or witnessed over the years, the predictable and defining features are fear, discomfort, and the loss of clear thinking and compassion. The framing of race and racism in relation to interpersonal and intergenerational trauma has been particularly useful for many readers in helping them make sense of this discomfort. The trauma-informed ideas and theories I talk about in this book have sowed the seeds of belief in the possibility of connecting with the impact of race and racism in much more profound ways, along with the belief that it is possible to move towards undoing racism on a personal and institutional level.

In the short time since the first edition of *The Race Conversation*, much has happened that continues to highlight a global phenomenon that obscures the humanity of racialised people. The UK government issued their long-awaited report from the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, which declared there was no evidence of structural racism in the police or education. This assertion devastatingly denies the reality of many racial and ethnic minorities. In the midst of the Ukrainian refugee crisis, African students, who make up a sizeable percentage of overseas students in Ukraine, were denied fair passage to neighbouring countries even after the declaration from the EU that anyone coming from

Ukraine would be welcomed. The Child Q safeguarding report was also published. This report stated that a black 15-year-old girl was taken out of an exam and strip-searched by police, including having to remove her sanitary towel, with no appropriate adult present and no one informing her parents. Teachers had wrongly suspected her of carrying cannabis. This incident had changed a 'top of the class' student, according to her parents, into a shell of her former self.

On one level, it would appear that not much has changed and that racism continues unabated. On another level however, there are expanding pools of grief and rage and a growing number of dissenting voices, which are becoming louder and more urgent. The opening up of consciousness that has taken place has blossomed into a chorus of voices that pressingly need to continue their momentum until the hearts and minds of significant numbers of individuals are impacted enough for cultural and behavioural change to take place. This book is about listening to, understanding and amplifying these voices. It is also about mindfully attending to how we are conditioned to react around race and being creative in our responses. I feel honoured to be able to contribute in words and ideas to the continuing struggle.

# CHAPTER 1

## BEING COLOUR CONSCIOUS

---

Everyday racism

Race, the body and the mind

A dance partner designed to trip us up

The language of race

The genetics and race question

Shared journeys

## Everyday racism

**W**hen I started writing this book, the electorate in the UK had just voted to leave the European Union. It was Obama's last week in office, after serving two terms as president of the USA, and Donald Trump had just been elected president. For me, and for many others, the social narrative of the UK and America had shifted decidedly away from equality and connection towards division, separateness and protectionism. Shifting narratives of connection versus disconnection were taking place in other countries also, as feelings that had previously laid dormant had once again been given licence to be expressed.

Whatever you thought of his policies, Obama brought with him a level of hope and possibility to the idea of a non-racial world. His very presence, however, placed a mirror up to the myth of a post-racism society. Obama's visibility and very existence brought to the surface hidden thoughts, feelings and behaviours that had been hiding in plain sight. Among other conversations around inequality, the world, it seemed, was in the grip of a race conversation few people knew what to do with.

Like many others, I went through a phase of dislocation and mourning, even paranoia as these narratives played out on the world stage. Before these events took place, I had done a considerable amount of research with regards to race and its traumatic effects on past and present generations. I had steeped myself in the historic horror and brutality of it all. What was happening in the UK, America and other countries around the world had triggered something inside me. I felt linked very personally to the atrocities directed at past generations, even though I was not a direct part of it. I had not experienced old-time racism in my lifetime in an overtly hostile way, yet I could feel it in my bones. The range of feelings that were happening within me could collectively be summed up as fear, and from that fear came rage, along with a sense of helplessness and intense inner discomfort. Nothing materially had changed in

my world, yet there I was with all this emotional turmoil. It was the charged narrative and the threat behind the narrative that had brought me to where I was.

My vulnerability as a person of colour had been exposed, and the race construct had been activated within me. It was troubling to observe the breaking down of clear thinking in those I heard in the media. Sweaty lipped politicians, desperate to recapture a sense of lost superior identity, frequently appeared on the news. On one side of the street, there seemed to be a drive to redefine British identity as something ahead of the pack that needed to reassert itself; on the other side, there was a cry from those who experienced cold alienation.

As I wrote the final chapter of this book, George Floyd had just been killed by a police officer in the USA. The calmness with which this police officer took George Floyd's life and the undisturbed nature of the other officers involved was genuinely shocking to witness. The subsequent sharing of testimonies of acts of race brutality on social media swept aside the seduction of the post-racism narrative. If you have never thought about racism before, and you watch or listen to these videos and testimonies, you will begin to understand what the stakes are and what it means for you as a person of colour or as a white person. Although it is very hard to watch and listen to these stories, this type of impactful engagement with race is a vital part of a journey. For some, it can be what flips the script. An understanding might begin to emerge that we are living in a system – from this understanding, we can start to orientate towards what we really need to be thinking about. For others, there can be an experience akin to waking up from slumber with a renewed effort to refocus and recommit.

