

Two Sides of the Same Coin

Revising Analyses of Lesbian Sexuality and Family Formation through the Study of Black Women

As dusk falls, I pull up to the house feeling embarrassed at my lateness. The e-mail invitation said to come any time after 4 P.M., but I am arriving slightly after eight, and the sun has already set. I have been here before. The first time was to interview Ruthie Erickson¹ about the family she has created with her three-year-old adopted son, Lawrence. Ruthie is a thirty-six-year-old accountant for a large financial institution. During the interview, she talked a great deal about Lawrence's godmothers, Dana and Angie Russell, who live on the second floor of the two-family house that Ruthie owns. Angie was recently promoted to sergeant in the New York City Police Department, and Dana works for the post office. This evening I am at their home for a purely social event: an end-of-summer/back-to-school barbeque. Dana's only child, whom she had in a prior heterosexual relationship, is headed off to college in a few weeks, and the invitation asks that we bring something her daughter can use for school. I forget to do this but manage to follow the other instruction, which is to bring "a dish or bottle to share." I've made a jerk chicken pasta salad and am hoping everyone will like it.

The Ericksons and the Russells share a large two-family house in a Black middle-class neighborhood in Queens, a short distance from a well-known shopping mall. It is a warm night and lots of folks are sitting on the front porch. A few people are smoking, and some children are tossing a ball outside. The family dog playfully chases other kids as they run in and out of the house. Rhythm and blues music floats into

the yard and a few people are casually doing a two-step, though at this point no one is actually dancing. Most are standing around laughing, talking, eating, and drinking. The scene looks and feels very familiar and reminds me of countless summer barbecues I have attended in my family throughout the years, with one exception: almost everyone here is gay. While walking up the front stoop I pass two men together on the stairs. One sits on the lower step between the legs of the second. He leans back into the other's chest, and they laugh at something they have just shared. As they talk, I detect a West Indian accent but cannot decide if it is Jamaican or Trinidadian. At the top of the steps, two women stand underneath the porch light; one takes the other's hand, playing with her fingers as they talk. On a bench near the front door a woman sits on another's lap feeding her a burger. From the entrance to the front yard it is difficult to see that the couples are of the same sex. Others who are not coupled are scattered throughout, so a casual observer might not notice the same-gender pairings. At this point I have been in the field for more than a year, but this scene still slightly throws me off. I expect to see gay people openly expressing their sexuality at bars or in nightclubs, but a lesbian outdoor barbecue in this Black neighborhood creates a subtle dissonance in my mind, because everything else about the setting suggests Black heterosexual life. In a context like this one it quickly becomes apparent that the family life of gay women of color has for many years been largely invisible to African Americans, myself included.

Scholarly research on lesbian identity, gay and lesbian family formation, and Black family life have also paid scant attention to these "invisible families." While a maturing field of study examines gender and sexuality in the construction and maintenance of families headed by gay people, particularly lesbian women, those scholars who deal with race at all tend to do so by including the experiences of very few racial minorities. Their overarching theme is gay sexuality, not sexuality and race. In fact, few scholars and hardly any sociologists have made race or ethnicity the focus of analysis of lesbian families. Past research has also taken for granted the middle-class and upper-middle-class status of its subjects, with less consideration of how middle-class experience helps produce particular ideological understandings of family. Yet if we allow "lesbian families" to mean "White middle-class lesbian families," and if we do not fully "race" ourselves and our subjects, we cannot de-center the White gay subject as the norm, and we reify the myth that "Black people aren't like that." We also continue to perpetuate unidimensional

understandings of the experience of creating and maintaining openly lesbian families and relationships.

Invisible Families offers a corrective, building on past work by asserting the fundamental importance of race, class, and gender in organizing lesbian sexuality and lesbian-headed families. It shows the ways in which Black cultures, ideologies, and the historical experiences of Black women structure lesbian identities, as well as how Black lesbians' participation in and enactment of their intersecting identities as Black, as women, and as gay people influence family formation, mate selection, expectations for partners in committed relationships, and other aspects of family life. The structural positions Black women have historically occupied in the labor market, in their families, and in cultural institutions, I argue, are critical to how Black lesbians define themselves and use those definitions to construct families (Moore 2011).

Both the inclusion of Black women in the study of lesbian identity and family formation and the inclusion of homosexual women in the study of Black families challenge some of the theoretical and empirical approaches that scholars have previously taken. In living as openly gay people raising families, the women I studied make their homosexuality a salient component of the selves they project to others in predominantly Black social spaces. These are spaces that have historically asked for allegiance to a social group whose boundaries are drawn around Blackness. Because gay people of color have to deal with the perception by some racial group members that lesbian sexuality challenges their race consciousness, their experiences may differ qualitatively from those of their White peers, whose racial identities may not be as salient to their sense of self. Including women of color in the study of lesbian practice and lesbian family formation reveals how these women structure their lives and approach family formation and identities of all kinds, including sexual identities, from a perspective that has at its foundation not lesbian feminism but Black feminist ideologies, discourses of Black respectability, racial socialization, race consciousness, and structural experiences with racism and racial discrimination. These alternative foundations lead Black women to approach lesbian sexuality and the structuring of lesbian-led families with different goals and objectives than previous theories of lesbian sexuality might predict.

