

## Disruptive Speech

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### A Discursive Analysis of Single Mother Memoirs and the Challenge to Compulsory Heterosexuality

*This article examines the discursive construction of single motherhood in contemporary creative non-fiction. Specifically, I analyze the way single motherhood is imagined in Robin Silbergleid's Texas Girl, Casey Goldberg, Beth Jones, and Pamela Ferdinand's Three Wishes, and Andrea Askowitz's My Miserable Lonely Lesbian Pregnancy. My analysis focuses particularly on the ways that these authors use the discourse of maternity to comment on their experience of compulsory heterosexuality.*

In 2013, acclaimed filmmaker Nina Davenport, promoting her autobiographical documentary *First Comes Love* at the Sarasota Film Festival, reflected on the response that she has received to her film. Davenport said that women would stop her in the street to applaud the courage with which she told her own story of deciding to become a single mother by choice (SMC): “People come up to me crying ... there was a 25-year-old woman who said ‘I know I want a kid and I just feel like I’m never gonna meet a guy and you made me feel better about it.’ I mean don’t ask me why she thinks that, she’s *gorgeous*, but whatever” (McFadden, emphasis mine). In one fleeting comment, Davenport cut to the heart of a discursive tension that structures almost every narrative of single motherhood by choice: the construction of the choice to single parent as evidence of failed mating. By failed mating, I am referring to the ways that motherhood is cast, culturally, as a temporal narrative that requires participation in a heterosexual marriage as a precondition for maternal subjectivity. By entering into maternity without a partner, SMCs are often cast as having “given up” on the quest to find a mate to facilitate the transition to parenthood, as if there is not just a biological clock but a romantic one as well. This logic extends as a verdict on a woman’s ability to attract a partner, which

enables Davenport to express skepticism when approached by a “gorgeous” twenty-five-year-old woman. In other words, hetero-femininity is imagined to be a necessary asset that can be leveraged to acquire a male partner, which is the entrance fee to normative mothering. Acquiring a male partner, while still fertile, is essential within heteronormative logic. This way of thinking encourages women to prioritize dating when young in order to enter into long-term monogamous relationships “in time” for childrearing. The choice to mother without a partner is cast as an unfortunate but necessary “Plan B” for women nearing the end of their years of reproductive fertility. Pursuing single motherhood because “reproductive time” is elapsing is the premise for Hollywood depictions of single motherhood in films such as *The Next Best Thing* (2000), *The Switch* (2010), and *The Backup Plan* (2010). Even their titles imply a temporal logic—reinforcing the notion that “the best thing” or “the first plan” would have necessarily involved a conventional heterosexual marriage followed by a planned pregnancy. The premise of these films reinforces the notion that “choosing” single motherhood is the kind of decision that can be morally redeemed in the face of a compelling biological deadline under which to have children.

Choosing to mother while unpartnered is a choice that goes directly against the idealized heterosexual nuclear family model. For this reason, the criteria used to decide whether and/or how to pursue single motherhood are important to examine. These criteria can reflect the terms in which a woman understands her relationship to maternity, sexuality, and agency. Although single mothers have been studied as a sociological phenomenon, the study of self-representations of single mothers by choice has been limited. This article contributes to the study of autobiographical narratives by SMCs. I am particularly interested in how SMCs narrate their decision-making process, and what the process can reveal about gender relations and sexual autonomy in the context of choosing to parent. In this article, I explore three memoirs written by women who consider and pursue single motherhood by choice: *Three Wishes* by Carey Goldberg, Beth Jones, and Pamela Ferdinand, *Texas Girl* by Robin Silbergleid, and *My Miserable, Lonely, Lesbian Pregnancy* by Andrea Askowitz. I argue that these texts rely on maternity as a narrative tool to frame larger conversations about compulsory heterosexuality, reproductive time, and self-actualization. These narratives demonstrate the liberatory potential of queered conception narratives that divorce sexuality from maternity in order to push for broader frameworks with which to imagine maternal subjectivity, agency, and sexuality.

