Essays
What Is the Right (White) Way to Be Sexual?
Reconceptualizing Latina Sexuality

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ABSTRACT: Dominant representations of Latinas in popular and scholarly literature narrowly portray Latina sexual practices. Latina sexuality is often dichotomized: we are categorized either as traditional and sexually repressed, or as acculturated and sexually liberated. These interpretations reflect ethnocentric and essentialized understandings of both Latina/o culture and human sexuality. Many authors assume that modern white sexuality has progressively become more liberated and is the healthy, right way to be sexual. Even some of the arguments and analyses of Chicanas/os and Latinas/os normalize assumptions about sexual expression and evaluate “traditional” Latina sexuality only in terms of “negative sex”: negative sexual attitudes and experiences. Additionally, Juárez and Kerl recognize Latina writers—many leaders in lesbian/gay studies—who acknowledge that Latina sexuality is complex, diverse, and always locally and historically situated. They argue that Latinas may have unique ways of expressing sexualities, but are neither as repressed nor as oppressed as both popular culture and scholars would have us believe.

For several decades now, Latinas/os have been “talking back” to scholars, researchers, and creators of popular culture, questioning their interpretations of our cultures, lives, and communities. In addition to spotlighting the politics and unequal relations of power embedded in studies and representations, much attention has focused on normalized, simplistic, and ethnocentric assumptions, interpretations, and representations of Latina/o culture. For example, Chicana/o scholars have challenged the notion that Chicana/o culture is basically negative (Romano-V. 1968; Vaca 1970a, 1970b) and that Chicana/o families are entirely male-dominated (Baca Zinn
1979; Zavella 1987). Scholars of Latina/o and Latin American cultures similarly have challenged the idea that gender is characterized by machismo (oversexed violent domineering men) and marianism (undersexed suffering submissive women) (see for example del Castillo 1996; Ehlers 1991; Dore 1997; Marti 1993; Gutmann 1996; Trujillo 1998; Fonseca 2001).

Our critique and review extends this type of criticism specifically to the study of sexuality, arguing that dominant representations narrowly portray Latina sexuality as inherently negative and also dichotomize Latina sexuality: Latinas are categorized either as traditional and sexually repressed, or as acculturated and sexually liberated. Dealing almost exclusively with heterosexuality, these interpretations are characterized by ethnocentric and essentialized understandings of both Latina/o culture and human sexuality. They assume that modern white sexuality has progressively become more liberated and is the healthy, right way to be sexual.

Ethnocentrism refers to the assumption that one's own culture or ethnic group is better, natural, or unmarked, and to the tendency to judge other cultures in terms of one's own cultural perspective. In current scholarly work about Latina sexuality, ethnocentrism is revealed in the assumption that less acculturated Latinas are more repressed—and that acculturation toward the “natural,” normalized white American way is the answer. This kind of thinking is evident when scholars describe the negative attitudes, submissiveness, and passivity of “traditional” Latina sexuality; they blame Latina/o culture for Latinas' sexual oppression. However, when this same phenomenon describes white American women, that is, when they experience submissiveness, passivity, discomfort, or shame regarding their sexuality, scholars do not suggest that American culture is sexually repressive. If Latina/o culture is responsible for keeping Latinas repressed (and if this is purportedly resolved when traditional Latinas acculturate), what is the explanation when the same thing occurs in white women?

The concept of essentialism generally refers to the underlying assumption that “individuals or groups have an immutable and discoverable ‘essence’—a basic, unvariable, and presocial nature” (Moya 1997, 381, n. 12). Here, we apply it primarily to the notion that women’s sexual disposition and experience is natural, and that women share an innate, universal essence of sexuality that is fundamentally the same for them all. Even when analysts recognize this as a problem in certain areas of their work, they sometimes continue to essentialize behaviors or cultural practices when it comes to Latina sexuality.
As the field of Chicana/o and Latina/o studies has developed, so has the production of both popular and scholarly literature. Scholars in the social sciences and humanities are increasingly producing theoretically and methodologically grounded analyses that cover a wide range of topics and issues while critiquing and extending earlier works in Chicana/o and Latina/o studies. Many now emphasize subjects (in all sense of the word) that were previously silenced or excluded, as well as the "multiple," "contradictory," and "discontinuous" spaces of history and culture (V. Pérez 1999, 46). Although Chicana feminist voices are increasingly heard (Davalos 1998), the topic of Latina sexuality still has been relatively marginalized and neglected in terms of both the quantity and quality of scholarship.

Too often, even the arguments and analyses of Chicanas/os and Latinas/os—including some of the leaders in lesbian/gay studies and even some of our most cherished and important role models, such as Ana Castillo, Cherrie Moraga, and Sandra Cisneros—have been based on ethnocentric and essentialized assumptions about sexual expression. Thus, we also turn our critical gaze on Chicana/o and Latina/o literary and academic predecessors, explaining how they too have essentialized and evaluated "traditional" Latina sexuality only in terms of negative sexual attitudes and experiences and/or white Western models that are equated with sexual health and liberation. Several Chicana/o and Latina/o authors whose work looks at sexuality in more complex and diverse ways nonetheless continue to make stereotypical assumptions regarding Latina sexuality. They often normalize Latina cultural practices of sexuality in a way that we call "negative sex"—attitudes that view sex as injurious, shameful, disdasteful, or otherwise unpleasant. As Bettina Flores's popular book states, "Sex is still referred to by many Latinas as 'you know what.' Latinas are naive about sex. They see it as a duty and, therefore, don't fake headaches too often" (1994, 60).

Our interdisciplinary review and critique is based on extensive analyses of scholarly literature, popular books, and creative essays on sexuality, in addition to our own personal and professional experiences. Kerl has relied on ten years of counseling clients, many of whom have been Latinas/os, to help assess the literature. Her experiences as a Latina psychologist and therapist have brought her into contact with many conceptualizations and conversations about women's sexuality in general and Latina sexuality in particular. Her anger over the misconceptions, blatant stereotyping, and devaluing of Latino culture related to
sexuality (while glorifying sexual freedom and liberation present in the United States) is one of the reasons she wanted to write this paper. She hopes to broaden the thinking of mainstream therapists whose information about Latina sexuality is based on many of the sources cited in this critique and to caution them about ethnocentric and essentialized understandings of human sexuality that may translate into biased ways of working with Latina clients.