My personal experience of George Floyd's killing and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests was, once again, dislocation and mourning; this time around, however, it was on a whole different level. I could actually feel my body bristling under the collective weight of distress. There were so many other people I knew who were experiencing something similar. It wasn't just that

#### 4 THE RACE CONVERSATION

racism had woken up in the present, there was also an awakening of historical distress from the past. Talking about race had always been hard work, but, after George Floyd's killing, it had somehow become hard work not to. The race construct had become glaringly evident in our collective, heightened state of awareness. People of colour, in particular, were either being asked about race by white people or feeling compelled to call out the racism they saw in their places of work or even in their own homes. They were then exposed to the intense feelings of discomfort that the race conversation brings about for them and particularly for white people and white institutions. In 2021, with a new administration in the White House, we can be spared the daily threats and toxic insults, but what does this mean going forward? What do we need to do to sustain the current level of awareness and move into action to dismantle the structures of racism and reduce suffering? The ideas and narratives in this book, at least, are my small contribution to this effort.

This book's central idea is about the discomfort that appears to be the abiding experience of the race conversation, for both people of colour and white people. Looking at the title of this book for the first time would have elicited a response, and probably an uncomfortable one. Most likely, there would have been images in the mind about how this book would be experienced as it was read. In our minds, we might imagine that this book is going to be tough-going, or, for some, not tough enough. Our expectations might lead us to imagine the tone of the book to be a pointy-fingered diatribe or maybe way too optimistic. There might be images in your mind of previous race conversations you might have had and how they didn't go as well as planned. Perhaps you've never had a race conversation and are wondering why, given how influential race is in people's lives. When we enter into the race conversation, we are entering into the territory of trauma, of the good/bad binary. Our most present experience is often one of confusion. What complicates the race conversation, as

we have all probably experienced, is the emotional soup that gets evoked that plays havoc with our cognitive and rational minds. The left side of our brain is eager for understanding and is brilliant at it, but, with emotions running high, instead of our cognition helping us, it just appears to make things worse.

I'm using the term 'race conversation' to describe the many narratives that happen within us and between us. Most race conversations happen internally, within the confines of our minds and bodies. These internal conversations are typically activated when we hear casual racism or when we witness or experience the grosser acts of racism out in the world. This internal conversation is generally in the form of conscious, competing voices in our heads, which result in confusion or a truce-making silence. Typically, there is also a non-verbal, physiological struggle between the drive to act, which feels dangerous, and the drive to be still, which feels safe. A challenge for all of us is communicating this internalised conversation to others, especially across racial lines.

**" Our present focus needs to be on our relationship with the construct of race itself, which can only come through dialogue among ourselves and with others "**

The aim of the book is not necessarily to make changes to the external world directly. Instead, it is about an internal shift that honours and validates our experiences and gives us more opportunities to discover our voice. Ultimately this would lead to challenging the paradigm of race in our places of work, places of study and our personal lives. With ending racism somewhere in the distance, our present focus needs to be on our relationship with the construct of race itself, which can only come through dialogue among ourselves and with others. Race conversations between individuals and between groups offer great potential for change and healing, and there are many contexts for the race conversation to take place. These conversations can happen between people of colour and white people, between people of colour and other people of colour, and between white people and other white people. Each context offers various levels of perceived

## 6 THE RACE CONVERSATION

safety or danger and different overall perspectives on living in a society deeply embedded in the race construct.

Towards the end of the book, I will be presenting race conversations I have had with people from white, black, brown and mixed-race backgrounds. My initial hope was to illuminate the ideas I wanted to present; what I received, however, was so much more. I was opened up to further important strands of exploration and was taken to new places of understanding. As well as mirroring the everyday places the mind and body move toward in the race conversation, each conversation contains other areas of possible interest and speak for themselves. Although the focus for these conversations is on race, the individual's intersecting identities inevitably give rise to experiences that are not merely the sum of each of them.

**" The process of understanding the impact of race is more about removing the clouds to see the sky than developing new eyes "**

The idea of intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), would make it very unlikely that, say, a black gay man and a black gay woman would have the same experience.

There are many stories that we tell ourselves around race that keep us stuck. For instance, there is the story that understanding

race is too far out of reach, too other, too strange and too complicated. Another might be that to make contact with the impact of race, you would need to develop a previously undiscovered part of the self. Another story might be that only a lived experience of racial discrimination can bring real understanding. These stories are trauma response stories. They are stories of protection from possible pain and stories that are, in part at least, an attempt to keep us safe emotionally and move towards comfortable ground. To counter these stories, I could say that the process of understanding the impact of race is more about removing the clouds to see the sky than developing new eyes. I might also say that, although being a person of colour is the most direct route to understanding, this does not necessarily take a person of colour any closer to the type of understanding that brings about healing and change.