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Regulating Latina Sexuality: Unlearning an At-Risk Framework to Make Meaning of Sexual Autonomy

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Regulating Latina Sexuality:
Unlearning an At-Risk Framework to Make Meaning of Sexual Autonomy

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-On-Hudson, New York

May 2022

para mami, gracias por tu amor, amabilidad y apoyo. gracias por ser mi protectora y amiga. gracias por enseñarme a amar y por el regalo más precioso en la vida, mi familia. **Espero algún día ser una mujer tan grande como tú. te amo con todo mi corazón.**

para anabana, thank u for ur unconditional love and support. u have the most beautiful soul and inspire me more than words can describe, i am so proud of the woman u have become and cannot wait to see what the future has in store. **este proyecto es para tu y yo, que Dios los de la fuerza para seguir sanando.**

para grace & giacomo, to the most intelligent, funniest baby brother and sister a gal could ask for, **thank u for the countless facetime calls and letters. not a day went by where sissy wasn't thinking about y'all.** stay curious, wild, and free.

to timmy, **the best dad** and husband, thank u for loving me as ur own and always showing nothing but love and support. **i thank God everyday for bringing u into my life.**

para saúl, **mi mejor amigo y inspiración**, gracias. for always believing in me and giving me the confidence to be the best version of myself, u have challenged me to grow beyond the stars and allowed me the space to become la victoria que soy hoy, i admire ur resilience, intelligence, and strength. **keep doing u homie and hopefully one day i'll be able to catch up.**

to summer grace, thank u for all of ur love and support, **for being my home away from home.** ur intelligence and grace have inspired me in more ways than u will ever know, saying i love u is an understatement.

to granny, thank u for always believing in me and supporting me in more ways than i could ever give thanks for. i would not be where i am today without ur love&support. **love u with all my heart.**

to grandma mary, may u continue to rest in peace and watch over me. i know you would be proud of the woman i am today, and that would not have been possible without u. there is not a day that goes by where i don't think about u, **peace&blessings always.**

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*Allison, thank you for listening to all of my ideas,
talking them out with me,
and reassuring me of my sociological voice.*

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*I dedicate this writing to my
participants, and all of the Latina women
out there who never had the chance to
explore their sexuality, sexual autonomy,
and were bounded by societal expectations
of womanhood.*

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But above all, I am terrified of making my mother the villain in my life rather than showing how she has been a victim. Will I be betraying her in this essay for her early disloyalty to me? With terror as my companion, I dip into my life and begin work on myself. Where did it begin, the pain, the images that haunt me? -Gloria Anzaldúa

Introduction

The topic of sexuality was taboo in my household; my mom never talked about anything sex-related and when she did it was always based on her own experiences with sex and whatever the bible would say about the topic, which mainly consisted of virginity, purity, and saving oneself till marriage. Or at least that was the case when it came to what was said to the women in my house. I grew up going to a nondenominational church and engaged in many of the youth programs they had, one of which was for young girls between the ages of 7 and 14. The program was centered on the idea of “being a princess of God,” emphasizing purity, staying celibate until marriage in order to wear a white wedding dress down the aisle and discouraging any physical form of affection until the wedding day, where two unions come together as one. It was essentially socializing girls to think that their only value in marriage consisted of sexual acts and shaming girls of their sexual pleasures.

Every year the church program would throw a huge ball where the girls would dress up in “princess” style dresses and celebrate another year of pledging their purity till marriage. Fathers would usually be given a special time during the ceremony where they gifted their daughters a purity ring or other form of jewelry. Somewhere in the attic of my parent’s house, my purity cards and every purity ring that I ever received lay. My mother’s experiences and the way in which she talked about sex and womanhood on a day-to-day basis shaped a lot of the way in which I viewed sex and the expectations of womanhood, along with the church and the conversations that I was engaging in with students at my school. I was trapped in a particular mindset when it came to sexuality, like many other women out there who do not grow up with the liberty and resources to explore and educate themselves. It was not until I came to Bard that I was able to take power over my sexual pleasures and wants, I was able to reimagine what

womanhood looked like outside the realms of motherhood and being the stay-at-home wife with a family.

Sexuality was not the only theme within the studies of humanities that piqued my interest. The construction of the female gender, womanhood, and ideas/expectations of motherhood as well, particularly in patriarchal societies. At Bard, I was able to talk with fellow Latinas about sex and even question my own sexuality. We discussed what it was like growing up in a Latinx household, and what values and norms were emphasized and held dearly by our families. We would talk about the machismo¹ ideals that our brothers, dads, and uncles portrayed, and about the generational trauma of womanhood our grandmothers, aunts, and mothers internalized that was perpetuated by the Latino culture. On top of all of that, being able to take gender and sexuality courses while in college, such as *Women's Rights, Human Rights, and Sexualities* allowed me to learn about the creation of sex and gender on a theoretical level and how we make meaning of these terms. I wanted to explore this mean-making process on sexuality further in regard to Latinas, to see if my experience was similar to theirs and part of a larger cultural framework.

The first time I allowed myself to be free with my sexuality I felt a lot of guilt, shame, and negatively associated feelings towards myself and I got to thinking that maybe I was not the only one. Just maybe, there were other Latinas out there who had grown up in a religious household and had a similar experience with sexual socialization as I did. The fact that college was the first time I was able to go out and explore my sexuality considering all of the values my mother ever imposed on me, such as saving myself till marriage and giving her a lot of grandbabies, excluded any possibility of me exploring myself sexually and in relationships.

¹ Machismo refers to the exaggerated sense of manliness; a form of masculinity that is shown through a strong sense of entitlement to power and domination. In relation to machismos is Marianismo, the female version, that is submissive and depicts an essence of the Virgin Mary.

My study questions what influences the way that Latina women make meaning of their own sexuality, through themes of Sex Education in school, conversations with friends and family, and their transition from home to college through in-person open-ended interviews. The small amount of research completed on Latina Sexuality has been focused within an at-risk framework where high rates of teenage pregnancy and STDs were primary themes, but my study delved into a deeper cultural framework with a sex-positive approach. The results of my study showed that although I did not make my questions based on the at-risk framework, the systems and institutions in the participants' lives were using such a framework in the way they were talking and interacting with them. The role that mothers play in the overall sexual education of their daughters by sometimes projecting their own experiences was also highlighted. Although many of the women were socialized to think about their sexuality within the at-risk framework, when they made the transition to college they were able to break away and make-meaning of their sexual autonomy. By studying these findings we learn more about the institutions and structures that shape Latina Sexuality and how to combat this to allow for the mean-making process of sexual autonomy to happen sooner and more efficiently.

Setting the Tone

Latina sexuality in the US has a very peculiar history that shows cultural and religious restraints on talking about sexuality. Many of the issues that arise when it comes to sexuality have been ignored. It is important to note that although I refer to ‘Latinx women’ as a collective and the literature written on this group, the majority of the research has been done on Mexican-American and Puerto Rican women because they make up the largest sub-ethnic population within the US in terms of the ‘Latinx’ category². In regards to talking about the government and power, there is a history of forced sterilization of Latina women, and the two examples that come to mind with this subject matter in the case of Mexican women in the state of California and Puerto Rican Women.³ Although there have been cases of forced sterilization, Latinas make up the highest rates of teenage pregnancies in the US⁴, which in and of itself contribute to the low percentages of Latinas who continue their education past the high school level. Aside from forced sterilization and women’s reproduction⁵, Latinx individuals also have

² Marysol Asencio and Katie Acosta, “Introduction: Mapping Latina/o Sexualities Research and Scholarship,” in *Latina/o Sexualities*, ed. Marysol Asencio, *Probing Powers, Passions, Practices, and Policies* (Rutgers University Press, 2010), 1–12, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hj4kz.5>. (11)

As Asencio notes in this introduction, there is much left to be studied within the Latinx community in terms of sexuality and being more inclusive with different Latinx ethnicities. The authors also go into detail about the difference between Hispanic and Latino. I choose to write Latinx in this paper as it is a preferred inclusive term to describe people of Latin America.

³ Rebecca Martinez, review of *Review of Matters of Choice: Puerto Rican Women’s Struggle for Reproductive Freedom; Fertile Matters: The Politics of Mexican-Origin Women’s Reproduction*, by Iris López and Elena R. Gutiérrez, *NWSA Journal* 21, no. 3 (2009): 210–16.

⁴ Kim Larson, Margarete Sandelowski, and Chris McQuiston, “‘It’s a Touchy Subject’: Latino Adolescent Sexual Risk Behaviors in the School Context,” *Applied Nursing Research: ANR* 25, no. 4 (November 2012): 231–38, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apnr.2011.04.001>.

⁵ Although rates of teenage pregnancy have since dropped from the 1980s-90s, it is still a precedent issue in the US and can be studied through the lens of the welfare system, reproductive rights, and generational cultural influences.

the highest rates of STDs/HIV and AIDS despite being the second largest ethnic group. These high rates of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases have caused Latina sexuality to be regulated by means of political and social institutions, such as the government in the forced sterilization and as I will discuss later on, through schools and Health Centers.

Within the context of regulating Latina sexuality as it relates to my study, there is a focus on the role that sex education, familial and cultural norms/values, and religious beliefs play in influencing. On a broader level, the sexuality of women in the United States can be looked at through a multitude of lenses which include, but are not limited to, historical (seeing the changes over time in the meaning-making of sexual autonomy and what societal factors contribute to it), cultural (looking at the norms/values about sexuality and how they are reinforced), racial (looking at how non-white individuals have constructed their meaning of sexuality outside of the one imposed through white heteronormativity), and political (discussing the laws and politics surrounding the human body and autonomy over sex). A long tradition of feminist scholarship on female subordination in regards to sexuality has discussed women's bodies and their ability to reproduce as a source of control [and power].⁶ "Sexuality can be defined broadly as attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and identities associated with sex, pleasure, and desire."⁷

Control of Sexuality Through the Health System: Focusing on Preventative Health Measures

⁶ The feminist scholars I refer to that I have read and been influenced by include Gerda Lerner and her book *Creation of Patriarchy* and Maria Mies "Social Origins of Sexual Division of Labour" in *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*.

