

# **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 nontraditionally black cultural influences, and it "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 "blacksploration" 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).

# "It doesn't have to be so serious ..." **The New Post-Soul Humor of Samantha Irby**

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# 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."

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.

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).



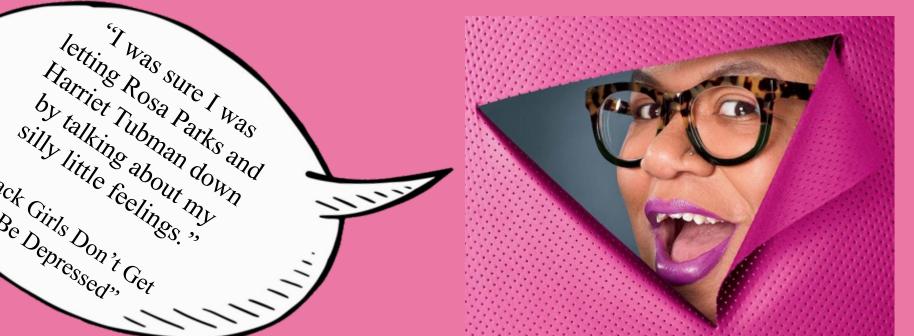
#### DEPRESSION

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 selfidentification 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.



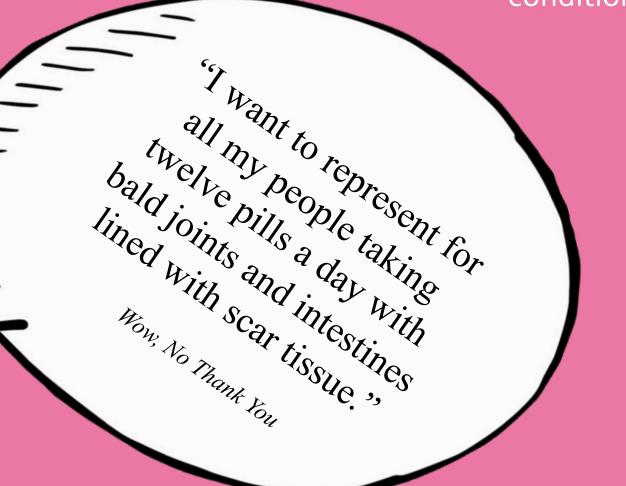
#### Blacksploration



## **NEW CONTRIBUTIONS TO POST-SOUL HUMOR**

#### 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).

*i always thought I would eventually end inischievous, too restless, too taxing, too and I don't want to spend my Chico's knot waiting for a dude to leave me* We Are Never Meeting in Real Life

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

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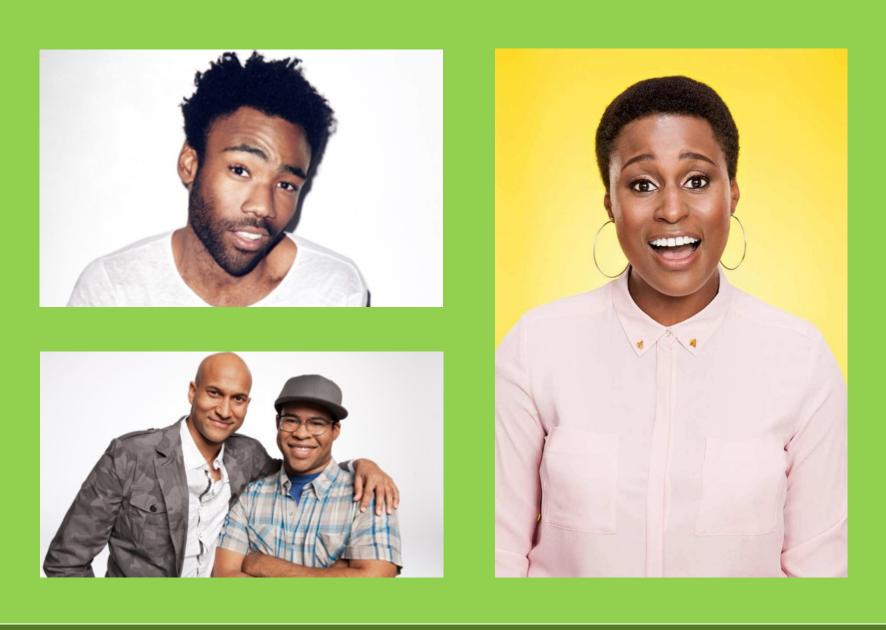
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According to David Gillota and Jessyka Finley, contemporary black humorists (like Donald Glover, Keegan-Michael Key, Jordan Peele, and Issa Rae) are embracing and adapting the post-soul aesthetic in three ways:

- 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).



# REFERENCES

Irby, Samantha. "Black Girls Don't Get to Be Depressed," Cosmopolitan, 14 Dec. 2015, www.cosmopolitan.com/lifestyle/news/a50692/blackgirls-dont-get-to-be-depressed.

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