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Telling Tales: Bearing Witness in Jennifer Fox's *The Tale*

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Abstract

Award-winning filmmaker and cinematographer Jennifer Fox is best known for her documentary projects exploring themes of trauma and identity with both sensitivity and insight. But, in her 2018 film *The Tale*, Fox turns her subjective scrutiny inwards to construct a filmic testimony that interrogates the machinations of memory and selfhood in the belated realization of her experience of childhood sexual abuse. *The Tale* institutes a complex witnessing model that encompasses the filmic and narrative construction of the testimonial 'I', and the coalescent empathic invitation of autobiography and testimonial witnessing. By incorporating critical perspectives from trauma, testimony and autobiography studies, *The Tale* is posited for analysis as filmic testimony, and considered within a multi-layered witnessing structure that includes production, viewership, and cultural impact. Ultimately, the analysis concludes that the empathic relation filmic testimony invites is tantamount to ethical witnessing, which persists as a form of activism beyond the viewing experience.

Keywords: Testimony; Witnessing; Trauma; Film; Autobiography.

Telling Tales: Bearing Witness in Jennifer Fox's *The Tale* (2018)

When violence is part of "what happened", then testimony must be part of "what's next".
Leigh Gilmore, Testimony.

As an award winning screenwriter, director, cinematographer and producer, Jennifer Fox has made a career of bearing witness. Fox won the Grand Prize for Documentary at the Sundance Film Festival with her debut project *Beirut: The Last Home Movie* (1987), with her wealth of subsequent work amassing numerous prestigious accolades in the years since. As someone who is familiar with both sides of the camera lens, Fox is well versed in the dialogic relationship that film invites, having turned the camera upon herself in the curation of the documentary film series *Flying Confessions of a Free Woman* (2006): a collaborative, relational memoir project that bears witness to "modern female life" around the world (Fox in Bussel). In witnessing the testimonies of other women whilst making *Flying Confessions*, and rediscovering an essay she wrote as a child, Fox was compelled to reevaluate a relationship from her past, which brought to the fore a traumatic personal truth. Fox's film explores the realisation of repressed child sexual abuse in her most recent film, *The Tale* (2018), which repurposes her documentary acuity in the construction of an introspective, narrative film with extremely sensitive and provocative content. In her cinematic act of self-witness, Fox interrogates the machinations of trauma and memory to produce a raw and culturally significant filmic testimony. The following analysis considers the forms and functions of witnessing in Fox's self-reflexive film from a critical perspective that encompasses trauma, testimony and autobiography studies.

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Whilst making the documentary series *Flying Confessions of a Free Woman*, Jennifer Fox rediscovered a middle-school essay that made her rethink her first sexual experience. As she reconsidered her childhood memories from a position of adult retrospect, Fox came to realise that what she had considered a relationship was in actual fact sexual abuse, committed by two people

whom she had respected and loved. The belated realisation was the impetus for an autobiographical project that saw her move away from the vocational mode of documentary to construct a narrative film of self-witness. When asked to explain *The Tale* in an interview, Fox stated "It's about unravelling denial, using myself as the red thread" (Fox in Reilly, 2018), a statement that compounds the significance of her self-witnessing project within a testimonial context on both a personal and a cultural level. As a retrospective act of self-witness, the production of *The Tale* allowed Fox to address suppressed memories of childhood sexual abuse, leading her to question herself and her ideologies in the present in order to confront her past and reshape her future.

As the keystone of the creative process of self-witness, the essay is the autobiographical artefact that galvanised Fox's testimonial enquiry. Though 'The Tale' was written as a scholastic creative writing assignment, the first-person narrative retains the essayistic posture of introspection, articulating first-hand experience within a progressive and evaluative framework. The essay's totemic presence within the film serves as a reminder to the viewer that the film is the product of real-world self-witness, further underscored by Fox's retention of her own name for the central character (Laura Dern) – a deliberate decision intended to authenticate the testimonial pedigree of the film. On the film's official website, Fox attests, "By leaving the Jennifer character's name as mine, I am there to tell [naysayers], 'no, this really happened. And yes, I did really feel 'love' for these people as they robbed me of my trust and betrayed and hurt me'"; Fox's use of her name is a prophetic gesture that inscribes autobiographical intent, but also serves to counter the pervasive cultural doubt that beleaguers the disclosure of sexual violence. In her book *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives* (Gilmore, 2017), life-writing scholar Leigh Gilmore contends that in contemporary culture, the inherent truth claim of female testimony is questioned, arguing that "Autobiography is more flexible than legal testimony" as it allows women to exploit "its literary elasticity to assert legitimacy" (9). By positing an autobiographical document at the

center of the cinematic discourse, and designating a nominal avatar as representative of the autobiographical 'I', Fox is able to command the contractual invitation of autobiography to reinforce *The Tale*'s testimonial efficacy.

