Abstract • This article analyzes the influence of confessional manuals on Catholic priests who solicited sexual favors from parishioners during confession throughout colonial New Spain. It proposes that we think about centuries of sexual encounters between priests and parishioners through the concept of cross-generational abuse, which describes intersecting forms of priestly exploitation based on chronological age differentials, allegorical power relations based on the rhetoric of spiritual kinship, and priests’ own abilities to profess redemption years after conviction and thereby regain positions of authority over parishioners. The plurality of these forms of abuse move beyond the usual associations of cross-generational sex solely with the question of age. It opens up the category of cross-generational sex and enlarges its potential to be a topic for historical reflection.

Keywords • abuse, colonialism, confessional manuals, indigenous, Inquisition, Mexico, New Spain, solicitation

In 1785, in the northern colonial Mexican city of Zacatecas, a mulatto bricklayer named José Francisco Rodríguez denounced a resident priest to local commissaries of the Inquisition for coercing him during confession. Rodríguez was a married man, twenty-nine years old, who told inquisitors that one morning he had gone to the cloisters of the nearby Apostolic College of Our Lady of Guadalupe to confess his sins with Fray José María García, who listened intently. According to his denunciation, he confessed about a time he used a piece of cloth to supplement his own “virile member” when having sex with his wife. Hearing this, María García, then in his mid-thirties, asked the penitent to return to the church that night, with his wife, so the priest could measure the size of his erect penis to determine if the cloth was necessary for coitus. Rodríguez protested, after which the priest summoned him behind the cloisters and touched him. Feeling ashamed, “the father then took out his own member, which was already erect, and he rubbed it against his own member” for about half an hour, after which the priest told him his size was sufficient.¹ Father María García then withheld absolution from Rodríguez, telling him to return that week to receive penance and be absolved of his sins. He did not go back.
Some weeks later, working in the church school’s infirmary, Rodríguez happened upon the same priest, who asked why he never completed his confession. At the priest’s beckoning, they went behind the cloisters where the priest, once again, touched him. According to the denunciation, Father María García masturbated himself until he ejaculated, cajoling the man to again confess with him. Rodríguez never did, and the inquisition ignored his 1785 denunciation, as was common. In 1789, however, the priest voluntarily denounced himself “as one miserable and unhappy, having left the hand of God, and defeated by my passion, I have committed the horrendous crime of soliciting penitents ad turpia in confessione.” It was only when inquisitors decided to prosecute the priest that Rodríguez’s denunciation was compiled as evidence into one inquisitorial file. María García’s use of Latin when describing his crime of solicitatio ad turpia—soliciting sexual favors from parishioners immediately before, or during, or immediately after sacramental confession—points to long institutional genealogies of identifying this heresy among the clergy.

The Inquisition trial of Father María García is a provocative entry point from which to analyze the multiple meanings and possibilities of cross-generational sex in the Spanish colonial world, as the trial gives us a window into age-differentiated sexual encounters between priests and parishioners, cross-generational dynamics within confession, and the racial dimension of such abuse. Father María García’s case is illustrative in all regards. First, for nearly a decade, from 1782 to 1791, María García solicited at least thirty-two boys and men, and two women, all of whom were younger than him, though often not by much, and some of whom may have even been willing participants. Indeed, Rodríguez’s denunciation is particularly interesting precisely because his own age so closely approximated the priest’s. In this instance, cross-generational abuse was realized primarily through allegories of spiritual kinship. From the trial records, we learn that the priest, who was forty-two when he denounced himself in 1793, solicited sex from individuals ranging in age from twelve to thirty over the course of a decade. Nine individuals were under twenty, sixteen were in their twenties, and five were over thirty (with a handful whose ages were unknown). Over these encounters, the priest’s age progressed from thirty-one to forty. Importantly, from Rodríguez’s denunciation we gather that the priest’s strategy was to solicit sex from parishioners either while or after they confessed their sins of lust, withholding absolution as a threat. Furthermore, the fact that Rodríguez was a racially mixed mulatto, and not indigenous—the population for whom bilingual confessional manuals were geared—points to how racialization intersected with other forms of social marginalization to produce historical vulnerabilities among the Spanish Empire’s diverse colonial subjects.

