

The Scarred Rapper and the Poems of Always

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*All depends, all depends on the skin
all depends on the skin you're living in
- S. Sundiata*

Prelude

All along, ever since I last saw him being wheeled away, strapped on a stretcher that was pushed by an expressionless medic, smiling a terrified and embarrassed smile before he was lifted into the ambulance and then was gone, on his way to a residential facility upstate, as so many before him and since, a transfer that I, as the evaluating psychologist, had recommended, all along I felt that at least I had his poems, or better, his songs. I had tucked them away, along with notes and drawings from other clients I had worked with in that psychiatric facility, never reading them again, but being convinced that one day I would, as I would try to tell his story. They were proof of our journey together, the tangible reminders of his presence in my journey as a psychologist. As I started looking for his poems for this paper and could not find them, I started thinking that I had lost them, and I could not understand how. It was with a mixture of relief and astonishment that I realized, as I was struggling to put together the first draft of this paper, I never had his poems, he took them with him, and I only had the vivid experience and memory of our exchanges. In a sense, I still have his poems.

His name was Chris – his real name. Using a pseudonym for a youngster who, like the thousands of youngsters that pass through the doors of psychiatric institutes every year and are quickly forgotten once they are transferred to other facilities, not only feels unnecessary, it also feels like it perpetuates his anonymity, his invisibility, another antisocial black male adolescent from a psychiatric institution. Like so many other youngsters in psychiatric facilities, his life history had been one of deprivation, abuse and neglect, an intermittent sequence of violent episodes and losses in the background of despair and rage. His life was full of interruptions – sudden relocations and placements to various facilities including foster care, residential facilities, juvenile centers, correction facilities and mental institutions. I have thought of him many times over the years since we met, and every time I do, I also have thought that the 16-year-old never had a chance. He belonged to the “wretched of the earth”, as Franz Fanon (1963) called the

victims of race, poverty and oppression policies; he belonged to the damned of inner-city reality, condemned by the darkness of his skin and by the chaos and violent pathology of his family, who themselves were the wretched of the earth in an never-ending cycle. To this day I can still vividly conjure his image sitting across from me in the bare room with the stained walls, the linoleum tiles and the institutionalized furniture, looking out past the courtyard into the distance, his deep scar that run from the edge of his mouth across his left cheek all the way to his temple fully exposed, a vivid metaphor to how slashed his life had been.

First Impressions

He was screaming ferociously the first time I saw him, when he was admitted into the psychiatric facility. Leaning forward as if he would lurch at anyone who would dare to come close to him, and warning everyone – psychiatric nurses, psychiatrists, social workers and other clients – to keep a safe distance from him. He seemed like menace personified, a muscular youngster with dark features, dressed in black clothes at the end of the corridor, surrounded by three or four muscular male nurses, all dressed in white.

He wasn't screaming when I approached him the next day. Yet, underneath his tranquilized demeanor I could sense a chronic state of turmoil and agitation. He sat quietly, waiting with obvious resignation while I fumbled with the testing materials. "How many days are there in a week?" "Who was Christopher Columbus?" He remained mostly silent, offering brief responses now and then, which barely contained the disdain he felt for the whole process. He just stared at me when I asked him about the days in the week; he shook his head and rolled his eyes when I asked him about Christopher Columbus. How does one score such responses? The manual is pretty clear on that – no score – but that didn't seem relevant at all. He seemed both suspicious of and resigned to the whole process. He did not know the capital of Italy, nor how far it is from New York to London, math and vocabulary questions frustrated him and he hated the Rorschach. He seemed easily rattled and acted as if this whole process was another meaningless exercise he had to be subjected to, an exercise that would only serve to confirm his sense of inferiority. He was a tormented soul whose state of chronic, paranoid irritation and repressed, yet palpable rage, along with his menacing appearance and dismissive behavior instilled fear to anyone around him.

