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*Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man*: Review

Section One: Review

*Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man* by Emmanuel Acho (2020), a former NFL football player who holds a Masters in Sports Psychology, discusses many different topics and issues plaguing our society when it comes to race. The book is intended for all audiences, but mostly directs the conversation to white people. In his book, Acho uses history, research, and stories to discuss what issues are affecting people of color, how they came about, what white people have to do with those issues, and provides evidence on the topics being current today as they were a decade to hundreds of years ago. At the end of each chapter, Acho presents ways white people can further educate themselves, become an ally, and become a more active participant in the conversation. Oftentimes, he adds additional readings, sources, and/or videos that are valuable resources to continue learning from outside of his book.

The amount of knowledge and education in *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man* is astounding—to pick just a couple points just cannot be done. Every page, every chapter has importance. I was captivated with every word. I marked a few chapters/conversations that really stuck a chord with me. There are four chapters that I think were the strongest for me that I would like to continue learning from outside of the book and use in future discussions and conversations are: The Mythical Me: Angry Black Men (Chapter 5), Shifting the Narrative: Reverse Racism (Chapter 8), Good Trouble: Fighting for Change (Chapter 13), Your Presence is

Requested: How to be an Ally (Chapter 14). These were filled with a grand amount of information that I found extremely valuable. Chapter five discusses the myth and stereotype of “the angry black man” and how black men, in particular, are seen as “overly aggressive... especially to innocent white women” (51) and where that ideology came from historically. In chapter eight, Acho talks about “reverse racism” and breaks down how the power and narrative lies with the white (male) perspective, and people of color do not have this, thus reverse racism cannot exist, as they do not hold the ability to oppress white people and push racism onto white people. Chapter thirteen focuses on how protesting and making change often comes with arrests and push back against authority. Acho speaks about getting into “good trouble” by advocating and producing change to our world and society. Lastly, Acho finishes the book with how white people can be a good ally, further their education after closing the book, and the importance of allies for people of color and in the fight for change. These four chapters were ones I gravitated to and really grabbed me as I read.

I would love to sit down and have a conversation with Emmanuel Acho and pick his brain. I’m not exactly sure where I would start, but I would ask him to unpack a few other conversations he did not discuss. I would like to know more about mental health in the black community. He did touch on some statistics, but I would love to have a better understanding of mental health in that community and where it comes from (obviously slavery and having to fight for rights since the abolishment of slavery, as well as others, but I’d like a more in-dept discussion). To bounce off that question, I would ask him how the Coronavirus has affective communities of color. I would also ask about what he thinks about education about people of color in our schools. What can we do to adjust our curriculums to be more inclusive and teach more than the white-cannoned narrative; and how do white teachers educate on black issues

without overstepping or accidentally being offensive? Lastly, I would ask him if he would be writing a sequel (because I know there's a lot more to talk about), and if so, what would he put in there.

## Section Two: Take-Aways

There are so many pieces of information and nuggets of wisdom that would be extremely beneficial to future teachers, especially white teachers. I have to be careful quoting because I will end up quoting the entire page or chapter, in some cases. I think an easier conversation to approach would be chapter two of the book, "What Do You See When You See Me?: Implicit Bias." One line that I underlined that I like to keep in the back of my mind is: "unconscious prejudices can manifest as racist actions, that's the whole problem... you don't even have to know you're racist for the damage to be done" (25). Everyone, including teachers, have implicit biases. We can all work to reduce them, but there's always something there. As teachers, we are in the forefront of the classroom and the face of our students' education. If those implicit biases are not made aware to ourselves, we can easily and mistakenly present them to our students, which could hurt a lot of rapport we work hard to build as teachers between our students, our colleagues, our principals, our school board, our communities, and so on.

Another take away I gleaned from *Uncomfortable Conversations* is Acho's breakdown of the terms, *protest*, *riot*, *rebellion*, *massacre*, and *civil disobedience*, in chapter thirteen, "Good Trouble: Fighting for Change." With the protests coming out of the Black Lives Movement, there are different reports on how these demonstrations are being perceived. Although he doesn't give a straightforward definition of each, he does break down the terms in regard to how society interprets them, as depending on who is involved and what happens and who is perceiving the

demonstration, each is used in different ways in different circumstances. For example, Acho states,

“Throughout all this history, white privilege has ruled how these conflicts were described. When it was white people instigating the violence, the media, politicians, law enforcement, and eventually historians called what was a massacre a *race riot*. When black people started the protests, the media called what was a rebellion a riot, a description meant to portray white people... as persecuted victims of unjustified black anger and hostility, while also making white policing of the situation, no matter how brutal, into a heroic or at least justified response” (164-5).

In summation, Acho states, “This is an uncomfortable conversation because it has to do with power and perspective. As I’ve been saying, there’s often no difference whatsoever between a riot and rebellion besides who’s looking at it and labeling it” (169). I think the idea of these terms being placed on events in American history is interesting. Being able to analyze why history (which is typically written from the white male perspective) has chosen to label an event or demonstration a specific way and who is behind why we have labeled it that way is an important skill students and educators should possess. Understanding that perspective plays a part in why we call the Boston Tea Party and destruction of goods in the 1700s as a form of rebellion and the George Floyd protests as a riot instead of vice versa is a unique yet vital skill that readers can take from *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man*.

My final takeaway, but definitely not the last take away that could be gathered from Acho’s book, is a little section in the back of the book that could easily be overlooked, as it is hidden after the Acknowledgements. Acho uses section, named “Quick Talks,” to briefly discuss smaller topics, such as “Lotion,” “Black Women’s Hair,” “Sagging,” and more. These quips do a

nice job giving an overview on the subject, breaking down stereotypes, and quick advice and histories.

Overall, Emmanuel Acho's *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man* provides a fountain of insight, history, resources, advice, and calls to action. I highly recommend this book to teachers-to-be, teachers who have been in the field, politicians, and basically every white person, as there is so much that can be gained from this reading. Acho literally has a conversation with his readers and does so in a way that does not point fingers or demean the readers. Although, he does make the conversation a tough one, as it is often said, we learn best when we are on the edge of un-comfortability.

#### Works Cited

Acho, Emmanuel. *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man*. Flatiron Books, 2020.