

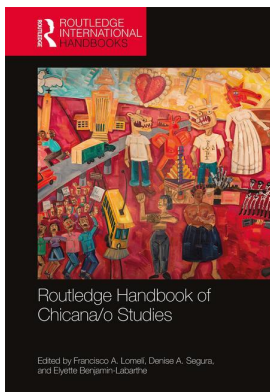
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### **Transnational incest**

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# Transnational incest

## Sexual violence and migration in Mexican families

*Gloria González-López*<sup>1</sup>

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The general goal of this chapter is to examine some of the dimensions of the incest phenomenon in contemporary Mexican society from a feminist sociological perspective. In particular, this chapter offers an initial analysis of a specific type of incest that I conceptualize as “transnational incest.” This work is part of a research project that I explain in more detail later, and in which I define incest as the sexualized contact (voluntary and/or involuntary, and the wide spectrum of possibilities that emerge between both) within the context of the family; this can happen between people related by blood and/or emotionally close family relationships, and which involve vertical relationships (that is, family members in positions of authority with minors or much younger women) or horizontal relationships (that is, family members close in age range or of the same generation).

To avoid pathologizing Mexican society, it’s important to make it clear: incest and sexual violence within the family circle is not something that is exclusive to Mexico or the Mexican cultures that exist in the United States; its existence has manifested in other Western and Westernized cultures and beyond, as well as in historical and influential documents such as biblical texts. Incest has also been thoroughly examined in different disciplines that focus on human behavior.

This project is empirically based on in-depth individual interviews, recorded with adult research participants in four urban centers in Mexico (Ciudad Juárez, Mexico City, Guadalajara and Monterrey) between 2005 and 2006, with the support of professionals and representatives from different organizations and social groups that I had the honor of meeting in these cities. I conducted individual, in-depth interviews with 60 adults who reported incestuous experiences in different stages of their lives (15 people per city; 45 women, 14 men, and one person assigned male at birth who lived as a woman at the time of the interview). In this study, some men and women identified as heterosexual, and some had a variety of understandings of their sexual identity such as lesbian, gay, and bisexual; while still others had not established exclusively heterosexual relationships, compelling them to express that they did not identify with any of the sexual identities mentioned previously. The youngest participant was between 18–19 years of age at the time of the interview, and the oldest participants were in their late 40s and early 50s. The study participants encompass a wide variety of demographic characteristics, in terms of education level, marital status, religiosity and socioeconomic status. Informants had a wide

variety of phenotypic traits, including but not limited to skin color, hair texture and color, eye color, height, and body size and structure; only two of the women identified as Indigenous. All informants were able-bodied, with the exception of one who made a special request not to include specific information in any publications discussing the study.

I also conducted interviews with 35 specialists of sexual violence such as professionals in the areas of law, psychotherapy, psychology, social work, priests interested in these topics, and activists from programs aimed at preventing violence against children and women. The analysis and organization of the life histories I collected has resulted in various academic publications in English, which examine different methodological dimensions of the project, as well as the implications of the ethical dilemmas and controversies of this topic. Information about some of these publications can be found in Appendix 30.1.

I was inspired to write this chapter by the enriching dialogues that have stimulated my intellectual work both in the United States and in Mexico, in particular Ciudad Juárez, Guadalajara, Mexico City and Monterrey. I have facilitated workshops and seminars in these four cities in different institutions, organizations or groups who offered me their support when I conducted my fieldwork. I also offered the preliminary results of this study in different professional spaces in the United States, including a presentation at the University of California, Los Angeles, which was recorded and has received a lot of attention through YouTube on the Internet. I write this chapter to contribute to the academic and educational exchanges on this topic in various outlets including anthologies that document the experiences of Mexicans in the United States and Mexico as well as achievements in the study of intimacy in Mexico and Latin American societies. I write this chapter as a Mexican immigrant originally from Monterrey, Nuevo León, a city from which I parted a few years after finishing my bachelor's degree to live in the United States, where I have lived and worked permanently for 30 years.

In the first section of this chapter, I share some aspects of the initial stages and origin of this project. In the second section, I examine the concept of transnational incest through case studies with the purpose of analyzing this phenomenon and some of its implications. In the third part, I share some of the ethnographic lessons that took me by surprise as a researcher while I conducted my fieldwork, and I answer the questions that emerged as part of presenting this project during a conference in Mexico City in June 2012.<sup>2</sup>

### Why study incest in Mexico?

The answer is long but important given the methodological implications I will expose later. At the end of the 1990s, I conducted a qualitative research study as part of my doctoral dissertation, with the goal of analyzing the sexual lives of 40 Mexican migrant women who had settled in Los Angeles, California. The project expanded with the support of a postdoctoral program at the University of California at Berkeley, to include data and analysis of the sexual lives of 20 migrant Mexican men who had also settled in Los Angeles. This study gave birth to various academic publications, including a book published in both English and Spanish, and a professional career as an academic committed to understanding the topic of sexualities in Mexican-origin populations from a sociological feminist perspective in both the United States and Mexico. Over the years and in silence, I never stopped feeling moved by the life histories that the women in those interviews shared with me regarding their experiences of sexual violence, which often took place within the context of the family. Although there were a few instances in which the men I interviewed also reported a history of sexual violence during childhood, the frequency with which the women shared these experiences during the interviews was higher and in stark contrast to the men's experiences.

Back then, I thought that I could investigate incest in the migration context and I conducted preliminary research that indicated the presence of some studies about incest in Mexico from the perspectives of history, law, or critical essays in the humanities. However, ethnographic research projects about incest in Mexican society – and projects that gave a voice to those who had lived through incest – were practically absent. At that moment I also found myself a bit in limbo as I was transitioning between research projects, and I sought the advice of my academic mentors to deliberate which research topic should decide my professional future. “Which community has a special place in your heart?” my advisor of over a decade asked in an assertive manner while I shared my concern of what should be the research topic for me to pursue in the coming years. “Ciudad Juárez” I replied without a stutter, as I remembered the professional services I had offered, through workshops on various topics as a “long-distance volunteer” since 2001, to one of the organizations that serves local women and families with histories of different forms of violence. “And what is urgent in Ciudad Juárez?” she asked. “I don’t know,” I answered naïvely. She immediately retorted: “Why don’t you go and ask?” The conversation that I thought would take an hour or more suddenly turned into an exchange of assertive questions and short answers that took a few minutes.