In the film, Jennifer Fox's testimonial invitation is immediately issued through the voiceover that precedes the opening scene, in the phrase "The story you are about to see is true… as far as I know" (0:45). This introductory missive is indicative of three key considerations within the context of filmic testimony: the installation of the testimonial 'I', the declarative truth claim of testimony, and the acknowledgement of the fallibility of subjective memory within the context of traumatic testimony. The voice is the referential anchor of the embodied subject and "empathic target" (Schmitt) of autobiographical discourse, in this case the testimonial 'I', which extends the relational invitation to empathic witnessing to the viewer by asserting the truth claim of testimony. Within the same statement, the testimonial 'I' pronounces "the epistemic dilemma of testimony" (Krämer, 32), which indicates both the impossibility of the verification of traumatic experience and the caveat of its incommunicability. *The Tale* holds both testimonial truth and traumatic memory in critical tension throughout, as Fox attempts to bear witness to the circumstances of her childhood sexual abuse in dialogue with the revelatory rationale of adult retrospect as a performative reenactment of self-witness.

The Tale is a manifestation of "autobiographical portraiture", which "is a way of offering a performative testimony about the manner in which personhood is constituted in relation to experiences of trauma" (Snooks, 399). The screenplay is the framework for Fox's performative testimony as the antecedent act of retrospective self-witness within *The Tale*'s testimonial structure. For Fox the screenplay is the product of the scriptotherapeutic practice of "writing out and writing through traumatic experience" (Henke, xii), with the help of which she is able to construct a

coherent account of the labor of self-witness as the basis of her filmic testimony. Realized as a film, the self-witnessing agenda of the screenplay transmits Fox's testimonial invitation through an intersubjective pact with the viewer, inviting them to bear witness to her traumatic past, but also to the process of self-witness that facilitates testimony.

The conditions of the testimonial witnessing structure are predicated upon the self-witness's testimony and its receipt by a willing witness (Laub, Gilmore, et al.) whose role is determined by "involvement […] not in the events, but in the accounts given of them" (Laub, 62). In essence, testimony is the revelation of traumatic experience, which "does not exist until it can be articulated and heard by a sympathetic listener" (Gilmore, 6). In the beginning, Jennifer's[1] refusal to define her childhood story as disclosure, and ultimately accept her experience as traumatic, complicates testimony's relational dynamic, confounding the invitation to bear witness. After finding the essay, Jennifer's mother, Nettie (Ellen Burstyn) calls multiple times in the film's early scenes, expressing concern for her daughter and attempting to initiate the witnessing paradigm (2:30-3:01). At this point Jennifer avoids contact, but is visibly unsettled by the implications of her mother's concern; when questioned about her preoccupation by her fiancé, Patrick (Common), she explains "sorry, I was just thinking about my mom. She's been calling and she read this story I wrote as a kid about my first boyfriend, and I hadn't told her about it because he was older, so she's beside herself trying to reach me" (5:21). Jennifer dismisses her mother's concerns, but the sharp flashbacks that follow her calls constitute "an instantly recognizable device to mark a traumatic return" (Luckhurst, 180) as "the unconscious language of repetition through which trauma initially speaks" (Gilmore, 7). These fragmentary flashes of memory invade both Jennifer's work (3:45) and sex with her partner (4:30) before the receipt of the story triggers a more coherent flashback of the environment in which it was written (5:57-6:52). The assignment instructions "Like Tom Sawyer: Write a fiction

[1] Jennifer/Jenny are used when referring to the film character throughout to prevent confusion.