The reality is that priests who often solicited sex from indigenous youths also did so with Spaniards, blacks, mulattos, mestizos, and other racially mixed parishioners. Certainly, not all sexual relations between priests and parishioners were de facto abuse, for there were other possibilities for vec-
tors of desire, mutuality, and agency within these encounters. Stephen Haliczer’s work on solicitation in early modern Spain—based on 223 Inquisition trials from 1530 to 1819—shows that 39 percent of female parishioners, often widows or women whose husbands abused or beat them, greeted such advances warmly and sometimes even “actively sought sexual favors from their confessor.”\(^4\) My own research shows that priests in New Spain regularly offered young parishioners gifts, clothing, chocolate, food, alcohol, and other items to engage in sex, and that many accepted such invitations either enthusiastically, willingly, or begrudgingly. Doubtless, when a priest took advantage of the confessional to procure sex, some parishioners were coerced whereas other may have been ambivalent about, or even excited by, the transgressive nature of the act. That said, in this article I am concerned with what I term cross-generational abuse (both individually and institutionally) and with priests who voluntarily or reluctantly admitted to coercing parishioners into sexual situations. This framework does not negate agency on the part of parishioners, but rather seeks to show how all priest–penitent relationships were marked by inherent power differentials intimately related to age and to metaphors of spiritual kinship.

Indeed, the confessional manuals’ explicit line of questioning, as we will see, though directed toward native peoples throughout Spain’s colonies, were equally directed to all members of colonial society. Thus, María García’s advances toward a twenty-nine-year-old mulatto man are inseparable from his sexual encounters with other parishioners, younger and older, indigenous and otherwise. Race was fundamental to how priests selected their victims, and was one of several factors, like age and social status, that marked particular subjects as especially vulnerable to solicitation. Age, Bianca Premo notes, was “fundamental to the legal logics of colonialism itself.”\(^5\) Confession thus became a testing ground for priests to identify their targets, both children and adults, all of whom were metaphorically the father’s spiritual “children” under the auspices of Church and God. This is the first of several cross-generational dynamics that play themselves out within the confessional, both literally and metaphorically. Though not mentioned explicitly in the trial transcripts, the genre of penitential texts known as confessional manuals prompted priests to ask explicit questions about their penitents’ sexual sins, and many priests, like Father María García, became excited by (and took advantage of) such verbal exchanges to facilitate sex. Age is one clear component of cross-generativity, but so too are the ways that some older convicted priests—years or even decades after being punished by the Inquisition—reflected back on their sinful youths in an attempt to once again administer confession to parishioners.

Throughout this article, I use the concept of cross-generational abuse to describe intersecting forms of priestly exploitation based on chronological age differentials, allegorical power relations based on the rhetoric of kinship, and priests’ own abilities to profess redemption years after conviction and thereby regain positions of authority over parishioners. The cross-genera-
tional nature of abuse is partly evident by the Catholic Church’s complicity across the centuries in shielding priests from public scandal, exposure, secular justice, and/or harsh inquisitorial punishment for their transgressions. The plurality of these uses of generationality allows me to move beyond the usual associations of cross-generational sex solely with the question of age, opening up the category and enlarging its potential to be a topic for historical reflection. Indeed, notions of childhood and adolescence in both early modern Iberia and colonial Latin America were themselves labile: adolescence was thought to begin between ages twelve and fourteen, at which age “children were required to take the Eucharist at least once a year and were deemed capable of marrying ‘by words in the present,’ although many synod constitutions still differentiated between the age of marriage for boys and girls (ages fourteen and twelve, respectively).”

In this article, I use a range of printed confessional manuals alongside a small but representative corpus of solicitation trials from the archives of the Holy Office of the Mexican Inquisition to show how generationality played out in relation to sex, power, and confession. Certainly not all relationships between friars and colonial parishioners were the same across the three-hundred-year history of New Spain’s existence from 1521 to 1821. Native peoples, for instance, were removed from the auspices of the Inquisition in 1570, pointing to their perpetual neophyte status (vis-à-vis Spaniards, mestizos, blacks, and mulattos) in the eyes of the Church. Here, however, I am interested in connecting historical instances of priestly solicitation across generations, showing how the paternalism and explicit sexual questioning of confessional manuals directly and indirectly influenced the words and actions of priests throughout New Spain, including the Spanish colonial Philippines, over the centuries. As the case of Father María García shows, some priests engaged in sexual encounters with both adult parishioners and youths, stretching the metaphors of spiritual kinship and the very meanings of cross-generational encounters in the process. Cross-generational sex—coercive, consensual, and often somewhere in between—could thus take place between, say, a thirty-two-year-old “Father” and his twenty-nine-year-old parishioner “child,” as happened when María García repeatedly touched Rodríguez. This discourse of the perpetual spiritual youth of parishioners—especially New Spain’s indigenous peoples—is evident in the language of the confessional manuals and the words of individual priests.