⁷ Asencio and Acosta, "Introduction." (2)

“Due to the lack of research focused on minority communities on topics of sexuality and sexual liberation, studies completed by Delida Sanchez⁸ and Emily Mann⁹, are critical to the field of Sociology and fundamental in furthering our understanding of how the concept of sexuality varies within different cultures and racial-ethnic groups. Research on this topic tends to agree on the importance of studying individual racial-ethnic groups as they have their own cultural norms and values associated with sex and the intensity that familial gender ideologies and health institutions play. Sanchez’s and Mann’s study looked at different age groups with an emphasis on Mexican Americans and African Americans.

In her 2017 article, Delida Sanchez studies early adolescent African American and Mexican American girls, between the ages of eleven and fourteen, and concludes that interventions involving Mexican American girls should “focus on promoting constructive conceptualizations of gender roles, which can ultimately foster self-efficacy around sexual communication with parents and potential partners.”¹⁰ By emphasizing ‘constructive’ definitions of gender, putting similar standards on both men and women, Mexican American girls can better learn and be encouraged to have conversations about sex. Throughout the process of the study, Sanchez found that Mexican American participants “reported patriarchal familial gender ideologies along with cautious attitudes towards dating and sexuality”¹¹ and she is not the first one as author Emily Mann also documents similar results.

⁸ Delida Sanchez et al., “Links among Familial Gender Ideology, Media Portrayal of Women, Dating, and Sexual Behaviors in African American, and Mexican American Adolescent Young Women: A Qualitative Study,” *Sex Roles* 77, no. 7–8 (October 2017): 453–70, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0739-x>.

⁹ Emily Mann, “Latina Girls, Sexual Agency, and the Contradictions of Neoliberalism,” *Sexuality Research & Social Policy: Journal of NSRC* 13, no. 4 (December 2016): 330–40, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-016-0237-x>.

¹⁰ Sanchez et al., “Links among Familial Gender Ideology, Media Portrayal of Women, Dating, and Sexual Behaviors in African American, and Mexican American Adolescent Young Women.” 453

¹¹ Sanchez et al., 453

Including the importance that familial and other cultural influences play on the creation of Latina sexuality, both Mann¹² and Sanchez go into detail about the emphasis on preventing teen pregnancy and promoting sexual abstinence as a form of coping with the significantly higher rates of Latina teen pregnancy than any other group in the United States. The ethnographic study completed by Mann in 2013 delves deeper into how health care centers specifically reproduce their idea of sexuality and preventative planning by focusing on the importance of birth control, condoms, etc. Mann says that “educators have long instructed Latina youth to be “good girls” by abstaining from sex and refraining from displaying knowledge or curiosity about sex in the classroom while at the same time assuming that Latina girls are culturally predisposed to be “bad girls,”¹³ referring to the high rates of youth teen pregnancies and sexual promiscuity that is often associated with Latinas. Mann reaffirms this idea of “at-risk girls”¹⁴ in her 2016 article stating there is a “particular emphasis placed on preventing teenage pregnancy, typically by promoting and prioritizing sexual abstinence until marriage.”¹⁵ In the qualitative study Sanchez seems to further this ideal, but specifically focusing on Mexican-Americans, by stating that “much of the research that touch upon the subjects of sexuality and sexual reproductive health on the Latina population has largely focused on preventative sexual health efforts, including disease prevention, STIs/HIV reduction, and unintended pregnancy prevention.”¹⁶ Asencio (2010) claims “while HIV/AIDS epidemic has increased attention on the sex lives of black and Latina/o populations, it has been framed by a medical model based on “risks” and disease.”¹⁷ Simply put, “latinx youth are the largest

¹² Emily S. Mann, “Regulating Latina Youth Sexualities Through Community Health Centers: Discourses and Practices of Sexual Citizenship,” *Gender and Society* 27, no. 5 (2013): 681–703.

¹³ Mann, “Regulating Latina Youth Sexualities Through Community Health Centers.” 684

¹⁴ Mann, “Regulating Latina Youth Sexualities Through Community Health Centers.” 684

¹⁵ Mann, “Latina Girls, Sexual Agency, and the Contradictions of Neoliberalism.” 330

¹⁶ Sanchez et al., 453

¹⁷ Asencio and Acosta, 3

racial-ethnic minority group and they also have the highest birth rate among adolescents.”¹⁸ This significantly larger birth rate has caught the attention of many, especially those in the academic and health fields, as they come up with their own ways to combat teenage pregnancy.

The study of these topics concerning Latina youth sexualities plays an important role in answering the question of how to better and more effectively foster and understand sexuality so that the vicious cycle of subjecting Latina youth to the at-risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases framework ends by focusing more on how familial, religious, and cultural institutions play a larger role. In doing so, not only could there be a deeper understanding at the root causes of Latina Sexuality but also allow Latinas the opportunity to make meaning of their own sexual citizenship.¹⁹ As Sanchez highlights, “families are one of the first agents of gender socialization and play a significant role in shaping young women’s gender ideologies during childhood and adolescence”²⁰ through the concept of sexual scripts²¹. There are three different levels to the sexual scripting theory that are all important in understanding the creation of sexuality. The first level is the macro-level which places an emphasis on cultural scripts, such as the media and television, the next one is the meso-level which deals with interpersonal scripts that are developed socialization and learning, such as familial norms, and the final one is the micro-level which focuses on intrapsychic scripts, such as sexual attitudes and desires.”²²

Looking at Sexuality on a Micro Level- Identity and The Self (motherhood)

¹⁸ Sanchez et al., 453

¹⁹ Sexual Citizenship is a term I first discovered in Mann (2013) where she describes the framework in which the health centers are using to project “a form of heteronormativity that prescribes a middle-class, heterosexual life course trajectory, constructed historically as a white racial formation. These discourses and practices by people in the healthcare field communicate that nonnormative sexual and reproductive practices among Latina youth must be prevented in order to produce the ideal girl citizen.” (682)

²⁰ Sanchez et al. 454

²¹ Sanchez et al. 454

²² This cited portion is edited work from a previous Literature Review written for Jane Smith’s “Writing and Research” course with additional sources and synthesis.

As stated in the previous section, sexuality can be studied in the context of sexual scripts²³ which are broken down into levels. Studies on sexuality in relation to the self and personal identity are of importance when trying to understand “Latina’s women experience as well as for highlighting the multiple levels of oppression and resistance found in these women’s lives.”²⁴

Sexual Socialization (the role of the family)

Though not studied nearly as much as the ways in which the healthcare system has played an influence in relation to Latina sexuality, the family, which includes both individual relationships and familial structures, and cultural customs/ideals have been a focus. Cultural socialization has been prominent among Latinas, especially those who are born into immigrant families, but not sexual socialization which according to researchers plays a role in the sexual practices and contributes to the large number of pregnancies, STD, and HIV percentages. A study by Marcela Raffaelli and Lenna L. Ontai²⁵ takes a closer look at the role the family plays in the sexual socialization of Latinas, which included themes of direct communication from parents, social control practices of the girls, and emotional qualities. Similar to Sanchez (2017) they came to the conclusion that “ultimately the family socialization affects the formation of sexual scripts. According to scripting theory, sexual behavior results from the interplay between cultural

²³ Sanchez et al. 454

²⁴ Asencio and Acosta, 2

²⁵ Marcela Raffaelli and Lenna L. Ontai, “‘She’s 16 Years Old and There’s Boys Calling over to the House’: An Exploratory Study of Sexual Socialization in Latino Families,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 3, no. 3 (2001): 295–310.

scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts.”²⁶ The scripts referred to can be summed up as learned behaviors.²⁷ “Although these cultural values can be depicted as stereotypical, there is a mutual understanding that they are important in family socialization practices. These include familismo and respeto and occasionally the importance of virginity until marriage. Within Latino families much of the socialization of daughters is influenced by historical beliefs in religion and family codes of honour.”²⁸ The themes of familismo and respeto relate back to Machismo and Marianismo, where family is the central focus and the respeto is given to and earned from the patriarch.

Pride in the family is correlated to the respect within the familial structure, which often reflects the biblical relationships where the wife serves her husband and power is passed down through the family.²⁹ This familial structure focusing on the father figure of the household has been further studied by Gloria González-López³⁰ where she concluded “fathers’ perceptions of a daughter’s virginity are shaped by regional expressions of patriarchy and masculinity, and the socioeconomic segregation of inner-city barrios.”³¹ González-López acknowledges that much of the literature has been dominated by “culturally defined traits such as familismo, machismo, marianismo, the madonna/whore dichotomy, and Catholic religion”³² but hers takes central focus on the connection between fatherhood, gender and sexuality, and immigration while looking at men who immigrated to the US and reside in Los Angeles. The men come from both rural and

²⁶ Raffaelli and Ontai, ““She’s 16 Years Old and There’s Boys Calling over to the House.”” 296

²⁷ Sexual Scripting Theory was introduced by Simon and Gagnon (1986) and is further discussed in terms of the sexual self-definition in Stanton L. Jones and Heather R. Holster’s “Sexual Script Theory: An Integrative Exploration of the Possibilities and Limits of Sexual Self-Definition” (2001).

²⁸ Raffaelli and Ontai, 296-297

²⁹ Nancy S. Landale, R. Salvador Oropesa, and Christina Bradatan, *Hispanic Families in the United States: Family Structure and Process in an Era of Family Change, Hispanics and the Future of America* (National Academies Press (US), 2006), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK19902/>.

³⁰ Gloria González-López, “Fathering Latina Sexualities: Mexican Men and the Virginity of Their Daughters,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66, no. 5 (2004): 1118–30.

