

Reconsidering Television True Crime and Gendered Authority in *Allen v. Farrow*

Although its title may suggest otherwise, the 2021 HBO docu-series *Allen v. Farrow* is notably committed to destabilizing a “he said/she said” framing of historic child sex abuse accusations against Hollywood auteur Woody Allen. Kirby Dick’s and Amy Ziering’s four-part television series openly and unapologetically stands with Dylan Farrow (the now adult adopted daughter of Allen and Hollywood actor Mia Farrow), who has long tried to publicly communicate her account that Allen sexually abused her when she was seven years old.¹ In re-centring and validating Dylan Farrow’s testimony, *Allen v. Farrow* actively works to reframe a gendered cultural narrative that has for decades ignored her voice and painted her mother as a scorned and vengeful woman.

It is the documentary’s stance of allegiance with the Farrowes that has proven most controversial, as critics have accused it of being “unbalanced” and “biased.”² Such accusations are particularly enflamed in the context of Allen’s celebrity status as a famous director, with “*auteur* apologism” (Marghitu, 2018) prevalent in responses that dismiss the docu-series as “pure PR” (Freeman 2021). And yet, we want to argue that the charges of bias and partiality against *Allen v. Farrow* overlook the critical significance of its politicized, feminist intervention into serialised true crime and the gendered dimensions of authority in 1990’s popular culture.

True crime has not generally been recognized for its progressiveness when it comes to issues of gender. For example, *Serial* (Sarah Koenig and Julie Snyder, WBEZ, 2014) and *Making a Murderer* (Moirra Demos and Laura Ricciardi, Netflix, 2015), the true crime blockbusters that re-tooled the genre for the streaming era, generated tantalizing ambiguity for viewers over questions of (male) guilt or innocence in murder cases, while side-lining the (dead) female victims (Horeck 2019). In the process of stoking a cultural desire for amateur

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online sleuthing, important questions about misogynistic violence go missing. By contrast, *Allen v. Farrow* repurposes the long-form true crime structure to focus sustained investigative attention on sexual violence as a crime that demands social justice. It joins a number of other recent documentaries on sexual violence that have emerged in the wake of #MeToo, including, for example, *Jeffrey Epstein: Filthy Rich* (Lisa Bryant, Netflix, 2020), *Athlete 'A'* (Bonni Cohen and Jon Shenk, Netflix, 2020), and *Surviving R. Kelly* (Nigel Bellis and Astral Finnie, Lifetime, 2019). To varying extents, all of these documentaries function as victim advocacy pieces, privileging and corroborating victim-survivor testimonies and showing critical awareness of the structural underpinnings of gendered violence.

Allen v. Farrow provides a space for Dylan and Mia Farrow to speak, but even more significantly, it deploys the documentary form to invite reflection on the wider operations of what Jilly Boyce Kay has termed “communicative injustice” (2020). As Kay defines it, “communicative injustice” refers to the “gendered norms around speech and communication” which curtail and circumscribe women’s voices (8). In the wake of #MeToo, and the cultural space it has opened up for women’s stories of sexual violence to be heard, Kay argues that it is imperative not only to provide individuals with the opportunity to “take control of their stories,” but also “to more fundamentally interrogate the historical, political and social structures that have meant that we conceive of voice in a particular way that contributes to gender injustice, rather than allowing the possibility of challenging it” (14). As Karen Boyle has suggested in her discussion of the metaphor of “silence breaking” in relation to #MeToo, it is imperative to “think critically about what it means to tell personal stories in a highly mediated context” and to reflect on “who has the opportunity to be heard and in what capacity” (2019, 29).

It is in trying to reveal, and then to rectify, the communicative injustices at work in the media framing of the Woody Allen sex abuse charges, that *Allen v. Farrow*’s critical

promise lies. While *Allen v. Farrow* includes Allen's voice through excerpts from the audio version of his 2020 book, *Apropos of Nothing*, it challenges a framing of sexual abuse as a story to be told through "both sides." As co-director Amy Ziering has declared: "I'm not...interested in showing a side. I'm interested in investigating and showing the truth" (qtd. in D'Alessandro 2021). For Dick and Ziering, who specialize in investigative documentaries on sexual abuse from a victim-centred perspective (see, for example, *The Invisible War* 2012; *The Hunting Ground* 2015; *On the Record* 2020), a key priority of their filmmaking is to refute the cultural logics of "bothsidesism"³ by revealing the institutional underpinnings of sexual abuse.

