

THE LOVE JONES COHORT

Drawing from stratification economics, intersectionality, and respectability politics, *The Love Jones Cohort* centers on the voices and lifestyles of members of the Black middle class who are single and living alone (SALA). While much has been written about both the Black middle class and the rise of singlehood, this book represents a first foray into bridging these two concepts. In studying these intersections, *The Love Jones Cohort* provides a more nuanced understanding of how race, gender, and class, coupled with social structures, shape five central lifestyle factors of Black middle-class adults who are SALA. The book explores how these Black adults define family and friends and decide on whether and how to pursue romantic relationships, articulate the ebbs and flows of being Black and middle class, select where to live and why, accumulate and disseminate wealth, and maintain overall health, well-being, and coping mechanisms.

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The Love Jones Cohort

Single and Living Alone in the Black Middle Class

KRIS MARSH

University of Maryland



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To my godson Lafayette “R’Jai” Dorsey Jr.
(May 1, 1997–August 6, 2020)

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Preface

I am a Black woman who is SALA – the acronym I coined for single *and* living alone – that is, without a “significant other” or romantic partner. I also use SALA to refer to those who are single *adults* living alone. I am a university professor, researcher, and businesswoman. I am friendly, bubbly, and outgoing, and I recently took up golf as a hobby.¹

According to the Pew Research Center’s “Are you in the American middle class?” interactive calculator, I am in the upper-income tier,² a category that 32% of adults in the Washington, DC, area (where I live) and 19% in the United States as a whole fall into. Taking into consideration my education, race, and marital status, among *all* American adults sharing the same demographics, 23% are lower income (less than \$48,500), 56% are middle income (between \$48,500 and \$145,500), and 21% are upper income (greater than \$145,500) (Bennett et al., 2020).³ Unlike the Pew Research Center’s calculator (2020), sociologist Karyn Lacy (2007) and others – looking specifically at the Black middle class – employ a lower-

¹ I acknowledge that I hold several privileges. I am cisgendered, heterosexual, able-bodied, Christian, a US citizen, and a native English speaker, with an androgynous name and 3C natural hair texture.

² www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/23/are-you-in-the-american-middle-class/

³ According to the authors of the interactive calculator, the middle class is defined as,

Your size-adjusted household income and the cost of living in your area are the factors we use to determine your income tier. Middle-income households – those with an income that is two-thirds to double the U.S. median household income – had incomes ranging from about $\frac{2}{3}$ (all figures computed for three-person households, adjusted for the cost of living in a metropolitan area, and expressed in 2018 dollars).

In 2018, the national middle annual income range was about \$48,500–\$145,500 for a household of three. Lower-income households had incomes less than \$48,500 and upper-income households had incomes greater than \$145,500 (incomes in 2018 dollars) (www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/23/are-you-in-the-american-middle-class/).

middle- (core), and upper-class typology. Professionally and personally, I prefer not to make those same demarcations. Yet, to be sensitive to the variability in the Black middle class, in this book I use the term “middle class” to signify the “middle class and beyond” to capture class variance.

In 2002, my two sisters and I purchased a home in Leimert Park, a Black suburban area in Los Angeles County, California. This area experienced, and is still going through, gentrification: In 2011, 75% of residents were Black; by 2019, this had fallen to 65%.⁴ Yes, three grown women lived in one house together: it was an adventure for the ages. I only lasted three years with them, but my two sisters went on to live together for more than 15 years. During the time I lived there, a single woman and a single man, each living alone (with neither siblings nor housemates), purchased homes on our street. The demographic shift on our street resonated with me as a graduate student studying the subfields of the Black family and demography in the Department of Sociology at the University of Southern California. The anecdotal and demographic changes I saw on my street were not apparent in the literature I was reading in graduate school.