story set in your hometown" are visible within the frame as the younger Jenny's voiceover accompanies her pen strokes on the pink paper (6:44), the same paper that Jennifer is holding in the narrative present. As a child, Fox veiled her testimonial disclosure in a school assignment, which, as the film shows, prompted her teacher to speculate on the inspiration for her story: "If what you talk about here were accurate I would say that you had been taken advantage of by older people. But, clearly you have a fine, full set of emotions blossoming into womanhood" (10:12-28). What becomes clear is testimony's contingency upon both an *explicit* truth claim and an ethical witness (Laub; Derrida), but, by presenting the story as fiction, the testimonial structure of witnessing remains uninitiated and the "traumatic truth" of testimony as "traced through the perverse interplay of fact and fiction" (Luckhurst, 143) is overlooked. Jennifer's memory installs the belief that the story is fiction, which motivates her dismissive behavior. However, contrary to Jennifer's "defensive dissociation" (Luckhurst, 88), Fox's use of flashback foreshadows the forthcoming exploration of traumatic experience as a signal to the viewer that, in spite of Jennifer's recalcitrance, her testimonial invitation manifests piecemeal through memory work and the precedent acceptance of the film's autobiographical register.

Though posited initially as a story crafted in response to an academic prompt, the essayistic purview of 'The Tale' is substantiated by Jenny's "intellectual, emotional and physiological" (Smith and Watson, 276) reflections upon adolescent awakening, as suggested by her teacher's evaluation. In the first instance, the film shows Jennifer reading the essay alone in her New York loft, the voiceover articulating the words as she reads them in a recognisably subjective trope: "I'd like to begin this story by telling you something so beautiful-"; the jump cut to a flashback of a teenaged Jenny (Jessica Sarah Flaum) is connected by the merging of their voices as Jenny takes up the voiceover. She reads:

> I've met two very special people whom I've come to love dearly. Imagine a woman who is married and a man who is divorced, sharing their lives in close friendship. Loving each other with all their souls, yet not being close with their bodies. Get this, I'm part of them both. I'm lucky enough to be able to share in their love. When I'm with them, the earth seems to shake and tremble-
>
> (9:07-47)

The young Jenny's reading narrates an imagined vignette, which serves to introduce the viewer to Mrs G. (Elizabeth Debicki) and Bill (Jason Ritter), both of whom smile directly to the camera outside their respective houses, before running in sync through the woods, and ultimately gazing up at a beaming Jenny seated atop a horse. The younger Jenny's voice is replaced by Jennifer's, as the wide shot shows the elder woman lifting the essay's first page, completing the sentence, "-and often I'm afraid I'll fall off of it" (9:50). In this instance the flashback is representative of Jennifer's idealised memory, untainted by the reality of her traumatic past and preserved as the preferred context for her exploratory essay. But, the essay is both the bridge between past and present, and the axis around which the transient self-witnessing narrative revolves. After reading the essay Jennifer chooses to "sit with [her] own memories" (10:35), which eventually compels her to seek validation through the comparison of her own memories with those of others who were present in her past.

For Fox, the process of self-witness became a relational exercise, necessitating the engagement of others as witnesses to events she had recalibrated in the story of her own history. This labor is brought to bear in *The Tale*, as Jennifer traverses the country in an attempt to clarify the details of her childhood~~,~~ that are obscured by the conflict between the essay and her memories; Jennifer seeks to resolve this tension primarily by speaking with those who were present at Mrs. G's farm, albeit ignorant of her traumatic experience. These *adjacent witnesses* provide vital

context for Jennifer's warped memories, as they remind her how her age and her character rendered her more vulnerable than she remembered. When visiting with Becky (Jodi Long) Jennifer is shown photographs of her time at Mrs. G's farm, which confirm her memories of the other girls but, as she is not in any of the shots, leave a question mark over her remembered self. Becky tells her "You were such a tiny, little thing. So much smaller than Franny and I. […] you almost looked like a little boy. […] you were so afraid, you barely said two words" (16:02-12). Jennifer's reaction registers her confusion, as the earlier flashback shows her as a lithe and developing young woman in her mind's eye. The encounter with Becky drives Jennifer to pursue further confirmation, which she looks for in her mother's photo albums. On finding a print that accords with her memory, the close shot reveals the young woman from Jennifer's flashback pictured with her horse (17:00). However, Jennifer's mother points out that the photo she has found is of her at age fifteen in 1975, redirecting her to a photo from 1973 (17:15). The photo confirms Becky's description, featuring a much younger and smaller Jenny (Isabelle Nélisse), whilst the reverse shot closely frames Jennifer's failure to comprehend the discrepancy in her own memory. This encounter demonstrates the way that photographs "alter the ways that we conceive of our selves" (Anderst, 226), as the earlier flashback is then replayed, this time with the younger Jenny at the center of the action. It is clear that Jenny is far more reserved and juvenile than Jennifer remembered, and as Jenny repeats the first line of the titular essay, the tone of the previously romanticized story shifts towards impropriety, lending credence to Nettie's earlier reaction and forcing Jennifer to further question the context of the relationship she remembers so fondly.