### Who’s Single Motherhood? Who’s Choice?

The term “single mother by choice” was coined in 1981 by Jane Mattes,

founder of the international Single Mothers by Choice network and author of the book by the same name. Single Mothers by Choice boasts over thirty thousand members who identify either as “thinking,” “trying,” or “mothering” (“About”). Local chapters of Single Mothers by Choice host social events, support group meetings, and share resources about fertility, sperm donation, adoption, legal issues, and parenting philosophies. Similarly, Mikki Morrisette, author of *Choosing Single Motherhood: The Thinking Woman’s Guide*, coined the term “choice mom” to emphasize the choice to mother rather than marital status. The website *Choice Moms* hosts a message board, podcast, e-guides and resources for women choosing “choice motherhood.”

Both Single Mothers by Choice and Choice Moms define their membership through a discourse of agency and choice. Single Mothers by Choice defines SMCs as “[women] *willing to take the initiative*. Her child might have been conceived or adopted. What we all have in common is that we are *willing to take on the responsibility* of raising our children knowing that, at least at the outset, we will be parenting alone” (“Philosophy”, emphasis in original). Similarly, Choice Moms defines a “choice mom” as a “single woman who *proactively* decides to become the best mother she can, through adoption or conception. Sometimes she finds a partner after she marches toward her goal of building a family; sometimes she doesn’t” (“About Choice Moms”, emphasis in original). What distinguishes SMCs from the generalized title of “single mothers” is the notion of *choice*. SMCs are understood to be active agents in the formation of their lives rather than passive actors. The way this distinction plays out is in terms of social class, and its intersecting axes of power relations, such as race, ability, and sexuality. Labelling upper-middle-class single motherhood based on the way it is chosen implicitly sets up SMCs as morally sound neoliberal subjects, as opposed to victims of circumstance. Furthermore, the distinction risks implying that single women who choose to carry unplanned pregnancies have not chosen parenthood. By way of example, both the Single Mothers by Choice and Choice Moms networks identify women over thirty-five with high levels of postsecondary education as a core demographic. As Mikki Morrisette writes,

Self-involved, immature or depressed parents, wracked by emotional issues and financial worries, tend to neglect their kids. That’s the basic explanation for [statistics that suggest children of single mothers are at risk of dropping out of high school or becoming engaged in criminalized activity] ... the typical Choice Mom—who tends to be older, more well-educated, and more well-paid than many unprepared single mothers—are quite focused on the needs of their children. (“About Choice Moms”)

“Single Mothers by Choice” is a term that comes from the organization, but it has been adopted as a category in social research as well. In both cultural representations and sociological studies of single motherhood, “single mothers by choice” are set up as a contrast to the “single mother by circumstance.” SMCs are cast as examples of women pursuing their biological destiny in the face of romantic disappointment, as opposed to the tropes of paternal abandonment and poverty that characterize depictions of single mothers broadly defined. In both representational models of single motherhood, the heterosexual nuclear family remains anchored as a standardizing ideal against which other family models are judged.

Hayford and Guzzo’s statistical analysis demonstrates that contrary to the proliferation of narratives both in self-help literature and in Hollywood, SMCs are not the social trend such a rise in visibility would otherwise suggest. Despite the rise in media visibility, Hayford and Guzzo estimate that less than 3 percent of college-educated women became single mothers in the early 2000s. Rather than serving as evidence of a new social trend, Hayford and Guzzo interpret the rise in visibility of SMCs in Hollywood as a corrective commentary on single motherhood generally. They write,

“By focusing on the (very few) affluent, older single mothers by choice, media narratives at best ignore and at worst disparage other single parents. Most importantly, the focus on SMCs takes attention away from the high levels of single motherhood, often *not* by choice, that have existed for decades among the disadvantaged and are linked to structural social and economic conditions.” (72)

