

The Erotization of Otherness

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UCLA Conference “The Cultural Lens in Psychotherapy”

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
The Sexual Century	4
The Ethnosexual Frontier.....	5
Case Vignette: Senai.....	7
Sex, Erotics, Love	10
Daydreams and Fantasies.....	12
Intersubjectivity in Psychotherapy	13
The Relational/Thirdness Perspective	15
The Quest for Merger with Otherness.....	16
Conceptualizing Change Processes	18
Countertransference and the Listening Perspectives.....	19
Conclusions	20
Case Vignette: Rabi.....	21
Case Vignette: Charles	25
Conclusions	30
References	32

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Introduction

Multidisciplinary studies over the past two decades have been studying how race, ethnicity, and nationalism construct sexuality and sexual identities. And how, in turn, sexuality and sexual identities construct race, ethnicity, and the nation. It seems that human beings are always somehow caught in the seductive lure of exotic Otherness. Perhaps for this reason the boundaries of race, ethnicity, and the nation are carefully patrolled and guarded from both sides—despite the fact that these eroticized boundaries are regularly transversed by those in search of intimate encounters with enticing Otherness.

Since the publication of my books, *Sex in Psychotherapy* (2011) and *Cross-Cultural Encounters: Bridging Worlds of Difference* (2012), I have gradually come to realize the importance for us as psychotherapists to allow ourselves greater freedom to permit into consciousness sexual fantasies about our cross-cultural clients and supervisees that can provide us with countertransference information about what is transpiring in the intimacy of the psychotherapy and supervisory relationships.

Let me first guide you systematically through the labyrinth of considerations that have led me to my conclusions. I will provide three

case vignettes illustrating cross-cultural sexualized transference/countertransference experiences from my own psychotherapy practice.

The Sexual Century

Ethel Person (1998), observes that sexual historians have regularly noted era-to-era swings between sexual suppression and sexual exuberance, but that the changes undergone in the twentieth century go beyond the ideologies of sexual liberation to include radically altered ideas about masculinity and femininity, heterosexuality and homosexuality, and the formation of sexual identities. Says Person, "These changes in attitudes and behavior are of such magnitude, and appear to be so irreversible, so destined to leave their mark on all subsequent eras, that we are justified in calling [the twentieth century] the "sexual century" (p.1)

What Freud added to the mix was the insight that how people behave sexually was not necessarily identical to their unconscious desires, fantasies, and activities. Feminist, queer, and other theorists have further shown us that far from being essential categories of nature, sexuality and gender are constructed from political, cultural, and social forces.

In recent years psychotherapists have begun to formulate various kinds of *relational* views on the development of self and sexuality. A century ago when Freud wrote his essay on transference love (Freud 1915) psychotherapists had it easy. They could rest in the assurance that one-person psychotherapy as it had been devised up to that point in time was an objective science with an observer studying unconscious transference love and sexuality of an observed. But with the now-prevailing two-person

relational approaches, the transferences of love and sexuality of *both* participants in the mutual, co-constructed therapeutic engagement are now involved. But we have yet to formulate exactly how loving, sensual/sexual/erotic engagements are to unfold for maximum therapeutic benefit. And we have yet to develop an agreed upon vocabulary or techniques to assist us in this process.

In an effort to consider the question of full emotional relatedness in psychotherapy, roundtable discussions were held a few years ago centering around Noelle Oxenhandler's (2001) book *The Eros of Parenthood*. Discussants considered the delicate balance between erotic enlivenment and isolated withering provided by parental responsiveness—and by analogy therapist responsiveness (Slavin, Oxenhandler, Seligman, Stein, and Davies, 2004; Slavin, Davies, Oxenhandler, Seligman, and Stein, 2006). Oxenhandler points out that there can be no question of the erotics involved in both the parental and the psychotherapy relationship, but what are the options open to a parent or to a therapist? One extreme is acting out the erotic desire. The other extreme is denial and self-castigation for even having such thoughts, fantasies, and desires. Or a third option is burying the erotic desire in the unconscious with repression or dissociation awaiting later enactment. How does each parent or therapist come to live with the necessarily erotic engagements in an appropriately enlivening way with each child or client?

