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CHAPTER SEVEN

"Talkin' Sex: Chicanas and Mexicanas
Theorize about Silences and Sexual Pleasures

PATRICIA ZAVELLA

The inner process of meaning, perception and comprehension takes place in the word, in sound, in gesture, in the body. —Pavel N. Medvedev and Mikhail Bakhtin, The Formal Method of Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics

Sometimes you don’t know you feel something until you say it out loud. —Anonymous

Feminists have long critiqued the Mexican cultural framework regarding sexuality that poses oppositions of proper and shameful sexual practices for women, known as the virgin-whore continuum.¹ In this patriarchal logic there are culturally sanctioned discourses or practices of repressing women’s sexual desires, whereby women should experience pleasure only in the context of institutional approval: through Church-sancitied marriage. Repressive practices include the multiple ways women’s bodies are controlled, covered up, and their desires thwarted by parents, lovers, Church officials, teachers, partners, children, or even themselves. Under the logic of repression, when women break the silences they often engage in transgression and can produce an escándalo (scandal) of melodramatic proportions. Women who are branded an escandalosa—someone who flaunts the conventions of propriety, who disrespects or dishonors the family—occasionally find a sense of triumph, but also can experience a great deal of shame. In the literature on Chicana/Mexicana sexuality, there is a well-
developed interpretive framework for understanding sexual repression, which I discuss below.²

Chicana lesbian theorists and creative writers have produced autobiographical essays and creative pieces illustrating their resistance to silencing and expressing their multifaceted desires, including spaces where women's yearnings are meaningful.³ Extending their insights, I discuss how working-class Chicanas and Mexicanas, whose experiences span a continuum of heterosexual and openly lesbian relationships, theorize about desire in their own words.⁴

As I argued in "Playing with Fire: The Gendered Construction of Chicana/Mexicana Sexuality" [Zavella 1997a], Catholic-based repressive ideology should be seen as only a cultural template. Women's cultural poetics, the social meaning of sexuality, entails struggling with the contradictions of repressive discourses and social practices that are often violent toward women and their desires. Women contest or incorporate repressive notions into their sense of sexual selves and they use metaphors of juego y fuego (play and fire) to express bodily pleasure. That is, in discussing their intimate relationships, playing was a recurring metaphor that signified women's experiences of teasing, testing, or pushing the boundaries of social convention. In women's discourse, fire had dual meanings: the repression of desire, where sanctions were "too hot," and the uncontrollable force of the erotic, where passion consumed them. Women, then, sometimes "got burned" in transgressing social conventions, even as they sought sensations and imaginaries of the body enflamed [Zavella 1997a].

This essay is situated within this framework of cultural oppositions, particularly as women move through the life cycle, and explores the meanings of silences as well as pleasures. However, I emphasize that discourse that silences women's desires is a means of control that goes beyond repression and must be interrogated for social meaning. As Foucault reminds us, "Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse than an element that functions alongside the things said" (1990, 61–62). My interpretation also builds on the framework by Ginsburg and Rapp [1995], who argue that social reproduction—of which gender and sexuality are central—should be seen as local expressions of transnational inequalities. In the context of transnational social inequality, individuals imagine and enact cultural logics and social formations through personal struggle, generational mobility, social movements, and the contested claims of powerful religious and political ideologies [2].

My interpretation of women's views of sexuality as a social firestorm
incorporates systems of power based on class, race, and gender. Contesting—or accepting—the Mexican cultural script of virgin-whore, women also grapple with their working-class origins, racialized bodies, traditional gender expectations, and sexual orientation. Women construct their sexuality in a historically specific time frame during which feminist, gay/lesbian, and Chicana/o social movements have created new discourses about sexuality and Chicanas’ rights as racialized women. Further, they reveal the production of complex local knowledges and cultural practices regarding sexuality that reflect women’s lived experiences in a regional political economy, and respond to global considerations other than migration—notably, the AIDS pandemic and transnational popular culture.

Building on this framework, I discuss how, despite the obvious differences one would expect between those who grew up in Mexico and those who were reared in the United States, Mexican immigrants and Chicanas share a repressive heritage that is not unique but is particular to Mexican culture. I analyze culturally sanctioned silences as a key expression of gendered power relations in which women are subject to social control and through which they reclaim human agency.

Closely related to the project of understanding the cultural specificities of control is the discourse that Chicanas and Mexicanas construct in response to silencing. Here I am referring not only to the language women create but the pleasure they express through their body, what Amber Hollibaugh and Cherrie Moraga (1983) call “what we’re rollin’ around in bed with.” This project requires a whole new set of lenses, a move from control to the relatively uncharted realm of creativity. To capture women’s views on control and desire, I conducted life histories in which I aimed for a conversational format where my questions seemed like the talk women have with those they trust. Nonetheless, I was struck with their tension in talking about sex—the embarrassed looks or hunched shoulders, giggles, stutters, or other bodily indicators of discomfort which, as they told stories or anecdotes, often gave way to a sense of wonder: “Gosh, I never thought I’d tell this to anyone,” said one, and “I thought I had forgotten all this.” Further, women often code-switched between English and Spanish to reveal the nuances of meaning. I use “talkin’ sex” to convey the sense of awkwardness women often felt in describing feelings, experiences, sensations they rarely articulated except in occasional safe spaces with kin, intimate friends, lovers, or therapists. I argue that through their actions and language, women configure carnal desire in ways that embody contradictions of acquiescence and contestation.

