



Heterosexual Fronteras: Immigrant Mexicanos, Sexual Vulnerabilities, and Survival¹

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Abstract: On the busy street corners of many U.S. cities, day laborers, known as *jornaleros*, wait patiently on sidewalks for someone to offer them work. These men remain invisible, however, in sexuality research with Latin American immigrant populations. Based on in-depth individual interviews with 20 self-identified heterosexual Mexican immigrant men living in Los Angeles, this article examines two ways in which migration destabilizes the boundaries of heterosexuality in these men's lives. First, they work under conditions that expose them not only to economic exploitation but also to potential sexual harassment by their employers, frequently White gay men. And second, same-sex encounters with other immigrants are prompted by contexts of marginality and selective sexual agency. The fluid nature of heterosexuality within these specific migration-related contexts and new capitalist relations that globalize and commodify the bodies of Latin American men help to explain the vulnerabilities of poor Mexican immigrant men.

Key words: Mexican immigrants; sexual harassment and employment; commercial sex; migration; heterosexuality

Some of my employers call me many times to offer me a job late at night. . . . They tell me it's easy, that I am going to enjoy it, and that they are going to pay me a lot for not doing much. They are offering money to have sexual relations. And they are young, older, of all ages. Seventy percent are White men. (Eugenio)

Eugenio is a single man in his early 40s who said he felt offended whenever he received this type of invitation. Unlike some other men on the margins of society, he had never had sexual relations with strangers in order to get a meal or a place to sleep. Eugenio left Mexico City

to immigrate to the United States and had lived in Los Angeles for more than 10 years. At the time of our interview, he had a place to live but it had never been easy or predictable for him on the north side of the border. He had lived in extreme poverty and at one point was even homeless, sleeping on the busy streets of the megacity. Despite the hardships, he had not given up hope. He got up every day when it was still dark wondering about what kind of job he would get so he could survive *al día*—one day at a time. Before the sun rose, he joined thousands of other undocumented men from Latin America who were looking for informal jobs as *jornaleros*, or day laborers.

Every day in Los Angeles County thousands of men like Eugenio look for work as day laborers (Valenzuela, 2003). Day laborers are increasingly visible in other cities as well, such as San Diego, San Francisco, and New York (D. M. Malpica, personal communication, December 23, 2005). At busy street corners in these cities (and more

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recently at centers sponsored by immigrants' rights organizations), immigrant men establish informal groups as they decipher the work of underpaid labor and wait for a transaction. These men offer their skills in carpentry, construction, plumbing, landscaping, roofing, and painting for menial wages that often barely cover their expenses for the day. In addition to being vulnerable to economic exploitation, these men are at risk for sexual harassment by other men.

According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), "Sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination that violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964" (2002, ¶ 1). The EEOC also indicates that "unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitutes sexual harassment when submission to or rejection of this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment" (¶ 2). Sexual harassment can include a wide variety of attitudes and behaviors, from subtle and nuanced, to rape (see Giuffre & Williams, 2002).

Why Sexual Vulnerability, Heterosexual Mexicanos, and Inequality?

Sexuality research that examines the sex lives of self-identified heterosexual Mexican immigrant men from a perspective of gender relations and socioeconomic and racial inequality is practically invisible. Why? First, since the 1970s, sexuality research on Mexican men has focused primarily on the experiences of gay and bisexual men. Gender and sexuality research with Mexican and Mexican immigrant populations has just begun to look at heterosexual love and sex experiences (e.g., Amuchástegui, 2001; Carrillo, 2002; González-López, 2005; Gutmann, 1996; Hirsch, 2003). For instance, sexuality research that has studied *down* on sex has analyzed the experiences of groups (mainly gay men and lesbians) that have been historically oppressed and marginalized within the structure of power and control in society. While these publications have been highly needed and informative, interestingly, studying *up* on sex, or examining the sexual experiences of those who represent sexual privilege (i.e., heterosexuals) within that same social structure, has been rare. Scholars such as Adrienne Rich (1980), Michael Messner (1996), Chrys Ingraham (1994, 2005), Jonathan Ned Katz (1995), and Lynne Segal (1994) have advocated for critical examinations of heterosexuality in the power structure. Thus, studying up on the sex lives of heterosexual Mexican immigrant men allows us to uncover the

reasons why not all heterosexual individuals or groups are privileged. The men who are the subjects of this study—and who had previously been the protagonists in stories of patriarchal privileges in Mexican society—simultaneously experienced diverse forms of inequality in the United States as the result of their race/ethnicity, citizenship and language, intra-male hierarchical interactions, and socioeconomic marginality, among other expressions of inequality associated with migration contexts and globalized economies.

Second, sexuality research on Mexican men who live in the United States has taken place largely within the behavioral sciences, public health, and epidemiology. A special concern about the HIV/AIDS epidemic has also resulted in extensive studies of Latino populations. Publications about these studies (see Diaz, 1998; Marin & Gomez, 1997; Marín, Gómez, & Hearst, 1993; Marin, Tschann, Gómez, & Gregorich, 1998; Organista, Organista, Bola, García de Alba, & Castillo Morán, 2000; Organista, Organista, Garcia de Alba, Castillo Morán, & Carrillo, 1996; Organista, Organista, Garcia de Alba, Castillo Moran, & Ureta Carrillo, 1997) have traditionally examined Latino men and sexuality from the perspectives of acculturation and assimilation, and the theoretical categories that have dominated this extensive body of literature have included familism, machismo, and Catholicism, all of which have been associated with a so-called Latino culture.

Third, the extensive literature on the sociology of immigration has analyzed labor markets, economics, and political activism and more recently has paid attention to family relations, religion, and gender. Research on day laborers from Latin America (see Malpica, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999, 2000, 2003) has provided insightful and groundbreaking studies on their living conditions, their marginality, and the social injustices they encounter.² While these publications have examined conditions of inequality and exploitation, they have ignored immigrants' sex lives. In short, Mexican immigrants have traditionally been desexualized in research about them (González-López, 2005, p. 7). Until recently, sexuality research that has been done with this population has focused on the sex lives of gay Mexican immigrants (Cantú, 1999), young couples' redefinitions of marital quality and sexuality across borders and between generations (Hirsch, 2003), and the sociology of immigration and heterosexual immigrants (González-López, 2005).