The case of Father María García shows us that parishioners of all ages could, and did, become the targets of some priests’ desires. While it was certainly easier for a priest to coerce a child or adolescent than an adult, some priests appear not to have made much of a distinction (judging by the diverse ages of those they solicited sex from). Many soliciting priests simply looked for those that would willingly (or silently) accept their propositions. To understand how cross-generational sex manifests itself in the case of Father María García and others like it, influenced as they were by the explicit questions of the confessional manuals around the Sixth Command-
ment (“Thou shalt not commit adultery”), we must delve deeply into what I have elsewhere termed the “archives of negligence” of the Catholic Church. After exploring below how generationality plays itself out, both literally and metaphorically, in confessional discourse, I turn to the language of the manuals themselves. I then consider cases of soliciting priests in order to show how cross-generational abuse attained its many meanings in relation to sex and power under colonialism.

Cross-Generational Dynamics of Confession

While we do not know the extent to which Father María García used confessional manuals to solicit sex from parishioners, it is no coincidence that in Rodríguez’s 1785 denunciation the priest acted only after hearing him explicitly confess his sins of lust. His narration of using cloth as a dildo with his wife excited the priest, who then assumed Rodríguez would be an easy target. What is certain is that the priest had access to, and would have been deeply familiar with, the genre of theological texts known as confessional manuals or confessionarios. These were essentially how-to guides for priests to properly administer the sacrament of confession to their parishioners in vernacular languages. While confessional manuals were frequently written in Latin, Spanish, or Portuguese in early modern Iberia (sometimes alongside Catalan, Galician, or Basque translations), in Spain’s colonies the genre took on a heightened significance in that the manuals had to be translated into indigenous languages, which gave rise to mistranslation and mutual misunderstandings. Though solely Spanish-language manuals existed, colonial confessionarios were most commonly bilingual, penned in both Spanish (or Latin) and some indigenous language (Nahuatl, Zapotec, Mixtec, Purépecha, Mixe, and Maya in Mexico; Tagalog and Visayan in the Philippines; and Quechua or Aymara in the Andes). These texts regularly appear with one column in Spanish and the other in some native language, as in Alonso de Molina’s Spanish–Nahuatl 1565 Confessionario mayor, en lengua mexicana y castellana (Figure 1).

In colonial Latin America, the confessional manuals took on particularly heightened meanings because they were envisioned by the Church and its missionaries as one of the most powerful tools to convert native peoples, many of whom had recently been converted to Catholicism and spoke neither Spanish nor Latin. Historian Serge Gruzinski argues that confession in New Spain was a “refined tool of ideological subjection and of domination over the individual.” Jorge Klor de Alva similarly writes of the “control mechanisms bound up in the rise of the penitential discipline.” Other scholars emphasize confessional ambiguity. Regina Harrison notes that confessional discourse in the colonial Andes was “hampered because of lexical disparities between Quechua and Spanish referents.” Matthew O’Hara writes that the “act of confession was full of tension and poten-
ially contradictory motivations and outcomes.” 11 Aided by manuals with such diverse potential, priests and missionaries throughout the Spanish colonial world sought to access the interiority of all parishioners, with native peoples presenting particular challenges. Priests also used Spanish-language confessional manuals to administer confession to ethnically diverse spiritual “children” in urban centers, as the list of Father María García’s victims between Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí, Tlaxcala, and several smaller mining towns shows: María García confessed to soliciting five indigenous peoples
(four men and a woman), six mulatto men, six Spanish men, twelve racially mixed *quebrado* men, and a *quebrada* woman, along with some whose identities he did not remember.

The paternalistic framing of the manuals is illustrative in terms of broadening our definitions of the cross-generational encounter. In 1634, a mestizo priest named Bartolomé de Alva, of Spanish and indigenous heritage, published his widely circulated bilingual Spanish and Nahuatl *Confesionario mayor y menor en lengua Mexicana*. Intergenerationality plays itself out here, as in other manuals, through metaphors of spiritual kinship that infantilized all Christians, but especially New Spain’s native peoples. Alva begins his *Confesionario mayor* with an admonitory speech for the indigenous parishioner about to make his or her confession: “My beloved child, you have come here today, and in addition God has willed that we have [lived to] reach this time.”12 For this is a time of confession and absolution, a time of welcoming those in darkness into the bosom of the Church.

Alva enlightens his children: “Now first it is very necessary that we teach you, opening your eyes concerning what is the dark and obscure night in which you still live and with which you greatly frighten and scandalize the other Christians who are your neighbors, the Spaniards. For they see that you are not strong in the faith, that still today the holy faith has not yet taken root and borne fruit in your heart.”13 Here, Alva portrays the Nahuas as perpetual neophytes who might never attain spiritual “maturity,” still young in their faith, and as children whose own childlike status is both Christian metaphor and an allegory for their own soteriological distancing from God, that is, until the fruits of faith are “borne” in the native person’s heart. Alva chastises the Nahuas for being bad spiritual siblings to those who have embraced Catholicism: “Look and marvel at the people of Japan, your younger brothers in the faith, and others who have recently received the faith, for already they have surpassed you in works of faith, throwing you quickly [to the side].”14 With the priest as mediator between parishioner and God, it was his duty to teach and properly guide his flock through the proper tenets of faith. Interpellated through God (the divine Father) and priest (a spiritual father), indigenous converts in the Americas were subjected to a will to know that seeped with paternalism and notions of the neophytes’ temporal distancing from the Word of God and their relatively late arrival to the faith.