This is not a story of oppression and victimization, though racism and discrimination are important parts of the histories and current experiences of these women and their forbearers. Instead, I attempt to simultaneously

deconstruct and claim marginalized and intersectional identity statuses for Black American and West Indian women who are gay and creating families. Moreover, I analyze race, class, gender, and sexuality not just as identity statuses but structural locations that influence the life chances of my respondents and the ways they experience their social worlds. I followed one hundred women for three years and gathered survey, in-depth interview, participant-observation, and focus group data to gain insight into how they negotiate their lives and form and raise families as openly gay people in predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods in New York.² Given the structural inequalities that have historically been associated with race, gender, and sexuality for this population, my subjects cannot entirely stop thinking about or escape from categories. Therefore, I pay attention to—and sometimes (but not always) reconcile—the fractured, problematic aspects of identity. *Identity* is represented in this work not as a settled status but as a lived, continuous project.

The broader framework for the study of Black lesbians in this work is the examination of the intersections of race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status as they shape the construction and experience of identities, behavior, and social relationships.³ The intersectional approach taken in this study offers two modifications to traditional intersectionality paradigms. First, this approach derives its strength from what McCall terms an “intra-categorical” approach to intersectionality (2005, 1774), because rather than compare respondents across race or gender categories it analyzes the experiences of individuals who lie at the intersection of single dimensions of multiple categories (in this case race, gender, and sexuality). These respondents are revealed to vary within-group and to reflect multiple dimensions of those and other categories (i.e., ethnicity, class, gender presentation, motherhood status). It is the intersection of race, class, and gender presentation within a *single group*—in this case, Black lesbians—that is of interest in this work.

Second, while the intersectional perspective ultimately ties together the book’s chapters, and while Black lesbians are the perfect embodiment of an intersectional existence and agency, this work specifically recognizes the significance of race in structuring Black women’s lives and in defining their identities. Both Higginbotham (1992) and Dill (1983) have shown that political, religious, and other identities of African American women have historically been framed around and are embedded within the context of race. A close scrutiny of the ways Black women in this study experience these multiple statuses suggests something similar.

Age cohort, region, racial socialization, and racial hierarchies in society work together for the respondents to produce particular understandings of gender and other identification categories through a racial lens that reflects a given sociohistorical period. Although the women presented here are multiply positioned, racial ideologies, racial identities, racialized social systems, and racial inequalities together create a framework for understanding and articulating their other statuses as women, as gay people, and as mothers. The lens of race does not negate the intersectional experience; rather, it guides these respondents' interpretations of how gender, sexuality, social class, and other axes shape their lives.

Black lesbians and their families have historically crossed the boundaries of traditionally constructed groups, and this work reveals the complexity of lived experiences within this population. My approach to the study of Black lesbian identities and their relationship to family formation explicitly uses categories to define the subjects of the analysis and to articulate the broader structural dynamics that are present in the lives of the respondents.⁴ It simultaneously acknowledges the stable and durable relationships that social categories represent at any given point in time, while interrogating the boundary-making and boundary-defining process itself.

This work offers a counterpoint to postmodern theorists who understand identity categories to be so inconsistent, transient, and unstable that they are virtually meaningless. While the shifting nature of sexuality is certainly apparent in the lives of Black lesbians, I find some aspects of anti-categorical approaches to identity problematic as frameworks for explaining how people who have had their entire lives structured around race experience identity categories. Race remains a relatively stable and slowly changing power system in the way it structures the life chances of Black Americans. For this group, the idea of categories being meaningless is largely a theoretical one, with little application to their experiences of being in the world or to their experiences of the domination and subordination that Alexander and Mohanty (1997) argue are named and articulated through the processes of racism and racialization.

The answer of one respondent, Jackie Roberts, to the question "Where are you from?" is illustrative:

I: Where you are from? Where did you grow up?

JACKIE ROBERTS: Harlem, born and raised.

I: Which part of Harlem?

JACKIE: Upper Harlem, Upper West Side; 150th and Broadway, right on the end of Harlem.

I: Isn't that the beginning of Washington Heights?

JACKIE: No! Washington Heights starts on 155th Street. I make it clear to people when they ask me that. [They say,] "That's Washington Heights." No, it's *not* Washington Heights. Washington Heights starts on 155th on the other side of the cemetery. So, I am very clear about that.