I arranged my trip to the border city immediately. My interests and curiosity that had been part of me for years had been validated: the idea of “being of help” as a feminist interested in themes of sexuality, and what is now known as “gender studies,” transformed me into a professional who is also committed to exploring various ways of establishing connections that made sense in my professional career, my personal growth and my spiritual life. The incest project in Mexico also emerged from the need to present a second research project that would occupy my mind and work at an intellectual and academic level, especially when being evaluated at an institutional level for being part of the tenure system at The University of Texas at Austin, where I have worked as a professor and researcher in the Department of Sociology for over a decade.

During my stay in Ciudad Juárez, I had conversations with activists and professionals (frequently women) who had honored me with their trust and friendship over the years. The idea of conducting research studies for the benefit of the communities who inspired said projects, and practicing a form of reciprocity, emerged as a critical part of this research experience. I also wished to avoid the “maquiladora syndrome.” That is, to go south as a researcher, conduct my fieldwork and collect data, and finally come back north to publish and produce for my own professional benefit and the benefit of a select group of people in positions of privilege (see González-López 2007a). “What type of research is urgently needed from the perspective of the professionals who work for the families and communities affected by sexual violence?” was the question that stimulated our conversations, which also served to establish a type of professional reciprocity and intellectual responsibility with the professionals I conversed with.

Even though violence against women had escalated to perverse magnitudes in the local community,<sup>3</sup> other *relevant* themes emerged in these conversations. In these dialogues, a lesson would be reiterated constantly: sexual violence against minors and women does not happen outside the family circle, but inside these very families. Moreover, what I had discovered some time ago was confirmed: an empirical research project that investigated, from a sociological feminist perspective, the histories of people who had lived incestuous experiences and other sexualized experiences within the family circle, did not exist, or at least had not been published up to that time in the country. After securing the necessary institutional support and funds, I moved to Ciudad Juárez with great motivation to start my fieldwork during the Fall 2005 semester. Ciudad Juárez marked the beginning of a long, ethnographic journey where I learned important methodological lessons, some of which I will share later (see Appendix 30.1 for a list of relevant publications in this area). Before doing that, I offer my reflections on the particular expression of

incest that I am interested in; that is, the phenomenon of transnational incest, which I illustrate through a case study.

### What is transnational incest?

I use the concept of “transnational incest” to identify and examine the social processes through which international migration and sexual violence interact with each other within the context of the family. Transnational incest illustrates the mechanisms through which the different forms of sexual violence within Mexican families (identified here with the concept of “incest”) are organized within the confines of and across territorial borders, and can be articulated, reproduced and reinvented as part of the migration processes, which can go in different directions, in this case between Mexico and the neighboring northern country.

The concept of transnational incest is inspired by the paradigms set forth by sociologists Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Ávila (1997), who conceptualize “transnational motherhood” in their research with migrant women from Latin America who live and work in the United States while maintaining affective ties and a sense of economic and moral responsibility towards their children, who are still living in the mothers’ countries of origin. The transnational dimension of migration indicates that borders do not deter family life histories, as these are carried out through a state of consciousness that some migrant Mexican women and men interpret as being with “the heart divided” (*el corazón dividido*); that is, the feeling of living simultaneously or *being* in both countries at the same time. Interestingly, recent studies in the field of couples’ and families’ psychotherapy have examined this perspective and propose a contrasting concept: the idea of having “two hearts” can capture the complexity of the lived experiences at an affective and personal level, as experienced by the so-called transnational families, in a more precise way (Falicov 2005). The contrasting phenomenological experience of not being in (or being from) either country could also be part of this experience at the level of personal identity, which I have heard Mexican-origin migrants express as the idea of not being from “neither here, nor there” – (*ni aquí, ni allá*).

The presence of transnational families is not something new or recent, and neither is the knowledge of the fluidity and complexity of *being* (*ser*) and *being in* (*estar*)<sup>4</sup> subjective experiences of multiple forms of identity, or the feelings of belonging in colonial contexts, territorial invasion, or intercultural lived experiences and geographical border life – this knowledge has been one of the most relevant contributions of Chicana critical theory (e.g., Anzaldúa 1987). However, the conceptual frames needed to understand these processes from the perspective of sociology and family studies are recent and include what Bacigalupe and Lambe (2011) identify as the “virtualization of intimacy,” a concept that explains the multiple modes of connection and affective exchange in families as a consequence of the emergence of information communication technologies (ICT). This paradigm can explain, for example, the ways in which the use of conventional telephones and affordable long-distance plans, cellular phones and their text messaging and picture transmission capabilities, computers that can use Skype, among other creative possibilities, can redefine emotional intimacy, which is not lost but only rearticulated or reinvented to be experienced genuinely as part of family life through and beyond national borders. It is important to clarify, though, that for transnational families with limited resources, without access to technology, or located in marginality, the virtualization of intimacy could be near impossible.

Using the paradigm mentioned previously as a form of departure, the concept of transnational incest can be applied to explain the various expressions of sexual violence within the family in the context of migration. For example, transnational incest can refer to the

women who use displacement towards the United States to resolve issues of sexual violence experienced within the family context in Mexico, but which could be repeated or take on reinvented forms during the women's visits to Mexico when they coincide with the family member who has transgressed them sexually in either side of the border between Mexico and the United States. This process can have an important emotional dimension, especially for migrating women who carry with them the memory of sexual violence they experienced in Mexico, which remains unresolved while they live in the United States, and which can be triggered when they go through other experiences of sexual violence beyond the family context in the United States (Argüelles & Rivero 1993; González-López 2007b). Another example would be the case of the family member (frequently male) who migrates to the United States and who, in the past, would have sexually transgressed a minor or a woman within the family circle before parting from their point of origin. In these circumstances, the violence does not end or disappear with this sexual aggressor's migration; it is just reinvented across the borders. In the case study of the woman whom I identify with the name "Ileana," I illustrate the ways in which the latter example is articulated, as well as the family situation and conditions that contextualize these experiences, and some of the feminist contributions that explain these phenomena.