The Ethnosexual Frontier

Over the last two decades stimulated by the groundbreaking work of sociologist Joane Nagel from the University of Kansas, *Race, Ethnicity, and*

Sexuality: Intimate Intersections and Forbidden Frontiers, sociologists, anthropologists, social constructionists, and relational psychoanalysts have created a newly emerging awareness about “the power of sex to shape ideas and feelings about race, ethnicity, and the nation and how sexual images, fears, and desires shape racial, ethnic, and national stereotypes, differences, and conflicts...how sex matters insinuate themselves into all things racial, ethnic, and national...[and] how ethnic boundaries are also sexual boundaries” (Joane Nagel, 2003, p. 1). Says Nagel,

Differences of color, culture, country, ancestry, language, and religion are the materials out of which ethnic, racial, and national identities and boundaries are built. Ethnicity and sexuality join together to form a barrier to hold some people in and keep others out, to define who is pure and who is impure, to shape our view of ourselves and others, to fashion feelings of sexual desire and notions of sexual desirability, to provide us with seemingly ‘natural’ sexual preferences for some partners and ‘intuitive’ aversions to others, to leave us with a taste for some ethnic sexual encounters and a distaste for others. Ethnicity and sexuality blend together to form sexualized perimeters around ethnic, racial, and national spaces. (*Ibid.*)

Ethnosexual frontiers are constituted not only by ethnic identity variations, but also by sexual identity variations, as well as the interactions between ethnic and sexual identities. International studies of movements of people occasioned by wars, colonization, trade, and the worldwide sex industry created by multinational military operations and international tourism leave no doubt as to the erotic excitement occasioned by the ethnosexual frontier. Further, the internet offers the latest titillating adventures in ethnosexual encounters. *In fact, researchers in ethnosexual history are now suggesting that the primary binary in human thought—whether in*

families, clans, tribes, religious, or ethnic and national groups—is between Us and Them, not between male and female. That is, that gender identities are secondary to but participate in constructing in- and out-group identities.

In psychotherapy beyond what is consciously and explicitly presented, client and therapist have the additional joint responsibility of being alert to how many different kinds of ethnicity and sexuality are embedded in each of their conscious and unconscious identities and histories, and how in the therapeutic relationship itself new erotics are continuously being mutually co-constructed based on the racial, ethnic, and national sexuality dimensions both participants bring to the encounter. Let me illustrate some of what I mean by telling you about my work with Senai.

Case Vignette: Senai

Tall, regal, exotic, very black and very beautiful, Senai entered my consulting room and asked immediately if she could lay down on the couch. From a formerly wealthy and influential Ethiopian Coptic family she was the youngest of seven with six older brothers and the favorite of her father. She had been raised and educated in a large walled family compound bustling with extended family, business associates, tradesmen, and numerous servants. She and her nanny lived in the large stone house with her father while family, friends, and animals filled the outbuildings.

Senai was currently a social worker living in an exiled family compound in Los Angeles and commuting daily to Orange County on a contract job. She wore unusual clothes always with a becoming bit of a draped effect and some bright patch or line of intense color emanating somehow from within—perhaps indigo, crimson, orange, or emerald. Her

African hair was long and curly but not kinky and always worn somehow up or back with sashes or ribbons revealing delicate gold earrings to match the rest of her equally delicate ornamentation and sculpted features—in short, Senai was an excitingly beautiful and exotic woman for whom I felt an immediate attraction.

She said she needed to talk, and talk she did. Senai began in a soft, slow deliberate manner the story of her childhood, her special and privileged relation with her father, and the family's constant apprehensions about the developing political situation and explosive religious prejudices in Ethiopia.

Nostalgically, Senai recounted moving stories of relationships with various beloved people during her growing up years in the compound while I nervously awaited what she had come to tell me. Over a number of months the macabre stories began—one after the other, each one worse than the one before. Servants attacked in the market and returning without hands, beheadings, the escape of the family with only she and her father remaining to clean up the last chores of closing the compound. On the day the massacre and burning occurred she and her father huddled together in a hidden outpost on the second floor of the stone house peering out from the secret slits beneath the cornices made for just such an occasion.

For weeks Senai told stories, tears running down her cheeks, voice halting, choking, at times softly wailing. She asked nothing from me but to witness her memories and sidestepped any attempts on my part to offer empathy or sympathy. She seemed not to need me to help her formulate her experiences, only to be quiet and witness attentively. Senai recounted

events in an amazingly subdued manner until at last she told how she and her father escaped to a private plane waiting for them on a hidden runway. She, her parents, her brothers, their wives, and children now all lived in relative poverty only able to take heart in the affections of the Ethiopian community in Los Angeles.

Throughout this entire time while I was with Senai I had a recurrent erotic fantasy of quietly spooning with her in some safe, secluded space. The feeling was subtle but strong and clearly erotic. I simply wanted to hold her, to quell the anxiety, to absorb the pain. You will recognize my feelings as those later described by Harriet Kimble Wrye and Judith Wells (1994) as the “maternal erotic countertransference.” Was this a replication experience or a new experience for Senai? I could not tell.

But years later as I was calling to mind my work with Senai for today’s conference I suddenly was possessed by a very different erotic fantasy. Breaking loose from dissociation, this fantasy has me erect and inside of Senai. The analytic third does not supply information about how I got there, how the penetration was achieved. But in the fantasy I am keeping absolutely still waiting for each micro movement of hers as she works on finding her own agency against mine, her own boundaries in relation to mine, her own pleasures against the hardness of my aroused watching, waiting, witnessing, and loving. Shall we call this the “paternal erotic countertransference?” Was I giving her the paternal admiration and witnessing that she missed in the incestuously tinged relationship with her father? Or was I simply providing opportunity for the excited and passionately involved replications and witnessing we know to be essential to recovery from PTSD?

