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Amanda Tovar

University of Texas, Austin, amandatovar@utexas.edu

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Chisme Saves Lives: Chisme, and #MeToo as Storytelling Interventions in Sexual Violence

Amanda Tovar

I have always had a strained relationship with my mother, which was much worse when I was younger. Some days were good days filled with love and tenderness, and some days were filled with utter loneliness and despair. I never understood the constant shifts in her mood and to this day I am often perplexed by her. My perception of my mom shifted in December of 2011 when I texted her about my experience with incestual sexual abuse. The following day my mother traveled from her home in Houston to Edinburg, Texas where I was living at the time. She held me when I saw her, rubbed my head, and told me everything was going to be okay. I confessed to her that I could not keep this secret to myself anymore, that the nightmares were too severe. Following that moment, my mother shared with me her own #MeToo story. She informed me that she was also sexually abused, being groomed from a young age by her own father. In that very moment, hearing about her experience was too heavy to handle but in the days that followed I began to have a sense of clarity over *who* my mother was. It dawned on me that she lived years in silence not sharing with my sisters and me due to her own confusion about her experiences which Bessel Van Der Kolk describes as “bewilderment about the difference between love and terror; pain and pleasure.”¹ It was then that I began to wonder what my relationship with my mother would be had she told me about her experiences with incestual abuse sooner. Would it have been easier to have a relationship with her if I understood her? Would I be kinder to her? Would I be more willing to receive her love now that I knew about her own experience with sexual abuse?

¹ Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 14.

My work aims to contribute to the ongoing conversations in the field of sexual abuse by demonstrating the ways chisme (or gossiping), and the #MeToo movement serve as active forms of storytelling, the action of telling any story whether fiction or nonfiction, that can be used as a form of healing. This work builds upon the work of scholars like Gloria González-López who utilizes *los relatos de vida*, rich oral practices of traditional stories and anecdotes in Mexican families as a methodology to emphasize incestual sexual abuse.² Likewise, I will utilize Gloria Anzaldúa's *autoteoria-historia*, or a "personal essay that theorizes," as a tool to tell my story to amplify my own voice.³ The conceptual framework provided by González-López and Anzaldúa assists me in showcasing how chisme, and the #MeToo movement are *relatos de vida* and can be used as an important innovation of storytelling.

Chisme as a Form of Storytelling

In my hometown in the Rio Grande Valley, amongst my circle of friends that is "chisme saves lives," which literally translates to "gossip saves lives." Often chisme, or "chismeando," participating in chisme or gossip, is viewed by hometown community as extremely feminine; however, it is important to view chisme as a valuable praxis of storytelling. Author of *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals*, Aurora Levins Morales, writes "we have to choose which truths we tell based on the impact they will have. What do these truths allow people to think about? What actions can they ignite? Who is it most strategic to reach with a particular truth" regarding storytelling.⁴ Engaging in chisme allows individuals to inform one another about potential sexual predators and abusers. In this context, chisme becomes a strategic and effective way of telling impactful stories that could potentially save lives.

While thinking about how chisme can save lives, I reflect upon my mother's story. My biological parents divorced when I was six years old, and my mother moved hours north of the Rio Grande Valley further straining our

² Gloria González-López, *Family Secrets/Secretos De Familia: Stories of Incest and Sexual Violence in Mexico* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 11.

³ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 238.

⁴ Aurora Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 45.

relationship. While divorce is stigmatized as untraditional by the Church—my family was steeped in heteronormative patriarchal expectations of silence. Anzaldúa writes that our culture “insists that women are subservient to males” and if she rebels, she is a *mujer mala*.⁵ Speaking about incestual abuse is regarded as being defiant, a rebel, a *mujer mala*. On April 30, 2017, my mother posted a picture of herself at 7 years old holding her baby brother whom she promised to always protect (fig. 1). Within the post, she described how at 12 years old she came forward to a teacher and testified against her father. She also details being slut-shamed and labeled “attention seeking” by her own family. Growing up I did hear stories from her paternal family about my mother being imaginative and a *chismosa*—one who gossips. Had she not rebelled, had she not gossiped, her father may have also assaulted others in the family such as my mother’s sister, brother, me, or my sisters. Instead, my mother’s actions essentially saved us—our lives—from her father’s abuse.

⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute), 39.

April is an awareness month for many things including Autism, Parkinson's, and quite a few others.....

It is also sexual assault and child abuse prevention month....

I have been posting a lot about child abuse lately....I feel like it is something that society as a whole feels like it is something that should not be discussed....however, not discussing it is only hurting more and more innocent children. We need to stand up and stick up for the children who have no voice.