I: How was Washington Heights different from Harlem when you were growing up?

JACKIE: Basically, Washington Heights was considered more of an upper-echelon type of neighborhood, whereas Harlem has always been seen as something that had to do with poverty and the ghetto and that type of thing. I'm from the 'hood, but if you lived in Washington Heights when I was growing up, it was like, "Oh, I live in Washington Heights." It sounded better.

From the very beginning of the interview, Jackie Roberts makes it clear that she is from Harlem and that this information is important to her identity. In answering a simple question, she establishes categories to clarify where she sees herself and where she wants others to place her. Her father's Portuguese ancestry has given her fair skin and long, wavy hair, so she could be mistaken for part of Washington Heights' predominantly Latino population. But she wears her hair in dreadlocks to help others identify the group to which she belongs. She claims all that a Harlem identity has to offer a Black woman raised in New York City in the 1960s and 1970s: the poverty, the toughness, the history of the streets, and the inequalities that have constrained the life chances of many in her generation. Jackie's statements offer a glimpse into how she sees the world and the meaning-making that goes into it. The way she introduces herself in her interview and the categories she uses to frame her identity and experiences not only include sexuality and motherhood but also race, class, gender presentation, and other statuses that, when taken together, offer a corrective to those who theorize social categories as social fictions. For Jackie, to treat these categories as fictions would be to disintegrate her sense of self.

Moreover, the structural position of Jackie as a young, Black, poor woman whose family life has been one of struggle amid a neighborhood

of struggling Black and Brown people typifies the structural nature of racial inequality. Rather than try to dismantle categories, I aim to understand how people whose lives have historically been structured by categories make sense of them and use them in different ways to explain who they are and how they fit in the world.

RACE AND CLASS IN THE STUDY OF LESBIAN SEXUALITY AND FAMILIES

In order to understand how lesbian-headed families are organized and function, we have to first understand lesbian sexual identity and its origins. The research on lesbian identity once framed it as a subculture of the dominant society, with some similarities but also some important differences in how lesbian values are demonstrated—particularly in terms of monogamy, future orientation, feminist ideologies, and family structure. This division was assumed to be based in or driven by sexuality, with the homosexual group suffering isolation from the larger heterosexual society and turning to one another, thereby increasing solidarity within the sexuality-based subculture (Lisagor 1980). For members of groups whose primary feelings of group identification lie elsewhere, however, there may be reason to question the assumption that boundaries in lesbian communities are primarily drawn along the axis of sexuality. That is to say, it may be the case that race rather than—or in addition to—sexuality is a primary organizing identity for some Black lesbians, with ramifications for how we understand the ways memberships in the “Black” and “gay” identity categories affect the daily lives of gay women and their participation in communities organized around just one of these statuses.

Race as an identity status or as a social location has not been well analyzed in the lesbian identity literature. Esterberg argues, for example, that lesbians’ understanding of race has been limited to seeing race as “an invisible backdrop” used in constructing one’s own identity, as a source of guilt and shame (viewed through the lens of Whiteness), as racism or a subject around which to rally, and as a force that creates hierarchies in society (1997, 99–100). Work like this fails to consider how “Whiteness” as a racial experience, or race/ethnicity more generally, affects the creation, enactment, maintenance, and reception of the individual identities and group identities that gay people take on or choose to ignore. The experiences of women whose biology, cultures, and structural positions in society have produced similar same-sex desires but different ways of

identifying with those desires have not been fully recognizable in past research. This study references a particular set of lived experiences that fall outside of much of what is currently represented in this field.⁵

In order to understand how Black lesbian families function, we must draw from previous understandings of the roles, experiences, and ideologies of Black women in heterosexual African American households. Both the literature on family process and functioning and the research theorizing Black feminist ideologies have emphasized several distinctive characteristics of Black heterosexual households. Two features that have attracted considerable discussion, research, and analysis have been the mother-centered nature of family relationships within Black nuclear and extended family structures and the long history of women's employment and economic contributions to the survival and stability of poor, working-class, and middle-class Black households. Some have pointed to these characteristics as evidence of cultural deviance and as an explanation for the economic uncertainties and conditions that Black women's poor and working-class male partners face (Rainwater and Yancy 1967). Others view the central position of women in Black families and their financial contributions to the home as adaptive compensations for the structural limitations of racism and inequality, and as key features of the intersectional nature of Black women's oppression in the social, economic, and political realms of society (Collins 2000; Dill 1983). Still others see the strong participation of Black women in the economic and occupational spheres as evidence of their greater autonomy and self-reliance across social class (Kessler-Harris 2003; Wolcott 2001) and as a route to greater egalitarianism, self-actualization, and fulfillment that Black middle-class women have had more success in following relative to their White middle-class peers (Landry 2000; Moore 2009; Shaw 1996).

