

# Changing Constructions of Sexuality and Risk: Migrant Mexican Women Farmworkers in California

## resumen

Este artículo examina las contradicciones existentes entre poder, cuerpo femenino y la sexualidad marcada racialmente y definida por cuestiones de género, en comunidades rurales de California predominantemente mexicanas. Después de migrar, las trabajadoras agrícolas mexicanas enfrentan una serie de “riesgos políticos y económicos” que están vinculados con inequidades sociales dentro del proceso migratorio. Basadas en métodos de observación participativa, grupos focales y entrevistas en profundidad, analizamos como los discursos hegemónicos se inscriben o “dibujan” en los cuerpos de estas mujeres y cómo ellas desarrollan mecanismos de sobrevivencia para enfrentarlos. En este escenario, las mujeres reajustan sus cuerpos transgrediendo normas sociales establecidas, enfrentando discursos hegemónicos y explorando su propia poética del deseo.

## Introduction

María García, 26 years old, had lived in California for only two years, yet she knew that how she displayed her body had significant consequences. When she went seeking work she avoided a nearby farm because her kin informed her that the supervisor had a couch in the back of the shed and women were forced to have sex in exchange for a job. Eventually she found a job as a farmworker, but the work was hard on her body and she developed several health problems. Furthermore, women were subject to sexual harassment while working in the strawberry fields. María explained, “We work almost all the time bent over with our ‘rumps’ in the face of whoever comes from behind, which is usually a man.” Male workers occasionally would touch women’s genitalia or buttocks or make lewd comments about their bodies. According to focus groups with Mexican women, male workers outnumbered women workers by about 20 to one and there was little workplace monitoring.<sup>1</sup> Outside work María entered into a sexual relationship with a farmworker. She had heard that male farmworkers often spend time with sex workers and that she

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might be at risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), yet she was unable to request that he use condoms to protect her. Because she was undocumented, María had not sought any medical care. A neighbor informed her about a local farmworker clinic where she joined a women's group.<sup>2</sup>

María's experiences illustrate contradictions about power, women's bodies, and gendered sexuality in predominantly *mexicano* communities in rural California. After they migrate, Mexican women are enmeshed in processes of racialized, gendered sexuality that constitute what Rayna Rapp calls a "political economy of risk" (2000). That is, migrant women face risks related to changing constructions of gender and sexuality that are contingent upon Mexicans' placement within the local economy and shaped by political and social forces. We suggest that the social body (Scheper-Hughes 1994; Martin 1995) of *mexicana* migrant farmworkers is molded by local expressions of transnational processes that shape this context.

Our interpretation builds on the framework by feminist scholars who argue that social reproduction—of which sexuality is central—should be seen as local expressions of transnational inequalities (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995; Moore 1988; Martin 1995). In this framework, individuals imagine and enact cultural logics and social formations through varied mechanisms—personal struggle, generational mobility, participation in social movements, or through contestation of powerful religious and political ideologies or the state. Situating migrant Mexican women within this framework, we argue that they construct complex local knowledges and practices regarding sexuality and the body, reflecting their lived experience in a regional political economy that are choreographed by multiple, intertwined forces: Globalization sets in motion capital, technology, popular culture, and sexually transmitted infections that cross national borders toward the south as well as push workers into the migrant stream within Mexico and toward the north.<sup>3</sup> Catholic-based patriarchal ideologies and practices in Mexico and the United States create

ambiguous notions regarding women's bodies and constrain their views of pleasure (Zavella 1997).

Overlapping with these gender, class, and social forces, when Mexican women migrate to the United States, they are racialized in multiple ways. That is, there are historically and geographically specific meanings or practices that construct particular groups as racially inferior (Omi and Winant 1994). Racialization can be seen in the concentration of Mexican migrants in "brown collar jobs" (predominantly immigrant coworkers) (Catanzarite 2000; Ibarra 2000), with farmworkers at the bottom of the labor market (Villarejo et al. 2000). Mexican women farmworkers labor in California agribusiness that is dependent upon transnational migration, with more than 90 percent of the labor force from Mexico (Villarejo et al. 2000; INS 1998). Sixty-three percent of adult farmworkers are legally authorized to work in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Seventy percent of farmworkers receive annual salaries between \$7,500 and \$10,000, placing them well below the federal poverty level (Villarejo et al. 2000).<sup>5</sup> In addition, some employers of agricultural businesses or labor contractors do not report the workers' salaries.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, many farmworkers who become injured or reach retirement age cannot obtain Social Security benefits, Medical (Medicaid) or Medicare, a predicament which can further endanger their health (Office of Minority Health Resource Center 1988).

Although they live and work in one of the richest nations, migrant farmworkers in the United States have a Third World health status (Dever 1991). Farmworkers have some of this nation's most severe social problems and are at greater risk for infectious diseases and chronic health conditions than the general population due to poverty, malnutrition, exposure to pesticides, and hazardous working conditions. Farmworkers' life expectancy is estimated to be only 49 years. Some health concerns are clearly attributable to the occupational hazards of farm work and include toxic chemical injuries, dermatitis, respiratory problems, dehydration, heat stroke, or urinary tract infections. Others stem from social isolation, stress, and poor living conditions, such as depression, diabetes, or tuberculosis (Environmental Work Group 1987). Seventy percent of farmworkers lack health insurance (Villarejo et al. 2000). Women farmworkers face the above health problems as well as high reproductive problems and an infant mortality rate that is 25 percent higher than the national average. This constellation of poverty and poor health conditions is crucial for situating our analysis of migrant women's racialized, gendered sexuality.

