

# UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS WITH A BLACK MAN

## BOOK DIGEST

Cite your sources or drop the class.

### CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

*“What would America be like if we loved black people as much as we love black culture?  
Amandla stenberg”*

#### QUESTION

**“IF THERE IS A HAIRSTYLE OR STYLE IN GENERAL THAT SOMEONE THINKS IS BEAUTIFUL AND WANTS TO TRY OUT, BUT IT IS MAINLY SEEN IN BLACK WOMEN/MEN, WHEN IS IT NOT CULTURAL APPROPRIATION?”**

In 2020, Kim Kardashian posted videos of herself with white-beaded braids. Her followers started the conversation about cultural appropriation, which took a sour turn when they realized she credited Bo Derek, a white woman, for inspiration to adopt this black hairstyle. To help center the discussion, the author makes a parallel between cultural appropriation and plagiarism. He adds:

*“While it might be true that imitation is the highest form of flattery, plagiarism isn’t flattery—it’s stealing. It’s doing none of the work yourself and taking as much of the credit as the world will give you.”*

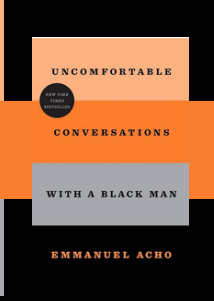
Borrowing influences from other culture is not problematic as long as we don’t do it without learning the history attached to it and without citing the sources.

*“So just when does something move from homage, creative influence, or flattery into the bad kind of copycatting —the realm of cultural appropriation?”*

#### LET’S REWIND

Thomas “Daddy” Rice was a white actor in the 1830s and the inventor of Jim Crow, a fictional caricature of an enslaved person. With a blackface, he would impersonate Jim Crow in order to perform minstrel shows built on mocking black people. Shows that were extremely popular among white audiences at the time, not only in America but also in Great Britain. The author adds:

*“That’s right: even the NAME for the laws that kept the South segregated until the 60s was a cruel hundred-year-old joke at the expense of black people.”*



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This is a case and point on why knowing the history is especially paramount when borrowing from black culture. And also one of the reasons it is never ever okay for a white person to resort to the practice of blackface.

Emmanuel Acho writes:

*“The exchange of ideas, styles, and traditions is one of the tenets of a modern multicultural society. It’s a part of how we grow, learn, advance. But cultural appropriation is something else. Cultural Appropriation happens when members of a dominant group—in the United States, white people—take elements from the culture of people who are disempowered.”*

Besides trivializing oppression, it allows people who are still prejudiced against the people of a culture to show love for that very culture, while allowing those who are privileged to profit from the labor of those who are oppressed. Finally, it perpetuates racist stereotypes.

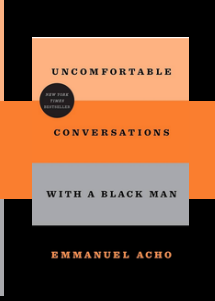
### LET’S GET UNCOMFORTABLE

Black people’s speech, bodies, skin color and culture have been seen as lesser than for hundreds of years. That’s why it feels so hurtful when white people then take those same characteristics and celebrate as their own.

*“Conversations must be had about what is and isn’t cultural appropriation,  
about the history of what is being appropriated,  
about how it makes people who have long been disenfranchised feel.”*

Emmanuel Acho adds:

*“The goal of sounding the alarm about culture appropriation is not to stop anyone, white people included, from celebrating black culture. The key is to celebrate it AS black culture—not to take it away as your own.”*



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### TALK IT, WALK IT

His advice?

To do our homework whenever we want to borrow from another culture. To find out about the genesis of that culture. To know where any of the habits or practices we want to imitate comes from.

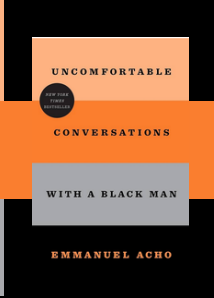
When in doubt, to ask questions and make sure the people we're asking are competent to answer them.

To steer clear of any ethnic stereotype and avoid anything that relies on evoking a race that is not our own—even more so when considering sacred cultural artifacts.

And it is paramount for white people especially because of the history of colonialism and white privilege.

*"If the first goal here is to stop being ignorant,  
the second goal is just to learn more about one another.*

*And that can be a lot of fun"*



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### The mythical me

#### ANGRY BLACK MEN

“To be a negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time.  
—James Baldwin ”

#### QUESTION

**“I HAVE UNFORTUNATELY ENCOUNTERED MANY BLACK PEOPLE WHO SEEM HELL-BENT ON HANGING THE HISTORY OF SLAVERY AND RACISM AND INEQUALITY AROUND EVERY SINGLE WHITE PERSON’S NECK. WHO ARE UNWILLING TO GIVE GRACE IF WE ASK QUESTIONS TO TRY AND UNDERSTAND HOW WE CAN BE BETTER. THEY ARE ANGRY AND I’M NOT SAYING IT ISN’T JUSTIFIED—ANGER IS A FORM OF GRIEF AND IT’S ALLOWED TO A DEGREE WITHIN THE LAW. BUT IF WE ALL GENUINELY WANT TO MOVE FORWARD, THIS IS AN OBVIOUS PROBLEM.”**

