

Reseña

Fernández-Morales, Marta (2026). *Rape Narratives that Paved the Way for #MeToo. The Crack in the Wall*. New York and London. Routledge.

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The #MeToo movement that sparked in 2017 emerged within a period when women found in speaking up about their own encounters with sexual violence a cathartic break from the all-too oppressive political and social environment of the time. Central to the movement is the idea that power and knowledge are vested in language (Reed, 2019), and that narration and storytelling are fundamental tools of feminist resistance. In this sense, the use that #MeToo makes of social media can be seen as a contemporary form of feminist consciousness-raising. The small-group practices developed within feminist circles in the 1960s and 1970s were vital in redefining the boundaries between private and public life and in providing a platform for women to share their life histories and collectively mobilize against systems of domination (Reed, 2019). It is precisely within this feminist tradition of narrative activism that scholar Marta Fernández-Morales

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situates the rape memoirs that constitute her analysis in the monograph *Rape Narratives that Paved the Way for #MeToo. The Crack in the Wall* (2026). Through the exploration of eight instances of life writing by a heterogeneous group of women—Jana Leo, Joanna Connors, Roxane Gay, Myriam Gurba, Jeannie Vanasco, Eve Ensler (now V), and Thordis Elva—the author demonstrates how personal narratives of sexual violence operate as acts of political intervention. The work developed in the book is strengthened by Fernández-Morales’ long-standing scholarly engagement with gender-based violence and feminist cultural analysis. Over more than two decades, her research has consistently examined the narrative, social, cultural, and institutional mechanisms through which sexual violence is normalized and disseminated, bringing to this volume the kind of methodological maturity and ethical commitment that such a complex issue deserves.

Published by Routledge, the monograph finds a natural place within the Auto/Biography Studies series—with other titles like *Career Narratives and Academic Womanhood. In the Spaces Provided* (Ortiz-Villarelle, 2023)—, where it contributes with a distinctly feminist and critical perspective to the understanding of life writing as a form of academic and political knowledge. At the same time, this work productively complements other Routledge publications on the topic, such as *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement* (Chandra & Erlingsdóttir, 2021) by narrowing the analytical lens to individual rape memoirs. This way, the author not only maps a genealogy of #MeToo by tracing its roots and rightfully recognizing the incessant work of activists like Tarana Burke, whom she dubs “the mother of #MeToo” (Fernández-Morales, p. 4), but also reveals how autobiographical writing has functioned as a crucial feminist strategy for challenging rape culture long before the movement acquired its viral status.

Organized into five chapters, the book examines, through a trauma-informed and

multidisciplinary lens, one or more rape memoirs in each chapter, attending to issues such as rape myths, law and (in)justice, consent, accountability, emotions, and narrative strategies. Thereby, the author tracks a decade of autobiographical work (2009 through 2019), offering an overview of texts that precede, accompany, and extend beyond the emergence of #MeToo. The analysis opens with the exploration of Jana Leo's *Rape New York* (2009) and Joanna Connors' *I Will Find You* (2016), both written in pre-#MeToo times. The writers abandon the confessional and emotional tone that characterized the genre and discuss their own race and class privileges while interrogating systemic injustices, such as the racism embedded in the American criminal justice system and the prison industrial complex. As the author of the volume notes, they simultaneously enact the dual roles of "narrated selves", as victims of an episode of violence, and "narrating selves", by owning control over their story (Fernández-Morales, p. 31), a feature shared by all the authors under discussion. The chapter exposes how these narratives prefigured some of the discursive and political foundations of #MeToo, including the displacement of blame from the victims to the perpetrators and the denunciation of the structural conditions that enable violence against women.

Developing these elements further, the author moves on in the second chapter to an analysis of Roxane Gay's *Hunger* (2017), where she dives into bodily politics, affect, and relationality to read a pre-#MeToo memoir that foregrounds the main concerns found in fourth-wave feminism. Against the neoliberal framework in which individuals, and particularly women, are expected to bear responsibility for every aspect of their lives without accounting for social, economic, or racial forces, Fernández-Morales emphasizes the fact that our subjectivity is inherently relational and socially embedded. Gay navigates *ugly feelings* (Ngai, 2005) such as shame, fear, disgust, and anger, transforming them into resources for social and political engagement. Building on Judith Herman's stages of recovery –

establishing safety, reconstructing the story, and restoring community – the volume’s author adds a fourth one for survivors who, like Gay, redirect their trauma into sustained social and feminist activism. Through this lens, *Hunger* exemplifies the interpersonal and political labor inherent in feminist storytelling, evincing, as the author observes, that “[f]or feminism and minorities, recovery has historically been best pursued collectively” (Fernández-Morales, p. 87).

If any of the writers studied in the monograph has used her anger to drive social change, it is the Chicana writer Myriam Gurba, whose rape memoir, *Mean* (2017), is studied in chapter three. Gurba pushes the limits of the auto/biographical genre to present a text that moves across different categories – *bildungsroman*, memoir, scriptotherapy, trauma narrative, and spiritual narrative, among others – to use her own story as an apparently perfect victim of rape to offer an acid critique about rape culture, the American publishing industry, and the US judicial system. The author of the volume thoroughly examines the different narrative strategies that Gurba employs to articulate an account in which relationality is central again, as she interweaves her story with those of other women like Ana Mendieta, Jennie Rivera, and more importantly, Sophia Castro Torres, a young woman who was raped and murdered by the same man who assaulted her. Gurba subverts the conventional healing narrative to remind readers, just like the author under discussion does in the conclusion of her book, that “victory is never final” and that “there is no room for complacency” (Fernández-Morales, p. 208). Therefore, resisting a redemptive closure and reaffirming how gender violence remains a present continuous in the lives of millions of women. In doing so, Gurba models an alternative approach to survivor storytelling, one that acknowledges fragmented and ongoing recovery while, like Gay, transforming trauma and unresolved pain into a source of social and political resistance. Additionally, Gurba challenges the notion of the perfect victim by refusing to collaborate with the authorities in the prosecution of her assailant, enacting a form of feminist praxis that aims at finding other forms of

justice and restoration outside the legal machinery of the state – as the volume’s author further explores in chapter five.

