

## BLACK-ISH AND THE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS

Department of African American & African  
Studies- 21:014:303  
Department of Sociology- 21:920:394:05  
Fall 2018  
M 2:30- 3:50PM, W 1:00- 2:20 PM  
Class Address: 424 Conklin

Professor James Jones  
Office Address: 410 Conklin Hall  
Email: james.r.jones@rutgers.edu  
Office Hours: Mondays 5:30-6:30 pm or by  
appointment

Since 2014, *Black-ish*, the popular ABC sitcom about a Black suburban family, has entertained and educated millions of viewers about the complexities of race and racism in American society. The Johnson Family has used humor to wade through complex racial topics related to identity, the workplace, school, childrearing, emotional trauma, sexism, and class issues. As a weekly viewer myself I have enthusiastically watched the show and admired how they approach vexing issues with thoughtful consideration and often sociological insights. But occasionally I have thought that the topics they engage only scratch the surface of much more complex issues and that we as an audience could benefit from reading more extensively research from sociology and African American studies. This course is an answer to that problem- it expands on the sociology of the Black middle class present in the show and provides a more complete profile of the Black middle class today.

This course explores one main question: what does it mean to be a Black middle-class person today? The answer(s) to this question is complex and we as a class will take a dual approach to answer it. First, each week we will engage readings from sociology and African American studies that investigate issues confronted on the show. Second, we will watch selected episodes of *Black-ish* that are related to what we are reading and critically analyze how the show presents the Johnson family. We will discuss the opportunities and obstacles the family encounters and analyze how the show depicts its characters. In this way, we will have multiples discussions in class that center around the Black middle class broadly and the Johnson family specifically. This dual approach is meant to spur students to critically think about the sociological gaps present in the show and critique academic scholarship and its applicability to the real-world situations.

The course begins with a brief review of Black middle-class families on television to understand the evolution of their depiction, contextualize the series within this canon, and build a toolkit for cultural criticism and analysis. Next, we approach the Black middle class as an intellectual field and consider how scholars have studied Black elites. We study foundational texts about Black elites from pioneering scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois and E. Franklin Frazier and pair this

historical perspective with present day demographic data and theory on the “Black middle class.” The remainder of the course is dedicated to gaining an intimate knowledge of who the Johnsons are and the experiences of the Black middle class today. We will follow the Johnsons across four seasons as they traverse white spaces in suburbia, professional workplaces, schools, and the global racial world. Their lives will serve as a portal to the Black American middle class(es).

What does it mean to be a Black middle person in America? We answer that important question by uncovering how the Black middle class approach the construction of their identities as parents, children, professionals, romantic partners, neighbors, and as Black racial subjects.

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Student will learn how to think sociologically about class— and status-based identities
- Apply sociological theory to explain the social world.
- Gain competency as cultural critics

#### COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Attendance/Participation	10 %
Quizzes	25 %
Midterm	30 %
Research Memo and Screen Play	35%

#### ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

I expect every student to come prepared for each class. This means not only have you read the assigned text and watched the relevant episode but you have synthesized these materials and are prepared for class discussion. I take attendance electronically at the beginning of every class period via blackboard. You are permitted to miss three classes before absences are negatively weighted on your final grade.

#### QUIZZES

During the course of the semester there will be unannounced quizzes at the beginning of the class. These short quizzes evaluate your comprehension of the assigned readings and television episode for that class period. There will be no opportunities to make up quizzes, however, I will not factor the lowest two quiz grades into your final grade.

#### MIDTERM

The midterm will be an in-class exam on Wednesday, October 17<sup>th</sup>. A review sheet will be posted one week prior to the exam. The exam will consist of identifying key terms and completing short- answer essays. If you have a conflict with the date of the exam it is your responsibility to make alternative arrangements with me. I will alternative arrangements with students who provide at a least two-week notice and have appropriately notified the relevant university officials.

## RESEARCH MEMO AND SCREEN PLAY

In lieu of a final examination, each student will write a research memo and screen treatment on *Black-ish*. The memo should analyze a topic important to the Black middle class and review the relevant research in sociology, African American studies, and other relevant disciplines. Next you will write a scene treatment for the issue covered in your memo. The scene treatment should be treated as a pitch to the show's producers around a new episode. You will explain why this topic is important for the show to cover, describe the setting, which characters are involved, and how the scene will unfold. A more detailed description of this assignment will be distributed after the midterm. This assignment is due on December 17 at 3pm via Blackboard and a hardcopy to be deposited at my office.

### Required Readings.

There is one required text for this course. This book is available at the university bookstore and other major booksellers. All other readings are available on Blackboard.