A married mother, Ileana identifies as a heterosexual woman and is over 30 years old. In our interview, she told me about the violent episodes she survived during her adolescence, in which her uncle, her mother's younger brother, harassed her frequently. During our interview, which took place in Guadalajara, she stated:

Back then we used to have [family] reunions and I didn't want to go. My family used to take it the wrong way. And the few times I went he tried to harass me. One time he tried to kiss me by force. I screamed, and one of my aunts said: "What happened?! Ay! Nothing, nothing, you are just screaming for no reason. Please, don't be like that." That is what she used to say, and I left. I got away from there.

*(Entonces había reuniones [en la familia] y yo no quería ir. Y me lo tomaban siempre a mal. Y cuando iba, las pocas veces que iba, entonces empezaba a intentar hostigarme. Una vez quiso besarme a la fuerza. Yo grité y fue una de mis tías [y dijo] "¿Qué pasó? Ay! Nada, nada, ahí gritando nada más, por no más [gritar]. Y ay, que no seas así." [Ella me decía] y ya mejor me iba.)*

Ileana's words that she shared with me described a family pattern that other women also reported in this research project: during childhood or adolescence they went through experiences of sexual harassment from male cousins and uncles in the presence of authority figures within the family, and who the women interpreted as having a lack of interest or just indifference with regard to these incidents. This response on the part of adults (generally, women in charge of taking care of minors) normalizes a wide spectrum of expressions of sexual violence – which can range from subtle to grotesque – perpetrated by males in the family who victimize women younger than them, especially adolescents and girls. When authority figures in the family trivialize these experiences, it generates a system that puts girls and adolescent women at risk of being exposed to sexualized experiences within the family circle.<sup>5</sup>

In *Family Secrets*, I offered my reflections on the need to make visible these forms of sexual violence in the family through the adoption and the study of what I suggest can be conceptualized as *family sexual harassment*, an idea inspired by the writings of Deirdre Davis (2002). Davis addresses the necessity to identify and name expressions of sexual violence that are interpreted as a "given" and, because of this, have become invisible, and are not questioned, identified or named, thus they are not interrupted or eliminated.

In what other ways was Ileana sexually transgressed by her uncle? On various occasions, her uncle pushed her against the bed, undressed her and touched her. Other times, that seemed less threatening to Ileana, he rough and tumbled her and kissed her. Obscene and graphic phone conversations were also part of the sexual violence. Ileana explained, for example,

Ay!, and he would tell me that he had been with a woman who had a very nice pussy and that she had it like this and like that, and that he opened it and, 'I put my dick inside,' things like that.

(*¡Ay!, y me decía que había estado con una mujer con la pucha muy bonita y que la tenía así, ay, y que se la abría y decía 'yo le metía la verga', o sea, cosas así.*)

When these episodes happened, Ileana would hang up the phone. However, the experiences of sexual assault in person were a huge challenge for her, since they happened within family contexts, and became situations that she would try to evade at all costs. As part of the control over his niece, Ileana's uncle managed to successfully silence her. She remembered her uncle's words clearly:

"If you say anything, I'll come and get you at the middle school. You're aren't worth shit – *vales madre*," he used to tell me. "Yes, *vales madre*, because a moment will come when you will disappear and nobody will know where you are." So I was terrified. I used to go to school by myself.

(*"Si tú dices algo, yo vengo por ti a la secundaria. Vales madre." Así me decía. "Sí, vales madre porque va a llegar el momento en que vas a desaparecer y ni cuenta se van a dar en dónde estabas." Entonces a mí me daba terror. Como yo me iba sola [a la escuela].*)

Ileana's uncle also threatened to kill her mother if she ever said anything. Between the age of 12 and 15, Ileana deciphered her life under what Carol Sheffield (1989) identified as "sexual terrorism," that is, the use of intimidation as part of a system of control and domination of women. Ileana's uncle migrated to the United States some time after she turned 15; her uncle was older than her by about seven years. With joy and in silence, Ileana celebrated her uncle's parting to the neighboring northern country, thinking that she would finally be safer and calmer. However, the geographical distance did not necessarily change the circumstances of her life:

The last time he called me on the phone, when he had already moved, we talked on the phone for about 2 hours and a half."

(*La última vez que me habló por teléfono, que ya se repuso, duramos como 2 horas y media hablando.*)

Ileana explained that her uncle phoned long distance from the United States to talk frequently with his sister and his mother (Ileana's mother and maternal grandmother, respectively), who insisted that he speak with his niece as well.

The obscene phone calls from the past turned into the *modus operandi* of a sexual violence beyond borders, where the telephone divided two realities that were difficult to reconcile. In Mexico, the phone's receiver confronted Ileana with the silence she needed to keep in front of her mother and grandmother, each respectively enthusiastically and insistently would greet him frequently without suspecting the sexual violence that Ileana had experienced years before. In the United States, her uncle spoke only for Ileana's ears, upon which she had to engage in what feminist sociologist Arlie Hochschild conceptualizes as *emotion work* (1983). In other words,

Ileana had to speak with her uncle in the presence of her mother and grandmother, while repressing her true feelings and emotions in the middle of putting on a *performance* for them (and whoever else from the family was present). This opened the opportunity for the use of hints but also conflicting messages, while she dealt with the situation in a state of confusion, annoyance and self-confrontation because of the pain from the past that was still unresolved. Ileana recalled a conversation that took place shortly before our interview:

The last time that he called me . . . my husband was to the side. I was listening to him [her uncle] and treating him meanly. Like, because I said, somehow I have to let it out, and I let it out that way. I told him something, like, because he called me to tell me about the family and talk about my mom; that why is my dad irresponsible; that he doesn't work and I don't know what. And I was telling him that what is he telling me this for, that why does he care, but I do not dare tell him what I really want to say. So he changed his tone. He changed his mind and told me: "You'll see, one of these days I'll go to Guadalajara and when I see you I will hug you and kiss you," and I don't know what. I tried to take it in the best way possible. I said: "well, maybe."