In chapter four, the discussion turns to the failures of the US criminal justice system by examining Chanel Miller’s *Know my name* (2019). Central to this section is the argument that legal procedures remain profoundly indifferent to the psychological effects of trauma on survivors of sexual violence, and how memory loss becomes an additional instrument of institutional punishment for women like Miller. Consequently, the author of the volume under review explains the memory paradox that victims are forced to navigate, whereby they are deemed unreliable if they cannot recall details due to trauma, yet also discredited if they do remember, as well as forced to live with these painful memories. Situating Miller’s case within a broader critique of rape culture on US university campuses, the reviewed author – just like Miller does in her memoir – deliberately shifts away from the assault itself and towards the legal process that followed it instead. This way, drawing on trauma studies and feminist legal theory – particularly following Leigh Gilmore’s theorization on *alternative jurisdiction* and *testimonial justice* – the author examines how Miller creates a different framework for justice through reading and writing. While she is careful to note that such testimonial justice cannot fully replace the material consequences of legal action, the author of the volume underscores its transformative potential. As such, the massively positive public reception of Miller’s Victim Impact Statement, and later her memoir, “counters the dynamics of epistemic injustice” (Fernández-Morales, p. 155), contributing to her recovery and affirming the legitimacy of her experience.

As suggested above, the final chapter expands the volume’s exploration of justice beyond the confines of the criminal legal system, entering what the author herself recognizes to be the “slippery realm of apologies and forgiveness” (Fernández-

Morales, p. 21). Putting in dialogue Jeannie Vanasco's *Things We Didn't Talk About When I Was a Girl* (2019), Eve Ensler's *The Apology* (2019), and Thordis Elva's *South of Forgiveness* (2021), the work examines three rape memoirs that confront the figure of the perpetrator directly. Informed by the concept of innovative justice, which integrates restorative practices with broader social, cultural, and narrative dynamics, the author analyzes how these memoirs disrupt the conventions of the rape narrative, demystifying the figure of the rapist to show that they are not monsters, but "well-trained sons of the patriarchy" (Fernández-Morales, p.167). Apology and forgiveness emerge in these texts as ethically complex and in many cases incomplete, yet they permit Vanasco, Ensler, and Elva to seek alternative channels that allow them to revisit their traumatic past, try to heal their present, and imagine a possibly renovated future, explains the author. In spite of the explicit incursion of their aggressors in the narrative, and the different outcomes that it generates, these writers never lose sight of "survivor credibility" and "perpetrator accountability" (Fernández-Morales, p. 195). They redefine justice according to their own needs and in their own terms, remaining "the dominant agents of their auto/biographical praxis" (Fernández-Morales, p. 196). In closing the volume with these controversial, yet necessary narratives, the author reinforces her broader argument that feminist responses to sexual violence must remain open to plurality, complexity, and ongoing critical revision.

The author of the volume under review concludes her monograph by noting #MeToo's success in exposing gender-based violence and sparking crucial, if uncomfortable, conversations, while cautioning that the current conservative backlash threatens to eclipse these gains. "[T]he crack in the wall is there", she observes, "and it is so obvious that the perpetrators and their enablers are trying to fill it in with their own words" (Fernández-Morales, p. 204). Not everything is lost, but as pointed out in the conclusion, sexual violence continues to evolve and expand, which reminds us that the work of feminism remains far from completed. Against attempts to silence survivor's voices and restrict access to

literature that addresses sexual violence, racism, and diversity – as the banning of Roxane Gay’s *Hunger* (2017) from multiple school libraries in Florida during the 2024-2025 academic year exemplifies (PEN America, 2025) – the volume reaffirms the importance of storytelling as a feminist tool. By showcasing a carefully selected and diverse set of texts, the author underscores that there is no single story of sexual violence, no uniform kind of trauma, and no homogenized victim profile, compelling readers to recognize that “rape is never just one woman’s problem” (Fernández-Morales, p. 158).

Methodologically, we can appreciate the author’s ability to move seamlessly across affect theory, trauma and memory studies, social psychology, philosophy, law, criminology, and victimology, all while maintaining a consistently feminist perspective, and a focus on the US panorama that is complemented, nonetheless, with a transnational vision, as her multiple references to other cases across the world – like Pelicot in France or Nevenka in Spain – reflect. In doing so, she produces a work that is complex and profoundly relevant, whilst making it accessible and fluid. The volume offers an unprecedented resource for understanding the patterns, debunking the myths, and expanding the conceptual vocabulary surrounding the *continuum* of sexual violence (Kelly, 1987) that structures patriarchal societies. Most importantly, the author emphasizes the necessity of embracing interconnected forms of activism, whether on the streets, in literature, or online, urging readers to never “retreat back into silence, no matter how much noise surrounds us” (Fernández-Morales, p. 208). In its thorough tracing of history, attention to the present, and orientation toward future action, *Rape Narratives that Paved the Way for #MeToo* (2026) emerges as a necessary cultural, academic, and feminist proposal, offering tools not only to understand sexual violence, but also to resist it.

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