Lacey, Karyn. 2007. *Blue-Chip Black: Race, Class, and Status in the New Black Middle Class*. University of California Press

### Watching *Black-ish*

Each class you will be required to watch an episode of *Black-ish*. The reading schedule details which specific episode we will watch. There are several ways you can watch the show. 1) You can obtain a subscription to *Black-ish* via Hulu. As a new customer you can start a free 30-day trial and pay a monthly fee between \$8-12 for the remaining two months of class. 2) You can also purchase the individual episodes via iTunes or Amazon for approximately \$1.99.

This may be the only university course you will take where you are required to watch television. However, you are not watching this series for pure entertainment. As you follow the experiences and antics of the Johnson clan watch with a discerning and sociological eye. Pay attention to the presentation of characters, development of narratives, dialogue and silences, and the overall message the show communicates about this particular family and its relationship with the black middle class more broadly.

## READING AND TV SCHEDULE

<i>Date</i>	<i>Themes</i>	<i>Reading</i>	<i>Blackish Episode Number and Title</i>
5-Sep	Introduction		
10-Sep	The Origins of the Black Middle Class	Frazier Black Bourgeoisie "Introduction" and Salamishah Tillet "What TV Says About Race and Money"	Episode 101: The Pilot
12-Sep	The Origins of the Black Middle Class	DuBois "The Talented Tenth" "On Our Spiritual Strivings" (Double consciousness)	Episode 303: 40 Acres and a Mule
17-Sep	The Origins of the Black Middle Class	Drake and Cayton Black Metropolis "Styles of Living— Upper Class	Episode 124: Pop's Pops' Pops
19-Sep	The Origins of the Black Middle Class	Drake and Cayton Black Metropolis "The Middle-class Way of Life"	Episode 210: Stuff
24-Sep	The Origins of the Black Middle Class	William Julius Wilson's The declining significance of race. "the changing Black class structure" The Black Middle Class of the 21st Century	Episode 204: Goodish Times
26-Sep	The Post Civil Rights Black Middle Class	William Julius Wilson's The Truly Disadvantaged . "Social Change and Social Dislocations in the Inner City" The Black Middle Class of the 21st Century	Episode 315: Im a Survivor
1-Oct	The Post Civil Rights Black Middle Class	Sharon Collins Black Corporate Executives "Race Track and Mainstream Career"	Episode 221: The Johnson Show
3-Oct	The Post Civil Rights Black Middle Class	Elijah Anderson " The Social Situation of the Black Corporate Executive"	Episode 120: Switch Hitting
8-Oct	Midterm	Midterm	
10-Oct	The 21th Century Black Middle Class	Karyn Lacy Blue Chip Black Chapter 1- Defining the Post- Integration Middle Classes	Episode 305
15-Oct	The 21th Century Black Middle Class	Karyn Lacy Blue Chip Black Chapter 3- Public Identities: Managing Race in Public Spaces	The Talk
17-Oct	The 21th Century Black Middle Class	Karyn Lacy Blue-Chip Black Chapter 4- Status based Identities: Protecting and Reproducing Middle Class Status	Episode 107: The Gift of Hunger
22-Oct	The 21th Century Black Middle Class	Karyn Lacy Blue Chip Black Chapter 5 Race and Class Based Identities: Strategic Assimilation in Middle Class Suburbia	Episode 205: Churched
24-Oct	The 21th Century Black Middle Class	Karyn Lacy Blue Chip Black Chapter 6: Suburban Identities: Building Alliances with Neighbors	Sink or Swim