I don't have the answers to these questions because sadly for me Senai's year's contract ran out and she had to return to work in San Fernando Valley and so needed to end our work with only six termination sessions. She thanked me profusely for allowing her to talk about things she had no one else to talk with about. With hindsight I believe she created in her relationship with me the calming, enveloping mother she never had and the mirroring and admiring father she never had. As for me, it was a beautiful and erotic experience with an exotic Otherness I had never known and with a person I never want to forget.

Sex, Erotics, Love

In popular and psychotherapeutic literature the words sex, sexual, sexuality, erotic, eroticism, romance, and love are used in many different and often interchangeable ways, but the world's great thinkers in this area are more consistent and clear in their formulations. Perhaps the clearest distinctions come from Octavio Paz:

The original, primordial fire, sexuality, raises the red flame of eroticism, and this in turn raises and feeds another flame, tremulous and blue: the flame of love...The agent that provokes...the erotic...is imagination. Imagination turns sex into ceremony and rite, language into rhythm and metaphor....Like all metaphors, it points to something that is beyond the reality that gave rise to it, to something new and different from the [sexuality] that it [arose from]....Eroticism is invention, constant variation; sex is always the same....(1993 pp 1-13)

Thus Paz distinguishes sharply between the energizing biological function of sex and the multitudinous forms of human social and cultural erotics. Echoing Paz, Georges Bataille (1962) formulates that humans in their life-

long constructions of interpersonal erotics seek to re-establish the biological and psychological continuity of experience once known in utero and infancy. Says Bataille,

The transition from the normal state to that of erotic desire presupposes a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the realm of [mature differentiation and] discontinuity....The whole [point] of eroticism is to destroy [temporarily] the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives....[A sense of] continuity [with Otherness] is what we are after....(p. 18)

Thus, the great formulators of erotics sharply separate the sexual reproductive function from the erotic as an infinity of *psychological* forms--images, gestures, energetic surges, and narratives that are all non-sexual metaphors for human interactions....

But going well beyond these “modern” and “late modern” thinkers, are sociologist Zigmunt Bauman’s many “postmodern uses of sex” (1998). In his treatment of erotics he sees postmodern culture freeing itself from the nineteenth century ‘panoptic’ model of securing and perpetuating social order--so championed by Michel Foucault in his studies of sexuality and the institutions of social power. Today a market and mediatized economy insures that eroticism is everywhere in the air, everywhere in the culture that surrounds us and lives within us. Says Bauman:

Postmodern eroticism is free-floating;...it has become an unattached signifier capable of being wedded semiotically to virtually unlimited numbers of signifieds, but also a signified ready to be represented by any of the available signifiers. (p. 26)

In Western culture today we are totally engulfed in a sea of erotics—consciously and unconsciously at all times. This engulfment in erotics which we continuously experience necessarily forms a substrate to the contemporary relational psychotherapy engagement, a substrate totally unknown during Freud’s time—or for that matter unparalleled in human history.

Daydreams and Fantasies

Sigmund Freud (1900) courageously opened the twentieth century and inaugurated psychoanalysis by revealing over fifty of his personal dreams including wish-fulfillment sexual dreams about his patients. Ethel Person points out that we all have outrageous dreams, but since they happen in our sleep we can hardly be held accountable for them. But we still have virtually no reports by psychoanalysts of their daydreams and fantasies though they arise from the same primary mental processes as night dreams. Person concludes that we feel responsible for our daydreams and fantasies because we are awake and we are aware of manipulating them to achieve a variety of psychological ends—mostly sexual and aggressive. Says Person, “We may...be loath to look at our own fantasies too closely, fearing to know what they might tell us about ourselves....(p.1)

Speaking directly to the psychotherapist’s erotic subjectivity, David Mann (1997) courageously suggests that

...erotic fantasies that are suppressed or ignored because they are thought incompatible to a personal or to a professional attitude, are more likely to become malignant, and lead the

analyst into a countertransference that disturbs and hinders the client's development. Erotic fantasies and desires, like any other feelings the therapist may experience, can be used in the service of the analysis....It follows that erotic desire forms a natural part of the therapist's 'ordinary' feelings towards the client....The erotic...takes us from where we feel safe and secure and places us full square into what is uncomfortable and exciting....Out of erotic desire two people have intercourse and something new is created....A recognition of the therapist's erotic desires contributes to the creative intercourse that is the analytic setting. (location 1602-1616)

Thomas Ogden (2004) urges us to attune to all of our daydreams and fantasies:

I believe that a major dimension of the analyst's psychological life in the consulting room with the patient takes the form of reverie....[T]hese reveries are not simply reflections of inattentiveness, narcissistic self-involvement, unresolved emotional conflict, and the like. Rather, this psychological activity represents symbolic...forms given to the unarticulated (and often not yet felt) experience of the analysand as they are taking form in the unconscious intersubjectivity of the analytic pair (i.e., in the analytic third)....A view of the analyst's experience that is dismissive of this category of clinical phenomenon leads the analyst to diminish (or ignore) the significance of a great deal...of his experience with the analysand. (p. 120)

Intersubjectivity in Psychotherapy

During the past few decades the development of subjectivity and intersubjectivity have been scrutinized in a wide range of multidisciplinary studies (Schore 2013, 2015; Siegal 2015). Infant researcher Daniel Stern

(1985, 2004) sees intersubjective relatedness as a crucial step in self-development as the infant becomes able to share subjective experiences, especially affective ones. Further, Stern has come to consider the capacity and drive for intersubjective communication as innate and present from birth (2004).

Jessica Benjamin specifies the main experience of intersubjectivity as one of *being with rather than one of observing and interpreting* (Benjamin 1988, 1995). The goal of psychotherapy in this view is for both participants in the context of a mutually-evolving, co-constructed intersubjectivity to come to recognize each other and to know themselves more fully in order to attain more flexibility, creativity, passion, and freedom in living and loving. Intersubjectively considered, various sexual interests, curiosities, and identity orientations become elaborated in relation to significant others early in life and later manifest in different interpersonal and intersubjective contexts. Says Benjamin:

My premise is that recognition of the other is the decisive aspect of differentiation. In recognition, someone who is different and outside shares a similar feeling; different minds and bodies attune. In erotic union this attunement can be so intense that self and other feel as if momentarily 'inside' each other, as part of a whole....In getting pleasure with the other and taking pleasure in the other, we engage in mutual recognition. Understanding desire as the desire for recognition changes our view of the erotic experience. It enables us to describe a mode of representing desire unique to intersubjectivity. (1988, p. 126, emphasis added)

The Relational/Thirdness Perspective

Interpersonal and Relational approaches have now influenced virtually all schools of psychotherapy. Relational psychotherapists emphasize that the human mind is not monadic but dyadic in nature. Vitalizing dynamic human relationships are seen as constituted by co-constructed intersubjective erotics—that is, by interpersonal interactions, dances, scenarios, or idioms that are formulated as a “third” force or vector mutually created by and influencing both participants.

Noting the numerous difficulties encountered over the years with Freud’s biologically-based instinct approach to sexuality, Stephen Mitchell, in his relational approach (1988), reverses the classical formula—i.e., that internalized object relationships transferred into adult relationships memorialize infantile sexual conflicts—to read that interactive adult sexuality *expresses* early relational configurations. This view of sexuality accents the importance of attending to the relational erotics actually engaged in the therapeutic relationship.

In my *Cross-Cultural Encounters* book (2012), I repeatedly call upon the metaphor of two human beings starting from different cultural, ethnic, or racial grounds and mutually constructing a bridge, a third private culture in and through which to meet. Yerushalmi (1999) points out the cross-cultural process of building bridges is a universal in co-constructing all meaningful intimate relationships—in other words, ***we are all from different and unique cultures, even if we grew up in the same family. We are all Others to each other. And we all seek attunement and merger experiences with intriguing, stimulating, and enticing Others.*** Considering the bridging process in the extreme instance of cross-ethnic,

racial, and cultural encounters helps us in seeing that in all relationships we are always building bridges, always co-constructing “thirds.”

In considering the implications of infant research for understanding the establishment of erotics in adult relationships, Benjamin observes, “These internalized [mutual affect regulation] schemas lead to expectations of closeness vs. distance in relating, of matched and met vs. violated and impinged upon experiences, and of an erotic dance [each schema being] fundamental to mutual attunement and pleasure in adult sexuality as well as to movements and mutual empathy in the analytic relationship” (1998). Benjamin views these early sensual experiences of mutual attunement and regulation as becoming internalized as interactional or intersubjective schemas. When they reappear in later intimate relationships, including the therapeutic relationship, she refers to them as “the erotics of transference.” “In erotic union this attunement can be so intense that the separation between self and other feels momentarily suspended [and] a choreography emerges that is not reducible to the idea of reacting to the outside. In erotic union the point is to contact and be contacted by the other—apprehended as such” (*Ibid.*, p. 184, emphasis added).

The Quest for Merger with Otherness

In my 1983 book, *Listening Perspectives in Psychotherapy*, I first spoke of “self and other” psychology in what we now call a “two-person” sense and hailed Robert Stolorow’s early work on intersubjectivity and Lacan’s then recently translated work on the elusive Other as constituting a “new wave in psychoanalysis.” It was in that 1983 book that I identified four watersheds of self and other relatedness complexity as defined in the

psychoanalytic literature and first spoke of countertransference as not a detraction, but rather as an analytic tool constituting “the royal road to understanding merger experiences.”