The revelation of Jenny's prepubescent body alters both Jennifer's and the viewer's perception of the power relations between Jenny and her adult lovers, exposing the underlying issue of consent. This adjustment unquestionably designates Jenny (and by extension, Fox) a "vulnerable subject" within the autobiographical discourse, by virtue of her status as a minor (Couser, xii).

Consequently, the ethical imperative of bearing witness is redoubled, as the implication of child sexual abuse irrevocably manifests. As the earlier flashback vignette is repeated, the young Jenny's demeanour is markedly different; she is more reserved, less confident, and visibly in awe of Mrs. G as she attests in the voiceover, "She was the most beautiful woman I had ever met. Every girl wanted to be just like her. Becky and Franny did. I did" (18:30-45). The extended flashback scene shows Jenny perceptibly unsure of herself in the company of the other girls at Mrs. G's camp - both of whom are physically more mature (18:43) - and eager to comply with Mrs. G's stringent training regime, which includes cross-country running with Bill. Mrs. G's introductory words are darkly prophetic: "Bill is an excellent coach. He will teach you to go beyond the complaints of your bodies" (18:59), as Bill rounds the corner in slow motion causing Jenny to stand bolt upright (19:06). As Bill introduces himself to the girls in turn, Jenny is submissive, a dynamic that is further installed by Bill's directive during the cohort's run: "I am Nouga, you are Neets. When I say Nouga, you say Neets!" (19:35-38). As the other girls drop back in exhaustion, Jenny forces herself to keep pace with Bill, continuing with the call and response chant "Nouga – Neets" (19:27-20:03) as she obediently follows him through the woods alone. By presenting Jenny as she was in contrast with the way Jennifer remembered her, Fox dispels any doubt regarding the nature of the relationship, which prompts further inquiry as to the circumstances that led an introverted, but eager-to-please child to victimhood, and a seemingly content adult to repress the truth of her childhood exploitation.

The relationship with Mrs. G and Bill becomes routine, with Jenny spending every weekend at Mrs. G's ranch where she keeps her horse. But, when Bill eventually suggests that Jenny stay with him without Mrs G, Jenny is visibly stricken, although Mrs G. creates the illusion that the decision to stay is Jenny's (27:17). In the voiceover Jennifer is heard asking "What did I say? I don't remember" (47:29-35) highlighting the fallibility of traumatic memory. Jennifer looks to the

essay as an *aide memoire*, searching the pages for an answer: (47:46) "Did I say yes?" (47:50). From off screen Jennifer questions Jenny, who appears to be conversing with her older self through her reflection in the mirror (47:51-48:58), a strategy of filmic autobiography that for Leah Anderst "can reveal an autobiographer's empathy with [herself] in the past" (Anderst, 82). Jennifer's reflection appears in the mirror next to Jenny's, as she directs her to the essay as evidence that Jenny did not want to stay. Jenny, again, denounces the story as fiction, levelling the accusation that Jennifer has become "like all of them" (48:49) in trying to control her before leaving Bill's bathroom enraged. Intercut with close shots of Jennifer reading the essay, the flashback demonstrates the way Bill's 'relationship' with Jenny crosses a vital line. Bill asks Jenny to read provocative poetry aloud and when her nerves make her hands shake, he apologises that he left it too late to light the fire, fetching her a blanket instead. The subjective camera pan from Bill to the fire and back again reveals that the fire that was previously lit in the memory was in actual fact dead (50:44), a detail that frames Bill's subsequent request to share the blanket as a deliberate ruse enabling him to get closer to Jenny. Bill tactically manipulates Jenny, stating "I want to save you from all those stupid young boys out there. I think you are perfect" before asking "Jenny, would you do something for me? Would you let me see you? […] Do you want to take your shirt off?" (52:45-53:18). Though Jenny is visibly reluctant, she complies; however, Bill soon escalates beyond looking. Jenny's complete submission is depicted just a few scenes later as Bill 'coaches' Jenny through his attempt to penetrate her: "Just breathe… It's okay…Not yet…We have to keep stretching you open slowly. No young boy would ever do this for you" (1:01:02-1:01:45). Bill's reassuring words are discordant with his violent actions, contributing to Jenny's misapprehension of their inappropriate sexual contact as intimacy, which, as Jennifer confirms throughout the course of the filmic narrative, derails her natural, sexual awakening and robs her of the ability to form lasting relationships (1:07:20 and (1:26:30). A close shot of Jenny's face intercut with a reverse shot of Bill on top of her illustrates her agonising resolve in response to her rape, as her voiceover

