Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness: What It Means to Be Black Now

By Toure.

Review by C. Jama Adams, a psychologist who grapples with issues of keeping it real, as a Black man, a teacher and a therapist. Associate Professor and Chairperson of the Department of Africana Studies at John Jay College of Criminal Justice-City University of New York.

Recently a trader who is Black was implicated in a multi-billion trading scandal at UBS. Another banker at Citibank who is also Black has been accused of embezzling over $19 million. I was disappointed that Black men would do that and surprised that they had that level of access and authority. Upon reading Toure's book I realized that in an un-thoughtful way I carry elements of the idea that Blacks have a responsibility to positively represent the race. Toure reminds us, prods us, toward the enlightened, if sobering view of these bankers, as representing themselves and not a larger group.

Post-Blackness, for Toure, is at its core a psychological product aimed at liberating the self from an archaic conception of Blackness. Toure sketches the contours of a version of contemporary Black identity with an emphasis on a highly autonomous and unfettered individuality, skepticism toward prior Black identity formulations and, in the final analysis, a not-quite acknowledged realization that while we should not be prisoners to history, we can never, nor should we desire to completely rid ourselves of its ethically informed constraining bonds.

Toure opens his polemic on the expansive nature of Blackness by describing a sky-diving experience that can be interpreted to capture the key features of Post-Blackness. He is warned, prior to going, by three middle-aged Black men that not only was his behavior highly risky but it was not the sort of risk that Black people take; in fact only crazy white folks go sky-diving. Toure in an amusing and at times hair-raising account describes boarding an aircraft well past its aeronautical prime, a seemingly maniacal and sadistic jump instructor and a multiplicity of physiological and psychological feedback that strongly suggests that those Black men were right: "*Brother, Black people don't do that*."

Toure jumps and is soon in trouble as one of his arms becomes entangled in the unfolding chute and an indifferent gravity sucks him head first toward the unyielding earth and a splatterly death. It would be fully understandable if at this point, and in no particular order, Toure wept, raged against the (white) idiot who did not fold his chute properly, realized that

Icarus, who was white and therefore entitled and well resourced had tried a similar stunt and died, bemoaned his cheapness in using such a ragged-ass outfit and chastised himself for forgetting that hubris plus Black manhood has historically been a recipe for pain and failure.

Toure's view of himself is however informed by a Post-Black sensibility: He is unfettered by history, does not feel the burden of having to always represent the race, has a nuanced understanding of the utility and riskiness of both the white and the black gaze and will do as he damn well pleases. He therefore gives in somewhat to the terror he is experiencing in his fast approaching rendezvous with death, but is also able to calm himself enough to recall and execute the instructions of the jump master as to how to deal with the scenario he is in. He does, it works and suddenly he is free, floating, taking in the broad vista and feeling close to God.

Based on more than one hundred interviews of elite artists such as Kara Walker, public intellectuals such as Cornell West, and prominent Blacks such as Reverend Jessie Jackson and Reverend Al Sharpton, Toure establishes what Post-Blackness is not. It is not a repudiation of Blackness and it is not an assertion that we now live in a post-racist or post-racial world.

Toure seeks to broaden the meaning of Blackness to allow for more individuality of expression. At his most fanciful he asserts, in the words of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "…that there are forty million ways to be Black." Given that, no one particular mode of being Black should be privileged over another. This does not mean that all the manifestations of Blackness carry equally moral force. So while one cannot question whether President Obama and Clarence Thomas are Black, one can make moral distinctions between them.

There are two issues being negotiated here. The first is skepticism of a monolithic Blackness that allowed little room, Toure argues, for individualized expression. There was only one approved way to be Black and that was a positive, fairly cautious way of presenting the self that was always informed by the need to represent the race in an 'authentic' and humanistic way. Initially a response to an ever vigilant and punitive white gaze, over time this version of being Black became incorporated into an almost equally self-punitive Black gaze. The second issue is a strong dissatisfaction by Toure and his associates at the heaviness of this traditional Blackness that results in restrictive, creativity-suppressing ways of being Black. In this context, Post-Blackness incorporates a skeptical stance toward history. Historical group struggle is equated with a homogenizing of selves. Historical legacies are also burdensome as they restrict one from being too different. A world view dominated by a historical perspective that stresses constraint, is not only irrelevant, but makes it difficult to generate new paradigms for creativity and even for struggle for equality and autonomy at both the level of the individual and that of the group..

Toure suggests that given the subtle and reduced nature of contemporary racism, there is now more room to be Black-- and less that is useful in the anti-racism strategies of the past.

At its most polemical this work is a rage against being constrained and an appeal for a life that is unencumbered by history or by the accident of being born Black. In its unvarnished state it is a reassertion of a hyper-individuality, the rejection of any mandated obligation to the group. In other words, Toure skates close to espousing American exceptionalism: the retail version.

Other recent works on Blackness also grapple with the individual's place in American society. In Jay-Z's somewhat coy autobiography, *Decoded*, he both champions and seems disenchanted with hyper-individuality. In, Disintegrating*: The splintering of Black America*, Eugene Robinson mourns the loss of a mythical Black community. He charts its fragmentation into various tenuously linked and free-standing socio-economic segments. In these works, as in Toure's Post Blackness, there is insufficient attention paid to the role of capitalism and neo-liberalism in the way those forces constrain individual freedom or offer false liberation.

So Post-Blackness does not have a sufficiently developed political sensibility. Toure's book does not address ways to resist the heaviness of the homogenizing and commodifying cultural gravity that seduces us to believe that individual autonomy for Blacks is purely an exercise in positive thinking. Toure therefore unwittingly promotes a vision of individuality for an elite class of well-resourced Blacks who appear alienated from their less fortunate brethren, in the name of eschewing the demand to represent.

It is therefore not surprising to find, among Toure's many interview subjects, a paucity of those who toil for the silent and embattled Blacks. We do not hear from social workers, community activists, public interest lawyers and the other foot soldiers of group struggle.

In a marriage between the enlightenment privileging of critique and the post-modern reluctance to affirm, Toure cannot integrate the ethos of his subjects who feel unconstrained, with his more, at times, grounded perspective. He deals with this dialectical dilemma by being inconclusive and leaving highly contested terms like authenticity and Blackness undefined. He is limited to promoting a fantastical notion of Blackness that is un-tethered from history or from community however defined.

By over-privileging the lightness of Blackness he marginalizes the reality that many Black folks find comfort within the ethical constraints of a historically grounded group identity and that some even take the heaviness of representation as a badge of honor. As the old folks used to say, '*I am because we are."*

Yet there is much to value in this rush of a work. It is vitally important that revered and institutionalized ways of thinking be challenged. Post-Blackness, despite its insufficient nuance, sensitizes us to the preciousness that is individuality. With Toure we explore the possibility of a having a unique Black self, that can hold in equal tension strivings for healthy individuality and necessary interdependence. Such a Black self project would be informed by a commitment to the group and a nuanced awareness of historical and contemporary constraints and struggles.