

UNCOMFORTABLE CONVERSATIONS WITH A BLACK MAN

BOOK DIGEST

THUG LIFE

Justice for some

QUESTION

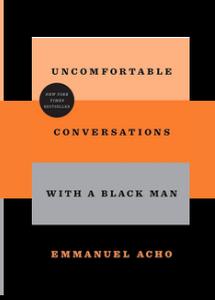
“AMERICA CLAIMS TO HAVE ABOLISHED SLAVERY GENERATIONS AGO. BUT WITH A LACK OF PUBLIC INVESTMENT IN BLACK COMMUNITIES DIRECTLY CONTRIBUTING TO HIGH PRISON POPULATIONS, AND PRISONS OFTEN BENEFITING FROM THE FREE LABOR OF THEIR INMATES, DID WE EVER TRULY ABOLISH SLAVE LABOR? OR HAS THE 13TH AMENDMENT SIMPLY PROVIDED PRISON OWNERS WITH A LOOPHOLE?”

“They kill or maim on impulse, without any intelligible motive... The buzz of impulsive violence, the vacant stares and smiles, and the remorseless eyes... They quite literally have no concept of the future... They place zero value on the lives of their victims, whom they reflexively dehumanize... capable of committing the most heinous acts of physical violence for the most trivial reasons... for as long as their youthful energies hold out, they will do what comes “naturally”: murder, rape, rob, assault, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, and get high.”

Criminologist John Dilulio, coining the term SUPERPREDATOR in the *Washington Examiner*, 1995.

Thinking about gangs, Emmanuel Acho first reflects on how no elementary school boy ever voices the dream of becoming a gang member—they want to be lawyers, doctors or play in the NFL! Then, he reminds us that most people join gangs either to feel protected or because they’re following the lead of other family members.

He then explains how the term superpredator was born. It was coined by Princeton professor, John Dilulio, who was invited to a working dinner on juvenile crime, in 1995, at the White House. That’s how President Clinton was introduced to the definition highlighted at the beginning of this chapter. Dilulio didn’t describe superpredator as black, however he did highlight that they were mostly met in inner city black neighborhoods. The greatest damage came from the fact that he also implied that violence came naturally to those kids, as if encrypted in their DNA, referring to a generation of young (black) sociopaths. This concept aligned and reinforced the myth of the Angry Black Man previously reviewed in this book.



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That term was also part of a subsequent speech of Hillary Clinton that he quotes saying:

“But we also need to have an organized effort against gangs. (...) We need to take those people on. They are often connected to big drug cartels. They are not just gangs of kids anymore. They are often the kind of kids that are called superpredators. No conscience. No empathy. We can talk about why they ended up this way, but first we have to bring them to heel.”

It stems from the same kind of thinking that what had inspired the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. That bill implemented:

- The “three strikes” mandatory life sentence,
- \$9.7 billion for new prisons
- Funding to hire one hundred thousand new police officers.

He adds:

“The bill, coupled with the image of the superpredator, helped create the conditions of mass incarceration we see today.”

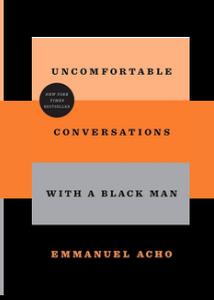
Finally, our author introduces the dismissal of so-called black-on-black crime which undermines the importance of addressing the tragic violence that many black folks face. He shares:

“This violence is, in itself, the product of systemic racism in ways we’ve already talked about. At the same time, policing and incarceration of black bodies is overblown and unjust, exacerbated in no small part by the racist specter of the superpredator, the gangbanger, the hug. It’s time to untangle reality from fiction.”

LET’S REWIND

Our author reminds us that the story of gangs started with white people in the 1800s, and especially with the Irish American group called the Five Points Gang (as featured in *Gangs of New York*). Black and Latinx folks started joining gangs much later, at the beginning of the 20th century—and the most notorious black gangs appeared in the ‘50s and ‘60s.

The first infamous black gang, the Crips, was born out with the intention to offer protection within the neighborhood and to counteract police harassment. At that time and until the crack cocaine epidemic in the 80's, violence was rarely lethal. Unfortunately the association of guns, money and drugs changed that and hundreds of gang murders started happening each year.



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However, those gangs are only the worst case scenario: brutal organized criminal enterprises. They are not an accurate reflection of all black communities! Still, all black communities suffer from the gang stereotypes.