² Visit www.pbs.org/independentlens/theworkers/more.html#books for a complete list of resources on day laborers, including labor organizations, documentaries, and academic research with this particular population.

Fourth, research on sexual harassment and work has made important contributions toward an understanding of gender, power relations, and sexism at the workplace and more recently has examined ethnicity/race, sexual orientation, and citizenship dynamics (see Giuffre & Williams, 2002; Welsh, Carr, MacQuarrie, & Huntley, 2006), including the experiences of Latina immigrant women—the female counterparts of my informants, who are also vulnerable to sexual harassment while deciphering underpaid work at the bottom of the power structure (see Cortina, 2004; Vellos, 1997). Interestingly, research on male-on-male sexual harassment is relatively recent (see Giuffre & Williams, 2002; Smith & Kimmel, 2005; Waldo, Berdahl, & Fitzgerald, 1998), and there are no major research studies or statistics on either sexual harassment of or commercial sex with day laborers.

This article reports on ethnographic data collected from in-depth individual interviews with 20 Mexican immigrant adult men and establishes a bridge between gender/sexuality and immigration studies in order to explain the ways in which self-identified heterosexual Mexican men working on the margins of society have experienced two contrasting categories of same-sex sexual activity. While both will be shown to expose the unstable nature of heterosexuality for some men, each of them is caused by and prompts different forms of sexual vulnerability. The first category consists of same-sex interactions between an immigrant man and his employer (frequently a White gay man) and involves structural power inequality between them. In this situation, the immigrant man is not only economically exploited but also sexually objectified from a location that places him at the bottom of a social structure made from a complex web of interdependent factors including, but not limited to, class, ethnicity/race, sexuality, language, and legal/citizenship status (see González-López, 2005). The immigrant men in such situations are exposed to sexualized negotiations that may include sexual harassment, commercial sex (either voluntary or coercive), and other forms of sexual violence. In these sexualized transactions, the men are not only surviving; they are also responding to prescriptions for masculinity that enforce their presumed responsibilities as fathers, sons, and brothers to their financially dependent families back home (see LeVine, 1993).

The second category of sexual interactions involves self-identified heterosexual Mexican immigrant men engaging in same-sex activities with other immigrant men. These activities involve less significant power differentials; coercion between partners rarely occurs; and the interactions result more frequently from immigrants'

own agency. However, these activities are often prompted by migration-related conditions such as crowded housing, alcohol and drug use, and other socioeconomic forces affecting the personal and sex lives of these men. Both of these categories of same-sex sexual activities can be explained, at least in part, by two central dynamics: a political economy characterized by both globalization and sexual exploitation and a notion that can be described as the *borders of heterosexuality*.

A Political Economy of Globalization and Sexual Exploitation

These men's experiences of sexual objectification and exploitation are in response to two interconnected processes taking place at both local and global levels. Class, ethnicity, language barriers, socioeconomic segregation, citizenship status, occupational incorporation, and the objectification of Latino men within White gay communities as "exotic, dark, and passionate" (Díaz, 1998, p. 125) have combined locally to make day laborers vulnerable to exploitation by other men who occupy higher racial and economic levels within the intra-male hierarchy of power and control. My study demonstrates that some White middle- and upper-middle-class gay men may engage in these complex dynamics. Such potential sexual harassment on the part of a gay employer should be viewed as the result of power differentials and not of sexual orientation or sexuality per se.

Globalization, sexual tourism, and new forms of capitalism are interlocking processes prompting these sexualized processes (see Altman, 2001). On the one hand, poor heterosexual men of color who migrate north or who go from less developed to more industrialized nations are often relegated to the margins of society and, thus, become vulnerable to commercial sex as an avenue for survival. On the other hand, White (gay) men who go south from developed to developing or underdeveloped nations for purposes of commercial sex and tourism do not operate in a socioeconomic vacuum:

Their sexual taste for 'Others' reflects not so much a wish to engage in a specific sexual practice as desire for an extraordinarily high degree of control over the management of self and others as sexual, racialized, and engendered beings. (O'Connell Davidson & Sanchez Taylor, 2004, p. 454)

Thus, in the microcosmos of the global city of Los Angeles (see Sassen-Koob, 1984), both social images overlap: Some White gay men in Los Angeles look for the exotic Other (those who come from the South) to sexually objectify them and to financially exploit their highly needed and underpaid day labor within contexts of

perverse racial, socioeconomic, and language inequalities (see O'Connell Davidson & Sanchez Taylor).

The Borders of Heterosexuality

Heterosexuality is a paradoxical social construction (see Ingraham, 2005). It is both normative—that is, heterosexuality is the hegemonic norm that promotes idealized and socially expected values and practices of sexual desire, behavior, and identity and represents sexual supremacy and social privilege—and simultaneously is neither firm nor stable. From this perspective, heterosexuality can be seen to be fragile and susceptible to changing socioeconomic contexts and conditions.

The interviews with the self-identified heterosexual Mexican immigrant men in my study demonstrated how the changing socioeconomic situations and other circumstances involved in their migration experiences revealed the paradoxical nature of heterosexuality, especially its vulnerable side. Thus, like gender (see Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992) and sexuality in general (González-López, 2005), heterosexuality is fluid and unstable and can be remade through migration. Migration-related conditions selectively shaped the sexual desires, behaviors, and identities of these self-identified heterosexual immigrant men. Crowded housing, alcohol and drug use, poverty, a stressful lifestyle, and peer pressure, among other factors prompted by social inequality and injustice, pushed some of these men to engage in same-sex experiences with other immigrants (González-López, 2005, pp. 134-144). And as they incorporated into and became part of the socioeconomic landscape of the United States, additional forces promoting inequality may have further blurred their former notions of heterosexuality. Men who sent remittance to families left behind may have felt forced to accept the sexualized advances of a male employer or compelled to engage in commercial sex for economic reasons. At the same time, when their heterosexuality was perceived to be vulnerable, these men may have felt the need to protect and reinforce it. Through such a process, these Mexican men exercised agency by defending their sense of manhood as traditionally associated with heterosexual masculinity, especially when the sexual advances made by potential employers compromised their sense of personal dignity and respect.