This continued to be the case as I became more immersed in the demographic and sociological literature, leading me to uncover a quandary that I felt was worth exploring. The demographic literature was clear: While marriage rates were declining for all racial and ethnic groups, this trend was even more pronounced for Black adults. In terms of the sociological literature on the Black middle class, some scholars were suggesting that the continued employment of both members of a Black married couple is required to maintain middle-class status (Billingsley, 1968; Hill, 2003; Landry, 1987, 2002; McAdoo, 2007). Thus, in their writings, it was explicitly posited that declining marriage rates may result in a shrinking Black middle class (Attewell et al., 2004; Besharov, 2005; Landry, 1987), with the implicit assumption being that the Black middle class and marriage are intrinsically connected. Something, it seemed to me, was amiss in the social science literature.

Fast-forward to 2019, when it could be seen that 45% of Black women and men in the US had never been married. I began to intellectually

⁴ Data provided by US Census, American Community Survey, 1-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table ID: B02001, zip code 90008. <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=race&d=ACS%201-Year%20Estimates%20Detailed%20Tables&tid=ACSDT1Y2019.B02001&hidePreview=false>

unpack a compositional shift in the Black middle class away from married couples to SALA households. Though there has been considerable recent research on and coverage of singlehood, and more generally burgeoning research on the Black middle class, little of it has addressed Black adults who are both SALA *and* Black middle class.

The Love Jones Cohort: Single and Living Alone in the Black Middle Class examines the lifestyle of SALAs as members of the Black middle class. Utilizing a constellation of social science literature, as well as extensive personal insights from this demographic group, this book sheds light on the state of class and singlehood in Black America. In doing so, *The Love Jones Cohort* unapologetically focuses on Black single adults in the middle class; neither white singleness nor comparing the Black middle class to the white middle class is my area of concern here. Instead, the book offers an alternative vantage point from which to examine the heterogeneity of the Black American, and specifically the Black middle-class, experience. Throughout, the core theme is understanding how the intersecting identities of race, class, gender, and singleness inform the lifestyle choices of the Love Jones Cohort. This book suggests that members of the Love Jones Cohort are innovators, paving the way for others to navigate, survive, and thrive as middle-class and never-married adults. Put another way, the book questions whether singlehood has become easier and more accessible to everyone because of the Love Jones Cohort showing the rest of the world how it can be done.

In the past 15 years alone, there have been several noteworthy books (and countless articles) studying various aspects of the Black middle class and Black elites in America,⁵ including scholarship from across the globe.⁶ Similarly, various books have examined notions of growing singlehood among all racial and ethnic groups.⁷ Even so, little of the scholarship has focused exclusively on the never-married Black middle class or just Black singles (Staples, 1981), or on college-educated and professional Black women's dating practices, challenges, and work/family balance (Barnes, 2015; Clarke, 2011). The *Love Jones Cohort* draws on these previously published works to understand just how unique the singlehood experience and lifestyle of a SALA is in the Black middle class.

⁵ Banks, 2009; Bowser, 2022; Charles et al, 2022; Clarke, 2011; Claytor, 2020; Clerge, 2019; Dow, 2019; Jefferson, 2016; Jenkins, 2019; Lacy, 2007; Landry, 2018; Pattillo, 2013; Sacks, 2018; Taylor, 2017.

⁶ Khunou, 2015; Khunou et al., 2019; Meghji, 2019; Melber, 2016; Southall, 2016.

⁷ DePaulo, 2011; Kislev, 2019; Klinenberg, 2013.

Throughout my scholarly career researching Black middle-class SALAs, my primary focus has been to move beyond the omnipresent inquiries: “Why are Black women *not* getting married?” and “Why are there so many single professional Black women?” This line of questioning places the spotlight on Black women’s individual dating practices while often ignoring the structural factors undergirding such choices, constraints, and decision-making processes. It implies a deficiency on the part of Love Jones Cohort members – specifically Black women – due to the fact that they are unmarried and child-free. As for myself, I am constantly asked why I am not married and/or whether my research can explain why so many other Black professional women remain unmarried.