One of the major risks experienced by migrant women is that their male partners may be involved in risky sexual behaviors. These risks include acquiring an STI by having unprotected sexual relations with women and men, including commercial sex workers who work at or near the camps, mainly during the

peak of the harvest season.<sup>7</sup> The high number of potential clients at the camps is highly attractive for the sex workers and their pimps (Organista et al. 1996). In this scenario there is a high proportion of single men—who are lonely, have money, and peer pressure and few alternatives for amusement. After surviving crossing the border (even worse when undocumented), vulnerability to HIV or other illnesses sometimes pales in comparison.<sup>8</sup> Married men are unlikely to use condoms, which would jeopardize their credibility as faithful spouses (Organista et al. 1996). Furthermore, the mobility of the farmworker population means that there is a positive relationship between migrant status and the increase in HIV and AIDS in Mexico as well (Castañeda et al. 2001).

In this binational context, the epidemic has been concentrated mainly among men. Of those diagnosed with AIDS in Mexico, 86 percent are men who have sex with men, and there is a ratio of six men for every woman diagnosed with AIDS. When the analysis is based on sexual transmission alone (rather than through injection drug use or other means), the proportion is even higher—90.3 percent men, 9.7 percent women—and the rates of heterosexual transmission for women are expected to increase (Magis et al. 2001).<sup>9</sup> The number of AIDS-related deaths for men in Mexico was 20 per 100,000 in 1996 while the number of deaths by AIDS for women was 2.5 per 100,000 in 1996. By 1998, however, the rate for men began to decline while the rate for women continued to increase (Magis et al. 2001).<sup>10</sup> In California the pattern is similar. Among those of Mexican origin, 69 percent of AIDS cases are men between 20 and 40 years of age who have sex with men. Of these cases, 32 percent were born in the United States and 68 percent were born in Mexico (California Department of Health Services 2000a). There has been a steady increase in the percentage of AIDS cases among women between ages 13 and 45 in California between 1988 and 1997, with Latinas moving from 3.3 percent to 11 percent of all cases (California Department of Health Services 2000b). Women of Mexican origin have disproportionately higher rates of HIV.<sup>11</sup> Research shows that Latinas have a particular epidemiology for contracting HIV: 46 percent of AIDS cases among Latinas are due to heterosexual contact with men (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 1994) and women often are unaware of their risk status.<sup>12</sup> Despite the increased numbers of women contracting HIV in Mexico and the United States, there has been little research on the social context that places migrant women at risk.

There are many barriers to accessing health care for Mexican women in the United States, including low incomes, low rates of medical insurance, language use (either predominantly Spanish or indigenous language use), and lack of transportation. Furthermore, condom use is often seen as socially inappropriate (Richwald et al. 1989; Romero and Argüelles 1993; CAPS 2001b). Similar to other Catholics, Latinos are unlikely to use condoms because the

Church considers them an “unnatural” form of contraception. One study indicated that 78 percent of the Latino respondents had never used a condom (Ryan et al. 1988), while in another study 75 percent of Mexican female migrant workers reported not carrying condoms (Balls et al. 1998).<sup>13</sup> Condom use is often associated with extramarital sex or prostitution. The study notes, “[This linkage] makes the Spanish word for condom a vulgar term to both male and female Mexicans. In [one] study, women expressed feelings of shame and embarrassment about their partners’ use of a condom” (Ryan et al. 1988:1).

In addition to these economic and social barriers, Mexican women may not seek health care because of politics. Leo Chavez (1996, 2001) argues that Mexican migrants, women in particular, were key in the debates on whether immigrants drained state coffers, a belief that led to the passage of Proposition 187 in 1994 and public anti-immigrant discourse. Jonathan Xavier Inda (2002) further argues that regulating access to prenatal care limits Mexican women’s reproduction (including HIV testing) and carries the implicit message that the lives of the undocumented are expendable. Even though Proposition 187 was overturned in the courts, many migrant Mexican women are uninformed about the rights for which they are entitled, particularly regarding access to health care. However, in the United States the immigrant, labor, Chicana/o, feminist, and gay/lesbian social movements have created countervailing discourses on race, citizenship, sexuality, and mexicanas’ rights as racialized women. Thus, upon migration, mexicanas must negotiate gender and sexuality within a highly contested social and political context shaped by transnational forces.