My point is not to support or refute these perspectives but to show how the vulnerability of Blackness makes the vulnerability of sexual and familial intimacy more burdensome for African Americans, creating a double jeopardy.⁶ One must examine the experiences of prior generations of Black women who lived through the major racial struggles of American history in order to understand family processes and expectations of autonomy in Black lesbian households.⁷ A volume edited by Honey (1999), for example, contrasts how White and Black America understood the experience of female blue-collar workers who became welders, riveters, and line workers during World War II. Honey argues that White women in dominant-culture magazine stories and advertising were featured as leaving behind or sacrificing their homemaking

desires and activities so they could take “temporary” industrial jobs and by doing so help the country win the war. These mothers and wives were shown in static roles, waiting for the return of soldiers so they could “resume” their lives as homemakers. Women workers in Black magazines, by contrast, were shown as trailblazers able to escape low-wage domestic work. The blue-collar jobs they now held were depicted as better alternatives to domestic work because of the higher wages and greater autonomy they brought to Black women and, by extension, to Black families. Labor recruiters noted the war’s disruption of Black women’s historic confinement to domestic work and assumed they would continue in this new line of work even after the war ended (Honey 1999, 12). This contrast suggests that differences in White and Black perceptions of women’s labor run deep and are likely to affect how Black women perceive labor and its place in their lives today.

The centrality of the Black church and African American religions more generally, provides a different example of how prior experiences in Black social environments frame the expectations lesbians have for how to structure their lives. Religious institutions both react to and shape local sexual attitudes and behavior (Ellingson, Tebbe, Van Haitisma, and Laumann 2001), and this is particularly the case in African American communities.⁸ The body of research on the functions of Black religious organizations as *cultural* institutions has highlighted the integral role they play not only as places of worship but as direct actors in secular organizations, financial and educational institutions, and political movements (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Taylor, Mattis, and Chatters 1999). The church and mosque act simultaneously as a school, bank, benevolent society, political organization, social hall, and spiritual base. Pattillo-McCoy’s 1998 research on the South Side of Chicago suggests that the rituals, beliefs, ideologies, and practices of the Black church in African American communities become part of the cultural repertoire of its members. If this is true, church rules and rituals are something that residents in predominantly Black communities believe in, even if they do not attend services regularly or have no particular religious affiliation (Moore 2010a). The involvement of churches and other religious institutions in so many aspects of Black community life means that the teachings of the church or mosque indirectly infiltrate and influence nonreligious components of life, including how people who live in Black communities go about expressing their sexuality.

BLACK WOMEN'S SEXUALITY AND DISCOURSES
OF RESPECTABILITY

When trying to understand how Black lesbians interpret and portray their own sexuality, it is also critical to draw from the literature on discourses of respectability in Black communities. This literature takes two forms. The first dates back to the response of middle-class Black women to the ideology of the cult of true womanhood, which defined the boundaries of acceptable female behavior in the South from the 1820s through the Civil War and well into the twentieth century. The second draws from Black feminist arguments responding to this field, criticizing the absence of analysis of the sexual agency of Black women. When taken together, the silence surrounding Black women's sexuality that emerged as a middle-class response to accusations of immorality as well as the active defense of sexual autonomy and exploration of pleasure expressed by the working class are simultaneously competing and complimentary forces at work in the open expression of Black lesbian sexuality.

True womanhood was presented by elite women's magazines and religious literature of the nineteenth century as an ideal by which a (White) woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and middle- and upper-class society (Welter 1966). The attributes of this ideal were divided into four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. They were understood to represent a certain type of womanhood to the world. Regardless of social class, Blacks were seen as lacking virtue, an essential characteristic of true womanhood. Indeed, true womanhood was often defined in opposition to Black and working-class women. Darlene Clark Hine, Paula Giddings, and other Black feminist historians have shown that in the generations after emancipation and throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Black middle-class women collectively sought to create alternative self-images in order to shield themselves from pervasive stereotypes about and negative estimations of their sexuality.⁹ In *Righteous Discontent* (1993), Higginbotham defines a "politics of respectability" through which turn of the Century Black women sought to gain status in the minds of Whites by reforming Black working-class behavior. A vulnerability around intimacy developed within Black communities because Black bodies were "assumed to be excessively proximate and desirous bodies, too readily revealed or exposed, too willing to reveal and expose others" (Jenkins 2007, 19–20).¹⁰

A crucial difference between Black and White women in their quest for true womanhood is that the model of Black respectability and virtu-

ous Black womanhood was one of achievement in *both* private and public spheres. Research on women raised in Black middle-class families during the Jim Crow era shows that Black women not only had to maintain a certain image of womanhood in their day-to-day lives, but these images were also critical to their ability to obtain work (Shaw 1996). In order to take advantage of the best work opportunities available, Black women had to be “extremely circumspect and never give even the slightest hint of impropriety” lest they be “negatively typecast” and raise doubts about “their abilities and fitness to serve in professional, educational, or other public settings” (Shaw 1996, 14). Black women’s strategies of cultivating respectability included formal schooling, moral behavior, self-assurance, self-discipline, and social responsibility.