I recall an incident in December 2015 at a winter bazaar in a gated community in Prince George’s County, at the home of a Black SALA physician. I was presenting my work alongside two other panelists: one a dating and relationship expert, and the other a financial planner. The dating expert spoke first, I spoke second, and the financial manager spoke third. Given that I was speaking after the dating expert, my aim was to move the conversation beyond dating to discuss other aspects of being SALA, such as the friendship networks and processes for acquiring and disseminating wealth, which would then lay the groundwork for the wealth manager. I therefore opened my talk by announcing something along the lines of, “Let’s switch gears and extend the conversation about SALAs beyond their dating practices.”

The facial expression of a young woman sitting in the front row left me in no doubt of her displeasure. She then backed this up with a comment audible enough for me to hear: “Dr. Marsh is throwing shade.” I hurriedly tried to clarify my comments by explaining that my goal on the three-person panel, as it had been throughout my academic career, was to add sociological context and texture to this demographic group while acknowledging that dating among the Love Jones Cohort is an important topic.

My research has not always been well received by those in the Black community and/or those who are pro-marriage, regardless of race or ethnicity. Some interpret my research as suggesting that young Black adults, especially women, should neither marry nor have children. To make it clear, I am neither anti-marriage nor anti-children. I am simply reporting demographic data, incorporating personal narratives from the Love Jones Cohort, and inserting several systemic factors into the conversation. I have presented data and findings on SALAs and the Love Jones Cohort in various contexts (including conferences, media interviews, and

podcasts)⁸ and, on occasion, have been met with angry responses, whether in person or by email. Responses range from “Dr. Marsh, you are bringing down the Black race by not promoting the Black family, Black marriages, and Black love,” to “Dr. Marsh, you are a bitter single Black woman and a man-hater.”⁹

These interactions demonstrate how the issue of dating among SALAs can be an emotive topic. Consequently, it can often feel like a balancing act having to juggle some people’s desire to discuss “Why are Black women *not* getting married?” with my intellectual curiosity to move beyond such a question. My overarching desire is to advance a more robust structural understanding of this demographic group, as well as their presence and lifestyle in the Black middle class. This book represents my commitment to doing just this while at the same time maintaining the delicate balancing act such an endeavor requires. Next, I offer a cursory profile of the members of the Love Jones Cohort.

⁸ Conference presentations include, but are not limited to, American Sociological Association, Population Association of America, Association of Black Sociologists. Media appearances include, but are not limited to, CNN, *The Washington Post*, and National Public Radio.

⁹ It should be noted that not all the responses are negative, and that many people express enjoyment of my research. Years ago, a supporter lightheartedly nicknamed me “Dr. Love Jones.”

Introducing the Members of the Love Jones Cohort

- 1 Adoriah (32) is a primary-grade schoolteacher and has taught in both Maryland and Washington, DC. She knew from a young age she was destined to work with children. She loves traveling, reading, shopping, and arts and crafts. Although engaged at the time of the interview, she identifies as SALA.
- 2 Alexandra (33) works as an analyst in a major public school system and previously worked as an assistant at an accounting firm. In her free time, she loves to write, read, and illustrate, with her favorite genre to write being young-adult fiction.
- 3 Alexis (31) has been a human resources manager for several years, having worked her way up from being an intern. Her favorite hobbies are running and traveling.
- 4 Alyssa (48) is a contractor and has a very active social life outside of work. To keep herself healthy, she loves taking hot yoga classes around the Washington, DC, area.
- 5 Antonio (28) is employed as an IT specialist, which entails interacting with customers at his company. He enjoys attending church, listening to music, and using his computer.
- 6 Ashley (29) is a program evaluator, assessing programs related to health. She holds a PhD with a background in public health. Her most recent and favorite hobby is doing arts and crafts.
- 7 Bianca (50) has worked for newspapers in various cities across the country and is currently settled in the Washington, DC, area. She spends her time listening to music, watching movies, and hanging out with friends.
- 8 Brenay (35) has primarily worked in school settings as an aide or assistant. She enjoys going out with friends and shopping and spending her downtime engaging in sports.

