

Incest revisited: A Mexican Catholic priest and his daughter

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Sexualities

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Abstract

This article offers a feminist sociological analysis of Otilia's incestuous relationship with her father—a Catholic priest. This case study is one in a series of Mexican women's narratives of incestuous relationships that reveal the sexual objectification of girls and women within the context of the family and its roots in a colonial history shaped by race, class, and gender inequalities. In this case study I also explore the complex origins of double standards of sexual morality within the Catholic Church: the Church desexualizes priests by insisting on celibacy, but perpetrators of incest, who are also priests, may benefit from the historical construction of the family that positions children as vulnerable, dehumanized, and objectified servants of the father.

Keywords

Catholic Church, incest, Mexican society, priests and their daughters, race and class and gender

It is very difficult to be the daughter of a single mother and a Catholic priest, and then, to be exposed to all that . . . stigma, discrimination and rejection in that small town where I was born and raised, that was difficult, beyond words . . . but I do not have the words to explain how excruciating this has been for me. While he was still a priest, all of us lived together at some point and though he had abused me in the past, he took me at that moment by force, and now that I think about it, it happened more than once. I do not know why the Catholic Church sent those priests to our small Indigenous towns. He did not come in the name of God; he only came to give us pain. (Otilia)

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This article is based on a narrative account shared with me by Otilia. She is a Mexican woman in her early 20s who participated in a research project in which I used in-depth interviews to examine the life histories of Mexican adult women and men who have experienced incestuous relationships.¹ As reported by Otilia, in the mid-1960s, her father was a young Catholic seminarian who had just arrived in her small town to work as a missionary and a teacher. He and other young, urban men who aspired to become priests were sent by their local churches and seminaries to work in poor areas in rural Mexico.² A tall man with European features, fair skin and blue eyes, Otilia's father arrived in the poor small town when he was 18 or 19 years old after renouncing an upper-class lifestyle of wealth and privilege in Mexico City. He was passionate about helping the Indigenous people living in the poor rural community where he hoped to work. Immediately upon his arrival he became acquainted with these Indigenous families and the community services provided by the Catholic priests, teachers, and seminarians.

When he arrived in the village, Otilia's maternal grandparents soon established a relationship with the young seminarian. "My mother was a little girl and my father already had a crush on her, that is what I have heard people say about their relationship," Otilia said as she explained that her parents' love story was well-known in her small town and that people had often talked about the early origins of their forbidden romance. The seminarian and young girl became close friends before she finished elementary school. As they grew older, feelings of mutual love and attraction between them developed. In spite of the forbidden nature of their romantic relationship and the many obstacles they faced, the couple eventually nurtured a long-distance relationship in which they exchanged long letters of friendship and romance and through frequent separations and reunions. In her late teens, they coincided again. The seminarian was well advanced in his theological training and excitedly making plans to be ordained as a priest. These plans did not deter their romantic relationship, and in the early 1980s she became unexpectedly pregnant. She was in her early 20s, and he was a recently ordained priest in his early 30s with a promising future in the Catholic Church. Their relatively stable but long-distance relationship became a social scandal, especially after their first child was born. The love affair was a "telenovela" of intense stigma, rejection, and discrimination for the children. They were raised by their single mother and the maternal grandmother and lived in extreme poverty and rarely received any financial support from the father-priest. He had a relatively stable financial life despite being relocated by the Catholic authorities to several different small towns.

These authorities, who were well aware of the situation, were mostly successful in putting distance between the couple, and between the father and his children. However, what the Church and inhabitants of the small town didn't know was that the periodic encounters between the priest and his romantic partner of many years involved not only clandestine sexual encounters between both adults, but also sexual contact between the priest and one of his daughters—Otilia. As I describe later in the article, Otilia's mother played an active role in facilitating some of these encounters.

This article offers a feminist sociological analysis of Otilia's incestuous relationship with her father—a Catholic priest. Incest refers to sexualized contact (involuntary and/or voluntary, and the gray area in-between) within the context of the family; this may take place between individuals sharing the same bloodline and/or within close emotional family relationships and involving vertical (i.e., relatives in authority positions and minors or younger women) or horizontal relationships (i.e., relatives close in age). Through Otilia's narratives of incest, I develop a three-part thesis: (1) Mexican women's narratives of incestuous relationships reveal the ways in which the sexual objectification of girls and women within the context of the family is well rooted in a colonial history shaped by race, class, and gender inequalities; (2) Mexican women's narratives of sexual violence and the double standards of sexual morality within the Catholic Church; and, (3) While the Church desexualizes priests by insisting on celibacy, perpetrators of incest may benefit from the historical construction of the family that positions children as vulnerable, dehumanized, and objectified servants of the father.

In the broader study that I conducted, Otilia is one among the 18 women who reported experiences of sexual violence at the hands of their fathers. Although none of the fathers of the other informants was a Catholic priest, two common patterns united Otilia's story and the lived experiences of these women. I use two concepts to identify these patterns: "conjugal daughters" and "marital servants." A *conjugal daughter* is a daughter who is expected to be sexually available to her father as part of a complex expression of sexualized violence, which may go from subtle and nuanced forms of affection to the use of extreme physical force and brutality. Conjugal daughters are a consequence of patriarchal moralities that assign specific sexual obligations to married women such that a conjugal daughter becomes her mother's sexual substitute, especially in contexts of marital conflict and discord. For instance, a daughter who becomes the parental child (that is, the child who takes care of her siblings when a mother is not available) may also become the sexualized daughter who is expected to take care of her father's unmet sexual urges. In other words, a conjugal daughter who becomes "like a mother" to her siblings may also become "like a wife" to her father.

A *marital servant* refers to a daughter who plays a sexual function or sexual service to both of her parents—her father and her mother. As a form of incest, a marital servant may serve specific sexual functions for her parents as a couple. In these dynamics, a father may seduce his daughter into coercive sex acts with the participation of a disempowered yet complicit wife/mother who experiences cultural and or economic pressure to see that her husband's sexual needs are satisfied.