The testimonies of the immigrant Mexican men in my study should not be viewed as stories of the powerful versus the powerless. Even though forces associated with power may oppress some poor immigrant men, the men in my study were not simply passive victims who automatically accepted perceived expressions of sexual harassment in the workplace. Indeed, a clear sense of sexual

agency was expressed in their same-sex experiences with other immigrant men. Similarly, an immigrant possesses some degree of sexual agency through his capacity for subjective negotiation in challenging or resisting such sexual propositions. At the same time, the men's sexual agency was shaped by their linguistic skills, citizenship status, and financial need, as well as by other factors including but not limited to personal histories of child sex abuse. Some of these Mexican workers also used homophobia symbolically as a way to resist sexual advances from their employers, because their homosexuality was what made some of their employers vulnerable. In the case of their same-sex sexual encounters with their peers, sexual activities happened under conditions of marginality but also as part of voluntary exchanges of friendship and camaraderie.

Method

This article presents data obtained from in-depth individual interviews with 20 Mexican immigrant men. These interviews were part of a larger study I conducted with 40 women and 20 men who were born and raised in Mexico and who immigrated to Los Angeles as adults (see González-López, 2005). I interviewed the men in the 2000-2001 academic year. In the original study I collected sexual histories in order to examine the ways in which the women and men redefined their sex lives as part of their immigration to and settlement experiences in the United States. The men were not related in any way to the women, and they were from a wide variety of educational, socioeconomic, and marital status backgrounds. However, all of the men had experienced poverty during migration and settlement. They migrated from either Jalisco or Mexico City at the age of 20 years or older, and they had all lived in the Los Angeles area for at least 5 years. All of them identified themselves as heterosexual. I use pseudonyms in this article when quoting them in order to ensure confidentiality.

I used a snowball sampling technique to recruit the 20 informants. In order to identify them, I visited and contacted professionals at four community-based agencies and three elementary schools in Los Angeles. These agencies and schools were not related to the day laborer centers, but some of the men I recruited at these locations had an employment history as jornaleros. In addition, I attended meetings at the Consulate of Mexico in Los Angeles and established contacts with representatives of hometown associations, community organizations, and employment centers for day laborers. After contacting some of these representatives, I scheduled and attended meetings at these sites where I introduced myself as a

sociologist and as a couple and family therapist who conducted sexuality research with Mexican immigrant populations. Potential informants soon identified me as *la doctora* and enthusiastically asked me if they could have individual conversations about their personal, family, and relationship concerns. Because of the potential for dual relationships (i.e., both giving a professional opinion and conducting a research interview), I referred these men to professionals working at community-based agencies in the Los Angeles area. Some of them qualified for the study and voluntarily accepted to be interviewed. I personally conducted all of the interviews in Spanish and in a private space primarily in agencies, schools, employment centers, or homes.

Study participants were between the ages of 25 and 45 years at the time of their interviews; their average age was 38. Half of the sample consisted of 10 men born and raised in the state of Jalisco, Mexico; the other half (10) had been born and raised in Mexico City. Mexico City is the capital and the largest metropolis in the nation. Jalisco includes large urban locations such as Guadalajara (the second-largest city in Mexico) but also semi-industrialized, rural, and small towns. As the birthplace of tequila, mariachi music, and traditional charro cultures, Jalisco has played an essential role in the creation of Mexican masculinist identities. All participants had lived permanently in the United States for between 5 and 20 years.³

Participants worked in a wide variety of occupations. They included construction and maintenance workers,

truck drivers, equipment operators, supervisors, and technicians. Five of the informants were day laborers at the time of our interviews. However, the vast majority were familiar with this type of informal occupation, either because they had looked for this kind of temporary job in the past or because they had relatives, friends, or acquaintances who had. The informants' annual income ranged between \$12,000 and \$24,000.

In the original project, I typed, coded, classified, and created categories of analysis based on verbatim transcripts of my interviews. For this article, I examined these men's responses to the themes related to what they had identified as dangerous and high-risk employment opportunities for Mexican men after immigrating to the United States. I also incorporated and analyzed participants' relevant reactions, recurrent themes, and fieldwork notes on employment, poverty, and everyday life and survival.

In my examinations, I also sought the opinions of Daniel Malpica, a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles, at the time of our interview who had previously conducted research on day laborers (Malpica, 2002). He responded in a telephone interview to questions I had previously sent to him electronically regarding day laborers, sexual harassment, immigrants' rights, and policymaking concerns. With his approval, I identify him with his real name when reporting the outcomes of this interview in this article.

Results

Political Economy of Globalization and Sexual Exploitation

While not all informants had been exposed personally to sexual harassment at their jobs, the vast majority had been told stories about such harassment by relatives, friends, or acquaintances. Many of them recalled stories involving work, money, and sex with White employers.

Alfredo explained how after trying unsuccessfully to get a job in Los Angeles, he had left for northern California to explore the job market there. During a short stay in San Francisco, he learned about a place he identified as *El Cachadero* (from "to catch," to get a job), which was often visited by affluent gay men. He explained the experience he had after being hired by a man at this site who drove him to his house in a sparkling Corvette:

We arrived at his home and he asked me to mow the lawn. So, I asked, "What else do you want me to do?" "Clean the windows." I agreed. So everything was fine. But when I was cleaning the windows, he was inside his house already wearing this bikini. So,

³ For more information on methodological issues and concerns regarding sexuality research with Mexican immigrant women and men, see González-López, 2005, pp. 8-16 and 265-267. The men from Jalisco in this study had lived longer in the United States (average = 13.5 years) than those from Mexico City (average = 10.1 years). Twelve of the men were married and most of these men lived with their wives in Los Angeles when I interviewed them. Some explained that they had first migrated alone and their wives migrated later, while others had dated and met their wives after migrating. Two men were cohabiting, 3 were never married, 2 were separated, and 1 was divorced. Most of them identified as Catholic (18); only a minority (2) had been raised Protestant. The lowest level of formal education for participants from both locations was equivalent to completion of the eighth grade, and the highest level was a master's degree. The average level of education for these men was 12 years, which is high for a country where the national average for individuals 15 years old and older is 7.1 years for women and 7.6 for men (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática [INEGI], 2004). Men from Mexico City were more likely to report attending college than their Jalisco counterparts. None of these Mexico City men, however, had completed a college education. The man who had received a master's degree had migrated from a small town to a more urbanized area where he had completed his college training.