- 9 Brett (44) previously worked for the federal government and is now self-employed. He enjoys coaching youth sports and riding motorcycles.
- 10 Carrie (38) is currently self-employed, working in media relations. She loves creative outlets like writing, photography, music, and art.
- 11 Celeste (35, *estimated*) is a government employee with experience working for multiple federal agencies. Most of her responsibilities include assisting companies in implementing their action plans. Her hobbies include attending concerts or being active through recreational activities.
- 12 Chelesa (30, *estimated*) is a graduate student in the STEM field. While she spends most of her time as a student or worker doing research, she also attends cultural events and the theater.
- 13 Christine (35) has a graduate degree in counseling, which she utilizes at a therapeutic group practice. Her responsibilities vary from directing programs to providing therapy to patients. Christine enjoys traveling, reading, and spending time with her family.
- 14 Darren (31) works as a consultant and likes watching TV in his free time.
- 15 Dawn (34) currently works with adults seeking employment and has also assisted individuals in need of counseling. She likes to spend time with friends and stay active by playing sports.
- 16 Deborah (50, *estimated*) loves traveling to new places and cooking. She works at her alma mater and was previously employed in the nation's capital.
- 17 Derwin (30) works in the entertainment industry and enjoys writing in his free time. He is also a huge sports fan and lives an active lifestyle by regularly going to the gym.
- 18 Genesis (age unspecified) has worked in a number of establishments, from assistant to management positions. Her current occupation is in brand management. During her spare time, she listens to jazz music and plays table sports, such as ping pong.
- 19 Glenda (36) enjoys riding bicycles, reading poetry, and swimming. Professionally, she works for the federal government.
- 20 Grace (35) lives in Virginia, considers herself mildly religious, and works in the legal field. She enjoys hanging out with her friends and family, bowling, and going to happy hours.
- 21 Gwen (37) works for the local government in the financial sector. In her free time, she enjoys hiking and is trying to make it a more consistent habit.

- 22 Jamir (42) works as a federal investigator and also provides financial services during his spare time. He enjoys working out and engaging in a number of sports.
- 23 Jerome (30) currently works at a public affairs firm, handling projects through government contracts. Before falling into his career, Jerome worked at different hotels to put himself through school. He enjoys playing the piano, and researching, as well as reading.
- 24 Joanna (47) is a communications specialist and has held jobs in several industries using her expertise in writing, editing, and organizing projects. She loves a good book and being outdoors.
- 25 Joseph (31) is a software specialist. He enjoys researching new information during his spare time, either through reading books or with a computer.
- 26 Justin (32) enjoys canoeing, hiking, and watching movies. He is currently unemployed. He identifies as Jamaican.
- 27 Kelsey (40) works in investment and in her free time travels as much as she can. She also works out often.
- 28 Kendra (30) has worked as an assessment specialist for several years. Her role entails assisting teachers with professional development as well as assessment development. Her hobbies include reading, listening to music, and traveling.
- 29 Kevin (25) enjoys going to the gym and mentoring youth in his community. Professionally, he works in the management domain for a government entity.
- 30 Lafayette (52) enjoys skiing and golf and plays a musical instrument. Professionally, he works from home for a technology company.
- 31 LaToya (37) provides consulting expertise to small businesses and government agencies. She likes to spend her free time with a good book, with her family, and exploring museums and is an on-demand movie service junkie.
- 32 Layla (47) enjoys going to the spa and dancing. In her professional life, she works for the federal government in a scientific department.
- 33 Lillian (37) does not have time for hobbies and dedicates her time to work. She spends all of her time running her public relations business.
- 34 London (40) likes watching nature shows on television in her free time. Professionally, she works on contracts for the federal government.
- 35 Madison (35) currently works in the school system counseling students on their everyday academic and personal needs. She enjoys

