



Sex Trafficking in Argentina Now and Then: Keepers of Memory in *The Impure*

Trata de personas en la Argentina en el presente y el pasado: Los guardianes de la memoria en *Los impuros*

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Abstract: In his 2017 documentary *The Impure* Daniel Najenson straddles the notions of past and present to denounce the horrors and the injustice of sex trafficking in Argentina. Following a family tale of a great-aunt who migrated from Eastern Europe to South America at the beginning of the twentieth century, he digs deep into Israeli and Argentine archives to tell the story of the Zwi Migdal and the way Jewish women were forced into prostitution. To give voice to these women, he brings in Sonia Sánchez, originally from northern Argentina, and forced into prostitution in Buenos Aires when she was seventeen years old. Sánchez tells her own story, but also reads letters from the now deceased victims of sex trade a century ago. This self-professed feminist and activist is also shown in demonstrations and interviews fueling the *NiUnaMenos* movement in Argentina, while the #MeToo and TimesUp movements explode in the U.S.

Keywords: The Impure. Sonia Sánchez. Zwi Migdal.

Resumen: En su documental del 2017, *Los impuros*, Daniel Najenson se mueve entre las nociones del pasado y el presente para denunciar los horrores y las injusticias de la trata de personas en la Argentina. Siguiendo una historia de su familia sobre una tía abuela que emigró de Europa del Este a Sudamérica al comienzo del siglo 20, busca en archivos de Israel y Argentina documentos que cuenten la historia de la Zwi Migdal y la manera en que las mujeres judías fueron forzadas a prostituirse. Para darle voz a estas mujeres, el director incorpora a Sonia Sánchez, originalmente del norte de la Argentina, y forzada a prostituirse en Buenos Aires cuando tenía diecisiete años. Sánchez cuenta su propia historia, pero también lee cartas de las ya fallecidas mujeres forzadas a la prostitución hace un siglo. También se la ve a Sánchez, feminista y activista, en manifestaciones y entrevistas que forman parte del movimiento *NiUnaMenos* en la Argentina, mientras los movimientos #MeToo y TimesUp explotan en los Estados Unidos.

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Palabras claves: Los impuros. Sonia Sánchez. Zwi Migdal.

Art 8.º A woman will be considered a prostitute if she has relations with many men for money or other remuneration for herself, for whoever traffics her, or if split between them.

Art 9.º The prostitutes registered in the brothel must be over 18 unless it can be proved that they engaged in prostitution before that age.

Reglamento de las Casas de Tolerancia

Power is a story told by women. For centuries, men have colonized storytelling. That era is over.

Elena Ferrante

In his 2017 documentary *The Impure* Daniel Najenson straddles the notions of past and present to denounce the horrors and the injustice of sex trafficking in Argentina. Following a family tale of a great-aunt who migrated from Eastern Europe to South America at the beginning of the twentieth century, he digs deep into Israeli and Argentine archives to tell the story of the Zwi Migdal and the way Jewish women were forced into prostitution.¹ To give voice to these women, he brings in Sonia Sánchez, originally from northern Argentina, and forced into prostitution in Buenos Aires when she was seventeen years old. Sánchez tells her own story, but also reads letters from the now deceased victims of sex trade a century ago. This self-professed feminist and activist is also shown in demonstrations and interviews fueling the *NiUnaMenos* movement in Argentina, while the #MeToo and TimesUp movements explode in the U.S.

¹ In a phone interview, Najenson talked about the fact that he was unaware of this part of his family history until recently. He says: “Hicieron un trabajo muy bueno en ocultar” (“They did a good job to hide”). Even though he is talking about his own family, it could be argued this statement could represent the history of sex trafficking within the Jewish community in Argentina. Part of Najenson’s agenda is to uncover this hidden truth. However, his approach differs from the many texts that exist about the subject, as he makes a conscious decision to connect that past to the present by also telling Sonia Sánchez’s story (NAJENSON, 2020).