I said to myself, if this guy is gay, he is giving me that kind of a signal. . . . This guy wants something else. Later on he told me that he wanted me to fix something in the bathroom. . . . I tell him, "I have to fix this and that," and the guy is right there, standing in front of me wearing this bikini. "Isn't it hot? Why don't you make yourself more comfortable?" he said. And I replied, "You know what? I am going to feel more comfortable if you pay me and I am going to leave right away because this place requires a lot of work, and I don't even know if you are going to pay me to begin with." He said, "How much do you charge?" "\$350," I replied. Then, he said, "Yes, I pay you. Do you want to drink a soda?" Then I told him, "I know what you want from me." "No," he says. "But look, you need to understand." [He pleaded]. So I said, "No, not with me."

Just as Eugenio explained in the introduction to this article, Alfredo claimed he never accepted these attractive offers, even in times of extreme poverty. Marcos, Nicolás, and Ernesto told similar stories involving work, money, and invitations for sex with their employers. They also reported witnessing other immigrant men practicing commercial sex out of financial need. "That is very common," said Ernesto, who went on to explain:

That is why I did not like to look for work by standing at the corner, never. I was not going to stand there. Someone could kidnap me and nobody would ever hear from me again. I know you find a lot of racist people over here who may hurt you.

Ernesto once shared an apartment with 10 immigrant men from Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador, and he reported that they had talked about their job-hunting experiences. He said, "One of my roommates was picked up by this homosexual man," and added:

He told me that when he arrived at the house and started to clean, the other man put this pornographic movie in the VCR and started to touch him. And he used to tell me that this man paid him very well.

I asked Ernesto if he knew whether his friend had engaged in that type of activity with his employer voluntarily. "He accepted out of need, he was financially needy," he said. "He had to send a check to Guatemala, so what else was he supposed to do?"

The experiences of Eugenio, Alfredo, and Ernesto illustrate day laborers' exposure not only to sexual harassment and coercion but also to temptation into sexualized encounters for money. Research with other immigrants, though not only day laborers, has found that commercial sex is still an avenue for survival for those who are unemployed

or financially needy, as described by Bronfman and López Moreno (1996) in their article about their findings with immigrants living in northern California (p. 60).

How did these immigrants react in situations of sexual harassment? Some resisted. In certain instances, expressions of discrimination were used to respond to the sexual harassment. For example, Alfredo made fun of his employer, using effeminate mannerisms and making homophobic gestures, and as indicated by their comments, Alfredo and Ernesto had sufficient linguistic skills to challenge the sexual invitations to them. Their use of humor and sexualized jokes demonstrated the resilience of some of the men. In addition, giving up job opportunities before they could become sexual threats represented the expressions of dignity and respect that I consistently identified in these men's narratives concerning sexual harassment. For instance, with teary eyes, Eugenio told me that he was *un hombre pobre pero decente*—a poor but decent man—who would never compromise his values of decency and dignity, not even while surviving extreme poverty. Many other informants expressed a similar sentiment during our interviews. The men used humor in order to maintain a sense of dignity as they deciphered potentially abusive encounters and grappled with their multifaceted feelings, emotions, and subjective interpretations.

In a project I am currently conducting in Mexico, I am learning that adult men with a history of sexual abuse as children may not be emotionally equipped to cope with an experience of sexual harassment and may reproduce a cycle of abuse that has been part of their lives. Thus, in the case of jornaleros with this type of history, a reaction to sexual harassment is always contextualized; it does not happen in a personal or social vacuum. Reenacting past abuse based on power differences, the perpetrator in these instances may have greater status based on racial/ethnic, class, citizenship, or linguistic privilege, while the victim embodies less status because of his multiple forms of social marginality.

The Borders of Heterosexuality

All informants reported having personally experienced and/or witnessed a wide expression of same-sex sexualized exchanges in all-male settings. These exchanges included teasing, harassing, joking and bragging about sex, talking with sexual innuendos, touching, seducing, and having voluntary or coercive sex. They reported that these experiences had taken place before migrating and at times had been prompted by factors related to social inequality and marginality. In Los Angeles, such exchanges were triggered in part by crowded housing, drug and alcohol use, poverty, and peer pressure, as well as social isolation and emotional loneliness.

I met Mauricio (26 years old, from Mexico City, a construction worker, cohabiting, and the father of two young girls) at a center for day laborers. In a long and informative interview, he told me that he had been involved in same-sex sexual practices, something he had kept private from his circle of close friends but had been public about with casual acquaintances and roommates. He described the intense mixed feelings he had regarding his experiences of peer pressure and alcohol and drug use as he embarked on voluntary and involuntary sexual contact with other immigrant men. I asked him about the number of occasions he had received oral sex from other men in Los Angeles. He said:

About twenty times or more. Yes, and with different men because they would arrive at our apartment and when you get drunk or drugged, and I did not know, by the time they told me, they had already got me undressed, but I was not aware of it when they did it. I did not like it.

Mauricio reported that some of his self-identified heterosexual migrant friends had also participated in similar exchanges. He explained, however, that his “friends had homosexual friends, but they had them only so they could give them oral sex, not to have sexual relations.” With regard to himself, he said, “I have had oral sex with homosexuals, when I had just arrived to this country. But not relationships in which they penetrate.” I asked him, “Do you identify yourself as homosexual?” Assertively, he replied, “No.”

Sexuality research with Mexican men has examined this pattern extensively. Self-identified heterosexual men who have sex with men do not identify themselves as “homosexual” when they play the active role during anal penetration (Almaguer, 1993; Alonso & Koreck, 1993; Carrier, 1976, 1977, 1985; Díaz, 1998; Flakerud, Uman, Lara, Romero, & Taka, 1996; Szasz, 1998) or when they receive oral sex (Bronfman & López Moreno, 1996). In addition, for these self-identified heterosexual men who play the insertive role, penetration may be an expression of honor, power, and masculinity (Alonso & Koreck; Bronfman & López Moreno, p. 59; Prieur, 1998). The assumption that men can split the sexual from the emotional (Rubin, 1983, p. 113) may facilitate these men’s sexual involvement with other men. Even though penetrating another man does not compromise a man’s sense of masculinity, being penetrated by the other man may.

