

# UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS WITH A BLACK MAN

## BOOK DIGEST

### Shifting the narrative

#### Reverse racism

#### QUESTION

**“MY QUESTION IS ABOUT THE TERM “REVERSE RACISM”.  
IT SEEMS TO ME THAT IT’S AN OXYMORON. ISN’T RACISM JUST RACISM—  
WHETHER IT’S WHITE PEOPLE HATING BLACK PEOPLE, BLACK PEOPLE HATING LATINOS,  
LATINOS HATING ASIANS, ASIANS HATING WHITE PEOPLE, ETC.?  
HATE BASED ON SKIN COLOR/NATIONALITY IS JUST HATE, AND THAT’S RACISM.  
ISN’T THE REVERSE OF RACISM LOVE?”**

*Those of us who know our whites know one thing above all else: whiteness defends itself.  
Against change, against progress, against hope, against black dignity, against black lives, against reason,  
against truth, against facts, against native claims, against its own laws and customs  
—Tressie McMillan Cottom*

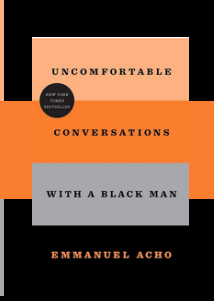
Reverse racism refers to the idea of anyone non white people being racist against white people. The question of whether it exists or not is often paired with wondering whether black people can be racist against themselves.

This phenomenon has been confirmed by Dr Ibram X. Kendi whom Emmanuel Acho refers to as one of America’s foremost experts on racism. He quotes:

*“And then you have black people, a limited number, who are in policy, making decisions to institute or defend policies that harm black people.”*

That is different from reverse racism though, as explained by our author:

*“When I say that reverse racism is a myth, what I mean is that, though individual black people can be prejudiced against white people, reverse racism by black people at large against white people at large just doesn’t exist. It can’t exist, because that’s not how collective power works in this country.”*



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He then introduces two different concepts that will help us for the next sections:

- [White talk](#), described by scholar Alice McIntyre:

*“Strategies white people use—consciously or not—to insulate themselves from their collective participation in racism.”*

- [White fragility](#), described by Robin DiAngelo:

*“When white people are put in situations that challenge their identity, “we withdraw, defend, cry, argue, minimize, ignore” explains DiAngelo. “And in other ways push back to regain our racial position and equilibrium.”*

*“The feeling of defensiveness is white fragility, and the way you hit back, with accusations like reverse racism, is white talk.”*

### LET’S REWIND

To oppress someone, you first need power over them, which is why reverse racism cannot exist. No other group holds power over white people.

And yet the concept of reverse racism is used to fight back against accountability around cultural appropriation or using the N-word. Those are examples of white talk.

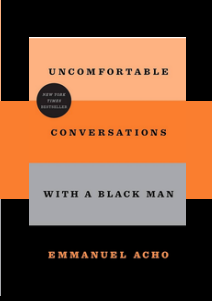
Another example is called Affirmative Action reverse racism:

President Kennedy signed the Executive Order (EO) 10925 in 1961, instructing federal contractors to take:

*“Affirmative action to ensure that applicants are treated equally without regard to race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.”*

He explains:

*“In a nutshell, Affirmative Action is an effort to redress systemic inequalities caused by centuries of discrimination. To try to achieve measures of social equality, it gives preferential treatment to groups that have suffered those long-standing inequalities.”*



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*“Fairness can only occur between equal parties, and black people have never been treated as equals in America. As a matter of fact, unfairness doesn’t even scratch the surface of how they’ve been treated.”*

Racism can never be judged on an individual level alone. It is also historic and systemic. Therefore unfairness cannot be evaluated on the individual level alone either. Even if a white person faces deep struggle right now and is not the descendant of a racist person, the kind of unfairness they would face because of Affirmative Actions are unintended effects of a system put in place to correct centuries of wrongdoings, which is different from the unfairness that black people have been facing—an unfairness pursued both as a mean and as an end.

*“What white people experience as unfairness as a result of Affirmative Action does not have as its aim being unfair to white people.”*

Another example of white talk is the backlash against Black History Month.

Dr Carter G. Woodson created the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) in 1915. From there, they chose a week in February (the birth month of Lincoln and Douglass, two main figures of black history) to promote awareness of black achievements. It had expanded to a whole month by 1950 and has been called Black History Month since 1976.

He highlights:

*“There’s no White History Month because we celebrate the accomplishments of white people Every. Single. Day.”*

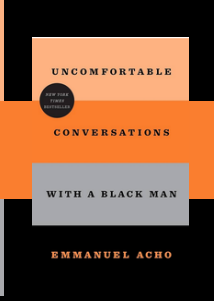
*“White people have had a lock on significance since before this country was even a country.”*

White people’s accomplishments are celebrated everywhere: including on the news, Mount Rushmore, the list of Fortune 500 CEO or in history books and the White House. Black people had to push to celebrate themselves and their culture publicly.

