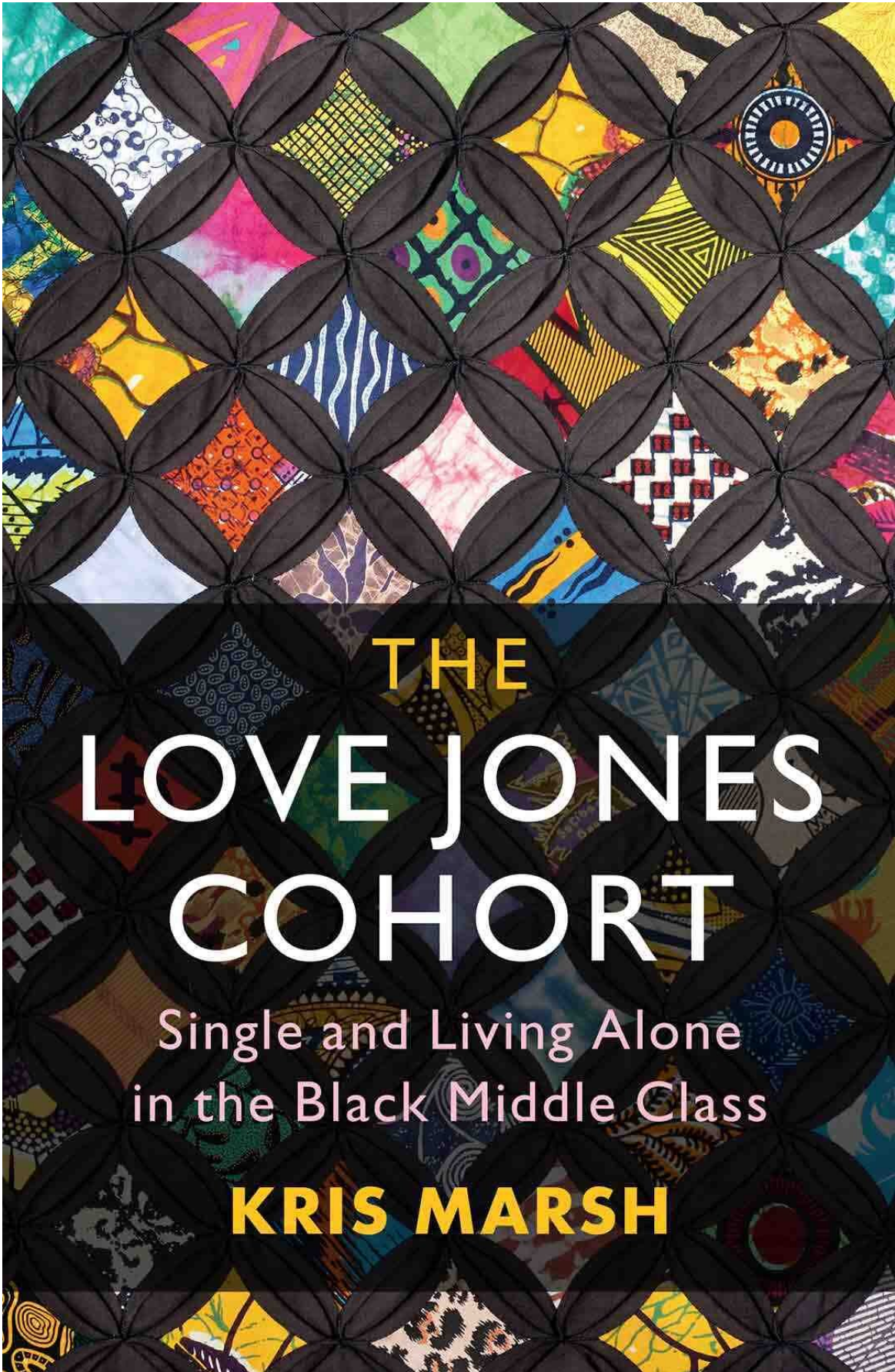


Book offers insight into lifestyles, societal constraints on single black professionals

February 9 2023



Credit: University of Maryland

Kris Marsh is tired of being asked: "Why are you single?"

The question has followed the University of Maryland sociologist throughout her [adult life](#), in gatherings with friends and family, and even after research presentations.

