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**Challenging Silence: Traditions of Sex Education and the Mexican
Immigrant Experience in the United States**

Anita Botello Santoyo

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the impact of rural to suburban immigration on traditions of sex education among Mexican women living in California. Through the intimate life histories of a small group of women from two generations, this project examines the ways that silence, public education, and community networks worked together to create and adapt traditions of sex education. At the center of this project are the oral narratives of mothers and daughters that came of age in different spaces and periods of time. The older generations of women were raised in Mexico's rural regions during the 1970s and '80s, while the younger generation is coming of age in Southern California's suburban communities. These environments shaped the ways in which they learned and talked about sex. Their experiences provide an untapped source of information for the study of the affects of immigration on traditions of intimacy and femininity.

To my mom, my dad, and my siblings.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to all the women who willingly (and sometimes reluctantly) sat down with me to talk about sex. It was a hard conversation for some and I was so humbled by their generosity in sharing their lives, memories and experiences with me. Thank you.

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On August 5, 2015, Olivia Tirado, a Mexican journalist, reported for *La Voz de Michoacán* on a meeting held by women from indigenous communities of the state's rural regions to discuss sex education. Brought together by La Casa Mazot, an organization devoted to advocating for women's sexual health and autonomy, the women learned about female condoms and discussed sexual pleasure. Tirado wrote that, "*Las mujeres indígenas hacen de todo cuidan la casa, la siembra, los hijos; pero lo que menos hacen es cuidar su cuerpo.*" (Indigenous women do everything to take care of the home, the harvest, and the children; what they do not do is take care of their bodies.) The meeting brought together women from communities that have traditionally viewed talking about sex as a sin. It is likely that this was the first time many of the participants openly discussed topics related to sex. In their communities, women's silence regarding sexuality has long been seen as a sign of respectability. La Casa Mazot's successful efforts to bring women together to talk about sex depended on an acknowledgment of deep-seated anxieties that surround the subject throughout Michoacán's rural region. Organizers addressed participants' apprehensions by providing an alternative space outside of their private homes for them to come together and talk about sexual health. In the fall of 2014, as part of an oral history project, I interviewed women who had grown up in rancho communities of Michoacán to discuss traditions of sex education. My interlocutors were as uncomfortable talking about sex as the women brought together by La Casa Mazot. Silence defined the ways in which they learned about sex; to speak about it went against their long-held understandings of morality. Once I understood the sensitive nature of the topic, I was able to develop interview tactics that allowed the women

to help create a space where they could feel comfortable talking about sex education. As a result, they generously shared with me this aspect of their life histories.¹

I began my thesis research with the preconceived notion that Mexican women do not talk about sex. This was a direct consequence of my upbringing, as my mother raised three daughters and never talked to any of us about the subject. I did not understand why all my attempts to ask her questions were ignored or shut down completely, even though sex was constantly present on television and talked about at school. Where did her reluctance to talk with her daughters about sex originate? Was silence a consequence of ignorance, of religious, or moral etiquette? A quantitative study of mother-daughter communication in minority communities has found that Latinas, including Mexican women, are less likely than black and white mothers to discuss sex with their daughters. The researchers did not explore in depth the reasons for this difference. Discomfort is likely a factor, but is that the only reason behind Mexican women's silence on sexual topics? To find my answers to this question I went directly to the source, Mexican mothers.²

Before moving to Riverside County in southern California, my mother spent her teenage years in a small rural town in Michoacán. Without access to official schools and health services, young women like her received informal sex education in their communities. Their learning was shaped by the moral and social expectations of families and neighbors. Despite the Mexican government's introduction of sex education into public schools in the 1930s and '40s, my interlocutors who grew up in rural México decades later received no

¹ Olivia Tirado, "Indigenas hablan de sexo entre ellas," *La Voz de Michoacán*, August 5,

² Lisa M. Meneses, Joan K. Orrell-Valente, Sylvia R. Guendelman, Doug Oman, and Charles E. Irwin Jr., "Adolescent Health Brief: Racial/ethnic Differences in Mother-daughter Communication About Sex," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 39, no. 1 (2006): 128-131, accessed April 18, 2016, <http://ezproxy.library.nyu.edu:2079/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2005.08.005>.

formal sex education and immigrated to the United States with a culture of silence regarding sexuality. This thesis offers a different perspective on the silence by exploring the informal traditions of sex education that have operated in México's rural communities and how they have evolved in the United States. These traditions have withstood government intervention, intergenerational tensions, and the social pressures on immigrants to assimilate.

My direct connection to the Mexican immigrant community in Riverside County allowed me to quickly recognize that my experience with my mother is not unusual. Deepening my understanding through my interviews, I have come to regard mothers' silence about sex not as an impediment to young women's sex education, but as one of its components. I brought two central questions to these interviews: How did young women in rural communities in Michoacán learn about sex? How have these traditions of sex education changed after immigration? My interlocutors' oral narratives illuminate both processes, and the ways silence figures in them. They testify to a tradition of maternal silence that played a crucial role in young women's sex education in Michoacán's rancho communities, migrated to southern California with daughters of these communities, adapted to the new environment, and still survives. The multiple narratives I have collected provide an invaluable window into the experiences of women across two generations that contributed to this tradition's resilience.

My project relies on memories, stories, and the personal opinions of women who grew up in rural communities of México and their daughters who were raised in Riverside County. I have loosely labeled these two groups the older and younger generations. The older group is made up of women who came of age in the 1960s and '70s. Many of them immigrated to California with children, while others became mothers in the United States.

The younger group is made up of women born and/or raised in California during the 1980s and '90s. While the majority of my interlocutors fit into one of these two categories, I also draw on conversations with older immigrant women who grew up in Mexican towns and attended schools longer than girls in rancho communities. Their experiences offer insight to what state-sponsored sex education was like for those who had access to it.