This paper aims to answer the following questions: How do personal and familiar stories get appropriated/employed by a modern lens to shape a collective discourse within present politics? Who benefits when these stories are silenced? Does the fact that the documentary is thought and created by a man present a conflict?² What can we find in the intersection of feminism, sex trafficking, and prostitution? Does talking about what happened a hundred years ago help or hinder the present situation?

1 Peripheral Memories: Zwi Migdal Victims find The(ir) Voice

In Daniel Najenson's documentary *The Impure* (2017) peripheral memories, marginalized memories, and silenced memories come to the center. The dark part of Jewish history in the early 20th century – the Jewish pimps and white slave trade—come into focus through the curiosity of the director, whose own family would like to forget a great-aunt who was a prostitute, and through several historians, researchers, writers, and scholars. The film could have been a revision of a part of Jewish Argentine history, but it is not: Najenson incorporates the 21st century struggle of sex trafficking via Sonia Sánchez, an Argentine feminist activist who was forced into prostitution for six years. By putting Sánchez's personal story vis-à-vis the Zwi Migdal's sordid universe of prostitution, Najenson provides a space for those peripheral memories (from the past, from the Jewish community in Argentina, from the "impure") to move center stage. Via Sánchez's voice the director gives voice to the Eastern-European Jewish women of a century ago – their memories no longer peripheral, now they contribute to the creation and validation of centers and their versions of the past.

Argentina's legal prostitution attracted Eastern Europe's Jewish underworld, riding the wave of 100,000 Jewish immigrants, mostly male. "Impuros" was the term created by

² I would like to thank *The Impure's* director, Daniel Najenson, for his generosity with his time and openness when interviewed on the phone. Najenson spent a significant amount of time reflecting on this, the fact that a man was creating and directing this film. He said he shifted the motivation that took him to make this film: from an interest in shedding light to a little-known subject in Israel combined with the involvement of his own family in it, to realizing his gaze as a man entails a responsibility (same as the society as a whole). Najenson made a conscious effort to surround himself of women in order to have that gaze too. Therefore, the camerawoman, sound engineer, and film editor were all women. Also, as a result of making this film, he enrolled in a gender and criminology class, as a way to further understand the dynamics at play (NAJENSON, 2020).



the respectable Jews of Argentina to distinguish themselves from the similar-looking immigrants in the sex trade.³ The Zwi Migdal was the organization that operated from the 1860s to 1930s in Argentina. After the First World War, it had four hundred members in Argentina. Its center was Buenos Aires, with offices in Brazil, the United States, and Poland, among other countries. The Zwi Migdal reached its peak in the 1920s.

If we consider this documentary in relation to questions of memory, we could point to at least four different aspects of “peripherality.” First, in portraying Sonia Sánchez as a central character (if we can call her that), the film can be said to shift and redefine the terms of this history. It thus offers alternatives to the history of sex trafficking, exposes it to criticism, and presents some of its crueler facets from unexpected angles. Second, while *The Impure* concentrates on the sex trafficking of the past and the present, the director’s point of view constantly takes the viewers not just throughout time but across several continents (from Eastern Europe, to Argentina, to Israel). The places chosen also within the documentary (archives, demonstrations, cemeteries) and the pictures the director takes there stretch and challenge the familiar landscape of the sex trafficking narrative. The third peripheral aspect refers to human rights, an integral part of the sex trafficking reality, which in the film appears only on the margins of the plot. In the first half of *The Impure*, we encounter a seemingly disconnection between the topics expressed in the figures’ dialogues (discussing history, but also present-day activism) and the camera’s short glances at Sonia Sánchez’s body. By incorporating these non-intrusive shots, the director lets the viewer juxtapose the bodies of anonymous Jewish Eastern European women over the body of Sánchez – we cannot have access to those