³¹ González-López, “Fathering Latina Sexualities.” 1118

³² González-López, 1119

urban regions, implying that the gender inequalities due to socioeconomic status they experienced before immigrating play a role in the way they view premarital virginity. Essentially, the different gender relations these men experienced in their hometowns of Mexico, which varied, were largely influenced by the socioeconomic status of the people that populated the areas. For example, the men that lived in the urban areas were more likely to have liberal ideals towards sexuality due to the higher percentage of women being educated and playing larger roles within the economy.³³

It is no surprise that cultural values play a role in sexual socialization as intersectionality is important to consider. Mari J. Matsuda³⁴ expresses the importance of intersectionality when it comes to studying patterns of oppression, writing “no form of subordination ever stands alone.”³⁵ Though not explicitly stated, sexuality has been used as a way to justify women as inferior to men. “Feminist scholars, particularly Chicana and Latina scholars, have drawn upon intersectionality as an analytical tool to not only demonstrate that a focus on culture alone is insufficient to comprehend the lives of Latinas, but also that culture is indeed dynamic for Latinas/os and not simply mired in tradition.”³⁶ Latina sexuality in relation to identity cannot be studied on its own as it is influenced by other social, political, and historical themes. Studying Latina sexuality relates to human rights, reproductive rights, race, and every other intersecting theme that is related to being a woman in modern US society.³⁷

³³ My study is related to this finding by González-López because the preliminary findings show that experiences of the mother in regards to sexuality were often imposed on their daughters, or the opposite. Though socio-economic status was not emphasized in my study, nor in the findings, the role of immigration and keeping cultural values of that area stand.

³⁴ Mari J. Matsuda, “Beside My Sister, Facing the Enemy: Legal Theory out of Coalition,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1183–92, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229035>.

³⁵ Matsuda, “Beside My Sister, Facing the Enemy.” 1189

³⁶ Lorena García and Lourdes Torres, “New Directions in Latina Sexualities Studies,” *NWSA Journal* 21, no. 3 (2009): vii–xvi.

³⁷ It is important to note that although this study and review of literature centers around Latinas in the United States, there must be an acknowledgement that the same issues that persist concerning the subject matter are similar, and sometimes worse, in Latin American countries. Women’s sexuality is used for perpetuation of violence and dominance.

As I have discussed, the limited research completed on Latinx Sexuality is rooted in [the belief that Latinas should conform and be a reflection of white heterosexual women of the US. Sexual scripting theory allows us to break down the different levels of interactions (macro, meso, and micro) that influence one's definition of Sexuality and Sexual Citizenship. Through meso-level interactions within the home, schools, and other institutions, Latinas gain an Overall Sex Education (OSE) that builds their intrapsychic ideas of sex and sexual citizenship. Most research done within this category has been centered around the at-risk framework, using the high rates of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases to guide them but my research focuses on the individual experiences of Latina women, going beyond the classic narrative. I am trying to figure out the ways in which these Latinas define their own sexuality by asking about experiences and the various outlets in which they learned about sexually related items.

This study is largely influenced and an extension of Lorena Garcia's³⁸ ethnographic study, where she goes against the risky behavior narrative and interviews Latina girls who identify as sexually active and safe in order to get a deeper understanding of "how Latina girls seek to develop and enact their sexual subjectivity and sexual agency and the constraints under which they do this for themselves."³⁹ Garcia's book, like my own research, goes beyond the classic narrative of Latina sexuality which is mainly centered around the risk factors of high rates of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases to discover other identity measures that play a role in how they talk and interact with their own sexuality in a world where there are certain social expectations and barriers already set. Though not highlighted as important to my own research, aside from choosing the population of the study, cultural and ethnic background were important themes in Garcia's research, as she chose to only look at Puerto Ricans and

³⁸ Lorena Garcia, *Respect Yourself, Protect Yourself: Latina Girls and Sexual Identity* (NYU Press, 2012).

³⁹ Garcia, *Respect Yourself, Protect Yourself*. 17

Mexican-Americans. Additionally, with the population of my study being only women who attend a private, liberal arts institution, it is important to highlight the level of education, as a class often plays a structural role in social problems.

Research Methods

In order to get a deeper look into the sexual experiences and influences of Latina sexuality, I have conducted in-depth interviews with eleven Latinx-identifying women, between the ages of 18 and 22, who attend a liberal arts college in the Northeast. In my initial round to gather participants for this study, I targeted Mexican, Mexican-American, and Chicax women from the Southwest and the Northeast between the ages of 18-22 who had either grown up in a religious household or currently practice religion but finding participants that met these requirements proved difficult as many of the women were not interested in talking about Sexuality. My assumption that many Mexican-Americans, like myself, grew up in a religious household was deemed to be incorrect, showing that I was generalizing and projecting an experience, similar to those who use the at-risk framework and project the problem of teen pregnancy as a backbone. After careful consideration, I opened up the study to any Latina-identifying woman but limited it to those that attended the college. This decision not only allowed for greater diversity in perspective and experience but it also allowed for the pool of participants to increase, therefore adding more validity to my argument and results. The interview questions were constructed around four themes, *School Life*, *Peers*, *Home/Church Life*,

and Personal Life with the addition of some general *Demographic Questions* at the end of the interview. For the participants that did not meet the religious criteria, I simply skipped over the Church Life section.

I chose to focus my research on the young adult population as most of the research I read in preparation focused on this demographic, as well as the accessibility to my network which consists of people within the age group. Along with specifically choosing this age group, I chose to conduct in-depth interviews to allow the space and opportunity for participants to voice their opinions in a safe, judgment-free environment and truly delve deeper into the topic than they have ever had before. By conducting semi-structured in-person interviews I was able to ask follow-up questions and ask for elaboration but my population sample was limited to students that attended the college in person. My intention with this project in terms of the participants was to start an open conversation about sexuality and allow for reflection, on all of the social and cultural factors that have shaped their understanding of their own identity when it comes to sex.

In order to get participants that met the criteria I created a flyer advertising my Senior Project with my contact information and sent it to the college's Latin American Student Organization listserv. From there I received several responses of interest. Along with the recruitment flyer, snowball sampling was a primary method of recruitment. Once a prospective participant reached out through email I followed up with a digital copy of the consent form, which highlights the risks and benefits of my study, confidentiality, and a portion with who to reach out to aside from me if there were questions and concerns.

All interviews were conducted in a private office setting and a printed out copy of the consent form was present and signed before the start of the interview. A typical interview lasted roughly forty-five minutes to an hour and was recorded on my cellular device through the voice

memos application. The interviews were conversational and did not follow the set of interview question themes according to how they were written. In addition, all names of participants and any names mentioned by them have been converted to pseudonyms in the findings portion of this paper.

Setting Up the Framework of OSE (Overall Sexual Education)

Many of the women I interviewed described not being feeling comfortable talking about sex within their homes, specifically with parents and guardians regardless of whether or not they pushed the conversation themselves, which led me to wonder where these conversations about sex were happening and with whom. Sex Education, although commonly referred to within the context of school sexual education courses, is referred to in this section as the culmination of information that participants received in order to come up with their own definitions and ideas about sex; I name this new way of using it as Overall Sex Education (OSE) and utilize it as a framework. While interviewing participants there were three main areas that were influencing their sex education, the school sex education classes, the internet, and other media outlets, and lastly, and perhaps the most influential, their friends and family members. Much of the information and conversations happening around sex stemmed from friendships and the social atmosphere of the school. Though it was common that many of the participants did not remember much of the specifics surrounding their sexual education in school⁴⁰, it is still an

⁴⁰ When asked to describe their sexual education experience in school, many of the participants were unable to go into depth about the specifics that were talked about.

institution that influences the thoughts and behaviors of the participants both in middle/high school and beyond.

In-School

Through the sexual education courses, schools proved to be a place where dialogue on sex was occurring. Sol, a 21-year-old Colombian who moved from Texas to Mexico in the middle of her high school years, described learning about sexually transmitted diseases, periods, and “things like that” but was never given what she considers the proper talk in sex education. She said “I was never given any specifics. It was very, like, here are the STDs, and here are the like, like the organs. You know it was very like surface level.. Very general, very medical very, like, you know, textbook material.” The lack of depth in the conversation of sex within her sexual education, outside of biological and medical reasonings of the “textbook material”, led her to the understanding “that sex was purely for like reproductive reasons, like you have to have sex to have a child.” This idea that sex is strictly for reproductive reasons takes away other social meanings of sex, such as pleasure and intimacy, and places all of the focus on the pregnancy aspect. Sol’s experience with sex education in school was similar to how most of the other women interviewed described it, especially in the instances where they felt as though their teacher did not do a good job in describing the subject matter in-depth, answering questions, and informing students beyond the textbook material. Whether that was due to the specific school curriculum or the teacher themselves, it was very rare that they would go into depth beyond the biological, surface-level topics.

Celia, a 19-year-old Mexican who moved to a town near Darby College 11 years ago from Mexico, had a similar but simpler Health Ed experience than Sol. She said, “It wasn’t really about sex it was just kind of like, like, birth and, like, what’s it called? Drugs. That was kind of

it.” Short, simple, and to the point capture Celia’s sexual education within the school setting, leading her, like most of the other women interviewed, to rely on conversations with her friends and family and the media to inform herself on sex and sexuality, which with her family did not go beyond the “te cuidas” talk that was repeated throughout the interviews with almost every participant in relation to respect and not getting pregnant. The idea of respect, or ‘respeto,’ within the family stems from a patriarch machismo perspective. This fear of pregnancy and disrupting her life stayed with Celia and almost all of the other participants as they grew older and transitioned into the Darby College atmosphere, where conversations about sex were more frequent and inviting, different than the conversations experienced during their adolescent years.

Aside from the importance of the curriculum material that was presented to participants, the teacher played an important role in how Sarita, a 21-year-old who attended a public school in New Jersey, and Estrella, a 22-year-old who attended a private school in Pasadena, received and remembered information. Both of them had women teachers who they described to go above and beyond the material as well as making them feel comfortable to navigate the material, Estrella said “she was really young, and had like a different outlook” while Sarita said, “I do feel like she gave us like, I don’t know, gave us the knowledge.” Although these two participants were the only ones who described having such an experience, they both had engaged women teachers that made their sexual education experience fun and inviting considering, as we will learn later on, that the sexual education at home was not as in-depth nor avoided at all costs except when necessary. Their teachers' engagement in the material made the subject matter less awkward and easier to engage with, making them two of the only participants to highlight a positive sex education experience.