*(La última vez que me habló . . . estaba mi esposo a un lado. Yo escuchándolo y tratándolo mal. O sea, porque yo dije, de alguna manera tengo que desahogarme y me desahogué por ahí. Dile algo, o sea, porque me habló para decirme de la familia y platicarme que mi mamá, que por qué mi papá es un irresponsable, que no trabaja y que no sé qué. Y yo diciéndole que él qué me decía, que qué le importaba pero no me atrevo a decirle lo que realmente quiero decirle. Entonces cambió. Cambió de parecer y me dijo: "Vas a ver, un día de estos voy a ir a Guadalajara y cuando te vea te voy a abrazar y te voy a besar" y que no sé qué. Yo traté de tomarlo de la mejor manera. Yo dije, "bueno, a lo mejor.")*

During this same conversation, Ileana felt that her tolerance threshold was at its limit. She shared the rest of the conversation:

Yes. That I said *ay* he's crossed the line. He tells me: "And that son of a bitch husband of yours I really feel like fucking him up." He said: "Because. . ." How is it that he put it? "What's mine is mine," just like that. He said: "And my. . ." How did he tell me? I don't want to lie; I did not really understand what he was telling me. He said: "What's mine is mine and no one penetrates what is mine." That's how he told me:

*(Sí. Que yo dije, ay ya se pasó. Me dice: "Y al hijo de su puta madre de tu esposo le voy a partir su madre que ya le tengo muchas ganas." Dice: "Porque . . ." ¿Cómo me dijo? "Lo mío, es lo mío," nada más. Dice: "Y mi . . ." ¿Cómo me dijo? Para no mentir. Que yo no le entendí bien lo que me estaba diciendo. Me dice: "Lo mío es lo mío y nadie penetra lo mío." Así me dijo.)*

And then Ileana continued:

So that's when I finally told him: "You know what? Don't be bothering me anymore, I am not to be bothered by you." And I made the decision to tell my mom and explain to her. I spoke with my grandmother and told her. Because, yeah, that's enough.

*(Entonces ya fue cuando yo le dije: "Sabes qué, no me estés molestando, a mí no me molestes." Y tomé la decisión de hablar con mi mamá y explicarle. Hablé con mi abuela y decirle. Porque pues ya, ya estuvo bueno.)*

Ileana finally spoke with her mother and her grandmother and explained in detail their reaction:

They sent me to a psychiatrist. And I would speak [with him] about these things but my mom would butt in and my mom would tell him: "It's because she's always making things



up.” And I’m like, well, but what have I made up? I mean, from all of this, I have never said anything. “Yes, yes, yes. It’s that she has always had a very creative mind,” my mom tells the doctor. – “Yes, let’s see, explain to me, why do you say she has a very creative mind?” – “Yes, because she always, in school, she told stories, made things up, because she always. . .” and I don’t know what. Yes, my mom says, going on a tangent, I mean. And she doesn’t live in reality. “No mom, but I’m not making this up. One thing is creativity and another is the truth, I am telling you the truth and if it bothers you, oh well.” I didn’t say anything. In the end, the psychiatrist gave me a ton of medication, which I never took. I said no, this will keep me sedated. He never explained to me or told me what we could do, nothing.

*(Me mandaron con un psiquiatra. Y yo le platico [a él] las cosas pero entra mi mamá y mi mamá le dice: “Es que ella siempre ha inventado.” Y yo me quedo, bueno pero ¿qué le he inventado? O sea, de esto, yo nunca le he dicho nada. “Sí, sí, sí. Es que siempre ha tenido una mente bien creativa,” le dice mi mamá al doctor. – “Sí, a ver, explíqueme, ¿por qué dice que tiene una mente bien creativa?” – “Sí, porque ella siempre, en la escuela, ella hacía cuentos, inventaba, porque ella siempre . . . no sé qué.” Sí, mi mamá dice, saliéndose por la tangente, o sea. Y no vive en la realidad. “No mamá, pero esto no lo estoy inventando. Una cosa es la creatividad y una cosa es la verdad, yo te estoy diciendo la verdad y si te molesta, pues ni modo.” Yo no dije nada. Total que el psiquiatra me dio un chorro de medicamento, que yo no me lo tomé nunca. Dije no, me va a tener sedada. Nunca me explicó ni me dijo que podíamos hacer, ni nada.)*

Ileana stopped going to the psychiatrist in an act of resistance and resilience while she explained to me, “Ay no! I will not be paying him so he could drug me, [so he] would want to drug me” (“Ay no! Yo no voy a estar pagando para que me drogue, [para que] me quiera drogar”). By the time Ileana saw the psychiatrist, she had already spoken with her husband about her lived experience with her uncle. Even though he apparently did not have a negative reaction the first time she spoke with him about this matter, some time later she regretted trusting him with this information. “Why did I get it in my head that I had to tell him?!” (“¿Por qué se me ocurrió que le tenía que decir?!”), Ileana said. She explained to me that he used this information against her, especially when they had tension or conflict around their sexual intimacy, which was frequently triggered by flashbacks or images of the memory of her uncle touching her.

Ileana remembered her husband’s words:

He would tell me, “Ay, why do you pretend you don’t know what to do, if you’re such a whore?” Like that, with those words. “Why do you pretend you don’t know, when you already knew what this is about?” “What?!” I’d respond. “That had nothing to do with this. So, he has used those tactics.”

