DOES THE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS EXIST AND ARE WE MEMBERS?

Reflections From A Research Team

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**Kris Marsh, PhD:** Professor Kris Marsh received her PhD from the University of Southern California in 2005. She was a Postdoctoral Scholar at the Carolina Population Center at the University of North Carolina before joining the faculty of Maryland where she has been tenured since 2014. Professor Marsh’s general areas of expertise are the Black middle class, demography, racial residential segregation and education. She has combined these interests to develop a research agenda that is divided into two broad areas: avenues into the Black middle class and consequences of being in the Black middle class. Currently, she is writing a book for Cambridge University Press on the wealth, health, residential choices and dating practices of members of an emerging Black middle class who are single and living alone. She also teaches courses on Research Methods, Race Relations and Racial Residential Segregation. She has been a visiting scholar at the University of Southern California, the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and the UJ. She has served as a contributor to CNN in America, the Associated Press, NBC Washington and Al Jazeera America and is frequently asked to contribute to the Washington Post. She serves as the secretary of the District of Columbia Sociological Society and the managing editor of *Issues in Race & Society*. She was awarded the Jacquelyn Johnson Jackson Early Career Award from the Association of Black Sociologists in 2015 and received...
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**Leo Igbanoi, DLitt et Phil:** Leo Igbanoi received his doctorate from the UJ in 2019 having been a recipient of the Global Excellence Stature Fellowship between 2016 and 2018. He was a lecturer in Gender Studies in the Department of Sociology at the UJ before joining the National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies, Abuja, where he is a Social Sector Analyst and teaches a course on Citizens and Political Change. He was a visiting research scholar at the University of Maryland in 2018. In 2010, he was awarded the Prize for African Studies at the Arrupe Jesuit University, Harare. His research interests include black masculinities, the black middle class, migration in Africa and the intersections of gender and social policy. He has presented papers at local and international conferences, and has been a contributor in two books, including *Treatise on Legislative Capacity Development for Good Governance in Nigeria* (2019).

**Lesego Plank:** Lesego Plank was awarded her Masters in Sociology from the University of Johannesburg in 2018 for a study titled *The Experiences of Single Black Middle Class Women from Soweto of Intimate Relationships*. She is currently a PhD candidate at UJ, under the Department of Sociology. Her PhD is focusing on Black motherhood, particularly the aspect of absent mothers and the idea of how motherhood
in Black families is not biological. She is also a member in good standing of the UJ Post Graduate Association (PGA) in which she serves the PGA office as an academic officer. She has worked as an undergraduate tutor at the Department of Sociology (2015–2016), is currently working as a research assistant supervised by Professor Grace Khunou and has worked in various other projects as a research assistant. She has also worked as a project consultant for the company Quest Research Services. She has attended and presented her work at SASA and other forums on the black middle class and fatherhood. In 2017, she attended and participated in the Decolonial Black Feminism School held in Cachoeira, Bahía (Brazil). In 2018, she was a visiting emerging scholar at the University of Maryland in the US. Her research interests are in the Black middle class, Black motherhood, the African Black family and gender studies.

