



# “It doesn’t have to be so serious . . .”

## The New Post-Soul Humor of Samantha Irby

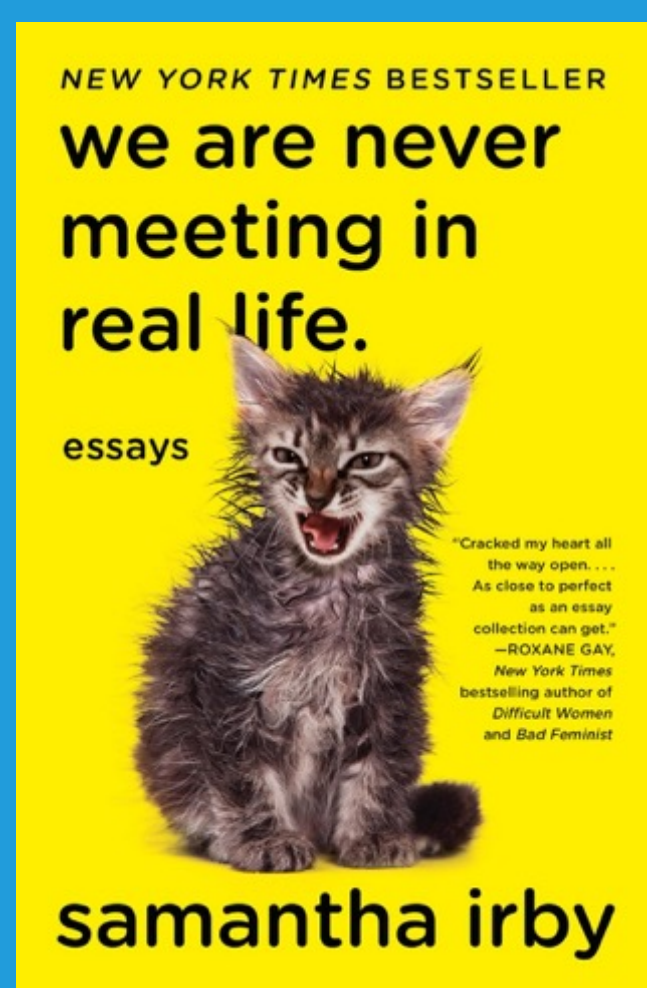
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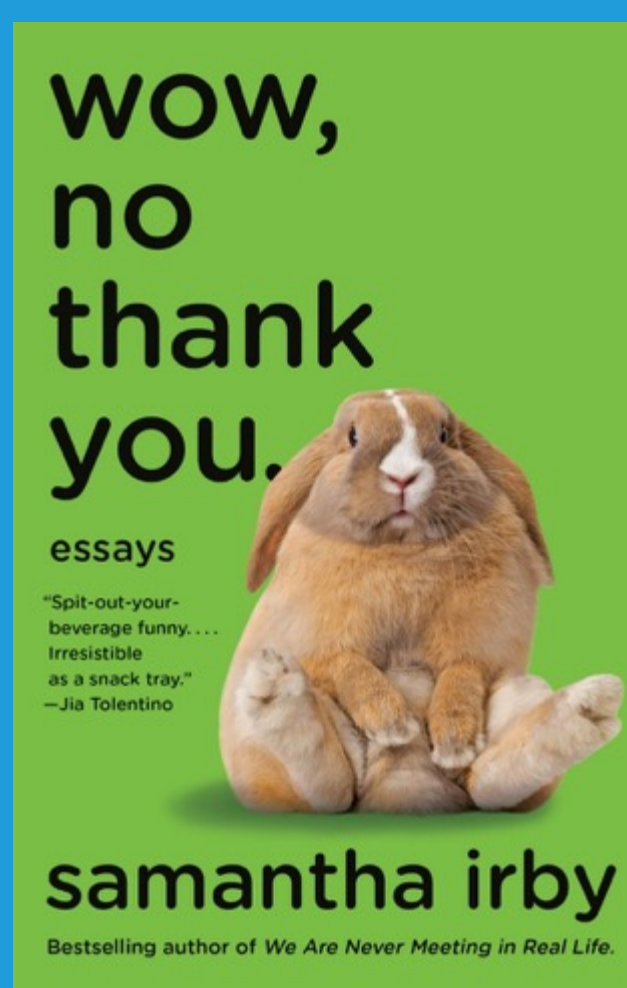


### STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

My project offers a post-soul reading of the work of humorist and essayist Samantha Irby and demonstrates how Irby’s essays are expanding the possibilities of black womanhood using the post-soul aesthetic.