Talkin’ sex during our interviews became a discursive space constructed
in collaboration between the subjects and me, inevitably colored by their perceptions of my project and me. I tried to be as clear and open as possible about the purposes of my research and how I would use the interview data, and I promised full confidentiality. Thus, the names I use are pseudonyms, with the exception of Maria Pérez, an out lesbiana, who insisted that I use her real name.

I asked women to refer me to other women, which means that to the new interviewee I had been vouched for in some sense by the first. Attempting to mediate the power relations involved when interviewers intrude into people’s private lives, I made it clear that they could stop the tape recorder at any point, could ask the purpose of any question, and could ask me questions about my life. Most women assumed that I was heterosexual, although several expressed their curiosity in coded ways; the most frequent question was whether I had children. As a middle-aged woman with children, I was open about my own multiple relationships, although mercifully, no one asked for details or I might have been as uncomfortable as the women I interviewed. None of these women refused to answer any questions; however, some responded metaphorically, as we see below. Finally, we must recall that these instances of talkin’ sex were social constructions, verbal expressions of individual cultural memories that define women’s identities and the meaning of Mexican culture in their own terms.

I base my analysis on life histories with seventeen women of Mexican origin, six born in the United States and eleven born in Mexico. The women’s ages ranged from 21 to 56. Generally, these Chicanas and Mexicanas were socially located differently from one another. However, I do not want to reify these social categories, for there was variation within each group (Zavella 1994). These data are part of a larger project, where my purpose is to understand how cultural expectations about gender and sexuality are configured in relation to race, poverty, and gender subordination in opportunity structures in Santa Cruz County. Thus, all of the women I interviewed had low income and were situated in the working class or among the poor.

Most of the women I interviewed who had migrated from Mexico had not completed an elementary education and came from rural villages in Michoacán, Jalisco, Guanajuato, and Oaxaca. Two women, however, were from Mexico City and held degrees from Mexican universities. Some women migrated to the United States because of labor displacement; others were seeking refuge from abusive male kin or lovers or were merely seeking adventure. All of the Mexicanas migrated between age 15 and 30—none were reared in the United States—and they were predominantly Spanish.
speakers. These women usually identified themselves ethnically as Mexicanas, but occasionally one would use another term, such as Hispánica or Hispanic.

The women born in the United States identified themselves ethnically in various terms, including Chicana, Mexicana, Mexican American, or Hispánica, and all were born in states in the Southwest. These women cannot be seen as culturally homogeneous, as they vary from the woman who identified herself as Hispanic and those at the other end of the cultural spectrum who considered themselves very Mexican in their cultural outlook. All of the Chicanas had completed high school and several had vocational training or some college. These Chicanas were the daughters of immigrants, that is, they were second generation; hence, most were bilingual although a few spoke very little Spanish.

This sample reflects globalizing processes particular to northern California. The settlement of Mexican immigrant women began in large numbers after the end of the Bracero Program (post 1964) and increased dramatically beginning in the 1980s. That the Chicanas are from the second generation, whereas the Mexicanas migrated as adolescents or adults within the past thirty years is a product of a particular migration history from Mexico to Santa Cruz County that is different from other regions such as Los Angeles or la frontera, which have longer settlement histories.

THE CULTURAL CONTRADICTIONS OF SEXUAL CONTROL

Mexican cultural logic includes severe control over sexuality and more openness for women's intimacy with other women. For example, research on traditional gender roles in rural Mexico indicates that sexuality and marital relations were largely taboo topics in peasant communities during the first half of the twentieth century, even between mother and daughter. The control over young women was so strict in rural areas that they were confined to their home to avoid being kidnapped for marriage or establishing illicit relationships (Mummert 1994, 195). Between the 1930s and industrialization, which began in the 1940s, the notions of virile macho men and self-sacrificing women—las mujeres abnegadas—were constructed in popular culture (Gutmann and Porter 1998). As late as the 1950s young couples often engaged in robo, a ritual “robbing” of the young woman (who may have actually consented or even helped plan the event) and elopement to circumvent parental control of children's choice of mate (Foster 1979, cited in Sánchez 1993, 31). During this time, the ideal of female chastity prior to marriage was an indicator of social class, with upper-class young
women being monitored and controlled more closely. Thus, working-class women were less restricted by the ideal of female virginity at the time of marriage, yet their variance from chastity was also seen as evidence of their inferiority to upper-class women (Sánchez 1993, 33).

Since the 1950s, Mexico has experienced rapid urbanization, feminization of the labor force, including in rural areas, increased migration within Mexico and to the United States, and the expansion of popular culture (influenced by the United States and other nations), including sexual liberation of women. Research on sexuality in Mexico in the late twentieth century finds much regional variation in sexual practices. Xóchitl Castañeda argues, "In Mexico, to speak of sexuality . . . one should take account of the heterogeneity of the country, the particular circumstances of place and the different sectors of the population, and especially gender inequality. The historical, economic, and social processes engendered by globalization have varied significance in different regions of the country" (Castañeda et al. 1997a, 55; my translation). Nevertheless, despite regional, ethnic, and class differences, the research on sexuality indicates that there are important gendered patterns regarding sexual experimentation prior to marriage. In one survey that was administered in rural and urban regions, 89 percent of young men first had sexual intercourse by age 15, but only 13 percent of the women had sexual intercourse by age 15. Moreover, the use of condoms varied significantly by region, with fewer living in the more rural area of Chiapas using condoms compared to the more urban Morelos, and women in the rural area had virtually no use of condoms (Castañeda et al. 1997b). This research indicates that we should expect variation in actual practice by Mexicanas who have migrated to the United States.

