

## The Immigrant Adolescent and the *In-body* Issue

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### Abstract

In this paper, I propose to discuss the effects of anxiety upon an adolescent in the midst of the process of immigration. I will discuss the development of this case along with a discussion of the subject's symptoms and adolescent crisis. I will use the expression coined by Colette Soler, the *in-body*<sup>1</sup> (2019) to describe the way that the patient's body communicates her experience, and I will present my own slight variation of this theoretical perspective on this concept as it applies to the case at hand. From clinical practice, we will see that the relocation of a young immigrant is imbued with elements that are not easily assimilated. These elements are imposed by the Other and incorporated through *in-body* impositions that are demonstrated through the clinical complaints and begin to be resolved through treatment.

In this present work, I propose to discuss the effects of anxiety on an adolescent in the midst of both the process of immigration and the crisis of adolescence. To touch upon the effects of this "talking" body, I will use the expression coined by psychoanalyst Colette Soler (2019), the *in-body*. From clinical practice, we are advised that the relocation of a young immigrant is imbued with elements

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<sup>1</sup> Or, as Collette Soler (2019) put the term, in its original French, "*l'en-corps de sujet*."

that are not easily assimilated, but which are imposed and, at best, incorporated at the time of the Other, in the Lacanian sense, impositions.

The first complaints arise as an indication that this extemporaneous incorporation has in-body consequences. Guided by the Lacanian assertion that the subject is not a body, but has a body, my approach to this work is to reaffirm and return to the "mystery of the speaking body." The lack of place caused by the phenomenon of immigration requires both greater care by the parents and a need for the issues to be promptly resolved so that the suffering does not take on greater proportions.

### **The Immigrant Adolescent and the *In-body* Issue**

The immigrant is a foreigner, a being who will always be on the edge of a culture and will never feel as if they belong. We say it as if it were big news, and writing this observation causes me a strangely familiar discomfort, the well-known uncanny (Freud, 1976). How could this be a condition exclusively associated with the experience of immigration? The other day I had the pleasure of coming across a phrase on the Instagram site of art curator Hans Ulrich Obrist wherein he quotes the artist Conrad Shawcross who stated: "Migration is older than language."<sup>2</sup>

Shawcross' phrase reminds us that migrating, and immigrating, are movements that reflect the history of humanity. All the fury and fear that has been experienced today with cultural fluidity, as a result of refugees and immigrants in the search for a better life, have given way to culture in a primarily brutal way. In the invasion and seizure of geographical and subjective spaces, language has been deconstructed, reconstructed, and transformed into this cultural mosaic that is the symbolic world as we know it. What makes culture into the stuff of non-belonging and invasion, is that, as Walter Benjamin (1940) reminds us:

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<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from; <https://www.piwox.com/tag/ConradShawcross>

“there has never been a document of culture, which is not simultaneously one of barbarism. And just as it is itself not free from barbarism, neither is it free from the process of transmission, in which it falls from one set of hands into another” (p.5-6).

As such, with this particularity of culture, the *substance body* of a baby, in its uniqueness, will be assaulted by the other who introduces him to the world according to their perspectives.<sup>3</sup> Then, the infant accepts the invasion and allows a border to occur, *in-body* (En-corps).

Soler (2019) plays with the French-language homophony of the Lacanian (1972) Seminar “Encore” (Even More) with the expression *En-corps* (*In-body*) to emphasize the body as a language effect, while maintaining the tension between the body included in the language (significant) and the language incorporated into the body (where the symbolic takes shape). The admission of the body in language and the incorporation of the symbolic contribute to the understanding of the Lacanian idea that the subject is not a body, but the subject has one body and only one, and it is from where he speaks (Lacan, 2003). To clarify, Lacan is saying that you must have a body to speak and you can only be a “speak-being”—a being that only exists through language from this body.

To speak of the body itself, I will use an expression used by Lacan in his Seminar “Encore” (1998), substance of the body. Understanding that the drive body is not the animal body, and that it is a denatured organism, as Colette Soler reminds us that drive as a language effect is a Lacanian viewpoint. In his first teaching, Lacan deals with the body of the imaginary. Lacan thinks of the body through the mirror stage, through which the body gains a libidinal dynamism. The imaginary body has a mediating function in the relationship of the organism to its reality, and the imaginary is not the image of the body or its representation only, but it includes the body in its real consistency that is beyond the image.