³ To learn more about the Zwi Migdal – both in fiction and not fiction –, refer to: SCHALOM, Myrtha. *La Polaca. Inmigración, rufianes y esclavas a comienzos del siglo XX*. Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2003 (out of print). Republished: Buenos Aires: Galerna, 2013; VINCENT, Isabel. *Bodies and Souls*. Harper Collins (Ed.). New York; CARNER, Talia. *The Third Daughter*. HarperCollins, 2019; GLICKMAN, Nora. *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman*. Routledge, 1999; YARFITZ, Mir, *Impure Migration: Jews and Sex Work in Golden Age Argentina*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019; a blog post by the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute: “Sex Trafficking: History Repeating Itself”; Reuven Glezer’s *The Argentinian Prostitute Play*, directed by Zeynep Akca, presented as part of Broadway Bound Theatre Festival 2019 (July 30 to August 25, 2019); the Argentine TV series “Argentina, tierra de amor y venganza” (produced by Pol-ka for El Trece TV channel); among many others.



other bodies due to the passing of time, but Sánchez's body is present, and she makes sure to use it to attend demonstrations, to support victims, and to educate people about sex trafficking. Finally, when it comes to past narratives the film doesn't dig into Sánchez's past, otherwise letting her use her own voice to tell her story. In contrast, historians, archives, photographs, and letters are the only vehicle to bring us the stories of those who cannot tell them in their voices in the twenty-first century. A poignant scene overlaps these two temporalities. The film moves between archives around the world from the Ezrat Nashim Organization Archive in Jerusalem to the Legislative Archive in Buenos Aires. In the first archive a letter is read by an anonymous female voice. In the second archive Sonia Sánchez reads from the rulebook of the *Casas de Tolerancia*: "The prostitutes must adhere the following terms: First, they must undergo medical examinations when required to do so." She stops reading and talks about what happens now, almost a hundred years later: "Currently in Argentina they must undergo an examination called 'disease update' every fifteen days." She connects both centuries through the requirements prostitutes must undergo, through what it is dictated for them by others. And she asks: "Why do they only invade the prostitute's body?" Meaning, why isn't there a required medical examination for men? Is it OK for men carry any disease, but women (prostitutes) must show they are healthy? Why this double-standard? After reading more about the rules and laws of the past Sánchez reflects: "...it's the same as now, in 2015. You look at this and the programs to regulate prostitution and it's exactly the same. They don't consider the women, victims of trafficking and pimping, all they think about is the 'business'." She comes to the conclusion that after a hundred years the status quo has not changed, that women are treated the same way, and that the conditions and requirements do not differ now compared to then. Reality and memory collapse in the center to show this.

The Impure thus presents ways through which peripheral views can challenge, enrich, divert, stretch, reevaluate, support and ignore narratives that address and shape memory. By considering the relevance of "periphery" to the study of memory, it wishes to do so by making explicit the memory-periphery link and offering new directions for exploring the insights entailed in this link. The questions that guide us are: What is the role of peripheral perspectives that seems to still focus on the alleged "center" of society and on collective, cultural or social memory as representing the elusive notion of a "majority"? Which aspects or objects of remembering can be considered "peripheral"? What constitutes their peripherality? What are the functions of seemingly "marginal" elements in the exchanges that characterize and constitute mnemonic practices and



products? Does it make sense to speak about remembrance/memory in spatial terms, and are there any alternatives to such conceptualizations?

Let us first review common definitions and usages of “periphery” in relation to its (at least implied) counterpart, “center,” and consider periphery’s epistemic potential. Generally speaking, the contrast of center with periphery is employed as an organizing tool based on the relation of isolated points (center) to the surface that surrounds them (periphery). Centers serve as focal points because they stand high in an order of symbols, values, beliefs or power and often also due to considerations of physical location. Nevertheless, the dividing lines between centers and peripheries are often blurred. Instead of clear distinctions in a two-dimensional mapping, we are increasingly speaking of in-between areas and examining encounters, connections and frictions (Tsing) in frontiers, boundaries, borders (Diener and Hagen, and Mezzadra and Neilson), edges (Casey) and alternative spaces (Megill). They turn their attention to mobility and movement rather than settle for stable locations and static categories (Andolph and Avrutin, and Sternhell).

