

The Other Serious by Christy Wampole

written by John Yohe | October 7, 2015



The Other Serious: Essays For The New American Generation by Christy Wampole
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Essayist Christy Wampole puts herself in the grand tradition of Montaigne in *The Other Serious: Essays for the New Generation*, using her ‘essaies’ in both the sense of ‘tries’ and of ‘tests,’ trying out ways of thinking and writing about such American topics as the movie *Labyrinth*, to technology, all the way to karaoke. Along the way, she’s testing herself, challenging herself to be honest and open and self-critical.

Wampole, with her background in Romance languages, informs her critiques of modern American Culture, either by quoting from great works of world literature, and/or delving into the Latin roots of words to give hidden meanings to their use today. In doing so, she’s modeling how studying the humanities can help us to think about and understand ourselves and our relationships with technology, social media, and each other.

Wampole is a professor of French at Princeton and she contributes to *The New York Times*, from which I assume these essays have been taken (there are no publishing credits listed). The key essay of the book is “The Great American Irony Binge.” The subtitle of this book is *Essays For the New American Generation*, which earlier she establishes means everyone living now, all of us, of all ages, and we’re all saturated with irony. Which Wampole sees as a bad thing. Mostly. Until the end of the essay when she backtracks a little. But before then, she makes what sounds like a valid point that irony: that it belongs to, is used by, the privileged. That

ironic living is a first-world problem. Could you imagine an ironic mustache in Bangladesh? Nerd glasses in Haiti? Goofy pseudojournalists delivering jokes between serious news reports in Somalia? Living conditions in these and many other places are simply not conducive to the self-indulgence of a life lived ironically. In America, the most irony-free places are those communities in which economic hardship imposes reality on everyday life. Go to the poorest neighborhoods in any town and it is unlikely you will find ironic frills.

Except, I’m not sure that’s true, nor am I sure Wampole has been to the poorest neighborhoods (she lives in Princeton and seems to spend most of her free time in Berlin). Or, that is, I’m not sure she recognizes irony in all its forms: In black culture, when people call each other ‘nigga’ they’re employing a certain kind of irony. Their meaning of that word is the complete opposite of what white people mean when they say it. That’s what an ironic statement is: saying something that means the opposite.

Another example: I've worked with white guys from economically depressed parts of Texas, Wampole's home state, and they're the funniest guys I've ever known, with a biting humor that's not just in the words, but in the way they talk: using their accent to sound like the expectations of what a white guy from the midwest might think of as a dumb hick. Picture an old Texas white guy saying this in a slow nasally twang: "I could be wrong. It's happened before." If that's not ironic, I don't know what is.

In fact, whereas Wampole says that irony doesn't exist among the poor, I would argue the opposite: it doesn't exist among the rich, especially the conservative rich. I'm not sure George W. Bush knows what irony is. Nor, say, the Koch brothers. Most especially, irony doesn't exist among religious fundamentalists, foreign or domestic. And in this, Wampole misses the real purpose of irony: as a self-defense mechanism against religion, capitalism, death, violence, and The Man in general. How else to respond to oppression but with black humor—which is what irony really is—except go mad with despair?

Wampole would have us look at irony as either "a frivolous mode of expression" or as an arrogant sign of superiority, which is why she wants to reject it, because that either sets up an elitism—that we privileged white people can congratulate ourselves on being better than po' folks—or we're just frivolously consuming irony on our various and sundry screens. Given that dichotomy, I'd reject irony too. But if it's a defense mechanism, or a language *tool* (or art?) used by all people as a way to invert power structures and knock down The Man (something Wampole elsewhere says she's for) then I'm for it, and want more of it. Let the fundamentalist christians and muslims and capitalists be sincere. At least irony is funny.

In this essay and others, Wampole feels as isolated in her own world as she sometimes accuses others of being. For example, when she states that hipsterism is dead, as someone who has been living in Portland, Oregon for the last three years, that leaves me scratching my head. I guess her point is that it's dead because it's popular (?). But that evokes more head-scratching. What she really means, or wants, is that hipsterism, and irony, be dead, be gone in our culture (Or cultures? Is that the problem here? That she wants to generalize too much about One Big Culture, rather than accept that there are many subcultures?), so that we can move on to whatever it is we'll move on to. She doesn't know what that is, exactly, but cites David Foster Wallace as the once-hoped-for voice of "New Sincerity." Then, after all that, she backtracks and acknowledges that irony can be powerful, and empowering.

Other times, other generalizations, like in her mostly-interesting analysis of the movie *Labyrinth*, with David Bowie as a hot goblin, which is apparently an important coming-of-age narrative to women of a certain age. *That's* interesting, but she digresses at the end into musings on hair, with statements like "...women gain power when they cut their hair." I won't even take that statement on, but there's more: "men gain power with their hair (think of the luscious locks of metal dudes or Jesus) and that having their hair cut is a symbolic castration." As a man who has kept his hair long most of his life, I can assure her that doing so sets one up for scorn and ridicule and being turned down for jobs all the time. In any case, she should

have probably written a separate essay about this.

It's these huge generalizations that are both the interesting and frustrating thing about Wampole, as they are with Montaigne. She's trying to make larger arguments about American Culture, and these 'zingers' make for good points—they sound good, clever and funny—and make for her readable and accessible style. But sometimes they leave me thinking, 'Wait, what? That's not true.' I'm generally on board with most all of Wampole's larger critiques and arguments. They just, inevitably maybe, get weakened by the zingers.

What I *do* like about Wampole's writing, and Wampole, is her willingness as an academic to engage in popular culture. She's what academics used to do, I think, which is to bring ideas incubated in the university setting out for a general audience to think about, argue about, and even disagree with. In any case, she's getting people in conversation, with her, with each other, and with Culture-with-a-capital-c. Academics, and the universities and departments that employ them, might take note: instead of writing inaccessible academicese in journals read by no one, they could be out in the Real World, engaging with real people. Montaigne would be proud.