For Alva, and others like him, it was only when the “fruit” of faith took root in native peoples’ hearts that a sincere generation of Christian Nahuas could be nurtured toward salvation. But it was also a will to know about the body in all of its sinful thoughts and acts—for repentance was the only path to salvation. Alva’s confessional manual, like all others, spent a great deal of time articulating the sins of lust under the rubric of the Sixth Commandment. The very functioning of the confessional manuals was thus inseparable from, and in some ways constitutive of, the line of questioning around sexual sin. As we have already seen, notions of spiritual kinship
were fundamental to getting native peoples to accept the faith, internalize Christian notions of guilt and sin, and ultimately submit to the authority of Church and crown.

Translating and Enunciating “Dirty Pleasures”

If we look at one of the earliest Mexican bilingual confessional manuals—Fray Alonso de Molina’s 1565 Confessionario mayor, en lengua mexicana y castellana—we get a good sense of how one early Franciscan missionary framed his own interventions around the Sixth Commandment, thereby enunciating a cross-generational dialogue around desire. Part of the evangelizing project was conveying the very meanings of “sin” and “shame” to Nahuatl-speaking converts. Among his questions, Molina advises priests in both Spanish and Nahuatl to ask the following of their male parishioners: “Have you desired some woman, or slept with her? With how many women have you had contact? Was she your relative, or do you owe her something, or is she another’s wife?” From questions on coveting another’s wife and improper kissing and touching, Molina moves on to themes such as estupro (the robbing of a woman’s virginity) and sodomy. Regarding the “sins against nature,” he asks: “Have you had sex with some man, or he with you? Did you do it to him with your hands, or you to another, or another to you? Because of this, did you fall into pollution, spilling your seed? Did you have sex with a dog, sheep, or hen? Did you, with your friends, have sex together with some woman? How many times does the memory of such dirty pleasures come to you?”

Following this line of questioning, Molina similarly counseled priests to pose invasive queries of Nahua parishioners about nocturnal emissions and the “dirty pleasures” they experienced in recalling them; thoughts of lustful sins “in the house of our Lord God”; prostitution and procurement; and the coveting of unknown women. Molina then, as did nearly all the other authors of confessional manuals, sets out a series of questions to be asked specifically of women: “Have you rubbed the shameful parts of some man? For this, did you fall into pollution? Have you committed some sin against nature, with another woman like yourself? Did you shave, adorning yourself, putting something on your face so that others covet you?” Molina then turns his attention to the institution of marriage, asking a series of questions for married men and women before moving on to the Seventh Commandment (“Thou shalt not kill”).

Most useful for our purposes here are how authors of confessional manuals in New Spain linguistically staged desire—setting in motion chains of linguistic understanding of the meanings of sexual sin among indigenous peoples—for future generations of priests and missionaries who would come after them. When Molina, for instance, in both his dictionary and confessionario, defined and used the Nahuatl terms cuiloni or chimouhqui for “sodomite,”
culontia for “to commit the nefarious sin,” telchiualoni for “abominable,” and patlachuia for “one woman doing to another.” he set in writing bodily terms that would be utilized not only by priests in central Mexico, who would confess Nahuatl-speaking parishioners in their native tongue, but also by future generations of Spanish missionaries who would then use those terms, building on them, to pen their own confessional manuals in the decades to come.18

I posit that each and every time a Spanish or mestizo priest asked indigenous parishioners about their intimate desires and their sexual sins, they were enacting a linguistic exercise of cross-generational sexual encounter inherited from earlier generations of priests and missionaries who had gone before them. Molina, who penned one of the earliest Nahuatl–Spanish confessional manuals in Mexico, likewise built his linguistic expertise of Nahuatl partly among the knowledge of Spanish missionaries who preceded him. And so too did Bartolomé de Alva after him. Thus, since the entire colonial project of conversion rested fundamentally on getting native peoples to internalize Christian mores and the concept of “sin,” the cross-generational sharing of knowledge (and vocabularies) around indigenous notions of sex and desire in the confessional manuals became one key mode of articulating cross-generational sexual encounters under colonialism.