explains "I find that I trust him so much, I never realise where he's leading me. Once we're that far, I don't know how to say no. I love him. He loves me" (1:00:52-1:01:31). Jenny's words drive home her childish misunderstanding of consent, forging the connection between what begins as the innocent trust of her running coach, whom she follows for miles through the woods, to her eventual manipulation into an exploitative cycle of abuse that she is unable to recognise or stop; this is the basis of Jennifer's ongoing mischaracterisation of the relationship as complicit. After failing to enter Jenny, Bill places her hand under the blanket before pushing her head down (1:02:03-1:02:11) further emphasising the aspect of coercion, after which she lays vacant next to him as he sleeps. The dissonance of Jenny's juvenile body beside her adult abuser resonates in the high-angled shot, forcing the viewer to reflect on the horror of the experience that Jenny fails to comprehend. The sexual scenes between Jenny and Bill are purposely the most difficult to watch, as they unflinchingly represent the reality of child sexual abuse at the core of Fox's self-witnessing project. In what is undeniably the pivotal revelation of the filmic testimony for both Jennifer and the viewer, Fox denounces the un-representability and unspeakability of trauma, bringing both into unambiguous, embodied focus.

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Dori Laub explains that trauma "invariably plays a decisive formative role in who one comes to be, and in how one comes to live one's life", even when the trauma is "repressed" (70). Fox's self-witnessing project illuminates this traumatic legacy by bearing witness to her abusers' strategies of coercion and the lasting impact of the indoctrination she experienced in the facilitation of her abuse. In *The Tale*, Mrs. G and Bill initially exploit to their advantage Jenny's feelings of marginalisation within her family dynamic. When Jenny's sister breaks her arm, her parents are unable to attend her end-of-season riding event at Mrs. G's ranch, leaving Bill as her sole source of support during the competition; after the event Mrs. G takes a stranded Jenny to meet him for dinner at a nearby diner. It is during this meeting that Mrs. G and Bill begin to groom Jenny by

flattering her writing and athletic talents before sharing the details of their affair. Jenny's voiceover reflects upon this moment, in a passage taken from 'The Tale':

> How did they know they could trust me with their secret, that I would never break their confidence? The other girls would have told on them, but I would never tell my parents or the other adults. It was like an unspoken oath, and I felt proud of it.
>
> (38:20-38)

Jenny's Montagnean introspection eschews the risk of secrecy, instead postulating an alliance of equals that further expresses her naïveté. By bringing Jenny into their confidence the couple establish the "secret order" of victimhood (Laub, 67), which Laub explains is "lived as an unconscious alternate truth" long after the experience of trauma. When Jenny claims she feels invisible at home, Bill tells her: "They can't see you the way we can" (46:03) offering an alternative 'family' "based on complete honesty and love. Hiding nothing, revealing everything, just the truth" (46:24-37). This truth is subtly levied by Mrs. G and Bill, who expedite Jenny's collusion by positing their own ideals as enlightened when compared with her parents' conventional principles (45:06-46-37). This alternate ideology persists into adulthood, evinced as Jennifer's indifference to marriage and her promiscuity in the wake of her abuse. When Jennifer's fiancé, Martin learns of her systemic manipulation by reading the letters she exchanged with Mrs. G and Bill, he levels "That's rape. That's illegal" (54:16), but Jennifer's riposte is one of acceptance and justification: "It was the seventies and people didn't talk about it like that" (54:24). The same rationale is offered by Iris (Gretchen Koerner), who is initially presented as another adjacent witness in Jennifer's attempt to make sense of her past, the existence of whom she had effaced. As Jennifer conducts what is essentially a documentary interview, the reason for Iris' omission becomes clear; as Iris recounts her involvement with Bill and Mrs. G, Jennifer's disclosure leads Iris to the realisation that she was posited as a co-conspirator in the "secret order", a fact that she had