And one last example is the discourse around “All lives matter”. He writes:

*“White lives have never been in danger from black lives to the degree that black lives have been endangered by white people and whiteness, and that’s on an individual level and a systemic level.”*

Proclaiming that Black Lives Matter does not mean that white lives don’t. It is a given that they do. The problem is that it is not a given yet that black lives matter just as much.



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### LET'S GET UNCOMFORTABLE

This conversation requires white people to face accountability. And it is hard for someone to think that they're paying for the wrong of someone else or to question whether they can be proud or not of their ancestors. However, our author reminds white people that in order to be proud of their history, they must also be willing to acknowledge the entirety of it. He adds:

*"And if we put all those great things in context, we must admit that they occurred in an America that rigged and denied opportunities to others, so that white people could thrive. And this is not to dismiss the talent, intelligence, drive, ingenuity, of all the great white people. Not to dismiss all those firsts from long ago and even now."*

*"But if we're going to talk about it, let's talk about all of it."*

### TALK IT, WALK IT

*"It's going to take courageous, informed, empathetic, committed white people to challenge their racial peers who rely on white talk."*

White people are called to both educate themselves and help educate others on white privilege, covert and unconscious racist behaviors, or any belief system or action that foster racism or fail to discourage it.

He recommends reading:

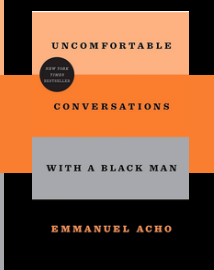
- How The Irish Became White, by Noel Ignatiev
- Racecraft: The Soul of Inequalities in American Life, by Karen E. Fields & Barbara J. Fields
- White rage: The Unspoken Truth of Racial Divide, by Carole Anderson.

He also invites us to visit the National Museum of African American History and Culture in D.C.

He concludes:

*"While you're out there living your everyday life, pay attention to how many times you hear something being touted as the first black X and how long it took for that thing to happen. Think about how weird it would sound to hear of the first white X to do something. (...) As you go through your days, pay attention to how often white is the default."*

*"Know that saying "All lives matter" means arguing that we're still not defaulting to white enough."*



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### The fix

#### WHO'S GOVERNING THE GOVERNMENT

"I'm not a Republican, nor a Democrat, nor an American, and got sense enough to know it. I'm one of the 22 million black victims of the Democrats, one of the 22 million black victims of the Republicans, and one of the 22 million black victims of Americanism. And when I speak, I don't speak as a Democrat or a Republican, nor an American. I speak as a victim of America's so-called democracy. You and I have never seen democracy; all we've seen is hypocrisy  
—Malcolm X "The Ballot Or The Bullet (1964)"

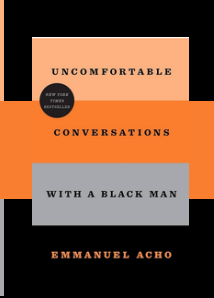
#### QUESTION

**“WHAT’S THE BEST WAY TO MAKE THE MOST IMPACTFUL CONTRIBUTIONS TO DISMANTLING THE INSTITUTIONS AND POLICIES MEANT TO KEEP POC AT A DISADVANTAGE?”**

Born and raised in Dallas, Texas, he found it quite convenient to vote in his hometown for the 2016 election. It took him less than five minutes to vote in a nearby church, alone and assisted by the six white poll workers that were there to help the process go smoothly.

In 2018, however, he experienced what voting in a gentrifying area of Austin, Texas was like. He was referred to a Fiesta grocery store (a popular chain in hispanic neighborhoods) and discovered a line of approximately 200 folks in front of him. He only stayed because a older black woman reminded him kindly of what it had taken black people to finally be allowed to vote.

Emmanuel Acho also asks us to consider the story of Crystal Mason, a black woman who's been sentenced to five years in prison because she had not realized that it was a second-degree felony to vote when not eligible, and she didn't know that her eligibility had been revoked when she had been previously incarcerated. She was only trying to set a good example for her kids by fulfilling her civic duty. She lost everything.



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Our author reflects:

*“Is America really a democracy? The short answer is no, it’s technically a republic, or what some people term as a representative democracy. Our laws are made by representatives we have chosen (in theory), who must comply with a constitution that was built (in theory) to protect the rights of the minority from the will of the majority. But the truest answer is that America has never been a republic for everyone who lives within its borders.”*

This chapter is dedicated to reviewing the tools that perpetuate racism while disenfranchising those who could do something about it: the voters.