In terms of broader generational shifts, as the colonial period wore on, Spanish priests taxonomically expanded the possibilities for sexual sin, probing even deeper into parishioners’ interiority and more thoroughly articulating the vast realm of “sin.” Moving into the late eighteenth century, Jerónimo Tomás de Aquino Cortés y Zedeño’s 1765 Arte, vocabulario y confessionario en el idioma mexicano illustrates such shifts partly through metaphors of racial mixing and linguistic corruption.19 Cortés y Zedeño opens his confessional manual with a preface explaining that his joint Nahuatl grammar, dictionary, and confessional manual will aid the “poor Indians” attain the glory of heaven by enabling other priests to better instruct them in the faith. Cortés y Zedeño asserts that in the northern Bishopric of Guadalajara, where he proselytized, due to centuries of contact with the Spaniards the indigenous peoples “have learned various Castilian words, from which it results that their language is already very adulterated, frequently mixing Mexican with Castilian words.” He writes that in Guadalajara “the Mexican language is full of vices, and not that purity that is still conserved in some areas neighboring Mexico [City].”20 He offers his colloquial dictionary and confessionario—which greatly contrast with the standard classical Nahuatl of earlier manuals—as a tool in future priests’ evangelization efforts.

What stands out in Cortés y Zedeño’s confessional manual is the sheer quantity of questions—an almost obsessive cataloging—subsumed under the Sixth Commandment that he counsels priests to ask. Historians have demonstrated that confessional manuals in the Iberian Peninsula dedicated far fewer questions around the Sixth Commandment than did their bilingual American counterparts, demonstrating that Spanish priests conceived
of native peoples as inherently more prone to sin than Spaniards or other inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula. We too see changes over time around the specificities of sin. Whereas Alva and Molina, respectively, dedicated a few dozen questions to the Sixth Commandment (with an extra dozen or so to be asked of the women), Cortés y Zedeño included nearly one hundred questions around lust and fornication to guide priests in the colloquial terminology and phrasing, with many of these questions being products of his own eighteenth-century anxieties.

Cortés y Zedeño asks, for instance, “Did you kiss her honesty [honestidad; i.e., genitals], and [did] she kiss yours?” broaching the topics of cunnilingus and fellatio, which were not explicitly mentioned in earlier confessional manuals (though they can sometimes be inferred by the language on the “sins against nature”). Showing an interest in the obscene and pornographic prints, images, and writings that circulated widely in the eighteenth-century world, he asks: “Perhaps you write, and send, lascivious papers?”; “Perhaps you have had, or you have, or have read, and given yourself into reading lascivious books?”; and “Perhaps you own lascivious images, and their honest flesh [carnes honestas] are naked?” Cortés y Zedeño touches too on biting with sexual aims, a topic never broached in earlier confessional manuals (and a possible gesture toward sadism): “Perhaps with sordid aims, you bit their [a man’s or a woman’s] face, shoulder, breasts, arms, or hands?” This was a priest on whom eighteenth-century erotic literature and pornographic prints from Europe had certainly made a great impression.

By the mid-eighteenth century in New Spain, the possibilities (and taxonomies) of sexual sin for indigenous parishioners had greatly expanded, discursively speaking, as part of broader generational shifts around ideas of the body, which related partly to increasingly medicalized categories of desire as well as to the influx of “pornography” from Europe to the Americas. These and other framings of sexual sin in colonial Mexico must be seen through generational shifts, both linguistic and conceptual, in the colonial incursions of priests into the bodies and minds of parishioners. As we will see below, many priests in colonial Mexico twisted the language (and aims) of the confessional manuals’ explicit questions to their own erotic ends. As Harrison notes regarding Luis Gerónimo de Oré’s 1598 Andean Spanish-, Quechua-, and Aymara-language Symbolo catholico indiano, the priest’s racy language might provide “masturbatory inspiration by means of the interrogatory.”21 This observation is certainly as applicable to priests as it is to parishioners. Centuries later, as Vicente Rafael notes with regard to Sebastian Totanes’s 1745 Spanish–Tagalog Manual tagalog para auxilio a los religiosos de esta provincia, “the priest’s discursive drift tends to mimic the sexual act it is decrying. Interest in the quantity of transgressions leads to a feverish desire to learn of their quality.”22 Such feverish desires to verbally access the bodies and desires of parishioners all too frequently bled into the real, and confessional discourse could, and did, occasionally instill desire in priests.
Priests and their Spiritual “Children”

Early in his 1634 confessional manual, Bartolomé de Alva broaches shame and the human propensity to sin. In Spanish, he writes:

*Now then, child,* do not be disturbed, do not be ashamed [before] me, because although I am in the place of God and am His minister I am a man like you, and if He releases me from his grasp it could happen that I would fall and dirty myself in greater sins than you. *And thus, my child,* say and confess your offenses that, be they what they may, they cannot frighten me since we are [together] in [this sinful] world.23

And fall into sin many priests did, using confessional manuals and their vaunted role in colonial society as a means to coerce and acquire sex. As Haliczzer writes, in early modern Spain a priest’s “power to grant or withhold absolution, to levy and control penance, and his superior education and social status made the confessional relationship inherently unequal.”24 This was certainly the case with Father María García, like so many other priests, who withheld absolution to coerce parishioners into future sexual encounters.