Moreover, in Mexican society it is quite acceptable for women to express affection through verbal display and touching. Sisters and female kin are often very close, as are women friends, and it is not unusual for women to sleep in the same bed, walk arm-in-arm or dance together in public, or embrace and kiss one another on the cheek in greeting or when departing. Indeed, the acceptability of women's intimacy is one of the attractions of Mexico for lesbians, who can be openly affectionate with lovers in ways that would be socially unacceptable in the United States. Mexican popular culture has become more open publicly, especially with the figure of the prostitute or sexually liberated woman permeating Mexican folk songs, movies, and literature. Finally, women who are considered "artists" (regardless of type of performance or art form) are accorded more freedom to be openly suggestive regarding sexuality (Yarbro-Bejarano 1997).

The research on sexuality in contemporary times on the U.S. side of the
border finds contradictory patterns for women of Mexican origin as well. Some research confirms the continuing importance of Catholic ideology in repressing women’s desires and supporting the double standard for women (Espín 1984; Povich 1986; Alonso and Koreck 1989; Padilla and Baird 1991). Perhaps Ana Castillo provides the most eloquent example of the cultural repression argument. In “La Macha: Toward a Beautiful Whole Self,” Castillo points out that repression is counteracted through social expression in daily life:

Sexuality surfaces everywhere in our culture, albeit distortedly, due to the repression of our primordial memories of what it truly is. We experience it in the hip gyrating movements of our cumbias and the cheek-to-cheek twirling tension of the Tex-Mex polka (both dances are commonly danced by women together as well as men and women); in the blood merging reflected in our mixed heritage as mestizas; in the stifling of emotions by the Church, its hymns and passion for the suffering of Jesus Christ (passion derives from extreme feeling and here it arises as a result of the repressed erotic and psychic sensations). Mexican erotica is charged by all our senses: in the traditional strict costuming of each gender: low cut dresses, tight Mariachi charro pants, open-toed pumps and pointed, dapper cowboy boots; in sum, our culture is infamous for its intensities. (1991, 34)

Similarly in “The New Mestiza,” Gloria Anzaldúa theorizes how women are alienated from homophobic, hegemonic Mexican culture: La nueva mestiza is “caught between los intersticios, the spaces between the different worlds, she inhabits” (1987, 20). According to Anzaldúa, the borderlands, la frontera, is more than a geographic space; it exposes the dominant power that Mexican culture holds over what is considered “normal” or acceptable. Ironically, despite a relatively liberatory environment with highly sexualized popular culture, a vocal feminist movement, and access to contraception and abortion in the United States, women often feel constrained about openly expressing affection with other women.

On the other hand, despite having a high percentage who identify as Catholics, Mexicans in the United States often ignore Church doctrine when it comes to decisions about contraception or abortion (Alvirez 1973; Darabi, Dryfoos, and Schwartz 1986). For example, Hispanic teenagers are just as likely to have an abortion as black and white teenagers, and among highly educated Chicana academics and white-collar workers, there is overwhelming support for the right to choice (Pesquera and Segura 1993).

These theories of repression and marginalization expose attempts at
control over what Carla Trujillo (1991) calls “the girls our mothers warned us about”: “loose women” and lesbians. For some Chicanas and Mexicanas, however, the silence regarding sexuality was so complete that our mothers only warned us about men, and lesbianism was not even discussed. These silences left open questions about which pleasures were acceptable and how lesbianism is constructed.

THE CONTEXT OF SILENCE DURING CHILDHOOD

My interview data provide no evidence for a cultural continuum where Mexicanas are more repressed about sexuality and Chicanas more liberated. Instead, despite many differences in experience based on being reared in two different societies at different points in time, Chicanas and Mexicanas often shared a repertoire of discursive practices about gendered sexuality, making statements about sex that were uncanny in their similarities.

For instance, both Chicanas and Mexicanas experienced childhood as a time when there was an overwhelming silence regarding sexuality. Consider the following typical statements by two women about the messages they were taught about sex as children: Vicenta Fernández, 56 years old, was reared in the 1940s in a small village in Michoacán and had no formal education whatsoever. Her family was so poor that Vicenta was sent to live with a *patrona* as a live-in cook, maid, and nanny. About her family of origin, she recalled: “Nunca hablaron de sexo, nunca. [They never spoke about sex, ever.]” Sara Rivas, a 22-year-old Chicana single mother attending a local community college, lived in the Santa Cruz region her whole life; her family had migrated from Mexico prior to her birth. She described how her family regarded sexuality when she was a child in the 1960s: “Sex you don’t talk about. You just do not talk about sex.”

In a similar vein, women received sanctions for sexual experimentation or play as young children that were often startling. Frida, an out lesbian with a Mexico City college degree, recalled her childhood in the 1960s: “Nunca se podía uno tocar los genitales en frente de la gente porque [decían] ‘déjate ahí, que haces allí, déjate ahí, no seas cochina.’ [One could never touch the genitals in front of others] because [they would say] ‘Leave that alone, what are you doing there, leave that alone, don’t be dirty.’” Maria Cabañas, a Mexicana from a small village, described an incident of childhood play that occurred during the 1950s: “Una vez que las niñas encueraban a los monitos y los acostaban, y me acuerdo que una vez lo pusieron encimados uno de otro. Mi mamá vino y vio eso y las corrió y no me dejó jugar con esas niñas. Y dije, ‘No te juntes con esas niñas porque son..."
muy groseras.’ [One time some girls undressed the dolls and they put them to bed, and I remember that one time they put one on top of the other. My mother came and saw that and she ran them off and would not let me play with them. She said, ‘Don’t get together with those girls because they are very crude.’]"