As a successful Black professional, the associate professor wondered why people focused on what she wasn't—married—rather than her accomplishments. She knew, from both her social circles and her research on the Black middle class, that she was far from an outlier: In 2019, 45% of Black adults in the U.S. had never been wed, compared to 24% of their white counterparts, a gap that has widened every decade since 1960.

That's why she decided to write a book on the growing number of her peers who are single and living alone (SALA). Called "[The Love Jones Cohort](#)" (referencing the 1997 romantic dramedy), the book seeks to paint a fuller picture of their lives, destigmatize singlehood and offer insight into the structural forces in the United States that contribute to the large number of Black singles.

"It's a timely topic, especially post-COVID. A lot of people are having these philosophical conversations about why they're in relationships," Marsh said. "Let's move beyond talking about dating practices of single people. I want to understand who they are, more thoroughly and fully."

She interviewed 62 single, childfree Black adults—43 women and 19

men—ranging in age from 25 to 56, all from the D.C. metro area for the book, which is heavily researched but accessible for a lay audience. They had completed college, held professional occupations, and met or exceeded the median income for Black households; many owned a home.

Marsh asked wide-ranging questions, eliciting candid answers that are quoted throughout the book ("We have economic privilege, and that makes a hell of a difference regardless of race [but] when we go out into society, you feel Black," said Kendra, 30. "We're still in the 'struggle' socially.") The conversations touched on whether their singledom was by choice or circumstance; their lifestyles, including careers and homeownership; their health and mental well-being; as well as strategies for creating relationships beyond marriage.

Here are four key takeaways from her research:

Racism has shrunk the dating pool

"The [social context](#) we live in constrains our personal choices," said Marsh. For Black middle-class singles who hope to partner with other Black, middle-class singles, the pool is limited, due to decades of segregation in education and housing, which left fewer pathways to upward mobility.

Today, Black middle-class [single women](#) outnumber men 2 to 1—an imbalance that stems in part from systemic criminalization and mortality of Black men due to community violence—which forces them to either date interracially, or partner with someone of lower socio-economic status. Both come with challenges. "The Love Jones Cohort" also cites a 2014 study that found that Black women were rated the least attractive across all races, an example of the discrimination they face in the wider dating world.

Additionally, because of the precarious nature of the Black middle class, without generational wealth as a buffer and often with the added strain of supporting extended [family members](#), choosing a partner without similar financial ability—such as the ability to buy a house—is less appealing.

"If we can't accumulate property because we once were property, that again constrains your dating pool," Marsh said.

Black singles should be viewed as pioneers

"Singlehood scholarship has a white gaze and white face," Marsh said, referring to scholarship and think pieces that present white women choosing to be single as a freeing decision. But for Black women, this has long been a reality. They have created relationships beyond traditional partnerships, such as friendship networks and sister circles, where they check in regularly on the mental health and well-being of their loved ones.

By speaking in depth with so many Black singles and offering such a nuanced view of their lives, Marsh wrote that she hopes they can offer "pathways for other non-Black singles to navigate their single lifestyles and the singlehood movement."

We need to redefine 'family'

The stereotype of a family as a married, heterosexual couple with two kids, along with the picket fence and dog, is deeply antiquated, Marsh suggests. "I want to be inclusive and broaden the idea of family."

She feels the discrimination of being a single person wherever she goes, from when she buys a cell phone plan that can't be discounted for just

one line, or when she books a vacation that requires an extra payment for a single-occupancy room.

"The current tax structure often benefits married couples and families. Single folks pay more. People say it's absurd to have a family of one, but it's worth a conversation," she said.

Marsh envisions a future where she could create her own "augmented" [family](#)—not just for voluntary, social aspects of life, such as vacations, but for important transactions like health insurance or estate planning.

Don't partner up just to partner up

With Valentine's Day around the corner, Marsh urges all singles not to fall prey to societal pressure.

"It's really important for us to think about singleness not as a transitional category and not as a negative category," Marsh said. Many of the people she talked to lived full, happy lives, with robust friend networks and extended families who depended on them, and vice versa. That should be a socially acceptable outcome, rather than pressuring people to partner up at all costs. "People should be comfortable and confident in their singleness, instead of being in romantic relationships that are toxic and oppressive just because they don't want to be single."

Provided by University of Maryland

Citation: Book offers insight into lifestyles, societal constraints on single black professionals (2023, February 9) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-02-insight-lifestyles-societal-constraints-black.html>

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