A common approach to the memory of periphery seeks alternative and local accounts of marginal subjects and appreciates their particular perceptions and experiences. This approach frequently follows a democratic impulse that aims to “redeem” underprivileged groups, diminish their (physical or other) distance from their respective centers, and provide them with social recognition. A commonly used concept that addresses the power relations implicated in marginalized memory is silencing. The term stresses social actors’ active efforts to exclude certain people and stories from collective depictions of the past. Silencing “deals with the many ways in which the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means of such production” (Trouillot xix). In order to break the silences that constitute and support oppression and inequality, the subaltern is given an opportunity to speak. Oral history is thus used to “clamor against the crime of silence”.⁴ Thus, Sánchez’s voice in this documentary is the chance to break that silence and voice not only her struggle and oppression, but the Zwi Migdal’s victims’ too.

The growing tendency of late to expand the perspective on memory articulates itself primarily by placing it within global, transnational and transcultural frameworks. Rather than simply enlarge the examined objects of study, the studies demonstrate the

⁴ LIM, 2014, p. 6.



continuous and multifaceted mobility, mediation and multidirectionality of memory (Rothberg). That is, they approach memory as a form of mediated action, which is not confined to certain “sites,” but rather is constituted through constant movements and interactions. Memories thus emerge from multiple places and are involved in interplay between different pasts and a heterogeneous present.

The notion of going “outside oneself” in constructing one’s memory can also be used to inquire as to what belongs to the self and what the self belongs to. In his documentary, Najenson contemplates what it means to be peripheral to the past. He does so in relation to his family’s history: a great-aunt that was a prostitute and his curiosity about her life brings him from Israel to Argentina. However, he encounters a true desire by his family to bury that “shameful” part of the past. Perla Deri (an Argentine relative of Najenson) when confronted with the story by Najenson says: “Why do you have to bring all this dirt out? What for? What for? It’s like stirring a rotten pot.”

“Es remover una olla podrida”⁵ However, Najenson’s film shows us how that rotten pot is as present nowadays as it was then. Sánchez completely relates to the desperate women who ended up in Buenos Aires brothels over a century ago. “My story is their story.... If they were rich, it was only in semen,” she says. She also arrived in Buenos Aires alone (from the province of Chaco, in the northeast of Argentina), she was also young (seventeen years old), and she was also forced into prostitution. Sánchez now fights for human rights and to end prostitution. She sees as one of the biggest hurdles to end prostitution that the overwhelmingly majority of positions at all levels of the government are held by men. Sánchez argues that the institutions are the ones keeping the status quo and even reinforcing it. We can see this is not just an issue in the present, but it also affects the past. Author Myrtha Schalom talks about the obstacles she encountered when researching about Raquel Liberman (the best-known name when it comes to the stories of prostitutes controlled by the Zwi Migdal). And we can also see the director of IWO, Argentina’s Jewish Research Institute, Prof. Abraham Lichtemboim, still trying to protect the public image of the first- and second-generation immigrants. He and Najenson have the most interesting conversation, where the true

⁵ “It’s like stirring a rotten pot.” This rotten pot that Deri is talking about is a personal one (within her family). However, there is another one which still challenges the community, as we can see when IWO, Argentina’s Jewish Research Institute, Prof. Abraham Lichtemboim is interviewed by Najenson.



interests in burying history (when it comes to the Zwi Migdal) come to light.⁶ The raised voice of Prof. Lichtemboim and his corporal reaction to Najenson's questions are just a sliver a what a hundred years of complicit inaccuracies and misrepresentations can achieve:

Najenson: "This is a story that happened almost a hundred years ago. So, I wonder, why the great effort to hide it?"

Lichtemboim: "It was hidden so the first and second generations wouldn't be stigmatized."

Najenson: "And now that two generations of hiding have passed, do you think it's time to investigate a bit more? [...] What about the cemetery in Avellaneda? No one is allowed in, no one mows the grass there either."

Lichtemboim: "Look... That community experienced a financial crisis and didn't have the money to mow the grass. When one investigator and IWO helped find funding, we mowed the grass. And we conducted a religious ceremony in memory of the Polish woman, Raquel Liberman, where songs were sung in Yiddish from the time of the prostitution as a study theme."

Najenson: "But, what does that mean in a place that is closed to except five people?"

