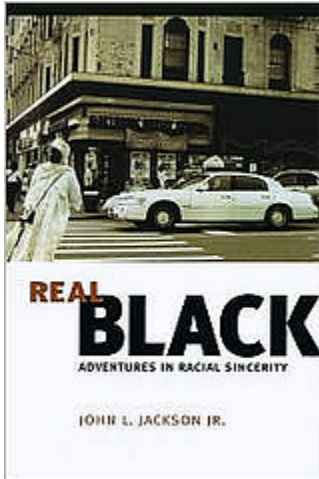


BOUGIE* BY DESIGN

by *Racialicious* Special Correspondent [Latoya Peterson](#)



“No one ever means bougie as a compliment. It’s never ‘Oh, you’re so bougie!’ It’s ALWAYS a negative trait.”

I had asked one of my close friends about being bougie and how the word is perceived in black circles. Depending on how it is used, bougie can almost be a curse word. Bougie is a stand in word for being racially removed, for pretending to be superior, for being out of touch with “true blackness.”

For many, being hit with a bougie label comes at random. Maybe it’s because you speak English with tight diction and clear pronunciation. Maybe it’s because you prefer off-broadway to the [chitlin’ circuit](#). Or maybe it’s because someone doesn’t like how you dress, how you wear your hair, or your attitude.

When I lived in [Prince George’s County, MD](#) I got called a “bougie bitch” so often I started to think it was my name. What prompted those outbursts? I refused to get into a car with a man I did not know personally. I’ll stay my bougie ass right here and wait for the bus, thankyouverymuch.

Bougie is most often a label applied to us by someone other than ourselves, as a way of demonstrating their superiority. It implies that they are authentic and you are counterfeit.

I am not sure if the term bougie as I have encountered it exists outside of the black community. Still, I am always more amused than offended when I encounter the term. After all, the counter to being bougie is to prove one’s own street cred by discussing their own hardscrabble beginnings or the rough areas where they are affiliated.

I used to play this game, particularly when I was younger. Any assertions of the word “bougie” would magically vanish by reciting my father’s address. As I grew older, I stopped playing the game. It was foolish to me, particularly because the types of people held up as the paragon of blackness, the regular folks, the street preachers and hustlers, the young hoods and door-knocker earring wearing divas that populate my family tree are the people who pushed me to become as bougie as possible.

For my father’s 43rd birthday, he decided he wanted to do something a little different and step outside of his culinary comfort zone. Over the protests of my younger brother - who desperately wanted to

make a mess of a plate of fried shrimp at Red Lobster - he asked me to name some more interesting restaurants near where I live.

I mentioned the local Burmese place. Dad was game.

After selecting entrees, our appetizers were delivered. They were a Burmese twist on an Indian samosa - wrapped in rice paper and lightly fried into small triangles. Dad ate one and enjoyed it. He asked what they were. I told him it was a samosa.

“A Samoan?” he asked.

“No, Dad, a samosa,” I explained, emphasizing the final syllable. “You know, like what you normally eat at an Indian restaurant.”

My dad regarded me with a bemused smile.

“Toya,” he gently chastised, “there weren’t any Indian restaurants in South East in the 70s.”

Fuck me. There was nothing left for me to say. Like a good daughter, I shut up and ate my Samoan.

Though the scene I describe happened months ago, I still reflect on it often. To me, what happened perfectly describes the balances that are walked with people who are in the process of changing classes. Not a single word in the exchange above was exchanged with any kind of negative intent - we were just having a moment when our two worlds collided.

My father - like many parents - wanted to make sure his children enjoyed a life and standard of living that he was not able to benefit from as a child. His desires were manifested in two of his children and we have gone on to surpass his hopes. (To be fair, my parents both raised their stations in life as well - from being impoverished teen parents to successful business owners.)

My sister and I are exactly what my parents wanted.

However, we are the ones who internally deal with the class fallout. Changing classes isn’t exactly an easy process. There are markers that go along with status that bear evidence to the change. Those changes serve to force a wedge between you and the “others.”

Once upon a time (read: four years ago) when I was waiting tables at [a spot in Dupont](#) I happened to serve an older African-American man who worked for the DC school system. I asked him for his order, told him the specials, and was perplexed by his ever widening smile.