The thesis rests on nine formal interviews along with several informal interviews. In all cases I protect my interlocutors' anonymity by withholding their surnames. We spoke in kitchens and coffee shops, and in a crowded office. My conversations with two women, Catalina and Griselda, were conducted in their kitchens while they prepared meals for their families. Both were hesitant to share with me their experiences of sex education, but agreed after I assured them that I would not ask for intimate details. They both refused to be recorded with audio or video equipment, so instead I sat at a table with my laptop and notebook, taking endless notes. Catalina was born in 1966 in the state of Michoacán and immigrated to California in 1992; she never talked to her daughters about sex. Griselda was born in the state of Michoacán in 1972 and arrived in California at the age of seventeen. Sex was not a topic she discussed with her mother or sisters, so when she had her own children she felt unprepared to bring up the subject with them. Her daughter Ana, age twenty-four, whom I also interviewed, confirmed that her mother had never discussed sexuality and reproduction with her. In these narratives, along with the others I collected, there is a recognizable pattern of silence that has moved across borders and bridged generational gaps. Silence between mothers and daughters was a practice intended to ensure the morality of young women, but this did not mean that other methods of sex education were not employed. Women in México's countryside drew on knowledge passed down to them through extensive

familial networks. For example, one woman recalled her grandmother's warning that touching a man's hand could bring about a pregnancy. Immigration to California separated these women from extended families and forced them to adapt to a different social environment, yet their daughters testify to the endurance of traditions that originated in rural México.³

My interlocutors' personal narratives contribute to the growing literature on the experiences of immigrant and first-generation Mexican-American women in the United States. While I root the older generation's narratives in a larger history of sex education in rural Michoacán, I also address immigration's impact on these women's cultural customs and identity. In doing this, I add to the work of historians, sociologists, and anthropologists who have increasingly studied and documented the experiences of Mexicans and Mexican-American communities in the United States. In *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression* (1999), historian Douglas Monroy chronicles the development of Mexican-American communities in Los Angeles, California, from the early 1900s until the late 1930s. He examines the sometimes turbulent assimilation of Mexican men and women to social expectations of urban living. In *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism and the Cultural Politics of Memory* (2009), ethnic studies scholar Catherine Ramirez explores the lives of later generations of Mexican Americans from the 1930s through the 1960s. By tracing the image of the woman zoot suiters, Ramirez exposes conflicting views of Mexican femininity. While Monroy and Ramirez touch on intergenerational differences in regards to sexuality, this is not the focus of their research. By

³ Catalina, interview by author, Riverside County, December 22, 2014; Griselda, interview by author, Riverside County, January 6, 2015; Carmen, interview by author, Riverside County, January 8, 2015.

placing traditions of sex education at the forefront of my interviews, I illuminate both differences and continuities between Mexican women who arrived in southern California in the 1980s and '90s, and their daughters who grew up there.⁴

My emphasis on the development of sex education also places this thesis in dialogue with interdisciplinary studies of sexuality among Mexican women. Migration's impact on their experiences of gender, marriage and sexuality is a central query in the work of sociologist Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez and anthropologist Jennifer Hirsch. Both utilize oral testimonies to study the changes in Mexican women's views on sex and marriage after migration. In *Erotic Journeys: Mexican Immigrants and Their Sex Lives* (2005), Gonzalez-Lopez draws on interviews with men and women living in Los Angeles to analyze migration's impact on sex and intimacy. The women she interviewed describe the pressures of sexual purity that they experienced growing up in México, primarily in México City. Hirsch traveled to two towns in México to explore firsthand the dynamics of marriage and sexuality among Mexican women, analyzed in her book *Courtship after Marriage: Sexuality and Love in Mexican Transnational Families* (2003). She compares these women's experience to those of Mexican women living in Atlanta, Georgia, and argues that transnational connections have changed traditional expectations. My research shifts the focus from Mexican traditions rooted in cities and towns to those that developed in rancho

⁴ Douglas Monroy, *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Catherine S. Ramirez, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism and the Cultural Politics of Memory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

communities, and my inclusion of a second generation of women adds to our understanding of immigration's impact on sexual mores.⁵

Oral history is essential to this project. The narratives I have collected illuminate the evolution of informal traditions that operate orally within my interlocutors' communities and lack written documentation. In his article "What Makes Oral History Different"—written in part as a response to the method's critics—renowned oral historian Alessandro Portelli acknowledges that writing represents language, but observes that the traits of oral expression, such as tone and volume, add to language a layer of complexity that cannot be reproduced in writing. The traditions of sex education in the rancho communities where my older interlocutors came of age relied heavily on the oral language that Portelli describes. No one wrote down the rules of teaching or learning about sex. Instead, these processes involved personal conversation and interpretation of subtle social cues. Without oral testimonies, it would be impossible to understand the complexity of sex education in these communities. This is not to say I have completely excluded written materials from my research. Aside from secondary scholarship, I make use of government reports on sex education that show how external forces have affected intimate affairs of families in the California suburbs that my interlocutors now call home.⁶

As a historian I understand the dangers of relying on memory; it can be unreliable and easily subjective. Oral history is a research method that cannot be deployed without careful consideration, but it has also afforded me with the opportunity to examine the experiences of

⁵ Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez, *Erotic Journeys: Mexican Immigrants and Their Sex Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Jennifer S. Hirsch, *A Courtship After Marriage: Sexuality and Love in Mexican Transnational Families* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁶ Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2006), 32-42.

women who are often overlooked in written accounts. Individual memories from various sources can make up a collective memory or expose a pattern. I am looking for these patterns in the oral narratives presented here.

My process of collecting oral narratives was methodical. Much as an archivist culls written documents to build a collection, I selected interlocutors with certain characteristics and chose the types of memories I wanted them to recall. The women I interviewed were active participants in setting the boundaries of our time together, however they decided where we met, how I would record our conversations, and which questions they would and would not answer. They chose to share their life stories with me; with this gift comes the responsibility of interpreting them with accuracy and transparency, and I have tried to do that throughout the thesis.

In order to present their testimonies in a cohesive manner, the thesis is organized into two sections. The first focuses on traditions of sex, marriage and family in Michoacán's rancho communities. Drawing on the testimony of my interlocutors from the older generation, this section addresses the importance of silence in sex education and rural families' reliance on their own educational devices thanks to their great distance from schools. In the second section, I shift to examining how immigration to Riverside County's suburbs affected traditions that derived from rancho life. Both mothers and daughters testify to the challenges of adaptation to the new environment. Here I also address the ways in which living in the United States has changed views on sexual education and what these changes have meant for younger women in particular.