Lichtemboim: "I ask you, why... There's nothing to flaunt. It's about awareness, it's not about publicity. [...] What is your interest? Everybody knows about it. What do you want to know? Let's stop with this morbid prying, let's stop it. Let these poor people rest in peace. I'm sick of this morbid curiosity and this mental masturbation. You know what "masturbation" is? Mental masturbation. Why don't you focus on corruption? It was legal, that's all. I have no desire that it be morbidly made known which families made their fortune and owns [sic] important companies in Argentina thanks to the money they made from prostitution. What do you want me to say? There. I don't want to stain the memory of the poor woman who's buried in Avellaneda. If you want to fight the trafficking of women, respect the poor woman who was forced to be a prostitute and don't put her on display in the town square."

By examining peripheral details that appear in depictions from varied media, we sometimes discover that they act as hints that invite us to reflect on alternative, and

⁶ In a phone interview, Najenson explains he decided to leave out scenes where the conversation gets even more heated. His intention was to provide an even account from all sides and for the audience members to draw their own conclusions.



even subversive, memories that may break these very silences. The clear examples are what we just saw: the existence of traces of certain aspects of that past, silenced in official accounts, on the margins of the society but forced to the center nowadays by movements like #MeToo, TimesUp, and NiUnaMenos (opposed to violence against women). While these aspects are constantly alluded to, they are not made central in the film: Najenson pushes from the margins to the center weaving stories of the past and present but without alluding at the current feminist movements. Nevertheless, it is not possible to ignore these movements when Sánchez is such a force in the film. The director chooses to end the film joining temporal spaces in a long shot at the Cemetery of Avellaneda. This tangible way of uniting Sánchez with the remains of Jewish prostitutes of the last century is a clever way of giving these women the last words – at least in the film. One timely insight from Sánchez: “I think the only way to fight, at least from what I’ve found, is not to hide.”⁷

On the one hand, this film shows the transgressive capacity of peripheral perspectives to blur boundaries, break silences, and destabilize centers regarding memory. On the other hand, it solidly works on showcasing some aspects of peripherality that contributed to the creation and validation of centers and their versions of the past. Yet the spatialization of memory through peripheral perspectives can do something else. It can introduce new and unusual ways of viewing our relationship to the past, raise questions regarding the forms and functions of centers, and contemplate the unit of memory itself and its possible “margins.”

2 Vulnerability as Resistance, Potential History as a Trigger for Activism

The Impure has a powerful thesis: prostitution is violence on women’s bodies and Argentina was economically built in part on this market. Rather than focusing on what has been repressed in official memory or what traumatically haunts (and could thus be revealed through symptomatic readings), Najenson’s documentary shows that thinking through conceptions of the periphery in memory work also allows insights into the role of remembering/forgetting as a protective, even productive, and reparative force. Najenson’s film reminds us that memory and oblivion stand together; both are necessary for the full use of time. The film pleads to not forget in order to not lose neither memory nor curiosity. Seen in this light, peripheral memory holds open the space for the spectator to re-view and decide what should drift away and what needs to

⁷ As Adriana Brodsky pointed out, this is also what Raquel Liberman did by denouncing the Zwi Migdal in 1929.



be pulled in more fully into the present consciousness in order to envision the past as a vantage point to fuel the present fight.

Performances of protest and art practices are an integral part of our inquiry into how the past can be opened up and its debilitating legacies transformed. [...] What role do the arts play in combating the erasure of past violence from current memory and in creating new visions and new histories for future generations? In particular, what unique strategies have women devised to reveal and attempt to redress the violence directed at women and at other disenfranchised social groups?⁸

Hirsch proposes to think of vulnerability as a key component of the feminist memory ethics – feminists have defined “vulnerability” as a space of interconnection in the face of entangled histories (14). So, why not think of both Sánchez and Najenson as agents working to redirect discourses of trauma, working to go around the grief and sorrow (or not just go around it, but go through it, challenging that pain), and come out the other end still knowing that there is an (fairly certain) unavoidable repetition of the past in the present and future in which that pain cannot be healed but lives on. It could be argued that we need that pain in order for society to wake up from the long darkness we live in. This darkness happens when, like in the case of the Zwi Migdal victims, their pain and injustice are buried. And it is buried for so long that that pain transforms into a constant, dull humming: the pain is not gone, it is there, maybe it is down below the surface, but it is there. “Redirecting the retrospective glance of trauma opens a view toward alternate temporalities that might be more porous and future-oriented, situated on the threshold of alternate reimagined realities”.⁹ This is what Sánchez and Najenson accomplish by the end of the documentary when she says (while at the Jewish Cemetery in Avellaneda, specifically at the “The Impure” lot):

