IDENTITY, BODY, AND DISPLACEMENT: RECONSTRUCTING SUBJECTIVITY IN TATIANA SALEM LEVY’S \textit{A CHAVE DE CASA}

Abstract: The intersection of identity transformation and (trans)national mobility is a recurrent preoccupation in twenty-first century Brazilian literature. Tatiana Salem Levy dialogues with this debate in \textit{A chave de casa} (2007) and additionally contributes to it by recognizing the importance of the body in the (re)construction of subjectivity. This paper thus analyzes the role of embodiment in the fragmentation and subsequent refashioning of subjectivity when Levy’s protagonist, a descendant of Jewish Turks who immigrated to Brazil, travels in search of both her family’s cultural heritage and her sense of self. Drawing upon the work of feminist scholars, I explore the fundamental role the body plays in mediating lived experiences and negotiating one’s place in the world.

Key words: Subjectivity – Paralysis – Body – Transnational Displacement – Agency

The refashioning of identity through forms of displacement has become increasingly important in contemporary Brazilian literature, which has seen a growing tendency towards representing rootless characters that interact in a continuous flux of movement.\textsuperscript{1} From stories of international immigration whose transnational experiences question the idea of national identity, to internal movement across different neighborhoods, cities or regions of Brazil in search of

\textsuperscript{1} The concept of displacement is broadly used across disciplines such as Physics, Chemistry, Geology, Medicine, and Freudian Psychology. I utilize the term as synonym of physical movement, specifically applied to its representation in literature and cinema regarding authors, characters, styles, temporal, spacial, and discursive realms (Bernd 89). Displacement through migration was a key theme in Brazil’s Regionalism movement, but it has taken on renewed significance in the last decade in works such as João Gilberto Noll’s \textit{Berkeley em Bellagio} (2002), Adriana Lisboa’s \textit{Rakushisha} (2007), Bernardo Carvalho’s \textit{O sol se põe em São Paulo} (2008), Milton Hatoum’s \textit{Orfãos do Eldorado} (2008), Marcus Vinicius Faustini’s \textit{Guia afetivo da periferia} (2009), Rodrigo Lacerda’s \textit{Outra vida} (2009), Paloma Vidal’s \textit{Algum lugar} (2009), Michel Laub’s \textit{Diário da queda} (2011), Susana Montoro’s \textit{Os Hungareses} (2011), Oscar Nakasato’s \textit{Nhonjin} (2011), and Rubens Figueiredo’s \textit{Passageiro do fim do dia} (2010).
social mobility, the focus upon the ubiquity of movement in the motif of displacement highlights new transcultural processes at the core of Brazilian cultural production.

By engendering the narrative of her debut novel *A chave de casa* (2007) with notions of identity, embodiment, and physical mobility, Tatiana Salem Levy dialogues with Brazil’s literary production at the beginning of the twenty-first century in its recurrent development of narratives based on spatial movement and identity issues. Levy’s voice in this dialogue stands out, however, not only because it underscores the importance of the body in this contemporary scenario, but also because she utilizes poetic and visceral language to describe the body’s transformations within a transnational framework. Her narrator’s identity crisis and subsequent attempt at reconstructing subjectivity stem not only from her inherited transgenerational cultural tradition, but also from her experience with physical challenges, including domestic abuse, disease, and ultimately renewal. Recognizing the body as an intrinsic part of the construction of subjectivity, this article analyzes the contribution of the notion of embodiment to the current debate about identity and displacement in contemporary Brazilian literature.

Donald Hall’s distinction between identity and subjectivity is instructive in this regard. If, on the one hand, identity is understood as a particular set of traits, beliefs, and allegiances that gives one a consistent personality and mode of social being, then subjectivity always implies a degree of thought and self-consciousness about identity. Subjectivity, therefore, is a critical concept that considers the question of how and from where identity arises, to what extent it is understandable, and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence or control (3-4). In order to analyze embodiment within this context, this article firstly traces the interlacing of subjectivity and embodiment through the work of feminist scholars to explore the fundamental role the body plays for the novel’s three main female characters: the protagonist,
her mother, and her grandfather’s lover. Secondly, I evaluate how displacement and embodiment converge in the reconstruction of the female protagonist’s subjectivity by analyzing the importance of the body in mediating experiences throughout her journey of self-discovery to Europe.