If we return to his case, we now have a better sense of how he might have arrived at some of the many questions around sex, desire, and lust that he likely would have asked his parishioners. The priest eventually admitted, in 1793, to soliciting at least thirty-two indigenous, Spanish, mulatto, and racially mixed *casta* men, and two women, during confession in over ten towns between the years of 1782 and 1791. There were likely many more: in the priest’s words (spoken in the first-person and recorded in the third-person, as was customary, by the notary or scribe), “these are those that he remembers.” Furthermore, Father María García was explicit about his tactics when choosing victims, admitting that he always “searched for rustic and ignorant people in whom there was the least danger that they denounce or defame him,” handpicking those he thought least likely to denounce him or be seen as credible.25 Of course, his sense of parishioners’ rusticity and ignorance was based on age, race, and social status. Inquisitors, in punishing him, permanently revoked his right to administer confession (except to other members of the clergy), sentenced him to abjure *de levi* (that is, “of light” suspicion of heresy), and required him to confess his sins and perform spiritual exercises for one month. This was on par with punishments that the Inquisition meted out to other priests for sodomy and solicitation no matter how egregious their crimes were.

In the archives of the Mexican Inquisition, there is no shortage of other examples in which an individual priest’s line of questioning around the sins of lust—guided by the confessional manuals, often improvising—served ulterior motives. Almost always, this was with younger racially and socially marginalized victims who were hand-selected by the priest. We see a clear pattern of older priests soliciting boys and girls, and women and men, all of
whom were their spiritual “children.” One such case from 1609 involved a forty-five-year-old Spanish priest, Cristóbal de Valencia, who was fluent in Yucatecan Maya and living in the Yucatán Peninsula. Dozens of Maya parishioners from the indigenous towns of Hocabá, Sanahcat, Yaxcabá, and Hoctún denounced him for solicitation, for attempted sodomy, for fellatio, and for telling male parishioners during confession that fellatio was a path to sainthood. They told stories of a priest who often initiated sex “after having drunk much wine, being deprived of his senses.” One twelve-year-old Maya boy, Juan Couch, asserted that Valencia had told him it would be a “work of God, should he let the priest fondle him.” The 176-folio trial transcripts show that, while many indigenous parishioners likely exaggerated their claims, the priest did admit to habitual sex with female indigenous parishioners and also that “as a wretched being, he had engaged in some caresses and pollutions [i.e., masturbation] with some men in the manner described in the charges against him.” Valencia denied uttering any heretical statements—asserting his detractors were “vile Indians, lowly, drunks, vicious, easy to persuade, and of little faith and trustworthiness”—and he denied that these acts took place in confession. As with María García, the priest’s alleged victims ranged in age, from adolescents to those nearly the same age as the priest. In 1612, inquisitors found him guilty of light suspicion of heresy, and he was sentenced to abjure de levi. Yet his punishment was particularly lenient: he was exiled from Hocobá, deprived of the right to confess women (for two years), and was fined one hundred pesos for the trial costs.

Many other priests used their privileged relationship with God to convince young parishioners to engage in sexual acts, and that to do otherwise would be a sin. Such persuasions on the part of priests distorted the generational wisdom around the “fathers” teaching their spiritual “children” the tenets of the faith, fomenting confusion among native peoples around both Catholicism and its ministers. In the 1620s, Franciscan friar Esteban Rodríguez, fluent in Nahuatl, Purépecha, and Otomí, was denounced across several parishes in northwestern Mexico for asking native peoples lurid questions in confession (such as if they had masturbated in front of holy images—a question that no confessional manual broached). The priest admitted to inquisitors that, as indigenous parishioners confessed their sins of lust, he would probe them further, asking them unorthodox questions and pleading that the boys expose their “members,” after which he would take the cord of his habit and masturbate them as he prayed for them not to sin (in their own native languages). Turning to the Spanish colonial Philippines, we find similar patterns of violation. Between the 1770s and 1790s, the Augustinian missionary Agustín María was denounced by several Tagalog- and Hiligaynon-speaking male and female parishioners for having whipped them and masturbated on them in the process, supposedly as a form of penance for their sins. The priest admitted to inquisitors that he had indeed committed acts of solicitation.
In both cases, separated by time and geography, we see the Church’s own intergenerational methods of shielding priests from serious punishment. In July of 1627, the Inquisition sentenced Rodríguez to abjure de levi and to four years of confinement in a convent. They exiled him from Tlaxcalilla and San Luis Potosí for ten years, stripping him of his privilege to administer confession. After some thirteen years of confinement to the convent, Rodríguez petitioned Church officials:

I am [now] an elderly friar, son of good parents [i.e., with no Jewish, Indian, or black relatives], and I confess my crimes with true repentance of them, and I will naturally live [only a] few more years, now that I am already a minister so necessary for the new conversions [of Indians] because I speak four languages, some of the most difficult that there are in this said province [Zacatecas], which are Nahuatl, Otomi, Purépecha, and Guachichil, in which I have administered for a period of thirty years.29

That Rodríguez, in 1640, successfully presented himself as an aging and “elderly friar” who was, by then, “truly” repentant of his earlier crimes shows that he was able to espouse a temporal discourse (of aging) in conjunction with a stance of contrition, which all but exonerated him in the eyes of Church officials. The Church granted his petition.

In a similar vein, María openly confessed to having solicited twenty-three men and four women in the Philippines, and in 1786 the Inquisition sentenced him to banishment from Manila, reclusion in a monastery for ten years, spiritual penances, and a loss of the privilege to administer confession. Yet, as with Rodríguez, this priest exhibited good behavior, and in 1792 he was reinstated as a priest some twenty leagues from Manila. Several years later, he was once again allowed to administer the sacrament of confession to native parishioners of the Philippines. While the records are silent on the specific language of Agustín María’s petition, in seeking to reinstate his ability to administer and hear confessions (after many years in confinement) he, like Esteban Rodríguez, would have presented an image of himself, some fifteen years after his initial sentencing, as an aging priest who no longer posed a threat to his parishioners, whether or not that was true. In essence, both of these priests levied their own aging selves, in (slightly) later periods of their lives, to negotiate their way back into the privileged space of the confessional.

This key manifestation of cross-generational sexuality can be gleaned from the ways that priests, like those above, portrayed themselves at different points in their lives, representing themselves at an older age as having been reformed, less desirous, and thereby deserving of reconciliation. Part of this certainly connects to perceptions (and realities) of waning sexual desire as individuals age. We see this too in the case of a Jesuit priest in central Mexico, Ángel María Quesa, who was denounced by one boy and two young women for solicitation between the years of 1765 and 1773. Quesa admitted to many of these acts, and in 1774 the Inquisition found him guilty of the
crime of solicitation, sentencing him to abjure *de levi* and to spend a period of reclusion in a monastery, permanently revoking his right to administer confession. Yet in 1785, eleven years after being sentenced, priests in the monastery lobbied on his behalf to Church officials. The specific language of that petition is illustrative: “It appears to us that considerable time that has passed since his crimes and his sentencing, and that the merits of the case [against him] were not great in number, and now that the defendant *finds himself in the advanced age of fifty, in which his passions [of lust] should be greatly extinguished*, the said Don Ángel Quesa might [once again] be greatly employed in the piety of Our Holy Church.”

While the archives do not hold the Church’s response to the petition, this particular instance of lobbying on the part of sympathetic members of the priesthood shows, yet again, how representations of aging priests might work in the favor of soliciting priests who wanted to reinstate their right to administer confession years or decades after it was “permanently” revoked. In appealing to Church authorities to be able to, yet again, administer confession to parishioners after a long period since his documented crimes, Father Quesa staged a cross-generational performance of his own age, temporally distancing his current (reformed and repentant) self from his previous (sinful and unremorseful) self. The Catholic Church has historically looked favorably upon such transformations, frequently placing the well-being of priests above that of parishioners. The issue at stake here is not merely that some older priests sought to vindicate their earlier sinful behavior, but rather that they did so specifically to be able to yet again administer the sacrament of penance to younger generations of parishioners. We can only speculate that some priests in similar positions were genuinely repentant and reformed, whereas other priests—perhaps even Esteban Rodríguez, Augustín María, or Ángel María Quesa (though the archives are silent on the issue)—clearly wanted privileged access to young parishioners, yet again, to satiate both their spiritual and corporeal desires, despite the fact that they had convincingly portrayed themselves as having aged out of sexual desire.

**Archival Connections**

To begin to understand the actions of individual priests and their victims, as well as the *longue durée* institutional reactions (and cover-ups) on the part of the Church in Latin America, we need to think about generationality—that is, generational identities and encounters across both age and time—in relation to sexuality, temporality, and power. Focusing on Inquisition trials from both the early and late colonial periods leaves us with a picture of aging priests who solicited younger and younger generations of New Spain’s multiethnic parishioners in urban and rural areas, using the cross-generational wisdom of confessional manuals to facilitate sexual encounters. As I
have suggested above, cross-generational sexuality functions in all manner of ways—temporally and archivally—in relation to the sacrament of confession. I have proposed that we think more capacious about the phenomenon of cross-generational sex as not simply something that occurred between adults and children, but rather between church “fathers” and their spiritual “children” of diverse ages, a phenomenon that was partly enabled by power differentials and the rhetoric of spiritual kinship, which stretched up to God.