Laurie Cassidy, a white woman herself, wrote an article about “[The Myth of the Dangerous Black Man](#)” in which she shares an experiment with her readers: to imagine themselves alone at night in a dark street and encountering three young black men on the sidewalk. She writes:

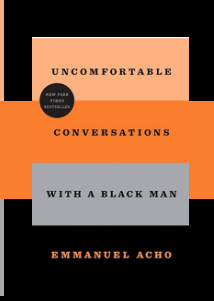
*“What do you do as these young black men approach? How do you feel as they walk by on the sidewalk? (...) if you are a white person reading these lines, ask yourself if you would feel apprehensive or frightened? (...) Are you afraid that they might mug you? And do you feel guilty that you even feel this way? After seeing these young men do you feel more vulnerable to physical harm and are you more alert to your surrounding?”*

Cassidy who admits she would feel apprehensive critiques her reactions, highlighting how it stems from ideas she learned about them—and not her actual experience!

Emmanuel Acho adds:

*“While Cassidy uses the word “learned”, I’d take it a step further and call those ideas INDOCTRINATION. This is what happens when implicit biases are absorbed, and instead of being educated away, are reinforced. They turn into stereotypes that make it harder for every black person to live a life free of racism.”*

And the myth of the angry black man is one of the most **harmful** and **pervasive**.



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### LET'S REWIND

#### There are two parts to that myth:

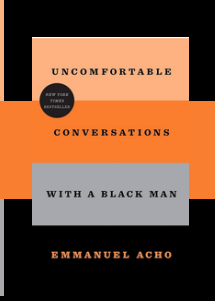
- **The current implication:** a man who sees racism and discrimination everywhere, even when he's not being victimized. The author shares the concept of “a woke black man” and reminds us that there IS a negative implication associated with it (the idea of the man who cried wolf).
- **The origin story:** seeing black men as overly aggressive and threatening—especially to innocent white women. Fueled by “The Birth of a Nation”, a 1915 movie celebrated by President Wilson at the time and recognized to have inspired the second coming of the KKK. A movie where a white woman kills herself when a black man asks her to marry him (the implication being that it shows how terrified she was he would rape her).

As with any myth, we can ask ourselves, is there truth in its origins? Acho has us consider why, in this case, might there be an association between anger and black men. He cites several painful potential sources: Enslaved black men had to witness their wives being raped and impregnated by their white masters. Something that could also happen to their children. At the same time, they could be lynched for nothing more than having looked at a white woman or the accusation that they did and that apparently being problematic. Then there is the accompanying angst that one could not help other black people in such circumstances. Finally, there was no consequence for white people if they murdered a black man. So he asks:

*“If that were your reality, if that were the history of your forebears, how angry would you be? At what point would you get over that anger? How in the heck would you get over that anger?”*

Our author then touches on what he calls an “ongoing weaponization of whiteness.” He writes about Emmett Till again and about the meme of Karen. Among many examples provided by the author, we could witness Karen in Amy Cooper, when she called the police, in 2020, to report that a black man—who was only asking her to re-leash her dog in Central Park—was “threatening her life” (thankfully with camera footage to document the absence of aforementioned threat). He writes:

*“Names aside, they’re all Karen, the meme: an entitled white woman who throws tantrums, asks to speak to the manager, and sometimes calls for the cavalry against a supposed Angry Black Man. Karen is also the granddaughter of a much older figure “Miss Ann.” Miss Ann was the name enslaved black people gave to white mistresses who exerted power over them on plantations.”*



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He also recalls The Tulsa Race Riot where an area of what was known as Black Wall Street was burned to the ground because a young black man, Dick Rowland, had been suspected of assaulting a white woman in an elevator. 300 people died and 1200 buildings were destroyed. Rowland was found innocent.

All those events were the foundation that rendered the murder of George Floyd possible. That's also how black men can die from minor altercations with the police when white men can survive ordeals during which they attack policemen before fleeing the scene (see Jerry's story in the book).

### LET'S GET UNCOMFORTABLE

The anger of the black man is historically justified.

*"It's not white people's job to police the feelings of black people, but as fellow human beings, please grant black people the right to the full amount of emotions regarding their wounds."*

Emmanuel Acho shares:

*"The uncomfortable conversation is, where do these stereotypes come from? Who do these stereotypes serve? In what ways, if any, have you perpetuated them?"*

And one interesting question to ask to someone who feels disturbed by the meme of Karen is: did you consider the history behind it AND are you as disturbed by the myth of the Angry Black Men?

### TALK IT, WALK IT

He invites his readers to pay attention to how many times white people weaponize their whiteness against black people and how often the myth of the Angry Black Men enables violence towards them.

Finally, he shares two books recommendation:

- White Fragility, by Robin DiAngelo,
- How to Be Antiracist, by Ibram X. Kendi.

*"I want to leave you with this: if you see a black man and he is angry, obviously don't assume he's angry because he's black, but also don't assume he's even angry at anything racism-related at that moment. Let people have emotions. See him as an individual."*