Displacement informs both the personal history of contemporary Brazilian author Tatiana Salem Levy and the history of A chave de casa, which was first presented as her Ph.D. dissertation at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The novel was a finalist for the 2008 Jabuti Prize and the 2009 Zaffari & Bourbon Award, and it won the 2009 São Paulo de Literatura Award for best debut novel. In addition, A chave de casa was first published in Portugal by Cotovia Publishing Press and was translated to several languages including English, Spanish, French, and Turkish. Levy works as a translator of French and English, and she has also published three novels – A chave de casa (2007), Dois rios (2011) and Paraiso (2014), – several short stories in various collections, as well as her Masters’s Thesis A experiência do fora: Blanchot, Foucault e Deleuze (2011). In addition, she organized Primos: história da herança árabe e judaica (2010), a collection of short stories written by Brazilians of Arabic and Jewish descent. All of these works foreground issues of physical and social belonging.

A descendant of Jewish Turks who immigrated to Brazil, Tatiana Salem Levy was born in Lisbon in 1979 while her parents were in exile as a consequence of the Brazilian dictatorship. The family benefited from the Amnesty Law and returned to Brazil when the writer was nine

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2 The complete title of her dissertation was A chave de casa: experimentos com a herança familiar e literária and it was divided into two parts: 1. Novel; 2. Postscript. By writing a dissertation-novel or a novel-dissertation, Levy defends a political position that aims at introducing novel paths of writing and creating knowledge in academia (Magalhães 5).

months old. In her dissertation proposal (Do diário à ficção: um projeto de tese/romance), Levy reveals her motivation for writing the novel, rhetorically asking, “O que significa ser neta de quatro imigrantes, fazer parte de uma família que ao longo dos séculos teve de deixar sua terra natal inúmeras vezes e procurar em terra estranha algum acolhimento possível? Ou ainda: o que significa crescer entre lembranças de viagens e não conseguir sair do lugar?” (qtd. in Meneses n. pag.). Although the writer creates fictional worlds using an autobiographical component, however, to claim that A chave de casa is autobiography would be to limit Levy’s notion of “telling” as synonyms with “creating,” a stance she reveals throughout the novel.

Nonetheless, the book aims to take possession of her own family heritage. It tells the story of an unnamed female protagonist-narrator, a descendant of Portuguese Jews who immigrated to Turkey due to the Inquisition and centuries later immigrated to Brazil. Like Levy herself, the narrator’s parents also experience exile when they leave Brazil for a period of time due to the dictatorship. Growing up hearing stories of immigration and exile, the protagonist feels the burden of her heritage. Coupled with this transgenerational suffering, she experiences a love relationship that culminates in rape. All of these instances of pain lead her to a state of paralysis and the fragmentation of her subjectivity, where she is literally unable to move, stuck in her bedroom. Seeing her deplorable state, her grandfather gives her the mission of going back to his hometown in Turkey to try to open the house where he used to live; for that, he gives her a key, which takes on symbolic overtones. The novel then shows the protagonist’s attempt to bring movement into her life by making the journey to Europe as a way to recuperate her family heritage and to come to terms with traumatic personal events. Her commitment to healing wounds and negotiating her place in the world on both a familial and personal level is recreated artistically through the act of writing, as she narrates her trip to Turkey and Portugal back to her
family’s roots, though the journey ultimately becomes more important than the original destination.

Literary criticism has primarily analyzed the novel through the perspective of autofiction (Magalhães), the relationship between time/space and literary creation (Melo), Jewish immigration and memory (Augusto, Caixeta, Meneses, Fux & Rissardo), and the interconnection between identity and mobility (Góis, Valério & Silva). Although the majority of critical studies highlight the fragmentation of identity in connection with the motifs of travel, writing, and memory, most overlook the importance of embodiment in the reconstruction of the character’s subjectivity. By contrast, I not only argue that the female body occupies center stage in *A chave de casa* in multiple ways – through questions of suicide, torture, disease, and death of the female body – but also that the protagonist’s fragmentation of subjectivity is mediated through the body. Her personal experience with physical pleasure, domestic violence, and disease hold the key to understanding the shift in identity that occurs during her international journey. Therefore, I propose an additional reading of the novel, one that expands the interconnection between identity and displacement to include the concept of embodiment.