“You speak so well,” he beamed, and I inwardly cringed. “What school did you go to?”

I explained that I went to school in Montgomery County, but he continued to smile.

“You,” he proudly pronounced, “are a credit to the race!”

I smiled weakly, hoping that the other tables around him did not hear.

OMG Please tell me he didn't just say that around white people!

My mind whipped around for a few frantic moments trying to purge some of the memories this man had involuntarily called forth.

Stop it. Stop it! I don't want to be a credit to the race. I don't want to be part of the Talented Tenth! I don't want to be different! I don't want to stand out! Because if I stand out, and I am the credit to the race, what does that make my cousins? What does that make my friends? Are they blight? Why do we have to be marked as better or worse? What do you want from me?

My mind swirled, but the rational part of me realized that I was on the clock. I smiled and moved on. He left me a 40% tip.

The fact that I am now different has never been a factor to my family. It is just seen as being part of Latoya's overall eccentricities, just like me listening to alternative music and dying my hair funny colors. When my mother comes over, she makes a point to look into my refrigerator to ask about the random things I eat.

“What's that?”

“Dried papaya.”

“What kind of wine is that?”

“Muscato wine - I forget the name, but it's really sweet. You'd like it. Do you want some?”

“No - what's that?”

“Edamame.”

“See, that's why you're always broke - buying crap like this at the bougie stores.”

She shuts the door to my fridge and sits on my bed. She, like my father, often finds herself amused at the person I have become. My parents consider me worldly, though I have never been off the continent.

Mom looks around the room and sees art house movie posters and large canvases created by my friends. I operate in a different, interesting kind of world.

When I began to reflect on this piece, I came to an interesting realization. I have never been called bougie by anyone in my family. I have never been called bougie by anyone who was lower or lower middle class. Most of the accusations of bougie came from others in a similar situation - either born to the black middle and upper middle class, or people insecure about their transition. This is why I think the word bougie tends to be a grab for power more than anything else - to shame someone into being "properly black."

But how am I supposed to take that notion? People who come from a privileged background are telling me to "be more authentic" and people who did not come from privilege encourage me to be smarter, to speak up more, to work harder, to learn more cool things about the world - and then bring these things back for them to enjoy.

Maybe the word bougie is intended to invoke shame at a perceived separation, a way to yoke people back into your fold. If you are bougie, the implication is that you have forgotten where you came from. Maybe, by invoking the word bougie, the speakers hope they can bring someone back into their idea of "blackness." Or maybe by using the word bougie, they are drawing a line in the sand. If you are "bougie," it means that I am authentic.

But again, what does it mean to be authentically black?

If black is what I am, how could anything I do be inauthentic?

Thanksgiving is coming.

My younger cousin is on MySpace, playing around. She emails me to say hi. I email her back and ask why she isn't in school. Deftly avoiding my question, she parries with one of her own.

Are you coming to Thanksgiving?

I split last Thanksgiving between my mother's house and my father's house. My mother, adept at Thanksgiving made a full feast. My father, attempting his first Thanksgiving ever, needed a bit more help. I found myself pitching in around the kitchen helping to erect the second feast of the day. The table was awash in gray, brown, and beige food, so I ran to the store to make something quick and green.

"What the hell is that?"

My grandfather looked into the pan I pulled out from the oven.

“Asparagus.”

Sitting on the table, the asparagus was met with questionable stares. The unspoken question hung in the air: *Why the hell couldn't she have just made a pot of greens?* (Answer: Because I only like my momma's!) A few brave family members added a single stalk to their plate. My younger sister, aware of my strange food predilections, split the rest with me. While we ate, the adults tried the asparagus. They decided they liked it. They applauded the “children” for helping with the feast. They asked my older cousins when they were going to stop eating and start cooking. And the evening rolled on.

Back in the present, I smile at the memory. I realize that my younger cousin sent me another message.

Please come to Thanksgiving. I'll eat the stuff you make.

*Bougie as in the short form of Bourgeoisie, taken to mean that someone has a bourgeois personality. By rights, bougie should be “bourgie” - but I can't stand the r, and if we are going to bastardize the term I would rather bastardize it phonetically. A variation on bougie is siddity.