In the fall of 1995, I started a Latina women’s support group at a Los Angeles inner-city elementary school, consisting of eight adult women, mostly from Mexico. They were all mothers, and all said they were heterosexual. They all were or had been in a relationship with a man. I led the women in discussions about many of their personal concerns, including issues such as self-esteem, domestic violence, drug abuse, family life, and parenting skills. Group members met every week for a total of ten months, but during the first weeks, they didn’t talk about their sex lives. After I questioned them about their silence on that topic, the women asked whether it was permissible to discuss sex-related themes. As they developed relationships with each other, the women finally began to explore their sexual concerns, fantasies, and fears. Participating in this collective experience drew me to what would become the topic of my doctoral dissertation as a sociologist: Mexican immigrant women and their sex lives.

Women undergo erotic transformations as part of their immigrant
experience—that was one of the lessons I learned from my women’s group. The sexual journeys that take place in the apparent isolation and privacy of their bedrooms are not divorced from their social contexts and circumstances. Instead, they are linked to the women’s experiences as immigrants. Their interactions within their communities, schools, and support networks shape their behaviors and thoughts during sexual encounters with their partners.

The women’s group experience led me to pursue three research questions: (1) How does immigration and life in the United States affect the sex lives of heterosexual Mexican immigrant women? (2) What sexual beliefs and practices do Mexican immigrant women bring to the United States, and how do these change in the new social context? (3) How do various dimensions of migration, such as social networks and the changing experiences of work, media, motherhood, and religion, reshape sexual ideologies and practices? To answer these questions, I approached various inner-city, community-based agencies and elementary schools serving Latino families in the city of Los Angeles to recruit and interview forty Mexican immigrant, mostly Catholic, women.

These forty Mexicanas defined sex as a fluid construct and not necessarily dangerous. This was true even among incest and rape survivors who had developed non-abusive, loving relationships with other partners. In those cases, the women reported experiences of love and erotic intimacy with men with whom they explored sexuality in safe, pleasurable ways. The diverse sexual stories of those who had never been abused also stimulated my intellectual curiosity. As I heard all the women’s stories, I realized that gender and sexual identity can be nuanced and complex concepts, bringing both pain and bliss. The notion of gender as a relational category—as well as all the theorizing of multiple expressions of feminine and masculine identities—kept coming to my mind. Eventually, my work forced me to revisit my own family life. I thought of my younger brother, cleaning my apartment, cooking, and washing the dishes while I worked on my dissertation; of my older brother, ironing his own shirts while getting ready for his busy job as a manager in my highly industrialized Mexican hometown of Monterrey; and of my father, fixing mole and rice for me during my Christmas visits to Mexico. Thinking about the men in my family helped me realize that I needed to learn about the social, economic, historical, cultural, and psychological complexities linked to the construction of Mexican masculinities and sexualities, and their nuanced connections with the various expressions of women’s sexualities.

As I prepared for my examinations with professors Pierrette
Hondagneu-Sotelo (my dissertation chair), and later with Patricia Fernández-Kelly and Barrie Thorne, I reflected on their observations. Many questions emerged: How are men’s heterosexual identities socially constructed by Mexican society? What would Mexican men have to say about the ways the same society constructs women’s heterosexual identities? What are the personal, emotional, and sexual costs Mexican men pay because of these social prescriptions? What are heterosexual men’s vulnerabilities in a patriarchal society? Is sex only about power? What promotes heterosexual women’s subordination and what does not? Why, how, and under what conditions do Mexican masculinities condition (or not) heterosexual women’s identities? What can we learn from Mexican masculinities that can help us understand women’s heterosexual experiences within a relational context and without neglecting the subordinated position of some men, such as the case of immigrant men? In short, what could I learn about heterosexual Mexican immigrant men? My motivation to begin exploring these questions was powerful, as was the encouragement I received from my mentors to build on my original project by incorporating additional, complementary interviews with a group of twenty Mexican immigrant men.

By bringing in men’s personal experiences and voices, I have built on the narratives obtained from my earlier interviews with women on heterosexual relationships within both couple and family relationship contexts. The present study is also motivated by my own journey. I was born and educated, through undergraduate years, in Mexico, before immigrating to the United States, so my own experiences as a woman migrant make me an insider. I share the same social and cultural complexities with regard to sex and the erotic that my female and male informants brought to the United States. After migrating, I too experienced many of the challenges, adventures, and disenchantments discussed in this book.