The notion that the body is a medium of culture has been a recurrent topic of discussion in contemporary research. The body is seen as a surface on which rules, hierarchies, and social control are inscribed and reinforced. Our bodies are trained, shaped, and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, and femininity through the organization and regulation of the time, space, and movements of our daily lives (Bordo 90-1). Recognizing that the body is a cultural text (90) that is constructed through ideologies, discourses and practices allows for alternative interpretations that contest such construction. In

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contemporary Brazilian literature written by women, the female body occupies a central role, as women writers give voice to dramas of social oppression and question traditional practices of gender representation by delineating multiple forms of embodiment (i.e. characters with eating disorders, different sexual practices, combatting disease, psychosomatic issues, etc).  

Although *A chave de casa* addresses longstanding themes in contemporary Brazilian literature, Levy seeks to recover and refashion them not only through the concept of embodiment, but also through the novel’s fragmented narrative structure, which is composed of different voices, chapters without a linear narrative, and an emphasis on genealogies and individual origins. She juxtaposes several voices – the protagonist’s, her mother’s, and a third-person narrator’s – along with narrating the parallel development of the family’s story, the protagonist’s personal interactions with her mother, her lover, and her trip. There is at first a sense of dispersion as multiple parallel narratives develop, though as the plot moves on, the narrative threads become unified as the stories converge and center on the protagonist. Moreover, the fragmented structure of the novel alludes to the protagonist’s wounded body and shattered subjectivity, which transitions from fragmentation to reconstruction. Though bodily fragmentation and physical wounds are often symbolized fictively in many postmodern feminist novels reflecting women’s historical fragmentation, this leads to an attempt to actively use the body as a site of deciphering, sharing, and healing these wounds (June 5, 11).

**Immobility and the Fragmented Body**

5 For a complete corpus on the subject, refer to Edma C. A. de Góis’ Ph.D. Dissertation “Cartografias dissonantes: corporalidades femininas em narrativas brasileiras contemporâneas.” Góis mentions works by Adriana Lunardi, Carol Bensimon, Carola Saavedra, Cíntia Moscovich, among other female Brazilian writers.

6 The third-person narrator “sketches a number of memories connected to historic facts regarding the dictatorial regime and the history of Judaism in Brazil in the twentieth century – respectively linked to two generations of the same family, the grandfather and the mother” (Melo 117).
Phyllis Ann Thompson argues that the Cartesian division of mind and body has been fundamental to systematic oppression against women in that it privileged the mind over the body:

In a Cartesian system, the body is characterized as the fleshy casing that houses the mind but is separate from it. Such a view suggests a disembodied mind or subjectivity. Connecting the mind with rationality, science, and the masculine and the body with animality, nature, and the feminine, Descartes’ “I think; therefore, I am” solidified the subordination of the feminine to the masculine by fixing rationality along rigidly-drawn, essentialized sex and gender lines. (4)

In this context, by valuing the female body and by exploring subjectivity in light of the physical, sexual, and psychological consequences of the body (27), Levy dialogues with a longstanding tradition of women writers who not only destabilize binary oppositions, but also express the relevance of the body to lived experience.7

In *A chave de casa* the abused, tortured, and physically-suffering body is no longer marginalized and disregarded in place of a painless, passionless Cartesian truth. The body is no longer of secondary importance; instead, it is a primary site of conflict whose conditions are both revealed and problematized. An active search for the body’s language occurs through pain as the characters’ psychological suffering is converted into bodily symptoms; in other words, the physical frame is somaticized. In addition, the body’s language is also delineated through

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7 Although not central to this study, it is worth mentioning that Levy’s non-dualistic conception of subjectivity is expressed beyond issues of embodiment for it is made visible through her writing. Not only is the individual questioned, but also the discursive medium used. In this manner, *A chave de casa* challenges the limits of fiction by introducing autobiographical aspects and by blurring rigid definitions between genres. In addition, the reading of the novel questions the truth of authoritative narrators, as competing voices constantly contradict one another. For more on the subject, refer to Magalhães (6-8) and Curti (29,36).
physical pleasure, revealing both pain and eroticism to be portals to subjectivity. The protagonist deals with an identity crisis that stems from the burden she feels in relation to her family’s heritage, from her mother’s torture and death, and from a violent love relationship. In each of these instances, not only is the protagonist’s lack of wholeness woven into the narrative fabric through bodily issues, but it also originates partially through experiences of displacement: her grandfather’s immigration and her mother’s exile.