- listening to music and attending concerts, shopping, and spending time with her loved ones.
- 36 Marquez (32) works as an engineer and plays several sports in his free time in adult leagues.
- 37 Maurice (age unspecified) works as an instructor and in his free time enjoys going to church, listening to music, and attending different festivals.
- 38 Megan (26) currently works for the federal government, as she has done for most of her professional career. She enjoys spending time with members in her sorority and loves trying foods from around the world.
- 39 Meisha (42) spends her free time skating, writing, and biking. Professionally, she works as a government contractor and a professor at a local community college.
- 40 Melinda (50) carries a law degree that she uses in her occupation in the healthcare management field. She loves to entertain and cook and also attends wine tastings and spa visits.
- 41 Nancy (43, *estimated*) has had many jobs since she was a teenager, from working at a summer camp to interning for the government, with her most recent occupation being a program manager. During her spare time, she enjoys gardening, writing for a local newspaper in the DC area, and traveling the world.
- 42 Natalie (30, *estimated*) specializes in conducting program and finance audits for a consulting firm. She enjoys various forms of art, from painting to listening to music to cooking new foods.
- 43 Olivia (54) is an experienced attorney working for the government. In addition, she runs her own fashion business. Olivia loves to read, shop, listen to music, and travel to the Caribbean.
- 44 Paige (33) works as a consultant and, when she has time off, enjoys reading and hanging out with friends. She is also an avid traveler and takes international trips as much as she can.
- 45 Patricia (56) has spent a number of years doing investigation work for the government and is currently self-employed. In her downtime, she enjoys networking and traveling.
- 46 Peter (31) works for the government and enjoys playing ping pong as a hobby. He defines himself as a proud member of the LGBTQ community.
- 47 Rasheed (48) has worked for the government in his current position for almost 30 years. His hobbies include singing, going to the movies, and playing or watching sports.

- 48 Reggie (30) is a financial analyst with the federal government, who enjoys hanging out with friends and defines himself as a “outdoorsy” type. He likes go-carting, rock climbing, and zip-lining and is from a West African country.
- 49 Renita (52) is a social worker, who has spent her career helping underserved populations. She enjoys going on shopping sprees and occasionally watching mobster movies.
- 50 Richard (30) works as an administrator for a private company in the Washington, DC, area. He is an avid TV watcher and keeps up with several shows, as well as college and professional sports.
- 51 Rick (33) is a project administrator at a private institution of higher education. He recently moved to the Washington, DC, area where his university is located. Rick enjoys doing fitness exercises, attending networking events, and spending time with friends.
- 52 Robin (49) has been employed as a consultant in the technology business for over a decade. Her downtime is spent eating, reading, and engaging in STEM-related activities.
- 53 Serenity (50) enjoys attending jazz festivals and considers herself a wine connoisseur. She lives a very active lifestyle and works in the medical field.
- 54 Shannon (50) works in different jobs while concurrently enrolled in a graduate program, generally in the capacity of a research assistant. She has been playing the clarinet since a young age and also enjoys trying new things such as dancing and learning languages.
- 55 Sheri (33) enjoys reading, as well as taking workout classes like Zumba and SoulCycle to keep herself in shape. Professionally, she works as a contractor for a government agency.
- 56 Simone (33) has been employed as a project manager for several years, prior to which she worked in public schools in the Washington, DC, area. She enjoys trying new recipes either on her own or by using cookbooks and has a similar fondness for interior decorating.
- 57 Tanya (44) used to work in various capacities within the world of media. She is currently unemployed, but is a freelance writer and loves the outdoors. She spends her time exercising, taking pictures, and visiting museums.
- 58 Tina (30) lives a very active lifestyle. When she is not working, she is either working out or taking walks or finding new bike trails.

- 59 Tivana (31) is a policy analyst working in healthcare reform at a large consulting firm. She is active in social organizations and enjoys participating in community service.
- 60 Walter (age unspecified) has worked in a variety of sales positions and is currently employed as a public school teacher. Working in an educational environment has led him to enjoy learning new things. He also watches and attends sporting events in his spare time.
- 61 Wendy (52) currently works in accounting for the government and has in the past worked for other major finance companies. During her spare time, she enjoys volunteering at various church events, eating at new restaurants, and attending music events.
- 62 William (age unspecified) works as a product trainer for a major corporation and has done so for a few years. He enjoys working out at the gym and playing sports with friends.

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Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

(Hebrews 11:1, KJV)