I also asked Mauricio if he liked men or if he felt sexually attracted to them. He reacted emphatically:

No, no! And that is what I think about. And I ask myself, “Why?” In other words, when I am drunk, I do it. But then, after I do it, I do not like myself.

But then I say, “What if later on I begin to feel attracted to men?”

Mauricio began to engage in same-sex behaviors before migrating. As an adolescent he was seduced by a friend he identified as homosexual. Mauricio had agreed to have sex with him on three or four occasions as an obligation; he had helped Mauricio get a job and offered him a room in which to live. Mauricio explained that there was one common denominator between his pre- and post-migration sexual experiences: On either side of the border, being under the influence of drugs or alcohol always prompted sexual activity with other men.

Other day laborers also mentioned the combined effect of drug and alcohol use, peer pressure, and isolation on some men’s sexual behavior. Alfredo (36 years old, a construction worker, cohabiting, and a father of a 13 year-old girl) and Alejandro (37 years old, a small-business owner, married, and the father of a girl and a boy) were from Mexico City and said at the times of their interviews that they were sober. Ernesto (43 years old, from Guadalajara, a technician, married, and the father of a girl and a boy) described himself as “shy with women” and “shocked” by what he saw while living with other immigrant men right after he migrated. This trio of men gave their views on what they had observed within their groups of Latino friends. Sounding defensive, Alfredo explained what he had observed at a bar:

When they drink, it’s like homosexuality takes over, because they say “I like you, I love you,” that kind of words. It’s OK for them to say to a person, “I am fond of you, I love you, I like you as a friend,” within what’s normal. But when they get drunk, they get closer and they want to hold you and that makes you think. . . . [They have told me] “I even feel like giving you a kiss.” [And I say] “Hey! Get away from here!”

With a similarly guarded attitude, Alejandro made sure I understood he did not hang out with immigrants who had same-sex desire, though he knew some. He said:

Men do it out of loneliness. A friend of mine, well, he is not my friend like that, right? He told me that he used drugs and also alcohol and then he started to have an inclination toward men. So it was loneliness. He found out that he was alone and perhaps his friends pushed him to do other kinds of sex acts.

Ernesto stated, “I saw it, and nobody is going to tell me about [men having sex with other men] because I actually saw it!” Then he elaborated:

My bed was right there, and the table and the big chair were over there [pointing with his hands]. So, yes, I saw when they would drink and I saw when more than one of my friends would screw this man,

you know, a friend they had . . . but they did it when they were already drunk and everything.

Ernesto explained that this man, his roommate's friend, approached him; however, he never accepted his invitations to engage in sex. Like Mauricio, he also explained that his roommates would penetrate and receive oral sex from their friend, a man he described as "very masculine with the people outside, but when he talked to us, he then would loosen up, you know, he would be more queer." Defensively, he explained, "I respect people who are homosexual, I hug them and play with them, and chat, you know, but when they want more than that, I get away."

In addition to activities done under the influence of alcohol and drug use, similar behaviors emerged from emotional isolation, socioeconomic segregation, and crowded housing. Raúl (34 years old, from Mexico City, a technician, divorced, and a father of a baby girl) and Alfredo explained:

I lived with these buddies, and they were about 15 men living in one apartment. They lived like sardines inside the apartment. Suddenly *el albur*⁴ [sexual wordplay] made them start touching each other on their buttocks because they did not have anyone to socialize or even go out with. (Raúl)

I lived with these five men in an apartment who were also immigrants, and every week they rented pornographic movies. And I did not like to join them, because you see that movie with a group, and then what? In 15 minutes your sexuality changes, you end up doing things you shouldn't. That is when some men reveal their homosexuality. (Alfredo)

These men's voices resonated with research in Mexico that looked at a variety of sexual exchanges taking place in all-male settings among working-class men, including having collective sex, touching each other, and joking and bragging about sex in different contexts such as their neighborhood streets, soccer fields, and work crews (Szasz, 1998). These testimonies also expanded on extensive research looking at the connection between alcohol use and eroticism between men. De la Vega (1990) examined how some self-identified heterosexual Latino men who lived in the United States engaged in sex acts with other men when they were under the influence of alcohol and other substances. In reporting on a group of immigrant men living in rural Watsonville, California, Bronfman and

López Moreno (1996) explained that sex took place among these men because being "under the influence of alcohol did not count. . . . Alcohol consumption constituted another effective mechanism to protect masculinity and reinforced the separation of roles" (p. 59). Research by Brandes (2002) with a group of working-class men in Alcoholics Anonymous in Mexico who were in primary loving relationships with women found that "homosexual wishes and encounters are part of their dark alcoholic past" (p. 127). Interestingly, these findings seemed to indicate that becoming heterosexual is part of an alcoholic man's recovery, as heterosexuality becomes the ideal of sobriety (see other reports on men living in Mexico for similar patterns between same-sex desire and alcohol use in Gutmann, 1996; Carrillo, 2002). In addition, I discussed these findings elsewhere in relation to HIV/AIDS and migration (see González-López, 2005, pp. 144-151).

A Professional Opinion

Daniel Malpica is a researcher who has spent long hours doing research with jornaleros. In our interview, he gave his opinion about specific issues. I asked him, "Why do you think these White men approach these day laborers?" He replied, "I think there is a *White gay-Latino man* thing going on. Latino jornaleros are sort of seen as exotic, sort of macho type, so I think that is one of the reasons why they are objectified." "Another reason?" I probed. He said:

I also think that they are easy targets because, you know, in the eyes of a lot of people you can screw a lot of these men. They are sort of disposable; they are always there. Everyone can sort of abuse them, with regard to labor, sex, everything. They are undocumented, and that is a big factor because in the eyes of the people who are sexually harassing these young men, they actually think they can get away with it. That is what I think; that is my reading of it.

Malpica's words suggested a process of dehumanization of these Mexican immigrant men. The sexual objectification of jornaleros by opportunistic people can also be understood as a reflection of additional and more complex dynamics. I argue that the fact that an employer has the economic power to buy the cheap labor of a poor man may give the employer a sense of sexualized entitlement over the poorer man. That is, an employer may have embraced the idea that he has the right and power to do whatever he pleases to his employee. And the fact that the jornalero has agreed to work at his employer's home or business (and in "his" country and "without legal documents" for that matter) can make him even more vulnerable to sexual harassment by the employer.