Originally from a migrant family uprooted by the Inquisition, the protagonist’s family undergoes the traumatic experience of immigration once centuries later. Her grandfather, Raphael, decides to make the journey in search of a better life and joins a relative in Brazil. The burden of immigration was evident as the mother grieved her son’s departure in advance: “No rosto dela, uma desilusão macerada . . . Ele sentia no peito uma culpa imensa, uma culpa que carregaria viagem afu, vida afu” (Levy 20, 21). The mother’s handling of difficult issues such as immigration – she refuses to talk to her husband or son after she finds out that Raphael will be leaving the family behind – is not the only instance in which a painful silence prevails. It is also present in the death of Raphael’s lover and, years later, of his own son.

Raphael’s need to leave Turkey extends beyond a search for opportunities; it also has to do with his love for Rosa, his boss’ daughter who is forbidden by her father to marry him. Heartbroken, Raphael decides that distance will heal their wounds, though after a period in Brazil, he receives a letter from his sister with the news that Rosa has committed suicide: “Rosa nada podia contra a decisão paterna. Sabe qual foi a maneira que encontrou para não ficar em silêncio, meu irmão? . . . Com uma pedra amarrada ao pé, ela se atirou no poço da praça. Matou-se, meu irmão. Encontraram o corpo boiando, o vestido inflado pela água” (53). This episode echoes historical forms of gender oppression in traditional societies where a woman’s ownership
of her body and future belonged to her father or husband. At times, women’s resistance failed and led to violent outcomes such as murder or suicide (Katrak 2), and this is precisely what occurs when Rosa is unable to reconcile her family’s expectations with her true desires. Raphael’s silent reaction is, in turn, somaticized as he spends more than one month without leaving bed, his chest “crushed” with guilt and pain as Levy puts it, while his arms and legs can barely move (Levy 67). His grieving process is not only viscerally embodied, but also its description in the narrative is mediated through the body. As Levy poetically describes, roots come out of his pores, his nails become crooked, and traces of mold appear on his skin (68). Eventually, Raphael recovers, but this is not the last form of loss that affects him.

Silence is also the mode of response when Raphael, after having built a comfortable life in Brazil with his wife Hilda, loses a son. For four years, the family is dominated by grief and silence: “O fantasma do menino rondava todos os aposentos e, assim como o passado, seu nome era interditado . . . Como se falar fosse um desrespeito à dor” (112). In this scenario, the protagonist of *A chave de casa* grows up internalizing her family’s heritage for they are not allowed to talk about this loss, confessing that

> a verdade é que nasci com os pés na cova. Não falo de aparência física, mas de um peso que carrego nas costas, um peso que me endurece os ombros e me torce o pescoço . . . Um peso que não é todo meu, pois já nasci com ele. Como se toda vez em que digo ‘eu’ estivesse dizendo ‘nós.’ Nunca falo sozinha, falo sempre na companhia desse sopro que me segue desde o primeiro dia.” (9)

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8 Another episode of grief in Raphael’s life relates to his sister’s death at a young age after contracting tuberculosis. Her death at a moment of fulfillment in her life – she had recently gotten married – highlights the family’s history of suffering experienced through the body.
The burden of such heritage is twofold: it is cultural in that her family is composed of different places and traditions as well as traumatic, for she carries the weight of the lacerating silence present for many generations. In other words, her pain symbolizes a haunting reenactment of her ancestors’ struggles (June 3). Although she understands through her family’s silence that fear has “defeated the word” (Levy 132) and acknowledges the need to speak as a way to overcome this scenario of oppressive silence, she is aware of its perils: “preciso falar, preciso contar a verdade. Mas tenho medo, muito medo, porque conheço a pontada de cada palavra que escondo” (141). Nonetheless, she moves forward with her project of telling her family’s story. Her motivation stems not only from her personal necessity to overcome her state of paralysis, but also from her mother’s voice telling her that “cabe a você, cabe aos que ficaram, contar a história, recontá-la. Cabe a você não repetir os mesmos erros, cabe a você falar em nome daqueles que se calaram” (132). She has the mission of breaking the cycle of silence and pain in order to overcome its consequences in her family’s life and her own.