Juárez’s northern Mexicana and Tejana heritage and experiences, together with fieldwork among Mayas and other Mexicans in Quintana Roo, Mexico, made her realize that “Mexican” ideas about sexuality were much more complex and diverse than scholars or other authors had suggested. Observing significantly different conceptions of sexuality among Mexicans and Mayas (for example, regarding male and female sex drives and identities) helped her to realize that Western cultural assumptions about sexuality are pervasive in both popular culture and scholarly research (Juárez 2001, 2002). As she began to teach and present her work, she was frustrated with the ubiquity of the dominant model found in both popular culture and academic literature. She was also surprised at how readily other Chicanas and Latinas accepted the stereotypical interpretations, even when, as one older woman said, “I never knew anyone who was really like that.” Although she hesitated to critique some of her favorite scholars and authors—and still holds their work in the highest esteem—she hopes that scholars and storytellers will begin to question assumptions about sexuality as effectively as they have critiqued other assumptions about Chicanas/os and Latinas/os.

In addition to critiquing portrayals of Latina sexuality, we recognize that some Latina writers—primarily lesbians writing popular literature or working in the humanities, especially literature and history—are increasingly contesting the ethnocentric and essentialized models of sexuality found in popular culture and the social sciences (see for example Trujillo 1998). Going beyond the many calls—often still unheeded—to analyze race, class, and gender as inherently interconnected, scholars such as Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano have even argued the importance of making sexuality central to all social analyses (1999). Within the field of humanities, unfortunately, this work is often marginalized (for instance, published in alternative presses rather than in mainstream journals), and is rarely cited by social scientists. Nonetheless, it is critical for both popular writers and scholars to begin recognizing that Latina sexuality is complex, diverse, and always locally and historically situated, and to move away from
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ethnocentric and essentialized understandings. Recognizing the ethnocentrism and essentialism inherent in both popular and scholarly paradigms and beginning to incorporate the marginal but more complex approaches will lead to better understandings of Latina and other sexualities and allow Latina/o communities to address inequality and other concerns in culturally specific ways. Latinas may have unique ways of expressing sexualities, but they are neither as repressed nor as oppressed as both popular culture and scholars would have us believe.

Dichotomizing Sexualities: Traditional or Acculturated?

“Traditional” Latina sexuality is often characterized in social science literature by women’s passivity, selflessness, and what many researchers refer to as marianismo, the sacrificing of self for the good of the family. Although scholars have challenged the powerlessness of Latin American women and the legitimacy of marianismo (for example, Ehlers 1991; Dore 1997; Marti 1993; Fonseca 2001; Gutmann 1996), these concepts continue to be applied to Latinas and other Latin American women. Scholars often suggest that the traditional model not only prevents Latinas from enjoying the fullness of their sexuality, but also contributes to some of the problems they experience (such as nonassertiveness in asking spouses to use condoms).

Many of the authors we critique imply that “modern” or “new world” (Gil and Vazquez 1996) sexuality becomes possible when Latinas acculturate: they then begin to adopt the values of the more “sexually liberated” United States. Much of the literature (such as Alonso and Koreck 1989; Espín 1999; Limón 1997; Moraga 1983; Salgado de Snyder et al. 2000) implies that it is not possible to be both Latina and sexually liberated. The dominant paradigm suggests that Latinas’ only route to sexual pleasure involves adopting the purportedly more liberated values of American culture, such as acknowledging and embracing one’s sexuality, taking pleasure in sex, and being able to voice one’s own sexual likes, dislikes, and desires.

Our first example of the dichotomization of acculturated and liberated Latinas is a popular self-help text used by therapists, The Maria Paradox: How Latinas Can Merge Old World Traditions with New World Self-Esteem (Gil and Vazquez 1996). Even the subtitle implies that there is no self-esteem in the “Old World.” Gil and Vazquez include a chapter about sex entitled “Do not forget that sex is for making babies—not for pleasure:
Old world marriage vs. real live passion" (126). The authors state that "the strong element of repression running through Hispanic tradition helps women ignore their own erotic impulses before and after marriage" (130). The chapter goes on to say that the denial of pleasure for Latinas is an Old World value related to traditional Latina/o culture:

The dogma of *marianismo* not only mandates what *una latina buena* should be, but also parallels the absolutism of *machismo*'s definition of *un buen hombre*. Thus, *marianismo* regards the ideal woman as submissive, subservient, self-sacrificing, self-renouncing, sexually pure, and erotically repressed. This emphasis on self-sacrifice and renunciation, combined with the importance placed on *la virginidad*, fertility, and the inability to feel and express eroticism, becomes characteristic of sexual development of many Latinas—far different from what North American girls are taught. For the Hispanic woman to enjoy sexual pleasure, even in marriage, is wrong because it indicates a lack of virtue. (135)

They recommend that readers "try to determine as honestly as you can whether you're still holding on to *marianista* sexual beliefs, or whether you have more liberal views, or feel that you belong in the middle of the acculturation continuum" (134), thus suggesting that "more liberal views" are characteristic of more acculturated women. In another place in the same chapter, the authors tell a story about a woman who was repressed due to her Old World values, but had started dating an American man:

Bruce, an American college professor, had lived in Guatemala for five years when he was in the Peace Corps, and understood marianismo and machismo all too well. Alicia recounted to us the story of her first dinner date with him. After they'd been seated, he asked her what she'd like to drink and eat—a radical change from the behavior of her late husband, Emilio, who used to order for both of them without bothering to consult her. And that was only the first of many surprises which made Alicia "feel like a person." Bruce involved her in other decisions, such as where they would eat or what movie they would see. ... At first, Alicia viewed Bruce mainly as a supportive and understanding companion, who would often make comments like, "I know that's the way you were taught to think and feel about yourself, but here in the United States you have options regarding your likes and dislikes." He was enormously helpful in Alicia's starting to perceive herself as an adult capable of making choices. (149–50)

Bruce, in the quotation, is seen as the North American savior rescuing Alicia from her life of culturally determined, Central or South
American values of repression and submission that kept her from exercising her own choices.

Another study on HIV prevention strategies similarly suggests that Latinas have less sexual comfort and less sexual power than non-Latinas (Gómez and Marín 1996). This study reproduces the acculturated versus traditional dichotomy, and attempts to measure the concept of sexual comfort in an ethnocentric manner. The six items used to measure sexual comfort were “level of comfort being naked in front of a partner, having sex with the lights on, buying a condom, watching a partner put on a condom, putting a condom on a partner, and having sex with a new partner” (357). Fully half of the measures are related to experience buying and using condoms, suggesting that people who lack experience with condoms are inherently less comfortable with their sexuality than those who do use condoms. Two other measures equate comfort with nudity and having sex with the lights on; we argue that people can be comfortable with their sexuality without being naked and having the lights on. Lights or no lights could be more related to other issues such as romantic preferences or desire for mystery. Finally, the last measure, having sex with a new partner, clearly assumes that sexual comfort is about comfort with particular kinds of sexual practices—that is, casual, premarital or extramarital relations. These questions measure comfort with a particular American style of sexuality, not some inherent level of sexual comfort. This particular style is assumed to be the healthy, “undistorted” or unrepressed style essential to humans.