Otilia's case study is relevant because: (1) it illustrates the ways in which women may become marital servants through incestuous arrangements produced within contexts of organized religion, family life, class, racial, and gender inequality; and, (2) it exposes the ways in which a mother may play an active role in the sexual abuse of a child by her father priest. Although Otilia's family characteristics (i.e., a Catholic priest and his mistress) is neither isolated nor new in Mexican society, the cases of incestuous relationships taking place between a priest and his daughter are

invisible in the literature on Mexican priests who engage in sexualized (mainly non-voluntary and abusive) contact with children.³

Although this article offers a separate analysis of racial, socioeconomic class, and gender, this is only a heuristic device. In social life, these dimensions are intertwined in intricate, sophisticated ways and my intention is not to simplify or split the complexity of these social processes, the dynamics of which are illustrated, for example, by Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) *mestiza* consciousness and borderlands theorizing, and Patricia Hill Collins's (2002) matrix of domination and intersecting oppressions. Both theorists have inspired my work and this way of organizing my analysis is only a reflection of "the kaleidoscope of inequality," a metaphor I use in the classroom when I teach about social inequality. That is, if we turn the kaleidoscope in some way, we might be able to see social inequality through the reflection of multiple shapes and patterns organized by race. If we keep turning the kaleidoscope, we will see inequality through the reflection of contrasting patterns organized by class. And if we turn it more, we will see how gender may similarly offer a distinctive pattern of colors and shapes.

Revisiting incest: Women's bodies, colonial sexual morality and the sex lives of priests

The social control of Mexican women's sexuality has hybrid historical roots established through a system that interconnects race, class, and gender inequality. Elite families ruling the colonial society placed a great importance on the inheritance of honor, which was secured by proving the "purity" of blood, which meant especially making sure that the ancestors were not Jews, Moors, Indigenous or Blacks (Dore, 2000). Family honor and respect (ultimately, a family's name and wealth) forced elite women not to associate with men from a lower socioeconomic class or status. In order to preserve the family name, estate, and other property, some elite families forced their daughters into arranged marriages.⁴ Women and their sexualized bodies (as the locus of reproduction) were controlled by their families under the official endorsement of the state as well as the Catholic Church, which enforced a patriarchal canon of sexual morality and spirituality based upon the Council of Trent (1545–1563). These social institutions promoted idealized expectations of virginity and marital chastity (Lavrin, 1989). As Ann Twinam states:

Questions of honor, female sexuality, and illegitimacy thus become inextricably linked. Women who engaged in premarital or extramarital sexual relations not only lost personal reputation and honor, but could beget additional family members whose illegitimacy excluded them from family honor. The double standard characteristic of colonial society meant that similar sexual activity did not as certainly threaten the personal honor of the elite male as that of the female. (Twinam, 1989: 124)

The institution of marriage legitimized heterosexual love, sex for procreation, and the patriarchal family as the idealized norm—all of which were essential for the

formation and stability of the gradually emerging mestizo society, and eventually, a Mexican national identity (Varley, 2000). Subordinate social classes and colonized Indigenous groups selectively adopted these beliefs and practices, which were further shaped by regional and local cultures.

Incest was prohibited in the more than 20 confession guides designed by the Church to monitor and impose moral obedience in colonial Mexico. Historian Carmen Castañeda examines 21 confession guides used by priests in the New Spain and identifies incest (or “sin” between blood-related) as one of the sexual prohibitions frequently identified in these religious texts. In contrast, “(rape) forcing a woman, or corrupting a woman by force” appears on the list less frequently (C Castañeda, 1989: 68–71). Sexual aggression against a woman (or rape) was of less concern than the loss of virginity and damage to the honor of her family. The loss of virginity represented both a criminal and civil offense to a woman, but especially to her family. Canon and civil laws demanded from rapists the payment of *la dote* and/or the obligation to marry her (C Castañeda, 1984, 1989: 143; Giraud, 1988: 334–335, 339). *La dote*—the dowry—in this case is used to refer to the form of payment meant to compensate for the damage perpetrated on the victim’s family. These laws punished rapists for the injury done to a woman; however, the penalty was a way to reinforce a code of sexual morality: sexual relations should always take place within the context of marriage (Penyak, 1993: 236). Rape of a woman by a close relative showed how ineffective these legal measures and social prescriptions were, especially when girls and adolescent women were the victims. In such cases, judges were more concerned about protecting the families involved in these trials, which relegated women of all ages to a marginalized position in the legal processes.

In the broader research project, interviews with attorneys revealed the colonial roots of the contemporary judicial system in Mexico. In 21st-century society, the vast majority of state laws identify “incest” under the category of the “delitos contra la familia”—literally, crimes against the family.⁵ As a nation that became independent in 1821, Mexico established its laws in accordance with Judeo Christian religious and cultural traditions and as such it had to legally punish a taboo—incest. Although the *Leyes de Reforma* (1857) promoted a complete restructuring of Mexico’s legal system and created the separation of Church and state, the legal system has been historically patriarchal. These laws (eventually represented by state penal codes) have traditionally and briefly identified incest as intercourse between blood related ‘*ascendientes*,’ ‘*descendientes*,’ or siblings. Legally, incest is assumed to be voluntary sexual activity between equals who are blood related. In general, in Mexico, the law punishes incest as sexual activity within the family but it overlooks issues of power, control, or abuse within families. Sexual violence within families is punished but as an aggravating factor of other crimes. For example, rape and child prostitution (among others) may receive a higher punishment if they go from “*ascendiente*” to “*descendiente*”. Thus, incest per se (with all its complexities) is lost in these legal classifications, it is punished only indirectly and remains invisible.

Laws about incest have not changed, but close to the end of the 20th century, left-wing and women's groups and other advocates had made important strides to promote laws aimed at protecting children and women from different forms of sexual violence while addressing issues of power and control. As recently as of 1980, in fact, a man who stole a cow received more severe legal punishment than a man who raped a woman. In some states in the country, these laws are still in effect to this day.