Purpose of the Study

“So why do you want to interview men if you’re just going to say that we’re a bunch of machos?” That was Marcos’s first response when I phoned to invite him to participate in this study. The narratives of my Mexican women informants had led me to reexamine my academic training, which had been dominated by Western theories of feminism and gender. Yet, it was the perspectives of Mexican men that ultimately invited me to challenge the Western feminist ideologies and theories I had been
exposed to in graduate school. After examining both women’s and men’s narratives, I gradually became more analytical and less ideological. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty said about feminism: “Men exploit, women are exploited. Such simplistic formulations are historically reductive; they are also ineffectual in designing strategies to combat oppressions. All they do is reinforce binary divisions between men and women” (1991, 64).

This book blurs those separations: it complicates the dominant feminist scholarship that polarizes women against men and that excludes women and men of color and their experiences of heterosexual love and sex. To accomplish that goal, I situate both Mexican women’s and men’s histories of their sex lives at the center of my analysis. And by concentrating on their pre- and post-migration sex stories, I claim that heterosexual experiences of gender and sexuality cannot be understood in isolation but from a relational perspective. In doing so, this sociological study explores research questions about both women and men designed to accomplish four objectives: (1) examine the social, cultural, and historical contexts shaping my respondents’ sex lives as they evolved in Mexico and during and after migration to and settlement in the United States; (2) explore the nuances and complexities of their erotic experiences as they simultaneously embraced a dominant sexual identity (i.e., heterosexuality) and marginalized social identities, such as being Mexican, monolingual, second-class citizens, and socioeconomically segregated; (3) study their heterosexual experiences as relational processes that are fluid, nuanced, changing, contextual, and contested; and (4) incorporate Mexican men’s experiences of heterosexual sex, love, and relationships in order to study the demands and sacrifices patriarchal contexts impose upon them.

Migrant Sexualities: Conceptual and Theoretical Contributions

The sex lives of the people in this study are revealing. First, the majority of the married women (70 percent) were not virgins when they married. I explore the disjuncture between the first sexual encounters of my women respondents and a generalized belief that Mexican Catholic women value virginity. The women’s narratives, for instance, suggest the existence of multiple femininities and heterosexualities within the context of Mexican society. These experiences of femininity reveal tensions, contradictions, and fluidity that allow women to have sexual agency and
pleasure but also to be exposed to forms of control and danger. As they migrate, women continue reinventing these gendered and sexualized processes in flux. Second, I argue that it is not just Catholicism but an entire social system that teaches women and men to value virginity as a form of social capital. Women’s perceptions of their sexualized bodies explain why and how they may use virginity — represented by an intact hymen — as a commodity they may exchange to improve their living conditions and their socioeconomic future. I introduce the concept of *capital femenino* to explain how women and men assign a higher or lower value to a woman’s premarital virginity depending on the socioeconomic context in which they grow to maturity. As a social construction, virginity is expressed through public symbols. A woman’s emblematic virtue is not private; it becomes a family and a community asset. Third, men’s recollections of their sexual experiences confirm women’s perceptions of virginity, and they also uncover the gender inequalities men are exposed to in patriarchal societies. Men’s expressions of masculinities are situated within and shaped by regionally defined socioeconomic forces. I introduce the concept of regional patriarchies to argue that patriarchy is not uniform or monolithic, and also to explain how local expressions of hegemony affect not only women but men’s lives as well. The men I interviewed were exposed to social expectations and exigencies including but not limited to forced sexual initiation and coercive marriage as expressions of manhood and masculinity. And fourth, these dynamics are exposed to the paradoxical challenges immigrants face. The United States — once the promised land for all of these informants — poses sexual threats for many of them. Immigrants experience an imaginary transition from tradition to modernity, from rigidity to flexibility, but newcomers’ dreams may become American nightmares, fueled by the social fears that permeate immigrants’ sex lives. A culture of sexual fear is present in both Mexico and the United States, and is aggravated among immigrants to Los Angeles by HIV/AIDS, the sexual abuse and kidnapping of children, promiscuity, the dangers associated with drug and alcohol use, and gang violence. But fear and apprehension are only one force transforming immigrants’ perceptions of sexuality in the United States. Their erotic journeys are also shaped by social networks, women’s paid employment, demanding schedules, and a fast-paced routine, among other social factors invading the most private moments of their personal lives.