*(Me decía “Ay, para qué te haces si eres bien puta.” Así, con esas palabras. “¿Para qué te haces si tú ya supiste lo que era?” “¿Qué?!” Le digo. “Eso no tiene nada que ver. Entonces, ha usado ese tipo de cosas.”)*

On many occasions, Ileana has felt that her husband has forced her to have sex with him. Ileana also shared a history of different forms of emotional abuse that her husband lived because of his father and sexual harassment from his aunt when he was a boy, as well as sexual violence he perpetrated some time after against a half-sister. Ileana’s uncle has never returned to Mexico since the day he left Guadalajara en route to the United States, and she has not been in communication with him since the day she broke the silence to speak with her mother and grandmother. One time, she clarified, her uncle went through a tragic accident and he called to ask

for her forgiveness. She felt, however, that the conversation was not genuine and she hung up the phone. She explained:

I feel like it's because he was afraid of dying. And because he has been deeply ingrained with the idea that he has to die asking for forgiveness, because if he doesn't, he will go to hell. I feel like that's why he asked me [for forgiveness].

*(Yo siento que es porque tenía miedo de la muerte. Y como tiene bien arraigado que se tiene que morir pidiendo perdón, porque si no, se va al infierno. Yo siento que por eso me lo pidió.)*

Ileana also explained that she always had a distant relationship with her uncle; however, she found out that he suffered from alcoholism and drug addiction. Ileana dreams about the day of seeing him again. Our conversation was very revealing:

*Author:* Would you like to have him in front of you and confront him someday?  
*¿Te gustaría algún día tenerlo de frente y confrontarlo?)*

*Ileana:* Of course . . . of course. Of course, and tell him everything that I would want to say. And in fact he told me: "ay, it's just that one day I will go." "Ay, well that's good," I said, "I'll wait for you here." I told him: "I will wait for you here because I have many things to say to you." I told him: "I'm no longer afraid of you."

*(Claro . . . Claro. Claro y decirle todo lo que yo quisiera decirle. Y de hecho me dijo: "ay, es que un día voy a ir." "Ay, pues qué bueno, le dije, aquí te espero. Le dije: aquí te espero porque tengo muchas cosas que decirte. Le dije: ya no te tengo miedo".)*

*Author:* Are you awaiting that day? *(¿Estás esperando ese día?)*

*Ileana:* Yes. *(Sí.)*

*Author:* You long for it. . . *(Lo deseas . . .)*

*Ileana:* Yes. *(Sí.)*

*Author:* How would it help you to confront him?

*(¿De qué manera te ayudaría confrontarlo a él?)*

*Ileana:* Ay, well I think, I don't know, I don't know, just that being in that situation. I think that I would let it out and I would tell him what I have to say. Even though that wouldn't, it wouldn't turn back time. But at least I would have the courage to defend myself and I would say: "Let's see, now try again so you can see what would happen." Then, that's what I would be willing to do. And I would also be, if he were to come, and he was not remorseful, I would be willing to turn him in and denounce him. Even if there is no proof anymore or anything, but the damage remains. And it would be very hard, but I'd do it.

*(Ay, pues yo pienso, no sé, no sé, solamente estando en la situación. Pienso que me desahogaría y le diría lo que tengo que decir. Aunque eso no, no retrocedería el tiempo. Pero siquiera tendría yo el valor de defenderme y yo le diría "A ver, ahora inténtalo para que veas lo que pasaría." Entonces, eso estaría dispuesta a hacer. Y yo estaría también, si él viniera, y no estuviera arrepentido, yo estaría dispuesta a denunciarlo. Aunque ya no haya pruebas ni nada, pero el daño está. Y me costaría mucho trabajo pero lo haría.)*

Ileana lived through experiences of sexual harassment perpetrated by other men, who were also family members: another uncle on the mother's side (five years older than her), a male cousin (her father's nephew), and a man she identified as a *primo político*, that is, a cousin's cousin

(not related to her) who is also male; these experiences happened in person and were isolated incidents. Nevertheless, she explained, her experience with her migrant uncle was the one that affected her life the most. During her adolescence, Ileana drank alcohol compulsively, she has had depressive episodes, and she tried to commit suicide on more than one occasion. In our conversation, Ileana asserted, “this cannot be forgiven” (*esto no se perdona*) and explained:

Because the wounds are deep, they're very deep and are hard to close. And regardless of how much you go to a psychologist and everything, they're still there.

(*Porque las heridas son grandes, son muy grandes y son difíciles de cerrar. Y por más que vayas con un psicólogo y todo, siguen ahí.*)

She explained, however, that she would like to forgive him: “because that would set me free, it would make me feel good” (*porque eso me liberaría, me haría sentir bien*).

Apart from the few and non-productive sessions with the psychiatrist, Ileana has never attended psychotherapy or sought professional help. She explained that beyond the disbelief of her mother when she confessed her experience with her uncle or her parents' marital problems, she has felt loved by both her mother and father, which together with the invaluable support of a high school teacher who offered support and understanding during difficult moments, her love for her children, and her regular habit of reading about human behavior and human thought, have all turned into sources of resilience in her life.

After conducting the interview with Ileana, I pursued my interest regarding these migration patterns of sexual violence with some of the professionals who specialize in studying sexual violence, who also took part in this study. In Guadalajara, I had the chance to interview two specialists in law and human rights that, for many years, have worked with migrating families with histories of sexual abuse towards minors. After sharing Ileana's story with them, they confirmed that Ileana's case is not an isolated one, and explained to me that throughout their professional journey they had worked with people who had lived through similar situations. During our interviews, they shared many cases of transnational incest, the most moving of which was the story of an adult man who, before migrating to the United States, sexually abused his niece, a situation that was repeated in a systematic manner during his trips back to Mexico. When the authority figures within the family found out, they sought professional help, and by then they had discovered that in addition to the niece, another minor in the family (a nephew), as well as his friends, had been subjected to different forms of child sexual abuse, individually as well as in a group, by this man during his visits to Mexico.