The second Lacanian thesis regarding the body is that language gives us a body: “the body is a fact of language” (Colette Soler, p.35). At this point in his teaching, Lacan brings an operation that

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<sup>3</sup> Here I refer to the other of the imaginary.

retroacts over the stage of the mirror indicating that it was not the image, but the language that had an operative value. Lacan (1998) raises a question about the substantial dimension of the body:

“Isn't that where the psychoanalytic experience is supposed to be? - the substance of the body, with the proviso that it is defined only as what it “*jouit*” [enjoys]” (Soler, p.35).

Lacan goes on to say that “*jouit*” a body only happens because it is embodied by the signifier.

Therefore, I want to add the additional notion here, that when I refer to the *substance of the body*, I conceive of it as maintaining the tension between a body that is not symbolized, but that is also not out of language alone, but is also a living body, while not reduced to only the organic condition.

### **Case of Sarah**

So I begin our discussion of the case with a fundamental question: Could this non-belonging, that shows itself upon immigration, be present since the beginning of life, in the helplessness of a being who comes into the world without a language of his own, waiting (even without knowing) for the Other to insert him into a significant chain? Can we assume that, like the immigrant, with each move towards a certain psychic restructuring, supported by this Other, the little subject will cry out for a place of recognition, of belonging, in a world that does not belong to him?

The fact is, the world will never belong to us, nor will we feel completely owned by it. In the eternal attempt to capture a language, a certain psychic structure is constituted of memory language. And so, as we return to the foundations of the symbolic, it is possible to find anxiety as its starting point.

Of the various forms in which this anguished anxiety affect can be presented, the body is the most enlightened scenario, for it is in the *substance body* that excess presents itself. So, taking excess, the anxiety, as a starting point I will get close to the edge of these two extreme experiences: adolescence and immigration and show how the symptomatic setting becomes confused, blended and blurred.

Sarah (fictitious name) migrated with her mother, stepfather, and half-sister (her mother's daughter) to another country. At 13 years of age, and 34 kg. (75 lbs.), she doesn't want to eat, she

doesn't want to speak, and she doesn't give in to appeals—instead, she closes up. In the interview with the mother, much is said about her, giving rise to the statement: “And so, we have the Problem Sarah.”. The daughter is presented as a problem, which does not resonate with the mother’s insistence that Sarah become a laid-back, communicative girl who presents herself in the same communicative and sociable manner of her mother and father. Both parents are very similar. They separated when Sarah was 3 years old and are still living in their home country.

While her father and mother are both very convincing, friendly, articulate, and resolute, Sarah is cornered, frightened, sullen, closed, monosyllabic and has lost her appetite. At the first meeting we talked about food, her longing for the flavors of her childhood, and when she talked about food, she introduced me to the places and people with which the foods were associated. In ways she seemed more childlike than expected from a 13-year-old girl about to turn 14, but in other ways, smarter and more rational than most of her peers. While her parents complained about this delay in becoming a young woman, she had no interest in such a change.

Sarah’s parents insisted on the idea that the change of country caused her lack of appetite, and while not discounting the contribution of immigration to the picture, to me there is something more symptomatic, an unconscious choice linked to the elements of anorexia. Eventually, this symptom presented itself as a deprivation when they both discovered that she had searched for some videos on the subjects of diet and anorexia. She developed an imaginary idea of these symptoms, we talked about them and their consequences, and she answered me decidedly that it is not anorexia. She rarely responds in the affirmative, she whispers answers, and lacks the courage to ask questions. Her parents insist that I get to the point and convince Sarah to eat more, but I stand by her and refuse to do what they want.

In Sarah’s sessions, we visited more fun places, and resumed talking of her childhood. On two occasions she tells me she feels she’s from “neither there nor here:”

“I don't feel Brazilian anymore, I don't want to go back there, I want to stay here with my mother. But I don't feel I am from here either. I feel like I'm not there anymore, but not yet here either.”

She expressed a desire to move to a new school because it has more immigrants—people who will understand her better.

Besides being neither from here nor there, Sarah is also neither a child nor an adult. In the next conversation, she tells me how hard it is to find clothes, and because she is no longer a child, she cannot wear “cute” clothes, nor is she yet an adult. At no time does she refer to the issue of her thinness. Talking about the clothes led to her discussing a curious decision. She reported on how strange it was to see her mother buying colorful pants that drew attention to her hips, at which point Sarah decided that she no longer wanted to wear colorful pants, since she does not want people to look at her hips.