In a recent article on the “queer archive” of Catholic sexual abuse in the United States, Anthony Petro asks: “What kinds of political work can queer analysis of the history of Catholic sexual abuse do—for the survivors of abuse, for the abusers and those who protected them, and for all of us trying to make sense of this case and so many others now accessible through this archive?” The archival cases that I have discussed here, as well as the confessional manuals that inspired the priests, are all part of a vast cultural and historical archive of desire that points to the cross-generational nature of clerical sexual transgressions. Petro rightly shows how “the ecclesiastical, cultural, or theological practices of Catholicism not only enable but also produce the kinds of subjects who commit (and who experience) acts of abuse.”31 My own research and writing are also part of an attempt to call out the cross-generational violations of the Catholic Church, which are evidenced by many centuries of privileging priests over the well-being of individual parishioners.

Historically speaking, the Catholic Church, with its deeply rooted emphasis on clerical celibacy, created the very conditions necessary for the persistent exploitation of the Church’s spiritual “children” in all meanings of that word. The Mexican Inquisition, as we have seen, was more interested in upholding the sanctity of the sacrament of confession than in punishing priests who solicited penitents and who violated their vows of celibacy. For so many centuries of priests procuring sex in the Spanish colonial world to make historical sense, we must think about generationality in terms of spiritual kinship, chronological representation of priestly desires, and institutional cover-ups alongside sex between adults, adolescents, and minors. When a layperson, independent of her or his age, in colonial New Spain—in central Mexico, Guatemala, Nueva California, the Spanish colonial Philippines, or elsewhere in the Viceroyalty of New Spain—was coerced into a sexual encounter with a Catholic priest, either during the act of confession or immediately before or after, some core spiritual component was inseparable from that interaction. At the very least, the parishioner’s own desire to confess and to carry out penance greatly influenced his or her impulse to comply with a coercive priest’s demands. Such encounters might thus be seen to as part of a chain of (temporal) being and interaction that stretched up to heaven, with the priest as God’s earthly intermediary. For as Rafael notes, “the logic of contrition is such that human desires should consist entirely of desiring God’s desire. Forgiveness can only come after desires have
been restructured so that the desire for the Father has been linked to the desire of the Father.”

Historical archives allow us (in the present) to produce and construct historical genealogies of occlusion in terms of how the Church censors its own records and has historically protected priests from exposure and public scandal as well as from state and civil authorities. That the Catholic Church throughout Latin America and the Philippines has historically suppressed or otherwise ignored denunciations of priests is in itself a cross-generational strategy to silence victims. Indeed, in the archives of the Mexican Inquisition—housed in Mexico’s national archive, the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) in Mexico City—there are literally thousands of such ignored denunciations, from the early 1500s to the 1820s, that inquisitors, for one reason or another, never investigated. The archives invite us to think about desire and sexuality across generations. This too, in our move to render the archives political in the fight against clerical sexual abuse, across time and place, is part of cross-generational sexuality (and intergenerational cover-ups by the Church).

Today, the Catholic Church throughout Latin America and its ex-colonies, including the Philippines, resorts to many of the same tactics that it did throughout the colonial period to “address” the issue of clerical sexual abuse: transferring accused priests between parishes to minimize public scandal; placing blame on the victims and their families; undermining the credibility of victims; initiating vast institutional cover-ups that privilege the well-being of the priests over that of their victims; and, hiding, altering, destroying, or archiving away, out of sight, documents related to priests procuring sex with their parishioners. To confront these issues in the present, we must take the Catholic Church to task, historically speaking, on the issue of cross-generational clerical sexual abuse by means of archives and critical historical reflection.

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Notes

1.Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico (hereafter AGN), Inquisición 1293, exp. 4, ff. 14–16.


15. Alonso de Molina, Confessionario mayor, en lengua mexicana y castellana (Mexico: Casa de Antonio Espinosa, 1565), 11. The translations that follow are from the Spanish.

17. Ibid., 12–13.
24. Haliczer, Sexuality in the Confessional, 8.
25. AGN, Inquisición 1292, exp. 15, f. 146.
26. Ibid., 288, exp. 1, fols. 1–176. See also ibid., 472, exp. 5.
27. Ibid., 288, exp. 1, f. 7.
28. Ibid., 288, exp. 1, f. 171.
30. AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Box 6534, Exp. 54.
32. Rafael, Contracting Colonialism, 99.