

Toure: The 'Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?' Interview

Born in Boston on March 20, 1971, Touré is a cultural critic for MSNBC, as well as the host of a couple of shows on Fuse-TV: "Hip Hop Shop" and "On the Record." A contributing editor at Rolling Stone, his articles appear regularly in publications ranging from The New York Times to The Village Voice to The New Yorker.

Touré is also the author of a collection of essays called "Never Drank the Kool-Aid," a collection of short stories called "The Portable Promised Land," and a novel titled "Soul City." He serves on the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Nominating Committee, and is a member of the adjunct faculty of the City University of New York's Graduate School of Journalism.

A devoted father, Touré lives in Fort Greene, Brooklyn with his wife, Rita, and their two children, Hendrix and Fairuz. Here, he talks about his new book, "Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?"

Kam Williams: Hi Touré, thanks for the interview.

Touré: Hey, man, what's happening?

KW: Not much. Nice to make your acquaintance.

T: Yours, too.

KW: I really enjoyed reading Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness, and I have a lot of my own questions for you, as well as a lot from my readers.

T: Whatever you want to talk about is totally cool.

KW: What inspired you to write the book? Let me guess, the incident in college where somebody embarrassed you by saying, "Shut up, Touré! You ain't black!"

T: Yeah, that was definitely an inciting incident. I had already been thinking very actively about what it means to be black since I was very young. But that got me thinking about it with a different intensity on an extremely deep, personal level. So, that sort of got the ball rolling, but the more specific influence was the success of Barack Obama which was an indication to me that something had changed in terms of race and what it meant to be black in America. We are not post-racial, but some things have changed. For instance, I think the younger generation has a more progressive attitude, and that definitely played to Barack's favor.

KW: Harriet Pakula Teweles says: It's one thing for artists to feel that blackness can mean anything. But how can so many in the period you describe as post-blackness give up being boxed in by race if they have neither the educational nor economic opportunities to leave the ghetto locality?

T: What I'm saying is that you have the ability to embody blackness however you wish. I believe Harriet's right that you see greater opportunity for education and advancement as you go up the class scale, but America is the land of rapid class ascension within a generation, within a decade, even within a year. So, I don't think this only applies to middle-class black people. If you go into the 'hood, you'll encounter a huge variety in terms of blackness.

KW: In the book, you talk about being from Boston, and how your parents taught as a child you that some areas of the city were dangerous for blacks. I learned that the hard way when I was in law school there in the Seventies, like the time I was refused service in a pizzeria because I was black.

T: That highlights the stupidity of racism. You were simply saying: "I'm just trying to give you money for the thing that you produce. I'm not looking to start a fight; I'm trying to engage in the commerce that you do every day." And they're response was, "We don't want your money, because you're black." Unbelievable!

KW: Troy Johnson asks: Do you see any value in the government census trying to keep track of people by race: black, white, etcetera? If so, how can we truly become post-racial??

T: I don't think the goal is to become post-racial. I don't want a world in which we're not thinking about race. I want a world where people are proud to be who they are, and where everybody feels comfortable imposing the beauty of their culture on America. The goal is that prejudice based around those differences ends. Post-racialism is not the goal, because it's not even possible.

KW: Rene Harris says: One time during a Twitter interaction with you, you freely used the actual n-word, but only referred to a slur against Jews as the k-word. When I questioned you about it, you never answered. Care to clarify now?



CELEBRITY INTERVIEW

by Kam Williams



T: I remember that interaction. It transpired a long time ago before I made a personal decision to not use the n-word anymore. Twitter is a very particular venue where it can be very easy for someone to misunderstand something that you've written. So, you have to be very careful when you are dealing with really incendiary ideas. For me to use the n-word as a black person is not going to be as potentially controversial as using the k-word. It can be tricky, if someone reads my tone wrong. But there's a big difference between using a word and talking about that word.

KW: Judyth Piazza asks: What is something your fans may not know about you?

T: I don't know how to answer that question.

KW: Judyth also asks: What key quality do you believe all successful people share?

T: The ability to take a "no," because in order to become successful at anything, you're going to experience a lot of setbacks and a lot of doors closing.

KW: Editor/Legist Patricia Turnier asks: What message do you want the public to take away from your book?

T: Two things: First, I want the black people made to feel like outsiders because they like opera or sushi or scuba diving to know that they're not weird and that they are black. You can do black and be black in any way you choose. And secondly, I want the self-appointed, volunteer identity cops to be frozen in their tracks, because they're not really doing the race a service. It's time for them to take off their badges and let people be black in whatever way they see fit.

KW: Patricia also says: In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois said that "The problem of the 20th Century would be the problem of the color line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the seas." If Du Bois were alive today, do you think that he would just cross out 20th and change it to 21st and consider it as relevant today, or would he see another issue as the prevailing question of this Century?

T: Well sure, it's still a dominant issue in America. However, now, class enters the equation and makes it a three-dimensional game, instead of a two-dimensional game. So, the issue is only getting trickier and more nuanced as class boundaries change, and as expectations and perceptions change. Plus, there's a growing class of mixed people who are going to bring a variety of additional new perceptions.

KW: Finally, Patricia asks: What advice do you have for young people who are interested in entering the field of journalism?

T: Oh God! Think about something else that might make you happy. I'm serious. I don't think the opportunities are there to make a comfortable living in journalism anymore.

KW: Professor/film director/author Hisani Dubose asks: How did you first become a Pop Culture consultant for CNN, and how did you go from there to being a regular contributor?

T: I started off at Rolling Stone. From there, I was given an opportunity to appear on CNN with Paula Zahn when she was hosting American Morning. That went well, and they asked me back more and more, and eventually had me do a panel three times a week called 90-Second Pop. After that I became a correspondent.

KW: Is there any question no one ever asks you, that you wish someone would?

T: No.

KW: Do you have a good question you can give me that

I can ask other celebrities?

T: Yeah, who is the person that led you to become the person you are?

KW: Thanks. That'll be known as the Touré question. The Tasha Smith question: Are you ever afraid?

T: I suppose, but not very often, because I always feel like there's something I can do to get out of any situation, sort of like MacGyver.

KW: The Columbus Short question: Are you happy?

T: Yeah, absolutely! I've got two great kids and a wonderful wife. And I just published the best book that I've ever written. So, I'm very happy right now.

KW: The Teri Emerson question: When was the last time you had a good laugh?

T: All the damn time! One of my kids said something earlier today that was incredibly funny.

KW: What is your guiltiest pleasure?

T: Bacon. It's not just for breakfast anymore. I know it's wrong health-wise. But even though it's wrong, I don't want to be right. At the butcher store, they'll sometimes talk me into a pork fillet which is like eating a steak of bacon. That couldn't be good for you.

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