Much of the literature cited in the section on acculturation views passivity and lack of sexual voice as part of “traditional” Latina/o culture (Gil and Vazquez 1996; Gómez and Marín 1996; Salgado de Snyder et. al 2000; Baird 1993; Cisneros 1996). However, passivity and lack of sexual voice can also be characterized as a problem for women in U.S. culture. Deborah Tolman (1991) has shown that in U.S. culture, women in general have a “missing discourse of desire.” She argues that this discourse is defined by failing to acknowledge that women have sexual feelings and that discussion about sex centers around male desire and women’s response to male desire. A recent study of advice columns in teen magazines (Garner, Sterk, and Adams 1998) showed that advice related to sex and sexual relationships changed very little from 1974 to 1994. The discourse within the advice columns encouraged young women to be sex objects and teachers of interpersonal communication rather than friends or lovers. Although some researchers recognize the sexist discourse, American culture is not
blamed, nor are American women stereotyped as being "traditional," nor is it ever suggested that they need to acculturate to another culture.

In fact, many mainstream texts on American sexuality paint women's sexuality as passive and repressed, without accusing them of being too traditional. In one study, Jason Low and Peter Sherrard (1999) surveyed gender role stereotypes in textbooks on human sexuality and marriage and family. They compared the content of photographs in the textbooks from the 1970s to the 1990s. Even though photographs from the 1990s contained some feminist messages, those with more "traditional" messages regarding sexuality and marriage and family still dominated. Similarly, the popular Women's Experience of Sex (Kitzinger 1983), a classic primer dedicated to helping women define and liberate their own sexuality, also described very passive and repressed sexual practices. This book is directed toward women in general, and probably white women in particular (of over sixty pictures, only four include people of color, and no mention is made of race or ethnicity). Sheila Kitzinger asserts that, early on, "a woman learns to do what she is asked/told, be pleasing to a man, care for others before herself, be compliant, say yes, let others make choices for her, act helpless" (13). Referring to U.S. culture, she wrote:

We live in a society in which men get serviced and women provide the service. Women are the nurturers. It is assumed that men go out to work and provide economic support in return for housekeeping, child-rearing and sexual availability and they are active and dominant, while women are relatively passive and submissive, having been led to expect men to know best how to satisfy them. Many people do not live like this, of course, but everything we believe and do is affected by that basic template from our culture which shapes and limits our choices. (10)

Nobody has called this marianismo, yet when the same occurs in Latina/o culture, it is seen as being part of the "traditional" culture.

**Contradictory Research: Are Mexican Americans More Traditional than Mexicans?**

Even when their own findings contradict the premise of repressed Latina sexuality, some researchers have fallen back on dichotomistic conclusions. A recent study by V. Nelly Salgado de Snyder and others (2000) examined the reasons that Latinas do not use condoms. The researchers compared three groups of Mexican women: immigrant women who lived with
their husbands in the United States, women who were "left behind" in Mexico while their husbands traveled as migrant workers, and women living with their husbands in Mexico. The researchers looked at differences in sexual history, sexual behaviors, HIV/AIDS knowledge, and communication and sexual negotiation. Their conclusion was consistent with the dominant stereotype, suggesting that Mexican American women lack the power to negotiate safe sex practices with their husbands. In traditional societies, such as the setting where the women who participated in this study were raised, cultural norms promote male dominance and female submissiveness, particularly in the sexual arena. (106, emphasis added)

However, the researchers' own data contradict their conclusions. When the researchers asked who makes the final decision regarding sexual activity, the women living with their husbands in Mexico responded "she" or "both" more often than did women of the other two groups (Salgado de Snyder et al. 2000, 106). In other words, the women whom the authors assumed to be more representative of "traditional sexuality" actually had more control. In addition, the questions in this study were asked in an ethnocentric way that assumed an active male as opposed to passive female sexuality,—for example, "How often does your husband make sexual demands on you?" (106). Even with these kinds of biased questions, the women living in the United States—presumably the most acculturated group—responded, more often than the other two groups, that their husbands made frequent sexual demands and that they tended to "give in and have sex" with them. These kinds of contradictions suggest that traditional Latinas may have healthier and more egalitarian sexual relationships than those who acculturate, and that issues beyond culture should be explored in analyses of sexual repression and lack of power.

Other recent studies draw similarly problematic conclusions even as they find nonstereotypical behavior among Mexican and Mexican American adolescents. Amado Padilla and Traci Baird (1991) surveyed Mexican American youth in East Los Angeles, while a second study by Baird alone (1993) examined Mexican teens in Cuernavaca and Guadalajara. She used the same questions for both studies with the intention of comparing the results. Although Baird does not specifically look at the stereotypes regarding acculturation, her findings suggest that some Mexican teen attitudes toward sexuality are closer to the "liberated" attitude than are the attitudes of Mexican American teens. On questions regarding
male and female virginity, preference for male children, and preference for large families, a greater percentage of Mexican American than Mexican youth reported values that could be seen as consistent with a "repressed" view (see table 1). Also, the finding that so many Mexican females and males agreed that "a sexual relationship is one of the best things in life" challenges the belief that Latina sexuality is only concerned with procreation, not pleasure.6

Table 1. Attitudes toward Sexuality among Mexican and Mexican American Adolescents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude</th>
<th>Mexican</th>
<th>Mexican American</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Important to have a boy child (%)</td>
<td>Female 40</td>
<td>Male 71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females should be virgins when married (%)</td>
<td>Female 68</td>
<td>Male 74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males should be virgins when married (%)</td>
<td>Female 50</td>
<td>Male 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual relationship is one of the best things (%)</td>
<td>Female 75</td>
<td>Male 88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many children desired (number)</td>
<td>Female 2.4</td>
<td>Male 2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

— Not asked.

Note: Attitudes were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "very" or "agree strongly" (5) to "not at all" or "disagree strongly" (1). Percentages refer to respondents who replied with a 3, 4, or 5 on the particular item.

Sources: Padilla and Baird 1991 for Mexican Americans; Baird 1993 for Mexicans.
Repression and Essentialism: What Is the “Right” Way to Be Sexual?