But for participants Margarita and Rebecca, who both attended private Catholic schools, their experiences were quite the unique ones as the religious aspect played a larger influence in what was included within the sex education health class curriculum. Both of them described that their biology and theology courses were the only places in which sex-related topics were discussed, and never condoned, as abstinence-only was the preferred action. Both Margarita and Rebecca were also in the Catholic School system for their middle school years. Though from different parts of the country, they both experienced a similar abstinence-only talk where they remember people telling them to sign purity cards. Although they both took the cards in a jokingly matter about staying abstinent, Rebecca said “it was really scary” after a guest speaker gave a presentation where he used a box full of old, dirty converse as an analogy for women who had sex before marriage, “being passed down from one guy to the next.” Clearly making a distinction between a woman’s sexual decision in relation to men, and the fact that the school approved such a presentation, it was evident that the expectation of women’s bodies revolves around the idea of them staying virgins and untouched. In the Catholic school environment, “they painted sex as a sin essentially. If you’re not married, don’t do it. Actually, anything sexual just don’t do it.” Their core curriculum is based on the religious views that the church holds, so for Margarita and Rebecca who both also grew up in religious households, the ways in which they received information about sex were heavily painted and enforced through the lens of Catholicism.

Almost all of the participants had received some sort of sexual education in school prior to coming to college but there was a common theme of not remembering what the curriculum looked like or feeling as though their sexual education did not adequately prepare them for all that comes with sex, both the risks and benefits. This can either mean the material was not

presented in a fun, engaging way by educators or the school system itself did not allow for an in-depth experience for the fear of promoting sex amongst adolescents, as teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease rates are especially high for Latinx youth.⁴¹ For a lot of the women interviewed, their association of sex with bearing children was influenced based on what they learned in school with the biological aspects of it and through their mothers, who were the primary source of information within the household, telling them that whatever they do, “don’t get pregnant”. This perspective led them to make not having children a priority above being safe in other ways. For the specific participants that attended Catholic school, their sexual education was based on abstinence-only teaching practices with an emphasis on what the religious values of the church are, and what they consider sins, which include fornication, sex outside of marriage, and non-heterosexual relationships.

Amigues y Familia

In one way or another, all of the women interviewed had some sort of discussion about sex with their mothers. Though this is not something that seems so out of the ordinary as it is usually the mothers having “the talk” with their daughters after they hit puberty, get their periods, and start showing interest in boys. But the lack of going beyond the period and “don’t get pregnant” conversations were most illuminating. Before interviewing participants I was convinced that religious values and upbringing would influence the way in which mothers talked to their daughters about sex, mainly placing an emphasis on the traditional virginity save-yourself-for-marriage, but to my surprise, it was not a conversation of do not have sex but

⁴¹Larson, Sandelowski, and McQuiston, “It’s a Touchy Subject.” ; It is important to note that many of the participants attended predominantly White institutions in their adolescent years, and I found no evidence indicating that their racial/ethnic background mattered in the type of sex education they received, rather the type of school they were in (private/public) and the demographics of the educators.

rather do not get pregnant. The “do not get pregnant” theme often stemmed from a mother’s views on abortion and ideas of young motherhood, that neglect the safety and security of their daughters themselves by not educating them beyond telling them do not pregnant. Considering the high rates of pregnancy amongst Latinas⁴² in the United States and the cultural phenomenon of having children at a young age, this could be a large reason as to why this was the primary way of discoursing sex with their daughters. This was indeed the case for all of the women except for Rosa, whose mother did give her a celibacy-only talk that later led to risky sexual behavior when she began engaging in sexual activity, and for Tita who did not grow up in a religious household.

For Estrella and Sarita the conversation with their mothers was described as awkward but fairly open and informative for the level of comfort that their mothers showed with the subject matter. “My mom gave me a very- like a conversation about it. Which you know, I think her being a Latina and on top of that being Christian that was a lot to do that. So I value that, even though it was very awkward.. very superficial, like, yeah, here are condoms.” After mentioning that her mother had her out of wedlock, Sarita said “I think that also really like, made her like to have like want to have this conversation with me.” Sarita’s acknowledgment of her mother’s positionality as a Latina Christian woman who had her out of wedlock, but still decided to have the conversation about sex shows us the projection of experience from mother to daughter, ways in which mothers socially reinforce their values and beliefs. For Estrella’s mom, her different layers of identity and beliefs were also noted in the interview as she said “they haven’t made an effort to like, make sex like an approachable or like less taboo topic, maybe because like, they’ve been raised and grounded being like really taboo and like something you are not supposed to talk about.” The phrase ‘like mother, like daughter’ comes to mind but rather than being in a direct,

⁴² Larson, Sandelowski, and McQuiston,

do or don't be like me, the mothers of Estrella and Sarita attempt their best at allowing them the space and liberty to think for themselves, as long as they are being safe, by talking and normalizing sex. By even having these conversations with their daughters, they are breaking away from projecting their experiences and views on the matter. Rosa's mother was on the opposite side of this anti-projection of values as she was the only mother that gave a celibacy-only talk.

Sarita described herself and her family as "very religious.. We go every Saturday to church.. And yeah, like God is always in the middle of our conversations, in our lives." Rosa also grew up in what she described to be "a really, really, really Christian household" but did not have a similar experience as Sarita. Although I cannot assume that all individuals who grow up in what they describe to be extreme religious households, will have similar talks about taboo topics such as sex and sexuality, it was worth noting the two opposite experiences as it speaks to the fact that religion only plays a part of the role, personal experiences from family members played another. She continued,

my mom had never had the talk with me, the talks we would have is very much you need to stay celibate before marriage. Because like, you know, that moment when like, you lose your virginity to the man that you're marrying, you'll be with him for the rest of your life. And I mean, that was my mom's story. So I guess it was very much like her trying to protect her narrative and Christian values onto me and her perspective.

Rosa mentions the projection of her mother's experience onto her as a way of protecting, and maybe validating, her own life experiences, clearly showing us that when the intersection layers are removed, it is up to the individual.

For Yokasta and Tita, unlike some of the other participants who had early conversations with their parents, conversations about the act of sex were not mentioned in the house until they began dating and their parents started having assumptions about sexual activity, which Yokasta

did not begin until college. Even then, the conversations surrounding sex did not go in-depth beyond the phrase, “don’t get pregnant”. Despite the fact that the first conversations about sex, sex occurred during her first year in college, Yokasta’s sexuality had been a topic of conversation early on in high school. For Yokasta, and her strict Catholic upbringing, the types of conversations she was hearing as she was growing up from family members, including her mom, were targeted towards the way she presented herself physically. For example, how she dressed and the length of her hair. The first-ever conversation was about her and her best friend at the time, who was female-presenting, whom she had unintentionally matched with on valentine’s day, and spent the day together. At this moment of her life, she was not out to her family, as she was fully aware of the language the Catholic church used when talking about non-heteronormative sex, that went along the lines of “being gay is wrong, all that stuff.” When she got home from spending the day with her friend, her mom blatantly asked her “Are you gay?” She further describes this as,

Yeah, like, that was the first time and I was just like, I don’t even know how to explain how I felt to my mom. Because I was still trying to figure out myself, but she was devastated. Like, I was just like, I’m bisexual at the time. I was like, I’m bisexual just to make her feel okay. Because at the time, I wasn’t into men at all whatsoever. So I was just like, let me just say I’m bisexual, because I think men are kind of cute sometimes. But I don’t want to be with a man. And yeah, she literally cried so much. And was like, You’re not my daughter and like, I don’t know who you are, and God is gonna punish you. And you don’t have to do this to me like it was so dramatic. I felt so guilty. And she basically didn’t talk to me for like two weeks or a little bit more after that. And then she put me in therapy. I had been begging her to put me in therapy for like, months before that. She was like, No, you don’t need it, it’s fine. And then I come out to her. She’s like, okay, let’s begin therapy. And I think it was to try and convert me or like so yeah, that was like my first time talking to my mom about sex. It was weird.

After describing the trauma of having to lie to her mom about what her own sexual desires were, claiming she was bisexual although she did not feel a deep attraction for men, Yokasta simply

said it was “weird.” Her mother’s outburst of tears and bringing God and religion into the argument shows the deep impact that the Catholic religion played, but more specifically the nature of the relationship her mother had with the Catholic church values and beliefs.

In her senior year of high school when Yokasta got a boyfriend, her mother would start to make comments and ask questions like, “Oh, are you guys doing this? Or I’m sure you’re doing this or don’t get pregnant... She’ll never outwardly say sex, but she’ll imply things.” Tita’s mother, similar to Yokasta’s, only had the talk with her after having a boyfriend. She said, “when I had my first boyfriend.. the conversation did come to up. Inevitably, my mom was just like, you’re gonna tell me when you have sex, right?” and when Tita got to Darby College she and her boyfriend broke up, the conversation turned into “make sure you’re respecting your body.” The comments Tita’s mom made before and after her having a boyfriend, from telling me when you are having sex under the conditions of a relationship to if you are going to have sex, do make sure you are respecting yourself, shows the extent to which she believes sex should be explored.

When it comes to friends, most of the participants, unsurprisingly, expressed that the majority of their knowledge about sex came from conversations with them, as well as both direct and indirect pressure to engage in sexual activity. As taboo and uncomfortable as the topic of sex is, it is usually more comfortable to engage and ask questions to people who are around your age who are also engaging in the same things; In the same way that Estrella and Sarita related to their Sex Ed instructors and felt more comfortable learning and engaging with course material. The participants that did not engage in conversations about sex with their friends in high school were either were not interested in that social activity or had friends who did not show interest.