similarly repressed (1:28:53-1:30:15). In their book *Traumatic Affect* (2013), Meera Atkinson and Michael Richardson aver: "being open to one's own trauma is necessary in order to be open to that of another, and conversely opening to the trauma of others facilitates opening to one's own" (3); this assertion attests to the intersubjective exchange of testimonial witnessing as evinced in Jennifer's encounter with Iris. Iris also provides the missing detail that allows Jennifer to assimilate the truth of her past, explaining that Mrs. G was "the cat bringing the mouse" (1:30:28). As the flashback vignette is replayed once again, the gaps in Jenny's story are filled by the acceptance that Mrs. G was the catalyst in the cycle of abuse (1:30:46-1:31:50).

Laub explains, "Survivors who do not tell their story become victims of a distorted memory […], which causes an endless struggle with and of a delusion"; he goes on to avow "The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor's conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events" (64). As a process of "repossession", testimony "is a dialogical process of exploration and reconciliation of two worlds – the one that was brutally destroyed and the one that is" (Laub, 74). In the repression of the traumatic truth of her past for more than thirty years, Jennifer failed to recognise her childhood story as self-witness from "within the experience" (Laub, 61), negating its healing potential. The repercussions of undisclosed traumatic experience are articulated onscreen in a stylised dialogue between Jenny and Jennifer, which allows Fox to underscore the disparity between misinterpreted childhood trauma and the adult reclamation of memory that informs the belated realisation of abuse. Recognising that the truth had been hidden in plain sight the whole time, Jennifer challenges her younger self: Jenny walks through the school hallway gazing directly into the camera lens, when Jennifer's voice from off screen accuses "You lied to me. You told me it was a good thing all these years" (1:41:24-

28). Jenny repeats the doctrine against marriage and children, resolute in her refusal of victimhood; but, her fear manifests when Jennifer tells her there were other victims and that she is planning to confront Bill in the present, which stops Jenny in her tracks as the school bell rings (1:43:00). Jennifer's acceptance of the testimonial nature of the essay mobilises her belated act of self-witness through a symbolic confrontation with Bill, as the 'telling' of her traumatic past that secures her "liberation" (Laub, 70).

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The Tale's testimonial status influenced the critical and commercial reception of the film, as Fox strategically managed both the release and distribution of the film in line with her own testimonial agenda. When the film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2018, the industry was besieged by the coalescing sociopolitical #TimesUp and #MeToo movements in response to widespread allegations of historical sexual assault and misogyny. In this context, Fox wanted to "break the picture" of what an abused woman looks like (Fox in Gray), to challenge public perceptions of belated outcry and to address pervasive opinions around the perpetrators of historical sexual abuse. Fox's representative awareness is further evinced in the deliberate "mediatization" (O'Loughlin) of *The Tale*. Ben O Loughlin explains:

> Mediatization refers to the manner in which a social event, process or practice becomes considered by those participating in it as a media phenomenon, and any media organisations involved are aware of themselves as integral to that phenomenon.
>
> (193)

Fox's public profile, coupled with the film's personal and testimonial capital, inevitably drew significant media interest, but this interest was mobilized as activism, using the film's press to draw attention to – and raise awareness of – the effects of childhood sexual trauma and the rationale for belated outcry in cases of historical sexual abuse. Jordan Hoffman's five-star review in *The Guardian* dubbed *The Tale* "the mother of all #MeToo movies", describing it as "an innovative,

honest and important film" that made both him and his contemporaries "extremely uncomfortable" during the Sundance screening he attended (n.p.). Nevertheless, as he concludes his review Hoffman urges readers to see *The Tale*, essentially perpetuating Fox's invitation to bear witness as an ambassadorial "witness to the process of witnessing itself" (Laub, 62). Moreover, by revealing her own experience of childhood trauma as filmic testimony within the public domain, Fox championed therapeutic engagement, creating an online presence for the film that included numerous resources for those who might have been affected by the issues raised in *The Tale.* The film's website includes an index of links to support charities and organizations at the bottom of each page, all of which Fox has engaged with in the composition and dissemination of the film. The website remains active to this day, providing a paratextual platform beyond the viewing experience through which Fox is able to propagate the testimonial witnessing paradigm, offering an interactive outpost for testimony that offers both education and empathy for those who need either, or both.