29-Oct	<i>Being Black in White Spaces</i>	<i>R.L'Heureux Lewis-McCoy Inequality in the Promise Land - Chapter 3 Segmented Suburbia</i>	<i>Episode 415: White Breakfast</i>
31-Oct	<i>Being Black in White Spaces</i>	<i>R.L'Heureux Lewis-McCoy Inequality in the Promise Land - Chapter 4 Making Your Public School Private</i>	<i>Episode 306: Jack of All Trades</i>
5-Nov	<i>Black at Work</i>	<i>Adia Wingfield Harvey No More Invisible Men Chapter 4 - Other Men in the Workplace</i>	<i>Episode 304: Who's Afraid of the Big Black Man?</i>
7-Nov	<i>Black at Work</i>	<i>Adia Wingfield Harvey No More Invisible Men Chapter 5 - Black and Masculinity</i>	<i>Episode 209: Man at Work</i>
12-Nov	<i>The Politics of the Black Middle Class</i>	<i>Lauren Davenport Politics Beyond Black and White Chapter 5 Development of Racial Ideologies and Attitudes</i>	<i>Episode 308: Being Bow-racial</i>
14-Nov	<i>The economic of the black middle class</i>	<i>Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro Black Wealth/White Wealth - Chapter 4 Wealth and Inequality in America</i>	<i>Episode 213: Keeping Up with the Johnsons</i>
19-Nov	<i>The fragility of the Black middle class</i>	<i>Mary Pattillo- Black Picket Fences Chapter 3 Generations through a Changing Economy</i>	<i>Episode 411: Inheritance</i>
26-Nov	<i>Interracial Dating in the Black Middle Class- The loving Generation</i>	<i>Averil Clarke Inequalities of Love, Chapter 3 Marriage: I do it when and if I Can</i>	<i>Episode 116: Parental Guidance</i>
28-Nov	<i>Raising Black Middle Class Children</i>	<i>Averil Clark Inequalities of Love, Chapter 4 :Sex is Everybody doing it?</i>	<i>Episode 414: R-E-S-P-E-C-T</i>
3-Dec	<i>Raising Black Middle Class Children</i>	<i>Maya Beasley Opting Out - Chapter 4 the role of the university</i>	<i>EPISODE 323: Liberal Arts</i>
5-Dec	<i>Raising Black Middle Class Children</i>	<i>Maya Beasley Opting Out - Family Effect</i>	<i>Episode 418: Black Math</i>
10-Dec		<i>James Jones – Racing Through the Halls of Congress</i>	<i>Episode 103: The Nod</i>
12-Dec		<i>No Reading</i>	
17-Dec	<i>Final Exam</i>		

## CLASS POLICIES

### BLACKBOARD

All class communication will be through Blackboard. **This syllabus is subject to revision and updated version will be posted to the course site.** Please check the site regularly for notification. All assignments must be submitted through Blackboard.

### ATTENDANCE POLICY

Attendance is required. There will be no make-up opportunities for missed classes.

Excused vs. Unexcused absences: [The Rutgers-Newark Undergraduate catalog](#)

The recognized grounds for absence are illness requiring medical attention, curricular or extracurricular activities approved by the faculty, personal obligations claimed by the student and recognized as valid, recognized religious holidays, and severe inclement weather causing dangerous traveling conditions.” If you plan to claim a religious holiday as an excused absence, you must inform me of this fact within the first two weeks of class.

### ELECTRONICS POLICY

Electronic media is a welcome tool to aid learning in the modern classroom. However, used irresponsibly it can also be detrimental to learning when students lose the ability to focus on lectures or distract other students with it. Use of electronic media is therefore a student privilege, not a right, and may be revoked by the instructor under certain conditions. During class time certain electronic media—laptop computers and tablets, not cell phones—may be used only for the following purposes:

- 1) to read required course texts (E-books or texts posted on Blackboard)
- 2) to type notes on lectures and classroom discussions

Electronic media may NOT be used to browse the internet, answer email, check social media, or for any use that is not directly related to the course. If any student is found to be in violation of the electronics policy—as witnessed by the instructor or as reported by fellow classmates—that student will be banned from using any electronic media for the remainder of the course. If the student continues to use electronic media despite the ban, his or her final grade will be reduced a full letter grade at the conclusion. In extreme cases I reserve the right to ban the student from the classroom altogether. The student will be notified in writing if s/he has lost the privilege of using electronic media. Cell phones must be turned off during class time or set to “vibrate”.

### PLAGIARISM POLICY

Plagiarism is a serious academic offense, for which a student may receive a range of punishments, including failing the course, a permanent record on his or her final transcript, suspension or even expulsion

from the University. Please familiarize yourself with the University's definition of plagiarism by reviewing the Rutgers University Policy on Academic Integrity, here: <http://wp.rutgers.edu/courses/plagiarism>.

If I suspect any student of plagiarism I will bring it to his/her attention and report it to the administration. We faculty have a professional obligation to report all instances of plagiarism in our classes. Failure to do so promotes inequity among the student body, given that honest students have not had the advantage of using external sources in preparing their work.

All students are required to sign the Rutgers Honor Code Pledge. To receive credit, every assignment must have your signature under the following phrase: **“On my honor, I have neither received nor given any unauthorized assistance on this assignment.”**

#### DISABILITY SERVICES AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, a student with a disability must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where you are officially enrolled, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines>. If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodations. Please share this letter with your instructors and discuss the accommodations with them as early in your courses as possible. To begin this process, please complete the Registration form on the ODS web site at: <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/registration-form>. For more information please contact Kate Torres at (973)353-5375 or in the Office of Disability Services in the Paul Robeson Campus Center, in suite 219 or by contacting [odsnewark@rutgers.edu](mailto:odsnewark@rutgers.edu).