This thesis project does not attempt to account for every experience with sex education on the part of immigrant women who grew up in México's countryside or their

daughters who have come of age in the United States. My research provides a glimpse of the life histories of a small group of women, and the ways in which traditions of sex education in their families and communities have been affected by migration from rural to suburban spaces across a national border. This is a history of communities of people who have in some ways adapted to new social norms, and at the same time maintained certain traditions of decorum from their home country. The project is driven by curiosity and determination to bring historical analysis to bear on the ways that women teach and learn about sex in Mexican immigrant families.

Living and Loving in México

When I first set out to examine why the Mexican families I grew up around never talked about sex, my logical starting point was the older generation of women. Why did my mother and my aunts never talk to their daughters about sex? Finding the answer to this question turned out to be much more complicated than I anticipated. My thesis project posed a paradox; I wanted to ask older Mexican women about sex education, a topic they have been notably silent about. The silence that had drawn me to the topic in the first place became my greatest hurdle as a researcher. Together, my interlocutors and I set the boundaries of our meetings, which proved to be both frustrating and rewarding.

The women whose stories I share in this section generously overcame their initial hesitations to discuss with me their experiences with learning the meanings and responsibilities of sex. Gaining their agreement to have these discussions required concessions on my part. To hear their stories, I had to create a comfortable space. This sometimes meant going against conventional rules of research, especially when it comes to methods of recording oral narratives. When I asked which recording methods would be

acceptable, the women of the older generation declined to be audio or video recorded. They all spoke Spanish; some spoke no English, so logically Spanish was the language of our conversations. This presented me with the challenge of taking notes and translating almost simultaneously. I introduce these women in order of appearance: Carmen, Griselda, Juana, Maurilia, Catalina, and Daniela. Despite their refusal to be recorded, they provided a rich historical record of life in México and sex education practices outside of the formal structures of education.

In the middle of the afternoon on Thursday, January 8, 2015, I arrived at Carmen's house in Menifee, California, a small city in Riverside County. She was alone in the house that day; after a hug hello she led me into the kitchen of her small mobile home. As is customary in Mexican etiquette, she offered me food. Carmen and I had interacted at family gathering for years, but this was the first time I had seen her visibly nervous. That day I was not visiting her as a member of her extended family, but rather as a researcher. She urged me to sit down; she remained standing, waiting for me start to interrogate her about a subject she rarely discusses. A week before our interview, Carmen had agreed to talk to me about her experience with sex education; it took her daughter's and my explaining the project and assuring her I would not be filming or recording our discussion to convince her to participate. All I had brought with me to our meeting were a notebook and a pencil. Rather than choosing where we would talk, I allowed her to find the place in her home where she felt most relaxed. Aware of her discomfort, I tried to put her at ease by asking about her family and work. After a few minutes we settled into a conversation about her children, which allowed me to steer

the talk to the topic of sex and reproduction. I sat in her spotless kitchen for over an hour as she shared with me her memories of growing up in México.⁷

Carmen was born in December of 1959, in the rancho community of El Zapote. Her family home was located on the outskirts of the Municipio de Turicato, Michoacán, far removed from hospitals, town squares, schools, and government services. Without easy access to markets or social services, families in such communities had to be self-sufficient. Long before Carmen was born, México's central government had tried unsuccessfully to remake rural culture with regard to sex. Before the 1930s and '40s, sexuality had been a strictly private topic, and the Catholic Church had been the final authority on the subject. Then, in the wake of the Revolution, the National Ministry of Health and Education attempted to combat high infant mortality and widespread outbreaks of syphilis by implementing sex education and encouraging women to seek prenatal care. As part of this effort, public schools started to disseminate information about sexual and reproductive health. The schools were concentrated in cities and towns, however, and Michoacán's rancho communities were largely beyond their reach. This was still the case in the 1960s, when Carmen was growing up.⁸

⁷ Carmen, interview by author, Riverside County, January 8, 2015.

⁸ Carmen, interview by author, Riverside County, January 8, 2015. On rural life in Michoacán following the Revolution of 1910-1920, see Marjorie Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán Peasants, and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). On rancho communities in modern México, see Gustavo Esteva, *The Struggle for Rural México* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1983). Despite the central government's support for sex education, it remained controversial even in cities. On this, see Patience A. Schell, "Gender, Class, and Anxiety at the Gabriel Mistral Vocational School, Revolutionary México City" in *Sex in Revolution: Gender, Politics, and Power in Modern México*, edited by Jocelyn Olcott, Mary Kay Vaughan, and Gabriela Cano, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 99-111.

The nearest public school to her home in El Zapote was two hours away by horse. The government assigned teachers to staff the school, which served families from various ranchos in the area. Carmen remembers classmates who traveled much farther than she and her siblings did to attend school. The students carried with them food for the entire day because lessons lasted from early morning to late afternoon, no meals were served, and going home for lunch was not an option. Eventually Carmen stopped going to school; the trip became an inconvenience for her family. Distance kept many of my interlocutors from completing their grade-school educations. Griselda, for example, was born in Sanonas, Michoacán, in 1972; she attended school until the second grade. The public school for children in her family's rancho was in the nearest pueblo. Her family kept her home from school when it became too expensive to send her and her siblings to attend. Although they grew up in the 1960s and '70s, when sex education was well established in Mexican schools, neither Carmen nor Griselda attended school long enough to receive formal lessons in sexual health.⁹

Two of my interlocutors, Juana and Maurilia, who grew up in larger pueblos and completed grade school there, provided glimpses of public sex education in these decades. I first contacted Juana via email to ask her to participate in this project. It took a few email exchanges to convince her that my questions would focus on systems of sex education rather than her intimate experiences. Her busy schedule made it difficult to find a private moment for us to meet. Eventually we were forced to meet during her lunch break, in a crowded room at the office where she works. With my notebook in front of me, I listened as she whispered

⁹ Griselda, interview by author, Riverside County, January 6, 2015; Carmen, interview by author, Riverside County, January 8, 2015; Carmen, interview by author, Riverside County, January 1, 2016.