In Los Angeles, my Mexican respondents revisited and reconstituted sexual beliefs and practices through community networks, work, media,
religion, casual and formal romantic relationships, and family life, including the experience of motherhood and fatherhood. And as a result of migration, they were able to transform their multiple experiences of femininity and masculinity. Before migrating, these women and men were exposed to various regional patriarchies, which in turn reproduced regional femininities and masculinities. The local hegemonies in Mexico were constructed through regional and cultural differentiation—the axis of state-building processes in Mexican society. As Jeffrey W. Rubin argues: “The Mexican state and regime should be perceived as parts of a complex and changing center that coexists with and is constituted and embedded in the diversity of regional and cultural constructions evolving throughout Mexico since the 1930s” (1996, 86).

Rubin identifies the center as Mexico City, “an institutional apparatus of power and decision making, and a set of ‘national’ cultural discourses” (86). His examinations of the Mexican state reflect celebrated Foucauldian notions of power as a decentralized social force embracing fluidity in its essence, emanating from different directions, and creating resistance as it is exercised through social interactions (Foucault 1979). Even though Foucault has been criticized for not including gender in his theorizing, this particular conceptualization of power informs the regional patriarchal processes underlying the multiple sexualities existing in Mexican society.

The men’s heterosexual narratives I discuss in this book expand on state-of-the-art research on Latino men, masculinities, and sexualities. While Mexican men and gay and bisexual experiences have received special attention across disciplines in both nations, heterosexual love and sex have remained practically unexamined.¹ Research by Gutmann (1996), Amuchástegui (2001), Carrillo (2002), and Hirsch (2003) has gradually begun to close this gap. This book expands on Gutmann’s 1996 study and similarly demonstrates that there is not one but multiple masculinities in Mexican society. By proposing the term regional patriarchies I seek to explain how women and men are exposed to diverse, fluid, and malleable but regionally uniform and locally defined expressions of hegemony and their corresponding sexual moralities. While shaped by the socioeconomics of a local region, each one of these patriarchies takes myriad forms and promotes various levels of gender inequality. The notion of regional patriarchies identifies gender patterns in Mexican society based on Belinda Bozzoli’s examinations of “The ‘Patchwork Quilt’ of Patriarchies” in South Africa (Bozzoli 1983, 149) and R. W. Connell’s analyses of gender and multiple masculinities as social constructions (Connell 1987, 1995). Gender relations and diverse representations of masculinity are not the
same across historical, social, and cultural contexts. They are fluid and reproduced in social interaction, through social practice, and in particular social and geographical situations (Connell 1987). “Masculinities are configurations of practice within gender relations, a structure that includes large-scale institutions and economic relations as well as face-to-face relationships and sexuality” (Connell 2000, 29).

The terms macho and machismo have a sophisticated history and different shades of meaning in Mexico and Latin America. I deliberately did not use these terms in my interviews, and I discussed them only to probe after my informants used them. Interestingly, as I interviewed women and men, these concepts began to emerge with a consistent meaning. Several of my informants systematically brought up and freely used macho, machismo, and machista in order to describe sexist beliefs and practices in their life narratives. In their stories, however, sexism was neither a uniform nor a unidirectional force; it was flexible and alternatively reinforced, reproduced, and contested by both women and men. Accordingly, men embraced regional expressions of multiple masculinities which were not necessarily hegemonic. These social dynamics either promote or challenge gender inequities, and as a consequence socially reproduce the existence of numerous and contrasting meanings and patterns of both women’s and men’s sexual identities. The notion of manifold sexualities and gender identities in Mexico supports Gutmann — along with other social scientists across disciplines — as he issues a warning against making sweeping generalizations and promoting stereotypes or traditional representations of Mexican women and men (see Baca Zinn 1982).

Why Mexican Immigrants? Why Heterosexuality?