In colonial Mexico, priests who solicited sexual favors from women were subjected to Inquisition, along with those accused of witchcraft and pacts with the devil (Behar, 1987). Historian Jorge René González Marmolejo (2002) explains however, that by the middle of the 16th century, lack of official ecclesiastical regulations with regard to these issues resulted in less severe prosecution by Church authorities. Though these codes of ethics went through revisions and scrutiny throughout the colonial era, women had made almost 800 of these formal denunciations by the early 19th century (2002: 143).⁶ González Marmolejo illustrates the ways in which these accusations and the corresponding punishment reflected the double morality that characterized internal ecclesiastical power relations.⁷ While these priests' sexual behaviors were well known and became public through the media of poetry and songs, the double standards of morality within the Church (along with race- and class-related inequalities affecting women's lives), meant that countless cases were silenced or went unreported in colonial Mexico (see Baudot and Méndez, 1997). Interestingly, Catholic priests Miguel Hidalgo and José María Morelos (main protagonists of the Mexican War of Independence, 1810–1821), did not escape from these puzzles of sexual morality. Before leading the movement of insurrection, Hidalgo was accused before the Inquisition for asserting that fornication was not a sin (González Ruiz, 2002: 30–31), while Morelos challenged norms on celibacy and accepted that priests should be allowed to have children, eventually becoming the last victim of the Inquisition a few years prior to Mexico officially becoming a nation in 1821 (Fehrenbach, 1995: 341). The tensions and contradictions of sexual morality discussed here continue to be present in various forms to this day.

It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze the ways in which *all* periods of Mexican history—with its continuities and discontinuities—have shaped gender inequality, women's sexuality, Catholic sexual morality, incest and some forms of sexual violence exercised by priests. In this article, I focus on the colonial period for two specific reasons. First, I suggest that it is necessary to examine the foundational socio-historical roots, especially with regard to colonialism, in order to understand the cultural and structural dimensions facilitating daughter–father incestuous sexual violence, in particular for the rarely reported or examined cases of daughters of priests living in contemporary patriarchal Mexico. This perspective is parallel to the paradigm offered by Black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins who illustrates the ways in which an analysis of slavery and the sexual objectification of Black women's bodies, for example, could help us develop a more critical understanding of pornography in the 21st century. Patricia Hill Collins asserts, “African American women were not included in pornography as an

afterthought but instead form a key pillar on which contemporary pornography itself rests” (Collins, 2002: 196).

Second, although Otilia’s case is one among the countless cases of sexual abuse perpetrated by Catholic priests in Mexico, analyzing her case and the cases of other frequently silent, invisible women may require a paradigm shift. In the contemporary crisis faced by the Catholic Church with its obsolete institutional policies, the victims are frequently *men* who were abused as children or adolescents by priests, also *men*. In the case study of Otilia, the paradigm I suggest may unravel and expose the complex colonial roots of race, class, and gender inequality and the sexual vulnerability of Mexican women within patriarchal families and answer a classroom question I have consistently encountered for 10 years while teaching about sexuality, gender, and sexual violence in contemporary society: “*Professor, but where does all that come from?*” Thus, I hope an analysis of Otilia’s case from this perspective may contribute to an ongoing dialogue on these issues in Mexico and other nations deciphering issues on sexual violence affecting women and men of all social strata. From this perspective, I examine the story of Otilia through each of these complex, historically constructed processes.

The family

“My mother was so angry and she slapped me on the face. ‘Are you going to cooperate, or not? What is wrong with you?’ she said while I felt so confused and really struggled to understand what had just happened.” Otilia and her mother engaged in this intense argument in the bathroom of a hotel room. They had gone there to meet her father who had just returned to their pueblo. It was the mid-1990s and Otilia was a shy 13-year-old girl. That day she had just learned about the emotional distance and tension between her parents and their struggle to re-establish a relationship. Then in her mid-30s, Otilia’s mother told her daughter that she wanted her to say hello to her father at the hotel. However, when she saw them together and witnessed them fighting, Otilia said that she felt out of place. The feelings of subtle discomfort intensified into an experience of confusion as she realized what was about to happen. She recalled:

They were arguing and then they said that we were going to sleep and I remember I had these really bad cramps because back in those days, in earlier months, I was having my menstruation for the very first time. And if I recall well enough, he had just had prostate surgery and my mother had had an accident. So each one of them was recovering from something. And I recall that he told her to give him a massage, but now that I am older I know that what they were talking about was not a massage but masturbation, and all of this is happening while I am looking, while I am in front of them. Then they put the two beds together, my mother gets completely naked and my dad is still wearing his underwear. Then they put me right in the middle and my father gives me this hug but I feel like it’s not right so I reject him and that is when my mother gets upset, pulls me up, and takes me to the bathroom. I was not expecting

that slap on the face . . . She also yelled at me, “He is coming back to us, be affectionate with him!” I went back to that bed, and I am right in the middle while they are also having some kind of sex. That was not normal, it felt really uncomfortable, and I felt so confused. This situation of abuse happened that night . . . that was the first time that my father sexually abused me.

Otilia’s recollection of incest offers evidence in support of the Latin etymological root of the Spanish word *familia*. According to historian Ramón Gutiérrez (1993), “Roman grammarians believed that the word [*familia*] had entered Latin as a borrowing from the Oscan language of a neighboring tribe. In Oscan *famel* meant slave; the Latin word for slave was *famulus*” (1993: 672). Gutiérrez cites Ulpian (a second century AD Roman jurist) to explain what the term meant: “We call a family the several persons who by nature of law are placed under the authority of a single person” (1993: 672). And the Latin word *pater* identified the father, who through the concept of *paterfamilias* eventually became the legal head of the family. In modern Mexico, the word *famulla* is still used in a derogatory manner to identify a woman who works as a domestic worker, and *padre de familia* is part of common language to refer to a man (and at times a woman) raising children (Gutiérrez, 1993). Growing up in Mexico in the 1960s and 1970s, I witnessed the use of “*padre de familia*” for both (father and mother). A more gender sensitive use of language in contemporary Mexico, however, would become “*madre de familia*” when applied to women.