The availability of long-term jobs in agriculture has enabled many migrants to establish homes in California, and increasingly migrants are settling permanently. These processes have fueled the “Mexicanization” of rural California, where migrant farmworkers have become the majority population and have changed the character of social life in these communities (Palerm 1991). Rural communities in California have become places of concentrated and persistent poverty, dual societies with a few Anglos who make up the land owners, professionals, and white-collar workers, and Mexicans who work in the fields, factories, and service sector (Palerm 1991; Griffith et al. 1995). However, predominantly Mexican communities are also vibrant social places where cultural expressions often resemble those in Mexico. One study of Mexican farmworkers found that a significant portion (13 percent) had “binational families”—they maintain occupied homes on both sides of the U.S.–Mexico border. These families provide an anchor for recent migrants and those who return seasonally and often continue to return to their communities in Mexico (Palerm 1991).<sup>14</sup> Thus, Mexican farmworkers maintain

key relationships in two social worlds: the predominantly mexicano farmworker communities in California, and the communities in Mexico from which they migrated.

Whether residing in Mexico or in poor Mexican communities in the United States, Mexican women are marginalized as gendered subjects and live in “divided social worlds” that require frequent negotiation. In her research with commercial sex workers in Mexico City, Xóchitl Castañeda (et al. 1996) suggests that when women remove their “social masks”—that is, provocative work costumes and heavy makeup designed to entice customers—they mark a social transformation from secret worker-warriors who must negotiate everything from violence to STIs to “normal women.” Thus, sex workers experience estrangement as they move between the violent worlds of work and varied family contexts. In a similar fashion, migrant farmworkers survive the dangers of crossing the border, struggle within socially violent work sites, and negotiate changes in their daily lives. Simultaneously, they are linked to kin and other social relationships in Mexico and are reminded that they should conform to “traditional” Mexican gendered expectations regarding sexuality and social relations in general.

One way in which subjects imagine and negotiate these complex changes is through the perspective of “peripheral vision” (Zavella 2000). Whether they reside in Mexico or the United States, migrants imagine their own situations and family lives in terms of how they compare with “*el otro lado*” (on the other side of the border). Peripheral vision originates in the power imbalance between Mexico and the United States, and Mexicans on both sides of the boarder experience social dislocation. Peripheral vision is a perspective that includes the frequent reminders that one’s situation is unstable in comparison to others “*en el otro lado*.” That is, peoples’ daily lives are contingent upon the vagaries of the U.S. and Mexican economies, which informs how they respond to globalization, including whether to migrate.

Based on ethnographic research, our findings illustrate how material circumstances of their migration and sociocultural constructions related to sexual behavior and the body place Mexican women migrants at risk for sexual harassment and acquiring STIs. We analyze how hegemonic discourses—based in gendered political inequalities—are inscribed or “mapped” upon the bodies of Mexican women farmworkers in California and how they develop survival mechanisms. We argue that it is precisely in the women’s transgressions of boundaries where they construct moments of “remapping” where they contest those discourses and create their own poetics of desire despite others’ attempts to control their sexuality. We suggest that these women delineate clear notions of the body rife with gendered conflict and construct practices

and meanings that situate them as subjects in relation to communities of origin *and* settlement.

## Methodology

Our analysis is based on exploratory research that used ethnographic methods, including focus groups, individual life histories, and participant-observation. Between 1998 and 1999, we organized seven focus groups with a total of 68 women of Mexican origin. We also conducted individual life histories with 12 women, all mestizas born in Mexico.<sup>15</sup> The participant-observation was done in communities where farmworkers live and work. We observed at the clinics and social service agencies where we conducted the focus group discussions; we frequented businesses and public places (such as parks, the flea market, plaza, and the county fair) with a farmworker clientele or presence; we toured farms, distribution warehouses, and canneries; and we attended public protests by the United Farm Workers and Madres por la Paz (Mothers for Peace), an organization devoted to antigang violence that organizes annual Mothers' Day events.

The focus groups were formed with the help of staff at community-based health clinics or organizations that work with migrant farmworkers and their families and participants were given a modest stipend. The focus groups were based on a dialogic process, designed to elicit women's views on the themes of changing expectations regarding gender, sexuality, and Mexican women's vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections in the United States.<sup>16</sup> We asked the women to honor confidentiality and allow each woman to take a turn speaking. After we explained the purpose and the participants agreed to these ground rules, we screened a film about women's vulnerability to HIV in Mexico that served as a springboard for discussion of these issues for migrant Mexican women in their own communities.

We used *La Vida Sigue* (Life Goes On), a 30-minute Spanish-language film produced in 2000 by the CONASIDA (recently renamed CENSIDA—Centro Nacional para Prevención y Control del SIDA [National Center for the Prevention and Control of AIDS]) in Mexico, directed by María del Carmen de Lara. The film is designed to educate heterosexual women about HIV risk in relation to men who migrate to the United States, and is set in a small town in Mexico. The film uses a *telenovela* (soap opera) format that is familiar to women in both Mexico and the United States. The film is a dramatic narrative about a married woman whose husband returns home after having spent some time working in the United States and dies from a mysterious illness. A physician approaches her and informs her that she is HIV-positive and she has contracted the illness from her spouse. The film then focuses on how she pieces together how her husband could have contracted HIV. There is an

interesting character—a Mexican woman who has spent time in the United States and seems savvy—who explains the temptations that men face. Interspersed are the protagonist’s flashbacks to conversations with her spouse denying any infidelity, as well as scenes of Mexican men in bars, consorting with *tranvestis* (transgender subjects)—all of which contextualize the complexities of risk for Mexican men who migrate to the United States. The protagonist experiences rejection and homophobia by local members of the community who believe that her husband must have been gay if he contracted AIDS, and she must educate her children about the disease. A sensitive widower strikes up a friendship with her and the film ends with indications that they may establish an intimate relationship. He is prepared to use condoms as well as defend the protagonist against local prejudice and be kind to her children.