This present study is innovative for three reasons. First, the sociology of immigration has remained “desexualized” — it has overlooked immigrants’ sex lives. Extensive research has examined many aspects of immigrant men’s (and more recently women’s) lives, with a special interest in labor markets, economics, and political activism, and, more recently, family life, gender relations, and religion, among others. A special concern about social and cultural change among immigrants has placed gender at the center of Mexican immigration analyses. For instance, Hondagneu-Sotelo’s Gendered Transitions (1994) both inspires and informs this study. Just as with the women and men Hondagneu-Sotelo studied in Northern California, the immigrants who gave life to the present work redefined
gender and power relations within migration and settlement contexts as they engaged in sexualized feelings, attitudes, and acts. The present study is also innovative because it focuses on the creation of heterosexual norms. The sociology of sexualities has examined the experiences of gays and lesbians since the mid-1970s. A long history of homophobia, marginality, segregation, along with the HIV/AIDS epidemic, has resulted in extensive sociological research that studies down on sex. That is, gay and lesbian experiences are examined within the social structure of power and control wherein the privileged group (i.e., heterosexuals) determines what is normative as socially accepted, appropriate, and “normal” in terms of human sexuality. In contrast, studying up on sex, that is, examining heterosexuality as the norm, has rarely been investigated. The third reason this study is innovative is that Latina and Latino sexuality research in the United States has remained confined within the behavioral, public health, and epidemiological sciences. This voluminous research literature—prompted by HIV/AIDS concerns—has been dominated by acculturation and assimilation models. Here, I attempt to fill in a gap in the migration and gender and sexualities subdisciplines within sociology by challenging the assumptions and theoretical models explaining Latina and Latino sexualities. This study offers an alternative sociological perspective that explores the intimate intricacies of Mexican migrants’ eroticism, not in a social vacuum but within migration contexts vulnerable to redefined definitions of gender relations, socioeconomic segregation, and inequality.

Methods

The women and men presented in this book narrated their sex histories through open-ended interviews that lasted three hours, on average. The informants had migrated to the United States when they were at least twenty years old, and they were between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five at the time of our interviews. All of them had lived in the United States between five and fifteen years. Half of the sample (20 women, 10 men) was born and raised in the state of Jalisco; the other half included individuals born and raised in Mexico City. Although some of the study participants reported same-sex fantasies and practices, they all identified themselves as heterosexual during our interviews. I use pseudonyms in order to protect the confidentiality and privacy of my respondents. Appendix A offers the demographic characteristics of study informants.
Jalisco and Mexico City represent two of the main locations sending Mexican immigrant women coming to the United States through Tijuana. California is the destination of immigrants from Jalisco, the state that sends the highest number of immigrant workers to the United States and the state with the highest incidence of AIDS cases related to migration (Salgado de Snyder, Díaz-Pérez, and Maldonado 1996). Similarly, Mexico City has the largest proportion of ill individuals who have lived in the United States (Bronfman, Camposortega, and Medina 1989). Conservative and traditional sexual attitudes have been associated with the sexuality of Mexican adolescent women living in Guadalajara, the capital of Jalisco and the second-largest city in Mexico (Baird 1993). Jalisco also encompasses pre- and semi-industrialized rural areas. This western state is the birthplace of tequila, mariachi music, and a charro culture, all dominant folklore images central to the creation of masculinist identities. Jalisco lies adjacent to the state of Michoacán, where el rapto or el robo (literally, the “kidnapping” or “stealing” of a woman) and rape prevailed in the 1950s and 1960s (Wilson 1990; Hirsch 2003). The urban sophistication of Mexico City has been associated with increased employment and education opportunities for women, which in turn may promote more egalitarian sexual views among both genders. Based on my clinical experience with Mexican immigrant women—I have a background in couple and family psychotherapy—it takes at least five years of permanent residence in the United States for them to establish a relatively stable personal life.

I interviewed the women in my sample during the 1997–98 academic year, after approaching three elementary schools and four community-based clinics located in inner-city Latino immigrant barrios. One of the immigrant women in the support group I conducted at the school agreed to participate in the study; I identified the rest of the participants by using a snowball sampling technique at the seven research sites. None of these additional thirty-nine women had participated in any type of women’s support group at those locations, and none had been a former client of mine. A few had attended HIV/AIDS-related talks, or pláticas, at some of the agencies. I attended meetings at the parents’ centers of the schools (e.g., ESL classes for parents, parenting classes, PTA meetings, etc.) to identify potential participants. I also located potential candidates for the project by visiting the crowded reception rooms of the various clinics where large groups of Latina immigrant women were waiting to be called for their doctor appointments.