Otilia was a marital servant. She became a sexual commodity to her parents as they explored ways to cope with their long distance relationship, sexual frustrations, challenging health conditions, and unresolved conflict. Her body became an object in the midst of a sexualized encounter aimed at family reunification. The syndrome of invisibility and dehumanization that made Otilia a sex object also illustrates the colonial roots of contemporary perceptions of children and Indigenous people as inferior, ignorant, and invisible—less-than-human (See Giraud, 1988; Penyak, 1993).

Otilia also explained that even though she thought that her mother had not touched her sexually that day at the hotel, she always felt uncomfortable when her mother kissed her on the mouth. She noticed that this pattern took place when her mother did not have contact with her father, or with another romantic partner she saw during times of conflict and separation from him. When Otilia told her mother that her father had kissed her inappropriately (i.e., “French kissing”) when she was 18 years old, her mother told her that it was “normal” for a father to kiss a daughter in that way. Through these experiences Otilia learned that daughters can be used as sexualized extensions of their mothers. As she talked about the different sexual encounters she experienced with her father, she said, “Every time my father abused me, when he touched my body, he called me by my mother’s name, but he made it diminutive to establish some kind of difference between both of us.” As she shared all of this with me, she said, “I do not know if my mother was sexually abused, but I think that . . . based on the way she has told me, you know, parts of her own story, I suspect that she was sexually abused by her father, you know, by my grandfather.”⁸

Race

In the early 1980s, when Otilia's mother became pregnant with her first child, she was exposed to many forms of stigma and rejection within her family and her community. The priest was fearful and tried to hide his mistress's pregnancy from his supervisors within the Church. However, his immediate superior (whose ecclesiastical ranking Otilia did not recall) had become aware of what was happening and became his protector. Otilia told me the family story that she has heard more than once:

My father had this kind of temporary leave as a priest, and it was not a punishment but basically a recess for him to think about it [the pregnancy of his girlfriend]. But he was kind of pressured by his supervisor to leave my mother. His supervisor told him that she was not worth it, that she was an Indigenous woman, and that he had to become aware of the many social differences between them. His supervisor told him that the relationship with my mother and the pregnancy had been a "simple mistake."

The "simple mistake" that Otilia referred to is related to the Mexican saying "la carne es débil" ("the flesh is weak"), frequently used to identify mistakes of uncontrolled desire. She also explained that more than one priest suggested to her father that he simply give her mother some kind of financial compensation and then "erase her completely from your life." But the priest did not find it acceptable to pay what could be the equivalent of the colonial "dote." Her parents corresponded only sporadically, but they remained connected. He visited the small town once or twice to see the newborn child and found that he was resented for not offering any financial support. The young mother-out-of-wedlock and her first child were living in the maternal grandmother's house in poverty and barely surviving. In the meantime, the father-priest's supervisors and other priests eventually intervened to put some distance between the couple by relocating him, more than once, to different churches located in various regions of Mexico.

In a desperate attempt to get financial support from him, Otilia's mother traveled from town to town, from chapel to chapel, and from church to church looking for him without success. When she finally found him, he openly rejected her, and they ceased all communication. Eventually, however, he came back to the small town and Otilia was conceived after the couple were reconciled three years later.

"When I was born, I was black. When I was a newborn, I had very dark skin and a lot of hair," Otilia reported while explaining that she did not look like her father. Her skin color had become the main focus of stigma and suspicion in her small community where her mother's neighbors inquired and gossiped about who the father was. As she became older, Otilia's skin color became lighter but her facial features reflected more and more her mother's Indigenous background. When I asked her how she identified herself in terms of ethnicity, she said that even though she was technically a "mestiza," she identified herself as an

“Indigenous woman” who embraced the cultural cosmic vision of Indigenous groups, or what Otilia identified as “la cosmovisión indígena.” In other words, she identified with the beliefs and practices of the small pueblo where she was born and raised.

As Otilia talked about her family, she said that as she grew up, she noticed that her older sister had her father’s European skin color and features. Although not all of the children fathered by the priest had inherited the same European phenotype, Otilia recalled a conversation her mother had with her sister at least once: “You should be grateful that I found you a father with white skin and blue eyes.” Then, Otilia elaborated, “You know? It is like my mother was practically saying, ‘I know that as a woman I am a moral failure, but at least all of this happened with someone who belongs to the elite.’”

Otilia’s sister eventually learned about the sexual violence that she had experienced. When Otilia asked her sister if she had been exposed to similar situations with their father, her sister responded that he had attempted it only once and she had defended herself aggressively. The father did not try to touch her again. Otilia was happy to know that her sister had not gone through the same ordeal. Her sister eventually became a ferocious advocate who defended Otilia from her father and eventually helped her to find professional help. Otilia said she was not jealous of her lighter-skinned sister, but she wished she had her sister’s assertiveness.

When I inquired if she had ever wondered about the reasons for the sexualized encounters with her father, Otilia said:

Because of the many differences between my parents, I think that is why all of this happened to me. From the very beginning when they met, everything was very unusual, very strange. They were from very contrasting ages, body sizes, cultural origins, races, education, values . . . everything, you name it. Can you imagine? My mother is short, slender and dark; actually, she looks Asian. Well, you know, Indigenous peoples from the Americas and Asians have a deep connection. And well . . . my father is tall, he has blue eyes, he is white. In short, my mother learned to believe that Benito Juárez was the best and my dad was trained to think that Benito Juárez was the worst, so can you imagine?⁹

I asked Otilia’s about the ways in which she had developed her insights of these intersecting forms of inequality. This awareness became the foundation to make sense of her vulnerability to being sexually abused by her father. She explained that she grew up without knowing the actual terms, but that she had been aware of the racism and other forms of discrimination shaping her own life and her family’s story since she was little. She then explained:

Indigenous people also discriminate. With regard to my skin color, I was always slightly lighter than the other children, and at times they did not see me as Indigenous and they kept calling me “la hija del sacerdote [the daughter of the priest].” So that was another form of discrimination. And then they did not give

me financial support, you know, from those state funded social service programs for Indigenous children because I had lighter skin. I am sure they said, “This is the priest’s daughter, she eats well for sure, she does not need help.” But then, when I arrived here, once again! In this huge city I was discriminated against for being Indigenous. So I am discriminated against in the pueblo for not being Indigenous enough, and over here I am discriminated against for being Indigenous. So discrimination does not seem to end.