This means so much to me because at the age of around 3 years old I started being "groomed". I was sexually abused as a young child. I didn't know it was wrong. I didn't know that I was allowed to say "NO". I was never told about sexual abuse. I was told not to talk to strangers....but this person wasn't a stranger. This person was my hero. This person was the one I trusted more than anyone in the world.....

When I was 12 I watched a video in school about sexual abuse....I told my teacher that someone had done those things to me. I then had to testify against this person....I was blamed for the abuse....it was my fault. I was a slut and a whore. I was NEVER to speak about my abuse. No family member ever asked me how I was. Instead they didn't want me around.

I am now 42 years old and I am for the first time in my life able to talk about it. I have extreme insomnia and when I am able to sleep I wake up screaming from horrible nightmares...all from my abuse. I have extreme anxiety from it. I have self doubt and very low self-esteem. I have so many issues that most days I feel crazy. There is so much more to say.....

However...this post is NOT for pity or for any reason BUT for you to talk to your children about it. Sexual abuse was something I was NEVER allowed to discuss and that was so ingrained in me that I never even talked to my daughters about it.

PLEASE talk to your children....talk to your nieces and nephews, talk to your friends kids, talk to everyone about it. This is something that needs to be discussed. Only once everyone is able to talk about it can we try and stop it from happening to other children.

I do wanna thank those of you who have been here supporting me these last few months! Thank you for letting me cry. Thank you for checking on me. Thank you for loving me....all of me....even the broken parts.

I am adding a picture of me at 7 years old.....I had already been being abused for years....as I held my brother I made a promise I would always try and protect him.....I was 7! That shouldn't have been something that I should have been thinking.....

PLEASE talk about it....

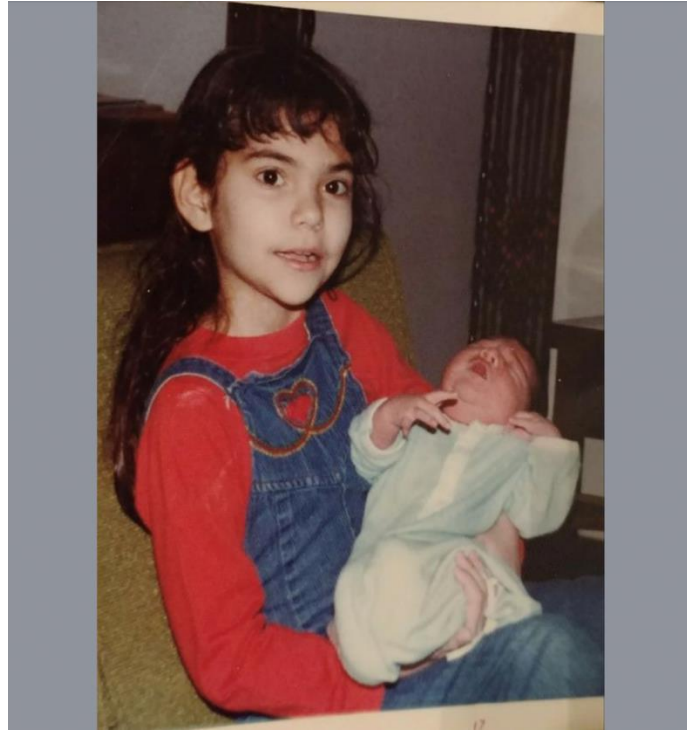


Figure 1, Facebook post by my mother with accompanying picture of her and her brother.

In *Las Hijas de Juan: Daughters Betrayed* author Josie Méndez-Negrete recounts the abuse she, her sisters, and her mother endured at the hands of her biological father, like my mother's experience. In the text, Méndez-Negrete's father is incarcerated because of the abuse he inflicted on his family and following that process the family begins to heal. Méndez-Negrete writes: "we abused girls who survived were drawn to each other like fireflies to light. Our lonely hearts and mangled souls made us friends. We, discarded and heartbroken girls, were attracted to each other like magnets. We created the embrace we needed to feel; we helped each other to survive."⁶ She goes on to say that eventually her and her friends went on to "spill the beans" about their abuse, creating a sisterhood of survival.⁷ Participating in chisme to form kinship,

⁶ Josie Méndez-Negrete, *Las Hijas De Juan: Daughters Betrayed* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 170.

⁷Ibid.,170.

therefore, is one way to forge solidarity and community for one's sanity. In this sense it quite literally saves lives. Stories like my mother's and Méndez-Negrete's are quite literally *los relatos de vida* incarnate, one shared on Facebook, the other in the form of a book—both extremely important interventions in storytelling regarding sexual violence.