Similarly, Davies and Rains argue that media depictions of SMCs “oversimplify the real-life experiences of many women by ignoring the gender relations within which single motherhood occurs” (550). Davies and Rains in particular highlight the *Murphy Brown* storyline from the early 1990s, in which the lead character, a middle-aged professional woman, becomes a single mother. The plot was criticized at the time by former American Vice President Dan Quayle as “mocking the importance of fathers” (544). Murphy Brown is often invoked as the prototypical SMC: white, of advanced maternal age, careerist, and financially established. However, as Davies and Rain make clear, the cultural debates about the *Murphy Brown* storyline that took place in the 1990s conveniently failed to remember the circumstances around the character’s pregnancy: Murphy Brown became pregnant by accident in the context of a relationship. The character chooses to carry the pregnancy to term, and the narrative arc could even be read as an anti-abortion storyline. Furthermore, her choice to carry the pregnancy to term ends her relationship

with her partner, who refused to co-parent the child as she had invited him to do. Murphy Brown is certainly a popular representation of an independent single mother, but the character's foray into single motherhood is mitigated by heartbreak and her partner's refusal to co-parent. For Davies and Rains, media portrayals of single mothers decontextualize the gendered context in which the "choice" to parent is made. They argue for deeper examinations of how SMCs make their decision to solo parent.

This article is a response to their invitation. By examining the self-representations of SMCs, my study focuses on how SMCs articulate the ways in which the choice to parent solo was made. Specifically, I am interested in the role of gender expectations in shaping the choice to parent, and how maternal subjectivity is imagined as the decision is made. As I will argue, the discourses that SMC memoirists rely on in order to frame their decision to single parent include a relief at having distance from the pressures of compulsory heterosexuality. Parenting outside a nuclear heterosexual family model offers opportunities for the authors to establish a relationship with their own sense of agency and sexuality, which they speculate may not have happened in a traditional family model. In this way, SMC autobiographies can be read as narratives that imagine a life course model disentangled from compulsory heterosexuality.

### *Three Wishes*

*Three Wishes*, a memoir written by Carey Goldberg, Beth Jones, and Pamela Ferdinand, follows three friends through their mid-late thirties as they each consider pursuing single motherhood by choice. At the age of thirty-nine, Carey decides to buy donor sperm because, as she writes, "It was biological midnight, time to give up on romantic love, and become a single mother. I was not desired. Not loved" (5). Carey frames her choice as a biological necessity, driven by the urgency that she was undesirable as a partner. The twinning of undesirability with maternity invokes the Madonna-whore paradigm. Carey's decision to become a single mother is made in tandem with the decision to "give up on romantic love." In order to plan to parent solo, she would need to reconceive of her ideas about her own sexuality and its role in the timeline of her life.

On the eve of attempting to conceive a child using donor sperm, Carey meets Sprax, a love interest, whom she pursues despite the anxieties that he is "too attractive for her." She writes, "The new power of having vials lessened the sting of rejection. I did not need him" (13). Making the decision to pursue donor sperm disentangled Carey's sexuality from reproduction, which allows her to pursue relationships with men with less pressure. After a brief romance, she and Sprax separate, but he agrees to be her known donor, and she conceives

and delivers a child as a single mother. No longer requiring her anonymous donor sperm, Carey gifts her vials to her friend Beth, whose marriage ended spontaneously at the age of thirty-five when she had expected to begin trying to conceive. After four years, Beth considers using the donor sperm that Carey purchased to become a single mother by choice, in tandem with exploring other ways “to redefine herself” (85). Beth writes:

I'd missed my projected motherhood deadline and, at thirty-nine, was barreling toward that scary marker for women: forty. I'd become careless with birth control, even with completely inappropriate partners. And that was a wake-up call, a milestone, a clear indication that I should stop being dismissive of my motives. I needed to be proactive, and that meant not using contraceptive failure as the means for constructing the future. (92)

As she considers becoming inseminated with donor sperm, she muses that it resembles a “post-modern arranged marriage. Not perfect, but what is? ... The searching inspired a blend of exhilaration and depression” (94). Beth's choice is framed as a choice between having a child and giving up on love. Before using the donor sperm, Beth meets and partners with Phil, and together they have a child. At which point, Beth passes the donor vials to her friend Pam, who claims that “At 37 years old, I confronted myself. I considered what I could not live without and immediately knew it was a child” (108). Almost as soon as she accepts the vials, she enters into a known donor agreement with a friend. As she contemplates the merits of a known versus unknown donor, she falls in love with a partner and, eventually, conceives a child with him.