Not only did Black women have to be concerned about how their portrayals of self would impact potential work and educational opportunities, they also had to be concerned about how the way they carried themselves would affect their acceptance by the larger Black community, which could reject them for being ineffectual or for being improper role models. Members of the Black middle class were taught from an early age the importance of collective consciousness, of setting an example for others in the community, and of being competent. Those with lower socioeconomic statuses also held the Black middle class to these standards, seeing community leaders as vehicles for their own and their children’s advancement.

Moving forward into the new millennium, Jenkins argues that Black women have been “scripted out of narratives of American national belonging” because of their alleged sexual and domestic character—their intimate lives (2007, 5). Black women’s high rates of nonmarital child-bearing and disproportionate representation among the poor have fueled a need for their ongoing self-defense of respectability. This is the case for Black women in the Caribbean as well, where changing economic conditions in Jamaica, to take one example, have had the consequence of increasing the rigidity with which social status, and Black middle-class behavior in particular, is policed. Black women emigrating from the Caribbean bring these understandings with them to the United States.¹¹ The emphasis on respectability for the Black middle class today goes beyond a general concern about images that are portrayed to Whites or the enhancement of employment opportunities. It is equally important for Black women to be seen by other members of the racial community as “people of good character,” meaning that they show respect toward others, commitment and responsibility to the group through

the demonstration of loyalty, and accountability to themselves and to others for their actions. An openly gay sexuality, however, complicates this image.

Black women choosing to live openly as lesbians—expressed through behavior, gender presentation, styles of dress, display of gay-affirming symbols, and other such actions—offer an active expression of Black women’s sexual autonomy. This expression of sexual pleasure and desire flouts the type of respectability championed by Black middle-class leadership. Carby’s article “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime” (1986) and Davis’s book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998) analyze the sexual agency expressed in Black working-class communities through popular music culture of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Carby says women Blues singers appear as liminal figures who explore the various possibilities of a sexual existence. They are “representations of women who attempt to manipulate and control their own construction as sexual subjects” (12). Davis also locates a Black feminist consciousness in the type of lyrics and tonality of the Blues and jazz music sung by Black women, a consciousness that was expressed through the open dialogue in song text about desire, heartache, violence, infidelity, and sexual intimacy. The singers and performers themselves embodied sexualities that were associated with working-class Black life in their styles of dress, hair, make-up, ways of walking, and ways of communicating with their audiences. The performances, the lyrics and arrangement of the music, and the dances that accompanied the music were open representations of sexuality and pleasure that were at odds with the type of Black respectability that educated and other higher-status Black women struggled to teach. Davis locates in social class these differences in expressions of Black feminist consciousness, finding that working-class women preferred and often embraced a space for the expression of feelings, behaviors, and experiences that contradicted the prevailing standards of femininity. The Blues women and the music they created provided “emphatic examples of black female independence” (1998, 20). They offered an alternative way to understand the autonomy of Black women, a way of being that was not in alignment with middle-class discourses of respectability.

In a different analysis of working-class Black women’s consciousness, Wolcott (2001) shows how the extremely limited job market in the decades following the 1920s required Black women to participate in the illicit economy through sex work, selling liquor, and other jobs that placed them in opposition to the “respectable” roles of mother, homemaker, and

worker. This, combined with their engagement in less wholesome leisure activities like suggestive dancing in dance halls, public drinking, and even ecstatic styles of worship in storefront churches, blurred the distinction between respectable and disreputable women (103). Working women needed to survive, and they were involved in various, sometimes sordid social activities to escape from the economic realities of their lives. Their participation in the informal economy and in urban nightlife as employers, employees, and consumers transformed certain behaviors from disreputable to acceptable, expanding the boundaries of respectability for women and making visible the autonomy of Black women.

Openly gay Black women today are positioned at the juncture of middle-class respectability and working-class sexual agency. Many lesbians across the socioeconomic stratum who are forming families are concerned about whether and how much they should conform to “acceptable” images of motherhood, but they also stand in defense of their own sexual agency and their right to define and declare a sexual freedom. Black lesbian couples reclaim sexuality, and through activities like weddings and commitment ceremonies, simultaneously affirm their own representations of Black respectability. They are at the forefront of a new era of Black female sexuality and offer a visible representation of female sexual expression.