In the discussions that took place after the film, we sought women’s observations about the changing expectations and practice in the communities in which they lived but did not ask about individual at-risk behavior. The discussion was audiotaped and transcribed. During the follow-up, in-depth interviews—conducted by the authors in Spanish or English, usually in women’s homes (occasionally at the clinics/agencies)—with individuals who volunteered, we explored concepts raised during the focus groups as well as their life histories, including sexual practices. Selective quotations from focus groups and interviews are included below to illustrate general processes that we found (any names that we use are pseudonyms).

### *Silences y Mujeres Decentes*

All of the women we interviewed had low incomes and, like other farmworkers, they had few benefits. Their ages ranged from 16 to 56. They migrated from the classic sending states of west central Mexico (Michoacán, Jalisco, and Guanajuato) or southern Mexico (Oaxaca), from rural communities as well as cities. Their length of residence in the United States varied from two months to over 30 years. Most of these women had not completed an elementary education, although three had degrees from Mexican universities and eventually moved to other occupations. Many of the migrants from rural areas had little labor market experience or knew how to drive prior to migration. If they did have work experience, it was often near their homes in gender-segregated workplaces where they had little direct exposure to male workers. The women reported that they migrated to the United States for varied reasons—because of poverty, labor displacement, seeking refuge from abusive male kin or lovers, accompanying their families, seeking adventure, or to better their lives; most had multiple reasons for migration. They all had migrated as adolescents or adults and thus were socialized in Mexico. The women lived in predominantly Mexican communities in north central California agricultural regions—

the Pájaro Valley in Santa Cruz County, the Salinas Valley in Monterey County, and the San Joaquin Valley in Fresno County. According to one survey, farmworker households are large (6.8 members on average), with 2.6 workers per household, and 65 percent have seasonal/temporary farm jobs (Santa Cruz County Farmworker Housing Committee 1993). According to focus groups, some farmworker households contain up to 35 men who rotate when they sleep, shower, and eat.

The women we worked with, for the most part, were reared within a repressive cultural framework that is not unique, but particular to Mexican culture. Centered in Catholicism that instructs them to repress carnal pleasures unless within church-sanctified marriage, women are pressured to construe their yearnings in heterosexual, conventional terms. While the virgin-whore cultural discourse has been eroded by a number of social forces, its salience can be seen in the ways in which these women subscribe to notions of silence about sexuality, the importance of virginity prior to marriage, and guarding their reputations as “*mujeres decentes*” (good women).<sup>17</sup> As an attempt to control their behavior, women were told that there was a whole array of signs that their bodies would display if they were to engage in transgressions, and mothers or other kin would be able to “read” those signs. As Irene explained, “When they lose their virginity, women walk different—with their legs separated—and in their faces and their eyes you can tell that they ‘know more’ (*saben más*), that they have been used by a man (*han tenido uso de hombre*).” According to this discourse, even after marriage, women are supposed to dress and move their bodies in ways that do not appear too provocative. Under these patriarchal constraints, then, the body is regarded as a map: it can be read by others regarding women’s transgressions and is a source of betrayal if women do not control how they move or display themselves in public. Simultaneously, women’s bodies are viewed as uncontrollable—subject to the whims of passion or provoking reactions by men. Thus, women’s bodies should be policed and their reputations guarded.<sup>18</sup>

In the focus groups and interviews, women provided many examples of how their lives were circumscribed to protect them from dishonor or serious social risks. Some women from rural areas were not allowed to walk alone in public in Mexico because of gossip about them or fears of sexual assault. The journey *al norte* (to the north) itself was fraught with literal and symbolic danger if women came without male protection, for the rumor was that “the women who come by themselves to the U.S. usually have sex with the smugglers.” However, the women were neither passive recipients of normative strictures nor uniformly “decent” all the time. As we discuss below, they contested patriarchal notions about their conduct and their bodies.

## Sexualization of the Racialized Body in the Fields

After moving to agricultural communities, these women experienced an array of changes in gender relations and expectations and faced possibilities they had only imagined prior to migration. For those women who worked in the strawberry fields, racialized sexualization took on specific forms. During the peak of the harvest season of the late 1990s, the labor force was predominantly male. Furthermore, the male farmworker population was internally heterogeneous. It included those older men who originally worked as Braceros (1942–64), those who are younger and of more recent waves of migrants who have settled permanently, and those who sojourn annually, returning to Mexico after the harvest season. The sojourners included those who left behind wives, lovers, and families in Mexico, and those who were single, looking to take a partner back to Mexico or with whom to settle in California. Unlike their experiences in Mexico in highly gender-segregated work sites, the farms of California put women farmworkers in close proximity with men who have varied motivations for establishing intimate relationships. Becoming farmworkers creates risks, for they are outside the norms that protect women and they must learn to defend themselves.