⁴ *El albur* refers to the very popular nuanced games of words with sexual connotations and double meanings that are widely used by Mexicans in a variety of social contexts and circumstances. *El albur* may even predate late-colonial society (Stern, 1995).

I also asked Daniel Malpica, "Why do you think some of these day laborers accepted the sexual invitations?" Recalling what Ernesto had expressed, Malpica responded, "I would actually think it is because they are so desperate; a lot of them are in such an urgent need to actually earn money that actually they go ahead and do this."

Both Daniel Malpica and the vast majority of my informants reported a deep awareness of the extreme economic plight and marginality surrounding the everyday life of jornaleros. All of my informants seemed to agree that *un hombre de verdad* (a real man) should not tolerate being sexually harassed, should not engage in sexual activities with an employer, and should not practice prostitution as a way to survive. For them, however, *un hombre de verdad* was also financially responsible for the welfare of the family he left behind, which left them with a struggle to understand the tension between their sense of manhood and their need to survive.

Finally, most of these informants expressed their discontent and disillusion with the United States. For them, everyday life in the City of Angels had little to do with the country they had created in their imagination before migrating—that ideal society, it turned out, did not exist for them.

Discussion

Heterosexual men are the protagonists of privilege and power in patriarchal societies such as Mexico. However, migration and socioeconomic incorporation within North American societies complicate such a clear-cut dynamic. The results from this study demonstrated that self-identified heterosexual Mexican men who were poor and who had immigrated to and assimilated into the marginalized communities of Los Angeles were exposed to segregation, socioeconomic exploitation, and racism. Within a structure of male hierarchy and domination, these poor immigrant men were at the bottom of such a system of power and control. Their underprivileged socioeconomic location made their sex lives vulnerable. An examination of this social inequality revealed the paradoxical nature of heterosexuality as the social norm. Those who left a wife and children behind never anticipated what their sexual destiny would be in the United States. First, for those who looked for work as day laborers, sexual harassment by a potential employer (represented in this study by White middle-class gay men) became a potential threat, which they need to negotiate with limited language skills while simultaneously encountering the effects of racism and socioeconomic marginality. Second, the immigrant men who reported engaging in same-sex activities with other immigrants did so in part

as a consequence of migration-related factors related to socioeconomic inequality and marginality, including but not limited to crowded housing, alcohol and drug use, poverty, peer pressure, and loneliness.

Race, ethnicity, class, citizenship status, and other factors appeared to contribute in nuanced and complex ways to the promotion of sexual exploitation of the men in this study, who lived at the margins of society in the United States and at times in their own countries of origin. While White gay men may also represent expressions of subordinate masculinities vis-à-vis White middle-class heterosexual men (Connell, 1995), their relationship to disadvantaged immigrant men complicates this picture. When they interacted with the poor Mexicanos described in this study, the gay men who hired them appeared to exercise their privileges based on class, ethnicity/race, citizenship, and language. Within this dynamic of power and control, the working-class men in these stories were at the bottom of the social structure yet still felt the pressure to fulfill social prescriptions of masculinity; these men, especially those who left wives and children behind, were expected to be good providers for their families in Mexico who depended on their remittances (LeVine, 1993, p. 83).

The protagonists of these sexualized interactions were not alone in their adventures. They experienced these processes within a larger international system and were part of a globalized political economy of sexuality (see Hennessy, 2000). The Mexican immigrant men's experiences united them with other Latin American men who have similarly been exposed to multiple forms of inequality within larger hierarchical systems and structures of power and control. At the busy corners of Los Angeles, late capitalism has given birth to racist and classist expressions of both sexuality and commodification, as some White gay employers and some Latin American male immigrant day laborers attempt to get their respective erotic and survival needs satisfied. These interactions may be seen to resemble the negotiations between White men from developed nations who visit Cuba for sexual tourism. Some Cuban *pingueros* (young male sex workers) who engage in commercial sex with foreign men have been shown to do so only to earn money for personal and family survival (Hodge, 2001). Thus, poor men of color who interact with White middle-class gay men, whether in Havana or in Los Angeles, are vulnerable to new capitalist market relations that serve to globalize and commodify their bodies.

When Diego (36 years old, part-time schoolteacher, separated, father of a girl and a boy) told me, "Los Angeles, California, is an urban plantation, it is a large factory," I

thought about the parallels between the experiences of the Mexican jornaleros in my study and those of other men who have been painfully dehumanized in the history of this country. The sexual harassment reported by the jornaleros brought to me the image of the sexual vulnerabilities of Black slaves. Although interracial marriage was illegal up until the 1960s, Black men continued to be the targets of sexualized requests made by White women especially “indentured servants and working-class women” (Marable, 2004, p. 22). In short, the Mexican jornaleros may have become sexual servants.

In such race and class clashes, White gay men are not the only ones responsible for these dynamics. Poor dark men from rural areas migrating to Mexico City have been exposed to very similar dynamics. For example, Gutmann (1996) examined Patricio Villalva’s research on the experiences of hundreds of *prostitutos*—adolescent, indigenous men who did not identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual and were sometimes married and had children—who were often hired by lighter-skinned men from Mexico City who took advantage of these poor men’s vulnerability after they arrived in the big city (pp. 127–128). In a current project I am conducting in Mexico, I am learning about similar dynamics in the northern Mexican city of Monterrey. An attorney and activist who specialized in sexual violence prevention programs described the experiences of poor men who had migrated from rural towns to Monterrey as they searched for a well-paid job. Like the men Villalva identified in Mexico City, these poor rural men were similarly harassed—and at times raped—by their potential or actual employers. Many of these cases remain unreported.