to me in Spanish her experiences with sex education. Juana was born in Carreras, Durango, in 1959. By the time she finished the sixth grade her only exposure to sex education was through a health textbook that discussed the body. She made no mention as to whether the textbook included any information on contraception.¹⁰

Like Juana, Maurilia recalls taking a health class during her sixth-grade year. She was born in 1972 in Las Juyas, Michoacán, and completed eleven years of schooling in all. Health classes were part of the natural science curriculum at her school. She describes the class as an anatomy lesson that covered male and female bodies; information on contraceptives and sexually transmitted diseases were left out. Her parents were not notified as to the topics the class covered, and the students were not separated by gender. While Juana and Maurilia received very limited sex education in their pueblo schools, women from Michoacán's rural communities like Griselda and Carmen had no access to such classes.¹¹

Whether or not they had received sex education in school, talking about sex or any related topic caused my interlocutors anxiety. When I approached women about my thesis project I was invariably met with uncomfortable smiles. As a young Mexican woman myself, I had in the eyes my elders committed a social blunder by talking publicly about sex. One of the questions I asked during every interview was, did you talk to your mother about sex? Carmen said she had never done so and found it hard to explain why; saying simply that it was just not done. Silence between mothers and daughters was not a unique custom of Carmen's family; Griselda also recalled never asking her mother questions about sex. Catalina felt that if she had asked her mother about sex she would have lost her teeth. She explained that in her community, "We had four neighbors; *en el rancho* we didn't talk about

¹⁰ Juana, interview by author, Alameda County, January 15, 2015.

¹¹ Maurilia, interview by author, Fairfield County, January 14, 2015

those things.” The transgression of speaking about sex was so serious for Catalina that she was compelled to maintain silence both in private and in public. Not talking about sex with their mothers set a precedent for all three women’s early sex education.¹²

Based on their shared experiences, I surmise that silence regarding sex had two important functions among rural families. It served as both a deterrent to sexual activity and a norm of cultural etiquette. Catalina insisted that it was ignorance that perpetuated silence. She said, “We didn’t know what it [sex] was, so we didn’t ask questions.” Silence, in her experience, discouraged any premature curiosity that might lead to her engaging in sexual activity and taught her to categorize sex as topic not acceptable in public conversations. Anthropologist Patricia Zavella argues in her study, “‘Playing with Fire’: The Gendered Construction of Chicana/Mexicana Sexuality,” that “culturally sanctioned silence” functioned as a method by which to repress sexual activity among Chicanas and Mexicanas. Zavella found that the women she interviewed overwhelmingly agreed with the following statement from one of her participants: “Talking about sex meant I was a bad person. So I didn’t talk about it.” Similarly, Carmen describes feeling that talking about sex openly could invite people to believe she was having sex. She was not my only interlocutor to recall feelings of shame and embarrassment associated with silence; Catalina, for example, found it ludicrous to even imagine she would walk up to a neighbor to ask a question about sex, and seemed to take offense that I would even suggest it. The sanctioned silence taught my

¹² Carmen, interview by author, Riverside County, January 8, 2015; Catalina, interview by author, Riverside County, April 22, 2016; Griselda, interview by author, Riverside County, January 6, 2015; Patricia Zavella, “Playing with Fire: The Gendered Construction of Chicana/Mexicana Sexuality,” in *The Gender Sexuality Reader: Culture, History, Political Economy*, ed. Roger N. Lancaster and Micaela di Leonardo (New York: Routledge, 1997), 393.

interlocutors the social politics of sexuality, including when it was appropriate for sex to be learned and talked about.

If Carmen and Catalina did not talk to their mothers about sex and did not attend a health class in school, then how did they and other women from similar communities learn about sex and reproduction? The answers were in the stories they shared and in their memories of rancho life. My interlocutors described learning from community and extended-family networks that protected young women from possible abandonment by sexual partners by sanctioning marriages without Catholic sacraments, by providing women with knowledge about childbearing and contraception, and by imparting moral codes of conduct. These young women's education about sex was shaped by community traditions, not by formal schooling.

Before Carmen understood the biological components of sex and reproduction, her grandmother warned her of potential indiscretions. When she was a teenager she was discovered meeting with a boyfriend along the fence that surrounded the family property. In an effort to safeguard her respectability in the community, her grandmother told her that pregnancy was a possible consequence of holding a man's hand. Carmen smiled during her retelling of this story, acknowledging the absurdity of her grandmother's informal lesson in reproduction. Despite their biological inaccuracy, her grandmother's words served as a reminder of what was at stake for a young woman in her community. Sex had the potential not only to undermine Carmen's moral standing among her family and her neighbors, but also to propel her into a lifelong commitment to her partner.¹³

While talking about matters of sex and reproduction was considered impolite among my interlocutors and their mothers, this did not mean that conversations did not take place

¹³ Carmen, interview by author, Riverside County, January 8, 2015.

among young women in private. Catalina, who like Carmen, was born and raised in a rancho community, described one such instance. She remembered that, before her marriage in 1985, she listened in on a conversation in which her married sister and another woman were discussing sex and contraceptives. From this conversation Catalina learned about the calendar method of contraception, which had failed her, she complained during our interview. When I confided that I was unfamiliar with this method, she was shocked and was quick to explain it to me. The method suggests that there are certain days of the month when a woman can engage in sexual activity without fear of pregnancy, but Catalina stressed that sex could happen only at certain times on these days. Unbeknownst to her young married sister, Catalina's eavesdropping provided her first experience with sex education.

While older female relatives were important sources of information for young unmarried women like Catalina, peer groups made up of other young women who were not kin allowed my interlocutors to ask questions they felt were inappropriate to direct at their mothers. Griselda, for example, remembered asking her friends questions about menstruation and sex. Matters of sex and reproduction were rarely addressed outside of close-knit networks of family and friends. Among my interlocutors from rancho communities, only Carmen spoke of a local *partera* (midwife), who assisted in the birth of Carmen's first child. Her work in the community afforded her the permission to provide young women information about sex and reproduction. It was expected that, despite their mothers' silence on the subject, daughters would gradually learn about sex. For many of my interlocutors it was not until after they left their childhood homes to start families of their own that they would learn more about sex, marriage, and reproduction.