In this context, how women presented themselves in public was subject to close scrutiny. Women's work sites in the fields became sexualized social gauntlets. Any expression of availability, signified by wearing makeup or "provocative" clothing was noticed by the male coworkers and became the basis upon which they were invited on dates, propositioned for sexual encounters, or sexually harassed on the job. Women learned that wearing cosmetics or colognes in the fields provoked unwanted responses. In this regard, María noted that "I can't even wear mascara or they will bother me, want to touch me, and start something." Women's bodies, then, were inscribed by social structures, "marked with instructions on how to be *mujer* . . . working class, Chicana" (Anzaldúa 1990:xv), that is, Mexican women in the United States.

### Masking the Body

Women farmworkers protected themselves from men's advances or abuse by utilizing a variety of strategies, including covering their bodies. They must wear clothing to protect themselves from the weather and pesticides. Normal work regalia includes heavy shirts, baggy pants, sturdy shoes, gloves, hats (often attached to scarves covering their necks), and kerchiefs over their mouths—so they appear cloistered while working, with only their eyes visible. In addition, despite the heat, they must wear shirts tied around their waists to cover their buttocks and genitalia from male scrutiny, commentary, or touches when they

bend over to work. María explained, “Well the number of women in the fields is much smaller than that of the men; we can’t always be in a crew of only women. It’s important to protect ourselves from them [the men] and from what the other women can think. If one walks around showing off her body, then the gossip will get around that we’re not there to pick strawberries but to find men.”

Removing the layers of clothing is time-consuming, and, given their short lunch breaks, sometimes women retain most of their cloistered attire during breaks: “Many times we don’t even uncover ourselves to eat.” They also had to inform newcomers to the community about fields to avoid because the men are particularly disrespectful, or the farm where, according to rumors, jobs are exchanged for sex. Certain areas of town were dangerous for women alone, particularly close to bars or other sites where men congregated. In addition to protective clothing related to their jobs, then, women appeared publicly at work with few parts of their bodies exposed and helped one another to protect themselves. We did not hear of instances in which women complained to their supervisors or confronted sexual harassers directly, indicating their sense of relative disempowerment. The consequences of complaining could be severe: they could be fired or even accused of instigating the trouble.

Working in such conditions was not always pleasant and women felt as if they were participating in an alien environment, similar to women who work in “clean rooms” in high tech firms (Lamphere et al. 1993). Irene said, “Sometimes when we are outside the fields, we don’t recognize ourselves, we don’t know who is working in the crew because there are so many layers of clothing and everything is covered up. It’s by voice and the eyes that we can recognize one another. We are covered up (*enmascaradas*.)” Such cloistering challenged women’s abilities to bond with fellow women, apart from their close workmates, as Margarita explained, “This happened to me: When I went to pick up my daughter at school, I hear someone’s voice and then ‘the light bulb goes on’ and I say to myself, ‘I think that Juana was working with me today.’” Irene expressed her unhappiness regarding her work conditions: “At first it is difficult; later you get used to it. It’s as if you are not yourself.”

After the workday, within working-class communities one can see tired women workers driving, walking home, or shopping in their work clothes, with only the face covering removed—so they are marked as farmworkers. Occasionally, one can see them removing their “uniforms” while in transit in preparation for their private lives. Upon removing the barriers to the elements and harassment, they are transformed from farmworkers and sexual objects to women situated within varied social settings. Furthermore, when women are not working in the fields, they freely wear makeup, nail polish, colognes, or

clothing that emphasizes their femininity. Indeed, manicured hands are markers that one does not perform manual labor.

In the context of heavy male–female ratios and unregulated work sites, women farmworkers face a dislocation similar to the sex workers that Castañeda (et al. 1996) studied in Mexico City. In their work sites, farmworker women feel alienated and estranged, wrapped in many layers of clothing that function as a protective barrier to the hostile environment—including work and weather conditions, as well as male harassment and women’s gossip. Like the “johns” who seek out sex workers, male farmworkers live in decontextualized social environments where the sanctions for inappropriate behavior are inadequate or missing if their kin are in Mexico. In this transnational context, the productive body as well as the sexualized body of migrant women farmworkers is mapped by the physical and social consequences of being Mexican women.

### **Women Remap the Body**

While they may accept the necessities of cloistering their bodies at work, women also contest or “remap” the social body in relation to traditional discourses about marriage and the family. For women who are single there is a wealth of potential lovers or marriage partners. Women find that traditional customs such as chaperones on outings or expectations of marrying as a virgin are challenged by the changes in their lives after migration. In contrast to previous constraints in Mexico, women have more freedom of movement in the United States. Even older women or those with children who would not think of themselves as good marriage prospects find that the high male–female ratios work in their favor. For example, after migrating to California, Alicia Gonzáles, a middle-aged single mother with five children, was abandoned by her spouse. She considered herself to be not particularly attractive since she was overweight and middle-aged. She enrolled in a local community clinic’s literacy and English as a Second Language program. Over the course of many months of working on her human capital in between stints of working in the fields, she joined a women’s support group whose activities included aerobics classes and discussing personal problems. During a focus group, she told her story and disclosed her newfound attractiveness in the farmworker community with great aplomb: “Look at me, I’m getting old, I’m fat, and I have five kids. And already I’ve had two marriage proposals! One man promised to support me and be a father to my kids. But I decided it’s better not to [accept his proposal]. You can’t trust men. It’s better if I work to support them myself.” Alicia’s new sense of independence as a single mother who occasionally dates meant that her desire for stability for her children would be achieved through her own efforts rather than through marriage.