Furthermore, multigenerational migration has taken a toll on the protagonist’s understanding of who she is and what her place is in the world. Therefore, her crisis is also triggered by her sense of rootlessness, and she explains, “Nasci no exílio: e por isso sou assim: sem pátria, sem nome. Por isso sou sólida, áspera, bruta. Nasci longe de mim, fora da minha terra – mas, afinal, quem sou eu? Que terra é a minha?” (25). While the protagonist holds a Portuguese passport, she speaks Brazilian Portuguese and at the same time feels a strong connection to Turkey. These confusing ethnic and cultural ties lead her to a misunderstanding of who she is, reinforced in the narrative by the fact that she does not have a name. In this manner, the character experiences a crisis of belonging to her physical space that leads her to question her place in the world, her identity in relation to others and to society.
The protagonists’ parents’ experience during the military dictatorship in Brazil is also a source of pain as her father is a leftist militant who has to flee Brazil in order to avoid arrest. Her mother, however, is captured and tortured by the regime before she reunites with her husband in Portugal. After degrading and inhuman treatment, she no longer feels that she has rights over her own body (140). The shaving of her head, the stripping of her clothes, and the subsequent water torture are strategies that aim precisely at creating a sense of powerlessness: “Respire: rápido, antes que mergulhem novamente a sua cabeça na bacia funda . . . Ela já nem era mulher, era apenas um corpo desmilinguido, quase sem carne, a pele frouxa esforçando para segurar os ossos” (156). Therefore, by attacking her body and inflicting physical suffering, the torturers suppressed their victim’s sense of self. The narrator’s mother no longer feels like a woman; her debilitated body has lost almost all of its flesh, as Levy viscerally describes.

Through storytelling, the narrator is intimately aware of both her mother’s and Raphael’s hardships. Decades later, after being born in exile and having moved back to Brazil after the amnesty, the protagonist, an adult at this point, experiences her mother’s battle with cancer and her subsequent death. There is, throughout the narrative, a posthumous dialogue with the mother in which her voice quite often contests that of her daughter’s. For instance, while the protagonist narrates her mother’s hospitalization and blindness through the perspective of pain, the mother reminds her that it was also a positive experience because they were in close contact, counseling, “Não vou dizer que não sofri, seria mentira. Mas também vivi naquele hospital a alegria mais profunda. Nós duas fechadas no mesmo quarto durante duas semanas, eu nunca tinha sentido amor tão aflorado, tão à superfície” (84). Although the mother’s voice adds a level of complexity to the narrative as it counters some viewpoints of the protagonist, the suffering that mother and
daughter endure is still evident through the graphic descriptions of the mother’s body as “decayed,” “rotten,” full of pus and smelling of death (84).

In this manner, the life stories of the protagonist’s grandfather and of her mother have a significant role in the construction and fragmentation of her subjectivity, as the narrator reenacts this suffering through her love relationship with a violent man. Although the relationship seems to be intensely passionate at the beginning, soon enough its novelty wears off and the protagonist starts to fear his violent treatment. Three different passages illustrate the decline of their interaction, all starting with the same sentence: “Quando você aproximou docemente os lábios dos meus ouvidos.” While the first occurrence is followed by Levy’s narrator saying to her partner that “sabia que me faria um pedido” (113), the second one builds upon the previous passage to extend her thoughts and express her growing distance: “sabia que me faria um pedido, por isso me afastei, estava cansada dos seus pedidos” (119). By the third occurrence, this distance has transformed into fear: “tive medo, muito medo. Tremi” (129). The different manners that the passages’ repetition gives way to distinct new outcomes charts the deterioration of their relationship. As the relationship oscillates between good and bad moments, this instability is felt and described through the body: “Eu acreditava que o amava. Acreditava que você me amava. Nesses dias, simplesmente esquecia que tinha o corpo aberto por feridas, que você havia me rasgado a pele. Nesses dias, fingia ter o corpo inteiro e o entregava a você” (163). The protagonist alludes to the fragmentation of her body, and, consequently, her subjectivity by claiming that she pretends that her body is whole, when, in reality her body is open with wounds.

When she finally decides to end the relationship, her partner, is unwilling to accept such a decision and rapes her. She narrates the trauma of her body, which becomes a site of oppression:
“Preciso falar com você, eu disse . . . apesar de todo o amor que sentimos um
pelo outro infelizmente não dá mais nunca conseguiremos ser felizes . . .
precisamos nos afastar para dar uma chance a nós mesmos . . . Arrancou-me a
calcinha com movimentos bruscos e penetrou imediatamente seu dedo no meu
sexo seco. No meu rosto, apenas terror. No meu corpo, a impossibilidade de
movimento . . . Você se rejubilava com a minha dor. Você me perguntou: então,
não é bom? . . . está vendo como podemos ser felizes juntos” (197-8).