What follows are the developmental metaphors I have used to describe these four watersheds of emotional relatedness complexity. These metaphors can be used to describe modes of relatedness that we all experience in our everyday interpersonal interactions as well as modes of engagement and enactment to be listened for in psychotherapy.

I. THE ORGANIZING EXPERIENCE: \pm 4 months from birth

II. THE SYMBIOTIC OR MERGER EXPERIENCE: 4 to 24 months

III. THE SELFOTHER EXPERIENCE: 24 to 36 months

IV. THE INDEPENDENCE EXPERIENCE: 3-6 years

It is from within the symbiotic relatedness experience that our erotic quest for merger with others becomes activated. The peak of the mutual affect regulation period marks the height of the merger or “Mommy and I are One” experience. Personal erotics, or the endless search for *psychological merger with Otherness* dates from symbiotic, attachment, or bonding experiences. It is this developmental level of relational complexity that Ethel Person (1995) sees as the beginning of “sexual fantasy prints”, that Robert Stoller (1999) cites as the beginnings of “sexual scripts”, and that I (1983, 1992) have pointed to as the construction place of “symbiotic scenarios.”

The bottom line here is that in adult relationships the loving quest for merger with an other in a way and style to which one has become

accustomed activates a lifetime of erotics formed in various satisfying and frustrating emotionally merged relational contexts. Stated differently, the ways we once discovered in early childhood to familiarly connect through the mutual affect regulation of the symbiotic, merger, attachment, or bonding period remain the predominant modes in which we sue for love and connection in later life. Unfortunately, our personal modes of attempting merger are perennially doomed to disillusionment, disappointment, loss, grief, and failure—because they are unique to each one of us. If we desire mutually rewarding relationships we must learn anew in each relationship how to negotiate, how to bridge a “third” meeting ground between each person’s preferred modes of living and loving.

But how in any relationship do we relinquish our preferred personal merger modes in favor of mutual relational negotiation?

Conceptualizing Change Processes

How can we consider psychological change from a perspective of a fully two-person psychology? This question has been bantered about for some time now by infant researchers and psychoanalytic scholars from the Boston Change Process Study Group who have concluded that *change processes necessarily occur between two people at a given moment in time.* The clearest statement of this relational change principle comes from Daniel Stern’s 2004 book, *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life.*

Stern’s studies conclude that the basic unit of human experience lasts 8 to 16 seconds—the time for a phrase in language, music, and dance. Like the illustrations in our Psychology 101 text that demonstrated

that we do not see in sweeping panorama but rather in momentary points of visual fixation that are seamlessly woven together by our central nervous system, so that our sense of living an ongoing continuous experience is derived from our brain's putting seamlessly together a series of 8 to 16 second "present moments." Stern has shown how "**present moments**" in infancy and in intimate relationships of later life often move toward special "**now moments**" that threaten the status quo of the relationship and threaten the intersubjective field as it has been mutually accepted up until that point. These emotionally intense "now moments" create a relationship crisis that needs resolution in what Stern calls a "**moment of meeting**"...an authentic and well-fitted response to the crisis created by the now moment. "The moment of meeting implicitly reorganizes the intersubjective field so that it becomes more coherent, and the two people sense an opening up of the relationship, which permits them to explore new areas together implicitly or explicitly (*Ibid.*, pp 219f)."

Stern's formulation is particularly pertinent to moments when mutually clashing symbiotic merger relatedness modes are engaged in the psychotherapeutic process. Each participant has an understanding of "what is or what should be" happening in the relationship but these interpretations inevitably differ, and a confrontation and negotiation of relatedness modes can produce a mutually co-constructed "moment of meeting."

Countertransference and the Listening Perspectives

After writing *Listening Perspectives in Psychotherapy* I struggled for a decade trying to work out in my own practice and in a number of case

conference study groups with colleagues the exact nature of the countertransference tool and how we were to make best use of it. My 1992 book, *Interpreting the Countertransference* opened with the case of a woman I chose to call Dora who had developed an intrusive erotic transference that I struggled unsuccessfully in various ways to deal with. It was only some years later that I came to see that my understanding of our work together had mistakenly focused on the erotic rather than the intrusive aspect of the transference. And that the erotic element had been unconsciously selected from the co-created analytic third *not* on the basis of her material but *as a function of my own historically based sensitivity to sexual intrusions* based on an emotionally disturbed adopted sister and from a yet earlier intrusive maternal erotic. Dora was intruding into what I regarded as my personal space just as her borderline mother had intruded into hers. In setting up the replicated role-reversal transference, she was nonconsciously doing to me what had been done to her. In doing so she had successfully located my vulnerability and was using it to communicate her symbiotic transference—but I, because of my dissociated blind spot, missed it completely.