Published 2017  
dedicated to Klonopin  
(no, really)



Published 2020  
dedicated to Wellbutrin  
(she actually did this)

### SAMANTHA IRBY’S POST-SOUL AESTHETIC

#### Cultural Mulatto Archetype

The best representation of Irby’s multiracial cultural education is her essay “Late-1900s Time Capsule” in *Wow, No Thank You*. Here she rhapsodizes about the way music formed her when she was coming of age, and the artists she draws on range from Sheryl Crow, the Indigo Girls, Tori Amos, and Phish to Nina Simone, Bone Thugs-n-Harmony, Black Star, and Mary J. Blige.

#### Signal Allusion Disruption Gestures

Irby often pokes fun at Civil Rights heroes and other canonized black idols in her work. In an interview promoting *We Are Never Meeting in Real Life*, for example, she said, “*Hidden Figures* is amazing, and it’s like, ‘Whoa, look at these black geniuses. Look at these heroes.’ But I think it is deeply valuable to just see black people living regular, complex lives.”

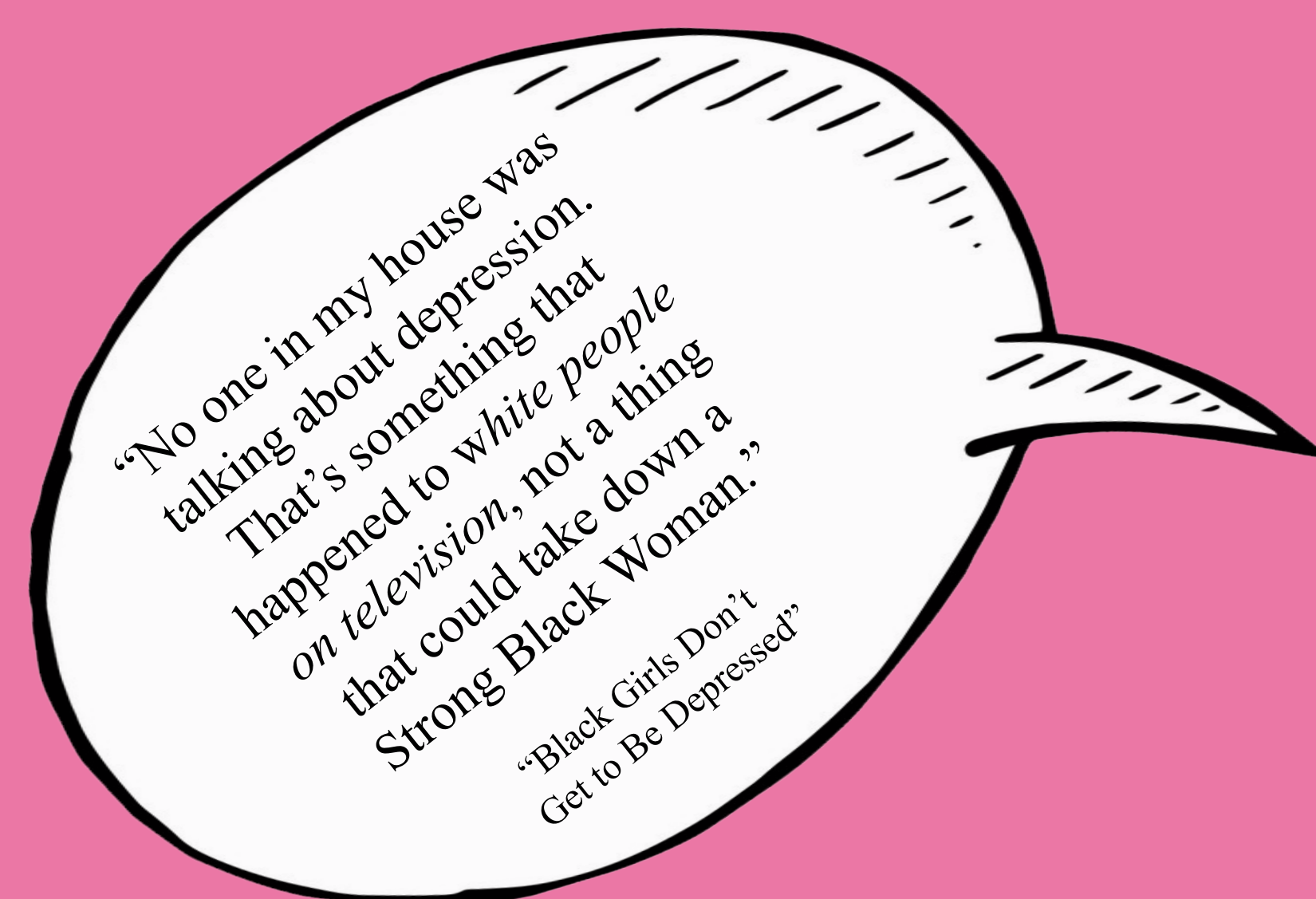
#### Blacksploration

In Irby’s essay “Black Girls Don’t Get to Be Depressed,” she says that, growing up as a young depressed person, she clocked in “on the low end of my skinfolk’s negrometers because I identified hard with Courtney Love and read *Sassy* magazine. Depression seemed like just another way I was desperately trying to be white.” This critique of the essentialized categories of blackness that defined her adolescence seems to demand space for depressed black girls, using her own personal experience to redefine what American blackness entails.



### NEW CONTRIBUTIONS TO POST-SOUL HUMOR

Several of Irby’s identities exist on the margins of essentialized blackness. By using her personal experiences as the jumping-off point for her humor (Gillota), she is providing even more nuanced expressions of American blackness and expanding the possibilities of black womanhood (Finley).