I think the only way to fight, at least from what I found, is not to hide. Look at me, look at me, look at me, you created me because you’re a man who goes to a prostitute. What did I do that she became a prostitute? What did I do? I looked the other way while they turned her into a prostitute there in Pichincha? What did I do in those places where they were born and trafficked? I looked the other way? My grandparents looked the other way? We must

⁸ HIRSCH, 2014, p. 3.

⁹ HIRSCH, 2014, p. 15.



show the face that we don't want to see, to restore the dignity that prostitution stole from us. It's impossible to fight from within the disregard and darkness.

Sonia Sánchez knows that claiming her vulnerability and everyone's vulnerability (all the victims of sex trafficking, past and present), creates the political resistance needed to address and combat the stagnant status quo. Sánchez's and Najenson's agenda look at how memory of past and continuing acts of violence against women can be turned around in the interests of awareness and justice. *The Impure* acts to mobilize the archives not only of tragedy but also of resistance: creating political subjects and collectivities, re-thinking ways of producing social change, promoting awareness. Memory (with capital M) and memories (as bit and pieces collected throughout a century in the form of photographs, letters, newspapers articles, and familial stories), then, do not stay caught, paralyzed in the past, but function as a clear platform from where to soar above the mere accusations and produce change. The filmmaker and the activist could be accused of naïve for thinking this way, but it is the only way they see moving forward: Najenson literally "remueve una olla podrida" (stirs a rotten pot) in order to denounce and to remember. He knows about the imprecision of the past, but he pairs up with Sánchez, whose body and voice inhabit the stories the Zwi Migdal victims left behind and tries to imagine alternative histories that will eventually could provide a different future.

It is useful here to think of Ariella Azoulay's notion of "potential history" (inspired by Walter Benjamin's idea of "incomplete history"). "Potential history" relates to what might have been: to "potentialize" history is to see what was from a different point of view. Instead of seeing things in a linear way, it is the capacity to contain differing truths that could potentially lead to alternate futures. *The Impure* is embedded in the idea of "potential history" as a resort to imagine the possible pasts of women who, in alternative past, were not deceived and trafficked across continents/provinces and, simultaneously, create the possibility of a present and future also free from that violence. "It is not sufficient for such history to criticize the existing situation. It must reconstruct the possibilities that have been violently erased and silenced in order to make them present anew at any given moment" (Azoulay 553). Sonia Sánchez knows of these possibilities as she reinvents herself, she reconstructs her life, as an activist and educator. The film opens with a long shot of the "The Impure" lot in the Cemetery of Avellaneda and spends the next ten minutes giving background information of the immigration situation in Argentina at the beginning of the twentieth century, specifically Jewish immigration. It also provides information about brothels and prostitution. However, right after all this we are taken to the twenty-first century, to a



demonstration on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. Sánchez is there, protesting (from the Latin, meaning to bear witness, to testify publicly). In this stage in her life, Sánchez is bearing witness of what happened to her and, astutely, Najenson involves her cooperation to also bear witness of what happened to the Zwi Migdal victims. When we first see Sánchez (what Najenson chooses to show us first), is her being interviewed by a radio station in the midst of a massive demonstration. Sánchez's discourse is clear and to the point when asked what advice she would give to young women: "Prostitute is violence, that they shouldn't immigrate looking for a job because it doesn't always end well, that they should kick their major's door in and demand jobs and decent wages and refuse to be silenced. The men must learn to associate with us without violence. I am devoting my life to the war against violence. Not only against prostitution and the trafficking of women, because prostitution and trafficking are part of the violence that women suffer from. [...] There's no free choice in prostitution...".