Mabone Kgosiemang: Mabone Kgosiemang is currently a PhD candidate in Sociology. He has obtained all his academic qualifications from the UJ. He was active in student politics in his undergraduate and early post-graduate years. He worked as a tutor in the Department of Sociology in 2016 and 2017. In 2018, he was appointed an assistant lecturer in the Department of Sociology at UJ. He has taught on Religion and Deviance, Power, State and Workplace and finally Social Inequality, focusing on Race, Class and Gender. He is a SASA member, a former SASA council member and has presented and chaired multiple times at SASA conferences. His recent publication is titled “University Transformation Re-imagined: Discourses Resulting After the Fallist Movements” (2018) in the book We Are No Longer at Ease: The Struggle for #Fees-MustFall. Johannesburg: Jacana. His research interests are on race and racism, student politics, higher education, transformation and decolonisation.
Polite Chauke: Polite Chauke is a PhD candidate and a teaching assistant at the University of the Witwatersrand in the Social Work Department. She is also a research member of the School of Human and Community Development (SHCD) research cluster team called WITSIE (Women Intellectuals Transforming Scholarship In Education) which focuses on the research on Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights, Gender Based Violence and Sexual Harassment in Higher Learning Institutions. Her publications include the article, “Shaming Fathers into Providers: Child Support and Fatherhood in the South African Media” (2015); “Half of the picture: Interrogating common sense gendered beliefs surrounding sexual harassment practice within higher education” (2015) and “The grenade, the murder and the truth: The TRC’s Section 29 inquiry for Rowan Fernandes” (2016). Her research interests are in gender, fatherhood and sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) and her PhD focus are on cancer and the narratives of black women.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are several people who made this project possible. We begin by thanking the beautiful people of South Africa. They allowed us to interview them for our study on the Black middle class. We appreciate the support from our University of Johannesburg (UJ), University of Maryland and University of Witwatersrand for helping to make this project possible. Many colleagues and associates helped to bring this book to fruition, and we thank each and every one of them with the deepest and most heartfelt appreciation possible.

We would each like to personally thank our friends and family members.

Grace Khunou: I am thankful for the great spirit of resistance shown continually and without fail by my people over the centuries – Thokozani Bo Gogo. May we continue to drink from your overflowing love. For this project, I am grateful to the UJ International Office and Research Office for their financial support, to the National Research Foundation grant for rated researchers and to my department for providing space for me to do this work. I am also grateful for the writing space provided by Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study during this project. To my extended family and friends, your counsel and love keep me fearless. To everyone who gave of their time during the study, we are forever indebted to you – Namaste.
Kris Marsh: I begin with the acknowledgement that “I can do all things through Jesus Christ, that strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13). Thank you to my family for their never-ending support. To my close friends for calling, texting, emailing and writing to me when I was in South Africa and while I completed this project. Words simply cannot express the gratitude I feel for every prayer you prayed, every word of encouragement you uttered, and every ounce of love you showed me through this entire process. I appreciate you beyond words. I would be more than remiss if I did not mention several organizations that offered support one way or another during this journey: the Dean’s Research Initiative Seed Grant, University of Maryland; University of Maryland, Office of International Affairs, Global Partnerships-Faculty Travel Grant; and the Fulbright U.S. Scholar Program for a grant for research in South Africa, 2017. The Fulbright experience allowed me to meet the wonderful people of South Africa and forever changed my life in so many positive ways.

Polite Chauke: To Professor Kris Marsh, thank you for opening yourself to South Africa, thank you for hearing our hearts, for that is where our stories lie. Thank you for this opportunity as it led us to your home and the world. May God bless everything you touch. Professor Grace Khunou, thank you for loving us, for making us a part of your success. You are a living ancestor who keeps paving new histories that make it possible for girls like me to exist. Thank you for being a constant disruption who seeks to make us great; you make me great. You make God smile and your ancestors dance – may they all bless you endlessly.

To my mother, father, my sisters and the Chauke family; thank you for choosing me every day and loving me stubbornly and shirtlessly. You are my lifeline, forever and always. To all the participants, thank you for stories and humanity – may
God bless you all. To the research team, it was amazing to have worked beside great minds, you are the beautiful ones Africa’s been waiting for – bless up to each of you.

Lesego Plank: To my family abakwa Plank and the Nyani-sa’s, thank you for your constant support and love. To Professor Grace Khunou and Professor Kris Marsh, thank you for entrusting me to be part of this study and making a contribution in so many ways. I have learnt a lot from this project academically, personally and spiritually and I have gained a lot from this journey. To the participants I interviewed, your experiences and your thoughts, the conversations we had, have really encouraged me to be and do better. Thank you. To my friends, thank you for being there and for being proud of me. Thank you for the constant video calls and phones calls to check up on me when I was in America. To the whole research team, thank you, beautiful souls. You are a force to be reckoned with in the academic space! Remember Black child, we are our ancestor’s wildest dreams!