The following section engages Chicana/o and Latina/o authors who have broached issues related to Latina sexuality, but still failed to transcend the dichotomous assumptions or effectively situate their studies within a broader cross-cultural context. Instead, these authors have often limited the question of sexuality to an essentialized range of Mexican and white expressions. Because so much of the literature on Chicana/Latina sexuality has been written by Chicana fiction writers who also write essay-based critical cultural analyses, here we examine one scholar and several popular writers. These texts—all written by “native” authors—are characterized by contradictions and ambiguity in their analyses. Included in this discussion are Cherrie Moraga, Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, and José Limón—writers who have shaped the field of Chicano studies and whose work has inspired and challenged us. However, like the previous texts we examined, their writings also reflect normalized assumptions of “unrepressed” sexuality. Although none of these writers explicitly suggests the need for acculturation, they assume that white sexuality is the universal, unmarked sexuality, and that the values and practices of modern liberated white women represent the sexually free and open way to express a healthy sexuality.

While early writings by Latina lesbians were at the forefront of sexual analyses in Latina/o studies, they too grappled with essentialized assumptions about white and Chicana sexuality. Author and activist Cherrie Moraga’s important essay “A Long Line of Vendidas” (1983, 90–144) explains the sexual, racial, ethnic, and gender tensions of growing up with a white father and a Mexican mother—both of whom pursued an assimilated lifestyle for their children. Even though the patriarchal father in her family was white, and both parents strove for their children’s assimilation, Moraga in her narrative emphasizes her family’s Mexican patriarchal gender and sexual repression. Moreover, she continued her parents’ assimilationist strategy during her youth, feeling compelled to choose her white culture and reject her Chicana culture because she felt it did not allow her any freedom for sexual expression, particularly when it came to being lesbian:

I did not move away from other Chicanos because I did not love my people. I gradually became anglocized because I thought it was the only option available to me toward gaining autonomy as a person without being sexually stigmatized. I can’t say that I was conscious of all this at the time,
only that at each juncture in my development, I instinctively made choices which I thought would allow me greater freedom of movement in the future. This primarily meant resisting sex roles as much as I could safely manage and this was far easier in an Anglo context than in a Chicano one. (99, emphasis added)

Later, in trying to make sense of culturally mediated sexual logic, Moraga briefly acknowledges that her choice may have been based as much on personal reasons as cultural realities. It may not have been Chicana/o culture per se that repressed her sexuality: “That is not to say that Anglo culture does not stigmatize its women for ‘gender transgressions’—only that its stigmatizing did not hold the personal power over me which Chicano culture did” (99).

As Moraga attempts to create a space for gays and lesbians within the Chicano movement, she provides a valuable critique of sexual and gender inequalities in Chicana/o culture. However, Moraga conflates the sexual liberation of white lesbian culture with white culture, and analyzes and assesses Chicana sexuality primarily in terms of white sexuality. As Paula Moya has argued, in making her choices Moraga assumed that “homo- sexuality belongs, in an essential way, to white people” (1997, 147). Unfortunately Chicana lesbians were not always comfortable within white lesbian communities because of race and class-based discrimination (Moraga 1983, 131), but many Latinas, both lesbian and heterosexual, assumed that white models were inherently more liberating and needed to be emulated.

In a recent essay, celebrated Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros recuperates indigenous ideas of femininity and sexuality for the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe, renaming her Guadalupe the Sex Goddess, but still assumes that white women’s sexual practices are superior to those of Catholic Mexicans and Chicanas (1996). Reinscribing the notion that Latina/o culture and Catholicism allow Latinas to have only repressed sexualities, she writes,

In high school I marveled at how white women strutted around the locker room, nude as pearls ... unashamed of their brilliant bodies. ... You could always tell us Latinas. We hid when we undressed, modestly facing a wall, or ... dressing in a bathroom stall. ... I was as ignorant about my own body as any female ancestor who hid behind a sheet with a hole in the center when husband or doctor called. Religion and our culture, our culture and religion, helped to create that blur. ... my culture locked me in a double chastity belt of ignorance and vergüenza, shame. (46).
Concurring with the dominant paradigm, Cisneros exalts white scientific and medicalized approaches to bodies and sexuality, even marveling at a nurse's provision of a mirror and speculum along with words of encouragement to "see" and "investigate" her cervix and genitalia during a visit to a clinic (47). Nevertheless, like the social scientists and health researchers who chastise or patronize Hispanic women for their culturally prescribed reluctance to discuss sexual activities (see Ford and Norris 1991; Hubbell et al. 1996), Cisneros relies on ethnocentric, essentialized assumptions rather than examining Latina practices within their own context and on their own terms.

Ironically, Cisneros exalts this medicalization of sexuality and the body, even as other scholars have begun to show how Western science and medicine have been used to create hierarchical sexual, gender, and racial identities. The medicalization of sexuality has also been used to justify and intensify gender and racial inequality, repress nonmarital and nonheterosexual desire, and naturalize female asexuality—not to liberate female sexuality (Foucault 1978; Somerville 1997; Laqueur 1987).

Paradoxically, historians such as Antonia Castañeda have documented and analyzed mid-nineteenth-century Euro-American complaints about Mexican women's immodest dress and behavior (1990), and today, Latinas are sometimes criticized for their sexy fashion look, with their tight, provocative clothes and what one anthropologist suggested was almost "garish" makeup (Limon 1997, 5).

The work of Ana Castillo, another prominent Chicana writer and essayist, has also challenged Latinas/os to consider issues surrounding sexuality, but likewise essentializes Latina sexuality in several ways. In "La Macha: Toward a Beautiful Whole Self" (1991), Castillo focuses primarily on documenting the repressive and negative practices and ideologies of Latina/o sexuality. According to her, "Sexuality for the Catholic woman of Latin American background has, at best, been associated with her reproductive ability (or lack of it), and otherwise, repressed" (40). While she does acknowledge some positive erotic practices and expressions, she ultimately asserts that these manifestations are "distorted":

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 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.

Thus, Castillo invokes dressing, elaborate costuming, dancing, and even spiritual negation as expressions of sexuality, but claims these are all “distorted” rather than healthy expressions and manifestations. As Carole Vance (1984) has recognized, sexuality within both dominant and nondominant cultures is full of contradictions and inconsistencies. She writes that nondominant groups “have different sensibilities and consciousness which are expressed in a variety of cultural forms—lyrics and music, oral tradition, humor, as well as in fiction and art” (13). Castillo does not consider the perspective that humans have no natural, undistorted human sexuality; she fails to recognize that “sensibilities” and expressions of human sexuality different from modern white expressions are not “distorted.”