I identified and interviewed the men after calling and visiting professionals at the same agencies and schools where I had located the women
who participated in this project. In addition, I took part in meetings at the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles and established contact with representatives of hometown associations, community organizers, and leaders of employment centers for jornaleros — day laborers. After I described my dissertation research project with the women and my desire to expand the project by interviewing men in order to write a book, many of these leaders invited me to meetings at their centers and organizations.

My professional identity as la doctora — as many men began to call me — inspired respect and curiosity in the men. Some asked me questions about my project or insisted that I listen to their stories about sex workers and women being raped in their small towns. Other men asked me if I could provide professional counseling with respect to their relationships with their partners, daughters, or wives. Because of the dual relationship that could potentially emerge, I did not give them a consultation and referred them to a professional in the Los Angeles area. A snowball sampling technique helped me to recruit all of my informants at these community organizations and employment centers. I interviewed the men between fall 2000 and summer 2001 as a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Sociology at the University of California at Berkeley. These male informants were not related to or acquainted with any of the forty women interviewed during the 1997–98 academic year.

I personally conducted all of the women’s interviews at the informants’ homes or at a private office at the school or clinic. Similarly, I conducted all of my interviews with the men mainly at agencies, schools, employment centers, or in their homes. At their request, I interviewed all of the women and men in Spanish. As an expression of personal appreciation for participating, I gave each participant books on literature, mathematics, and geography that I requested and received free of charge from the Mexican consulate.

I conducted informal participant observations during the Latina women’s support group meetings I led for ten months at the elementary school. I obtained authorization from the group members to use this material for research purposes, and it helped me to design the open-ended question guide I used during my subsequent interviews. In my interviews, I explored the following subjects: sexuality: general concepts; religion and sexuality; sex education in the home; puberty and adolescence; sexuality and media; sexuality, AIDS, and sexually transmitted diseases; sexuality, immigration, and cultural differences; sexuality and social institutions, contexts, and networks in the United States; sex education: current beliefs and attitudes as a mother; personal reactions to real-life situ-
ations (vignettes); interviewees’ personal information; and interviewees’ personal reactions to the interview. My interviews with the men were similar and explored many of the topics I discussed with the women, including questions aimed at exploring the men’s reactions to my findings with the women.

In my in-depth, open-ended question interview guide, I incorporated recollections of past experiences of what I identify as storytelling and personal reactions to vignettes. Storytelling triggers past life events recollected in the present. In Ken Plummer’s *Telling Sexual Stories* (1995), he collected the coming-out stories of homosexuals and the recovery tales of women rape survivors. He demonstrates how reconstructing past stories through storytelling becomes a sociological phenomenon: stories help organize the flow of interaction, binding together or disrupting the relation of self to other and community. In his study, rape stories (recovery stories) feed upon and into community. That is, they connect the spheres of what is public and private, secret or known about. In his words: “Sexual stories lay down routes to a coherent past, mark off boundaries and contrasts in the present, and provide both a channel and a shelter for the future” (172). Plummer urges sociologists to see and analyze grounded storytelling activities and their links to social structures.

In a related way, Marta Rivas (1996) did research in Mexico that demonstrates the value of articulating sexual narratives as the best way for Mexican women to organize personal sex histories. Rivas cites Jerome Bruner (1990) to argue that narrative is one of the most common everyday life ways to express and organize language and an ideal vehicle to express and give shape to one’s personal experiences. Similarly, Oliva M. Espín (1999) uses narrative techniques in her psychological research of women’s sex lives as part of their migration experiences from different countries to the United States.

“Personal reactions to vignettes” consist of the researcher reading a passage to the informant and inviting her/him to verbally articulate ideas, thoughts, and feelings in response. The purpose of this technique, particularly in this study, was to gather from my informants a self-built ideology about sexual morality and controversial issues and dilemmas. I read texts (including a passage from *La Carta al Papa*, which I discuss in the last chapter) describing specific cases where the central character (or characters) is a Mexican woman exhibiting particular behaviors and/or attitudes in regard to sexuality and religion.