*Three Wishes* offers a contradictory meditation on single motherhood by choice. In the memoir, single motherhood by choice is presented as an underestimated “Plan B,” which the narrators enter into tentatively, and although Carey is the first to pursue the decision, Pamela and Beth offer relief that they do not, in the end, need to. Heterosexual marriage, as the container for family life, remains in place as a preferred “Plan A.”

Perhaps the most compelling contribution from *Three Wishes* is the insight that the willingness to pursue single motherhood by choice offers the narrators. Carey explains:

For twenty-five-odd years, romance had been the central focus of my life ... the deep-down priority had been ... men. Now, to my own shock and gigantic relief, those days were over. And they were over because ... I had finally convinced myself life without a man could be just as fulfilling as life with one... To a few friends who were

parents, I expressed my dismay: why didn't you tell me that my love for a child could be so amazing and satisfying? Why didn't anyone push me harder to do this, and tell me more emphatically that really, Carey, if you possibly can, you should make sure to become a mother? It seemed no accident that "fulfilled" has the word "filled" in it. My life felt full, rich, centered. (116)

On dating, Carey continues, "I had quit. It felt subversive and liberating, like a bra burning. Enormous swaths of our culture concerned self-improvement for the purposes of romance, movies and books whose only real arc followed romance, endless girl talk revolving only around romance. I would henceforth be happily immune" (9). Pam expresses similar surprise at how fulfilling she found her sense of her own life's trajectory once she imagined herself outside of a heterosexual love script. She writes, "In accepting donor sperm, I also accepted that I could script my own life and not wait for it to happen to me. I could follow an untraditional route and still be happy" (273).

In *Three Wishes*, the decision to single parent for each of the narrators involves a reassessment of their relationship to heterosexual dating conventions. In the process of imagining themselves situated outside of normative family and dating models, the authors express relief, satisfaction, and surprise at how liberated they felt. Importantly, it is not simply distance from heteronormative dating conventions but rather distance from the temporal construction of them. By pursuing single motherhood by choice, the authors disrupt the heteronormative order of things.

### *Texas Girl*

Relief at the distance that maternity offers from heterosexual romance is also expressed in Robin Silbergleid's memoir *Texas Girl*. Silbergleid began planning to conceive a child on her own, by choice, at twenty-seven. She reflects on her experience with heterosexual dating:

I'd realized sometime in those long months of thinking about getting pregnant and trying to get pregnant that the whole reason I'd dated men was because everyone knew that dating was the first step toward having a baby, which was the only thing I really ever wanted. Now I could be done with all that. Thank goodness. (154)

Silbergleid's reflections construct heterosexual dating as a goal-oriented activity, required to access pregnancy and motherhood. Indeed, even as she begins to pursue single motherhood by choice she is constantly cautioned that

such a choice is not yet necessary given her age. She writes:

“I just want you to understand what you’re getting into. You’re so young.” That was what everyone said when I told them I was thinking about having a baby. Some variation on you’re so young, what if you meet a great guy? Or why now? Or why don’t you wait until you have tenure? All these questions told me was how little my desires resembled those of other women my age, or how frightened most single women were of not finding a partner and how culturally expected marriage was. Even women I’d chatted with online, women who were also thinking about becoming single moms, encouraged me to wait, date a little, keep single motherhood in mind as a backup plan; how could it possibly be my first choice? (66)