From her perspective, her partner’s forced sexual intercourse expresses his disagreement with the
end of their relationship as a way to “teach her a lesson.” He is unable to accept her agency in
making a final decision that would affect his life and puts himself in a position to have the last
word. Feminist scholar Catharine Mackinnon explains that there is a widespread
misunderstanding in society that men cannot rape women they know, for rape must be
perpetrated by a stranger. In addition, even if that were to happen, it would be less awful for a
woman to be raped by someone close to her (47), though these assumptions could not be further
from the truth. In reality, “[w]omen often feel as or more traumatized from being raped by
someone known or trusted, someone with whom at least an illusion of mutuality has been shared,
than by some stranger” (47). The protagonist’s sense of powerlessness resembles at some level
what her mother experienced in prison, not having ownership of her body and of her life, for
there is an assault on her subjectivity as her power of agency is stripped away which leads to
paralysis.

In A chave de casa the protagonist, her mother, and Rosa undergo what Ketu Katrak in
Politics of the Female Body calls “a state of ‘internalized exile’ where the body feels
disconnected from itself, as though it does not belong to it and has no agency” (2). Katrak
explains that the experience of internalized exile unfolds as a process that may include resistance to domination. In resisting internalized exile, women often express their bodies via speech, silence, starvation, or illness (2). In Levy’s novel, the protagonist’s crisis of internalized exile leads to and is heightened by a period of physical paralysis. In addressing her paralysis, the protagonist first mentions that it is related to her family heritage. Later on, she claims that it happened after her mother’s death, as “nós duas sabemos ser outro o motivo da minha paralisia . . . Eu não nasci assim . . . Nenhum passado veio me assoprar nos ombros. Eu fiquei assim. Fui perdendo a mobilidade depois que você se foi” (Levy 62). Yet, in a different fragment, she changes her mind once again and confesses that her immobility is a consequence of her traumatic love relationship: “nós dois (só nós dois) sabemos ser outro o motivo da minha paralisia . . . Fui perdendo a mobilidade depois que o conheci. Depois que o amei: depois que conheci a loucura através do amor, o nosso. Foi o amor (excedido) que me tirou, um a um, os movimentos do corpo” (133).

Even though one could initially interpret this as a contradiction in the protagonist’s narrative, it should be noted that all of these experiences – her family’s difficult history of immigration and exile, her mother’s torture, disease and death, and her experience with sexual abuse – lead her to an “impossibility of motion.” As she puts it, “[n]o centro do quarto, a minha cama. De madeira apodrecida, nem sei como ainda se mantém de pé. No centro da cama, o meu corpo. Dilacerado, aberto por feridas em carne viva. . . . Impossibilitado de se movimentar” (41). This passage underscores two important points. On the one hand, the abject state of her body is directly proportional to the fragmentation of her subjectivity – her questioning of who she is and where she belongs as well as her sense of powerlessness after being raped. On the other hand, while displacement (as immigration and exile) is a fundamental component of this
state of fragmentation leading to her paralysis, it is also the force that will propel her forward in search of the missing pieces of her story. Along those lines, the protagonist makes visible the necessity of discovering mobility in order to find herself: “Queria voltar a andar, encontrar o meu caminho. E me parecia lógico que se refizesse, no sentido inverso, o trajeto dos meus antepassados ficaria livre para encontrar o meu” (27). By going back and retracing her ancestors’ steps in Turkey and Portugal, she has the potential to move forward. It is the protagonist’s grandfather who triggers a sense of movement in her life as he gives her not only the key of the house where he lived in Turkey, but also the mission of searching for the missing pieces of their lives.

**Displacement and the Body as a Site of Healing**

While fragmentation and a crisis of identity do indeed dominate much of *A chave de casa*, additionally there is an impulse towards moving beyond instability, reconnecting to one’s inner truth, and recovering one’s origins. In other words, a commitment to continuity and reconstruction emerges rather than merely a celebration of rupture and fragmentation. This reconstitution in the protagonist’s life takes place through the act of movement, which, in turn is mediated through the body. Her trip to Turkey and Portugal allows her to be in touch with herself and with strangers who meaningfully affect her. In all of these interactions, the presence of bodily sensations is pervasive and intertwined with the act of movement.