But Najenson's voice is also part of the documentary, he doesn't take a completely passive role. The first time we hear Daniel Najenson's voice is at the beginning of the film when he reads from the rulebook of the *Casas de Tolerancia*, a politically correct wording for a brothel. The second time we hear his voice is when he is talking with Guillermo Zinni, a researcher. While Zinni is explaining how common it was at the beginning of the twentieth century to have access to brothels, a fact that everyone accepted, men and women ("And it wasn't considered that bad, they didn't kill anyone"), Najenson interjects, surprising Zinni: "It depends who you ask. The uncle who took the nephew and the women see it in totally different ways". It is the powerful collaboration of Sánchez and Najenson that provide the space needed for this film to be created, to exist, and to challenge from the screen. The intersection of feminism, sex trafficking, prostitution, activism, and human rights gives us this film and it is Sánchez's body that confers political force upon her. It is also Najenson's digging into uncomfortable peripheral memories and his strategy to move them to the center that confers this film with the possibility of becoming a tool for change. His work (their work) reveals that this subject is not dormant, that it needs to be awakened, that memory can be built together in moments of reuniting and of juxtaposing past and present. *The Impure* presents the opportunity to activate and alter suppressed memories – and tangible realities – in the service of resistance and change.

3 The Prospects of Collective Truth Telling, or the Problematics of Misrepresentation?



When Daniel Najenson makes the decision to invite Sonia Sánchez to interweave her story with the one of Najenson's great-aunt (and possibly all the victims of the Zwi Migdal), there is a constant issue of (mis)representation and of creating a collective with shared, but also fraught, identities. Can a certain "I" represent a "we"? Do we demand that that "I" accomplish certain requisites? Meaning, can a non-Jew, non-Eastern European represent those women a century later?¹⁰

When Rigoberta Menchú was accused of misrepresenting the truth, of representing others' experiences as her own, of constructing a composite narrative that wove together several people's life events and integrated them with her own life story, her whole narrative was being questioned.¹¹ Menchú argues: "The history of the community is my own history...I am the product of a community".¹² In Menchú's case, she was being accused of representing others' experiences as her own and of constructing a composite narrative that wove together several people's life events and integrated them with her own life story. This narrative "I" is called upon to represent the experiences of the "we", in which the narrator speaks as a member of an oppressed community or social group. However, if we look closely at what is being denounced as a lie, we see that what is being ignored is the performativity of Menchú's life narrative as an intentionally crafted text. In a similar way, Sánchez is a fierce advocate for her oppressed community and that community does not have a timeframe, meaning, for Sánchez all women victims of the sex trade, in any century, deserved to be acknowledged, respected, and remembered. Also, the idea of one voice being the voice of a community is not always completely accepted in Western society, where individualistic forces reign. Menchú emphasizes: "It's not a question of believing my

¹⁰ Daniel Najenson explains the powerful effect of having Sonia Sánchez be part of the film as a way of "abre la historia a algo más grande" ("it opens the story to something bigger"). Meaning that his documentary shifts from digging into the past of one specific country and the history involved in that past (both familial as well as historical) to showing multilayer connections of countries and chronological times.

¹¹ In 1983 Elizabeth Burgos and Rigoberta Menchú published *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (the original title in Spanish, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*). The North American anthropologist David Stoll published *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* in 1999 denouncing Menchú's testimony. Following the controversy, she said: "*I, Rigoberta Menchú* was a testimonial, not an autobiography" (AZNÁREZ, 2001, p. 110).