Fox felt strongly about including the explicit and sensitive sexual content to preserve the integrity of traumatic experience within the testimonial act of self-witness, stating "It was a deal breaker to take it out" (Fox in Galuppo); however, choosing to do so raised a number of creative and ethical concerns, further complicated by her multiple roles within the witnessing structure. Fox initially experienced resistance from financiers and cinematographers, all of whom deemed the sexual content too difficult to address (Galuppo). But, Fox persevered, exhausting her personal connections to amass the necessary financial and creative support for the film leveraged by her own personal investment. As both filmmaker and subject, Fox negotiates the ethical imperative of bearing witness from each perspective, both of which must contend with trauma's innate resistance to representation (Caruth). In her coalescent roles of self-witness and autobiographical subject, Fox is compelled to represent her experience as accurately as she is able, in line with her personal testimonial agenda. But, the necessary re-enactment of the traumatic episode presents an ethical,

representational dilemma. Fox resolves this issue by casting an adult body double to take the place of Nélisse, the actress in the role of young Jenny, in all scenes of a sexual nature (confirmed by the disclaimer in the end credits), using arbitrary prompts to illicit her pained expressions for the close shots (Nicholson). As director, Fox ensures the substitution is imperceptible on screen using the Kuleshov effect – an editing technique whereby separate images are strategically shown in sequence to produce meaning – to facilitate a credible representation of traumatic experience without destabilising the autobiographical integrity of the testimonial 'I', and further, protecting the young actress from an inappropriate situation on set. Consequently, Fox successfully navigates the ethical imperative of bearing witness without compromising the moral or testimonial boundaries of representation.

Fox acknowledged the affective power of the film and the potential impact that inviting the viewer to bear witness could have. Instead of issuing the film through theatres, Fox struck a worldwide deal with HBO that would bypass cinematic release and bring the film directly to the home-viewing arena, making *The Tale* more accessible for a broad range of viewers; Fox stated:

> It has always been my intent to find an engaged distribution partner who deeply understands the wide reach of the project, not just as a film but for the impact it can have on a larger global conversation […]. In a world in which stories like mine have often been pushed into the darkness, no one had been better at shining a light on storytelling and important issues than HBO.
>
> (Fox in Galuppo)

This move also enabled Fox to authorize what are listed on the film's website as "outreach screenings" by charitable organizations, academic institutions and activist groups throughout the

world, from Stellenbosch to Seoul. Recognizing the film's affective potential, the screening list is preceded by the directive:

> **THE TALE** is a movie like none we've ever experienced on this topic. It opens our eyes, hearts, and minds. The film is particularly effective when watched and talked about in small or large groups, in the classroom, in the office, in screening rooms and with your colleagues, fellow students, and friends. We invite you to sign up to host free public screenings of **THE TALE** in your community. With our complimentary viewing guides and other materials, we are committed to supporting your discussions and your participation. Thank you for helping us ***change the conversation.***
>
> (Original capitals, bold and italics)

With this guidance on, and perpetuation of, the invitation to bear witness, Fox assumes an ambassadorial role that both enables self-witness and actively encourages ethical, empathic witnessing as an imperative cultural step.

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According to Dominic La Capra:

> The importance of testimonies becomes more apparent when they are related to the way they provide something other than purely documentary knowledge […] in the attempt to understand experience and its aftermath, including the role of memory and its lapses, in coming to terms with – or denying and repressing – the past.
>
> (86-7)

In bringing the "unrepresentability" (Caruth, 131) of the trauma of childhood sexual abuse to the screen through her own filmic testimony, sharing her experience and her process of self-witnessing as a narrative film, Fox installs the viewer as both "the immediate receiver" of her testimony and

the witness to witnessing (Laub, 61-2) within a broader cultural context. In her acceptance of the inevitable responsibility of metonymic representation, or "representativeness" (Gilmore), Fox recognizes the ethical imperative of bearing witness to an endemic issue that is inherently unspeakable. As a result, Fox uses testimony as "a form of action" (Laub, 70), as both a personal processing tool and a valiant, visible vindication for those she represents: survivors of sexual trauma.

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