#MeToo as Storytelling, With and Without a Hashtag

In the fall of 2017, my Twitter feed was flooded with tweets with the accompanying #MeToo hashtag, and rightfully so. The #MeToo hashtag was intended to bring light to the insidious rate at which women were sexually assaulted by men to the public eye. During the commencement of the #MeToo movement, it was successful in the public take down of many celebrities, CEOs, and politicians, over two hundred cases in two years.⁸ Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa's research on hashtags contest that Twitter is a powerful tool for digital protests that "does not just allow you to peer through a window; it allows you to look through manifold windows at once." While the #MeToo movement was culturally impactful, I am interested in how it allowed individuals to share their experiences of sexual violence even if they did not always use the hashtag.

I started openly speaking about my experience with incestual abuse in the spring of 2017 outside of my immediate family and eventually my experience made its way to my paternal grandmother. At first, she was angry with me and did not believe me. One of my aunts believed I was just seeking attention and lying. Likewise, my grandmother did not believe me until I did not invite her son to my wedding that she understood that my accusations were in fact the truth. I was at work when she called me to ask why I didn't invite him when she asked point blank "is it true, did he hurt you?" and I quietly but sternly said "yes." She started crying and saying, "I'm so sorry, baby!" over and over again. She hysterically asked me if I was going to send her son to jail, she prayed for me, and then we prayed together. She asked me not to ever publicly identify him by name because it would ruin the family. Before we got off the phone she said, "mi'jita, I've never told anyone this," cried and then said, "but my cousin used to hurt me, too. I have never ever said this to anyone before." Her words haunt me to this day. I often

⁸ Anna North, "More than 250 Powerful People Have Been Accused of Sexual Misconduct in the #MeToo Era. Here's a Running List.," Vox.com (Vox, January 9, 2019), <https://www.vox.com/a/sexual-harassment-assault-allegations-list>.

wonder if she would have believed me sooner if she had the opportunity to utilize *los relatos de vida* to speak about her experience with sexual abuse. While she did not take to social media to tell her story, this qualifies as part of the #MeToo movement because she told me to reassure me that I was not alone.

While the #MeToo movement began in 2017, people have been sharing their experiences with sexual violence long before that. In *Malinche's Daughter*, Michelle Otero recounts her experience in Oaxaca, Mexico where she hosts writing workshops for women who are survivors of sexual abuse, stating that they write to “heal their wounds.”⁹ In this short text, Otero recounts her experiences of incestual sexual abuse at the hands of her brother when she was a child. Otero details an office visit with her therapist, Alma, who is treating her for post-traumatic stress disorder. During a session, Alma asks her to communicate with her childhood self and Otero eventually exclaims “it’s not your fault,” and “I was so little. And all I did was trust my brother. He was nice to me, and I felt lucky.”¹⁰ Otero then exclaims that she, like my grandma, never told anyone about her experience with sexual violence. Eventually Otero shares that her workshop students and women friends confide in her that they also think they have been victims of sexual abuse. While #MeToo wasn’t explicitly said, it was implied.

My Experience as a Form of Chisme, and #MeToo as Storytelling

I was about thirteen when I first experienced incestual sexual abuse and was always coerced into staying quiet about it. However, I engaged in chisme and vaguely informed my sisters. I informed them to warn them because I did not want them to experience what I was experiencing at the time. My sisters and I have since talked about my uncle and I have asked them if he ever harmed them to which they informed me that because I vaguely told them about my experience, they steered clear of him. This instance of chisme saved their lives. And I don’t mean saved them from actual death, I mean what Huey P. Newton considers the death of the flesh—a spiritual death—where one lapses and lives in quiet despair and is much worse than physical death.¹¹ In this light, chisme about my *relato de*

⁹ Michelle Otero, *Malinche's Daughter* (Notre Dame: Momotombo Press, 2006), 26.

¹⁰ Otero, *Malinche's Daughter*, 23.

¹¹ Huey P Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), 2.

vida is a valuable expression as storytelling because it served as a means for my sisters to remain guarded around a predator.

I painfully kept silent for years outside of a subtle warning to my sisters. In 2011, my uncle married a woman who has two young daughters, one being the same age as I was when the abuse began. I remember feeling sick to my stomach for days after hearing the news and somehow mustered up the courage to tell my father and stepmother—I was genuinely concerned for the wellbeing of the children. Me coming forward with my *relato de vida* was an act of lifesaving chisme. Although no one told my grandmother for some time, my father told his other siblings who informed my uncle's new wife. Although this caused some friction in my family with some of my cousins and aunts who do not believe me, other family members stopped associating with my uncle. Furthermore, his new wife insisted that she, him, and her children attend family and individual counseling to determine whether he was harming her children. To be quite honest, I never followed up on him in counseling but as someone who believes in abolishing the prison industrial complex, all I could hope for is accountability on his part and I firmly believe it starts in counseling.