The experience of displacement – the act of walking the streets of a foreign land, of watching strangers, and of not quite comprehending a strange language – along with the sense of hearing allow the narrator to reconnect with her inner self. When first hearing the Islamic call for prayer in Istanbul, she is transported to a very intimate place: “O canto continua . . . ecoando de
maneira inesperada em alguma parte arcaica do meu corpo, alguma memória que ignoro. A voz – um gemido, uma lamúria – se expande por toda a cidade até cessar. Istambul parece então morta, e sinto que há em mim algo muito antigo que começa a renascer” (58). The protagonist’s awareness of the music not only establishes a connection with her heritage through bodily sensations, but it also grounds her in the present moment of experience as she feels that something inside of her is coming back to life.

It is important to note that while the protagonist seeks an inner truth, this truth manifests itself in a process of continual revision, rather than the realization of the goal. Levy’s protagonist’s grandfather’s house in Turkey is no longer there when she arrives. The key no longer has its original purpose of opening a door. However, the key takes on a metaphorical dimension as the object that triggers movement in her life. It is thus the key to herself. In other words, the search is ultimately what matters, and dislocation and embodiment have a central role because they allow for the protagonist to engage in this process.

As she continues her journey, she goes to the city of Smyrna, where she is told by her grandfather to look for relatives that may still live there. Although at first she feels lost and frustrated because her search seems to be going nowhere, she eventually makes contact with some long lost relatives. After speaking on the phone with one of her cousins, her feeling of accomplishment is addressed once again via corporal descriptions: “Quando coloco o aparelho no gancho, sinto o corpo relaxar, penso que devo estar no caminho certo” (138). The relaxation of her body positively signals that she is in the right path. In this manner, setbacks and accomplishments of her journey are also internalized and felt through the body. Although she feels like a foreigner in Turkey, a level of identification is gradually established through interaction with strangers. As she strikes up conversations with people she meets, they begin to
acknowledge her Turkishness through physical markers: “você tem mesmo cara de turca, a pele morena, o nariz grande” (44). She might not speak Turkish or fully understand the culture, but her body and her face are testament to her ties to the nation.

The most telling experience of belonging the protagonist is exposed to, however, takes place in a Turkish bath. When she sees how untidy the establishment is, she doubts her decision of going to a traditional women’s-only bath, as opposed to the hammams for tourists. Even though her mind races to find excuses to leave the establishment, she fights against her cultural preconceptions and decides to stay. If she truly wants to experience these women’s world, she reasons, she has to leave her own at the doorstep (94). She is obviously an intruder in that space, as the women devour her with their eyes and gossip openly about her (95). The protagonist, then, accepts the massage and exfoliation services that Sihem, a worker, offers her. Their interaction goes from lack of familiarity and reticence – the constant mispronunciation of Sihem’s name and the awkward way Sihem touches her – to the bridging of distance. As Sihem starts to cleanse the protagonist’s body, she relaxes and a more intimate exchange ensues. After enjoying several baths and establishing ties, the Turkish women’s hard stares turn into welcoming gazes. They symbolically invite her into their community when one of them asks the protagonist to rub her body. In this manner, unexpected yet sincere bonds are created as the protagonist’s sense of belonging strengthens.

When Sihem starts to massage the protagonist’s body, she notices its stiffness and asks if she carries the world on her shoulders (98). By addressing her physical condition, Sihem provides space for the protagonist to confide in her about the reason for her trip. After listening carefully to the family’s story of immigration and the history of the grandfather’s key, the masseuse feels a stronger connection to the protagonist, as if “naquele momento, nos
tornássemos iguais pela primeira vez” (98). The protagonist experiences through her body the strengthening of their ties, responding, “Depois de eu ter contado os motivos de estar na Turquia, ela intensificou ainda mais a massagem, feito para fazer a sua parte na tentativa de me desvencilhar do passado. Sentia que ela não estava apenas distendendo meus músculos, mas também lutando contra tudo o que eu acabara de contar” (99). In dialogue with this passage, Pamela June in *The Fragmented Female Body and Identity* (2010) explains that the symbol of the bodily wound effectively connects women, through its recognition, to other women, and suggests sisterhood, matrilineage, and community” (5). Thus, the massage can be interpreted as a ritual of expiation, a ceremonial practice where the protagonist, with Sihem’s help, attempts to pacify the past.