When evaluating family formation and the development of a gay sexuality among Black lesbians, then, we must consider the economic, political, and socioemotional positions Black women have historically occupied in heterosexual families. We must also consider the racial socialization these women and their parents and grandparents experienced in order to understand how the structural and cultural experiences of race influence lesbian practice. In this work, I show how Black lesbians, socialized in Black families and communities, incorporate and navigate notions of Black respectability into their identity construction simultaneously with their behavioral expression of sexual autonomy and sexual freedom. This is particularly the case for middle-class lesbians and women trying to achieve middle-class status. Relative to working-class women and women who are not mothers, the upwardly mobile and women who were mothers before taking on an openly lesbian identity use the framework of Black respectability as a guide for how to enact a gay sexuality.¹² Their use of this framework affects when they publicly claim a lesbian identity, how they approach lesbian motherhood, and their more general self-presentation as lesbians.

THE WOMEN OF THE INVISIBLE FAMILIES STUDY

New York is the best place to study gay populations of color. During the time of my fieldwork, from 2003 through 2006, it offered several public social events each week that specifically catered to Black lesbians.¹³ Information about these activities is not readily available through the usual outlets of gay-themed periodicals, which showcase a city's lesbian and gay-themed parties and social groups, however. It was only once I was introduced to several gatekeepers in New York's Black gay community that I began to receive party flyers and hear through word of mouth about these types of events. I began this research by spending time at a variety of public events, including after-work networking cocktail hours, karaoke socials, church meetings, book clubs, art salons, shared meals, poetry readings, parties, and workshops on parenting and adoption. I also attended gay pride and Black gay pride events in Brooklyn, Manhattan, Philadelphia, Washington, DC, Atlanta, and Orlando, all of which draw large crowds of Black women from New York.¹⁴

At the start of this fieldwork, I was not sure how the study would evolve. I was meeting working-class and low-income Black lesbians in the South Bronx, middle- and upper-middle-class gay women in Brooklyn's Park Slope neighborhood, older lesbians in Harlem, and African American adolescents with lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) identities at the pier off of Christopher Street in Greenwich Village. As I began to delve further into these women's lives, I discovered their participation in intricate, multilayered, expansive networks with other Black lesbians who occasionally intermingled socially with Whites but who tended to remain with other Black people for their primary social interactions. Drawing on my past research experiences with African American heterosexual families, I decided to focus my efforts for this study on how Black gay women formed families.

When I began my fieldwork, I was not familiar with Black lesbian communities in New York and had had very few experiences with Black gay social groups more generally. I had spent the majority of my adult life in graduate school and doing postdoctoral work outside of New York, where my social networks consisted primarily of colleagues and students. Hardly any were Black gay women, and to my knowledge none were significantly involved in New York's public Black gay life. McCorkel and Myers (2003) write about the ways in which the multiple dimensions of the researcher's identity take shape when relating to subjects in the field. They and other feminist ethnographers argue that the re-

searcher's status as both an outsider and an insider shifts throughout her time in the field as she negotiates and renegotiates relationships.¹⁵ I write from the perspective of someone who was an insider by virtue of my race and sexuality, but also as an outsider, having no prior knowledge of the norms and practices of Black lesbian social spaces. The shifting contexts where my fieldwork took place at times made some of my identity statuses less visible and at other times heightened their visibility. During the time I was collecting data I did not have children, which particularly cast me as learner, rather than expert, when respondents would describe childrearing issues and household dynamics related to parenting. I am Black American, and some Caribbean-born women saw me as culturally different from themselves. I was a professor at Columbia University while conducting this research, and my social class made middle- and upper-class women feel connected to me and willing to share their lives. I believe it made some working-class women proud of my accomplishments. It is also possible that other working-class women thought of me as having significantly different life experiences than themselves. Despite this difference, I was able to successfully gain a rapport with working-class women, who represent 42 percent of my sample.

Once I was invited into the friendship groups of gay Black women in New York, I was introduced to others who did not participate as frequently in lesbian public events. These more private women hosted parties and other activities in their own homes, and many of these events bore a striking resemblance to the vibrant portraits painted by Lorde (1995) of 1950s Black lesbian life. I began taking field notes approximately four months after learning about these activities, and soon after began talking informally with my contacts about their potential involvement in other forms of data collection.

There are populations that traditional methods of data gathering will not capture, and the Black lesbian community is one such group. Public advertisements, notices, flyers at lesbian nightclubs, or postings at LGBT community centers largely go unnoticed or unanswered by gay populations of color, and studies that use these methods of getting in touch with research subjects are not successful in recruiting significant numbers of non-Whites in their samples.¹⁶ By spending time at social events attended by Black women, I was able to recruit respondents who are not part of predominantly White social groups. They are understudied in part because of the tendency of researchers who study gay families to be White and to recruit participants from their own networks. I drew from more traditional Black social spaces to recruit individuals for the

more formal methods of data collection in the study. For *Invisible Families*, I targeted women living in New York and the surrounding metropolitan area who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, “in the life,” and/or same-gender-loving and who are forming families. These women are either in committed relationships with other women or are gay mothers. To be eligible for the study, one person in the relationship had to identify as Black.

