

UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS WITH A BLACK MAN

BOOK DIGEST

NOOOOOPE!

THE N-WORD

Disclaimer:

*As a white woman writing this digest, I will only include the word when quoting the author, and I will not write it down but replace it with **.*

QUESTION

“WHY DO I HAVE TO BLEEP MYSELF WHEN I’M SINGING IN MY CAR TO A BLACK-AUTHORED SONG? WHY CAN’T I QUOTE THE LYRICS OR EVEN SING THE MUSIC THAT BLACK ARTISTS THEMSELVES SELL IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN?”

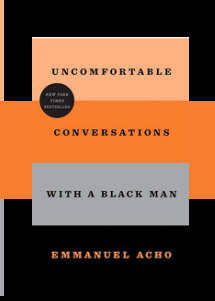
Emmanuel Acho reminds us of when Riley Cooper, a white teammate of his on the Philadelphia Eagles, used that word in 2013. He shares:

*“It all started at a Kenny Chesney concert (well, his feelings on race clearly started before that), where a purportedly drunk Cooper was upset that he wasn’t being allowed backstage and said, “I’ll jump over the fence and fight every ***** in here! He said it with the hardest ER.”*

A video was made and surfaced a few days later. Their head coach told the team that Cooper had been sent home to ‘rethink his actions’, which did little to help repair the bonds that had just been severed between Cooper and his teammates—especially since his punishment allowed him to miss the most grueling part of their training.

After another incident with a white Miami Dolphins lineman, the NFL tried to ban the word by creating rules enabling referees to intervene with ejection in case of a second offense.

Colin Kaepernick would start kneeling to protest against police brutality against black people two seasons later.



UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS WITH A BLACK MAN

BOOK DIGEST

The author adds:

*“There will never be any circumstances under which a white person should use the word *****. Period.”*

Because to a black person that word is associated with all the worst kind of dehumanizing insults one could imagine.

LET'S REWIND

Spelled with only one “n” at the time, the word ***** comes from the Latin and simply meant Black. It became Negro in the Americas, under the influence of colonialist John Rolfe. Emmanuel Acho adds:

*“In 1775, the first derogatory usage of the term ***** shows up—and boy, did it catch on.”*

By the 1800s, it was part of the American lexicon; and its usage continually spread from then on.

Black people stopped using it during the civil rights movement, guided by great thinkers such as James Baldwin, who said:

*“We have invented the *****. I didn’t invent him. White people invented him I’ve known and I’ve always known... that I’m not a *****.”*

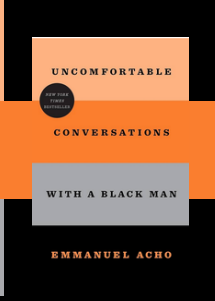
That term reappeared through Hip Hop culture in the late 1980s. Our author highlights:

*“From the height of the group [N.W.A.]’s early 1990s popularity till now, the word ***** [with an A instead of ER] has been a staple in rap lyrics”*

It allowed black people to seize some of the power of the word and for some, it is a term of endearment that black folks can use with other black folks.

*“It’s a way for black people to commute, to create a space that’s only for us.
It is not, like any other forms of the word, a word that is available to white people.”*

Of note, while some black people feel like using those derivations are a way to empty it from their original malice, others find it irredeemable even in that context.



UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS WITH A BLACK MAN

BOOK DIGEST

The NAACP held a funeral for that word in 2007. And Maya Angelou once said:

“The N-word was created to divert people of their humanity. When I see a bottle [and] it says ‘POISON’ then I know [what it is]. The bottle is nothing but the content is poison. If I pour that content into Bavarian crystal, it is still poison.”

As the author highlights:

“If black people do or don’t say it, that’s up to black people.”

He adds:

“Either way, unfortunately, there will always be white people, white men especially, who feel entitled enough to use the word. White entertainers sometimes think it can be made into a joke (...). Friends, it’s not funny.”

LET’S GET UNCOMFORTABLE

Emmanuel Acho shares how Chris Rock used to have a routine where he would describe a black person doing something absolutely atrocious to someone else, adding layers upon layers of insult to injury. He would conclude by saying:

*“If you’re white, at that moment, you can say “somebody stop that *****”.*

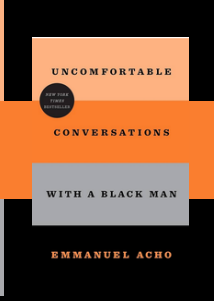
Rock decided, however, to retire that joke, as the crowd’s eruption was conspicuously too loud... to the relief of our author.

He adds:

*“There is no conversation that excuses a white person using the word *****. There’s too much pain in that word coming from a white mouth.”*

And he also invites anyone who felt inclined to use it to reflect on WHY?