I spoke to Daniela one afternoon in my mother's kitchen. It was an unplanned interview; I did not know she would be there cooking that day. To my surprise, it was my mother who brought up my research project. Daniela grew up in a rancho in Michoacán with some of the same traditions of sex education as the women I have introduced so far. When she heard about my project she laughed and asked what I wanted to know. I quickly ran to get my camera, hoping that this time I could get a woman speaking on video, but when I came back she shook her head and told me to put the camera away. Daniela's mother died when she was very young, so she was raised by her immediate family. She attended school until she turned fifteen but had no sex education at school. When I asked her what sort of sex education she received, she laughed and told me she had learned by doing. The night of her elopement provided her education in sex.¹⁴

Most of the older women I spoke to learned about sex when they ran away with their boyfriends. The act of sex was part of a complicated tradition of *rapto* (elopement) that involved a young couple's running off together. Daniela laughed when she shared with me her family's anxiety that she would elope with a man when she reached adolescence. They went so far as to hide her shoes, in hopes that this would prevent her from going out with her boyfriend at night. She smiled coyly when she assured me that this did not stop her, but merely delayed the inevitable. The *rapto* tradition dictated that, once a young couple ran away and spent at least one night together, they had committed themselves to marriage, whether or not a priest or public official had performed a ceremony. Daniela and her family

¹⁴ Daniela, interview by author, Riverside County, December 22, 2014.

understood that when she left home in this manner she would be sealing her fate as a married woman.¹⁵

For my interlocutors from rancho communities, the rules of *rapto* positioned sex and marriage as one and the same. The man a young woman left home with would be her husband in the eyes of her community and, by extension, god. Carmen left with her boyfriend one evening; together they went to his mother's home for shelter and blessing for their union. Once she had spent the night with her boyfriend, all that was left in *rapto* was to ask formal forgiveness and blessings from her parents. Catalina left her family home at the age of eighteen and did not return to complete this ritual until after she had her first daughter a year later. Elopement was commonplace in rancho communities; so much so that that Catalina and Carmen's families expected them to follow this tradition.¹⁶

While the Catholic faith condemned sex before marriage, *rapto* allowed women to engage in sexual activity without the sanction of the church. Juana, who grew up in a pueblo, described premarital sex as an unthinkable act for which a young woman would be shunned by her community. This did not happen to Catalina or Carmen, however. Despite their communities' devotion to Catholicism, both women were accepted back after their elopements, even though they had not yet engaged in the Catholic sacrament of marriage.

¹⁵ Daniela, interview by author, Riverside County, December 22, 2014.

¹⁶ Traditions of *rapto de seducción* (abduction by seduction) are defined by historian Kathryn A. Sloan in her book *Runaway Daughters* as "the abduction of a woman against her will by the use of physical violence, deception, or seduction in order to satisfy 'carnal desires' or to marry...rapto also occurred when a woman under sixteen years of age went voluntarily with a man" (1). Sloan examines court records of various cases of *rapto* to illustrate the conflict between state officials and families regarding the enforcement of laws and established social norms in the state of Oaxaca, México. My interlocutors' experiences with *ratpo* do not fit her description of the practice. I did not find evidence of violence or rape in the stories of elopement in the oral narratives that were shared with me. See on *rapto* Kathryn A Sloan, *Runaway Daughters: Seduction, Elopement, and Honor in Nineteenth-Century Mexico*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 1-2.

With regard to *rapto*, faith was flexible, meeting the needs of rural communities that did not have easy access to established churches. Life in Juana's pueblo was more strictly bound by Catholic doctrine on sex and marriage because the physical markers of the church were in closer proximity to her home. Her family and community expected her to have a church wedding before she engaged in sex. That was not true for my interlocutors who grew up on ranchos.¹⁷

Before sitting down with these women to explore the México living in their memories, I took for granted the countless times older women in my family had said, "*En el rancho no teníamos esto*" (On the rancho, we did not have this). Sex education under the auspices of the government and Church was among the things they lacked. Instead, Michoacán's rancho communities depended on extended family, peer groups, and *rapto* to educate daughters on matters of sex, love, marriage and reproduction. Limited access to public schooling and Catholic churches made it easier for these traditions to continue over the decades, despite the teachings of the Church and the government's attempts at social reform. What happened to these informal traditions of sex education when they were taken out of isolation and plunked down in southern California suburbs with contrasting views on sex and reproduction? All the women introduced in this section immigrated to California with their husbands and went on to raise children in suburban communities on the other side of the border. In these new spaces life changed for all these women and sex education took on a new meaning and importance for their daughters.

¹⁷ Juana, interview by author, Alameda County, January 15, 2015.

Things Are Different Here

On Tuesday January 6, 2015, I finally found myself sitting in Griselda's kitchen after multiple failed attempts to meet her. Initially we had agreed that I would come to her home in the morning, before her youngest children returned from school and her husband came home from work. Running late after another appointment, I arrived at her doorstep in the mid-afternoon, but rather than turn me away she invited me inside and asked me to sit at the kitchen table while she cooked dinner. Two of her daughters, ages three and eleven, and her teenage son sat in the living room watching television, while her husband was resting in their bedroom. Throughout our conversation, her three-year-old daughter would wander into the kitchen, only to be pushed out by her mother. Griselda had hoped to have this conversation in private, but instead we were speaking about intimate topics with her family all around her. Despite her constant displays of discomfort with the topic, she answered all of my questions and generously shared with me her immigration story.¹⁸

Griselda left her rancho community in Michoacán in the mid-1980s. She went to live with her extended family in the border city of Tijuana, Baja California, where she hoped to find work in the developing border industrial economy. She stayed there until 1989 when, at the age of sixteen, she met her husband and moved across the border to Riverside County. Griselda soon learned that life was different on the northern side of the border. A year after her arrival, she was pregnant with her first child. Had she been living with her family in Michoacán or Tijuana, her pregnancy would likely have been received with excitement, but in Riverside County a pregnant seventeen-year-old girl faced social stigma and legal uncertainties. Griselda did not receive any prenatal care during her pregnancy because she