With the availability of so many potential sexual partners in a context of often less social control than they experienced in Mexico, women seeking adventure learn to negotiate choices they did not have previously. These choices include everything from how they dressed in public to where they walked on the streets to recreation possibilities. Perhaps the most disapproving and elaborate comments were about the attire that young Mexican women wore, which was considered “scandalous”: “They walk around wearing mini skirts or short shorts, showing off everything!” These women were well aware of the fine line between dressing attractively and too provocatively, which would subject them to harassment in public. For example, women advised others to avoid the streets where sex workers congregate so as not to face propositions from drunken men who could not tell “working girls” from other women.

However, some women purposely sought out circumstances where the boundaries of social control were more fluid. On weekend nights the local bars and dance halls became sites of aggressive encounters with men, where women were sexual objects in a different social context. If they came with partners, they or their partners did not appreciate the competition and fights would break out when competitors became too aggressive. However, if women came without partners the attention was often desirable and women sought adventure and pleasure at local nightclubs. Through their provocative dress and makeup, flirting, or dancing, some women found romance at the dance halls. Margarita had sparkles in her eyes as she told us, “I can go to the nightclub and pick and choose my partners. The men line up and I choose: ‘you, you, and you.’ I go for the tall cowboys.” Even married women frequented the dances as sites of pleasure. Marisela, a married, middle-aged woman, confided, “I can dance all night long. It’s *so* much fun! And then I go home by myself.” It is unclear if her spouse knew about these outings or what his reaction might be; however, Marisela is not the only attached woman who frequents nightclubs, and some of them do not stop at dancing.

Regardless of whether they frequent nightclubs or not, women who were happily married found that they must take care of their bodies and make time for sexual relations with their spouses. When living in large farmworker households, this can be quite a challenge. For example, Carmen, her spouse, and young son lived in a household with 20 male farmworkers, and the family slept in a corner of a room cordoned off with a rope and blanket. She considered herself “unnatural” since her innate sex drive (*la naturaleza*) was stronger than her husband’s and was “like a man’s.” (During the focus group when she said this, there was general agreement that men have stronger sex drives than women.) Thus, she repeatedly had to negotiate securing some privacy from her apartment mates and child so the couple could have sexual intercourse. Other women, married to men who made regular trips as part of their jobs—

produce truckers, for example—and living in nuclear households, made it a point to schedule in time for privacy from the children so they could have sex. Dora explained, “My husband is gone all week. And he meets lots of women while making his deliveries. I want to make sure that he *wants* to come home. So I take care of myself and we spend time together apart from the kids . . . I never had to think about this in Mexico.”

When women migrate and settle in California, they find different expectations about the body. Women often feel vulnerable in competition with white women. Alicia elaborated on her sense of needing to work at being attractive to her spouse: “Sometimes over there [in Mexico] you don’t take care of yourself. You let yourself get fat. Here there are many ways to take care of married women and there are many places that help you lose weight. It’s as if the men are attracted to something different [here], as if they make a few comparisons.”

Paradoxically, Alicia’s comments are not supported by the clinical research that shows that obesity actually *increases* after migrants settle in the United States. Furthermore, Mexican farmworker women who are permanent residents and have lived in California the longest run the greatest risk of becoming obese (Villarejo et al. 2001).<sup>19</sup> Alicia’s feelings of vulnerability about comparisons to white women reflect gendered racialization processes in California where body types like hers are not valued by the dominant society. Georgina illustrated a sense of bewilderment over the different expectations in the United States:

In Mexico when you are socialized in a conservative way (*educado en una manera recatada*), well you don’t go out much to the dances. You get married and you live your nice life, married with only your husband and that is what you believe. Later when you come here [United States], you expect more, but you live in poverty and you worry about what others think about you.

In this new social context, and with such high proportions of men to women in the fields, the constraints imposed by kin or others can be transgressed. There are many opportunities for establishing sexual encounters as Susana explained: “We all work in pairs and many times in the furrow right behind me there is a man. The crews are not always only women; it depends on where there is work.” Thus, women get to know a great number of men and can establish personal relationships if they wish. The high demand for women’s sexual favors is highly desirable for some women, like Susana: “Well, it is difficult to resist so many temptations (*tantas tentaciones*). I have had various young men offer me, as the song says, ‘the moon, the heavens and the stars’ if I will spend some time with them. They are very lonely and have strong urges (*el instinto alto*).”

