New Choices, New Families

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Lesbians have been having children in record numbers in the past twenty to thirty years, starting the lesbian baby boom. The boom began with women who became mothers within heterosexual identities and then later identified as lesbians. More recently, women within their identities as lesbians have been choosing motherhood by adopting and birthing children. The lesbian baby boom has captured the interest of politicians, academics, and the general public. Over the last fifteen years, writings on lesbian mothers have burgeoned.

This book adds to that literature by addressing the basic question of how lesbians decide to become mothers or remain childfree. The book moves away from White, middle-class models and the assumption that all lesbians, as women, want to become mothers, by looking at how structures of race, class, gender, and sexuality shape lesbians’ decision-making processes regarding motherhood. By doing so, the book takes a fresh look at classic sociological questions of how social structure, culture, and human agency interact to both maintain current social conditions and create social change. The book is grounded in historical and current data, as well as ethnographic accounts from lesbians of diverse racial-ethnic and class backgrounds.

This book has three main purposes. First, it challenges biological and essentialist assumptions about the decisions lesbians make about motherhood. Second, it shows how social and cultural conditions shape individual decisions and how those conditions are shaped by structures of race, class, gender, and sexuality. These structures act to privilege and disadvantage different groups in different ways, thus affecting individual decisions. Third, the book sheds light on how lesbian families form in ways similar to heterosexual families, with key exceptions due to how sexual and gender structures shape the lives of
lesbians and heterosexual women. The book not only contributes to the literature on the social construction of motherhood and multiracial feminism but also forges new ground by focusing on how lesbian families, like all American families, are the outcome of the social and cultural conditions that exist in America today.

The writing of this book involved many people to whom I owe much gratitude. The work falls into two time periods: conducting the doctoral research and then turning the dissertation into a book. From the first time period, I first of all thank the women who participated in the study. Without their generous sharing of their time and experiences, I would not have been able to conduct my research. They are the heart and soul of this study and deserve many, many thanks.

Anne Ferguson, Rita Gallin, and Steve Gold helped me formulate my topic, move through my research, and write my dissertation. Marilyn Frye challenged me to think about why researchers are so preoccupied with lesbian mothers, forcing me to consider lesbians’ choices to remain childfree. Lori Post gave me added incentive to finish my doctoral work. Teri Swezey offered much support throughout graduate school. Heather Dillaway and Brooke Kelly assisted me in conducting focus groups and encouraged me throughout the entire process. Many thanks for the guidance and support of these professors, colleagues, and friends.

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