Despite the prevalence of these patterns of sexual abuse in transnational families, which is difficult to estimate, it is important to clarify that not all Mexican men who migrate to the United States are involved in the practices that Ileana experienced with her uncle, or which the specialists I interviewed reported. It's important to also clarify: Mexican-origin men who live in the United States (especially those who live without legal documents) are vulnerable to countless expressions of injustice, and for me – as a Mexican and as an immigrant who has lived and/or been witness to such injustices – it is important not to establish nor reproduce negative images that could hurt them even more with regard to the creation of stereotypes or deficit perceptions of migrant men in academic publications. Nonetheless, it is urgent to document, make visible and examine the testimonies of women like Ileana, the people who have received help from specialists like the ones I interviewed, and other parallel stories that surely exist in silence. It is imperative that we pay attention and create interventions for the multiple expressions of transnational incest as part of our enriching intellectual and professional encounters.

## In dialogue

In the next section, I share the methodological lessons that I have learned during my field work and subsequently I answer the questions that were raised after a presentation I gave by the people who attended and honored me with their attention and genuine interest, and who facilitated an enriching conversation that took place during a conference in which I presented this project in previous years.

I made contact with the first people I interviewed in Ciudad Juárez thanks to the support of professionals I met through various organizations, who selflessly and generously expressed their solidarity towards me as part of the research process. This made me feel confident and motivated, yet I did not even suspect what was in store for me as a researcher.

After establishing initial contact with the first people interested in participating, I organized an appointment with them for an initial conversation in which I would answer any questions they had with regard to the forthcoming interview. In these initial conversations, which were rather informal, I soon learned that it was I who would need to be interviewed as a condition for the participants to accept my invitation to be a part of the study. This caught me by surprise, but with an available disposition I submitted myself to the interrogation process (that would sometimes feel endless) conducted by the people who wished to participate in my study, but who wanted (with good reason) to corroborate if I possessed the professional training and the cultural sensitivity necessary to entrust me with a difficult and painful dimension of their lives. Moreover, in these conversations they asked me about some aspects of my personal life, including whether or not I had lived experiences of sexual abuse during my childhood.

Making myself available in an honest way, I answered their questions, but I became concerned about the effect this dialogue could have in the upcoming interview and the research process. Thus, I suggested that I would gladly answer some of their questions after the formal interview, so as to not influence the interview process during which they would share their personal lives with me. In addition to facilitating the establishment of rapport with the people I would interview, these initial dialogues helped me remember that having a doctorate degree, being an academic or a researcher, or belonging to the so-called *intelligentsia* (or “intellectual class”) does not suffice when conducting an investigation of sensitive or controversial topics, in this case, sexual violence and/or sexuality within the context of the family. These experiences afforded me great lessons in humility as a human being, as well.

During the preliminary dialogues, I also discovered something that transformed my stance on the research process: I identified two important processes. First, I realized that frequently I was the first person to learn about the experiences of sexual violence lived by the people who honored me with their trust. And second, not only was I a researcher, but I had also become a witness to a history that up until that moment had not yet been revealed. The research interview broke not only the silence of so many years, but also as a witness I had transformed into some kind of adult authority figure that inspired respect and trust, and who finally listened to a story that had hitherto existed only in secret. Upon discovering this pattern in the people who shared their experiences of sexual violence with me, I realized that I had transformed in a way into a symbolic maternal figure. That is, I converted somehow into an ethnographic mother who listened and believed unconditionally – without judgment, stigmatization or rejection. On occasion, I felt as if I was the symbolic mother of some of the people I interviewed.

“And when you say ‘family,’ what do you mean?” (*¿Y cuándo dice usted ‘familia,’ a que se refiere?*) was one of the questions that surprised me in these preliminary dialogues. I realized then that my initial conceptual framework that contained the definition of “family” would also have to be evaluated critically by the people I would interview. As a concept, “family” is another one

of those concepts that I am also in the process of redefining, so for the purpose of this chapter, “family” refers to a group of people who share a personal and emotional, close relationship that happens through bloodlines and affective ties that emerge as a consequence of a civil union, given traditionally through marriage and procreation, but which is not exclusively limited to what is known as the nuclear family (immediate descendants of the mother and the father, sisters and brothers), the extended family, and the now more visible binuclear families (families that emerge as a consequence of divorce).

In the case of Mexican society, family includes but can go beyond these conceptualizations; in other words, family could be a somewhat complex and diverse network of kinship relations and affective affinities that could include not only aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, in-laws, half-siblings, step-parents, among others, but also individuals who some of the people I interviewed identified as “trusted family friends” (*amigos de confianza de la familia*) or “people that were like family” (*gente como si fuera de la familia*), including but not limited to godfathers and godmothers (*compadres* and *comadres*), (adopted) children raised as one’s own (*hijas e hijos de crianza*), among others.

While the concepts of nuclear family, binuclear family and extended family have become part of the lexicon in family studies, the previous categories are also a reflection of my respect towards the complex social construction of what is considered family in Mexico, and the ever-more apparent redefinition of the concept given the now-more-evident diversity of family expressions that exist in Mexico. This includes families whose authority figures belong to the same sex category, known as “familias homoparentales,” a concept used to identify mothers and fathers of the same sex (that is, lesbian and gay couples) who are in charge of raising, supporting and educating children.

### **What recommendations can you offer regarding self-care when working with topics that are so difficult?**

The fieldwork took over a year and a half to complete and took place in the four cities mentioned earlier. I always took strategic breaks before moving to a new location to conduct more fieldwork. During these much-needed breaks, I frequently incorporated meditation retreats, which would last between one and two weeks. Moreover, I have done all that is possible in order to maintain a balanced lifestyle that includes exercise, good diet, not compromising the seven to eight hours of sleep needed every night, and mediate my professional ambition so as to not pressure myself to exceed my writing labor over a topic that can be overwhelming and debilitating. It has also greatly helped to not isolate myself and to share my research process with colleagues. I have learned as well to do everything I can to not compromise my personal and familial quality of life. Some of these reflections are written in more detail in the publications included in Appendix 30.1.