As a girl who was raised in an Indigenous community, Otilia became a woman as she embraced her maternal and local racial and cultural identities while also deciphering inner and external tensions and conflicts around her complex family background. As a self-identified Indigenous woman, she has not been alone in her struggle. While Indigenous groups of the past have been historically acclaimed and glorified in Mexico, Indigenous children, women and men of an everlasting present have been denigrated, marginalized, and discriminated against.¹⁰

Otilia’s life experience reflects Anzaldúa theorizing about “the mestiza consciousness” that is, the “consciousness of the Borderlands,” a way of thinking and acting that tolerates ambivalence and contradiction, frequently involving a process of inner transformation—all of which has important implications when it comes to race relations and issues on identity in colonized territories, such as the populations of Mexican origin living in the USA–Mexico Borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987)¹¹ Otilia may not be familiar with the life experiences of the latter but she explained that she has tried to understand the history of Mexico through the multiple contradictions that inhabitants of both her small town and those of Mexico City have attached to her skin color and features. Her sophisticated awareness has continued to develop as she completes a college degree at a public university in Mexico City (which is where our interview took place in 2006).

Class

For many years, stigma, fear, contrasting social differences, and geographical distance separated Otilia’s mother and her children from their father’s side of the family. Poverty, negligence, and abandonment have left her with a negative impression of her father’s relatives. Her resentment is evident when she talks about them. Although her mother eventually met the priest’s siblings and mother (she accompanied him to a family gathering), Otilia does not know how much communication her mother has had with her father’s immediate and extended family. Her understanding of the social dynamics of the situation is that the reputation and name of her father’s family would have been damaged had her parents’ relationship been made public to his close relatives and friends in Mexico City. With a dismissive chuckle, she stated, “My father’s family has money, they live in this kind of fancy part of Mexico City. Actually, they have this kind of ‘hacienda owner superiority complex.’ They think that they are from Spain.”

Through the family stories she heard many times, she became familiar with the power that her paternal grandparents exercised over her father when he was younger. She explained, for instance, that when her father's supervisor learned about the romantic relationship he was having with her mother, especially after the birth of the first child, he recommended that the priest have a conversation with his parents about this sensitive situation. She remembers the family story this way:

[They told him] "We do not want to know anything about these people, we hope that the rest of our family will not know about this, let's make sure that your siblings do not learn about this, so this is between us." So he received this kind of legal sentence from his parents, "If you love your parents, you do not talk about this with your siblings." So he never went back to our town. After his first baby, you know, after my oldest sibling was born, he visited once or twice, but then he never went back to my town... well, at some point he did because my mother got pregnant with me. But right after that conversation with his parents, he did not do it [return to the town].

Otilia did not know why her mother had gone back to the priest years later following that painful break up. After the second child was born, the emotional distance between the couple, as well as the poverty and deprivation, left Otilia's mother in a state of depression and despair. Otilia explained that their financial destitution was one of the reasons her mother was so desperate to be reconciled with the priest. Thus, when the three of them reunited at that hotel in the mid-1990s, the fragile financial condition of her mother and siblings was what made 13-year-old Otilia vulnerable to a forced sexualized exchange with her father. She appeared to understand this dynamic well.

Overall, class relations within larger Mexican society made Otilia vulnerable to being sexually objectified by her father. There is a long history in Mexico of "sexual use" of low-income girls and women by young middle- and upper-class men which is illustrated by the vulnerability to sexual harassment by women employed in paid household work—women who may become easy prey and sexual outlets of their male employers (Siller Urteaga, 2012). Striking socioeconomic contrasts have shaped these forms of sexual violence in a contemporary society where "6 out of 10 people consider that wealth is the factor that divides society the most," as indicated by the *Encuesta Nacional sobre Discriminación en México* a major 2010 national survey conducted with 13,751 households (2010: 121).¹² This finding coincides with striking demographics: out of the 112.6 million who lived in the country as of 2010, 52 million people lived in poverty, according to the *Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social* (CONEVAL).¹³ In the same study by CONEVAL, the Southeast states represent the region with the highest percentage of children and adolescents living in poverty—the same region where Otilia was born and raised.

Gender

Recalling her childhood, Otilia stated, “In my hometown, being the daughter of a single mother is like being the daughter of a prostitute—that is the worst that could ever happen to you.” She explained that her mother was exposed to rejection and censorship from her family after becoming pregnant out of wedlock, and her relationship with a priest complicated things for her even more. Her family was not only concerned about the destiny of a single mother and a “fatherless child,” her family was worried about the harsh treatment she would receive from the community. When women get pregnant out of wedlock in Otilia’s small town, their cases are handled by well-organized groups representing their small communities, which follow local traditions (known in México as *usos y costumbres*) in order to “resolve” these cases. The situation for single mothers becomes worse if there is some kind of suspicion of becoming pregnant by different men. Through a ritual that was elaborate but also violent, Otilia’s mother was literally kicked out of her town every time she gave birth out of wedlock. Otilia explained:

People who do witchcraft, and also shamans, and others went to do some kind of ritual at my grandmother’s house. And they also had people who give advice, and some of these people come across as very respectful, so some of them helped my mother and my grandmother, but other people were really disrespectful and aggressive. So what I am going to tell you happened right after I was born. Groups of people came to check out my physical appearance. I have been told that they said, “She does not look like the first child.” So they came to establish a comparison between my mother’s first child and myself. But then, as part of this whole thing, they had this fistfight, they hit my mother, they also used sticks to hit my mother. She was pushed and shoved roughly and when she was on the floor, they kicked her hard on her body. My grandmother says that she tried to protect me because people did not like me either. My grandmother then said that she was going to take care of me, so that protected me and they left me alone. But after my mother is all bruised and bleeding, they put her clothes inside a bag outside the house, by the door. She left and got a job outside our town. She came in and out to visit. The people told her to leave and to take me with her, but she had no money and my grandmother did not allow it. Grandma said that she would take care of me so people left her alone and my mother then left by herself. My mother was out of town for long periods of the time, but at night, when it was dark, kind of hiding, she came to visit us. She had a rough life.