Mexican American anthropologist José Limón also invokes stereotypical essentialized assumptions about the nature of sexuality in an essay about Selena, a popular Latina musician killed in 1995 (1997). In his analysis, Limón briefly acknowledges the complexity of sexuality, and certainly begins to historicize and contextualize it, but ultimately he evaluates Latina sexuality primarily in terms of modern white sexuality. Beginning with a description of her concert performance, he admiringly describes Selena’s clothes and body parts, focusing on how she gradually reveals more for the audience (2–3). Situating Selena in the Mexicana/o popular culture of late capitalism, he mistakenly declares that Selena is a “sexual revisionary” who “fully expressed” her sexuality and revised traditional models of Latina sexuality (13–17).

Concentrating on her sexual persona, Limón argues that Selena was so popular because the “bodily sexuality [of previous Mexicana singers and dancers] was not yet fully available as a key aspect of their performance. I say ‘not fully,’ because it is quite impossible and an exercise in naiveté, for example, not to see the erotic presence of the fulsome Lucha Villa singing her rancheras in a low-cut Mexican peasant-style blouse” (12). In contrast, he continues, Selena “fully expressed her bodily sexuality as no other such singer-dancer had ever quite done before for a mass public audience—
an expression, as I have suggested, always done at great risk, the risk of the stigma of illicit, prostitutional sexuality from either cultural side" (13).

Limón then goes on to explain the implications and meaning of "fully expressing" sexuality:

Selena's display of her sheer sexuality provides a sanctioned realm of culturally deeply needed freedom for the people of Greater Mexico. ... Possibly borrowing from the Madonna and Paula Abdul influence in American pop music culture, she openly sexualizes this [Greater Mexican musical] tradition in the most eroticized of ways. I suggest that for Catholic working-class Mexicans ... Selena's public sexuality permits a much-needed site of discharge and expression for a still too repressed sexuality in this culture as true for women as for men. (14)

Like other scholars (hooks 1992; Kellner 1998; Bordo 1993; Yarbro-Bejarano 1999; Trujillo 1998), Limón acknowledges that public performances of sexuality are mediated by race and ethnicity—with nonwhite women often portrayed as "bad girls" or whores—but suggests,

Selena controlled this dark possibility [of being constructed as whore] in two ways. The first was through the production of what I shall call a 'good girl narrative' evident in public statements about her and in the recent film. Her brazen sexuality on stage is bracketed, rendered acceptable, and sanctioned by her well-noted activities offstage. ... Selena is able to achieve her full sexuality for herself and for the psychological benefit of her fellow Mexicans even as she defeats, or at least controls, the possibility of its racist and sexist appropriation. ... [The second way] is also evident onstage, and it seems to me much bound up in her large open smile of full radiance, interestingly minimally sexualized, a smile which disarms and contains her body from the smile on down even as it allows this body to happen. (14–15)

Unfortunately, Limón's argument is flawed because he equates a "fully expressed" sexuality with one that—like modern white sexuality—is publicly expressed or performed and depends on scantily clothed bodies and ritualized body movements and facial expressions. Moreover, he assumes that this sexual style is less repressed than other styles. Thus, Selena's musical precursors' "bodily sexuality was not yet fully available" to them because they neither performed the ritualized body movements nor dressed scantily enough in public. Limón's argument does not fully consider that sexual expression and desire—whether publicly or privately performed—are always historically and culturally specific (see for example Yarbro-Bejarano 1999; Vance
Juarez and Kerl

1984; Lancaster and di Leonardo 1997; Weitz 1998; Stanton 1992; Lamphere, Ragoné, and Zavella 1997; Foucault 1978; Rival, Slater, and Miller 1998). As anthropologists and historians have attested, sexual expression, desire, and pleasure can look extremely different in different cultures: for the West African Wodaabe, men rising on the balls of their feet is suggestive (Grant and Meech 1992), while in the Trobriand Islands, eyelashes are important in erotic play (Malinowski 1929).

Furthermore, Limón argues that Selena is a revisionary because she balances public eroticism with offstage good-girl behavior and an onstage good-girl smile. Rather than being revisionary, this balance is an inherent part of both white and Latina/o everyday culture, and is certainly evidenced by almost any female entertainer (think of the “virginal” Britney Spears).

In fact, are public and unclothed exhibitions of female bodies inherently less repressed, as Limón’s analysis assumes? Drawing on Sherry Ortner’s concept of “serious games,” which posits that people have agency even as they live lives embedded within social structures and institutions, Limón does acknowledge that Selena is “constructing herself sexually under the hegemonic ‘male gaze’ even while marshalling all of her resources so as to be in effective performative command of it” (19). Even though, to paraphrase Karl Marx, she may be “making her own history but not under conditions of her own choosing,” Selena is not “fully expressing” and unpressing her sexuality. Instead, she is eroticizing herself and adhering to dominant notions of beautiful bodies and female sexual expression, as almost all successful female musicians—particularly women of color—have had to do (Jhally 1995; Bordo 1993; hooks 1992; Kellner 1998). Instead of thinking of Selena as Limón’s “sexual revisionary,” a better analysis would historically situate her within a global popular culture in which most successful female musicians are less clothed and more eroticized.

Likewise, the “unrepressed sexuality” Limón discusses is primarily about female sexual prestige and desirability, and only secondarily about an individual woman’s sexual pleasure. Again, Limón neglects other scholarly work that documents how contemporary (white) women focus on their beauty and sexual attractiveness to the neglect of their own sexual pleasure (Wolf 1991; Kilbourne 1998; Morgan 1998; Saltzberg and Chrisler 1997). Lisa Dietrich offers a more insightful analysis in her recent ethnographic study of adolescent Latinas, finding that “Most of the girls exchange control over their sexuality for control over their sexual attractiveness” (1998, 61). Likewise, we find that the “Selenaization” of young women’s bodies does not necessarily mean that their sexuality is
now fully available to them. Although Limón’s concluding paragraph acknowledges that he writes of a “particular kind of sexuality—‘popular cultural,’ ‘heterosexual,’ ‘patriarchally conditioned’” (23), his actual analysis does not effectively employ this understanding and instead assumes an underlying essentialized nature of sexuality, as we have shown.