¹⁸ Griselda, interview by author, Riverside County, January 6, 2015.

feared her husband might face criminal charges on account of her age. That would not have been the case in México, but in Riverside County she had to adapt to a social environment that held different expectations regarding marriage, childbirth and young women's sexuality.¹⁹

During our conversations, my interlocutors from both generations expressed that sex education and marriage have different social meanings and consequences in México and the United States. Along with immigration across the border, the move from rural to suburban living had a profound impact on the ways women of the younger generation learned about sex. New expectations were placed on their mothers; traditions of sex education that had flourished in rancho communities were not easily replicated in Riverside County. While respectable silence between mothers and daughters did not completely disappear among my interlocutors, its meaning has diminished as forces external to family networks and the multigenerational immigrant community have bombarded their daughters with lessons about sex. My interlocutors' testimony underscores the importance of three sources of these lessons: first, media, including the internet, television and movies; second, sex education in public schools; and, third, peer groups that developed in the schools.

Riverside County is made up of clusters of small cities with large Mexican-American communities throughout. Mexican immigrants are drawn to this area because of these communities and the county's proximity to the border. Formed in 1893, the county is now the fourth most populous in the state. Its landscapes include fertile river valleys, low deserts, mountains, foothills and rolling plains. The census of 2010 found 2,189,641 residents of the county, 865,117 of them people of Mexican descent. In the same year, Riverside's close

¹⁹ Griselda, interview by author, Riverside County, January 6, 2015.

neighbor Los Angeles County had a total population of 9,818,605 and about 35.8 percent of its residents were Mexican. When Griselda arrived in the area, she doubtless took comfort in the fact that it was home to an established community of Mexican women. Once her daughter neared adulthood, however, Griselda would face new pressures of life in the United States.²⁰

A striking difference between Griselda's adolescence in rural Michoacán and her daughter Ana's adolescence in Riverside County is that Ana had access to information about sex through the internet and other media. At one point in our conversation Griselda joked that her children most likely know more about sex than she does. A few days later, I sat down with Ana and tried to judge the accuracy of this assessment. How much had television, movies and the internet really impacted Ana's sex education? Ana was born in Riverside, California, in 1991, hitting her teenage years in the early 2000s, and it is safe to say that she grew up with the internet. To a large degree, her sex education involved watching television and surfing the internet. When she wanted information on contraceptives, she recalls, "I looked it [sex] up when I was watching *Teen Mom*.... There was a commercial...[that said] for more information on ways to prevent pregnancy go to [a website]. I went on it and looked at it." Watching an MTV reality show about teenage pregnancy sparked in Ana a curiosity about methods of contraception. She did not need to go any further than her computer to find the answers she wanted.²¹

²⁰ County of Riverside California, "Riverside County History," accessed April 1, 2016, <http://countyofriverside.us/Visitors/CountyofRiversideInformation/RiversideCountyHistory.aspx>; United States Census Bureau, "Riverside County, California, 2010 Census," accessed April 1, 2016, <http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>, Data from 2010 census report are the most complete, providing a breakdown of population by race and ethnic background.

²¹ Griselda, interview by author, Riverside County, January 6, 2015; Ana, interview by author, Riverside County, January 6, 2015.

For another one of my interlocutors—Lorena, who was born in México but raised in Riverside County—television and movies were a central part of sex education. “My parents were never strict of what we would watch,” she explained. She and her siblings would watch both television programs and R-rated movies that depicted sex. From these sources Lorena not only obtained an image of sex and sexuality but also was encouraged to ask questions. Like Ana, Lorena grew up in a media culture that constantly raised topics related to sex, and this form of education was not moderated by adults from their communities.

Griselda felt she could not control what her daughters were exposed to on the internet, and she was right. Examining a similar phenomenon in the 1920s and ’30s, historian Douglas Monroy’s article titled “‘Our Children Get So Different Here’” describes the “cultural transformation,” that took place as younger Mexicans in Los Angeles were influenced by the Anglo-American culture they saw in film and fashion. The addition of television and the internet increased this influence on my younger interlocutors. Much as the Mexicanas that Monroy describes embraced the fashions worn by their favorite screen actresses, my interlocutors from the younger generation sought to learn about sex outside of the traditions of their mothers. Conversations about matters that in rancho culture would have been discussed privately with friends or family, customarily after a young woman was married or had eloped, now took place in very public venues.²²

Media were not the only such venue; school was another arena for learning about sex. Ana took her first sex-education class during her freshmen year of high school. Her mother, Griselda, signed the permission slip without any discussion regarding the topics Ana would

²² Douglas Monroy, “‘Our Children Get So Different Here’ Film, Fashion, Popular Culture, and the Process of Cultural Syncretization in Mexican Los Angeles, 1900-1935,” *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 19, no. 1 (1990): 79-108; quotation is from page 80.

be learning about. During our conversation, Ana had trouble remembering the topics covered in the class. However, a statewide survey of sex education and HIV/AIDS-prevention education found that, as of 2003, 96 percent of California's public schools offered classes in sexual health, and that the topics addressed included abstinence, pregnancy, methods of contraception, and sexually transmitted diseases. Unlike ranchos, where children and youth had limited access to schools, Riverside County operates under truancy laws that require that parents of children ages six to eighteen send them to public school unless alternate education has been arranged. Across the county, moreover, public schools are close at hand. More than 425,000 students attend them, and over 60 percent of the students are Latinos, largely of Mexican descent. Whether or not the older generation trusted the state to educate their children about sex, sex education in public school became the norm in my interlocutors' families once they moved to southern California. Through this medium, members of the younger generation have been widely exposed to the state's perspectives on sex and sexuality while their parents have had to confront its expectations with regard to childrearing.²³

Erika, who belongs to the younger generation, contrasted sex education in the United States and México in the following way:

If you have sex in México you are automatically with the guy; you go live with him and get pregnant.... [In the United States] they teach you in school that if you are having sex to be careful.... There is a big difference [in] the way you think as you get more educated...[in] how you think about [sex].