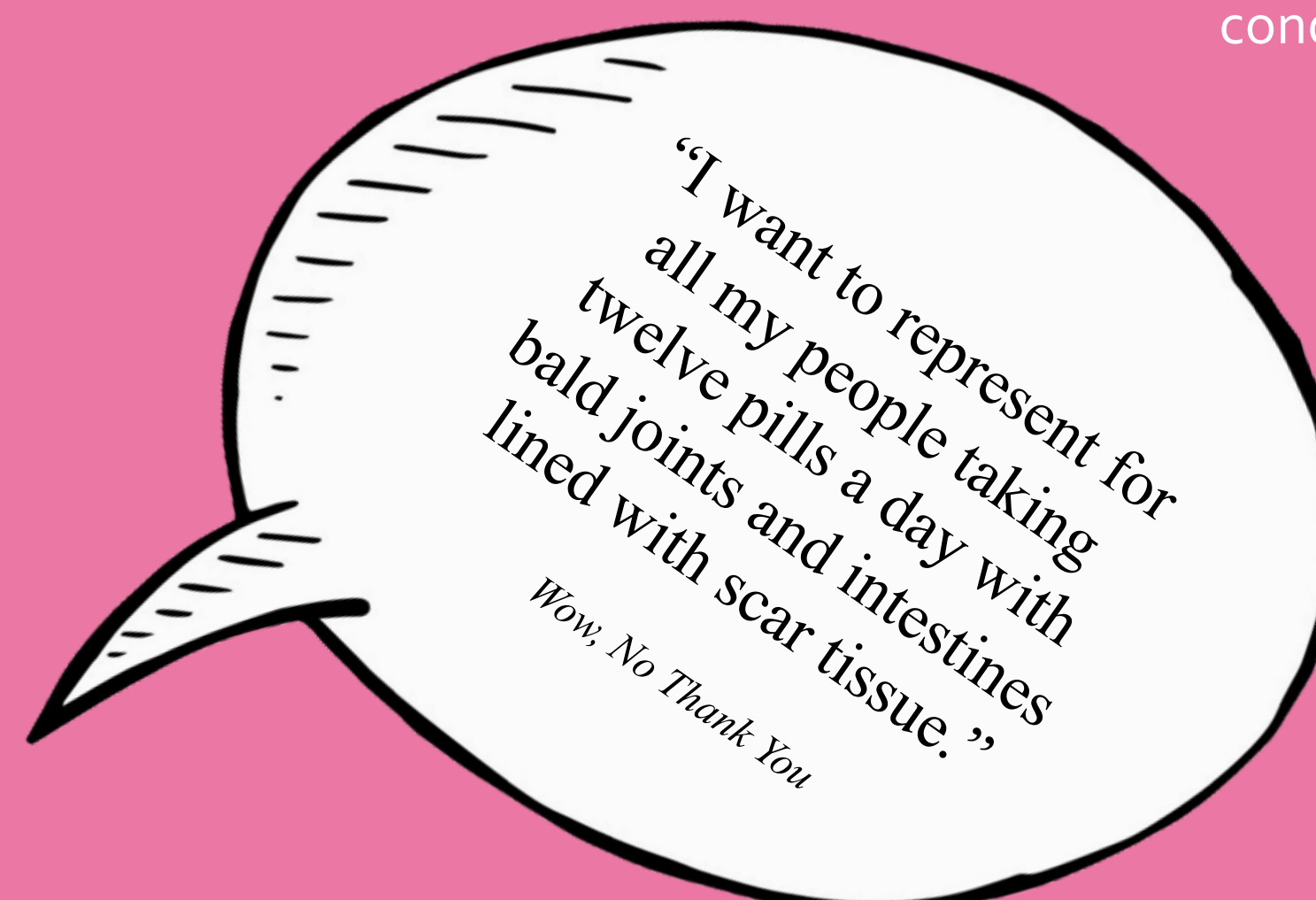
#### DEPRESSION

As Nyasha Junior has written, the lack of representation in media of African American women with mental illness reinforces the myth of the “strong Black woman” and perpetuates the misperception that mental health issues are the sole territory of white women. However, nuanced representations of black women attending therapy or living with mental illness normalize issues of mental health, break down cultural stigmas around mental health care, and encourage black women to seek help.

Frank depictions of depression and anxiety populate Irby’s writings—from morbid jokes about her medication routine to inner monologues about getting hit by a bus. Her humorous self-identification as “a middle-aged depressed lady with chronic diarrhea” (*Wow, No Thank You*, 97) makes depression less intimidating for other black women who may identify with Irby’s narrative.

#### CHRONIC ILLNESS

Irby has Crohn’s Disease, a form of inflammatory bowel disease, and in writing about it has (and I quote) “managed to make a career out of ‘LOL, I SHIT MY PANTS’” (*Wow, No Thank You*, 233). Like with mental illness, these candid, shame-resistant descriptions of life as a chronically ill person have the potential to positively impact the status of black women who have similar conditions.