To be young and to grow up, means a definitive move from a certain position to another position, and she is, so far, unable to resolve her reluctance to make such a move. As the treatment continued, it seemed that her untenable position also concerned her father. She does not keep any photographs of her father, and each time she talks about him in her session, she gets emotional and closes up. At first, during her discussion, she does not feel angry, and just can't give words to what she feels. She has not lived with her father since she was 3 years old, and even while she lived in Brazil, they didn't see each other very much. These days, the geographical distance seems to have made the relationship even more fragile. They talk once a week, and he usually calls at the time she's having dinner. Sarah has already explained to him that it is not a good time, but it is the time he has for her.

Sarah admonishes herself to give a more loving response to this father than she tends to offer. She feels an ethical obligation and duty to do so. During the phone calls, her father is present in only a didactic way, trying to educate her about literature, politics, and eating well. She lacks nourishment, lacks nourishment for the love she needs to live out the subjective position of daughter

and allow herself to become something different. In the emotional sense, she has never felt that she was her father's baby, he has yet admired and valued her properly. The mother presents herself fully and ideally.

Sarah needs to "swallow" this father and she to seem "satisfied" with this excessive mother, there is no room to "*grow*", to *trow*, to just be and to *speak-being*<sup>4</sup> Sarah. Her mother is not a mother who satisfies her, she is a mother who makes her full, who exceeds and does not allow anything that belongs to Sarah herself. In the context of either parent, she feels that there is no room to "*grow*." She asks me to help her with her father and to send him a more assertive message. "Tell him that when I go there, I want to choose my dresses, and my books, and also say that I don't understand anything he says about politics, and besides it doesn't interest me."

During the course of our work together, she went to meet him, it wasn't good, she doesn't want to go anymore, and she doesn't know how to say it. She's afraid her father won't love her anymore if she states her feelings. She reported that while visiting, her father didn't change his routine to be able to spend time with her and she felt neglected and felt that she was being punished during the time spent waiting for him. She recognized that this is a feeling she's always had.

Her life is only moving with her mother, but at the same time, she longs to have a life of her own in this new country. However, with each return to Brazil, she feels she has lost something, feels that she is losing something in exchange. On one hand, Sarah longs to have a life of her own in her new country, but on the other hand, her mother is all the reference that she has. She passively puts her trust for every decision into her mother's hands. Although she doesn't always agree with or think like her mother, she accepts her mother's decisions every time. Sarah is afraid to speak up and oppose her mother's judgments, and lives with the consequences. It took almost a year of our treatment for her to allow herself to state that she sometimes finds her mother annoying. She expressed this feeling after realizing that her mother did not genuinely listen to her, take her

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<sup>4</sup> Or as Lacan sometimes put it, *parlêtre* (drawing from Heidegger's philosophy).

opinions into account in decision making, and that her mother made decisions that affected the two of them according to her own desires.

At this point in her treatment, I helped Sarah with the pivotal task of working to reclaim this territory, the territory of having preferences or desires, and of wanting some self-determination in her life. It is not an uninhabited territory: it is just that this inhabitant (Sarah) doesn't know how far she should go to work her own soil. So many statements and so little understanding of what governs an appropriation. But, no, her body hadn't been fully appropriated, she is struggling against the attempts. Sarah is struggling, that is, she has not been fully colonized. She has desires that are not recognized, not even by herself at the beginning of treatment, but at the moment she can already talk about them. In order for her to regain ownership, her treatment had to help her to transform the rigid frightening edge that points to a precipice with each attempt to walk forward on a coastline, and to accomplish going in her own direction, of her own choosing. Her territory would never be without marks of conquerors, but for her to become her own person, she needs to continue to cross borders and discover coastlines from where she should start navigating in the directions of her own choice.

Sarah wants, and was becoming ready, to move ahead on her own and doesn't know how to say no to what they offer her as if it were a feast. She does not feel the flavor. Over the ten months of sessions, where she regained some control of her body,<sup>5</sup> she has also regained 7 kilograms (15 pounds). I indicated that it was time to celebrate, because Sarah is now beginning to journey in her own time and mapping out her life and her own decision-making territory.

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<sup>5</sup> Once the symbolic is on track, we have a knot, articulating the symbolic, real and imaginary. So, the body to which I am referring at this point is the symptomatic body, which means having the best use of your symptom.



Though not fully expressed yet, she has gained strength in learning to speak her language. As she migrates from her childhood country, and now, also from her childhood body, and, importantly from her parents' language to her own language, I listen to her.

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