Women’s exposure to sex was sometimes violent. Dirana Lazer, a Chicana performance artist who had several years of university education, had been sexually molested by her uncle at age 4 in 1961. When her father found out he severely beat the uncle. Despite the highly charged nature of this conflict, the family never discussed the abuse or the beating until Dirana was an adult, and then the discussion was inadvertent and her sister asked that they never speak of it again.16 In this context of denial, Dirana’s family found sexuality in general difficult to discuss. When she was 7, her mother found Dirana masturbating and had a reaction that terrorized the child: “I remember she was screaming at my father, saying that my uncle made me like that, and so it was very clear: masturbation was a bad thing.” Developmental psychologists maintain that children have moral values as early as age 4. These women’s moral universe includes notions that sex is bad and carnal exploration or discussion is to be avoided (duCille 1996, 14).17

Despite having schooling experiences in different countries, Chicanas and Mexicanas had similar experiences with sex education. Minifred Cadena, a Chicana who attended school in southern California, recalled sex ed during the early 1960s: “In school we never talked about sex. The only time I learned about the female body was in Girl Scouts when we watched films.” Frida recalled sex education in Mexico City during the early 1970s: “Del sexo empezamos ha estudiar eso el sexto año de primaria, y fue muy simple, muy básico, anatómico nada más. Nada de reproducción, ni de emociones, ni de hormonas, ni de ‘esto les va pasar y se van a sentir así’ o ‘es normal,’ o no, nada. [We began studying about sex during the sixth year of elementary school, and it was very simple, very basic and anatomical, nothing more. Nothing about reproduction, nor about feelings, hormones, nor ‘this is going to happen to you and you will feel like this,’ or ‘its normal,’ oh no, nothing.]”

Menstruation is an important turning point for young women, and the lack of information they received about it was telling. Virtually no Mexicanas received any warning that she was going to menstruate and several thought there was something wrong with them when it happened. María Cabanas, who began menstruating in the early 1970s, recalled: “Cuando tuve mi primera regla fue una experiencia muy fea para mi porque no me advertieron de eso tampoco. [When I had my first period it was a very ugly
experience for me because they did not warn me beforehand.]” Thinking
she had suffered an injury that would not stop bleeding, she had such a
fright that she did not menstruate for three years. Some of the Chicanas re-
ceived information via films, but only if their mother allowed them to sign
up for sex education classes at school. Several immigrant mothers would
not give permission, despite entreaties by older siblings. Thus, Chicanas
too were often unprepared for the onset of menstruation. Sara Rivas, who
began menstruating in the 1980s, recalled: “It just happened. I was in the
bathroom, and like, ‘Oh Mom!’ and she comes in and she’s, ‘Oh, it’s okay,
it’s okay, it happens to everybody.’ And that’s how I found out.”

The silence around sexuality extended to same-sex relationships as well.
Several women had heard about male homosexuals. Frida pointed out: “En
México we always laugh at gays because there is the extreme of homosexu-
ality. They’re like queens . . . the ones who are not out, you never know—
they might be married, they might be having children and all that and they
can be gays en México. Los que más se ven son las transvestites de plano, las
reinas, así bien bien jótotes. [Those who one sees more are the transgenders
or the queens, those who are very very gay.]”

However, few of the Mexicanas had heard about lesbians as children.
María Cabañas said: “Antes de casarme [en 1972] casi no se oían comenta-
rios de las lesbianas; no supe mucho yo, nada más de esas mujeres jótatas. [Be-
fore I married [in 1972] one did not hear comments about lesbians; I did not
know much, nothing more about gay women.]” Chicanas experienced simi-
lar silence about lesbians. Sara Rivas recalled, “Yeah, my brothers talked
about fags and sissies, but that was all.” Dirana Lazer was one of the few
women who had knowledge of lesbianism as an adolescent in the mid-
1970s: “There was a lot of name calling—‘oh she is just a dyke’ or ‘she’s just a
butch’—but that was because I was in an all-girl high school and that’s how
the other girls would refer to the gay girls. It was derogatory.” Nowhere did
these women hear notions of pleasure in relation to same-sex relationships
among women.

Women did receive clear instructions about not losing their virginity,
however, although sometimes the message was coded or opaque. María
Cabañas recalled being told, “Como mujer, debe de ser respetada, siempre.
Mi mamá especialmente decía que ‘cuando te cases tienes que ser una seno-
rita,’ siendo virgen. [As a woman, one should be respected, always. My
mother especially said, ‘When you marry you have to be a young lady,’
meaning a virgin.]” Chicana Monique Rodríguez, who became pregnant as
a teenager and dropped out of high school, said: “My mom would explain
it to us like this: ‘You are like a flower or an apple right now, and if you are

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with somebody and they pick your flower or take a bite of your apple, then nobody is going to want you no more.’ Even a kiss, she just said that ‘you are dirty after you do that. You should wait until you get married.’ There was great variance, however, between the admonitions and the practice. In Mexico, these women lived sheltered lives prior to and after migrating to Santa Cruz County as adolescents. On the other hand, many Chicanas grew up in large households where both of their parents worked, and they had little after-school supervision. The assumption by parents was that the girls would obey the restrictions on their behavior and resist the temptations offered by American popular culture and the pressure of peers.