¹² AZNÁREZ, 2001, p. 110, 113.



own truth or someone else's; I'm simply saying I have a right to my memory, as do my people".¹³ By narrating her account in terms of collective memory, Menchú is bringing a marginal experience narrative into the center, while we see Sánchez realize throughout the documentary that her own experience needs to be supplemented by other voices to fill the gaps in her knowledge and the memories that lay beyond the grasp of her understanding in order to produce a more accurate historical account of her experience. The voices that Sánchez finds are the ones from a century ago, born in another continent, brought up in a different culture. Now Sánchez's fight for recognition of all the "putas" (as she calls sex workers, not "prostitutas") has a historical background and a layer of memory that work as the basis of her demands.¹⁴

5 Keepers of Memory within the Sex Trafficking World (Now and Then)

In Alsace, France, there are volunteers who take care of Jewish cemeteries. They are not Jewish themselves, but they find despicable the desecration that happens too often in these cemeteries. They are known as the "keepers of memory" (Infobae). Theirs is a physical task which involves monitoring the area and, in the case of vandalism, cleaning up as part of what they call "their duty as citizens" of that area (Infobae). For Sonia Sánchez, the preservation of memory is not so much a physical one as it is the intangible preservation of stories.¹⁵ Sánchez's appears to have a strong connection with the women who were victims of the Zwi Migdal as she was also a victim of sex trafficking when still a teenager. However, there is a desire to also preserve stories of women in general, women that were not allowed to have their own voices then and who are still struggling today. Sánchez wants to represent all women, but this could prove problematic. When the central rhetorical tactic is to operate in the language of one group through the employment of first-person narration in order to gain intelligibility within first world circuits, while operating in excess of these very same paradigms, then the situation complicates without providing many choices to counterargument. Consequently, as mentioned before, when Rigoberta Menchú tells her story, she does

¹³ AZNÁREZ, 2001, p. 116.

¹⁴ In the film, Sánchez never uses the word "prostitutes", only the word "whores" to refer to sex workers. The appropriation of the word works on the same level as her demand to call things the way they are and to acknowledge sex workers and victims of the sex trade as that (and not penalize them under the law, which was written by men).

¹⁵ It could be argued that there is a physical preservation of memory by victims of sex trafficking and by prostitutes.



not assume her “I” is a “we” (specifying that her story is not an autobiography but that it is *testimonio*), thus reinforcing the understanding of foundational cultural and ideological configurations of what “truth” is viewed as. Therefore, signaling an interpretive impasse between vastly different worldviews. It can be argued that Sánchez and women like Raquel Liberman have dissimilar worldviews, as they are separated by almost a hundred years; however, their realities did not differ greatly (not the core of their daily lives and daily sufferings).¹⁶

When Sánchez or Menchú narrate their account in terms of collective memory, they stake a claim in how their stories can be utilized to advance social struggle. Working against a purely documentary interpretation and toward an intentionally crafted perspective of their accounts alternately rubs up against western notions of “art for art’s sake” given their activist role (they are both well known in this role). Not to forget the complex power dynamics that are brought forth by the denouncing of these two women, relegated by most, to their minority status. Their take on memory and truth (and their self-imposed role “keepers of memory”), brings the conversation into the realm of marginalized subjects and how their plight is interpreted within a reductionist paradigm by racially and geopolitically privileged audiences in which the truth-claims put forth by the speakers are either uncritically believed as transparent, uncomplicated narrative truths of life-as-it-happened, or alternately, wholly dismissed at the attitudinal whim of geopolitically privileged audiences who make the willful choice to remain uninformed on global political issues and their entanglements with them. This begs to disrupt this narrow interpretive model by moving the “true/false” binary in order to complicate the ways we understand the power-laden relationship that surrounds Menchú and Sánchez.

One way Najenson works to disrupt this “true/false” binary is by creating this documentary and having the channels to distribute it around the globe. By providing a space for Sánchez (and, at the same time, Liberman) to voice the stories, Najenson becomes now part of the “keepers of memory”. Belonging to this group dares the audience to open up to their vulnerability that accompanies laying claim to the limits of their social knowledge. This is a process that is enabled through sustained dialogue and recognition of the responsibility that accompany the information we have learned – sand that we now must remember. It is through the intentional working through of

¹⁶ It is, of course, troubling to fail to name the victims of the Zwi Migdal by name, except for Raquel Liberman. It is done for efficiency in the writing process, but I am painfully aware that it is a way of perpetuating their unfair anonymity.



such social vulnerabilities and the responsibility of this remembering that an assertive and (hopefully) lasting politics of hope and social equity is forged. And the keepers of memory in *The Impure* will be not alone.

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