Women may also experience relative empowerment by working outside the household and earning money that provides resources and autonomy for pursuing their own interests. Women unaccustomed to such explicit attention by men may find the possibilities enticing, especially in the context of anonymity. Gloria explained:

Our best people (*nuestra mejor raza*) are working in the fields. There are young men who are handsome and very strong (*guapos y fuertotes*), and sometimes are very solicitous and they promise love. Sometimes it is difficult to resist. And since many of them come from the small towns of Mexico, well one thinks that there won't be a problem; they can't have "those" problems such as AIDS. In addition, they are so alone; they don't know anyone here.

Women feel sorry for men who are alone or without family members, are often lonely themselves, and empathize with the changes in their lives. Esperanza elaborated on the opportunities for privacy for sexual encounters that had not been available to her in Mexico: "Here in the U.S. things are easier. There are motels, everyone has a car, and since one works, well you can escape and no one will notice. For that reason you have to take care of yourself, not show that you have been 'in something,' even your facial expression (*hasta de la expresión de la cara*), or else you will get stuck." Getting stuck, or caught (with multiple meanings), has significant consequences. With little experience in negotiating such possibilities, some women have unprotected sex and place themselves at considerable risk for losing their reputations as well as contracting sexually transmitted infections.

This new social context in which these women remap their bodies is often less restrictive than in Mexico. "Modernity" and its artifacts (work outside the home, their own income, credit cards, cars, motels, telephones, nightclubs, etc.) enable some women to subvert patriarchal mechanisms of control and to pursue their own notions of pleasure (Guendelman 1987). However, there were limitations to their empowerment, and despite pushing the boundaries, women often accepted some notions of being *mujeres decentes*. Women continue to experience some anxieties generated by the traditional embodied norms and values "en el otro lado." The expression of their sexual desires is often checked by the fear of being betrayed by some signs inscribed upon the body where the sanctions can be severe. In this sense, these women turn peripheral vision upon themselves and their deportment. They face a series of new opportunities for sexual encounters or relationships, and reconstruct how they conduct their bodies as they negotiate whether they are available for sexual relations or not. Many of these new possibilities would be faced if they had migrated from rural to urban sites in Mexico; however, these women saw

change as products of migration to the United States, where mexicano communities provide a context highly different from Mexico and where their racialized, sexualized bodies stand out.

### Transgressing Borders: Purity and Risk

Women discussed the risks of unprotected sex openly during the focus groups. They were well aware of the potential deadly consequences of their partners' behaviors and that requesting that their partners use condoms is unthinkable since, within patriarchal discourse, the woman would be to blame. Irene said, "For me, it would be worse if my boyfriend thinks badly of me, that I am not 'clean.' I would rather not confront him." Margarita was starker: "It's male privilege (*el machismo*) to think that 'it won't happen to me and it won't happen to you because I'll take care of you.' But in reality it can happen to anyone." During one focus group, a woman shared that she used condoms under the guise of contraception, even though the Catholic Church prohibited it. She advised other women to use condoms in this manner so as to protect themselves from STIs since it was socially more acceptable to men: "Just tell him [her spouse] that you want to space your kids. And the pill is bad for you." Here condom use for contraception does not jeopardize women's "purity" because there is no assumption that she is having sex with multiple partners. In contrast, using condoms for prevention of HIV is threatening because of the link of prevention with possibly more than one partner—that is, sex for pleasure rather than for procreation.

Mindful that the United States provides complex new freedoms and dangers to be negotiated, Marisela stated: "Here the struggle is different than the struggle we face in Mexico (*aquí la batalla es diferente que la en México*)." Gloria was clear about the risks of her newfound independence, as well as the oscillation in her thinking: "What I do here I cannot do over there, and the risks that I face if I am discovered are not the same [she sighed]." Anonymity and less social control enables women to have more room to maneuver, even though social surveillance is still present through transnational social networks. Regardless of whether they remembered Mexico with nostalgia, relief at having left, or anxiety about what those "en el otro lado" would think, they compare their lives now to their previous lives. Despite their newfound sense of independence, engaging in heterosexual relations can be fraught with dangers for migrant Mexican women.

### Conclusion

The social inequalities in which migrant Mexican farmworkers live are inscribed upon their bodies, as seen in poor health indicators, and constitute a "political economy of risk" where women face particular dangers. Despite

the enormous and valuable fruits of their labor, women migrant farmworkers frequently are marginalized by society and are racialized and sexualized in the communities where they live and work. Clearly there is a critical need for higher wages, health insurance, and better monitoring of working conditions that create the problems described here. The lack of enforcement of existing laws preventing sexual harassment constitutes an important barrier for women farmworkers, pushing them into situations in which they are discriminated against as racialized women and forced to work in hostile environments. Effective programs for HIV prevention among Mexican farmworkers must address the context of their lives as well as the interpersonal and sociocultural factors that put them at risk for the acquisition of sexually transmitted infections. We agree with Jack Kelly (et al. 2000): “HIV behavioral research can only stop HIV infection when results of the research can be used to make applied programs better.”

