

# UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS WITH A BLACK MAN

## BOOK DIGEST

### INTRODUCTION

Emmanuel Acho opens this book with this friendly invitation to a safe space where we can find answers to questions we didn't know who to ask before. He writes:

*“Dear white friends, countrypersons: welcome. Pull up a chair.”*

With open arms and an open heart, he adds:

*“For all of you who lack an honest black friend in your life, consider me that friend.”*

Our author has been navigating the lines between whiteness and blackness his entire life, having grown up in Dallas, Texas and being the son of Nigerian immigrants.

His home life grounded him in Nigerian culture more than in black American culture, while his surroundings were disproportionately white, in the upper class suburban neighborhood he was living in and within the private school he attended. Having grown up in a state that was the birthplace of Juneteenth, he was already aware of racism as a young person and experienced it first hand as early as nine years old, in subtle but potent way. He heard things such as:

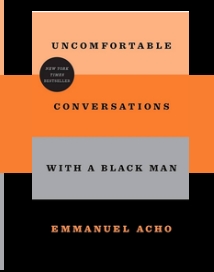
*“You don't sound black”,  
“You don't even dress like you're black”  
or “You're an oreo: black on the outside, white on the inside.”*

He reflects on how confusing it was for his identity as a kid.

His second part of the journey was when he joined the University of Texas and was surrounded by more black people than ever before. That's when he understood what feeling home meant; he knew he had found HIS people. That's also when he connected more deeply with what it meant to be a black man in America. Finally, that's when he realized he had not been immune to the stereotypical stuff we're being fed. He shares:

*“Finally surrounded by so many different expressions of blackness, I knew I was fine the way I was. But I started to wonder: “If I, a first-generation-American black man, could be taught to believe distorted things in such a short time, how much easier is it for a white person to believe them?”*

He takes the analogy of a foreign language that you can only truly learn by studying abroad. He considers himself someone who got to study both in white culture and in black culture and feels fluent in both. This book is what he chooses to do with this perspective.



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He adds:

*“I want to be a catalyst for change, to help cure the systemic injustices that have led to the tragic deaths of too many of my brothers and sisters; prisons popping up like fast-food chains; inequalities in health care and education; the forced facts of who gets to live where; the ingrained ignorance of Americans who can’t see beyond skin color. I believe an important part of the cure, maybe the most crucial part of it, is to talk to each other.”*

Which means conversations rooted in trust, respect, shared perspectives and exchange of information. Which also means building relationships and ultimately recognizing our shared humanity.

*““The ultimate logic of racism” Marthin Luther King Jr. once said “is genocide.””*

He reminds us that:

*“In these pages, the only bad question is the unasked question.”*

Each chapter is based on a question that was emailed to him. He highlights why he appreciates anyone who comes to him with one of those questions:

*“Wherever the askers are coming from, they came to learn.”*

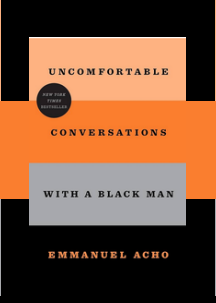
His goal is to help us gain more understanding of race, more empathy and more grace, while becoming less and less judgemental—judgment being one of the roots of racism.

Also, he reminds us that there are degrees in racism and that this book is also for those who are not overtly racist but:

*“On a spectrum between a person who is a little racially insensitive or ignorant and someone who holds deeply ingrained negative ideas about people of other races and ethnicities.”*

Emmanuel Acho highlights that his perspective IS a perspective, and that he cannot speak for every black experience in this country, nor pretend to know absolutely everything about black culture. But he is a black man in this country and he writes:

*“What I can do is tell you how it looks from here.”*



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Finally he reminds us that:

*“It’s going to take all of us—you, me, everybody—to achieve the dream. You are going to have to learn how to move beyond being NOT racist, to being antiracist (a term that’s been around for decades, but was recently made popular by scholar Ibram X. Kendi).”*

*“Getting uncomfortable is the whole idea. Everything great is birthed through discomfort.”*

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### PART 1: YOU AND ME

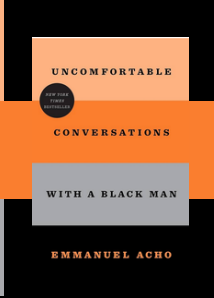
#### THE NAME GAME: **Black** or **African American**?

*“According to my Teachers,  
I am now an African-American.  
They call me out of my name.  
BLACK is an open umbrella.  
I am a Black and A Black forever.  
I am one of The Blacks.  
--Gwendolyn Brooks. “I AM A BLACK”*

This is a question our author gets a lot and he reminds us that, especially when it relates to race, the words we use have power and that’s why there will be a lot of definition in this book.

#### LET’S REWIND

The roots of a majority of black people’s journey in America lie in enslavement, when their ancestors were seized from their lands and stripped from foundational parts of their identities—such as links to tribe and language—before landing in a country where they would be legally considered less than human, for hundreds of years. This is one of the reasons why adopting different racial labels was so important to emancipated black people after the Civil War. At first, the word **colored** was adopted because it was accepted both by black and white people and was inclusive of anyone who had mixed racial ancestry. It stayed that way for the most part of the 20th century, and this is why it’s still a part of the name of one of the most important black organizations: the NAACP (or National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), which was founded in 1909.



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This term was changed for **negro** during the time of progressive black figures, such as W.E.B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington, and this name held on until the end of the civil rights movement. It was ultimately abandoned, because it was a term originally imposed by white people onto black people.

The name **Black** appeared in the late 60s and was the preference until 1988—it had been created as a parallel to white people.

Black leaders proposed the usage of **African-American** in 1988, in Chicago, when black leaders met to discuss the “National Black Agenda.” They criticized the term **Black** which had been a label used by slave owners and is often linked to sin, lack of virtue, dishonesty or other negative connotations. To them, **African-American** celebrated their cultural heritage.

Not everyone agreed, preferring how inclusive the umbrella term of **Black** is or highlighting that **African-American** can imply that black people are not “American” American.

And others thought that those discussions was a diversion drawing attention away from the real problems.

As of now, both **Black** and **African-American** are used, with defenders for both names.

Of note, for our author, the term **BIPOC** (Black Indigenous People of Color) is more a synonym of the word “minority” than “black.” And he prefers this to “minority” because, as he reminds us:

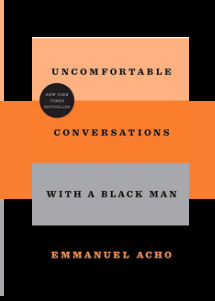
*“People of color make up the global majority!”*

### LET’S GET UNCOMFORTABLE

Emmanuel Acho empathizes:

*“I imagine some of you are thinking: if black people can’t decide which term to use, then how and why should white people be expected to know which term to use? Point taken. But all that means is that this conversation is worth having.”*

Personally, even though he embodies the definition of **African American** as a dual citizen of the United States and of Nigeria, he leans towards the name **black** and believes that it is the most inclusive choice. It’s a descriptor of what black people have in common, no matter how they came to live in the US.



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He concludes:

*“There’s no one label that will satisfy all (...) but there is usually an opportunity to ask someone their preference. Yes, it might be uncomfortable, but it’s the right thing to do.”*

### TALK IT, WALK IT

When in doubt, the best policy is to ASK.

Just like a new caring teacher in school would survey all their students on the first day, to find out what their preferred name was.

The goal is not to question why, and only to adapt and respect their choice.

*“The question of whether to use Black or African American is ultimately preference, one that helps a person present their identity to the world.*

*Each person you meet might not have a preference, but maybe they do.*

*TRUST ME. LANGUAGE MATTERS.”*