As an attempt to control their behavior, women were told that there was a whole array of signs that their body would display if they were to lose their virginity; for instance, women who were no longer virgins would walk differently—bowlegged or with their legs spread apart. Monique Rodríguez recalled that after she had sex with her boyfriend, her mother “read” her indiscretion on her body: “My mom told me that ‘you don’t walk right now, any more. You walk with your legs open.’ So that’s what she always told us.” Women were told that their face or their eyes would become more “knowing,” and, of course, the way young women dressed was an important indicator, for, as women were lectured, virgins do not dress provocatively. María Cabañas recalled: “Yo oí que cuando ya no son señoritas, las muchachas caminan diferente, y en la cara, siempre tienen vergüenza. [I heard that when they are no longer ladies, the girls walk differently, and by the looks on their faces, they seem ashamed.]” Some of the warning signs were downright bizarre. Monique Rodríguez continued: “And your ears, you can tell that they’re yellow [when a woman loses her virginity], that’s what she [her mother] said.” Mexicana María Pérez recalled: “They told me that the backs of their knees would be different. And I was told that once you started, it never stopped, you know, you never stop after you have it [sex] for the first time, it will be kind of difficult to hold your desires.” I could not help but chuckle and María responded: “That’s ridiculous, but that’s what they said to me.”

The body, then, was seen as a map, a document to be read by others regarding women’s possible transgressions and a source of betrayal if women did not control how they moved or displayed themselves in public. At the same time, women’s bodies were seen as uncontrollable, subject to the whims of passion. Thus, women’s bodies were policed, their reputations guarded, and the consequences for transgressions were severe. Sara Rivas, unmarried, became pregnant at age 17 with a black man, a student from the local university, which caused a big scandal in her family. She recalled this
period of extreme tension: “It [sex] just wasn’t talked about in this house, and if you did—that’s when I was just considered a total slut…. My parents wouldn’t talk to me when I was pregnant. I was just living here and they didn’t talk to me. My mom was really worried what other people would think.” Monique Rodríguez, who became pregnant at age 13 with a 15-year-old Chicano, recalled the tension in her family: “Because I had a baby, my dad kind of hated me for a lot of years. He never really talked to me. He was sad too. But he never confronted me. He could never, like, look at me and say anything.”

Besides guarding their virginity and reputation, women heard admonitions that estranged them from their own body. There never seemed to be any let-up in the ways their body was objectified. Every woman believed that something was wrong with her body; most often, they told me they felt too fat, although the thin women regretted that they were too skinny. Women who were not feminine in dress or demeanor or excelled in sports were teased for being tomboys and felt pressured to conform. Race politics intersected with these women’s devalued bodies so that skin color, type of hair, and facial and body features became open to scrutiny and evaluation. For example, Dirana Lazer was beautiful and light-skinned but had dark hair and was chided by her blond mother for not being guera (blond). Her mother hoped that perhaps since her own green-eyed, red-haired European ancestry had skipped a generation with Dirana, these features would show up in her grandchildren. Because Dirana was overweight, her mother would not buy her clothes as a teenager, hoping she would be pressured into losing weight. It is not surprising that Dirana developed low self-esteem: “I would feel really bad because I’d go to school and, in comparison with the other girls who were traditionally Mexicanas, and were always made up and really clean, you know, that whole beauty enforcement that we get in our culture? I just couldn’t even pretend because she wouldn’t buy me anything.”

**MIXED MESSAGES**

As these women made the transition to being teenagers, they found a new, difficult enforcement of modesty. They were no longer able to walk around in bathing suits or underwear, sit with their legs open, or play rough with brothers or other male kin, and they were discouraged from playing “boys’ games.” Adolescence was when many women noticed the marked gender privilege for the young men in their families: they had no curfews, got special meals, had no restrictions on displaying their body, and were entitled

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to seek carnal pleasures, including multiple partners. Dominique Ponce, for example, recalled her adolescence, which contrasted with that of her brother of a close age: “A guy does what a guy does; like it’s okay for him to have sex or whatever. If you’re a girl: ‘No, you don’t do that.’”

Along with these overt mechanisms of patriarchal control over women’s sexuality, their families often celebrated the Mexican Catholic ritual of quinceañera for a young woman’s fifteenth birthday. It is important to see a quinceañera as a tradition that is “an open, and sometimes chaotic terrain that is constantly reconfigured in everyday experience.” Nevertheless, in its most general features, la quinceañera is intended as an expression of gratitude to the Virgen de Guadalupe, a social debut that mimics a wedding, and a coming-of-age celebration of a young woman’s purity. The celebrant wears a white dress (or, occasionally, pastel colored) and veil, and her fourteen female attendants dress in color-coordinated outfits, escorted by formally attired chamberlains. After a celebratory mass, the family often hosts a dinner or reception with a special cake and sponsors a large dance in which the attendants dance a waltz, although in families with fewer resources, the celebration can be more modest and include only extended family members and close friends who attend a dinner party. The celebrant often has an escort and, in contrast to prior strict monitoring of her interactions with men, it is permissible for the young woman to dance with her partner and friends. Often, mastering the waltz is the most time-consuming part of the preparation for a quinceañera, and the frequent practices are occasions for socializing. After the ceremony, the young woman is often allowed to date, although occasionally under the supervision of an adult. Increasingly, young Chicanas are also hosting quinceañeras, even when their family no longer has strong ties to Mexico.