### **In this study, who are the most violent family members? For example, is it the cousins, the brothers, or the uncles?**

In this study, out of all the patterns that were reported by the women and men I interviewed – that is, out of father–daughter, brother–sister, male cousin–female cousin, among others – the one that was reported with more frequency, especially by women, was that of uncle against niece. This last one is precisely a pattern of sexual violence that I analyze in more depth in *Family Secrets*, a book that examines the study of incest and sexual violence in the four cities (see González-López 2005).

### **Could you share more about the men who reported experiences of sexual violence perpetrated by a female family member? How did they see her?**

I have some cases very present in my mind, shared by some of the men who had sexualized experiences with older women in their families, such as sisters or female cousins. Apparently, certain social prescriptions with regard to what it means to be a man would shape the way the men interpreted these lived experiences. Particularly, the idea that sex with a woman should not be an undesirable opportunity can somehow create confusion, ambiguity and a grey area that is pretty wide when it comes to what this experience can mean for a man, especially in the life stage of pre-adolescence. This is important to keep in mind when understanding the lived experiences of a boy or a young man who has reached puberty, because they enter an internal struggle to try to decipher up to what point the experience is coercive and up to what point it is voluntary, especially if the sexualized encounters are not overtly forced or do not involve physical violence. This process can become an emotional labyrinth, especially when it carries certain forms of seduction or expressions of affection, or if the involved parties shared closeness in age or generation. This also reminds me of the complexities that emerged when interpreting the lived experiences of the men whom I interviewed over 10 years ago in Los Angeles, and who spoke about coerced sex with a sex worker, an initiation ritual into manhood, which was sexualized and frequently orchestrated by a father, brother or uncle who was older than them in their hometowns, and took place precisely during puberty or early adolescence (González-López 2005). I interviewed a man who established a romantic heterosexual relationship with an older cousin, an experience that he described as positive and that lasted for about a year, apparently without anyone noticing in the family.

### **What is the conceptual framework that you are using to analyze the results of the entire study?**

The theoretical framework that I am putting together for this project draws from disciplines and specialty areas that include what is known as Women's and Gender Studies, Sexuality Studies, sociology of the family, and multidisciplinary studies of sexual violence, spanning English-speaking countries as well as Mexico. Currently, I am investigating the genealogy of the social, political and historical construction of incest in Mexico; that is, I am exploring the ways in which certain ideas or concepts have evolved throughout the history of the country and how these have been applied in the past to explore relevant themes, especially in the legal realm. I have learned, for example, that the Penal Codes of certain federal entities define incest briefly as "crime against the family" (*delito contra la familia*). Some concepts that I am also considering include, for example, the "continuum of sexual violence" developed by Liz Kelly (1987), "sexual terrorism" and "public sexual harassment," among other concepts that I have developed and that I am still working on.

### **Can you explain to us how incest manifests itself when it is sparked by cultural practice?**

One of the most important lessons I learned from the people I interviewed is the following: sexual violence in the family circle does not happen in a social or cultural vacuum, but it is deeply contextualized by socioeconomic forces and local cultures that are very specific and unique. During my stay in Jalisco, for example, I interviewed a historian who alerted me to the need for

exploring the fine lines that unite and at the same time divide incest from endogamy. Endogamy, she explained, takes place in certain communities in Mexico where “custom” allows for heterosexual sex, love and marriage between family members to emerge without it being a problem or social or moral concern for that community. On the other hand, I interviewed many women who made use of internal migration within the country (especially towards urban areas) as a way to deal with the sexual aggression they lived with within the family circle. I interviewed, for example, women who were born and raised in rural areas plagued with extreme poverty, where despair at a family and local level has created countless disadvantages for girls and women of all ages. At least from one of the informants I interviewed and in the workshops I conducted to present my initial findings, I learned that in some places around the country, when a mother/wife passes away, one of the young nieces or another female family member substitutes the mother in her marital and/or sexual responsibilities, which is a type of conjugal duty. It’s necessary and important to conduct more research to explore up to what point these practices can be considered “customary” and could generate a very drastic inequity in the lives of women in certain parts of the country.

All of the above has led me to think about the concept of “regional patriarchies,” a paradigm that I incorporated in my previous project about the sexual lives of migrant women and men and that suggests that patriarchy is not universal, but rather it is composed of economies, cultures, ideologies, and local and regional practices in Mexico, which could be shared and common in specific zones or localities in the country, but very different from each other, especially when compared with other zones or regions within the national territory. I hope that this chapter can be of use for the readers who are interested in these topics from different disciplines and professional fields.

## Final reflections

Writing a last section for this chapter leads me to think about some research areas that need more attention in order to have a critical analysis of transnational incest in the context of Mexico and the United States. In my heart, I hope that future readers consider the reflections that I will put forth so that we are able to continue having interdisciplinary dialogues in the areas of intimacy and family studies.

- (a) *Intimacies and silences.* Ileana, like others I interviewed in the original study, kept the wide-ranging experiences of sexual violence that they shared with me in a very generous and vulnerable manner during the interviews, a secret for many years. Keeping a secret or living an experience in utmost silence, however, goes beyond just staying quiet. The silence and the secrets are indeed complex social constructions and both are just as much a cause as they are an effect of the sexual violence. At an early age, in fact, Ileana realized her vulnerability as a woman; the fear of her uncle kidnapping her when she was in middle school simply turned into other expressions years later when he would harass her over the phone during long-distance calls. In what ways does gender inequality (for example, what it means to be a woman living in Mexico) make these types of cases get lost in silence? In what ways does the deeply rooted influence of the Catholic Church – with its rituals of confession and forgiveness – sustain a narrow relationship with these types of silences and secrets?
- (b) *Cyber-violence in the family.* Sexual violence that is not interrupted just becomes reinvented in unpredictable and creative ways; this is one of the greatest lessons taught to me by the 60 adults who I interviewed in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico City, Guadalajara and Monterrey. Ileana’s uncle doubtlessly was intelligent and had discovered this corollary years before; however, for economic reasons he limited himself to the exclusive use of the telephone as

his main vehicle to harass and humiliate her. In our current time of advanced technology, in what ways can computers, cellular phones, tablets, as well as other tools that are now part of the so-called social networks (such as text messaging, chat rooms and websites) be used with the same purpose? How can we document and examine the social organization of cyber violence within the family?