I asked Otilia if she knew how her father had been treated by the people in her town during those years. She said that she has never heard stories of rejection or disrespect for him; in fact, some people seem to have special respect for her father. The most intense expressions of censorship and rejection toward him have come from his own children. She explained, “As the daughter of a single woman, I could not

participate in any cultural celebrations in my town. I was an outcast. I was defective. It was as if I was born with it. Only what they perceived as ‘the real families’ could be part of social activities but we were not, so we were excluded in many ways from life in that town.”

From these experiences Otilia learned that women are worth much less than men, and children of single mothers are worth even less. Within their Indigenous communities, she and her mother grew up feeling socially devalued and inferior. Being sexually abused by her father confirmed the need of being of service to those who represent power. The local cultures where Otilia was born and raised perceive women and children as “sexual objects” (versus men as “sexual subjects”) whose value is defined by the presence of a husband and a father, respectively. These social prescriptions legitimated sexual violence and validated the idea that Otilia should be available to satisfy her father’s sexual needs.

The foregoing is not a homogenous, uniform pattern existing throughout all the frequently poor Indigenous groups in Mexico and/or rural locations. Although sexual violence against women is more prevalent in rural Mexico, Indigenous women exposed to violence may pro-actively take action as they decipher a patriarchal legal system (González Montes, 2009: 167–168, 179) and the sexualities of Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities may be more complex, fluid and non-static than it appeared from what Otilia shared with me (Núñez Noriega, 2011). Otilia’s story, however, illustrates the ways in which extreme and more rigid expressions of gender inequality may make girls and women vulnerable to different forms of violence within some Indigenous families and communities in Mexico.

Becoming “family”

In her mid-teens, Otilia, an older sister, and her mother migrated to a small town not far from Mexico City; they left Otilia’s grandmother and the rest of the family behind. They joined her father who was in charge of a parish located away from their home. For the first time her father supported them and they shared the same house. Otilia described the sexualized encounters that happened when all of them lived together and she shared this painful realization with me. She said, “My mother sent me to sleep with him, she knew that he abused me, and yet, she would send me [to sleep with him]. I do not even want to think that she sent me to sleep with him on purpose.” Otilia then described another graphic event that involved forced kissing and masturbating him after her mother “had sent her to sleep with him.” She recalled, “He kissed me but it was horrible, I wanted to throw up, but then the alarm saved me. He then told me, ‘May God bless you,’ and he gave me his blessing. He touched my forehead. He blessed me after he abused me.”

Otilia recalled the sexually violent encounters with her father as always painful, fearful and confusing. The confusion became more intense when her father started to talk to her about reproductive health while telling her that, “condom use is the worst” and “masturbation is sinful,” while promoting values of sexual abstinence

and virginity for single women and “insisting a lot” that she allow him to be her spiritual confessor. During this time, Otilia attempted suicide more than once.

Otilia did not know if her mother was actually aware of all of the instances of sexual violence that she had endured with her father. Apparently, the first encounter was the only one that she had strategically used to reconcile with him. Setting up a daughter to be sexually available to an abusive father had an unexpected turn, however. When her mother learned about one particularly violent incident that occurred after she had sent Otilia to sleep with her father (which happened when Otilia was 20 years old), she used the situation to manipulate the non-committal priest and gave him an ultimatum in hopes of establishing a permanent relationship with him. Otilia paraphrased her mother’s words during a confrontational telephone conversation she had with her father, “If you really want me to forgive you for what you did to her, you leave the Church now, and bring your clothes over here, right at this moment!” After this intense event, Otilia confided in her sister, who then told her that she had also been exposed to her father’s sexual coercion but resisted him aggressively. Otilia and her sister left their parents and found a small apartment where both now live in Mexico City.

Unraveling legacies of sexual violence

Otilia’s excruciating incestuous experiences with her father—a Catholic priest—reveal some of the historical social forces responsible for the sexual objectification of women and girls within the family context in Mexican society. Otilia’s vulnerability to sexual objectification and eventually rape by her father—an act of violence in which her mother was complicit—can be interpreted through the following dynamics.

First, the gender oppression of Indigenous women and girls within their families and communities prior to the conquest made it easier to transfer and establish regulations brought from Spain (Tuñón Pablos, 2000). With the sponsorship of the Catholic Church, these hybrid patriarchal ideologies and practices, which were well rooted in the religious communities of the Iberian peninsula (i.e., Christian, Jewish and Muslim), were extended to what eventually became colonial society (1521–1821). Deliberations of the Council of Trent (1545–1563) became the Catholic Church’s guiding precepts on sexual morality as well as the treatment and indoctrination of Indigenous groups (Rubio, 1997). A woman’s sexualized body becomes family property; she has access to her own sexual body only under the sacrament of marriage and for exclusive purposes of procreation. These ideologies, intermingled with the honor and shame codes prevalent in Mediterranean cultures, which were later promoted throughout the Americas (including territory that is now identified as the US Southwest); these beliefs taught women values of self-enclosure and discretion as they safeguarded their own families from gossip and the risk of a bad reputation (Gutiérrez, 1991). These were the same ideologies controlling the lives of both Otilia and her mother who were further stigmatized by the patriarchal ideologies of their Indigenous communities.

Otilia's mother actively and purposefully facilitated the sexual violence perpetrated against her daughter when she became a teenager. From a critical feminist perspective, however, many tensions and contradictions emerge as we become aware of the fine lines between responsibility and complicity vis-à-vis disempowerment and the fragility of women who live in marginalized communities within patriarchal societies. If we alternatively and carefully *zoom in* and *out* the critical lens of this kaleidoscope we see the intricate and complex patterns of persistent abuse.