Negative Sex: Essentializing the Cultural Practice of Sexuality

The following section examines the work of several Latina scholars whose studies clearly acknowledge sexuality as a constructed, complex, and diverse phenomenon, but who nevertheless continue to make stereotypical assumptions regarding Latina sexuality. These authors narrowly portray and essentialize Latina cultural practices of sexuality and describe it in a way that we characterize as “negative sex”: attitudes that view sex as shameful, distasteful, or otherwise unpleasant. Their analyses assume that Latina/o culture has not and does not allow any room for women to enjoy or positively experience sex. While some Latina women under some conditions have believed and do believe that sex is evil and disagreeable for women, certainly others enjoy sexual relationships, even if bounded by the institution of marriage.

Anthropologist Ana Alonso’s work, for example, recognizes the complexity of sexuality, yet still characterizes Latina sexuality as negative. She has produced innovative ethnographic analyses of Latina/o sexuality that challenge essentialized assumptions about male sexual identities and categories such as heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual (Alonso and Koreck 1989). In addition, her historical work carefully documents how state and institutional policies regarding class and ethnic relations have shaped gender and sexual practices in specific times and places (Alonso 1995).

However, Alonso’s work narrowly portrays Latina sexuality as entirely negative. Citing Octavio Paz (who seems to be the source of many stereotypes and misconceptions regarding Mexican gender and sexuality), she contends, “In Mexico, sexual intercourse (whether vaginal or anal) is ... a sign of and a source of tropes for domination and subordination” (Alonso and Koreck 1989, 109). Intercourse is inherently about “violence” and the “violation” of women. Citing one informant, she argues that “sex, even with one’s wife, is always a ‘violation’ ... of the woman by the man, a breaching of her bodily boundaries. If intercourse makes a man a chingón, it makes a woman a chingada” (85–86). “Even marriage, the legal and divine sanctioning of sexual
activity, does not erase the shame of intercourse” (89). While intercourse certainly can be a source of shame, violence, and violation, Alonso provides almost no evidence that this is what intercourse means (or has meant) to women and men within the institution of marriage. We doubt that this is the only meaning of sexual intercourse, either today or in the past. For both women and men it can also be a source of pleasure, an expression of love, a means to procreate, and so forth.

Alonso and Koreck even suggest that Latina/o culture is so antisex that it does not allow most women to experience sexual pleasure, or even to imagine the possibility of same-sex relations between women (109–11).

Though women are objects of desire, they are never subjects of their own desire. Sex is something they are polluted by, not something they enjoy. “Decent” women, it is thought, only engage in sex as a duty to their husbands and in order to have children. Thus, lesbianism is inconceivable. (121, n. 22)

This research is based in rural northern Mexico, but Alonso and Koreck suggest that their conclusions are applicable to all Mexico (114). Our observations and experience with the people of this area suggests otherwise. Although more research is needed, we have observed that some “decent” women enjoy sex as mediated by love or within the culturally sanctioned bounds of marriage, whether civil or common law. Other decent women—at least in the northern Mexican states of Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas—not only conceive of but discreetly engage in “lesbian” sex, sometimes even living together in rural towns. In fact, Anzaldúa’s work generates numerous descriptors and terms for lesbian identities and relationships, as seen below.

Latina psychologist Aída Hurtado’s interdisciplinary scholarship is also characterized by both progressive and stereotypical models. For example, she effectively breaks away from dichotomizing Latina and white sexuality, and goes beyond the virgin and whore dichotomy, instead writing of Mexican and Chicana/o culture as having three main female sexual roles: the virgin, the whore, and the “femme-macho” (1996, 49–51). In addition, Hurtado is careful not to dichotomize or essentialize white and Chicano practices. She asserts that “Chicano communities are as homophobic as white mainstream communities”; that Chicano ideals are “similar to the ideals of womanhood held by other ethnic and racial groups”; and that for Chicanos, “As in all patriarchies, there are rewards for women who comply and punishments for those who rebel” (1998, 141–43).
On the other hand, Hurtado’s interpretation of the data still assumes that the cultural elaboration of sex is inherently negative for Latinas. Woman, she argues, “is conceptualized as not fully human but, rather, as property” and “Femme-machos are ... the only women who are allowed sexual pleasure. Virgins and wives are not supposed to feel sexual desire; it is seen as a necessary evil for accomplishing the higher goal of becoming a mother” (1996, 59). Citing an early essay by Oliva Espín (1984), Hurtado agrees that not only do Latina women “shun sexual pleasure,” some even “express pride at their own lack of sexual pleasure and desire” (59). Undoubtedly, some Latina women—like some white women—do shun sexual pleasure. However, many others (modestly) enjoy, or at least try (like white women) to enjoy their sexual experiences.

Oliva Espín, another Latina psychologist, has made significant contributions to the understanding of Latina sexuality, especially among immigrant women, even as her work perpetuates some of the dominant assumptions. She incorporates women’s own voices in her analyses, and has created theory based on personal narratives (1997). Espín’s work also recognizes that sexuality is a cultural variable rather than a static essence, and acknowledges that what is considered to be sexual in one culture is not necessarily sexual in another. She argues that “definitions of what constitutes appropriate behavior for women are justified in the name of a society's prevalent values: nationalism, religion, morality, health, science, and so forth” (1999, 124).

However, some of her recent work is still characterized by implications of negative sex. Her analyses conclude that Latina/o cultures are repressive to woman’s sexuality, while the English language and the United States are freeing or sexually liberating. Espín does this in a twofold manner. First, she uses personal narratives to characterize cultural influences:

Presently, there is a renewed interest among psychologists in the role of narrative in establishing personal identity ... When people tell life stories, they do so through commonly understood models specific to their culture ... the culture speaks through the individual narrator's "voice" and the culture provides the individual with the needed support to live, develop, and feel “normal.” (1997, xi–xii)

She believes that the culture is reflected in the voice, which becomes a problem when she essentializes the voice: essentializing the voice thus essentializes the culture. Second, she acknowledges that she, as a researcher and a therapist, serves as an interpreter, a “co-creator” to their stories: “As
I describe their experiences, I am conscious that I have not so much 'translated' their stories as co-created them. I am aware that representation is never mere description, and narratives are never an exact equivalent of experience" (1999, x).