After collecting the data, I typed verbatim transcripts of my interviews. I read and examined the interview transcripts to identify significant and
recurrent themes. On the basis of those themes I categorized and coded my data in order to develop theoretical analyses (see Appendix B for a discussion of the methodological considerations involved in this project). All translations of quotations from works originally published in Spanish are mine.

I am not offering concrete, linear analyses of women’s sexual practices “before” and “after” migration. My work is based on the conceptualization of sexuality as a malleable process in constant flux. Thus, I look at how pre- and post-migration social and economic complexities shape my informants’ experiences of sexuality in both countries. I look at how sexualized bodies engage with each other as part of the pre- and post-migration experience. The changes women and men experience in their sex lives after migrating flow throughout my examinations of the meanings and interpretations underlying their narratives. My sample of sixty informants does not represent the totality of Mexican immigrants, and my conclusions are not aimed at drawing generalizations about the lives of other Mexican or Latina women and Latino men living in the United States. Given the sensitive nature of my interviews, I am aware of the extent to which the study participants were self-selected. Nevertheless, I greatly benefited from that process, since the self-selection process helped me to interview only women and men who were interested and candid about revealing their intimate lives to me. I have attempted to portray their sex lives in this book with the same frankness and honesty.

Mexicans Talking about Their Sex Lives?

“How did you get Mexican women to talk about sex?” “Aren’t Mexican women kind of closed-minded and conservative in talking about sex?” Those are questions that colleagues in both the United States and Mexico have asked many times, even as they were intrigued by my research with Mexican women. Others have similarly inquired about my “courage as a Mexican woman” to conduct sexuality research with Mexican men.

I felt inspired to become a sociologist after reading Lillian Rubin’s book, Worlds of Pain, in a Master’s program in Psychology in the late 1980s. I switched disciplines as I became interested in learning her secret of harmonizing professional careers as both a psychotherapist and sociologist. She has also been an inspiration with regard to the ways in which she has used her clinical skills as sociological research tools. Oliva M. Espín’s psychological research on the sex lives of women who migrated
from different countries to the United States (1999) has similarly validated the ways in which a researcher can use previous clinical training in data collection and analysis. As a novice following their example, I have used my clinical skills to conduct sociological research. My training in couple and family therapy, and in sex therapy, provided me with the in-depth interviewing skills to approach and pursue my sociological curiosity with respect and kindness. As I noticed that most women and men were enthusiastically willing to open up about their sex lives, I let myself go while paying close attention to my interview schedule. Developing intimate dialogues with immigrants became an act of expressing care and concern for them.

My own personal history has been written in the context of heterosexual, loving experiences, and it also helped me conduct this study. I used myself as a source to answer many of the personal questions my interviewees asked. At the end of the interviews, my interlocutors surprised me with countless questions and reactions. I was asked many times whether I was a virgin, had children, was married or divorced, believed in oral or anal sex, or masturbation; whether I thought that homosexuality was sinful or not; whether I had an opinion about abortion, condom, and contraceptive use; whether I was a Mexican or a Chicana; Catholic or not; whether I had ever cohabited with or was presently cohabiting with a gringo; and whether I was satisfied with my sex life. After we finished up our interview, one of the women, Tomasita, looked at me closely and exclaimed, “Gee whiz, Gloria! You must have a fucking good sex life. Look, you don’t even have acne or wrinkles!” Salomé asked me if I had a secret formula to share with her so that she would have sexual fantasies, or at least one sexual dream, about Jorge Rivero, a Mexican sex symbol. “I try, and try, but I can’t. How do I do it? Tell me how, young lady!” Salomé shared with me some of the sexual frustrations and feelings of sexual deprivation she had experienced after her divorce many years earlier. After a deep sigh and a long pause, she asked, “Do I have to masturbate?” Other women, especially those raising adolescent daughters, asked me for my mother’s secret in making me stay in high school and go to college. Some women expressed concerns about their children and asked me to give them basic advice to make sure the sex education they were providing for them was appropriate and well informed. I answered each of their questions unhesitatingly and with complete honesty. Interestingly, when I would carefully and gradually begin to open up about my personal life, many of my informants wouldn’t even let me finish my first sentence. Instead, they would interrupt me to continue on with confessions
of their own sexual experiences, fantasies, dreams, and fears. The interviewing experience became a seductive and engaging process of sexual exploration on both sides. Once these women started telling their sex stories, I couldn’t stop them. Sharing sexual memories became a journey of self-discovery and reaffirmation. Twelve of the forty women reported some type of sexual violence, including sexual abuse as a child or adolescent, incest, date rape, sexual assault by a stranger, and marital rape. Only one man reported an incident of sexual abuse as a child, by an older man within his family. For those women survivors, the process gave them the hope that they could find professional help and heal their emotional wounds.