I collected four types of data: (1) participant-observation fieldwork gathered over a period of approximately thirty months; (2) focus groups on Black lesbian identity, family life in households with children, gender presentation in relationships, and the influence of religious background on individual sexuality; (3) a fourteen-page mail-in survey of one hundred women who provided demographic and family background information and answered questions about the methods they have used or considered to obtain children, the division of household and economic labor in the home, relationship quality, changes in the respondents’ sexuality over time, physical representations of gender, experiences with female and male partners, and the extent and nature of their friendship groups and social interactions in Black communities, gay communities, and predominantly White communities; and (4) in-depth, semistructured interviews with fifty-eight of the respondents who participated in the mail-in survey. The more process-oriented, detailed information provided by the interviews complemented the broader data of the survey.¹⁷ I used a variety of collection strategies to create a multidimensional portrait that would help me evaluate behavioral patterns over time and allow me to capture not only how respondents said they behaved but also their actual behavior, which I observed repeatedly over a three year period.

The women who have shared their lives with me and who are represented in this book are those who in some way participate in public or private social groups organized around gay sexuality. To some extent, they see themselves as part of or interested in some aspect of a lesbian community, and they interact with people who see themselves in this way. There are others with same-sex desire who do not identify as a member of a sexual minority group or who do not interact with others who self-identify around these categories. While they may share some similarities and experiences with the women in this work, their voices are not directly incorporated here. Lesbians who do not ever spend time in predominantly Black gay social spaces or who do not have an understanding of themselves as having a Black ethnic or cultural group membership are also not well-represented in this book, though they may

also find some commonalities with the women who are the focus of this study.

My work draws loosely from Cornell and Hartmann's definition of a "race frame," which conceives race as "an organizing principle that is deeply embedded in culture and social structure and has profoundly shaped both intergroup relationships and society as a whole" (2007, 105). My discussion of *Black lesbians* throughout this work in no way describes an essential Black gay woman with certain inherent or natural traits. I use the term, rather, to refer to women who participate in same-gender-loving relationships and social or political communities, and who also participate in Black heterosexual families, social groups, and institutions. I realize that my definition may not adequately capture the ideologies, experiences, and ethos of some Black women who predominantly participate in social worlds that contain few Black people, women who experience a social distance from Black communities, or women with same-sex desire who do not identify as lesbian or gay.

In this work, I categorize my respondents as "lesbians" and as "gay women." I use both of these descriptors to be consistent with the terms the respondents use to describe themselves and the larger women's community. *Lesbian* is a term not uniformly embraced by the women in this work and by many Black women born before 1970. As a label and identity, "lesbian" is at times politicized in a way that some Black women do not appreciate. These women prefer "gay," "gay woman," or "in the life" as descriptors for their sexuality, so throughout this work I also use "gay woman" to identify members of this population. While the term *queer* is used by some scholars and activists to describe the LGBT community, as well as in reference to queer theory, it has not been embraced by the women in my study, and I do not use it in this work. Throughout the book, I also use the term *Black* to refer to people of the African Diaspora and to such populations that reside within the United States. In New York, approximately 30 percent of Blacks are foreign-born, first- or second-generation American, or identify as members of Caribbean and African ethnic groups (Kent 2007). Because some of them are first-generation immigrants or for other reasons do not identify as African American, I tend to use *Black* rather than *African American* to describe the women in the study.

As suggested above, "Black" is not a monolithic racial category and the diversity of my respondents reflects this point. Almost two-thirds (64 percent) of the study participants are Black Americans, while 26 percent identify as Caribbean or African, 5 percent are Latina from

non-Caribbean countries, and 5 percent are the White partners of Black respondents. Twenty-two percent of my respondents are foreign-born. The women in this book range in age from twenty-one to sixty-one years old, with a mean age of thirty-six. Ninety-two percent live in neighborhoods with substantial Black and Latino populations. Thirty-six percent completed their education with high school, 29 percent hold a bachelor's degree, and one-third hold a master's degree or higher. The respondents' occupations vary considerably and include physician, exotic dancer, professional football player (for the New York Sharks, a Tier I team in the Independent Women's Football League), electrician, secretary, police sergeant, elementary school teacher, nonprofit organization director, and attorney.

Education, income, and occupation were taken together to create a composite measure of socioeconomic status: 45 percent of the respondents are categorized as working class, 42 percent as middle class, and 13 percent as upper middle class. There are three types of households in the study: partnered with children (40 percent of respondents), partnered without children (34 percent), and single-mother families (26 percent of respondents). During the survey and interview data collection period (October 2003– June 2004), 74 percent of respondents were cohabiting with a partner, and those relationships had a mean length of 3.7 years ($SD = 3.1$). Sixty-four percent were parenting or co-parenting at least one child, and 45 percent were biological mothers. Please see the methodological appendix for additional information about data collection and methods.