A quinceañera is an expression of ethnic identity and an event that transforms a girl into a Mexican Catholic woman through an ongoing process of negotiation [Dávalos 1996]. La quinceañera carries significance regarding young women’s sexuality as well, for it is often through the process of staging the event that parents withdraw some of their control over young women, and the women negotiate the terms of their adulthood. Among the women I interviewed, several did not have quinceañeras for varied reasons: not enough resources, disinterest, or, in the case of Frida, because “me daba pena [it bothered me]. I refused. I was ashamed of it. For me it was a waste. I didn’t feel like I needed one. But we finally had a religious ceremony at the church and that’s when I did my first communion too.” Other women who did have quinceañeras had particular recollections. Sara Rivas, for example, recalled the significance of this ritual for her family in terms of her
own autonomy: “It was really fun, and it meant I was a good little girl. It was a big event. I had everything, from the chambelánés, the whole works. That night my friends came over and there were guys there and I was dancing with a guy, and my parents were there and they didn’t say nothing.” Mirella Hernández recalled her quinceañera as representing “purity, your virginity,” even though she thought she was one of very few virgins among her peer group (Zavella 1997a). All women who had full-scale quinceañeras recalled having a very good time; over and over they reported: “It was so much fun!” Regardless of the meaning the participants attributed to having or not having a quinceañera, it is the only Mexican ritual that focuses exclusively on young women, and it celebrates their purity.21

At the same time that young women were attempting to understand changes occurring in their body, the control against experimentation and exploration, and the changing messages they received at home regarding sexuality, these women were also enduring pointed messages at school, in church, and in their neighborhood. These messages were not just about how they regarded their body, but, in California, included questions about whether Mexican immigrants should receive an education and about tracking Mexicans and Chicanas into courses that did not prepare them for college. These women also struggled with teachers’ questions about their abilities to perform academically or whether they fit into important social groups.22 Minifred Cadena recalled wistfully her attempts to fit in with predominantly Anglos in her southern California school. Her immigrant parents came to this country “to be white, and they taught me white—everything was white on white.” Not surprisingly, she remembered high school as a difficult period in her life. Adolescence was often when these women experienced a new interest on the part of men in their developing body and when the pressure to experiment with sex, drugs, or alcohol came from friends and kin their age. On top of these tensions and conflicts in the public arena, young women often had heavy household responsibilities, caring for younger siblings or, if living in farmworker households, subject to heavy work responsibilities themselves. It is not surprising, then, that many women felt besieged, as if they had little power or recourse other than to rebel in those arenas where they did have some freedom.

Several women’s cultural poetics embodied struggle against the violent control of their desires. Occasionally that struggle became outright resistance. Sara Rivas moved very quickly from being her mother’s favorite daughter at the time of her quinceañera to disgrace when she became a young single mother of two out-of-wedlock children at 17. She made her rebellion clear: “My mom said that she doesn’t know why I did this to her.
She thinks that it’s something against her, like I’m rebelling and stuff. And at first it was; they were just so strict, you know? And the more they would tell me that, the more I did it to hurt them. And that’s what I still do sometimes now: they tell me not to do something, they make me mad, then I’ll do it.” Unfortunately, by having unprotected sex, Sara’s rebellion eventually pushed her into circumstances in which she had very little autonomy.

PLAYING WITH FIRE AS ADOLESCENTS

Within this cultural and social context of pressure and the multiple attempts at silencing women’s passion, how did they find pleasure in their body? Here women shed light on another facet of silence, the social space where women explore their feelings, relationships, or social taboos only with highly trusted friends, confidants, or lovers. Women’s experiences with sexual experimentation are instructive and reveal how they “re-mapped” their body and ultimately transformed their subjectivity. Particularly regarding their initial sexual experiences, many women used metaphors related to playing (flirting, teasing, learning, or testing how far the relationship would go) and sexual pleasure as fire (“hot,” “passionate,” “boiling,” “explosive”) and, like uncontrolled flames, difficult to stop. The sanctions, if women were found out, were often a firestorm: “I got burned” or “Things got too hot at home.”

Of the women who had been with only one sexual partner, all were reared in Mexico. For example, María Cabanas, now married with five children, was cloistered in her village, spending her time either in school or in the company of women kin, and thus had very little experience with men when she migrated at age 16. After courting for two years, mainly by telephone or with a chaperone, she was enticed alone to her future spouse’s home. When I asked what had attracted her to Lucio, she recalled “su cuerpo [his body],” that he had a strong, trim, dark body. She described the couple’s first sexual experience: “Para mí fue bonita, porque yo recuerdo que mi esposo decía que era muy inocente y que le gustaba verme. Se me hizo bonito, pues, haber aprendido todo de él. [For me it was beautiful, because I remember that my husband said that I was very innocent and that he liked to look at me. It was beautiful for me, well, to have learned everything from him.]” This couple considered their first sexual experience a commitment of marriage, and two months later went back to María’s village in Guanajuato for a church wedding with the extended family and friends. Her relatives were unaware of her transgressions.

Not all of the women with one sexual partner had a marriage that lasted,
however, and their limited sexual experience made them naïve regarding other prospects for courtship. Like the other Mexicanas, Frida had fairly limited sexual experience, only one male. Upon moving to Santa Cruz County, however, she encountered the possibility of a relationship with a woman: “I never thought about that, but I was seeing all these lesbians and it looked very normal to me. I started to experience some kind of feelings, excitement, especially with particular persons. So this woman approached me and I was like, my ego was big and I was like, ‘OK!’ There was never any direct communication, like ‘Oh, you like me’ or ‘I like you,’ but it was wonderful. I was exploring this side of myself. Then she kind of dumped me. But it was good because when that happened I came out to myself.” Frida’s initiation into lesbianism, only her second sexual relationship, was positive and resulted in her eventual commitment with another woman: “I knew that I liked women, that I was ready for a relationship with a woman.” However, she remained closeted for quite some time.