Estrella, who had parents that did talk about sex but still made it an uncomfortable and uninviting conversation, expressed that in high school her friends were,

like, oh, like, I want to lose my virginity to like, someone so important that like, I love so much. And I feel like I didn't think that way. Like, I was like, it's just sex like I was so like, I don't know, didn't think it was a big deal. And then I feel like, now, I still think that it's like, not a big deal. And people should have sex with whoever they want. But it is like, a bigger deal in like, you need to like, I don't know, there's just so much that can go wrong when people have sex.. I feel like it's gotten more complicated as I've gotten older.

Estrella's lack of wanting to fulfill the fantasy of losing her virginity to someone special may be influenced by how it is spoken about at home, by her mother. Because it was instead a topic of embarrassment for Estrella at home rather than something valued in a fantasy sense, it can be inferred that she brushed off the idea of sex being a special thing because of the way it was socialized in her home, specifically the lack of conversation around it with her mom.

The Internet and Media

Considering that many of the women had similar experiences in their households when it came to their sexual education and their parents giving vague information about sex, they relied heavily on the internet as a way to answer any sex-related questions or curiosities, which included using Google and porn websites. Though this was not one of the most significant findings, it is still worth mentioning as it was a commonly mentioned source of information, one sometimes that people felt they were obligated to turn to for things they didn't know. When reflecting on her sexual experiences and the decisions she made, Rosa said "I went through pain and like really, like stupid, and didn't make like smart decisions and have those kinds of experiences because I didn't receive any sex ed and I guess I should have done a better job of like, Googling and asking around." Rosa's response shows the pressure of being well informed by oneself due to the failure of the institutions around her, which include both the familial and education systems.

Digging Deeper

As mentioned previously before, initially when I was planning out this study I was influenced by my own experiences and the structural forces that played into my overall sexual education, which consisted largely of religious institutions and the social groups I was interacting with. My own thoughts on contraceptives, whether or not I engaged in risky behavior, my ideas of pleasure, and autonomy over my own body, were all very different before coming to college, where I was allowed the space and opportunity to explore myself, my sexuality, and ideas of pleasure in an environment away from all of the people and places that influenced my perspective.

The transition from adolescence to young adulthood is nothing short of a hectic roller coaster, with puberty and transitions from middle school to high school and then college. In terms of sexuality, this is the time in which people begin being sexually active and start to explore their bodies more, especially for women as they begin their period, usually the sign that determines when their bodies are biologically ready to bear children. In the previous section, I outlined three main sources of information made up of the OSE of participants, which included their school sexual education, their family and friends, and the internet/media. Their OSE is the base as to how the women engaged in risky behavior when it came to contraceptive use and engaging in secretive sexual activities, their mean-making of pleasure or lack thereof, and their idea of Sexual Autonomy.

Unlike the other research that has been conducted on Latina youth, the fact that they were Latina did not seem to play a larger role in this study when it came to the influences on their ideas of self-perception of sexuality. This was partially due to the way in which questions were

asked and structured but participants did not themselves self-identify the ways in which their ethnic identity played a role in the way they experienced life, specifically in engaging in sexual activities.

Contraceptives

Research shows that contraceptives, such as hormonal birth control and condoms, are popular amongst the Latinx population despite a large percentage identifying as Catholic.⁴³ This statistic proved to be true as the majority of the women were on some sort of birth control before coming to college, had the resources/support from their parents to do so, or had learned about them within their OSE. There were three major categories that participants fell into, those that have never used hormonal birth control (four out of eleven), those that started hormonal birth control in high school (five out of eleven), and those that began when they got to college for reasons of accessibility (two out of eleven). Additionally, almost all of the women that had or were using birth control, showed similar stats in condom use. Access to birth control depended on various factors, but the ones highlighted in this section include lack of access to healthcare insurance, healthcare professionals both in and out of school environments, and familial structures, including their mothers' opinions on and willingness to talk about birth control.

The high number of contraceptive usage usually stemmed from a fear of pregnancy as almost every mother told their daughter to be safe and not get pregnant. Regardless of the fact that mothers were vocal about not getting pregnant, they never gave a clear explanation or elaboration as to how to go about this besides using condoms. And they never took the initiative

⁴³ Dana Rodriguez and Richard J. Fehring, "Family Planning, Natural Family Planning, and Abortion Use among U.S. Hispanic Women: Analysis of Data from Cycle 7 of the National Survey of Family Growth," *The Linacre Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (May 2012): 192–207, <https://doi.org/10.1179/002436312803571429>. Data from this study showed that 69.1% of sexually active Latinas were using some sort of birth control while 32.8% were using a form of hormonal birth control. Findings also showed that the percentage of women that preferred not to use hormonal birth control were due to fear of effects, rather than for religious reasons as 57% of the Hispanic women identified as Catholic.

to provide such contraceptives to their daughters. Despite this, many of the women internalized the “don’t get pregnant” talk and took it upon themselves to get on birth control or at least become educated about birth control, aside from condoms. The lack of familial support in getting birth control sent many to look elsewhere, such as the school nurse and their private healthcare provider. According to their interviews, they saw birth control as the ultimate safety net to not disobey their parents because of hormonal birth controls’ higher rates of efficiency to stop pregnancies than condoms themselves. Their association with condoms and pregnancy prevention, despite condoms main purpose being protecting against sexually transmitted diseases, was particularly striking though I do not go further in-depth about this.

Within the large group of the participants that identified as using birth control, they revealed they began to use birth control because they interacted with other people who were on birth control and felt as though it was a normal thing women used when they began having sex. These types of interactions were usually with friends, or in the case of Isabel with family. When Isabel was fifteen, her older sister began being sexually active and in order to prevent pregnancy, her mother provided birth control pills. Isabel described her sister flaunting the pills and telling her about all the places she was having sex leading her to become curious about birth control. She did not want to go to her mom about this so after hearing from a friend that the nurse’s office on the fourth floor of her school building provided free contraceptives she paid them a visit. She described this experience by saying,

I remember my first time thinking about my first time getting on a pill was in high school. And I remember going to- it was a nursery⁴⁴ in the fourth floor and I used to go there and I like spoke with her. She was showing me all the like, it wasn't even the school told me, it was me because I knew my sister had gotten it, had gotten pills and stuff like that. And I was like, oh, I want to get some, and that I heard from a friend that she got

⁴⁴ Isabel referred to the nurse’s office as the nursery throughout the interview but later corrected herself as she had forgotten what the proper term was. Isabel is not an native English speaker.

like her contraceptives in...the nurse office. So I was like, oh, I want to do that, too. So she was like, Oh, just schedule an appointment with the nurse. And I scheduled an appointment with the nurse and I went to the fourth floor.

She took it upon herself to find a place, with the suggestion of a friend, that was accessible to her, in this case on the fourth floor of where her school was located. This could have been for various reasons and says more about Isabel's character than her relationship with her mom and the ability to talk to her about sex-related things. Nevertheless, this repeated interaction with people who were on birth control influenced the level of normalization she felt towards taking birth control that then pushed her to ask a healthcare provider about getting on birth control.

For a majority of the women, like Isabel, the healthcare providers they were going to visit were nurses in their schools, people they may have seen or heard from on a regular basis that they felt comfortable going to ask about birth control. The fact that they were not closely related to the women, such as a mother, allowed for relief of pressure. Nurses are also points of safety and privacy in schools and proved to be some of the easiest points of access to contraceptives. Additionally, parent's do not accompany their children to school, therefore, taking away a bit of the stress of either not wanting your parents to find out you are interested or raising the question of whether or not you are sexually active. But this access to birth control in schools was only the case for people who had some sort of open health clinic at their school or in close proximity.

Milagros, similar to Isabel, went to the health professionals at her school to get birth control but her reasoning went beyond accessibility and proximity. After asking where she went to get the birth control Milagros said "I used the clinic from the school because that's my, my, my doctor was a little a little crazy. Yeah broh she would shame me and shit." Milagros describes her primary care doctor as projecting shaming attitudes toward sex and I highlight this difference because though it was the only one that occurred amongst the women that were active birth

control users, there have been studies on the interactions between Latina youth and their healthcare providers in which the risk of teenage pregnancy is their framework for treating their patients. Her experience, specifically the response from her main doctor, is similar to the response of health care providers in Mann's study (2013). Instead of considering cultural and familial structures that impact sexual health, healthcare professionals use the framework of pregnancy risk when treating young Latina women.

In another interview with Sol, she also described getting on birth control because she regularly saw someone close to her taking the pill. Throughout her interview, she expressed adamancy about using condoms before engaging in sexual activity so when asked about where her knowledge about birth control came from, she said,

Yeah, no, it was one of my closest friends has been very like, here that I met here who's like my best friend here. She has been sexually active for like, a very long time. And so she has a lot of knowledge about that stuff. And I always saw her like taking birth control. And I was just like, in my head, I was like, why did she do this, even though she's not having sex. And then I just kind of noticed that a lot of people did that, like a lot of people that I was like, surrounded by were taking birth control. And then I was like, if i'm sexually active, and like, these people are doing it to prevent it in case they have sex. Like, I feel like I should be doing it. Because I'm having sex.

Through the various interactions she had with her best friend, which she met here at Darby College, and other friends that were also participating in the act of taking birth control, Sol felt the pressure and made the decision to look into birth control. Her phrase "I feel like I should be doing it" shows the heavy reflection she went through. Sol's and Isabel's experiences are reflections of the way in which many of the participants began taking birth control, through these interactions where the act of taking birth control was normal for the sake of avoiding pregnancy.

Accessibility to birth control was not always guaranteed though, and for participants like Rosa and Sol they were only able to get birth control through Health Services at Darby

College, one due to lack of healthcare and the other because their parents never talked to them about it and were too afraid to ask. Darby College has a moderate population of international students and students from diverse backgrounds, therefore when I began this research I had assumptions that immigration status would somehow affect participants' access to healthcare but the reality of that being true did not hit me until Rosa expressed that growing up she didn't have any medical insurance and had to "take what you can get." When asked about whether or not she had a health care center in mind she could turn to for the sake of sexual health and any emergencies that may have arisen, she said

No, there was like, I think immigration plays into this too, because I didn't have any, like medical insurance. And so I think that we had, because I didn't have like a primary like doctor. There was like, this hospital like near my house, and it was like where all the Latin people went. So I knew that like, if things were like, really bad, I can go there. I just didn't know how to go about it without my mom and dad finding out or getting the money for the procedure and like the signature.