Ironically, the term black-on-black crime was first used by black people in the 70's after black leader Jesse Jackson used the phrase to denounce the ineffectiveness and silence from the police and justice system. But the concept evolved, as the author highlights:

"It had also been transformed from well-intentioned black people decrying an unfair justice system and the products of systemic racism, to white people making the case that violence is endemic to black people and drafting policies that make the problem worse."

People from the All Lives Matter group use statistics against black people to ask why black folks focus on white-on-black crime and police brutality, that is not as widely spread that black-on-black violence. And our author answers:

"Black people care about being murdered."

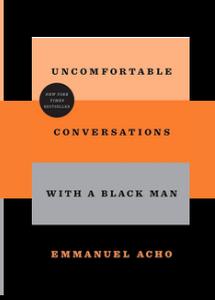
Without proper context, Black-on-Black crime is a misleading term. He adds:

"The majority of violent crimes against white people are perpetrated by white people. As sad as it may seem, people generally commit crimes against people of the same race. And I've never heard in my life (have you?) reference white people killing white people as white-on-white crime."

"Poverty, not race, is a more accurate predictor of who commits crimes."

Black killings among black people is a factor of other systemic factors (including housing, school funding and poverty) and first and foremost a reflection of the impact of poverty in a community.

"The best tough-on-crime bill is a tough—the toughest—on poverty bill."



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Our author shares some staggering statistics:

- Folks from households below the federal poverty line are twice as likely to turn to violence than folks from high-income households, independently of race.
- Black folks are incarcerated at a rate 5.1 times greater than white people.
- Black men account for 13% of the U.S. female population but 35% of the prison population.
- Black women account for 13% of the U.S. male population but 44% of the prison population.
- One in three black men born in 2001 will probably be incarcerated in this lifetime against 1 in 17 white men (and 1 in 6 Latino men).
- One in 18 women born in 2001 will probably be incarcerated in this lifetime against 1 in 111 white men (and 1 in 45 Latino men).

“And this isn’t something out of the blue but from the predictable outcomes of years of racist policies.”

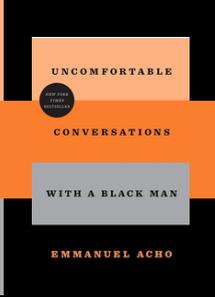
When Richard Sherman, a Stanford graduate and Seahawks football player at the time, talked negatively about another player in a post game interview in 2013, he was called a thug over social media. He apologized for what he had said, but also highlighted how the word thug seems to be a new way of calling black people the N-word.

The word thug comes from “thuggee”, an Hindi word which means “thief.” Mark Twain imported the term in the 1800s, with a connotation closer to gangster. At the time it described white people since black folks were still suffering from enslavement. However, the term became mostly associated to black people since emancipation.

He warns us:

“Calling someone a thug is putting them on a continuum that ends with a superpredator. (...) A thug is the fictional archetype of Dilulio’s nightmares, a stand-in for a black man that is hopelessly lost to violence or drugs; (...) a caricature instead of a human being.”

And that’s another way that is used to dehumanize black people within the criminal justice system.



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LET'S GET UNCOMFORTABLE

The word thug has been used by black artists because, just like with the N-word, some folks are trying to take the sting out of it. However, it is still a word attached to a detrimental impact that needs to be rethought.

He writes:

“Trust me, I get it. No one wants to knowingly put themselves in danger. America is steeped in stereotypes about the danger of black men, and when those mingle with the real statistics of disproportionate black arrests and incarceration, it can be hard to know what to believe when you’re deliberating whether to cross the street in front of the guy in the hoodie.”

We can't lose all our biases just by reading a book, but we can still change. Hillary Clinton modeled that in 2016, when she reflected on how she shouldn't have used the words she chose, and would not use them again, after being called out on the repercussions of the speech that was quoted in the intro of this chapter.

TALK IT, WALK IT

He invites his readers to help **dismantle the myth of black-on-black crime**. He also urges us to stop talking about Criminal Justice and to think about Justice only. And he discourages the use of the term thug even as a joke.

“Not that criminals don’t exist, but who gets called a criminal and why is not so cut-and-dried and usually has something to do with race and class or both.”

As usual, he also shares some useful resources:

- sentencingproject.org: to get involved with justice reform.
- themarshallproject.org: journalism focused on justice reform
- pen.org: a website collecting writing from inmates!
- *Boyz n the Hood*: a movie by John Singleton
- *Menace II Society*: a movie by Hughes Brothers
- *When They See Us*: a miniseries about the trial of the Central Park Five.
- The Second Look legislation: a reform aiming to enable reevaluation and release of folks who have aged out of committing crimes and already served long sentences.