OVERVIEW

The central six chapters of this volume explore, through different analytic lenses, concepts of gender, power, class, and identity in processes of lesbian family formation and family life. Chapter 1 offers a process analysis of the spectrum of affect and choices that individuals make as they come to recognize and act on their same-sex desire in Black racial and ethnic contexts. The majority of Black lesbians born before 1975 have a sense of themselves as Black that was formed before they accepted a gay sexuality. Even if they felt same-sex attraction or a sense of “difference” at early ages, they tended not to name those feelings or link them to a particular identity until much later. This chapter reveals four dominant pathways by which these women have come to accept a lesbian sexuality, and it emphasizes the importance of race, class, and geographic disloca-

tion in the initial move from private to public presentations of gay sexuality. Chapter 2 analyzes processes of gender presentation and mate selection in racially segregated lesbian social environments, showing how race, class, and notions of authenticity through style influence the presentation of lesbian sexuality. It introduces three categories of gender presentation that organize interactions in Black gay social environments and shows how gender complementarity is used to express the eroticism of difference.

Chapter 3 looks at race, gender, and sexuality as multiple stigmatized social identities as well as structural positions for Black lesbians. It analyzes how reception by outside forces (i.e., mainstream society, family members) and from within the self (i.e., self-assignment of some identities as primary) influence the differential importance lesbians assign to race, gender, and sexuality as identity statuses. These evaluations have critical relationships to the ways they express a gay sexuality and create families. These statuses are not only markers of identity but representations of positions these women occupy in the larger social structure. Chapter 4 examines the different constructions, pathways, and timing of motherhood for Black lesbians. It compares the ways Black women view motherhood and lesbian identity when they become mothers in a heterosexual context before they take on a self-definition as gay, to the ways they view motherhood and lesbian identity when they identify as lesbians before becoming parents. It also shows how discourses of respectability and differences in social class permeate those experiences. Chapter 5 concentrates on family life and the division of labor among couples with and without children. It reexamines lesbian-feminist assumptions of greater egalitarianism in lesbian relationships and presents a provocative argument for alternative conceptions of “gendered” power between women drawn from Black feminist frameworks.

Chapter 6, the final analytical chapter, shifts away from specific processes of family life to explain how the move from private to public expressions of gay sexuality has affected the quality of the relationships Black lesbians cultivate with their families and with others in their larger racial communities. It also explores the contradictions of Black religions and religious ideologies as organizing features of Black community contexts, analyzing how Black lesbians’ experiences with religion as a simultaneous source of condemnation and support influences how they interact with others in the racial group and how they interpret their own sexuality. Finally, the concluding chapter situates the findings of this book in contemporary debates on same-sex marriage

and the future of identity group politics. The appendices detail the process by which this study evolved, the methods used to recruit subjects, and the instruments used to collect data.

Taken as a whole, *Invisible Families* offers at least three important correctives to disparate literatures and fields. First, it speaks directly to the sociology of the family and study of household divisions of labor through its examination and rethinking of how gender structures familial relationships and organizes labor in the home. It will help others rethink definitions of egalitarianism as a feminist ideology by bringing in alternative foundations upon which lesbians build a sense of self and use those foundations in the creation of families. It also extends the literature on Black families to sexual minority populations and draws conclusions about the ways cultural experiences of Black American and Caribbean families work with structural experiences and understandings of racism and discrimination to influence the ways Black lesbians “do” family.

This book also contributes to the study of sexuality and identity construction by showing how lesbian family formation and lesbian sexual identities are shaped by racial differences in norms, culture, historical understandings of women in families and the labor force, and historical interpretations of women’s sexuality. It simultaneously explores how people with multiple stigmatized identities imagine, construct, and reconstruct an individual and a collective sense of self, negotiating the maintenance of boundaries around various identities according to social context. It looks at how individual agency works with structural conditions and social stratification on the basis of identity categories like race and gender to reify these categories and individuals’ memberships in them.

Finally, this volume contributes to a growing sociological literature interrogating intersectionality using the intra-categorical approach by offering a nuanced understanding of how social class interacts with race and sexuality to affect the experiences of Black lesbians. It does this by looking not only at economic disadvantage but also at how class privilege and diversity within this group mediate the stigma of gay sexuality. Race and class status are often conflated in ways that inadvertently construct images of “the Black woman” from the experiences of those who are poor. Those images are then compared to images of middle-class White women to illustrate difference. I highlight and analyze the significance of class diversity and even class advantage among Blacks in shaping ideologies about lesbian sexuality, pathways to lesbian motherhood, gender presentation, notions of respectability, and the lived experiences of being openly gay in Black social contexts.