Conclusions

Therapists working within an intersubjective or relational framework have come to consider co-created erotics as actively and continuously mutually enacted between people in relationships. The past schemas of both client and therapist come under scrutiny as the erotics of the psychotherapy relationship emerge. The evolving dynamics or erotics of the mutually co-constructed therapeutic relationship allow the possibility for the opening of new space and new tensions in which the dance of

thirdness can appear and be jointly negotiated toward mutual regulations and transformations.

Case Vignette: Rabi

Rabi was the first and only son of parents from a mid-eastern country who migrated to the United States when he was 18 months old so that his father could take advantage of a business opportunity. During preschool years Rabi enjoyed a close relationship with his mother who encouraged bi-cultural and bi-lingual assimilation, though she herself did not want to learn English and insisted that only their native language be spoken in the home. She relied on Rabi to negotiate for her in the outside world. There was an extended family and a community of nationals living in Los Angeles that were visited regularly and with whom they celebrated holidays and special events but otherwise Rabi grew up in a suburban community of mostly Euroamericans. I was entranced by his descriptions of extended family life with aunts, uncles, grandparents and many, many in-laws and cousins—their customs, rituals, values, and relationships.

Though Rabi excelled in academics, he developed few close friends throughout his school years and college. He met his Angle-American wife in classes where both were studying for their MBA degrees. They both landed great professional jobs and soon were driving comfortable cars and were able to purchase their first home. They agreed that having children was for later. Both families fortunately managed to accept the crossing of racial and religious lines with a minimum of difficulty.

Rabi was referred to me by a therapist friend of his at work. Rabi knew that he was bright and competent, but felt severe inhibitions when it

came to reaching out to his wife or to his friends and colleagues for enjoyment and support. He was a strikingly good looking man of slight but muscular build with dark skin, dark hair, flashing eyes, and a winning smile. I was continuously aware of his beautifully formed body and his pleasant and seductive demeanor.

Rabi's job was suffering. His marriage was suffering—he didn't know what the matter was but, in short, he was "stuck" in life, unable to take initiative and pleasure in moving ahead. We worked together weekly two days in a row. He chose to use the couch. It was clear to both of us that we enjoyed being with each other but somehow nothing important seemed to be happening in therapy or in Rabi's outside life. At last we agreed we were somehow "stuck." We worked for months on what being stuck was about. It was excruciating for both of us and from time to time we contemplated discontinuing our work together. Rabi said, "I know this makes you feel inadequate, but this isn't your fault. There's some block in me that I just can't seem to get to."

One weekend Rabi felt particularly discouraged and went over his sense of utter defeat with his wife who knew him well enough to be quite supportive. He went over this during Monday's session and then, with 5 minutes remaining to the session, he suddenly remembered a dream he had the night before.

I was at home, a combination of the house where I now live but with the sumptuousness of my grandparents house in the old country where my mother grew up. I heard a loud knocking at the door and went to answer it. There was an unknown man looking at me wanting to come in. I was stark naked and flung open the door to the man as the dream abruptly ended.

There was not time in the hour to process the dream, but it clearly had an impact on both of us and we agreed to take it up first thing tomorrow. He did say as he left the room that he thought the unknown man in the dream must somehow be me.

I had a full day of clients ahead but nevertheless my preconscious mind worked all day on the dream until I had composed in my head its completion. The next day Rabi said he felt totally stumped, stuck again on a dream that was in one sense so transparent in his desire to be seen, to be known, and yet in another sense so obscure. Where was the dream going when he so abruptly woke up? He asked for my thoughts. Though he's lying on the couch I asked humorously if he was sitting down. We both laughed. "My mind completed the dream, are you ready?" "Yes, I am." "I knock loudly at your door wanting to come in. Stark naked you invite me in, lead me into the sumptuous living room, undress me, pull me to the floor, raise your legs and guide me inside of you. You shiver with pleasure and demand that I perform—harder and faster while you go wild with a pleasure and a sense of being alive that I have never seen from you. You beg for more, for all you can get. I feel somehow raped but compelled to bring you to life and to a kind of fulfillment you have never before experienced."

There was a long silence. Tears began silently streaming down Rabi's cheeks. At last he said, "That's what I've always wanted." In context we both knew that at that moment he was speaking with his mother's voice. And I, feeling raped but compelled was experiencing Rabi's child-self—invited in and made to give her a sense of aliveness she never had with her own family or husband. "No wonder I'm stuck! To perform is to be

incestuous; to back out is to abandon the only love I ever knew. No child should ever be in such an untenable position!...Yes, you said it, I was ‘raped’ and ‘coerced’ to bring her to life. She was stuck in a completely unsatisfying world, and an unsatisfying marriage, I was her only hope for any joy or fulfillment. I have taken her in—identifying with her stuckness lock, stock and barrel—awaiting motivation and fulfillment from you, from everyone in the whole world! Oh shit! How will I ever get unstuck from this?!”