When we *zoom in* the lens, we see a more complex illustration of a pattern a feminist law professor from Mexico City identified for me as she shared stories of the women she has worked with: "Mothers become '*cómplices por omisión*' when they cover up their eyes in front of these acts of aggression." Although Otilia's mother actively participated in the production of Otilia's sexual abuse by her father priest, her case exposes the countless nuances and gray areas that exist between "complicity by omission" and "active participation." Future research should examine the legal complexities emerging from cases involving different expressions of the conjugal daughter and marital servant incestuous arrangements.¹⁴

If we *zoom out* the lens, we see the complex ways in which patriarchy is reproduced (in part) through sexist models of motherhood.¹⁵ First, viewed from the perspective of broader patterns of patriarchy, the mother's actions reflect, in part, the internalization of sexist beliefs and practices within the family that include exercising sexual control over women in positions of disadvantage (in this case, a girl within her family). This activity is also situated in a realm of social, economic, and cultural marginalities, and re-colonized Indigenous bodies that women like Otilia's mother experience. And second, as marginalized women, they have learned self-oppressive ways to deal with their own disempowerment in these reportedly volatile and catastrophic heterosexual relationships. In short, finding themselves collectively oppressed as women, mothers like Otilia's oppress the younger women under their authority. If, as mothers, they are responsible for these acts of sexual violence, to what extent are they innocent as women? These are thought provoking issues. Rather than taking sides—find ways "to blame" mothers or "to justify" mothers for the actions that left deep painful imprints in the heart of Otilia and the women I interviewed in the larger study—my intent here as a feminist scholar is to expose the perplexing complexities, tensions, and contradictions that are responsible for the articulation of these forms of sexual violence in the first place.

An additional broader cultural factor involves the race relations that have historically placed Indigenous women in opposition to both mestizas and women of European descent, which has promoted a racist paradigm in which the latter (especially Spaniards) have been identified with a higher social status in Mexican society (AI Castañeda, 1993). Indigenous women and those who do not possess features representing western ideals of physical beauty are automatically devalued and thus more vulnerable to being objectified, exploited, and abused. For instance, racism and ethnocentric ideologies of cultural superiority have historically placed not only the woman, but also the man of Indigenous blood in a

devalued image in the social construction of sexual violence. These men were dehumanized, they were perceived as uncivilized, as savages (Giraud, 1988).¹⁶ Giraud, for instance, found that men who received more severe forms of punishment (including the death penalty) were less frequently of Spanish blood when compared to men from other groups such as mestizos, mulatos and Indigenous (1988: 337). If racism made Indigenous men vulnerable to victimization within these colonized patriarchal communities, within the family infrastructure children were placed at the highest risk of vulnerability. Hundreds of years later, the echo is still heard through the story of Otilia.

The religious practices of Catholic priests who used more than 20 confession guides as part of the project of invasion and colonization of Indigenous people's lands and hearts, echo as well centuries later within the complex formations of multiracial incestuous families involving fathers who are priests. For instance, Otilia's story becomes an extreme and grotesque illustration of Michel Foucault's conceptualization of the confessional in his highly acclaimed book *The History of Sexuality* (1977): The power of a father who rapes his daughter becomes magnified through his strategic use of his status as a Catholic priest, especially in his attempts to become her confessor and to further intrude, invade, and exercise control over her sex life (Foucault, 1977).

Poverty and socioeconomic marginalization also render women of lower class more vulnerable to exploitation and sexual objectification (C Castañeda, 1989: 152; Penyak, 1993). As Otilia talked about her mother's painful experiences of poverty from childhood to present, she struggled to explain to herself why her mother would facilitate the sexual abuse of her own daughter. An awareness of the combined effects of gender, race, and class differences between both of her parents' families did not heal Otilia's wounds, but this awareness has helped her to externalize and to make sense of her painful history through social patterns of injustice.

In contemporary Mexico, discourses promoting chastity, double standards of morality, the desexualization of priests, and avoidance and denial, along with geographical relocation of priests are still used as "solutions" to discipline priests who sexually abuse children. Some of these victims (mainly boys), now adults, are actively accusing the Catholic Church for these sexual transgressions.¹⁷ Unlike the men who have legally prosecuted their offenders—Catholic priests—Otilia says she has never had the courage to legally accuse her father. However, these many cases and Otilia's story may have more than one thing in common: they reflect broader and complex institutional systems, patriarchal cultures, and outdated policies. Based on empirical research with priests with histories of sexual abuse of children, Marie Keenan's book *Child Sexual Abuse & the Catholic Church* (2012) is a notable publication in the growing literature examining this topic. Keenan uses material from gender studies which explains the double life-style of Otilia's father and the sexual violence he exercised against her.

First, the social construction of hegemonic expressions of ecclesiastical masculinities that Keenan identifies as "Perfect Celibate Clerical Masculinity" has become the ideal of priesthood formation. This "sexless" expression of manhood is based on self-denial,

purity, chastity, idealized, and unrealistic aspirations within a religious culture promoting sexual silence, denial, fear, and disengagement from 21st-century scientific, honest, and realistic dialogue on celibacy, human sexuality, and human intimacy. Second, the paradox of “powerless and powerful” is also at the heart of sexual offending: a priest may follow an ethic of obedience and submissiveness with regard to how power operates in the *upward* direction, yet he might be poorly trained and supervised while exercising power and privilege *downward* and as part of everyday life interactions and other personal and public engagements. And finally, the theology of sacrament of confession that is anonymous and confidential may allow a priest to break his silence about a sin that is also a crime. Paradoxically, the information that is disclosed then makes a U-turn and goes back into a social system where sexual abuse and other transgressions have remained systematically and collectively unreported as shared, complicit secrets. Engaging in “double lives” may become a coping mechanism used by priests to navigate these challenging labyrinths while also enjoying patriarchal privilege and legal immunity as a member of a social institution that has dealt with these transgressions that resemble, to an extent, an incestuous family.