*“If the word ***** is in your heart or on your tongue, please, please try to figure out why.”*



UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS WITH A BLACK MAN

BOOK DIGEST

TALK IT, WALK IT

Notably, when Riley Cooper issued his public apology on social, black people were absent from it. He only talked about his coach, Jeffrey Lurie, Howie Roseman and his teammates, as well as his fans and community. He also pledged to accept the consequences of what I did—but no consequence came. The next step in his career was a \$25-million extension.

Emmanuel Acho tends this chapter with two reading recommendations:

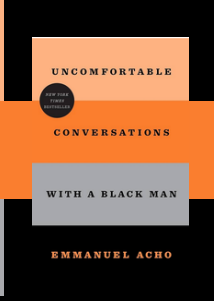
- The N-word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn't and Why, by Jabari Asim,
- Eulogy for *****, by David Brasley.

“As always, try to reflect critically on how you use language

and the extent to which your language reflects your innermost thoughts and feelings.

If you can't help yourself,

I suggest you stop raping along to the music.”



UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS WITH A BLACK MAN

BOOK DIGEST

PART II: US AND THEM

The House Always Win

SYSTEMIC RACISM

“The dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement—James Truslow Adams, The Epic of America, 1931, coining the term AMERICAN DREAM.”

QUESTION

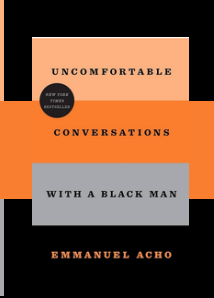
“WHAT SYSTEMS ARE RACIST THAT NEED TO BE CHANGED NOW? I HAVE HEARD ARGUMENTS ABOUT THINGS RELATED TO HOUSING AND SCHOOLS NOT BEING AS WELL FUNDED, WHICH BOTH SEEM TO BE MORE ECONOMIC ISSUES THAN RACE ISSUES. I CAN SEE HOW IN THE PAST THE NOW-GRANDPARENT GENERATION MAY HAVE SUFFERED FROM RACISM UNDER REDLINING AND OTHER PRACTICES THAT ARE NOW ILLEGAL. I ALSO SEE HOW THAT CAN HAVE LINGERING EFFECTS. HOWEVER, I SEE THOSE RACIST ISSUES AS HAVING BEEN DEALT WITH.”

Our author opens this chapter by walking us through his friend’s new house, who was excited that it had come with plantation shutters... until he saw Emmanuel Acho’s face and realized that plantation shutters are a potent reminder of slavery.

He reminds us that:

“The signs aren’t so overt everywhere, but don’t ever let anyone convince you that we are in a “post-racial” America.”

That term came up during President Obama’s years at the White House, but our author reminds us that until Systemic Racism has been dismantled, a post-racial America will not be a reality.



UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS WITH A BLACK MAN

BOOK DIGEST

The term “American Dream” was coined in 1931 by historian James Truslow Adams. Emmanuel Acho remarks:

“I’m sure we can all agree that an America built on “opportunity for each according to ability or achievements” sounds like a pretty great place to live. But it’s a place that America has never been—especially for black people.”

On the individual level, it is made impossible in everyday interactions between black and white Americans because of implicit bias, white privilege, cultural appropriation and harmful stereotypes. And those are the fingerprints of a much bigger problem: **Systemic Racism**.

“Racism is a form of oppression, a.k.a. Those with more power putting their thumbs on those with less power. And oppression is as old as civilization.”

Emmanuel Acho reminds us that, ever since groups of people started creating rules, customs and governments, some form of oppression followed. Sooner or later the systems ended up favoritizing some at the expense of others. He adds:

“In America, like many other countries founded on colonialism (even before we get to slavery!), the rule makers are white, and those faring worse are black and brown people.”

As a sign that the history of slavery is still mirrored everywhere around us, our author reminds us that Mississippi waited until 2020 to remove the literal Confederate Flag from its state flag.

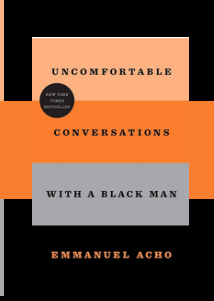
LET’S REWIND

“Systemic racism is the legitimizing of every dynamic—historic, cultural, political, economic, institutional, and person-to-person—that gives advantages to white people, while at the same time producing a whole host of terrible effects for black people and other people of color.”

Emmanuel Acho explains:

“Those effects show up as inequalities in power, opportunities, laws, and every other metric of how individuals and groups are treated. Which is to say: systemic racism is making the unequal treatment of people of color the national norm.”

And it is particularly impactful in three areas: housing, schooling and criminal justice.



UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS WITH A BLACK MAN

BOOK DIGEST

“The racism ingrained in each of these areas of life perpetuates a vicious cycle in which certain groups, including black folks, are held down, while other groups—namely, white folks—are elevated.”

Home ownership is one of the most common ways to build wealth, so redlining explains why black families have just one-tenth the wealth of white families.

Homey Hoyt was the chief economist of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) in 1934, when he wrote a report ranking various nationalities by order of “desirability” in regards to home-ownership loans. At the top were Anglo-saxons and northern Europeans. At the bottom were Black folks and Mexicans. From there they mapped out cities, marking for instance in green the neighborhoods where it was seen as safer to lend money (where white people lived) and in red the neighborhoods where black people and Mexicans lived.

Redlining was outlawed in 1968 thanks to the Fair Housing Act, but it’s still in practice and shapes what neighborhoods look like across America. 72% of white households are homeowners, in contrast with 43% of black households—an advantage one can pass down to their children.

It also impacts the way schools are funded, since less local taxes are paid when homes are worth less in a neighborhood and when there are fewer businesses—and local taxes constitute 45% of a school’s funding.

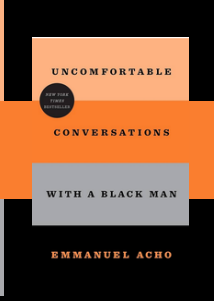
Systemic racism did not only impact education for young black folks because of the schools themselves. Emmanuel Acho reminds us that:

“We must never lose sight of the truth that when black people were enslaved, they were forbidden to read and write, that their white owners did everything they could think of to keep them illiterate, undereducated, ignorant.”

Cheyney University, the first black college, was founded in 1837, two hundred years after Harvard, the oldest institution of higher learning in America.

Our author highlights that:

“The socioeconomic makeup of a school can play a larger role in achievement than the poverty of an individual student’s family, and a poor education has a huge effect on later fortunes.”



UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS WITH A BLACK MAN

BOOK DIGEST

And then there is the well-described school-to-prison pipeline. A 2009 study showed how high school dropouts are 63 times more likely to be incarcerated.

Black people make up for a third of the federal and state prison population, even though they account for 13% of the US population. This overrepresentation is another striking consequence of systemic racism and a reflection of how black people have been criminalized.

Emmanuel Acho explains that some believe that it started with what he calls “a little” adjustment to the U.S. Constitution, called the Thirteenth Amendment:

*“Neither slavery nor involuntary service, **except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted**, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” [The part in orange was bolded in the book]*

Indeed many scholars link that clause to what is now known as “Mass Incarceration” or the “Prison Industrial Complex.”

Finally, he shares how:

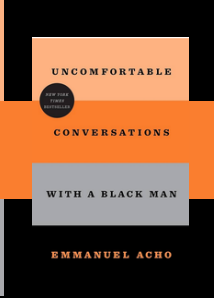
“Around the time that amendment was passed, Southern white people were inventing BLACK CODES, laws that penalized black people for stuff like not showing proper respect or doing “malicious mischief” and punished those “crimes” as misdemeanors or felonies depending on how severe someone (almost always a white person) decided they were.”

“It wasn’t that black people had suddenly become criminals; it was that the laws began to criminalize black people.”

Black people were sent to prisons like never before, due to those vague laws. The states could then require them to work through “convict-leasing” deals, recreating conditions similar to slavery.

He concludes:

“Prisons today don’t have programs like that. They just have mandatory labor projects, sans a living wage, worked disproportionately by black people. Hmm.”



UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS WITH A BLACK MAN

BOOK DIGEST

LET'S GET UNCOMFORTABLE

It's an especially hard conversation to have because of how pervasive and big Systemic racism is.

"I've touched on a few of the places it rears, but the truth is that it pervades almost all areas of American life, even as it's hard to suss out just what role an individual white person plays in the system."

Our author agrees that none of this is the fault of any white person individually. And maybe a white person could trace their family tree back over hundreds of years and witness that no one among their ancestors had been a slave owner. However, it would be impossible to confirm that none of that person's ancestors ever benefited from white privilege in any form, let alone that all of them were abolitionist and antiracist. He adds:

"Remember what I said about white privilege, how you don't have to do anything to have it work for you [when you're a white person]?"

The good news is that with this awareness, white folks can engage in the solution.

TALK IT, WALK IT

Emmanuel Acho highlights:

"No one can fight systemic racism alone."

However, there are a million ways we can help. And as a great place to find inspiration, he recommends the Urban Institute Online (urban.org).

He also invites us to advocate for diversity at work and take any political action we can through our votes and ability to hold local and national officials accountable.

Dismantling systemic racism is nothing short of dismantling white supremacy.

It's going to take a herculean effort by all of us to tear it down."