It is through her analyses and interpretations of narratives as voices of the culture that Espín perpetrates negative representations of sexuality. She writes that, in immigrant communities, “traditional” Latina/o cultures repress women, while their “crossing the border” leads to more sexual liberation. For example, she suggests that lesbian immigrants' Old World culture is more repressive, and that they experience a type of liberation through their migration to the United States (1996, 103–105). Although Espín acknowledges that North American religious and cultural mores often conflict with homosexuality, she still implies that the Old World culture is far more restrictive. Again she characterizes Latina sexuality as sex-negative:

For many immigrant women, emphasis on self-renunciation and maintaining sexual purity is a primary determinant of their sexuality. Many of them still deem shunning sexual pleasure to be virtuous ... they regard sexual behavior exclusively as an unwelcome obligation toward their husbands and a necessary evil to create children. Some immigrant women express pride at their own lack of sexual pleasure or desire. (1999, 129)

Becoming sex-positive and sexually liberated is connected to acculturation. “For parents and young women alike, acculturation and sexuality are closely connected. In many immigrant communities, to be ‘Americanized’ is seen as almost synonymous with being sexually promiscuous” (1999, 6). Although Espín ties traditional cultures to sexual control and repression, is there not promiscuity in traditional cultures? What if one were looking at a community that had not migrated—would Espín still tie acculturation with promiscuity or sexual liberation? In fact, as Nan Alamilla Boyd points out in her review, “Espín's model seems dependent on the United States as a liberating environment” (1999, 258).

Espín credits acculturation as the process of growth and development that takes immigrants out of a repressed state and into an (implied) healthier state (1999, 158). Instead of challenging dominant models of acculturation, as some scholars have (for example Hurtado 1997; Rosaldo 1988), her work reproduces the dominant models, once again dichotomizing traditional culture as repressive and U.S. culture as liberating. Unfortunately, although she hints at the possibility of immigrant dynamics actually creating a more repressive environment, she fails to consider the
significance of political and structural factors. For example, she acknowledges that “Policing women’s bodies and sexual behavior becomes for immigrant communities the main means of asserting moral superiority over the host culture” (1999, 129). In other words, sexual repression may not arise only from cultural logic, but instead may be intensified through the dynamics of immigration, especially when mediated by issues of race and class. As Boyd’s review of Espín states, “New research on Latina migration, sexuality, and work suggests that immigration and acculturation often yield increased vulnerability and restricted sex and gender roles for women” (1999, 258-59).

Although it is important to validate that women in Espín’s study say they feel repressed by Latino/a culture and freed by emigration to the United States, we must also evaluate Espín’s role as “co-creator” of their experiences (which end up as Old World repressive, U.S. liberated). By her use of the construct “co-creator,” Espín masks the imbalance of power between psychologist and client. Even researchers who identify as Latina/o cannot automatically assume that they can transparently represent the other—the voice is still filtered through the researcher. Despite the various layers of context and the different directions the research journeys could have taken, Espín chose to see the sexuality in her participants as congruent with the dominant models we critique in this review.

**Toward Complex, Diverse, and Contextually Situated Sexualities**

In the mid-1990s, some Latina writers—many of them contributing to lesbian theory—increasingly questioned the need to emulate modern white models of sexuality. Instead they began to affirm the possibilities for healthy liberated expressions that draw on and incorporate their own cultural logic, and move away from the negative sex model. Unfortunately, most of these newer, more complex analyses are available primarily through alternative presses specifically designed to represent marginalized people, such as Third World Press and Aunt Lute Press, not in mainstream academic journals and presses. The concluding section of this paper presents some of these newer approaches, suggesting that reading and incorporating the insights of alternative analyses will help move us beyond stereotypical, ethnocentric, and essentialized understandings of Latina sexualities.

Writer and scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (1998), a leading theorist of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, once again fundamentally reformulates ideas
by questioning the naturalness of "lesbian" as both a term and an identity, instead reclaiming both Latina and working-class notions and terms for women-loving-women:

For me the term lesbian es problemon. As a working-class Chicana, mestiza—a composite being, amalgama de culturas y de lenguas—a woman who loves women, "lesbian" is a cerebral word, white and middle-class, representing an English-only dominant culture, derived from the Greek word lesbos. I think of lesbians as predominantly white and middle-class women and a segment of women of color who acquired the term through osmosis, much the same as Chicanas and Latinas assimilated the word "Hispanic." When a "lesbian" names me the same as her, she subsumes me under her category. I am of her group but not as an equal, not as a whole person—my color erased, my class ignored. Soy una puta mala, a phrase coined by Ariban, a tejana tortillera. "Lesbian" doesn't name anything in my homeland. Unlike the word "queer," "lesbian" came late into some of our lives. Call me de las otras. Call me loquita, jotita, marimacha, pajuelona, lamiscona, culera. ... (263)

Anzaldúa's work here even reminds us that there is nothing natural about assigning social identities to people who choose same-sex partners; even the term "homosexual" as a social category was coined by scientists in the mid-nineteenth century (Somerville 1997, 37).

Anzaldúa goes on to discuss and contextualize cultural differences, without assuming that modern white practices are healthier and better:

Yes, we may all love members of the same sex, but we are not the same. Our ethnic communities deal differently with us. I must constantly assert my differentness, must say, This is what I think of loving women. I must stress, the difference is my relationship to my culture; white culture may allow its lesbians to leave—mine doesn't. This is one way I avoid getting sucked into the vortex of homogenization, of getting pulled into the shelter of the queer umbrella. (264)

Rather than positing white sexuality as healthy and liberated, Anzaldúa suggests an affirmative aspect of Latina culture and sexuality, implying that white families and communities may push out or abandon lesbians, while Latinas/os might stigmatize them but allow them to stay (263–64). By contextualizing social dynamics, she challenges the presumption that it is automatically freer and easier to be lesbian in white communities, instead recognizing the high price that can be paid for that freedom.
Latina Sexuality

Similarly, historian Yolanda Chávez Leyva counters the simplistic assumption that Latina/o cultural silences about sexual practices indicate a greater level of sexual repression and oppression for Latinas/os, instead presenting a more nuanced and complex analysis. In “Listening to the Silences in Latina/Chicana Lesbian History” (1998), she looks specifically at the silence surrounding sexual practices such as lesbianism. Silence, she suggests, may have different meanings in different cultures and contexts; thus she examines the contextualized meanings and implications of silence about lesbianism. Describing the common practice of family and community members silently “knowing” and “imagining” that someone is lesbian, she quotes an informant’s story about her relationship with her mother: “Basically, you know, she doesn’t like my way of life so we don’t talk about it. She respects me, she loves me, she spoils me. But it’s something we just don’t discuss. I think I don’t do it out of respect for her, and she doesn’t do it out of respect for me” (432).

Chávez Leyva then suggests that “not discussing ‘it’ became a way to put love first, to reconcile very different expectations, a way not only for the daughter to defer to her mother, but also a way for the mother to show respect for her daughter” (432).