Apart from the changes in social policy and practice that would help women who work as farmworkers, migrant Mexican women themselves are social actors. They develop strategies to protect themselves and cover their sexualized bodies while working in predominantly male environments, display them while socializing, or negotiate gendered expectations about sexuality and occasionally transgress notions of being *mujeres decentes*. They are mindful that California’s agricultural regions are like “little Méxicos”—social worlds that are predominantly *mexicano* and, simultaneously, profoundly different from Mexico. In the process, they construct complex identities that are shaped by powerful repressive discourses and express their own notions of desire. Reflecting on the patterns of gendered sexuality we have illustrated here, we find the metaphors of mapping and remapping useful to characterize how women are objectified, and how they construct and contest hegemonic discourses respectively. Women see the different perceptions and behaviors related to gender and sexuality as originating in new circumstances brought on by transnational migration. In this unstable and contested social climate, these women migrants construct new subjectivities regarding their work sites, their social lives, and their bodies.

## Notes

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1. Sexual harassment is a common problem for women farmworkers. The federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission settled a sexual harassment lawsuit in 1999 against Tanimura and Antle, the nation's largest lettuce grower, yet enforcement of the existing law is lax (Rodebaugh 1999; López 2002).

2. For research on farmworkers in general, see Griffith et al. 1995. For the little research on farmworker women, see De la Torre 1993 and Buss 1993.

3. Only 15 percent of all Mexican migrants (2.1 million of 13.9 million total migrants) actually leave Mexico and move to the United States (Santos Preciado 2001).

4. There are about 8 million undocumented residents in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau 2001); 72 percent of the undocumented residents are of Latino origin (U.S. Department of Justice 1997); and about 40 percent of undocumented Latinos live in California. Mexicans are the largest undocumented population in the United States, composing 55 percent of the total undocumented population (U.S. Department of Justice 1997).

5. In a survey of California farmworkers, 42 percent live in dwellings shared by two or more households; 20 percent of those dwellings have no telephone service, and 68 percent of the respondents have no assets in the United States (Villarejo et al. 2000).

6. California Assembly Bill 2862, passed in 2001, increased civil and criminal penalties for growers and farm labor contractors for failure to pay wages to farmworkers (interview with I. Hernandez, chief of staff for California assemblywoman Gloria Romero, cited in López 2002:290).

7. In Mexico and the United States there is little stigma for men to have sex with men if the initiator is the *activo* (penetrator) (Almaguer 1991).

8. Many migrant men do not have enough knowledge about HIV and STIs and do not believe these concern them since AIDS is seen as a gay or white problem (CAPS 2001a). The explanations of unsafe sex are complex and multifaceted and include feelings of invulnerability, perceiving that unsafe sex is more pleasurable than safer sex, being depressed or sad, having conflicting allegiances with sexual identity, and using alcohol or other drugs (Kegeless et al. 1999). Furthermore, Latino adolescents (male and female) are twice as likely as white adolescents to have misconceptions about the causal transmission of AIDS and prevention, and hence may be at greater risk of HIV infection. Among adult Latinos, those of Mexican origin are more likely to have less knowledge about HIV and AIDS, particularly the elderly and

those with fewer than 12 years of schooling (DiClemente et al. 1988; Dawson and Hardy 1989; CAPS 2001a).

9. Among the 25- to 34-year-old age group, AIDS represents the fourth main cause of death for men and the seventh for women (Magis et al. 2001).

10. Magis et al. 2001 charts the cases of mortality for people between 25 and 34 years of age. For men, the cases of mortality increased steadily beginning in 1988 and peaked at 20 per 100,000 people in 1996, dropping to 17 in 1998. For women in the same age group, the data was recorded beginning in 1989 and showed a steady increase until it reached 2.5 per 100,000 in 1996, then dropped slightly, then increased to 2.75 per 100,000 in 1998 (Magis et al. 2001:7).

11. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (1994), by 1994 Latinos accounted for 17 percent of total AIDS cases while composing only 9 percent of the U.S. population. Also see Russel 1993; Ickovics and Rodin 1992; and Mishra et al. 1997.

12. In California about 70 percent of Latinas/os are of Mexican origin. For further discussion of Latinas at risk for AIDS, see Amaro 1988; Argüelles and Rivero 1988; Romero and Argüelles 1993; Mays and Cochran 1988; Nyamathi and Vasquez 1989; Selik et al. 1989; Singer et al. 1990.

13. Many Spanish-speaking (or indigenous) Latinos have trouble reading instructions on condom use. One-third of Latinos between ages 15 and 45 report that they are illiterate in English and almost 40 percent report they are illiterate in Spanish.

14. Remittances, the third largest source of revenue for the Mexican economy, pay to maintain households in sending communities in Mexico (CONAPO 2000).

15. We had a male researcher conduct focus groups with men, and Zavella conducted interviews with seven male Mexican farmworkers regarding the working conditions and production process in the fields. Those focus groups and interviews inform our discussion here, although we focus on the women and only quote from focus groups or interviews with women.

16. For a discussion of focus group methodology, see Morgan 1993.

17. For a full discussion and critique of this cultural master script, see Zavella 1997.

18. For a full discussion of this analysis along with ethnographic support, see Zavella 2003.

19. Among women ages 20 to 29, 12 percent of undocumented women and 45 percent of documented women are likely to be obese, having a Body Mass Index of 30 points or greater (Villarejo et al. 2000).

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