

Sunday Book Review

The Post-Black Condition



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Published: September 22, 2011

WHO'S AFRAID OF POST-BLACKNESS?

What It Means to Be Black Now

By Touré

Illustrated. 251 pp. Free Press. \$25.

Much has been written on the benefits that accrued to the generation of African-Americans reaping the rewards of the civil rights revolution. But we have heard surprisingly little from those in the post-civil-rights age about what these benefits have meant to them, and especially how they view themselves as black people in an America now led by a black president. In his new book, Touré's aim is to provide an account of this "post-black" condition, one that emerged only in the 1980s but by the '90s had become the "new black."



Touré

Post-blackness entails a different perspective from earlier generations', one that takes for granted what they fought for: equal rights, integration, middle-class status, affirmative action and political power. While rooted in blackness, it is not restricted by it, as Michael Eric Dyson says in the book's foreword; it is an enormously complex and malleable state, Touré says, "a completely liquid shape-shifter that can take any form." With so many ways of performing blackness, there is now no consensus about what it is or should be. One of his goals, Touré writes in "Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to Be Black Now," is "to attack and destroy the idea that there is a correct or legitimate way of doing blackness." Post-blackness has no patience with "self-appointed identity cops" and their "cultural bullying."

What this malleability means, according to nearly all the 105 prominent African-Americans interviewed for this book, is a liberating pursuit of individuality. Black artists, like other professionals, now feel free to pursue any interest they like and are no longer burdened with the requirement to represent "the race." Indeed, when they do explore black themes, as most still do, they feel at liberty to be irreverent and humorous. Thus [Kara Walker](#), a typical

post-black artist, unhesitatingly “mines modern visions of slavery for comedy without disrespecting slaves.” There are no sacred cows, not even the great civil rights leaders. The artist Rashid Johnson is typically candid in a way many older African-Americans are bound to find hurtful and ungrateful. According to Touré, some of Johnson’s work says, “These people are our history, so honor them, but also, these people are history, so let’s move on.” Ouch!

Post-blackness also means an expanding of collective identity “into infinity.” This involves a radically new intercultural fluency, partly exemplified in hip-hop but also in the new hybrid genres challenging its hegemony. For every [Eminem](#) there is a post-black Santigold, who counts the Pixies and punk rock among her strongest influences. Oddly, there is no mention of the retro-futuristic singer Janelle Monáe, whose portrayal of an android as the Other — pamphlets listing Monáe’s “Ten Droid Commandments” for individuality have been handed out at her concerts — has to be the ultimate in post-blackness.

Such fluency undergirds complete ease in interethnic relations. Touré, himself married to a Lebanese-American, praises the effortless “mode-switching” of celebrities and leaders like [Oprah Winfrey](#) and [President Obama](#): “Blackness is an important part of them but does not necessarily dominate their persona.” This allows them not only to trust and be trusted by European-Americans, but to seamlessly display the many forms of blackness when the occasion demands.

This all sounds idyllic, but there are problems. To his credit, Touré — a correspondent for MSNBC, a contributing editor at Rolling Stone and the author of three previous books — devotes nearly half of “Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness?” squarely, if not always successfully, to confronting them. If blackness has become so infinite and malleable a thing, wherein does it exist? Touré insists that there is a “core” there and that “who I am is indelibly shaped by blackness.” Nonetheless, many blacks, including members of his own generation, may wonder if there is anything left, as Touré discovered one terrible night in college. During his freshman year at Emory, he had hung out mostly with white friends, but soon enough was spending “all my social time with black students.” Later on, after a party at the black dorm, a large black man from Alabama barked at him: “Shut up, Touré! You ain’t black!” Devastated, Touré spent the rest of the night in the soul-searching that eventually led to the present book.

Helping him to understand, in the words of [Henry Louis Gates Jr.](#) (an interviewee), the core beneath the “multiplicity of multiplicities” of ways to express blackness were the many successful people he spoke to. Post-black identity, we learn, resides in the need to live with

and transcend new and subtle but pervasive forms of racism: “Post-black does not mean ‘post-racial.’ ” This new racism is invisible and unknowable, always lurking in the shadows, the secret decisions of whites resulting in lost opportunities blacks never knew about or even thought possible: “There’s a sense of malevolent ghosts darting around you, screwing with you, often out of sight but never out of mind.” Even so extraordinarily successful a person as [Elizabeth Alexander](#), the tenured Yale professor and inaugural poet, claims to be haunted by “a continual underestimation of my intellectual ability and capacity, and the real insidious aspect of that kind of racism is that we don’t know half the time when people are underestimating us.” Touré, though he doesn’t call it that, seems to have unearthed here a new post-black sociological evil: counterfactual racism.

Ess metaphysical accounts of what constitutes post-black identity turn out to be nothing more than the shared experience of living with, and overcoming, lingering old-fashioned racism, of learning to ignore the white gaze, along with the added burden of disregarding the censoring black one. This sounds remarkably like a black version of what Alan Dershowitz calls “the Tsuris Theory of Jewish Survival,” in which assimilated American Jews desperately need external troubles and imagined enemies to maintain their identity.

Touré is at his best in his finely delineated observations of the joys and dangers of post-blackness, whether it is being lived or being staged. He offers a wickedly funny account of a performance piece by the artist William Pope.L, some of whose “best-known projects are his crawls, where he dons a business suit and crawls on hands and knees through miles of Manhattan.” During one such performance, in Tompkins Square Park, an older black man accosts a white man who is videotaping Pope.L, thinking that the videographer is humiliating a homeless brother. “What are you doing showing black people like this?” Pope.L tries to explain: “I’m working. . . . I create symbolic acts.” There is generational bewilderment: “What is a symbolic act? Crawling up to the white man, or what?!”

Touré fully assays the “complex and messy and fluid” possibilities and dangers inherent in post-blackness in a dazzling deconstruction of the tragicomic art and life of Dave Chappelle. Utterly uninhibited by black or white gazes, Chappelle irreverently cast a sharply revealing light on black life that drew a multiracial audience of millions to his Comedy Central routines. But did he go too far in his comic mining of traditional black postures and vulnerabilities? Touré suggests that, in the end, Chappelle came close to both prostituting and pimping the black life he had once so endearingly parodied, and that in a terrible moment of self-recognition he realized that his “comic mouth has written checks that his body is afraid to cash. . . . The freedom of the post-black era has scared him to death. So he

picks up the gauntlet he threw down at the beginning of the show and he runs,” ditching a \$50 million contract for the anonymity of Africa.

For all its occasional contradictions (why the put-down of the comedian Byron Allen for his Middle American cultural fluency?) and omissions (there is no consideration of the ways immigrant blacks and mixed-race people are contributing to post-black heterogeneity), this is one of the most acutely observed accounts of what it is like to be young, black and middle-class in contemporary America. Touré inventively draws on a range of evidence — autobiography, music, art, interviews, comedy and popular social analysis — for a performance carried through with unsparing honesty, in a distinctive voice that is often humorous, occasionally wary and defensive, but always intensely engaging.

Orlando Patterson, a professor of sociology at Harvard, is an editor, with Ethan Fosse, of the forthcoming book “Bringing Culture Back In: New Approaches to the Problems of Black Youth.”