Yet it was her first choice. Silbergleid’s narrative consistently places her outside a heterosexual life course model. When her best friend, Aimee, marries a man, Silbergleid reflects on the consequences it has for their friendship and laments that she feels like a “jilted lover.” After having a child and co-parenting with her husband, Aimee “seemed like she lived in another galaxy, hetero world” (14). Silbergleid’s language is significant and points to the ways that her choice to single mother challenges the traditional family model. Silbergleid does not overtly identify as a queer author in the text, but her distance from heteronormative ideals is clear. She becomes alienated not only from the two-parent norm, but from the ways that heterosexual families reposition her friendships with women parenting with male partners. One of the most interesting ways in which she narrates her distance from heteronormativity is by framing it as a script that she has deviated from. She writes:

In my introductory literature classes I talk to my students about what makes a good story or, really, they talk to me about it. Plot, they shout ... The girl wants the guy; the girl can’t have the guy; of course in the end the girl ends up with the guy. It makes for lovely fiction. But what happens when the story isn’t true? What happens when the heroine decides at 27 that she wants to be a single mom and she finally gets pregnant and then she has a long drawn out miscarriage and spends a couple months being depressed? What kind of story is that? (136)

Silbergleid positions her choice as off-script and, in so doing, narrates her conception story according to a different set of milestones. She begins her memoir by telling the story of conceiving her daughter, saying the moment of conception was not the bio-medical transaction that inserted sperm into



her uterus, but rather, the moment she decided not to co-parent with her on-again, off-again lover. By deciding not to co-parent with her lover, she realized she effectively was deciding to pursue single motherhood. Upon making that decision, Silbergleid adds that “something in me shivered and burst open, something beyond narrative, beyond the predictable life story of man plus woman equals baby, and in the words that travelled across the phone lines, something marvelous began to take shape” (3-4).

As Silbergleid describes the progression of her pregnancy, she considers ways that her daughter lived inside her body, in the “pocket of an ovary” while Silbergleid attends her grandmother’s funeral (6). Pursuing intrauterine insemination with anonymous donor sperm, Silbergleid muses that her doctor “knew my body better than anyone else in the world. We were two women who had created a child together.” (111-2) In this way, Silbergleid’s narrative queers normative conception stories by positioning her pregnancy as the result of the labour of two women.

Similarly, Carey from *Three Wishes* also articulates her choice to single parent as an opportunity to go “beyond narrative.” While attending a friend’s wedding with her young child, Carey listens as the bride refers to the event as the “most beautiful night of my life.” Carey continues, “I told her how happy I was for her, but deep down, for myself, I felt an ugly surge of cynicism and disbelief. Brides follow a script and so do their emotions, I thought; you have to drink the Kool-Aid to hit those highs, and I don’t anymore” (123). Both *Texas Girl* and *Three Wishes* situate the choice to single parent as a choice made by resisting a heteronormative life course model. Both texts make reference to how the narrative unfolding of one’s life shifts when the decision to parent outside of a heterosexual love story is made.

### *My Miserable, Lonely, Lesbian Pregnancy*

Andrea Askowitz similarly positions her pregnancy as decidedly oppositional to heteronormative conception narratives. In *My Miserable, Lonely, Lesbian Pregnancy*, Askowitz reflects on her decision to become a mother at thirty-five. She writes:

Pregnancy and motherhood are experiences I crave. I want to connect myself to generations before and after me. I want to belong to the society of mothers. I want to recognize myself in another person. I want to create. And I’m almost 35; time is running out. (9)

Significantly, the biological “clock” informs Askowitz’s decision to conceive, but her anxiety about family structure is less central to the narrative that she

presents. Askowitz's pregnancy is not framed as evidence that she could not achieve a fulfilling relationship with a man. Instead, as a lesbian, her path to maternity was always expected to be a medically supervised and carefully planned endeavour. She writes:

I got pregnant after five years of planning, because, for a lesbian, there are no accidents. It didn't actually take me five years to conceive; I just talked about it and thought about it and took my temperature every morning for a very long time.... A lot of people ask me why I want children, and anyone entering parenthood should have to answer this question. But when I asked my straight, married friends why they wanted children, three of them said, "No one ever asked me that. People just ask when." (8)

