“It doesn’t have to be so serious…”
The New Post-Soul Humor of Samantha Irby

By Christy Lynch
ENGL-6221 — African American Literature — faculty sponsor, Dr. Laura Dubek

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.

WHAT IS THE POST-SOUL AESTHETIC?

Bertram D. Ashe uses four metrics for defining works within the post-soul aesthetic:

1. Art produced by African Americans who were either born or came of age after the Civil Rights movement

It’s important that post-soul artists weren’t adults during the Civil Rights movement, because then they’re “positioned to critically engage the movement’s legacy from a state of objectivity” (611).

2. The presence of the cultural mulatto archetype

Someone who is culturally mulatto can navigate easily in the white world as well as the black world, because they’re educated by a multi-racial mix of culture. Their work employs non-traditionally black cultural influences, and it’s “consciously [crosses] the traditionally separated racial lines in US popular culture” (614).

3. The execution of an exploration of blackness

Ashe writes, “These artists and texts trouble blackness, they worry blackness, they stir it up, touch it, feel it out, and hold it up for examination in ways that depart significantly from previous . . . attempts to establish and sustain a coherent black identity” (614). He calls this brand of inquiry, “blackspolation” and emphasizes that any “troubling” of blackness done by post-soul artists is ultimately done in service to black people and communities.

4. Many of these texts perform signal allusion disruption gestures

As post-soul artists critique Civil Rights-era identity markers, they will likely “make fun” of elders who embodied the ideas of blackness that they’re troubling. As Ashe summarizes, “Through the allusion disruption process, post-soul authors use characters that I read as cultural mulattos to trouble blackness, to oppose reductive iterations of blackness” (616).

Samantha Irby’s Post-Soul Aesthetic

Cultural Mulatto Archetype

The best representation of Irby’s multiracial cultural education is her essay “Late 1990s: Time Capsule” in Wow, No Thank You. Here she hypothesizes about the way music formed her when she was coming of age, and the articles she reads on Evita, Chilly Crow, the Indigo Girls, Tori Amos, and Phish to Nina Simone, Bone Thugs-in-Harmony, Black Star, and Mary J. Blige. She concludes by saying, “I have been a black mulatto my whole life.”

Signal Allusion Disruption Gestures

Irvy often poikes fun at Civil Rights heroes and other canonical 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, ‘Wow, 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.”

Blackspolation

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 “at the low end of my skinfolk’s negotiometers 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 (Gillotta), she is providing even more nuanced expressions of American blackness and expanding the possibilities of black womanhood (Finley).

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, 235). Like with mental illness, these comedic, shaming narratives of life as a chronically ill person have the potential to positively impact the status of black women who have similar conditions.

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 misconception 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.

Queerness

Irby’s openness about her bisexuality and marriage of convenience for someone younger.”

References