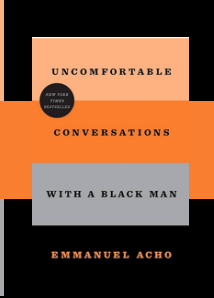
### LET’S REWIND

This section focuses on the long history of voter suppression and practices of rigging juries against black people.

The founding fathers believed that ordinary Americans would not have the necessary information to make educated votes, which is why they created the electoral college. And another factor that was being debated at the time, between Southern and Northern delegates, was to decide what to do regarding the five hundred thousands enslaved people. That’s how the Three-Fifths Compromise was designed: each enslaved person would count as three-fifth of a human being for taxes and representation purposes. So black people who couldn’t vote, own property or aspire to any of the white man’s advantage were now being used to give their enslavers more power.

The thirteenth amendment would abolish slavery a century later. The fourteenth amendment supposedly granted formerly enslaved people “equal protection under the law” and the fifteenth amendment conferred voting rights to all citizens independently of color, race or past condition of servitude.

However, new clauses were soon added to limit black people’s voting rights in the South. Grandfather clauses enabled anyone who had been granted the right to vote before 1867 (so before the grand majority of black men were freed from enslavement) to continue voting, but required literacy tests, property ownership or a poll tax from anyone else. Which means that black people who had been forbidden to read, write or own land until then and did not have the means to pay the tolls would not be able to vote, still. And the Northern states did nothing to stop those clauses from going into effect.



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Emmanuel Acho then highlights many tactics through which voter suppression laws are still being enacted.

He also highlights how some states increase or decrease the number of polling stations in a given district or change the days and times when they are open to impact voters' abilities to vote.

Then he explains what gerrymandering is: the redrawing by a state of a voting district to negate certain votes. Two techniques have been described:

- *“Packing, where voters are clustered into a district predicted to be won by an oppositional party, so the extra votes are wasted on that party”*
- *“Cracking, when voters for a party are broken into multiple districts where the opposing candidate will win with a large majority, again wasting votes.”*

Finally, he reminds us that black people are disproportionately imprisoned in the U.S., which means that preventing people who've been convicted from voting is another way of hindering black people's ability to vote.

*“We have a system of justice that treats you better if you're rich and guilty than if you're poor and innocent  
—Bryan Stevenson, social justice activist”*

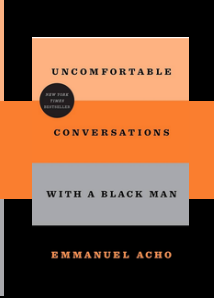
Our author concludes with a powerful recap:

*“For almost a century, black bodies (three-fifths each) were used to beef up the Southern vote. Then they get the legal right to vote, only to face all kinds of nefarious tactics to keep them from it. They they face a justice system not of their peers but white people (in 2017, 71% of U.S. district court judges were white), who send them to prison far more often than white people. Once freed, they face yet more obstacles to vote. Should they somehow vote by accident, they face more prison—and should they not vote, well, they have little means of changing the laws and those who make them.”*

## LET'S GET UNCOMFORTABLE

He explains:

*“Because of voter suppression, there are fewer polling stations in places of lower socioeconomic status, particularly liberal places in Republican states.”*



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He witnessed that first hand in 2018 and can testify to the very different experience he had had in 2016.

He adds:

*“Voting privileges, juries: it’s a difficult conversation for anyone who counts political ideologies as an important part of their identity, because you want to believe that your party is on the up-and-up. Our democracy is supposed to be impartial, but the truth is that both Republicans and Democrats engage the fix to some degree. You don’t need to be a political scientist to see how unfair the political system has been to black people.”*

*“We must continue to bring up these tough conversations, between one another, on our social media platforms, in our newspapers, and so on.”*

### TALK IT, WALK IT

Emmanuel Acho directs us towards: [www.usa.gov/absentee-voting](http://www.usa.gov/absentee-voting) to learn about mail-in voting in our states. He also encourages us to understand the specific rules about voting in our states. He highlights the American Civil Liberties Union as a great source of information and lists many ways to support voters in the country:

- Volunteering at a local community organization
- Helping with voters registration
- Visiting the League of Women Voters
- Reading the For The People Act
- Visiting NAACP website
- Supporting black leadership
- Making sure we choose our leaders critically
- Showing up for local election: they impact state laws, the city budgets which then determine school and police funding, who the district attorney will be and road maintenance.
- Holding our officials accountable
- Showing up for jury duty

*“Vote, vote, vote, vote like your life depends on it. Like our lives depend on it. They do.”*