Askowitz frames her relationship to maternity as the consequence of deliberation and planning, which invites oppositional examinations of heteronormative pregnancy as accidental and inevitable. However, it is in Askowitz's commentary about being single that she offers the most disruption to heteronormative familial codes. Throughout her memoir, Askowitz describes her pregnancy as lonely and miserable because she spends almost the entire pregnancy lamenting her recent breakup with her former partner, Kate. Although she grieves the end of the relationship, she confronts the fact that her hopes for her relationship with Kate were based on fantasy. Once she delivers her daughter, Tashi, Askowitz reflects on the ways that fantasy can inform an idealized notion of family life. She writes:

The moment Tashi was born, I was different. I was calm and confident and completely content—the best me I've ever been. My anxiety faded, and for the first time that I can remember, I wasn't hoping for an imaginary future when life would be better. I was happy right where I was. I was proud of my decision to have a baby alone and felt strong and bold and special being a single, lesbian mom. (236)

For Askowitz, Tashi's arrival marks a shift into self-actualized time. Rather than position her maternity as a signal that her sexuality has ended, Askowitz gains perspective on her former relationship. Askowitz, like Silbergleid and the *Three Wishes* authors, experiences a sense of relief and liberation from a preordained narrative structure that her life was expected to take. By no longer "hoping for an imaginary future," Askowitz can strengthen her sense of agency as a single mother. In this way, Askowitz, too, is resisting the heteronormative model of a two-parent family. The nuclear family structure is premised on a

social model of economic dependency and the separation of spheres. As Robin Silbergleid argues in an academic essay about single motherhood:

the stories that we tell about SMCs ... demonstrate continued cultural anxiety about the changing nature of the American family.... In a culture without the gendered separation of public and private spheres, in which women do not need to rely on men for their financial well-being, the ideological force of narrative works even harder to create a cultural and psychological need for Plan A; much as the romance narrative emerged with the rise of capitalism in order to make desirable a gendered division of labor, the contemporary heteronarrative continues to police changing economic realities. Economically and biologically, heterosexual coupling no longer needs to be a woman's only choice for maternity. (Silbergleid, "Oh Baby!")

Silbergleid argues for recognition of the social forces that conspire to discursively construct a normative life course for women according to a trajectory that requires motherhood to be born out of a romance myth. As an alternative, she proposes, "a narrative model that allows us to take ... the SMC on her own terms, to give value to her vision of reproduction instead of reproducing traditional narratives of family values" (Silbergleid, "Oh Baby!").

When Askowitz articulates that her desire to be a mother comes from her desire to be connected to the generations that came before her in her family, as well as to the "society of mothers," she is articulating her vision of reproduction on her own terms. She is not voicing a desire to join two families through the reproduction of biological kin, nor is she positioning her single-parent family as a symbol of lack. Rather, she frames her choice as "strong and bold and special." Like Askowitz, Silbergleid reflects on the stresses of single parenting in *Texas Girl* and notes that "I couldn't envision myself rolling over in bed to share my fears with a partner ... I felt grounded, connected to my friends and the world" (194). As the narrators of *Three Wishes* conclude their memoir, they write, "We do believe there is magic in the moment when a woman becomes convinced she can reach her single-minded goal, to bear a child, by herself" (278).

*Three Wishes*, *Texas Girl*, and *My Miserable, Lonely, Lesbian Pregnancy* offer a celebration of single motherhood by choice as model for family planning that invites deeper reflections into how motherhood is framed in relation to time, compulsory heterosexuality, and self-actualization. These first person accounts contribute to a reimagining of the temporal construction of maternity as an antecedent to a romance narrative and offer alternative narratives for conception and family planning. In this way, these memoirs come closer

to Silbergleid's invitation to move "beyond narrative" and to take the single mother on her own terms.

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