It is meaningful that *Allen v. Farrow* begins with Woody Allen making a public statement at The Plaza Hotel in New York City in 1992 in which he refutes the child molestation charges and professes to be a victim of a smear campaign led by Mia Farrow. Allen's statement-making belongs to what Sarah Banet-Weiser has recently termed the "genre of the public statement," which has risen to cultural prominence in the #MeToo era. Banet-Weiser argues that many high-profile men have used the public statement to "wrestle back a hegemonic gender stability" through assuming the "mantle of victimhood themselves" (2021, 3). As revealed in Banet-Weiser's analysis, the rhetoric of statements by men including Brock Turner, Matt Lauer, Bill O'Reilly, and Harvey Weinstein, is couched in legalistic language that evokes the trenchant "myth of the lying woman" and is "strategically personal" (2021, 6) in the use of domestic tropes of familial duty and masculine truth and authority. By contrast, #MeToo testimonies of abuse and violation operate according to what Carrie Rentschler refers to as "feminist protocols" (qtd. in Banet-Weiser 2021, 6). Such protocols are situated in opposition to masculinist legal domains, often circulate through social media channels, and constitute a "testimonial network" (Banet-Weiser 2021, 6).

Allen v. Farrow is avowedly part of this #MeToo moment, which seeks to evoke a different and much needed feminist form of “law,” ethics, and accountability on sexual abuse cases. While *Allen v. Farrow* may contain some tabloid TV flourishes, with the recaps at the beginning of the episodes in particular undermining its wider commitment to resisting titillatory true crime, it nonetheless asks important questions about gendered authority and exposes the ways in which “testimonial truth is indexed not to facts but to power” (Gilmore qtd. in Banet-Weiser 2021, 6).

The argument carefully built up across four episodes is that Woody Allen used the might of his celebrity and white masculine privilege to control the public narrative about the abuse accusations. In an effort to deflect cultural (and legal) attention away from the reports of child sex abuse, *Allen v. Farrow* argues that Allen’s PR team created what would become a dominant cultural narrative: that Mia Farrow “brainwashed” 7-year-old Dylan into accusing Allen of sexual abuse because she was devastated by his affair with her adopted college-age daughter, Soon-Yi Previn. Through evidentiary materials (collected over the course of three years of research into the case) and a reconstructed timeline of events, Dirk, Ziering, and their investigator and co-producer Amy Herdy, puncture this narrative to suggest that the relationship with Previn was used as a diversion from potentially life-destroying accusations that he sexually abused Dylan. However strange it might seem for Allen to use his sexual relationship with another of Farrow’s daughters as a kind of alibi, *Allen v. Farrow* convincingly illustrates the abiding patriarchal logic that made it such an effective public relations strategy: the figure of the scorned mother was somehow more readily believable and culturally digestible than the notion of a father being sexually inappropriate and abusive towards his young daughter.

In detailing this skewed notion, the series is notably embedded in a conspicuous cultural turn toward re-evaluating the gender roles of the 1990s. So many of the public

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culture milestones of that decade centered on the credibility and authority of women, from the (compelled) testimony of Anita Hill during the 1991 Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation hearings, to ice skater Tonya Harding's profession of innocence regarding the 1994 attack on her Olympic rival Nancy Kerrigan. The era seemed marked on the one hand by exuberant take-downs of women in power (Hilary Clinton, Janet Reno, Winona Ryder whose shoplifting conviction led to long-term Hollywood blacklisting) and tabloid revelations of the emotion-driven crimes of distraught women like Lorena Bobbitt and "Long Island Lolita" Amy Fisher on the other. Meanwhile Hollywood trafficked in a steady procession of female stalkers and lunatics in hit films including *Misery* [1990], *Single White Female* [1992], *Basic Instinct* [1992], *Poison Ivy* [1992], *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* [1992] and *Disclosure* [1994].