Though she did not elaborate on the specifics of her immigration status, nor did I think it was appropriate to ask, her response shows us the extent to which immigration status may affect proper healthcare. Along with the barriers to healthcare, Rosa expressed she wouldn't know how to go about getting any kind of "procedure" without her mom and dad finding out but that she would go there if things got really bad, a risk she would be willing to take. Though I did not ask specific questions about the status of her healthcare currently, Darby College as an institution requires that all students have health insurance when enrolled at the college, and from personal experience, the nurse practitioners do everything they can to provide affordable services and products. Though not described in more detail, almost all participants revealed that they had at one point used birth control or another form of contraceptive. This shows us that regardless of

their OSE as highlighted in the previous section, they were informed about what birth control was.

Pleasure

Antoinette's Tale

The thing is

*Ni**as cannot handle if a woman takes the same liberties as them*

Especially with regards to sex

Like our society teaches them to be so wrapped up in themselves

And their own conquests

That they forget we are sexual beings as well

Plus, their egos are often way too fragile

To ever handle a woman who owns and has any real agency over her body

And we're to blame as well, because

We're out here telling them, that the pussy is theirs

*When in actuality, it's ours*⁴⁵

Before I interviewed participants, I was convinced that the social environment of Darby College would play a more significant role in the way the women interviewed would talk about pleasure because of the safe sex-positive approach the school takes. By saying ‘talk about pleasure because of the safe sex-positive approach’ I mean more or less that the conversations happening around sex would push for them to have a more sex-positive framework or approach to sexual experiences. Aside from the monthly emails about STD/STI Clinics that the Health Center sends, there are various clubs established on campus, such as Peer Health and Wellness that host monthly events and talk about sex positivity, safety, and pleasure.⁴⁶ There is even a section of Peer Health dedicated to providing free condoms, for both penises and vaginas, and

⁴⁵ Jazmine Sullivan, “Antoinette’s Tale,” recorded 2021, track 2 on Heaux Tales, RCA Records, Spotify
In the conclusion of the interview with Milagros she said, this song is my anthem, include it.

⁴⁶ In her interview, Tita described ‘Sex at Darby’ being one of the first events she attended in the first year writing program that happens the month before the fall semester begins.

lube directly to your mailbox and in the dorms as well.⁴⁷ To my surprise, it was less the social environment and clubs that influenced their definition of pleasure but rather their sexual experiences or lack thereof.

Sexual pleasure for women is in and of itself a stigmatized topic. If we think about sexual pleasure as a form of empowerment and necessity for women's liberation, a woman can find self-fulfillment through the act of having sexual autonomy and seeking out pleasure in romantic and sexual relationships. But a sexually liberated woman can often be seen as promiscuous and not held to the standards which other women are, which in turn can be equated to not having respect for oneself. For many of my participants, they had been socialized to associate pleasure with their male sexual partner as it was in moments of having sexual experiences with them that their own pleasure was mentioned. One example is if the man was able to finish during sex and received sexual pleasure then that was enough for the two of them and the interaction happening would conclude, leading them to believe that the act of sex was bounded by whether or not the male finished.⁴⁸ There was a significant lack of conversation around pleasure from the institutions that were educating the women I interviewed, and for a majority of them the discovery of self-pleasure, and also finishing during sex, was not discoverable until they made that transition into the college atmosphere where they were able to explore their sexual sides with different people and meet individuals who had been sexually active for longer and in different ways where they could talk, reflect, and share experiences with each other. There was a shared experience amongst many of the women where their experiences with their first sexual

⁴⁷ Tita revealed in her interview that she is currently the head of this described section where she "promotes safe sex and raises awareness about it, and destigmatizing" the subject matter.

⁴⁸ This instance where the male finishing, or finishing first, mean sex is done, contribute to the larger social problem of the Orgasm Gap.

partners and the way they internalized the conversations about sex leading to the risk of pregnancy, caused a lack of sexual pleasure agency.

Overall there were three patterns that appeared when it came to pleasure and the ways in which participants gave meaning to pleasure, according to their experiences. The first consists of the ways in which they used pleasure as a way to justify their risky behavior and decision to engage in sexual behavior, the second was the way they described pleasure in relation to the pleasurable experiences of the people they were engaging in sexual activities with, and the final way was their mean-making of self-pleasure within the engagement with other people and themselves. Within these conversations of pleasure themes of how they defined and gave meaning to relationships with other people, love, romance, and traditional gender roles were highlighted. Collectively, the three ways in which pleasure was explored by participants lead partially back to their OSE and partially to their own personal experiences with sex, demonstrating the complexity of defining pleasure.

Pleasure and Risky Behavior

Though not all of the participants engaged in sexual activity while in high school, the ones that did had to go about it in a secretive way to hide it from their parents and other individuals that they feared would expose them. Rebecca's and Rosa's experiences highlight this finding while they both used the reason that "it felt good" to keep engaging in sexual activities regardless of the guilt they expressed feeling. In the previous section where risky behavior in relation to contraceptive use was explored, I highlighted Rosa's experience where her immigration status affected her ability to see a doctor and get on birth control but this did not seem to faze Rosa as she still continued to engage in actions that can be considered risky

behavior, mainly having consistent unprotected sex with her partner at the time and skipping school to have sex and obtain emergency contraceptives when needed.

Not only was Rosa risking the chances of getting pregnant at the time, by only putting her trust in the pull-out method, but she also faced the risk of getting caught by her mom who she said “still thinks i’m a virgin.” When asked whether she used condoms or other types of birth control when she had sex for the first time Rosa said,

So he was experienced and I was not at all, I believe. We didn’t use a condom. And I mean, I knew that like, you had to use a condom. And then- but he explained that he would pull out and even though he had to finish for like sex to be done, which is obviously like, not the case, but I think like, that’s the way he was thinking of it. So like, very much like lying down on my floor. And it was really, like, okay, like I’m doing this, like I remember the thought so vividly. It’s like, this feels so weird, but like, it kind of feels good... And this was all occurring when my mom went to Bible study.. The instances where I did have sex, it was very much like, my mom wasn’t home or when I stayed home from school.

Rosa’s clear statement of not using condoms even though she felt as though it was a must because her “experienced” partner said he would pull out, reveals to us the amount of trust she put in her partner and the extent to which she would go to keep engaging in what she considers a pleasurable act. This excerpt also shows us a bit about how she made meaning of pleasure and what sex was at that time, according to her partner who said he had to finish for sex to be done. It is evident Rosa does not think that way anymore but the fact that she went along with his claims of pulling out instead of using condoms, considering the risk of pregnancy and STDs, does reveal the influence that she allowed someone who she considered as more knowledgeable due to experience.

Later on when asked about whether or not she had ever had a moment of dilemma when she thought back to the “Christian values” her mother had taught and projected on her that stopped her from doing anything she said “no, I think that like, there are a lot of moments where

I felt guilty during because those were the thoughts that were running wild in my head while I was like, losing my virginity... And in my rebellion I was like, okay, you know what, shut down those thoughts and enjoy yourself.” Regardless of the guilty consciousness that Rosa felt in regards to having sex and doing other sexual-related things that went against her OSE, she somehow managed to convince herself that the pleasure and “enjoy yourself” part would be worth it. Similarly, Rebecca described this experience when asked about feeling regretful and guilty,

Yeah, I think at the start of like, doing blowjobs or like getting eaten out. And such, I did feel like a certain level of guilt. But then I was like, I enjoy it too much like, whatever. And I didn't really have a boyfriend in high school, I was just kind of doing different things with different guys. And it was to me, I was like okay. I think also keeping it very secretive, helped me because then I knew people at school like weren't talking about me. And then if they're moms or parents, who knew my parents, there was no chance it would like get back to my mother in some weird way.

She claims to have not committed to just one person at her school either but multiple people at once, “different things with different guys,” revealing that there may have been a lack of pressure to remain monogamous, regardless of people knowing she was being involved with anyone in the first place. Rebecca's statement of feeling guilty and keeping things secretive to protect herself from being put in an uncomfortable situation with her parents did not stop her from engaging in risky behavior with boys at her school for reasons of pleasure.

Pleasure and Meaning-Making with Partner

The next theme proceeding pleasure in regards to risky behavior is pleasure and mean-making of it in regards to experiences with partners. In the previous theme highlighting pleasure and risky behavior, it was evident that Rosa's engagement in sexual activities and ideas of pleasure were partly influenced by the ways in which her partner talked about his own

pleasure, setting a definition of what sex was for her without her having the prior experience to make meaning of what sex what meant for her. The participants mentioned in this section all expressed ideas of pleasure in relation to their partner as well, oftentimes but not always instituting traditional gender roles.

Although there were moments of reflection throughout the interviews where the participants that did create meaning and definition of sex in response to first time experiences with their partners, began to break away from this meaning of pleasure, it cannot be negated that their initial experiences and perspective were largely influenced these interactions. This will be discussed later on and affect their definition and actions towards sexual autonomy and ‘liberation’.

One such experience that highlights and pushes forth the traditional gender roles in relation to pleasure was Margarita’s when asked about her thoughts on sex toys. Though she does explicitly relate the experience to a specific male counterpart and interaction, she nonetheless utilizes the traditional gender stereotypes of men by mentioning men’s sexual power, and lack thereof. She said

They’re cool. I definitely- they’re cool thing to have. But I feel like it gives a wrong impression as to like, physical contact with like, another person and then like a male relationship, like when penis and vagina contact like, you have vibrators? And shit like that I’m like, I don’t even think like a man would ever use that. In its I mean sex... Like I feel like that’s demasculating for them because they’re like we want to do all the work.