Men reported they felt similarly comfortable opening up about their sex lives during the interviews. In general, the men were more formal, reserved, and distant than the women, and fewer of them asked me about my sex, marriage, and family life. The few men who inquired about my sex life were from Mexico City, whose modernity and urban sophistication made the topic easier to raise. At the end of our interview, Diego asked if I had real-life experience with the topic of my research or whether I was a like a priest — a “voyeur” who knows about everybody’s sex life but who may have little personal exposure to erotic pleasure and sex. Raúl, who was also from Mexico City, told me more than once that I reminded him of an ex-girlfriend he loved deeply who he had left behind in Mexico after he migrated. He blushed and acted in a respectful manner as I firmly redirected him to my questions and explained the ethics involved in a research project.

Conducting sex research raises controversial issues, especially when the interview is conducted in the relative privacy of an informant’s home. For some of the women, being interviewed about sex in their homes represented a challenge to be honest while being cautious and discreet, especially when family members were present. I interviewed some of these women in their kitchens or their living rooms when their relatives were not at home. However, when that was not the case, many of them identified their bedrooms as the safest place to be interviewed about their sex lives.

When I went to interview Yadira at her home, I was greeted by her children and her husband. She introduced me to them as a counselor at the clinic while showing me her many lithographs of the Virgin of Guadalupe and other images of Virgins hanging on the wall. Then, she gradually led me to a bedroom while telling me in a whispering tone of voice, “If we are going to talk about sex, well . . . we need to go to the
bedroom.” She opened the door to a small, crowded space decorated with more religious images, at least one crucifix, and many stuffed animals. Then she lay down on the floor while complaining about the hot summer, invited me to sit next to her, and asked me to start the interview. Shortly after, she said she felt tired and jumped onto a twin-size bed, where she lay down. I remained seated on the floor, stretching my weary back many times against her bed in a scene that made me feel like a Freudian psycho-analyst interviewing her patient during a free-association session. I experienced a similar scenario with other women. Graciela complained about her lack of privacy at home and invited me to meet her at a friend’s house. As with Yadira, Graciela did not wait long to take me to her friend’s bedroom. “Right on! The bedroom is the ideal place to talk about sex,” she stated as she lay down while patting the queen-size bed and inviting me to sit down next to her. As with Yadira, I remained seated next to Graciela during the entire interview, and again felt like an analyst in search of her innermost fears and fantasies. I experienced similar circumstances with Rosalía, Romelia, and Fernanda, who all identified their bedrooms as the ideal place to be interviewed.

I also conducted some of my interviews with the men at their homes, mainly in the living room or on the porch. In only one case did I interview a man in the master bedroom of his house, at his wife’s request. Both the man and his wife were from Mexico City, and I had met her through a community organizer. She had asked me about my professional training and interests, said she believed in the importance of my project, and suggested that I interview her husband. After she talked to him, he agreed to participate in the study. When I arrived at their home, she asked me to interview him in their bedroom while she stayed outside and next to the door to be sure their children didn’t disturb us. Later, the couple fixed me a cup of tea and drew me into a conversation, that included their adolescent daughter and son, about teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and gang violence in Los Angeles. In contrast to its loaded meaning in other contexts, for my research purposes, the bedroom offered my informants privacy, safety, and a sense of protection. It also provided symbolic freedom and a censure-free environment in which to talk about their sex lives.