Otilia currently attends college in Mexico City, something unthinkable had she lived in colonial Mexico. Her close and supportive relationship with her older sister has been an important source of resilience. Bright and receptive to her surroundings, Otilia grew up actively seeking answers to the experiences she lived. For instance, she attended a retreat and met a supportive priest who was deeply moved by her story and suggested therapy. With her sister’s support, she finally did engage in psychotherapy and this has helped her to cope successfully with her depression and suicidal tendencies. Unlike some of the women in the larger study who expressed a variety of both positive and negative views of their fathers as individuals and within their family and community relationships, Otilia’s experience of her father was unequivocally negative. At some point Otilia lost contact with him; she does not know where her mother is either. In a conversation with her mother some time ago, however, she learned that she still dreams of some day finding and marrying him.¹⁸

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Notes

1. Through individual tape-recorded in-depth interviews, I collected the sex life histories of a total of 60 women and men who have been involved in incestuous relationships and who currently live in urban centers in Mexico (i.e., Ciudad Juárez, Guadalajara, Mexico City, and Monterrey). In the same locations, I also interviewed professionals (i.e., attorneys, therapists, priests, and social workers) working on these issues and concerns. I collected all of my interviews in 2005 and 2006. I use pseudonyms for all the names in this research project.
2. Although Otilia did not know if her father belonged to the vibrant left-wing movement known as *la Teología de la Liberación* (Liberation Theology) of the late 1960s, many seminarians and priests like her father created communities known as *comunidades de base* in Mexico and other Latin American countries.
3. As she became older, Otilia learned about other priests who had established families with women who lived nearby and also in more distant parts of the country around the same period. Historians Carmen Castañeda (1984, 1989), Jorge René González Marmolejo (2002, 2005) and Marcos Hernández Duarte (2005) have examined the romantic and sexual experiences (both voluntary and coercive) that took place between Catholic priests and women living in colonial Mexico.
4. See Tostado Gutiérrez (1991) *El álbum de la mujer: Antología ilustrada de las mexicanas. Volumen II*. As Tostado Gutiérrez reflects, "The purpose of family protection was to erect a solid barrier to protect a daughter's honor: virginity was the only certificate of worthy reputation, an indispensable requirement to meet *pretendientes decentes* or "decent" potential dates with whom women could get acquainted at social and religious events" (1991: 23–24; my translation from Spanish). See also Seed (1988) *To Love, Honor, and Obey in Colonial Mexico: Conflicts Over Marriage Choice (1574–1821)*.
5. The law does not pay attention to the sexual freedom or rights of the individual; the law is more concerned about protecting the family as an institution and perhaps to prevent genetic malformations.
6. In early colonial Mexico, the Catholic Church used the Ecumenical Council of Trent (1545–1563) to express its concern about the image of priests and appropriate lifestyle, however, they did not have official regulations to control the sex lives of Catholic priests until the middle of the 16th century; soliciting sexual favors from the women or men who requested a confession was not identified as a crime by Catholic authorities (González Marmolejo, 2005: 136, 145).
7. In all of these cases, the Inquisition identified the confessor under accusation as responsible for the mortal sin. Very frequently, however, these priests were members of the *bajo clero*, or lower strata within the Church, while priests of higher ranks (and who might have engaged in similar behaviors), were never prosecuted (González Marmolejo, 2002: 235). Almost half of the women making these denunciations were *criollas* (45%), while women who identified themselves as Indigenous, mestiza or mulata (13%) represented a small minority (2002: 212). See also, González Marmolejo (2005).
8. In my professional experience as a couple and family therapist I learned that multigenerational patterns of sexual abuse are not uncommon.

9. Benito Juárez García (1806–1872) has been recognized as the first full-blooded Indigenous person to serve as president of Mexico.
10. Historians, anthropologists, and sociologists have examined many different themes with regard to racial discrimination in Mexico. Recent national surveys on racial discrimination in contemporary Mexican society are shocking and revealing. See Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación (n.d.).
11. In this regard, Otilia's experiences of discrimination mirror the racial and cultural tensions of people of Mexican origin born and/or raised in the USA who are exposed to several forms of discrimination within US mainstream society, but within Mexican contexts (i.e., US Mexican immigrant communities and Mexican territory) they are also exposed to many prejudices including, but not limited to, not being "Mexican enough," especially if they do not speak Spanish or speak it with "an accent" or with difficulty.
12. Encuesta Nacional sobre Discriminación en México: Resultados sobre mujeres (2010) Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación. Visit, www.inmujeres.gob.mx and www.conapred.org.mx (accessed 15 March 2013).
13. See "Medición multidimensional de la pobreza en México. Análisis de bienestar de la infancia". Septiembre 2011. Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (CONEVAL, n.d.) México.
14. See Kashyap (2004). The legal complexities involved in Otilia's case are beyond my area of specialty and beyond the scope of this publication. I hope, however, the case presented in this article will advance conversations and debates on policy making and Mexican laws sensitive to women's rights.
15. See González-López (2005: 117–122) for reflections and additional citations on motherhood as a social vehicle for the reproduction of patriarchy in Mexican families.
16. In "La reacción social ante la violación," François Giraud argues, "The indigenous man is the only one that is a rapist because of his own indigenous nature. The indigenous woman, and even the wife of the indigenous man, sees that her word is devalued and therefore she cannot have a way to articulate a complaint" (1988: 341; my translation from Spanish).
17. Personal conversations with Joaquín Aguilar, Mexico Coordinator of SNAP (The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests) and two adult men who are former seminarians sexually molested as boys by Fr Marcial Maciel. Conversations took place in Mexico City, Summer 2006. The controversial cases of Mexican priests Marcial Maciel, Nicolás Aguilar, and more recently Gerardo Silvestre Hernández, illustrate some of these scandalous events, which have resulted in extensive mass media attention and moral controversy in recent years.
18. As a feminist sociologist who uses qualitative methods in her research on sexuality and gender I wrote this article while being concerned about sensitive ethical considerations. In order to protect her anonymity (an issue Otilia addressed with deep concern prior to sharing her story with me), I neither include myself in the text nor discuss how my encounter or encounters with her shaped the narrative I present and examine in this article. I have done everything possible to present an honest and respectful narrative of her life experience while also following her request of not including in academic publications some aspects of her life story, which she shared with me with so much sincerity and trust. Otilia asked me not to reveal the actual number of siblings she has, all fathered by the priest, or the location of her town where the case is widely known and likely to be recognized by potential readers from the area. For more on the ethics and methodological challenges involved in the larger project, please see González-López (2011).

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