²³ Ana, interview by author, Riverside County, January 6, 2015; Phyllida Burlingame, "Sex Education in California Public Schools: Are Students Learning What They Need to Know?," American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California, August 2003, accessed April 1, 2016, https://www.aclunc.org/sites/default/files/sex_ed_in_ca_public_schools_2003_full_report.pdf; "District Enrollment 2013-2014," Riverside County Office of Education, accessed April 28, 2016, <http://www.rcoe.us/about/statistics/district-enrollment-2011-2012/>; "Student Diversity," Riverside County Office of Education, accessed April 28, 2016, <http://www.rcoe.us/about/statistics/student-diversity/>.

Erika was born in Tijuana, México, in 1988, and at age seven moved to Riverside County with her mother Carmen. Her upbringing in the suburbs of California was a far cry from her mother's youth in Michoacán. Erika did not need to travel hours by horseback to get to school; the public schools she attended were a short bus ride from her home. She graduated from high school instead of dropping out of grade school. The cultural transference that took place in the classrooms where she received sex education was designed to discourage teenage pregnancy. This doubtless helps to explain Ana's fascination with *Teen Mom* and curiosity about contraception, and transference seems incontrovertibly evident in Erika's assertion that education alters perceptions of sex and marriage that predominated in rancho life. The traditions by which her mother learned about sex no longer hold the same meaning for Erika.²⁴

Access to public schools influenced not only my younger generation of interlocutors, but also their mothers, who faced new social responsibilities to talk to their daughters about sex. When I asked Erika whether her mother ever talked to her about sex, she answered, "I wouldn't have been comfortable talking to my mom about anything sexual." She quickly added, however, "As I grew up here...I wish my mom would have talked to me about it." Carmen's rancho traditions dictated that young women's sex education was a task for the extended family, so not talking to her daughter about it seemed only normal. But public schools constructed a new norm for the younger generation by instilling in students the idea that mothers should actively guide their daughters' learning about sex. Parents were typically informed when sex education classes would begin and had to sign a consent form so their children could participate. Carmen remembered signing such a form. It made her feel included in the intimate education of her daughter. While Erika does not remember talking to

²⁴ Erika interview by author, Riverside County, December 30, 2014.

her mother about what she learned in school, Carmen expressed the feeling that people in the United States talk more openly about sex. Despite her distress at what she views as girls' growing up too fast because they no longer wait to have sex, she acknowledged that it was important for her daughter to learn about sex.²⁵

In the tightknit rancho communities where most of my older interlocutors grew up, conversations regarding sexuality were controlled by strict rules of morality. Reconstructing the family and community networks that enforced these rules proved virtually impossible in Riverside County's suburbs. Here, my interlocutors live in close proximity to neighbors who often subscribe to different cultural beliefs or even speak a different first language. If family and community networks are less influential, however, young women's peer groups are stronger than ever, thanks to the many years children and adolescents spend in school. While Ana did not talk to her parents about sex, she told me, "I would talk about it with my friends.... I was curious after they did it." She felt comfortable asking her friends questions; they provided her with the kind of sex education she could not receive in health classes or at home. On her mother's rancho, a young unmarried woman could not have asked more experienced women about sex without jeopardizing her moral standing.

Lorena, too, described learning about sex through conversation with girlfriends: "I learned with friends; we would talk." During our interview she repeatedly mentioned "mainly learning through friends." Her peer group was very important to her understanding of sex, and the social expectations that came with it. Lorena was engaging in conversations about sex long before she thought about marriage or pregnancy. Her friends took the place of

²⁵ Carmen, interview by author, Riverside County, January 8, 2015; Erika, interview by author, Riverside County, December 30, 2014.

the older relatives who traditionally educated young women about sex in rancho communities.²⁶

“Aquí las cosas son diferente”(Things are different here.): throughout our conversations, my interlocutors repeated these words, in both Spanish and English. The older women’s memories of life in rural México and their daughters’ experience with mass media, public schools and peer interactions have made both groups keenly aware of the difference. The older generation’s cultural traditions have had to adapt to suburban environments in southern California. Adaptation has not meant the abandonment of rancho traditions, however, and even as the young generation embraces new influences, it has not conformed wholesale to Anglo-American values.

In “Mexican culture they are more quiet about [sex]... They don’t want to talk about it.” These were Ana’s words to me when we sat down in her home on January 6, 2015, to talk about sex education. Growing up, she did not ask her mother, Griselda, any questions about sex and if the topic somehow came up, Ana was quick to change the subject because she felt weird and awkward. Despite growing up in a community in which public schools offered sex education, Ana found it difficult to talk to her mother on the subject. In our conversation, she repeatedly used the word “it” rather than “sex,” displaying her general discomfort with topics related to sexuality. She does not commonly engage in discussions of sex.²⁷

Traditions of respectable silence were not discarded after immigration; instead, silence’s role in sex education has become less important in the new environment. In the homes of my interlocutors, silence remains a method of teaching young women the rules of respectability and discouraging promiscuity. Ana remembers one occasion when she and her

²⁶ Lorena, interview by author, Riverside County, January 6, 2015.

²⁷ Ana, interview by author, Riverside County, January 6, 2015.

mother briefly discussed birth control; the conversation ended with her mother's warning, "Don't get any ideas." She never considered speaking to her father about sex lest it give him the impression that she was having sex. Lorena refers to sex as a "taboo subject" between her and her mother. Erika never talked to her mother, Carmen, about sex, and she says of Carmen, "That's the way she grew up as well." While silence about sex remains the rule in mother-daughter relationships, however, it holds less importance in the larger community. Ana, Erika, and Lorena still display anxiety at talking openly about sex, but they all have positive opinions of sex education in the schools.²⁸

My interlocutors of the older generation acknowledge the inadequacy of their rural traditions in providing the sex education necessary to their daughters. Just as mothers in rancho communities relied on the extended family to educate daughters about sex and social conduct, immigrant mothers in Riverside County seem to rely on new networks that include friends and schools. According to Lorena, her mother's understanding of sex education was that "school was going to take care of that." Erika's mother, Carmen recalled her daughter-in-law talking to Erika about sex. Erika also remembered this conversation: "She asked me if I was having sex. I told her no. She [told me] when I start to have sex to tell her so she could [help me] get condoms or get on some sort of birth control so I would not get pregnant." This exchange reproduced to some extent a tradition from Carmen's rancho community, where young married women shared their knowledge of sex with inexperienced female kin. Though immigrant women could not replicate rancho communities in Riverside County, this did not

²⁸ Ana, interview by author, Riverside County, January 6, 2015; Lorena, interview by author, Riverside County, January 6, 2015; Erika, interview by author, Riverside County, December 30, 2014.

deter them from incorporating into their new environment elements of childrearing from the old country.