- (c) *Healing and resilience.* Ileana, like the other women who I interviewed, are far from being simply “victims” or “damaged women” who accept passively the experiences of sexual violence they lived at the expense of men within their families such as uncles, fathers, brothers or male cousins. Some of them, in fact, spoke of situations in which their maternal figure not only believes the story of a young daughter who confides their experience of lived pain at the hands of their father, for example, but also act and intervene on their behalf and enact in that way a type of family justice. The mother or father who believes in the young boy or girl – without any trace of doubt and with full trust in the testimony – reaffirms and promotes the healthiest, warmest and most significant emotional intimacies in the families affected by incestuous sexual violence. This type of family intervention does not only offer immediate physical and emotional protection to a girl or boy, but it also protects them from the potential effect of psychological trauma. In fact, the women and men who I interviewed often explained that more than the violation itself, what caused the most intense emotional pain was the negative or punitive reaction by the family when the silence was broken and the violent experience or harassment was exposed. In what ways can the so-called family democratization facilitate healing, resilience and family justice in the families affected by incestuous sexual violence? (Schmukler Scornik & Alonso Sierra 2009). What do authority figures within the family (such as the mother, father or other adults) who promote these forms of intimacy, healing and justice in these families have in common?

I hope that this chapter stimulates future dialogue with regard to these topics in the social sciences, gender and sexuality studies, intimacy and society studies, migration studies, public policy, and human rights of girls, boys, women, and other groups at risk of experiencing complex forms of sexual violence on both sides of the border between Mexico and the United States.

## Notes

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- 2 III Encuentro Latinoamericano y del Caribe: La sexualidad frente a la sociedad, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City, June 26–28, 2012.
- 3 See Tabuenca, MS in this *Handbook* for a discussion of femicide in Mexico.
- 4 The reader is referred to the chapter by Cecilia Montes-Alcalá in this *Handbook* for a thorough explanation of the ways in which Chicanas/os, Mexicanas/os and Latinas/os use *estar vis-à-vis ser*.
- 5 Some of these expressions of sexual violence include (but are not limited to) sexual harassment in public, which include sexual harassment that women experience as they walk down the street and are subjected to the behavior and attitudes of some men who feel entitled to check out and often verbally evaluate women’s bodies, either individually or in a group. Women and men who exhibit non-normative gender expressions also experience different forms of sexual harassment in public, on the street, and in other public and shared spaces.



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## Appendix 30.1

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The following publications (all by the author, Gloria González-López) offer a more detailed analysis of some of the methodological and ethical dimensions of the study of incest and sexual violence in the four cities:

- 2015, *Family secrets: stories of incest and sexual violence in Mexico*, New York University Press, New York.
- 2013, 'The maquiladora syndrome', *Contexts*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 40.
- 2011, 'Mindful ethics: comments on informant-centered practices in sociological research', *Qualitative Sociology*, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 447–461.
- 2010, 'Ethnographic lessons: researching incest in Mexican families', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol. 39, no. 5, pp. 569–581.
- 2010, 'Engaged research on incest in Mexico', In P. Aggleton & R.G. Parker (eds.) *The Routledge handbook of sexuality, health and rights*, Routledge, New York, pp. 309–315.
- 2007, 'Crossing-back methodologies: transnational feminist research on incest in Mexico', *Forum*, Latin American Studies Association (LASA), vol. 37, no. 2, pp. 19–20.
- 2006, 'Epistemologies of the wound: Anzaldúan theories and Sociological research on incest in Mexican society', *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, vol. 41, pp. 17–24.

## Part VII

# International perspectives on Chicana/o Studies

## From Aztlán to shores abroad

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### Introduction

The section offers a collection of essays that interrogate the far-reaching impact beyond national borders that Chicana/o Studies has had in other countries, most notably the process of developing Chicana/o Studies as an intellectual field of study abroad. Given that the early stages of the field in the 1960s and 1970s were regarded as more insular, localized, or regional, the essays illustrate the interest that the field has inspired in diverse international settings. The authors discuss the process whereby Chicana/o Studies was introduced and integrated into scholarly inquiry, including multi-national collaboration on conferences, research, and publications. These exchanges and collaborations occurred at both the personal and institutional levels. The authors in this section present in-depth summaries and assessments from countries that have developed significant engagement with Chicana/o Studies: namely, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain. Throughout the *Handbook*, research and nuanced impressions on Chicana/o Studies from other countries (i.e., Ireland, Greece, and Norway) appear, but this section is explicitly devoted to a panoramic view of the place Chicana/o Studies has played within the academia of each respective country. While in the early years of Chicana/o Studies in the United States, the legitimacy of this field of inquiry was contested, in several other countries, the study of the history, literature, culture, and social status of this group was taken up by a number of scholars interested in how a discipline can develop and be utilized as a framework and a tool to more fully examine culture from the lens of ethnic studies thinkers and critics. The analyses herein reveal a robust interest exercised in each respective country and used to better capture intricacies and subtleties of a multicultural United States and what that says about the internal life of a country as well as the revisionism required to reconcile some of its suppressed past. The number of conferences held in these countries attest to a scholarly effervescence only rarely seen. At the same time, these international conferences and scholarly exchanges have motivated Chicana/o Studies to situate much of its developing scholarship into larger, comparative questions receiving in the process greater visibility and acclaim.