Needless to say, this was a life-changing transformative moment for both of us. Rabi in going over this with his therapist friend at work called this experience we had together a “projective identification” of his crippled child-self into me. “Okay,” I said, “But projective identifications have to latch onto something already in the therapist. What did you tap into in me?” “Oh, that’s easy,” Rabi quickly said. “Your repressed homosexuality and your covert racism.” “Explain, please.” “You’ve been as stuck as I have because you haven’t dared to let yourself love me the way I know you do. You haven’t dared to let yourself feel the cross-racial hatred and excitement of our being bonded together—stuck erotically together in all of this.” At that moment something inside of me radically shifted.

Now I know that we therapists are supposed to be the ones who do the deep interpretations—but honestly it doesn’t always work that way! However, I can say this. When I wrote my *Interpreting the Countertransference* book a year later my experience with Rabi was the central guiding light in the formulation of the role-reversal scenarios emanating from the symbiotic, merger, or attachment period of development. I didn’t report this experience in the countertransference

book because at the time I was still too ashamed of the exposed homosexuality, of the exposed racism, of the hatred and sexual excitement aroused in me by this very beautiful dark skinned exotic man who was so entirely Other to me! But most of all I was ashamed by my psychoanalytic conscience. How could I possibly tell colleagues what I had experienced, what I had done, what I had said, and how I had “used” my client to cure me of long-internalized inhibitions? When the mutual dissociations broke, Rabi and I had both come to experience what I have called “relational flexibility” (2011, 2014) and Donnell Stern calls “relational freedom” (2013). Thereafter, experiencing homosexual desire, racial hatreds, and the inter-racial excitements of Otherness not only became tolerable but enormously helpful to me in my work. I owe a debt of gratitude to Rabi.

Case Vignette: Charles

I worked with Charles a number of years in a three times a week analysis. I have written up our work together in my book, *Sex in Psychotherapy*, but until preparing for my presentation today I had never thought it particularly important to mention that Charles was Jewish and that for a lifetime I have had a particular affinity for Jewish people. As children playing house and doctor upstairs in Myrna’s bedroom, doing chemistry experiments in the basement with Kippy, or later sipping coffee in the college refectory with David I never knew fully why Jewish people constituted for me an exotic and exciting Otherness. But I always knew that Jewish people simply looked and carried themselves distinctly differently from the mainstream Bible-belt Waspish friends I mostly grew up with.

So Charles was Jewish and from my first session I was attracted to him—his Jewish facial features, nose, hair, body movements and knowing smile—all magnificently exciting and seductive. Often I imagined being married to him, taking proper care of him and taking delight in his body—the kind of fantasies Searles (1954) reports having when caring for his patients.

One feature of Charles' life we had repeatedly worked on was his internalized self-hatred and his periodic insistence that he was a hopeless case and ought to kill himself. My role for many years in this scenario was to insist that this wasn't true—that I loved him, that he was well respected by many others, that his professional work was truly remarkable, and so forth.

In the session to be reported, we were once again caught in this irritated, confrontational mode, with my insisting that he is a strong, worthwhile person who is relating better than ever to everyone he knows, and with Charles angrily challenging me on every point. As our aggressive intensity escalated, I felt us to be in a very familiar place together, one we had gone to many times before. My forearms and fists were raised angrily toward him and flushing with a definite charge of sexual energy and excitement running throughout my body. Suddenly I had a flash: "This is sexual!" Momentarily flabbergasted, I let Charles carry on a bit until I gathered my wits about me and then interrupted.

Larry: This is sexual!

Charles: What?

Larry: This is sexual. What we are doing right now is sexual. And now that I think of it, whenever we get into this excited, agitated state fighting with each other, we are both in a highly stimulated state of arousal—but I had never thought of it before as sexual. This is our way of fucking, one we have developed over time and haven't ever seen as an erotic. I don't know why we haven't seen it before, but I just experienced this flush come over me, and I realized that we go to this place in order to express ourselves vividly to each other and our interaction carries a strong erotic charge.

Charles: Like I get off to putting you in your place?

Larry: Maybe?

Charles: Like, by putting myself down so vigorously I can get you to build me up, to affirm me, to make me feel good about myself? Like this is a sexual dynamic that we get off to, me putting myself down and you building me up?

Larry: Actually, no. Paradoxically, the louder I insist that you are a good guy, in however many ways I may, and the more I confront you about how rotten your appraisals of yourself and your progress in relating are, the worse I end up putting you down.

Charles: Putting me down? No, you're building me up. I'm the one putting myself down.

Larry: No, I'm not talking so much about the specific content, but of our *process of relating* in this highly charged dance in which we collude in putting you into an essentially humiliating position.