Of the women in my sample who had many casual sexual partners, all were Chicanas with the exception of María Pérez, a highly educated Mexican immigrant who used her self-described “promiscuity” as a means of controlling her sexual partners [Zavella 1997a, 398–404]. Often, Chicanas’ devalued self-image became a factor in their sexual exploration. Minifred Cadena recalled: “The first time wasn’t that pleasant. He didn’t believe I was a virgin and then I kinda got flack for bleeding on the blanket. I remember that kind of made it very uncomfortable because I didn’t even know that was to be expected. After that I got more promiscuous. I just felt like, well, I was ruined anyway and I was just like going for it. I felt pretty much like the black sheep of the family in a lot of ways, for other reasons too, but that was one of them. After that there were a lot of one-night stands; I don’t know if I saw anybody twice: just experimenting, you know?”

In a similar fashion, Dirana Lazer had a negative first sexual experience. Bolstered by tequila, mushrooms, and marijuana, Dirana does not recall her first time: “I was devirginized at age 21. I was so drunk and so high, and I had such low self-esteem. Apparently we had sex.” After that first relationship ended, she went through a phase of sexual experimentation while living in a big city: “I was sleeping with all kinds of different interesting men, whatever I could get my hands on. That sounds awful but that’s the truth. I had lost that weight, and I looked good, and I felt like a million bucks. That’s why I was seeing so many different guys.” In her mind, Dirana was making up for her adolescence, in which she had felt “really ugly.”

Several Chicanas who were coerced into sex the first time often had been drinking heavily and did not use birth control or condoms. I asked

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Sara Rivas what she had been thinking at the time, and she said, "Actually, I didn't think. I had that kind of attitude, like 'getting pregnant, it will never happen to me.'" Unfortunately, she did get pregnant, at age 17, which caused the tension in her household described earlier. In contrast, 13 years old at the time, Monique Rodriguez was totally unprepared for the effects of alcohol and being alone with her 15-year-old boyfriend. She said, "I'm a person that can't really say no to people," that is, she could not say no to the young man who pressured her for sex. When she became pregnant, Monique's parents were very upset.

**Expressions of Sexual Pleasure**

After such troubling initial sexual experiences, how did women construct pleasure? As women described their sexual history after they lost their virginity, it became clear that each individual underwent a different process. When I asked women directly what gave them sexual pleasure, they often indicated that this was the point when they felt the most uncomfortable. This question came toward the end of the interview, after they had answered a number of questions about their experiences as children and adolescents and described their sexual history, sometimes in more detail than I had asked. I came to view the "pleasure question" as an important point of revelation, when women disclosed highly charged imaginaries or experiences—positive or negative. This was the point when women revealed transgressions, unfulfilled fantasies, sexual problems, or their play through language about sex.

Some women were attracted to certain "erotic scripts"—physical or social types or patterns in relationships—and if they had multiple partners, would return to that fantasy repeatedly. When the particular stereotype or script was problematic or promised more than real persons or circumstances permitted, then their relationship history was painful. Chicana Monique Rodriguez, for example, told me she was attracted to cholos. In her experience, these were men from Mexico who were very handsome, sexually aggressive, and flattering, who promised commitment and wanted children with her, but then had trouble with drugs and crime and became violent when things did not go their way. It was only after several of these relationships that she realized she needed to rethink her attractions, and that perhaps cholos were not the best type for her: "I don't like having sex, but I wish they'd just comfort me, sit with me or kiss me or stuff like that, but not have sex.... This life is crazy. You're not going to find a perfect guy."

Women's notions of sexual pleasure often included the common female
request for more foreplay prior to intercourse, for partners to take the time so they could fully enjoy sex. For example, "I like a lot more foreplay than I usually get," said Minfred Cadena, who laughed as she characterized her current lover: "He's an animal. That [foreplay] doesn't always happen." Women also desired orgasms, variation in carnal exploration, and not to be pressured into sex when they were not in the mood. María Cabanas, married for twenty-three years to the same man, said, "Bueno, lo que a mí me gusta en verdad es siempre de satisfacerlos y buscar la manera, sin preguntar, si tienes ganas. [Well, what I really like is to always satisfy ourselves and seek the means, without asking, if you are in the mood.]" Her tone indicated that this scenario did not happen every time. Dirana Lazer said: "I'd like orgasmic satisfaction. My pleasure would be doing it when I truly feel like doing it. Too often it is boom, boom, boom and it's done. I don't mind when it is aggressive sex. That is satisfying to me, that feels good. But I don't necessarily want to be having sex all the time. So my sexual fantasy is that it would be slower, longer, and more intimate, more affectionate. That would be nice, that would be a real treat. He knows that and he does try. We are not always in sync, but when we are it is nice." Note that pleasure and intimacy were seen as more romantic and thus preferable if they were spontaneous rather than subject to discussion or negotiation. As Frida observed, "Talking about sex has not been part of our cultural practice."

As women with low income, often the precarious circumstances of their lives had a negative effect on their sexual relations. Dirana Lazer had been unemployed for months and explained: "When I turn him away, I can see that at times it really hurts him, but I can't help it if I'm not in the mood. A lot has to do with our current situation, getting stressed out because of work and money. Those things affect me a lot. [But] when we do have sex, it is really, really good."

Other women who had less satisfaction with their sex lives nevertheless appreciated sexual intimacy or play. Dominique Ponce, for example, another Chicana who had been a teenage mother, admitted that she had never experienced an orgasm, yet found other pleasures in sex: "I don't care. It's nothing big. It's kind of funny and embarrassing. Somebody was telling me, 'It's probably better that you haven't [had an orgasm] because every time you're going to want it, and you can't.' But I like being close to somebody, I guess, and cuddling and having sex play. I enjoy that." After her divorce, Vicenta Fernández no longer had intimate relationships with men. However, I observed her taking pleasure by playfully bantering with her friends about a local wealthy, white widower. She speculated about whether he
could stay awake long enough for courtship and joked that a shot of tequila would liven him up: “A ver si un trago lo anime.”