Leo Igbanoi: Loving thanks to Atinzwaishie for being a constant pillar of strength to me, and for caring for the boys when I was far away from home during this research. Special appreciation to my family members and friends who, through constant calls and messages, followed my progress during this project, in both South Africa and the USA. Makari, you are forever cherished; thank you for being a true friend. I am indebted to you, Kris, for welcoming me into your beautiful home in Maryland; we made good memories even as we spent time writing. Thank you to the International Office at the UJ for a travel grant awarded to me for this project, and the research award from the University of Maryland to spend some time in the USA. Finally, my deepest appreciation goes to God who continues to lead me to where His grace sustains me.
Mabone Kgosiemang: I would like to thank and acknowledge everyone who has supported my academic growth and development, especially Professor Grace for being there during the entire journey. To my friends, both Magents and those from the academy: thank you for pushing me on days I felt tired and demotivated. To Professor Grace and Professor Kris thank you for the opportunity, in both South Africa and the United States; I grew and learned a lot. UJ and the Department of Sociology there, I thank you for the intellectual advancement; may other young Black academics experience similar. To my family, the Kgosiemang family, who my ancestors gave me and God blessed me with, I thank, love and appreciate you. None of this would be possible without your love, peace and belief in me. To my ancestors and God, may my prayers continue to be heard.

If we forgot to mention you, please charge it to our heads and not to our hearts!
Blackness is as open and as complex as the wide turbulent seas. This openness is a challenge and opportunity for those of us who work in black studies to trace and unfurl the contours and untangle the knots of the multiple ways of being black in the world. The black middle class is one of the strands of blackness that the academy has taken a keen interest in. This curiosity has been driven by multiple agendas which span from narrow consumerism which sees black people as not just workers but as eaters with increasingly refined and expensive tastes. This research has been about critically engaging with processes that cultivate a capitalist market for growing profits in an increasingly unequal world. At the other end of the spectrum are researchers committed to the nuances in identity that have emerged as a consequence of class transitions. Here, there is an increased concern with the ethics of class and self-reflexivity on the part of those doing this research. This book falls within the latter category of work. Grace Khunou has been on the edge of the black middle class wave of research over the past decade. Ever ahead of the wave, in this collection she is joined by African American scholar Kris Marsh and together they turn around to think about the process and meanings associated with researching the black middle class. But they take it a step further to think together with students for a communal...
reflection of what it means to do this research. This is a crucial
turn because it centres reflections of graduate students in the
cusp of their own class transition. In South Africa and else-
where, it is still fair to say that the more education one has,
the greater the likelihood they have to enter into a new class
position if they and their families had previously been work-
ing class as has been the case for the majority of black South
Africans. But class movement is complex and does not occur in
a straight line. These reflections point to these movements and
the nuances in the lives of the researchers.

Class scholarship in South Africa has long needed a truly
intersectional lens. The strength of this work is the positionality
of the contributors. They are mostly women, they are black, and
they inhabit class jauntily as largely first generation black mid-
dle class persons or in the liminal spaces between classes. Their
reflections about their work on this topic are inflected with their
own positioning and negotiations of intersecting identities. In
this volume, we have the opportunity to see novice scholars cut
their teeth in the academy under the sisterly guidance of experi-
enced editors. This is not a trite undertaking. It as an important
political intervention for both class scholarship and mentorship
of the next generation of researchers. Khunou and Marsh do not
just bemoan the marginalization of black women in the South
African and global academy – they intervene decisively. This
project bears witness to this. I frame this intervention as deco-
lonial because decolonization is a process of doing. It not only
challenges coloniality but leads to discernible change.

Our scholarship is better for this intervention. We now have
a perspective of what it means to do this research in an ethical
and embodied way from black peoples varying positionalities.
With the publication of this volume, we no longer have to rely
only on ‘objective’ accounts that do not implicate the bodies of
those who produce scholarship about others.

Hugo Canham, Associate Professor of Psychology,
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