Recent years however have seen a turn toward the re-evaluation of this era and a humanization of the women at the crux of many of these incidents. *I, Tonya* (2017) generates an empathetic portrait of Tonya Harding and the class and gender politics in which she was enmeshed, while in a Ted talk and other appearances, Monica Lewinsky has emerged as a thoughtful anti-bullying advocate.⁴ Most strikingly the media disparagement of celebrities like Britney Spears, Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan in the nineties and noughties has been unmasked as a symptom of a misogynist media culture, inviting rumination on taken-for-granted histories of public and private ownership of female celebrities.

Allen v. Farrow strongly suggests that Mia Farrow and Dylan Farrow should join this list of "wronged women" of the 1990s and emphasizes the losses they have suffered personally and professionally. Juxtaposing Woody Allen's robust professional output with the termination of Farrow's acting career since the scandal, the series includes interviews in which the actress relays how Allen told her that her career was dependent upon him since no other director would cast a woman of her age. (Farrow was 47 when she appeared in

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Husbands and Wives [1992] the last of the twelve films which she made with Allen).

Although he is only briefly referred to in Episode 4 of *Allen v. Farrow*, the exposure through previously suppressed or disregarded women's testimony of Harvey Weinstein as a serial rapist and the imprint of his independent film company Miramax on 1990s film and Allen's career is apparent.⁵

The docu-series revisits a period in which women's claims were trampled on with regularity and the sexualization of female public figures often worked hand in hand with social permission to treat them cruelly. Going further we might well say that an often sensationalized antipathy toward women suffused 1990s public culture (social histories of the period are united in emphasizing gender retrenchment as a core thematic; see Friend, 2017; Yarrow, 2018). Scrutinizing the cultural terrain on which cases such as *Allen v. Farrow* rested may emerge as a valuable (if unlikely) contribution of this phase of the true crime industrial complex.

We have suggested here that sociohistorical framing around the *Allen/Farrow* scandal is a necessary critical maneuver to recognize a 1990s, gendered cultural logic that saw a child-exploiting midlife female vendetta as a more intelligible cultural script than male child sexual abuse. The hierarchies of credibility so dextrously brought to light in *Allen v. Farrow* resonate not only through the court case at its centre and its long aftermath; they have implications for advocacy documentaries and indeed serialized true crime as forms of redress.

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¹ See Tanya Serisier (2019) for an important discussion of how Dylan Farrow has tried to tell her story – and the ways in which she has been judged and doubted according to a “he said/she said framework.”

² See, for example, Hadley Freeman (2021); Ibe Bondebjerg (2021) and J. Clara Chan (2021).

³ The term “bothsidesing” entered the cultural lexicon, post Trump, to refer to attempts to see “both sides of the story,” ostensibly in order to appear “fair,” while in fact lending problematic “credibility to a side or objectionable idea that has none” (“Looking at Bothsidesing”). An infamous example of the practice was Donald Trump’s claim that there were “very fine people on both sides” at a white supremacist rally in Virginia in 2017. While the term ‘bothsidesism’ might be new, the concept is familiar to feminist activists and scholars who research sexual violence. Indeed the #MeToo movement seeks to challenge a long and recalcitrant history of doubting women’s testimonies of sexual abuse through undue cultural concern over the man’s “side of the story.”

⁴ See, for example, the podcast *You’re Wrong About* (2018-), co-hosted by Michael Hobbes and Sarah Marshall, which is dedicated to re-evaluating events and people “miscast in the public imagination.” It includes many episodes on previously maligned women, including Tonya Harding and Monica Lewinsky. In 2014, Sarah Marshall wrote an important article reappraising the Tonya Harding/Nancy Kerrigan scandal that presages the current cultural drive for cultural reassessment of media treatment of celebrity women from the 1990s. For an earlier, important example of how feminist academics were attentive to 1990s gender controversies at the time they were playing out, see Cynthia Baughman’s 1995 edited collection *Women on Ice: Feminist Essays on the Tonya Harding/Nancy Kerrigan Spectacle*.

⁵ For an announcement of Allen’s 1994 deal with Miramax see Claudia Eller (1994). Allen would go on to release six additional films through Miramax and its later incarnation The Weinstein Company.