In response to my question about sexual pleasure, there was another similarity between Chicanas and Mexicanas: how they talked about sex among women. Although only three women admitted having sexual relations with women, their language was downright gushing. Frida, for example, described a process of “coming home” with great aplomb:

I feel it [having sex with a woman] was something that fulfilled my soul. It was like, “I feel good.” It’s different from being with a man. A man can treat you soft but there is still something rough there and a woman can just change the whole thing. It’s another way to see love. It’s more kind. Me sentía llena [I felt full]. It’s a little milimetro espase [tiny space] that wasn’t fulfilled with men. Men could bring down the sky and give you the stars and all the universe [referring to an orgasm], and then, “OK, we’re finished, that’s it. I’m the man and you’re the woman.” With a woman I didn’t feel that way, I felt like an equal, something more ritualistic, more spiritual. I reacted like, como si hubiera sido [as if I had been a] lesbian por años [for years], you know, like when you throw babies into water and they start swimming? I was in my element.

Dirana Lazer believed that everyone is bisexual but was closeted to her husband, and had similar superlatives regarding her one sexual experience with a woman. She batted her eyelashes and swished her hand as she recalled: “‘Lily’ and I had one very intimate encounter, I guess you could say we played one afternoon. And I really liked it. It was a beautiful experience. I’ve never had as beautiful a sexual experience as I had with her. And that just leads me to believe that sexual experiences between women are much nicer than they are between men and women. I liked the softness, the sentiment. It’s so different, the essence I get [she giggled]—I’m using all these deep words here. I was not threatened by her like I was with guys.”

These women found carnal pleasure in situations in which there was gender equality among women (“I felt like an equal,” “I was in my element,” “I was not threatened”), and the sensual aesthetic was familiar and pleasing. Regardless of whether they found pleasure with women or men in these politics of intimacy, women preferred that their desires were fulfilled on the basis of affection and respect, without resorting to open requests, negotiation, or struggle.
CONCLUSION

By historicizing these women's experiences, we see the transnational nature of discourse and practice that links second-generation Chicanas and Mexicana immigrants regarding sexuality. The pervading themes of silence and violence is clear. Women who are beaten or scolded for sexual experimentation as children and are taught to deny their own worth or sense of pleasure often find it very difficult later to take charge of their own desires—sexual or otherwise. Clearly, processes of silence can be devastating for those who have been sexually abused—every woman who disclosed abuse to me felt that she had been at fault or had done something wrong. This has a damaging effect on women's self-esteem and makes standing up for themselves when confronted with other systems of power very difficult, although not impossible. Further, young women who are subject to vigilance over their movement, comportment, and body, particularly when combined with heavy household responsibilities and racist, class-based constraints in public institutions, often feel disempowered and, not surprisingly, find ways to contest and perhaps even rebel. When that rebellion takes place through unprotected sex, women can become vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, single parenthood, inadequate preparation for the labor market, and poverty.

We also see how women construe pleasure—whether with men or other women—by “playing” in multiple forms with complex notions of “fire,” although the particular “gendered script” they enact or find attractive within those cultural poetics varies tremendously. Perhaps the one theme we see among women is their yearning for pleasure in relationships where there is equality, respect, and affection, that is, a safe space to play. Again, the nondiscursive appears in this realm of creativity, where open negotiation or struggle places a damper on passion. These women are “rollin’ around in bed” with contradictory experiences and feelings derived from their multiple sources of structural subordination, against which they express their human agency. Their notions of carnal desire embody acquiescence and contestation of silencing discourses.

The similar discourse and practices experienced by Chicanas and Mexicanas are the product of my sample and the location where I am doing this research. Although I cannot claim that these findings hold for all women of Mexican origin, given the small sample size and lack of random sampling, clearly there are important cultural processes at work among these subjects. It would be very interesting to conduct this type of research in other regions—for example, in la frontera, where cultural border crossing
17. For two other ethnographic examples of violent sanctions toward women for sexual exploration as children, see Zavella (1997a).

18. In a study of female adolescents’ body image, whites and Hispanics were more likely to worry about their weight than were blacks. The majority of the study’s subjects describe the “perfect girl” as 5’7,” 100–110 pounds, with a good figure, long blond hair, and blue eyes (Nichter and Vuckovic 1994).

19. For a discussion of the multiple perspectives on the meaning of quinceañeras in the literature, by the Catholic Church, and by the participants themselves, see Dávalos (1996, 1997).

20. Jeanette Rodríguez (1994) finds that those women who have active, daily interaction with other Mexican Americans tend to refer to Our Lady of Guadalupe in more familial terms, such as “Our Mother,” whereas those born in the United States and acculturated refer to her in more distant terms, such as “The Mother of Jesus.” Her use of the acculturation model, however, is problematic.

21. Young men receive no coming-of-age ritual celebration [although there may be some encouragement of sexual experimentation], and other Catholic rituals include males and females.

22. For an interesting ethnographic study about social groups at a local high school in which Chicanas/os differed from Mexican immigrants, see Matutí-Bianchi (1986). For a discussion of how alienated Mexican American youth express their resistance to schooling, although not necessarily education, see Valenzuela (1997).

23. For a discussion of inexperienced drinking behavior by women, especially those from working-class or immigrant families, see Mora (1997).

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