Under conditions of great structural inequality, some immigrant males may feel that they have no option but to engage in sexual activities that have been prompted by conditions of coercion and constrained choice. As I thought about the situation of the particular group of men in my study, I was challenged by the difficulty of theorizing the fine boundaries between sexual coercion and sex work, especially in relation to the challenges these immigrant men may have experienced when identifying and labeling themselves as having been sexually harassed (see Giuffre & Williams, 2002, p. 239; Welsh et al., 2006) and while living in conditions of marginal survival and undocumented status. Few of my informants reported that they had themselves been sexually solicited during a day laborer job, and none of my informants revealed their actual involvement in sex work activities with their employers. Embarrassment, shame, concern, and fear of deportation might have been some of the reasons why such accounts were not revealed. Also, they might have felt more

comfortable sharing stories that had taken place voluntarily under less coercive circumstances. I hope, however, that this article will serve as an invitation to explore more deeply some of the questions that remain unanswered by this study: How in fact do such sex-money exchanges take place? What happens when immigrant men do agree to, or are coerced into, engaging in sexual encounters with male employers—White and non-White and self-identified as gay and those who are not? How do the immigrants who engage in such activities perceive these interactions? How and when do heterosexual jornaleros perceive gay employers as potential harassers? (see Giuffre & Williams, 2002, p. 251).

It is beyond the scope of this article to examine parallel situations of sexual harassment and employment of Mexican immigrant women. It is important to mention, however, that both women and men share a common ground: The socioeconomic factors that shape their lives as immigrants in Los Angeles become some of the crucial forces that make them vulnerable to sexual harassment by an employer (see Cortina, 2004; Velloso, 1997). In short, the weaker and more desperate, the powerless, and those who do not feel they have a choice may encounter these types of experiences in contexts of pronounced economic power differentials.

Thus, the “White gay man–Latino man” sexualized interaction described by Malpica while relevant is clearly not the exclusive social force underlying the relationships between men described in this article. Future research is needed in order to explain additional processes contributing to these dynamics, including examinations of other forms of sexual and racial harassment and coercion by nongay men, non-White men, and women who also hire these immigrants.

The question arises as well if some of these informants and their acquaintances and friends might have been gay or bisexual men who did not know their identity until after they had migrated. I believe that sexuality is a complex, fluid, and sophisticated process that goes beyond the categories of sexual orientation labeled as homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual. For those who migrate between countries (and between different socioeconomic contexts), sexuality can be shaped by different economic, political, and ethnic/racial factors as well as by modes of settlement and incorporation. For instance, for men like Mauricio who had been involved in long-term romantic relationships with women, sexual desire for men was not reported as part of their sexual repertoire of feelings and emotions. Even though Mauricio may have found pleasure while receiving oral sex from men, he reported that for him sex with other

men had always been prompted by conditions that had to do with inequality and marginality, such as crowded housing, the effects of drugs or alcohol, or a sense of moral responsibility for someone who had helped him while he struggled with poverty. Thus, while men like Mauricio may embrace heterosexuality as their sexual identity and as the main organizer of their romantic choices, their actual sexual behaviors may also be affected by the changing social contexts that they experience.

Elsewhere I have explained the ways in which same-sex eroticized attitudes and behaviors became part of the nuanced everyday life interactions in these immigrant men's lives (both before and after migrating) and described how they were not only the result of structural conditions (see González-López, 2005, pp. 137-144). Interestingly, Mauricio and other informants blushed or became defensive and anxious when I carefully asked if they had ever felt sexual attraction toward men. And when I asked them why a man would actually have sex with another man, they associated negative factors (i.e., alcohol, drugs, crowded housing, isolation, and pornographic movies) with such behaviors. While these factors may explain in part why these sexualized interactions took place and often negatively impact the sexual health of this population (a concern examined in the extensive Latinos and HIV/AIDS literature; see González-López, 2005, pp. 131-151), my informants less frequently described same-sex desire and sexual pleasure as part of these exchanges. Their feelings of homophobia might have not allowed them to directly express their authentic erotic desire when we discussed these specific issues. Thus, further research is needed to explore how and why same-sex desire and pleasure may inform the behaviors of nongay-identified migrant jornaleros who have sex with men before and after migration.

In sum, these men's experiences exposed heterosexuality's complex fluidity and potential fragility. Heterosexuality can thus be viewed as a paradox, socially powerful and vulnerable at the same time. The voices of these men also served to support the argument that heterosexuality—as an institution and as the hegemonic sexual norm—has to be consistently reproduced and reinforced in order to preserve its dominance. Their voices may also be seen to extend the findings from other critical studies that have examined heterosexuality with the purpose of “revealing and demystifying the mechanisms of power, identifying their internal contradictions and cleavages, so as to inform movements for change” (Messner, 1996).

Implications for Sexual Policy

Breaking Silences in Sexuality Research

Sexual harassment of day laborers is of special concern if one considers that between 20,000 and 22,000 laborers are looking for work in Los Angeles County alone every day (Valenzuela, 2002) and that their numbers are gradually increasing in Los Angeles and in many other cities throughout the country (Malpica, 2005). Study of this topic has sensitive multidimensional implications.

First, we must better understand how sexual harassment can be prevented. Some possible avenues for change became apparent to me as I collected the data for this study more than 5 years ago. I also discussed these ideas and concerns with Daniel Malpica. According to Malpica as well as some of my informants, day laborers seem to be very aware of the potential risk for being sexually harassed as part of their search for jobs. This awareness, Malpica explained, could be further increased by the leaders and workers in nonprofit organizations that defend immigrant workers' rights:

The leaders of these organizations, like CHIRLA [Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles], for example, and other nonprofits, and the activists and educators who work in direct contact with the day laborers could actually provide workshops to tell the day laborers that this [sexual harassment] is a reality and that they should be very, very keen to this situation, and that they need to be very careful. And also, obviously, to tell them about their rights as workers. But you know what? I think that is one of the great things that a lot of these day labor centers do because they are educating the workers that they in fact have rights as workers. And now what they need to add, I think, is another dimension to it, which is that they also have the right to protect themselves from sexual harassment, and that they have the right to say no. So that is what I would recommend.

Founded in 1986, CHIRLA is a nonprofit agency advocating for the rights of immigrants and refugees in southern California. CHIRLA sponsors the creation of immigrant day laborer centers in the Los Angeles area. Its representatives have worked shoulder-to-shoulder with other activists fighting for day laborers' rights.