Finally, I listened to these women and men and/or analyzed their stories in the midst of a number of sexually charged episodes in the history of the United States. The Monica Lewinsky–Bill Clinton sex scandal, the introduction of the Viagra pill, and the revelations of pedophile priests within the Catholic Church confirmed the centrality of sex in the nation’s social life, even as I worked on different aspects of my own study. While
I do not discuss any of these topics here, the disjunctures and contradictions that emerged in mainstream society with regard to sexuality and sexual morality fed my motivation to write a sociological book about Mexican immigrants and their sex lives.

Organization of the Book

This book is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 lays out a theoretical framework that focuses on Mexican women’s and men’s experiences of sex and the erotic in the social sciences, including immigration studies and scholarship on gender and sexuality. Chapter 2 offers my central argument about Mexican women’s need to preserve premarital virginity: far beyond religious obedience and the cult of virginity historically promoted by the Catholic Church, Mexican women socially construct virginity as a resource to improve their living conditions. I examine the ways in which both women and men build virginity as the *capital femenino* which possesses a social exchange value. Mexican women, as a subordinate social group struggling to improve their living conditions and opportunities in a patriarchal society, use *capital femenino* vis-à-vis men in order to enhance their life opportunities. In addition, a need to preserve premarital virginity interacts with gender dynamics in two ways: (1) a woman’s need to preserve her virginity until marriage is deeply rooted in an ethic of family honor and respect, and (2) a woman’s need to preserve her virginity is linked to a socially learned fear of sexism and men’s expectation of marrying virgin women. In addition to revealing both of these dynamics, the women’s testimonies unmask, first, the moral contradictions and social mechanisms of the gender inequality that heterosexual women experience while being educated in a patriarchal society. And second, their testimonies offer the possibility for women to explore sexual agency, pleasure, and autonomy in such social contexts. Chapter 3 reveals the experiences of sexual initiation among men. The men’s narratives show the ways in which patriarchal prescriptions of masculinity shape both men’s sexual vulnerabilities as well as women’s beliefs and practices of sexuality. Their testimonies illustrate how regional patriarchies shape the lives of women and men educated in social contexts characterized by an emphasis on gender inequalities and rigid sexual moralities (e.g., in *pueblos*, or small towns). Such small-town patriarchies are more likely to assign a higher value to virginity as *capital femenino* than is the case for individuals educated in a social context where sexism is disguised or less intense (e.g., in
urban contexts or large cities). Regardless of their places of origin, however, a common emotion enveloped the first sexual experience of both my women and men informants: fear. Reported feelings of apprehension and concern by both women and men suggest the existence of a culture of sexual fear in Mexican society. These feelings seem to originate and be reproduced through one of the institutions shaping my informants’ experiences of sexuality: the family. Chapter 4 explains how families — via maternal authority — become an important institution establishing and shaping beliefs and practices with regard to femininity and masculinity, courtship, heterosexual love, and sexuality. Finally, both the preservation and the loss of virginity, as displayed through socially constructed symbols (e.g., the white dress), transfigure a woman’s virginity from an intimate and private rite of passage into one that is a public, family, and social affair.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 examine the changing experiences of sexuality related to migration and settlement in the United States. Chapter 5 looks at how these Mexicans’ sex lives are transformed by their social and economic conditions in the new country, including sexual dangers (e.g., sexual abuse of children, HIV/AIDS, drugs and alcohol use, and gang activity) and the fast-paced economy and lifestyle migrants encounter in the United States. Chapter 6 discusses Mexican women’s and men’s views and experiences of the erotic in the context of their conversations with one another and within the immigrant women’s community. The chapter also discusses the culture of sexuality the women actively create while establishing new social metrics with regard to sexual morality and sexuality. Chapter 7 puts the female silhouette at the center of my examinations of migration and sexuality by examining how and why women reshape their sex lives (and how men perceive these changes) as part of their everyday life experiences within new socioeconomic contexts characterized by anonymity, geographical distance, softened family control, social networking, and laws protecting women such as regulations against domestic violence. I also examine men’s sexual transformations in the United States. Finally, chapter 8 discusses the ways in which mothers and fathers redefine their own meanings of virginity as they educate a new generation in the United States. The chapter also includes my final reflections with regard to this study’s implications for reproductive health, as well as the additional research challenges for me and others to follow in the virgin field of Mexican migrant sexualities.