BLACK-ISH AND THE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS

Department of African American & African Studies- 21:014:303
Spring 2019
MW 4:00-5:20 PM
Class Address: Hill 101

Professor James Jones
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Office Hours: By appointment on Mondays 5:30-7:00 pm via https://calendly.com/james-r-jones

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 multiple 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**

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<th>Attendance</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
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<td>Presentation</td>
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<td>Quizzes</td>
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<td>Critical Essay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Memo and Screen Play</td>
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**ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION**

Every student should come prepared for each class. This means not only have you read the assigned texts and watched the relevant episode but you have synthesized these materials and are prepared for class discussion. To this end for each class students must submit a discussion question based upon course readings or the assigned episode on Blackboard.

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.

**Episode Presentations**

Each student is responsible for giving one presentation on an assigned episode. In the presentation students should analyze the episode and discuss how it relates to course themes and assigned readings. In addition, presenters should review discussions questions posted on Blackboard and develop their own question to facilitate a robust conversation. Students should select scenes from the episodes to watch and discuss for their presentation. Presentations should last no more than 10 minutes. In addition, students will have the options to further their expertise by writing their research paper on their chosen research area. If you choose to use PowerPoint, you must email a copy to Dr. Jones at least two hours before the class meets.

**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 three quiz grades into your final grade. If you miss more than 3 quizzes due to an excused absence you should contact me directly.

**CRITICAL ESSAY**

Students will be asked to write a short critical essays on how Black-ish presents the Black Middle Class in
lieu of a midterm examination. Details about this assignment will be posted on Blackboard. This assignment is due on March 13.

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 is 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 in March. This assignment is due on May 15th at 3pm via Blackboard and a hardcopy to be deposited at my office.

Research Description Annotated Bibliography 5%
Pitch Presentation 5%
Final Paper 25%

Grading Rubric

A: Outstanding  
A-: Outstanding, with one or two areas of improvement  
B+: Very good  
B: Good  
B-: Good overall, with some significant weaknesses  
C+: Satisfactory, with some potential for improvement  
C: Satisfactory, but needs significant development  
C-: Barely satisfactory  
D: Poor: overwhelming flaws  
F: Failing: doesn’t complete assignment

Final Grades
89.45+ = A, 89.44-84.45= B+, 84.44-79.45= B, 79.44-74.45=C+, 74.44-69.45=C, 69.44-65.45=D, 65.44-Below= F

All written assignments are evaluated for content, grammar, and logic. For assistance on your writing assignments, please consult the University Writing Center. Tutors can help students: clarify an assignment, generate ideas and writing, review and revise drafts, improve grammar and usage, and strengthen reading and editing skills.

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.

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 communities about this particular family and their relationship with race and class.
READING AND TV SCHEDULE

JANUARY 23
Introduction

JANUARY 28

MEET THE JOHNSONS AND THE ORIGINS OF THE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS
Episode 101: The Pilot
E. Franklin Frazier Black Bourgeoisie
“Introduction” and Salamishah Tillet “What TV Says About Race and Money

JANUARY 30 THE ORIGINS OF THE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS
Episode 303: 40 Acres and a Mule

FEBRUARY 4
Episode 124: Pop’s Pops' Pops
St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton Black Metropolis “Styles of Living—Upper Class”

FEBRUARY 6
Episode 210: Stuff
St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton Black Metropolis “The Middle-class Way of Life”

FEBRUARY 11
Episode 204: Good-ish Times
William Julius Wilson The Declining Significance of Race “The changing Black class structure”

FEBRUARY 13
Episode 315: I’m a Survivor
William Julius Wilson The Truly Disadvantaged “Social Change and Social Dislocations in the Inner City”

FEBRUARY 18

THE 21ST CENTURY BLACK MIDDLE CLASS
Episode 305: The Purge
Karyn Lacy Blue Chip Black Chapter 1 “Defining the Post-Integration Middle Classes”
February 20
Episode 107: The Gift of Hunger
Karyn Lacy  Blue Chip Black Chapter 3- “Public Identities: Managing Race in Public Spaces”

**FEBRUARY 25**
Episode 410: The Talk
Karyn Lacy  Blue-Chip Black Chapter 4- “Status based Identities: Protecting and Reproducing Middle Class Status”

**FEBRUARY 27**
Episode 205: Churched
Karyn Lacy  Blue-Chip Black Chapter 5  “Race and Class Based Identities: Strategic Assimilation in Middle Class Suburbia”

**MARCH 4**
Episode 214: Sink or Swim
Karyn Lacy  Blue-Chip Black Chapter 6: “Suburban Identities: Building Alliances with Neighbors”

**MARCH 6**

**BLACK PARENTING IN WHITE SUBURBS**
Episode 415: White Breakfast
R.L'Heureux Lewis-McCoy Inequality in the Promise Land - Chapter 3 “Segmented Suburbia”

**MARCH 11**
Episode 306: Jack of All Trades
R.L'Heureux Lewis-McCoy Inequality in the Promise Land - Chapter 4 “Making Your Public School Private”

**MARCH 13**
Critical Essay Due
No Reading

**MARCH 18- MARCH 20- SPRING BREAK**

**MARCH 25**

**RACE AND UNIVERSITY LIFE**
Episode 418: Black Math
Maya Beasley Opting Out  Chapter 3  “Family Effects”
March 27
Episode 323: Liberal Arts
Maya Beasley Opting Out Chapter 4 “the role of the university

**BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS PROFESSIONALS**

**APRIL 1**
Episode 221: The Johnson Show
Sharon Collins *Black Corporate Executives* "Race Track and Mainstream Career"

**APRIL 3**
Episode 304: Who's Afraid of the Big Black Man?
Adia Wingfield Harvey *No More Invisible Men* Chapter 4 “Other Men in the Workplace"

**APRIL 8**
Episode 209: Man at Work
Adia Wingfield Harvey *No More Invisible Men* Chapter 5 “Black and Masculinity"

**APRIL 10 BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS ECONOMICS**
Episode 213: Keeping Up with the Johnsons
Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro Black Wealth/White Wealth - Chapter 4 “Wealth and Inequality in America"

**APRIL 15**
Episode 411: Inheritance
Karyn Lacy “All’s Fair? The Foreclosure Crisis and Middle-Class (In)Stability"

**APRIL 17 BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS ROMANCE**
Episode 414: R-E-S-P-E-C-T
Kris Marsh et al "The Emerging Black Middle Class: Single and Living Along"

**APRIL 22**
Episode 116: Parental Guidance
Averil Clarke *Inequalities of Love* Chapter 3 “Marriage: I Do it When and if I Can”

**APRIL 24**

**THE POLITICS OF THE BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS**
Episode 308: Being Bow-racial
Lauren Davenport *Politics Beyond Black and White* Chapter 5 “Development of Racial Ideologies and Attitudes”
**APRIL 29 BLACK CULTURE**
Episode 103: The Nod
James Jones “Racing Through the Halls of Congress”

**MAY 1**
Presentations

**MAY 6**
Presentations

**MAY 15TH FINAL ASSIGNMENT DUE AT 12PM**

**CLASS POLICIES**

**BLACKBOARD**
All class communication will be through Blackboard. This syllabus is subject to revision and any 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.