Since I began sharing my *relatos de vida*, many friends and family have shared their experiences of sexual abuse whether incestual or at the hands of a partner or stranger—in this sense the #MeToo as a hashtag is a *relatos de vida*. Me coming forward to my family about my abuse served as my #MeToo moment for my mother and grandmother and provided me with the #MeToo stories I needed to hear the most. In those moments our *relatos de vida* intertwined and we were no longer carrying heavy burdens of incestual abuse alone. While my relationship with my mother is not completely perfect, I have a better understanding of what her life must have been like growing up which ultimately informed her parenting. To my knowledge, my mom was never vocal about her experience with incestual sexual abuse prior to my confession but her being vocal now provides me a sense of security I never knew I needed. I have a built-in partner in my journey. And while it may seem odd to have any positive feeling about that, bell hooks writes that mindful remembering helps us put the broken pieces of our hearts back together again and it is then that we begin to heal. It also

serves as a reminder that as I put my broken heart together, my mom is putting hers together and we are healing simultaneously.¹²

Conclusion

In *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation*, Linda Martín Alcoff writes that “sexual violations transform us. Both victims and perpetrators are transformed as well as their families, friends, and social circles,” and it’s true.¹³ I will forever be changed by my experience of incestual sexual abuse and so will the lives of my mother, my grandmother, and every other living person who has experienced sexual violence. Storytelling is an essential aspect of healing and combating feelings of isolation. In an online conversation I had with friend and colleague Sergio Barrera regarding sexual violence he said “first you write it. You reflect on it. Then you speak about it. And it is LIBERATING!”¹⁴ Barrera’s use of all capital letters when saying “liberating” is why I argue in favor of storytelling as a necessary tool—it is liberating. Often, we are taught that silence is better for our families, but silence is an act of violence. Since my initial conversation with my grandmother, her attitude towards sexual violence has shifted, and I believe she now understands the importance of speaking on the subject since sharing her story has now made her “incest burden” lighter.¹⁵

Stories allow us to make sense of the world around us. I grew up with my grandma telling me to “*tapate*” (cover up) whenever men were around. Anzaldúa reflects on this cultural norm and states that “mothers made sure we didn’t walk into a room of brothers or uncles in nightgowns or shorts,” and while the argument can be made that mothers should teach their sons and the men in their lives to not be sexual predators, it is also obvious from these stories that the warnings from mothers, or in my case grandmothers, stem from experience.¹⁶ If storytelling were viewed as valid and not as just gossip I firmly believe my

¹² bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: William Morrow, 2001), 209.

¹³ Linda Martín Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation* (Medford: Polity, 2018), 110.

¹⁴ Sergio Barrera, interview with author, spring 2021.

¹⁵ Aishah Shahidah Simmons, *Love with Accountability: Digging Up the Roots of Child Sexual Abuse* (Chico: AK Press, 2019), 10.

¹⁶ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 40.

grandmother and mother would have been able to tell their stories sooner. In my case, perhaps my relationship with my mother would be an easier one to navigate.

Storytelling is not solely reserved for the academic nor the writer or journalist. Storytelling is a powerful tool that is accessible by literally everyone. Ken Plummer, author of *Narrative Power*, writes that stories can “*facilitate connections and belonging*, build ‘we’ groups,” establish trust, and community; perhaps rendering storytelling the most fruitful tool one can have at their disposal to combat sexual abuse.¹⁷ Participating in chisme culture, or utilizing the #MeToo movement are all active forms of storytelling that align with *los relatos de vida* as a theoretical concept. Likewise, Levins Morales affirms, all actions from “sitting in front of a bus, laying down in front of a train, stopping work, leaving a school building, blocking the loading of a ship” are forms of storytelling that “contradict official versions meant to uphold the horrible status quo” by exposing sexual violence and disrupting silence surrounding it.¹⁸ Stacy Holman Jones writes that “stories are our *way in* to understanding—to theorizing, and thus to knowing and working to change—our culture and ourselves” which encourages the importance storytelling as a means to heal.¹⁹ It is crucial, then, to consider all forms of storytelling—from chisme to participating in the #MeToo movements—as disruptions of the silence nature surrounding sexual violence.

¹⁷ Ken Plummer, *Narrative Power: The Struggle of Human Power* (Medford: Polity, 2019), 52.

¹⁸ Aurora Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories: Essays for Radicals* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 45

¹⁹ Stacy Holman Jones, “Living Bodies of Thought: The ‘Critical’ in Critical Autoethnography,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 22, no. 4 (2016): 228-237, 230.

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