The experience at the Turkish baths – the massages, the naked bodies, the sharing of vulnerabilities – creates a realm of intimacy that, in turn, functions as a space of meditation and interrogation for the protagonist (Augusto n. pag). In addition, this space allows for the construction of a community of women that, despite their cultural backgrounds, identify on a personal level and use their bodies as means to connect and create bonds of solidarity and intimacy. In this context, the portrayal of the female body changes from a site of pain and patriarchal oppression to an arena where such views are contested. Hence, by mediating the protagonist’s feeling of belonging through bodily experiences, the narrative highlights the body as a vital component in the reconstruction of her subjectivity.

The final episode that allows the protagonist to mend the pieces of her fragmented subjectivity takes place in Portugal, where she decides to go after discovering her grandfather’s house no longer exists in Turkey. Lisbon holds importance for her because it is her birthplace and, as such, she believes that she can find “alguns sentidos para o [seu] corpo, a [sua] história”
The passage makes clear that her personal story is intrinsically connected to her body, as locating meaning for the first will lead to her encounter with the second. The meaning that she searches for has an important component in eroticism, for even in her abusive relationship, physical pleasure plays a significant role in her self-discovery. In the narrative, there are several explicit descriptions of the protagonist’s sexual pleasure, bringing to the forefront Levy’s reflection upon a theme that is not frequently addressed in Brazilian literature. However, that self-discovery is put on hold after her rape. During her trip to Lisbon that chapter in her life continues to be developed when she has an affair with a Portuguese man. The act of allowing herself to open up for a relationship once again attests to her desire to move beyond fragmentation and search for reconstruction through physical pleasure. In this case, eroticism “é a constante busca pelo sentimento profundo de continuidade do ser” (Bataille qtd. Souza 44).

If in the beginning of her journey the call for prayer in Istanbul awakens something inside of her, the interactions with her Turkish family, with strangers including the women in the baths, and with her Portuguese lover not only allow her to heal bodily wounds, but also confer upon her the internal coherence she has sought. Accordingly, in *A chave de casa*, the protagonist’s subjectivity is redefined in a way that allows at least the possibility of agency in her process of self-construction and re-construction (Hall 99). As her journey nears the end, she comes to terms with it: “E assim pude partir em paz, voltar para o Brasil com a certeza de que a minha relação com Portugal não era mais uma relação com o passado, nem do passado” (Levy 205). In this manner, the process of physical movement mediated through the body puts the protagonist in contact with her heritage and her place in it. She discovers acceptance towards the end of the journey when she makes peace with the mission her grandfather gave her, made up by her own steps, but also by the heritage she has accepted.
The last chapter of the book invites the reader to circle back to the beginning of the narrative for it uses the exact same lines about the grandfather’s key as the initial pages: “sem me levantar, pego a caixinha na mesa de cabeceira. Dentro dela, em meio a pó, bilhetes velhos, moedas e brincos, descansa a chave” (12). While in the beginning of the text, she stares at the key in her hands and wonders what to do with it, at the end of the narrative, Levy returns to the initial scene, but now the protagonist and her grandfather both hold the key together: “esticando o braço, alcanço a mão do meu avô. Seguro-a com força, e permanecemos com as mãos coladas, a chave entre nosso suor, selando e separando nossas histórias” (206). The destiny she alludes to having to create in the beginning pages is realized when she accepts that her life story is twofold, personal and familial. Through this meeting, the past and present are unified.

In *A chave de casa* traveling and writing are intertwined movements that are also interdependent in the reconstruction of the protagonist’s subjectivity (Augusto n. pag.). In addition to spatial and writing movements, the realm of the body, as illustrated in the preceding analysis, is of significant importance to this process. While the protagonist’s imagination is at work during the experience of displacement as she expresses a necessity to write, writing is interlaced with embodiment throughout the narrative. The mention of pain and blood expresses the urgency and the difficulty of telling the protagonist’s story and her family’s: “Se não sangra, a minha escrita não existe. Se não rasga o corpo, tampouco existe. Insisto na dor, pois é ela que me faz escrever” (Levy 69). While the protagonist refashions herself as an agent in the making and remaking of her own subjectivity, Tatiana Salem Levy fictionally binds the notions of identity, body, and displacement together. For Levy and her protagonist, to narrate and to create are one and the same [“Conto (crio) essa história” (133)]. This recuperation of a personal geography composed of fictional and biographical elements provides agency on both levels,
acting as a literal and metaphorical key to concepts of home and self. Although she is initially burdened by the stories of her family’s struggles, her decision to write, and thus narrate, her own struggles means she is no longer a passive recipient of the past, but an active participant in her present.
Works Cited