Instead of essentializing silence as always negative and oppressive, Chávez Leyva begins to culturally and historically situate its meaning:

Silence has its own contours, its own texture. We cannot dismiss the silences of earlier generations as simply a reaction to fear. Rather than dismiss it, we must explore it, must attempt to understand it. We must learn to understand the ways it has limited us and the ways it has protected us.

This is not, however, a call to continue the silence, nor to justify it. Naming ourselves, occupying our spaces fully, creating our own language, is essential to our continued survival, particularly in these times of increasingly [sic] violence against us as Latinas and lesbianas. This is a challenge to explore the contradictions of silence within Latina lesbian history, to understand the multiple meanings of silence, to uncover the language of silence. (432)

Rather than assuming that silence is always negative, Chávez Leyva posits a more complex and contradictory concept of silence, including a “silent tolerance” for lesbian experiences, even as she encourages the transformative project of naming and speaking of and about lesbians and their experiences (432).

Along similar lines, Lourdes Arguelles, a Cuban American lesbian writer, has used her recollections of the “crazy wisdom” of gender-crossing,
women-loving-women in Cuba to question basic assumptions about healthy and liberated sexuality. One of these was “the notion of partnership in life as based only on romantic love, rational considerations, or initial sexual chemistry” (1998, 208). Instead, she remembered relationships that could be based on “trans-biographical experience or shared spirituality” that “involve ways of relating that run contrary to Western notions of intimacy.” In addition, these relationships allowed me to question the current convention of assessing the health of a relationship by measuring the autonomy of each of the partners. Woven into the poetry of Teresa’s songs and played out on her veranda were images of the blending of two strong women, the union of thoughts and feelings, the absence of boundaries. Fusion in relationships became a viable and acceptable possibility for me, as had spirit-oriented and trans-biographical unions. (208)

Arguelles counters the conventional wisdom that healthy relationships should be marked by each partner’s “autonomy and individualism,” contending that although Western concepts of intimacy reject the notion of fusion, fusion can also be pleasurable and can be a part of a healthy sexual relationship (208–9). Again, Arguelles moves away from the idea that traditional sexual practices are inherently negative and unhealthy, instead exploring the pleasure of traditional Latina expressions.

Finally, recent research by anthropologist Pat Zavella (1997) departs from simplistic negative and repressive representations of Latina sexuality. Although many of the same themes emerge in her work (for example, Anglo-American sexual freedom and “the continuing importance of Mexican Catholic repression and the double standard”) she treats them very differently. Her ethnographic interviews and analyses emphasize the complexity and diversity of Latina sexuality, as well as the ability of Chicanas and Mexicanas to negotiate the seemingly more repressive cultural logic to create diverse ways of experiencing sexual satisfaction. Zavella emphasizes that Chicana/Mexicana sexuality is and has been marked by plural, competing, and conflicting “narratives” or cultural models (392–93). Using her interviewees’ metaphor of “playing with fire,” she explains the complexity of Latina sexualities:

The metaphors “playing” and “fire” recurred in the cultural poetics of sexual desire among all my Chicana and Mexicana interviewees. … Heterosexuals and lesbians indicated that in seeking sexual desire they
were "playing"—flirting, teasing, or testing potential lovers. Fire contained dual meanings, signifying both the repressive forces of culturally sanctioned silence regarding Eros in Mexican society; and simultaneously, in seeking the "powers of desire," women imagined sexual pleasure as fire—"hot," "passionate," "boiling," "explosive"—and difficult to stop. They envisioned seeking out potential sexual partners as a "game" played within the limits imposed by cultural authority of church doctrines, family practices, and the sanctions of conventional society. (393)

Zavella concludes her analysis by recognizing that cultural models are always competing and contradictory, and that this ambiguity is compounded in bicultural families and communities. Rather than focusing on acculturation as the way to achieve Latina sexual liberation, she has begun to document the space for sexual pleasure within Latina/o culture. Although Mexican Catholic traditions produce "a virtual cult of virginity" for unmarried women, Zavella shows that it can be mediated by love, and that sexual pleasure is allowed within heterosexual marriage (404–5). Moreover, "While the boundaries proscribed for women seem rigid and limiting, they were certainly malleable enough for these women to create space for themselves" (405). Rather than dichotomizing North American and Latina sexuality, Zavella produces a more complex picture, and recognizes the role of individual agency and negotiation within historically situated cultures.

The more complex, contextually situated approaches presented here begin to move us beyond ethnocentric and essentialized models that posit "traditional" Latina sexuality as repressed and pathological while white U.S. models are held up as the unmarked, universal ideal. These approaches begin to examine ways of expressing sexualities without equating liberation with acculturation, but neither do they shrink from documenting sexual and gender inequality. These new approaches recognize that human sexuality does not have to take one form or another for it to be healthy or "undistorted." As we stated previously, humans have no "undistorted" sexuality. Although dominant ideologies suggest that Latina sexuality is repressed, many people would concede, as Ana Castillo has, that "sexuality surfaces everywhere in our culture" in the form of sensual dancing, religious passion, and erotic male and female costumes (1991, 44–45). We agree that sexuality surfaces everywhere in Latina/o culture, but we do not see these expressions as only negative and distorted; rather, they are alternate and equally valid ways of experiencing sexuality that deserve more attention and exploration from social scientists.
Notes

1. Paredes (1993, 75) may be the first to have used the term “talking back,” but it has also been used by many others in anthropology (see for example hooks 1989; Rosaldo 1989; Davalos 1998).

2. Several key studies and reviews of the literature have documented and assessed these issues in Chicana/o studies, including Limón 1973, Rosaldo 1985, and Davalos 1998.


5. In addition to assuming that Latinas must be acculturated for their sexual health, much of the literature relies on simplistic notions of acculturation. They usually explain acculturation in terms of changes that occur in nondominant groups who come in contact with dominant groups, including modifications in values, behavior, eating habits, language usage, and attitudes. However, scholars in ethnic and cultural studies have challenged the construct of acculturation as a linear, one-way process, showing that it can be contradictory and complex (see for example Rosaldo 1988), and using more complex notions such as transculturation, which focuses on questions of power and involves mutual influence (Pratt 1992). This simplistic understanding of acculturation further problematizes many research findings. Hurtado (1997) suggests using the social engagement model and considering contexts and social spheres when analyzing multiple, changing social identities. This model “requires the researcher to systematically ask participants in a social sphere to define the phenomena under study rather than a priori assuming the researcher’s definition is the definition” (319).

6. The Mexican American study (Padilla and Baird 1991) did not include the question about a sexual relationship being one of the best things in life.

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