Margarita, unlike the other participants interviewed, expressed she wants to wait for the right time to have penetrative sex with the special someone for the sake of respecting herself and her body.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, she has indulged in other sexual acts that included giving and receiving pleasure through oral sex. In saying using a vibrator to enhance your pleasure during sexual

⁴⁹ There was only one other participant who identified as still not having had sex but her reasonings, mainly due to not wanting kids and interrupting her academic career, differed from the fantasy moment Margarita wants one day.

intercourse with a man may be “demasculating” for them because they would probably want to “do all of the work” themselves, she is highlighting traditional gender roles of power and sex. Additionally, her giving thought to how using a vibrator would make a man feel during sex, shows the emphasis on male pleasure. In these sexual topics of conversations where men like to feel in control.

Pleasure and Meaning-Making of Self Pleasure

In this final portion of pleasure, the themes of discussion will include discovering self-pleasure, which in some cases is connected to using things like vibrators and other sex toys, as well as self-healing from sexual trauma to be able to experience pleasure with themselves and with others. The majority of the participants did not learn about pleasure in their OSE and therefore were left with only experiences and knowledge of others to make meaning of their own pleasure. Sex toys were very popular amongst many of the participants when it came to discovering what pleasure meant to them, as they were able to explore themselves in ways they were not able to do before. This also included touching themselves and getting to know their own bodies outside of sexual interactions with other individuals. Most of the participants expressed receiving their first sex toy/vibrator when coming to college from friends and or one of the various raffles that Darby College clubs threw.

Aside from the unique cases of Tita and Isabel, where their mothers either talked about sex toys or gifted them their first vibrator, it took the other women leaving home and coming to college to discover and engage with things like sex toys and other objects of pleasure. When Tita came to college, her mom gifted her with her very first sex toy which she attributed to the school atmosphere that allowed her to become more open about it with her. She said “our relationship has grown since at least I’ve been here at Bard” and for Isabel and her mother, sex has long been

a topic of conversation since she has an older sister, as previously mentioned in the section on contraceptive use, that would outwardly talk about her sexual experiences. Although it was not until she came to Darby that she won a vibrator in a raffle and was able to have “access” to one considering how expensive they are, she said,

I started having access to it. And that helped me explore myself too. Because it was like, after you have a sex toy, then you can explore yourself, rather than like, you know, because it's, I don't know why. It's very weird to touch yourself. Then having a toy touch you. That is very, very weird. That's some weird shit, you know? Because I remember like, you know, like it- the toy knows what to do. My finger does not know what to do. I have to teach myself what to do. Like I no one ever told me what my fingers supposed to do. You know, but like the toy already knows the movements that everything that you're supposed to have

In the excerpt above Isabel describes how the sex toy allowed her to explore parts of herself that otherwise, she would have not. Her comment about feeling weird when it came to touching herself turns our attention to the relationship between intimacy and self-pleasure, sexual expectations, and women. There is expectation and power set to the sex toy as its main job is to bring pleasure to the individual that is using it, Isabel says “the toy knows what to do. My finger does not know what to do.” This could explain why Isabel felt comfortable using the toy, not because the act of pleasure was uncomfortable but rather the act of exploring her body in an intimate and sexual way, a conversation that did not happen between a majority of the women within their OSE.

Unfortunately, this discomfort with touching herself did not only come from a lack of conversation and encouragement from their OSE but for Sarita and Yokasta events of sexual trauma led them to put walls up and not explore any version of sexual experiences, including Yokasta feeling uncomfortable with the conversation altogether. Their decision to practice sexual agency, and pleasure, only came after they were able to confront their sexual trauma, but in

doing so it resulted in them thinking about the different levels of their identity in relation to sexuality. Their stories capture the larger narrative of the ways in which sexuality is impacted by experiences and the transition from home to college life, where they are away from the social environment that nurtured and shaped their understanding of sexual autonomy.

Autonomy of Self

The things we experience as adolescents often stay with us as we transition into adulthood, this includes our values, culture, and trauma. For example, any person making the transition from high school to college often quite the adjustment as they are on their own for the first time experiencing some version of independence. This comes as they are without the supervision and influence of their usual social environments, often put into an atmosphere with people from completely different backgrounds and experiences.⁵⁰ For many of the women, there appeared to be a shift in their definition of sexual autonomy as they became more engrained in the Darby College culture, began having conversations with their friends, and engaged in new sexual experiences. When it came to sexuality, many choose to engage in the sex culture of their respective institutions because they felt the pressure of the ‘hookup culture,’ essentially that everyone at Darby was having sex which many college students assume to be true but studies such as Wade⁵¹ (2017) shows us differently. In this final portion, I will elaborate further on Sarita and Yokasta’s stories about sexual autonomy and sexual violence (*trigger warning*), Yokasta, Milagros, and Sol’s experiences with exploring their Queer identities, and finally with a discussion on how the women who participated in this study are actively participating in taking ownership over their own sexual autonomy, breaking barriers of their OSE.

⁵⁰ This phenomenon can also be described as Culture Shock, which describes the feeling of disorientation experienced due to a change in environment, culture, and way of life.

⁵¹ Lisa Wade, *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2017).

As we talked about sex education and what introduced her to sex, Sarita recounted awkward conversations with her mom about having sex and staying safe. I followed up by asking if these conversations with her mom had stuck with her as she became older and influenced her decision to engage, or not, in the act of sex, to which she responded “I will say that it was a lot of factors, I had a very interesting journey when it comes to my sexuality... But I was molested when I was a kid. That is- That’s when I- That was the first like, moment that I came to even have an idea what that was of like the sexual world and my own sexuality.” Sarita describes these moments as the ones that led to her sexual consciousness. She went on to say,

And all this happened when I was very little from the as little as like the ages four all the way to the age of twelve. And to that later, you add the Christian layer, and you add the family, right, and they’re like, like the Latino family. So there was more of like, it took a lot of like self healing, and took a lot of therapy. That’s what helped me be able to come up with that decision of whether I wanted to be sexually active or not.

Sarita reflected on the complexity that the different layers of her identity added to healing her sexuality. It was not just about overcoming the pain but overcoming it as a Christian Latina, where morals and values about sex are nurtured, we see this in the sex conversation Sarita’s mother had with her due to her own experiences with sex and getting pregnant out of wedlock. Sarita’s anecdote also highlights the ways in which intersectionality plays a role in how experiences such as these, sexual violence and healing, are connected with identity.⁵² There are so many layers that contribute to her being and how it influences the lens through which she sees herself and her sexuality. Through therapy and healing and “having someone who really listened and understood,” Sarita made the decision to be sexually active with her current partner but before this, in her two previous relationships, had chosen to be celibate.

⁵² Intersectionality as discussed in the review of literature section has been a focus of Latina studies, as with other marginalized and non-White groups.

Part was- has to do again with religion and what like the idea of like, just it was not so much even the idea of like, “oh, yeah, it’s just a sin if you have sex before marriage”, it was more of like I wanted to wait for the right person and for that person that would protect me... And it’s actually like something that is not just going to happen, and then someone is going to away and like, just let you there. It was very appealing to me it was like, “Well, you know, like, yes, it’s true. I had this thing my past happened to me” But when I found in like, in that when I heard this new belief, I was like, hmm, this is nice... Now I not only get to like, find someone that genuinely cares for me. But also I also get to have agency into who I choose to like have sex with, which in the past is I was a kid and those things happened to me, I didn’t have agency... So I think the whole religious belief was like a coping mechanism to a certain extent to what happened to me. And that’s why to me was like, being celibate makes sense.

She alludes to the religious belief of renewal and new life as a way to acknowledge her past while still holding claim to her sexual agency. Sarita’s description of using religious beliefs as a “coping mechanism” reveals to us the ways in which she was able to use religion to her advantage in reclaiming autonomy and agency over her sexuality. Religion helped her make the initial step towards healing but it was “having the opportunity to step away from having this like, guard for like- for like my parents” that pushed for therapy and reclaiming of sexual autonomy. As amazing as it was that Sarita was able to find comfort in religion and heal both mentally and emotionally from her sexual traumas, religion did not play such a supporting role for Yokasta and her Queer sexual autonomy, nor did the change in environment from high school to college.

After discussing the nature of the relationship between her and her best friend growing up, who also came from a religious background, Yokasta expressed the lack of support for her queer identity from both her home and school systems that normalized heteronormative relationships. After briefly mentioning the sexual abuse she faced as a child, I asked her if the sexual violence she faced closed her off to any ideas of sex, she said,

Yeah, for me, um, I was experiencing that from like ages, like five to twelve. So that was a big part of my childhood... But it definitely made me have a really huge fear towards men... like doing sex is just like, it makes everything so real.

Yokasta's layers of identity include being a queer Catholic Latina, whose sexual identity was not respected in whatever setting she presented herself in. From the first section, we know that her OSE included her disapproving mother who sent her to therapy after she came out and the Catholic church practices, as she often went with her grandmother. In high school Yokasta described being the only Queer person in her friend group and where her "sexuality was actually really not respected." It was not until she got a boyfriend that her mom and others around her began including her in the conversation, as her queerness was not put in question for dating a guy. When I asked her if she was currently in a relationship she expressed she was currently celibate as the people at Darby College were "just no, It's just no, it's just so bad. Because it's like, I feel like the men here, take or just, they it's hard to feel like they see you as a person." Although Yokasta identified as a Queer woman she had only recounted relationships or situationships⁵³ with guys so when I asked why she had not explored non-heteronormative relationships at Darby, considering the large population of non-heteronormative and gender-conforming students that attend, she said,

I feel like I'm really scared to develop something, or try hooking up with someone or with a woman or just a non man... And I know that my attraction towards women is much stronger than my attraction to men. And I think my fear is, is if I have sex with a woman, like I'm scared of not liking it. I'm scared of not fully, like performing well. I'm afraid of accepting the reality that I might not actually really like men... I feel like a lot of the things I want men to do are things like women just exude naturally. And so I would- just because also my ex-boyfriend, he was just like, sometimes he felt like, I wanted him to be a woman... If I experienced that, I am afraid of my entire reality changing because I come from a family that I know is really religious. I come from a country that does not accept, you know, queerness... I'm afraid of like, that being like, if I'm a lesbian, let's say, what does that mean for my future? Will my family accept me?... I know it's going to mean more difficulty... so if it's easier to deal with men or be okay with, you know where I'm at right now. But I do feel like I'm definitely suppressing being with women.