Charles: Humiliation? How so? I don't feel like you are humiliating me.

Larry: *That* may be the problem, that you don't feel it. But implicitly, relationally I am diminishing you as a person. Why should *I* be the one to bolster your self-esteem, to shore up your nasty attitudes and behaviors about yourself? The more I do, the more I implicitly agree that you are indeed a pathetic case, that you're so pathetic that you can't even do a passable job taking credit for yourself, allowing good feelings about yourself, or enjoying your hard-earned creative steps forward.

Charles: I gotcha. It's not that I put myself down and then I take heart in your building me up?

Larry: No, you take heart when I implicitly prove how little I really think of you by agreeing to trivialize you with support and faint praises!

Charles: There. You see, I've been telling you all along how much you hate me, how much contempt you have for me, and how you lie to me when you say that you respect me—when in fact you do see me as a pathetic case, a hopeless wretch! I knew it!

Larry: Not so fast! I'm not copping to any of that! What I am saying is that we have constructed a game, a dance between us that we often fall into—sometimes in quick steps, and other times (like tonight) in expansive ballroom ecstasy. The content per se of our banter is in some sense totally irrelevant; what is crucial is our affective interaction. This is our way of fucking. Look at us, how we both always get hyper-aroused in all of this mutual misunderstanding, disrespect, and hatred! I'm saying this is relationally orgasmic and that we are both repeatedly drawn here to enjoy together this perverse level of erotic excitement—at your expense, and mine, too, because this is not a position I like to be in either.

Charles: I just thought of something. I don't think I've ever told you this. I must have been 3 or 4 spending long lonely days with my psychotic mother waiting until I heard the tires of my father's car in the driveway. He would mix a stiff martini, put on a Broadway musical and we would get silly and dance around the room together. It was the only sign of life there was for me during that time. Even then I knew he felt sorry for me that I was stuck with her. So even as we were playing together under the influence of music and martinis, *he was only doing it—building me up—because he saw me as a lost and pathetic child*. There it is: the only liveliness and excitement I knew was in the context of being seen as a poor, pathetic, essentially hopeless child who needed to be livened up. Like you just described how it often goes with us. It *is* a super-charged erotic interaction. You're right, I see it all now. *This was my first love*. The homosexual parts of me suddenly seem clear for the first time ever. Wow! I see it all so clearly now. And you say we replicate it here, the homosexual play and arousal?

Larry: Absolutely.

Charles: Have you known this before?

Larry: No, not in the way I do now.

Charles: You got it! Shit! Well, *I don't want to do this with you anymore!* But I can't help myself. I *have* to see myself as weak, inferior, and pathetic.

Larry: Then we have our work cut out for us.

You will not be surprised to learn that midway into writing up this case report it dawned on me that the name I had spontaneously chosen to disguise my client was, of course, my father's name, Charles. Nor will it

come as a surprise that my entire childhood was devoted to developing ways in which to assuage my father's violent temper and his constant abuse. For several days after I had discovered my naming slip, a recurring image haunted me of happily and excitedly playing in the bathtub with my father when I was about three years old and his abruptly standing up to get out of the soapy bubbles, with water dripping down his fascinating body hair and his penis large, red, and partially erect.

I mention these personal associations without further comment simply to illustrate the depth to which unconscious relational enactments in the relational third often go; and to note the extent to which the personality dynamics of *both* participants have to be taken into account when considering psychotherapy from a relational standpoint.

Conclusions

It is my belief that erotic dynamics, imagery, and experience are ubiquitous in all human relationships, including psychotherapeutic ones. With a relational lens we are in a position to realize that the erotic dynamics, imagery, fantasies and experiences brought from the merged infantile pasts of both participants are necessarily replicated or enacted in the therapeutic relationship *in order for the limiting internalized object relations structures to become known and therapeutically worked through in transference and countertransference.*

We know that misunderstanding and miscommunication occur in all relationships and can be a special problem when communicating in the area of sexuality. However, the answer is not to avoid or back off from meaningful relating, but rather to step up to relationships and work hard

toward achieving rewarding interactions and good communication about whatever is important in the relationship—eroticized or not. There is no need to confuse working on sexually charged images, fantasies, and enactments that arise in the transference/countertransference engagement with destructive sexualization of the relationship and the slippery slope of sexual acting out.

We carefully protect ourselves, our clients, and the psychotherapy situation through clear communication, as well as through appropriate and timely consultation and documentation of all events that are puzzling, troubling, or subject to misinterpretation. *By distinguishing sharply between countertransference disclosures which are simply gratuitous and distracting from countertransference experiencing and interpreting which serve to give emotion and voice to the client's long-internalized child-self desperately struggling to be heard, we need no longer dread erotic feelings and fantasies in countertransference experiencing and interpreting.*

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