Important issues regarding greater involvement with immigrant advocacy organizations like CHIRLA have not been examined in this article and urgently need to be explored in future research. Many other related research questions still need to be explored: To what extent are CHIRLA representatives and activists at similar

organizations aware of sexual harassment of day laborers? To what extent is a discussion of these experiences, strategies for response, and other related issues incorporated into the labor rights education work that they do? Has discussion of issues of sexual harassment of day laborers ever been incorporated into White gay rights organizations and forums? How are U.S. sexual harassment laws applied (or not applied) when instances involve stigmatized social groups such as undocumented immigrants and gay men? Research on these issues demands activist research methodologies and may potentially address the ethical and political dilemmas that kept coming to my mind as I wrote this article.

“What would you do if your sexuality research with Mexican immigrants revealed information that could be used against them?” a senior scholar asked me after a presentation I gave at the American Sociological Association (ASA) annual conference in Chicago in 1999. Back then, I was getting prepared to finish and defend my doctoral dissertation as a sociologist. Since then, I have engaged in conversations with some of my mentors and colleagues in order to explore this sensitive question. The conversations have always been thought-provoking and stimulating. As I worked on this article, the same and other related questions kept coming to mind: Should I write about this or should I keep my mouth shut? How do I write about this topic? In my larger research project, the stories of the men who have been sexually harassed touched me deeply; I did not think twice about including them in my book *Erotic Journeys: Mexican Immigrants and Their Sex Lives* (González-López, 2005). Some of those narratives and examinations are included as well in this article. However, writing an article to discuss these issues in more depth presented me with an intense struggle, especially regarding the need to reveal that some immigrant men had engaged in commercial sex and my concern about further stigmatizing White gay men.

To me, writing about such topics uncovered two levels of vulnerability: one regarding how this article would be read and used by readers and the other about the personal risks I would be taking as a researcher. I am keenly aware of the ways in which such information can be misused by right-wing and conservative politicians and other anti-immigrant organizations (e.g., the Minutemen)—groups that in my estimation are always searching for information that will further stigmatize and oppress immigrants, their families, and their communities. I feared as well that such politically conservative groups might similarly misuse my findings to promote homophobic beliefs and practices against White gay men, their families, and their communities. As a

Mexican woman and a feminist sociologist, my political alliances are with both groups, Mexican immigrant and LGBT communities and activists. While aware of these concerns, I also realized that withholding information about the themes discussed in this article would mean silencing the victims and preventing the possibility for justice and change.

“Silence is complicity, silence is consent” was an expression that kept coming to my mind as I wrote this article. I felt validated by Daniel Malpica’s response after I shared my concerns with him. He said, “If this article can be used as an avenue to promote social policy that can protect immigrants who are vulnerable, then it is worth taking the risk, it is worth talking about it.” Hopefully, the discussion of these issues will compel policymakers to explore ways to prevent these forms of sexual violence against marginalized immigrants but not to further stigmatize already disadvantaged individuals.

In December 2005, the U.S. House of Representatives voted and passed the Sensenbrenner (HR 4437) immigration bill with the title the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005. This bill contains a series of controversial provisions including the construction of a 700-mile fence at strategic points of the U.S.-Mexico border. The passage of this bill created intense reactions. U.S. immigrant rights activists organized and demonstrated against it in massive numbers throughout the country, while counterprotests by anti-illegal immigration groups such as the Minutemen also took place. Heated immigration debates have been unleashed as it is still being considered by Congress. And as I write this paragraph in August 2006, President Bush has deployed 6,000 National Guard troops to border states in an action consistent with some of the bill’s controversial plans to control illegal immigration from Mexico.

Because of their fragile migration status, many of the immigrant men whom I have described as sexually vulnerable cannot themselves denounce their experiences of sexual harassment. The resulting impunity for the perpetrators then becomes an accomplice of racism, limited linguistic skills, and socioeconomic segregation. I hope that this article can serve as a way to denounce the types of sexual violence that threaten the sexual freedom and safety of Mexican immigrants.

Final Reflections

The voices of immigrant men presented in this article show how macro and micro conditions of immigration sometimes push at the fronteras of heterosexuality. On the one hand, these men have been exposed to structural coercion and commercial sex within oppressive racialized

and sexualized intra-male hierarchies and larger and globalized socioeconomic forces, and on the other, they have reported engaging in same-sex experiences within migration contexts and through their own agency. In the first case, I have described a larger structural power inequality that has influenced the sex lives of these immigrant Mexicanos. In the second case, no one had significant power over anyone else. I have argued that these two patterns of sexual behavior are not part of the same phenomenon—one does not necessarily lead to the other—and that they belong to different categories of same-sex sexual activity. Each one of these processes is complex, however, and requires further research.

Sexuality research with U.S. Latino populations has traditionally used and abused paradigms that focus on a so-called Latino culture based on concepts such as machismo, marianismo, religiosity, familism, and acculturation.⁵ I argue that it is time to go beyond such simplistic culture-based paradigms in order to identify and critically examine other social forces affecting and shaping the sex lives of these populations. The objective of my research with Mexican populations is to challenge stereotypical representations of Latina women and Latino men in sexuality research. In addition, I am interested in addressing why in-depth sociological examinations are overdue. These sociological examinations are crucial for a better understanding of the sex lives of the poor immigrant men (in this case) who may become sexually disempowered while surviving in an increasingly complex and exploitative capitalist society.

Finally, as I write the last paragraph of this article, I realized that the more I tell the stories of these men, the more dangerous this information will become. But the dissemination of these stories is worth it to me if this article sparks new interest in research that is concerned with the humanity and dignity of those living on the margins of society. My ultimate goal is to stimulate a new generation of sexuality researchers whose emerging ideas may promote projects that address human rights, promote and defend equal sexual rights for all individuals, and help create progressive social policies. Exploring these issues is important in the current turbulent time of tension and war, multi-phobic times in which immigrants are being demonized and devalued not only in the United States but also in other countries, such as France. In the

end, my own vulnerability is held by strength. As a sociologist who conducts sexuality research, I find the late Chicana intellectual Gloria E. Anzaldúa's reflections on the September 11 terrorist attacks to be emblematic for me: "May we do work that matters" (Anzaldúa, 2005, p. 102).

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⁵ In fact, the concept of *Latino culture* is not only a problematic theoretical fiction and stereotypical monolithic idea; it also ignores the multiplicity of Latino cultures in both the United States and Latin America.

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