⁵³ Situationships are not established romantic or sexual relationships between people, there are no labels involved.

There is a lot to unpack here, themes of sexual and identity suppression, and autonomy to choose who to date. Yokasta's expression of fear and not taking ownership over her sexual desires due to concerns about her future and not being accepted by her family, though she feels a bigger attraction to women, reveals the power that these external factors hold over her sexuality.

Yokasta internalized the way in which her mother talked about queerness, the teachings of the Catholic church about sex, and the culture of her home country. This fear of not exploring one's own queer sexuality is nothing new and was explored further by feminist Dorothy Allison, she said "Women talked about years of celibacy, self-hatred, rejection, and abandonment by lovers, helplessness after rape or incest, social censure and street violence, family ostracism, and -overridingly- the fear of what our desires might mean."⁵⁴ Though I would not go as far as to say that Yokasta's decisions to engage only with men come from feelings of self-hatred and rejection, the fear of family ostracism and what her desires might mean, largely capture the essence of Yokasta's sexual autonomy. Allison's description of what the women in the Lesbian Sex Mafia⁵⁵ expressed is a testament that Yokasta's fears are not solitary but rather a shared collective among many other non-hetero-conforming women. The change in environment and the social scene changed drastically for Yokasta as she stepped foot into the sex-positive college atmosphere of Darby. She was able to join and become one of the co-heads for the Queer People of Color club but when explaining her positionality within the club she said,

I'm the club head for QPOC and now like listening to myself, I'm like, I'm very removed from it, because I'm very like, events, events, events, but I don't attend meetings. And part of that is me being busy. Another part of that is, I feel like I joined the club in general, because I wanted to learn more. But I also think I am very afraid of learning more. And like, just exploring, because it's just the idea. It's just so scary. And it will change my life completely. And the idea of liking men is just so much easier. Even

⁵⁴ Dorothy Allison, *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class & Literature* (Firebrand Books, 1994). 108

⁵⁵ The Lesbian Sex Mafia was created with the intention of being a sex-consciousness group.

though it's been so painful and difficult for me. It's like easier than potentially not having anyone love me for loving women.

Yokasta expressed feeling removed from the club, despite the fact that she held an important leadership position, due to her lack of going to the weekly meetings where they would have more in-depth, serious conversations about identity and acceptance. Again, she mentions the fear she had with getting to know herself more and her sexual identity. The bigger statement that it will change her life completely reveals to us the importance and power that sexuality plays in the life of Yokasta, and the other participants. Unlike Sarita, who was able to take advantage of being away from home and the social environment influenced by the familial and cultural norms of her religious family in order to heal and explore her sexuality, Yokasta's lack of exploring was bounded by the religious values that she grew up with. Although religiosity did not play an impactful role big enough to be considered a social finding, as less than half of the participants that identified as religious ever mentioned religion playing a role in the way they thought about their sexuality, both Sarita and Yokasta did highlight it as layers to their identity in relation to sexuality.

Yokasta was not the only queer participant whose identity was troubled due to their parents' thoughts and opinions on non-heteronormative relationships. Sol, who is currently in a same-sex relationship, and Milagros both came out to their parents, with the risk of getting ostracized. For Sol, after having a traumatizing experience with sex at Darby, which is where she began having sex for the first time, she began seeing her current partner. Although they were not exclusive when they first began seeing each other in early April, by the time summer came and Sol was face-timing her on a daily basis, she made the decision to tell her parents. Sol imagined her mom would be more upset than her dad but it was actually the other way around, she said, "she was super supportive. And I don't think she fully processed it though. Like I thought she

was like, Oh it's just like a phase. And then now at this point, like she's my girlfriend... Like I taught- had to talk about it with them for a while and it's not that their homophobic. I think that it's just, they have a lot of internalized homophobia." Sol's response to her parents having internalized homophobia and thinking nothing of it reveals to us the deep level this is ingrained into what they consider normal but also that values and norms parents try to project onto their children do not always work.

Regardless of their past experiences and OSE, all of the women felt strongly about taking control of their sexual autonomy, the notion of self-governance over their body, and sexual decisions, when coming to Darby College. They either chose to engage, or not, in the sex culture, either chose, or not, to chase after their sexual desires, and either chose or not, to break away from what they grew up learning and hearing about sexuality. For Sarita, that meant healing from her sexual trauma and having the agency to choose when to engage in sexual activity. For Yokasta, that meant consciously choosing to conform to the familial norms and values for the sake of never feeling not loved. For Milagros, that meant choosing who and when to have sex with, not telling the world her sexual orientation. For Estrella, that meant coming to Darby and having fun exploring while maintaining boundaries with herself.

Conclusion

For many of the women that participated in this study, as I expected, did not engage in conversations about sex and sexuality as the topic was not something normalized in the household aside from conversations around avoiding pregnancies and taking care of oneself. Findings by Mann (2013, 2016) and Sanchez (2017) about familial roles and the at-risk framework were evident in the way that participants described their sexual education. The lack of sexual education within the household, and lack thereof in schools, lead these Latina women to depend on conversations with their friends, healthcare providers, and the internet to become more informed. When they made the transition to Darby College, where they were granted the liberty to explore and engage in a sex-positive culture, some were left with the battle of healing their sexual trauma, practice unlearning the meaning of sex and sexual autonomy they grew up experiencing, defining what sex means for them, with questions of autonomy and pleasure. Though two-thirds of my participants identified as religious in some type way, there was no significant evidence that proved their engagement with religion explained their behavior and choice to engage, or not, in sexual experiences. Although religion was used as a coping mechanism and excuse to not engage in sex, it was never the core reason as conversations around sex with their families, friends, and adults in their schools always intersected the conversation.

My own preconceived notions and the at-risk framework that shaped my experience were deemed to be the case for some women. These interviews show us that the risky behavior and teen pregnancy framework has affected and continues to affect many Latinas but there is hope that they can break away from this mindset and reclaim their path to sexual liberation and autonomy that is associated with identity. Through conversations with friends and peers, an open

mind, and a supporting safe-sex environment, the women in this study were able to slowly claim their power and change the meaning of sex, pleasure, and autonomy while at Darby College.

Afterword/Methodological Reflection

My hope with this study was to interview Latinas and find a shared experience when it came to learning about sex and defining one's own sexuality, in hopes of a collective reflection about how we can actively work towards changing the narrative and allow for the generations after us to claim sexual autonomy, making their own meaning of sexual citizenship. I often have my reservations concerning the demographics of individuals who complete research on minority and marginalized communities, as they are usually outsiders looking inwards and making claims that the individuals of those communities never get to hear, learn, and reflect on. As a Mexican-American with immigrant parents who grew up in a religious household, I questioned my positionality in this study in order to have the most objective perspective. I acknowledge the privilege I have, of studying and researching sexuality, at a liberal arts institution where I have been given the tools and knowledge to discuss such a topic, and I don't take it lightly. I am eternally grateful for all of my willing participants, they are the evidence.

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Appendix A: Participant Data

Name	Age	Religious	Immigration
Estrella	22	Yes	2nd Generation
Sarita	21	Yes	1st Generation
Tita	20	No	2nd Generation
Rebecca	21	Yes	3rd Generation
Yokasta	20	Yes	2nd Generation
Rosa	21	Yes	1.5 Generation
Sol	21	Yes	2nd Generation
Isabel	21	Yes	1st Generation
Milagros	22	No	1st Generation
Celia	19	Yes	1.5 Generation
Margarita	20	Yes	2nd Generation

Appendix B: Interview Questions

School Life

1. Where did you go to high school?
2. Did you receive sexual education in school? What did they teach you? What did you learn?
 - a. Can you describe it to me?
 - b. Before this moment, had someone talked to you about sex?
3. Has it influenced your decisions about sex?
4. How did your school talk about contraceptives such as birth control pills and condoms?
 - a. Were health care centers such as Planned Parenthood ever mentioned/accessible?
 - b. Did your school make an effort to make contraceptives accessible? If not, were they open about directing students to health care centers?
 - c. What about abortion?
5. What contraceptives did you learn about? What are your thoughts about them?
6. How did your school talk about STDs and HIV?
7. Did they talk about consent?
8. About being gay?
9. Did they talk about pleasure?
 - a. What about Sex toys? What are your thoughts on sex toys?
10. Did you ever think of what you learned in Sex Ed when in a sexual situation?

Peers

11. What did you learn from your friends?
12. Was it common among your friends to be having sex?
13. Did you feel pressure from them to have sex or not to have sex? Did friends or other kids in school ever judge you?
14. Were there any sexual stereotypes about you/your ethnic group?

Home/Church Life

15. What was your living situation when you were in high school? How has that changed?
16. Is your family religious? How often did you go to church? How important was religion to your parents/guardians?
 - a. In what ways was your family involved with the church?
 - b. What was your church's stance on sex? On premarital sex? Gay sex? Gender roles?
17. What kinds of messages have your parents/guardians given you about sex?
 - a. Birth control? Condoms?
 - b. Homosexuality?
 - c. How do your parents talk about virginity?

18. If other young people in the household: What did you hear about sex from them?

Personal Life

19. Have you ever had a boyfriend/girlfriend (partner)?

a. Have you ever been sexually active? Are you currently sexually active?

b. When do you think people should start having sex?

20. Have you ever had a dilemma about sex?

a. Have you ever done anything to prevent pregnancy? What about STDs, STIs, and HIV?

21. Can you describe a time when you second-guessed your choices to participate in sexual activities?

22. Is there anything you think I should have asked you but didn't?

Demographic Questions

23. What is your age?

24. Where do you live?

25. Are you in school? (What is your degree study in?)

26. Do you work? Where?

27. What did your parents do when you were growing up?

28. When did you/your family immigrate to the US?