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Preview

The Seattle Times

## Author, Fox Sports analyst Emmanuel Acho sits down for 'Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man'

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Fox Sports analyst Emmanuel Acho is the host of the “Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man” video series, and he is author of the bestselling book of the same name. (Chris Pavlica)

By [Carla Bell](#) 

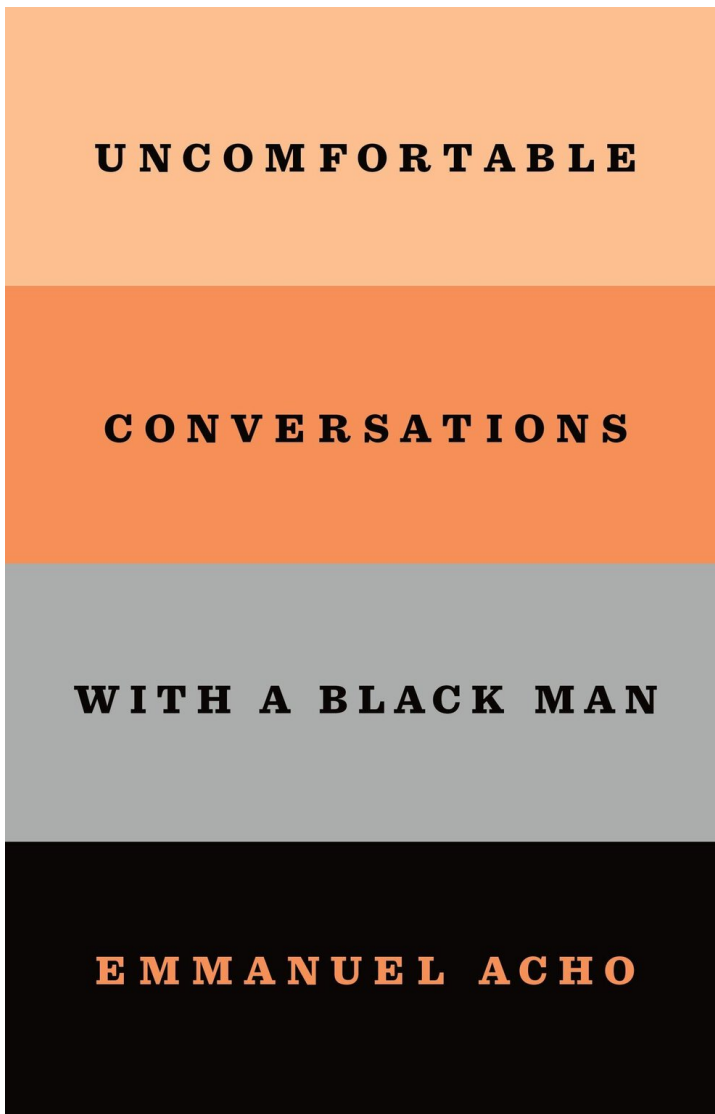
*Special to The Seattle Times*

The [police killing of George Floyd](#) in May 2020 gripped our hearts as a nation. Many were shaken awake from comfort into a brand-new ravenous appetite for public discourse on what it means to be Black in America.

Fox Sports analyst and former NFL linebacker Emmanuel Acho’s video series “Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man” launched a week later.

When actor Matthew McConaughey asked about [the possibility of equality in America in Episode 2](#) of the series, Acho explained that as long as “the wake of slavery is still hitting [Black people]” through various systemic injustices, there could be no equality. Indeed, it’s hard to imagine that racial equality for Black people could proceed from the same governing bodies which mandated or allowed African chattel slavery, slave codes, segregation and more.

After launching his series, Acho saw an increase of more than 650,000 social media followers (primarily white women, Acho said) in just two weeks. This drew the attention of Oprah Winfrey, resulting in a book deal with her imprint, An Oprah Book. In two months, Acho had written “**Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man.**” The book made The New York Times bestsellers list in one week.



“Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man” by Emmanuel Acho (Flatiron Books / An Oprah Book)

In our recent interview, Acho said that by removing “white only” signs, American law didn’t go far enough. The law “should have mandated integration,” he said. Short-arm gestures like this, layered over a history of complicity in anti-Black racial oppression, means it’s really up to all of us to mandate racial equity.

And Acho, 30, a pastor’s son, believes we can get there by implementing racial integration in our own lives.

“If only those who are affected by COVID were trying to find a cure for COVID, we will struggle to find a cure as expeditiously,” Acho said. “And if only those who are affected by racism are trying to find a cure for racism, we will struggle to find a cure as expeditiously.” Acho said his “Uncomfortable Conversations” are about pushing against our ingrained self-centeredness, and making a decision to fight together against the common enemy of oppression.

Floyd’s death — for which the individual officers involved have been charged with second-degree murder and aiding and abetting murder — brought a collective pain that transcended race and nationality, and an atmosphere charged with expectation and demand. “There was an incredible appetite for this information, for these conversations,” Acho said. However, “it shouldn’t take us viewing graphic murders to care.”

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Acho holds a master’s degree in sports psychology, but he knows meritocracy has its failings. “A lot of unintelligent people have degrees,” he says, “and a degree ... can’t overcome a stereotype.”

When he was new to televised sports commentary, Acho intentionally presented himself in a certain way because, he says, his NFL career had only shown his athleticism, not his intellect. It’s by time in front of the camera, speaking to viewers, that “I’ve proven myself to be an intelligent individual. [Code-switching](#) is a whole conversation,” he said. There’s much debate over whether or not code-switching helps to traverse or offset Black stereotypes. Acho, who “rocks a subtle Mohawk and a beard,” aims to rebrand the white image of success in America.

Billy Bush of “Extra” asked Acho, “Which is a bigger problem: racism or classism?” They’re interwoven and interconnected, Acho said. They strengthen and support one another.

Relative privilege creates and sustains an “us versus them” perspective, produces competing priorities and encourages us to “agree to disagree” about oppression, resulting in an overall disunifying effect. Acho says it’s important to realize “it’s not possible to ‘meet in the middle’ when there are multiple prongs of oppression, like racism and classism, and those who are oppressed don’t benefit by keeping the peace.”

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Acho says he hates “cancel culture,” particularly when it comes to discussions of race and racism, because it decreases opportunities for human growth, development and evolution. He’s gracious about answering questions that many white people are afraid to ask, like if he prefers to be called Black or African American. It can be difficult to know which term is best, and this can create trepidation on the part of the white person to utter the first word — a definite obstacle to deeper conversation.

The term “African American” isn’t always acceptable to Black people, Acho said. For some, this is because of the violent mass displacement of their ancestors from Africa to America. He explains that others may reject the term because, while they may be Black people who live in America, they aren’t Americans. “You can’t be wrong [in] calling someone who is Black by skin color, ‘Black.’”

“Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man” is set apart by its transparency and conversational approach. “I really brought my white brothers and sisters into the fold, into dialogue,” Acho said. For white people and non-Black people of color alike, the book’s lessons encourage a new normal — conversations with people who don’t look like them. Simplistic as it seems, Acho believes it’s person-to-person verbal communication that will make the difference. “It’s only uncomfortable until you do it.”

Despite the scrutiny and pressures that come with a large platform and the polarizing subjects of race and racism in America, Acho is grateful for this moment: “It’s [my] dutiful responsibility to say the right thing.”

The second of his two-book series, “Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Boy,” is anticipated in the spring.

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### **‘Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man’**

Emmanuel Acho, Flatiron Books / An Oprah Book, 256 pp., \$27.99

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