Premarital sex is no longer a form of betrothal or a voluntary step toward motherhood. In Riverside County, sex and marriage are two separate things. This shift causes anxiety in Mexican families; daughters could become pregnant without the insurance of a committed partner. This would not only jeopardize their respectability but also make life much more challenging in purely practical ways. Erika seems to have struck a compromise that her mother approves: “She knows if I bring a guy [home] that’s the guy I am probably going to marry.” This both appeases her mother’s traditional ideas about marriage and sidesteps rigid rules about sex. Formal sex education gave Erika the information she needs to control her sexual and reproductive health and at the same time redefine the relationship between sex and lifelong commitment.²⁹

My interviews also offered evidence that younger women who grew up in southern California consciously preserve certain values they define as distinctly Mexican. Lorena and I met outside a coffee shop on a sunny day and spent the afternoon talking about sex education. She was born in México in 1990, but was raised in Riverside County from an early age. Sex is not a topic she has ever talked about with her mother, who still follows a tradition of silence handed down from her own mother. My efforts to involve Lorena’s mother in our conversation were rejected. She did not want to talk to me, a stranger, about anything related to sex. But neither do she and her husband expect Lorena to remain uninformed. As Lorena explains, “They assume I know.... My dad will say, ‘*De seguro ella sabe más que nosotros*’ [Surely she knows more than us].” Lorena’s sex education took place

²⁹ Erika, interview by author, Riverside County, December 30, 2014.

both formally in health classes and informally among her friends. She learned what condoms are from an interaction with an eighth-grade girlfriend with whom she rode the school bus: “She was talking about a condom; I had never heard of that.... She said, ‘You should ask your parents.’.... She was Hispanic, more like a whitewashed Hispanic. You could tell her parents grew up here”.³⁰

It is revealing that Lorena identifies this friend’s culture as different from hers. Whereas Lorena is Mexican, the friend is described as “Hispanic.” This could mean Mexican American, Latin American or Central American. Whatever the case, however, Lorena makes clear that her friend belongs to the second generation born in the United States and that this is why she knows more about sex. By Lorena’s definition, moreover, her friend is not authentically Mexican, but instead “whitewashed.” This term, popular among younger Mexican Americans, is used to describe someone who has assimilated to white American culture, which Lorena clearly associates with an unseemly knowledge of sex on the part of young girls. This reflects a more widespread anxiety about assimilation that surfaced in virtually all of my interviews. New methods of sex education are one small piece of a complicated process of cultural transformation that began when immigrants from México’s countryside arrived in Riverside’s suburbs and accelerated as their children grew up in the new environment. If Mexicanas have been agents in this process, it has also been a response to forces beyond their control. The process has unfolded, moreover, in suburbs where white Anglos hold the lion’s share of power, even when they do constitute a numerical majority and where many Mexican Americans are second- or third-generation U.S. citizens far removed from rancho traditions. Although my interlocutors have embraced new ways of

³⁰ Lorena, interview by author, Riverside County, January 6, 2015.

teaching and learning about sex, they also associate them with Anglo culture, which they regard as hypersexual.³¹

Immigration marked a crucial transition for the families of all my interlocutors. For the older generation of women it meant leaving behind the communities that raised them and for their daughters it meant growing up in environments where their mothers could not feel entirely at home. Working from different angles, however, both groups have participated in the construction of new traditions of sex education that combine customs from México's countryside and both formal and informal systems of sex education in the United States.

Conclusion

When we reached the end of our interview I asked Catalina, "Do you think sex education is important?" She responded that it is important because she does not want her daughters to have sex without knowing what it is.³² Rancho life nurtured traditions of sex education that were rooted in silence, in customs of elopement, and in community involvement in controlling the sexual maturation of young women. The preservation of these traditions depended on geographical isolation and customs passed down orally from generation to generation. My collection of oral testimonies provides a record of this heritage and its evolution in Riverside County.

Immigration catalyzed change in my interlocutors' experiences with sex education. As a teenager living in Michoacán, Catalina understood that mothers and daughters did not

³¹ Lorena, interview by author, Riverside County, January 6, 2015. For more on the category "Hispanic" and the concept of "whitening," see Ana Maria Alonsa and Maria Teresa Koreck, "Silences: 'Hispanics,' AIDS, and Sexual Practices," in *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader*, ed. Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton (London: UCL Press, 1999), 267-283. See also Monroy, "'Our Children Get So Different Here.'"

³² Catalina, interview by author, Riverside County, April 26, 2016.

talk about sex and this was a tradition that she continued while raising her daughters in the United States. Her traditions did not disappear under pressures to assimilate to a different social environment; instead, she adapted by providing her children greater access to platforms for sex education outside the home. This was typical of my older interlocutors. The younger generation—Ana, Erika, and Lorena—have in turn had to adapt their heritage to a much larger world with contrasting views on female sexuality. In the process, they have not only pioneered change but also preserved the intimate politics of respectability by depending on peer networks and public sex education rather than imposing conversations about sex on their mothers. In this respect—the observance of silence between mothers and daughters—rancho culture persists.

When I began this project one of my many questions was, why do Mexicans not talk about sex? The question rested on a generalization that was as true for me as it was for many of my close acquaintances of Mexican descent. By the end of this project, I discovered that my talking about sex openly is a cultural practice born of my experience as a young Mexican woman educated on the northern side of the border, just as my mother's silence on the topic expresses traditions born of her experience. My mother had learned about sex in her own way, and expected that I would find my own way as well. She talked to me about the birds and the bees the only way she knew how: by saying nothing. So when she assures me that she is still a virgin at fifty years of age, I laugh and remain silent.

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