#### QUEERNESS

Irby’s openness about her bisexuality and marriage to a woman offers visibility for other queer black women. Many authors have written about the gravity of being queer and black, but few have portrayed it with the sort of lighthearted normalcy that Irby does—spending afternoons “shouting at the television set with my best friend in our matching house sweaters and magnifying readers from Costco” (*We Are Never Meeting in Real Life*, 136).



### OTHER CONTEMPORARY BLACK HUMORISTS AND THE POST-SOUL AESTHETIC

According to David Gillota and Jessyka Finley, contemporary black humorists (like Donald Glover, Keegan-Michael Key, Jordan Peele, and Issa Rae) are embracing and adapting the post-soul aesthetic in three ways:

1. Their humor doesn’t engage with tropes of essentialized blackness, offering instead more nuanced and varied representations of black identity in mainstream culture. (Cultural mulatto archetype)
2. Rather than evaluating broad systemic inequalities, they use personal experience as the jumping-off point for their comedy. (Blacksploration)
3. Their art critiques rigid forms of blackness embraced by earlier comic traditions—especially aspects of the tradition that have been homophobic and misogynistic. (Signal allusion disruption gestures)

Finley in particular calls for more attention to the intersection of race *and* gender in this burgeoning movement, since humor has the unique power to “break open new possibilities for representations of blackness and womanhood” (261).



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