He was not wanted nor liked by anyone, including his mother who, fearing his explosive reactions, requested, in his presence, that he would not return back to her house. With the prospect of remaining hospitalized for the foreseeable future, unwanted by his own mother, having nowhere else to go but to another facility, he was assigned to three-times-a-week psychotherapy sessions that he did not ask for nor felt any desire to participate in. He did impress me as one of the unlikable, unlovable in fact, “repugnant” souls, Willock (1987) has written about. He would talk in monologues, mostly to himself, was easily offended and prone to explosive outbursts. He would become eerily transformed at the mere sight of adolescent girls from the female ward passing by, pausing literally midsentence to intensely gaze at their anatomy, his eyes checking them from head to toe, until they had turned the corner, oblivious to the person with whom he was conversing. He had nothing to say in our sessions, he was a victim of the world, upset with everyone, angry at everyone, unwanted by everyone including his own mother. He would show up for his sessions, not out of an unconscious desire for connectedness – and he made his disdain for the whole process clear – but out of not wanting to risk losing the few coveted privileges, such as being allowed before dinner to hang out in the playground with other residents from different units.

What is the treatment for such individuals? What can a treatment, which was not likely to last for more than two or three months, offer to such a person? Insight? Skills training? Systemic intervention? What can one create with such individuals, the wretched of the earth, the repugnant of the earth? What could a white, not-yet-licensed therapist like me who had lived a life of relative privilege, full of choices and opportunities Chris could never dream of, offer to him that would be relevant and meaningful? How could a novice therapist, uncertain of himself and his clinical skills, fearful of failure and of acknowledging racial and social differences, be able to explore transference and countertransference dynamics? How could one facilitate a meaningful exchange given Chris’ distrust, if not disdain, and the institutionalized transient conditions of the treatment?

How did he see me? Certainly not as an ally; after all I had strongly recommended that he be placed in a residential facility, and he knew that. Nor did he see me as a person with whom he could explore the trauma and intangibles of his life and build a relationship. He expected nothing from me and our therapeutic engagement. In fact, I now feel that he was bracing himself for the unavoidable replication of past experiences with therapists from other

institutions and community centers who had either been ineffective or not available for long. His life, after all, was full of failed or interrupted relationships, which must have contributed to his sense of mistrust toward everyone. I was aware from the beginning that the context of our encounters replicated a core racial dichotomy in his life in which whites were consistently cast as superior individuals of privilege and power, and blacks as inferiors that needed to be evaluated, treated, and be told what to do. I felt that I was invisible to him, just as he felt that he was to me, another doctor or specialist he had been assigned to while waiting to be transferred to another facility, where he would be assigned to other doctors and specialists until the next transfer, in a never-ending cycle.

Silence as a Communication

According to Davies and Frawley (1992), psychologists who work with traumatized individuals are likely to experience in the countertransference strong rescuing fantasies. But with Chris, I had no such fantasies. The context in which I was seeing him, bore many similarities to core experiences in his life; lack of control, having no say in or preparation for the abrupt changes in his life, finding himself at the mercy of decisions and acts that were initiated by others, and so on. For a youngster who had experienced adults, especially authority figures, as basically rejecting, unreliable and withholding, it only made sense that Chris conveyed in his posture no positive expectations from his encounters with me. The absence of any kind of positive expectations not only reflected his contextual transference (Scharff and Scharff, 1987) to yet another mental health facility, but also his attempts to ward himself from recurring disappointments and from reliving past experiences of failure. His experiences with others had solidified in him a basic mistrust and sense of futility and he conveyed that in our sessions. He expected nothing, he wanted nothing, he was there because he had no control, no voice in it, and that was that.

In an eerie replication of past therapeutic relationships, he was about to engage in a psychotherapeutic process in which he had no say whatsoever and was to be interrupted soon. The context that framed our encounters precluded any possibility of experiencing myself as the benevolent, socially and racially conscious “white knight” Altman (1995) describes. I felt defeated before we began and, like him, I sought to ward myself by expecting nothing from our sessions, by convincing myself that our sessions were doomed to fail.

He mumbled a lot in our first sessions, avoided my gaze, shrugged his shoulders to many of my questions, and would become visibly irritated when I attempted to comment on how devoid of purpose our sessions felt. But what could he say? How could he describe the physical and sexual abuse he had witnessed, been forced to participate in, and had been subjected to? What was the point of describing to a stranger, like me, with whom he was about to terminate soon, a stranger who perceived him as an unlikable youngster, as a hopeless case – and he must have sensed that – that when he was two or three years old his father, after beating his mother, would often ask him and his brother to kick and stomp her, laughing at the faint kicks of the confused boys, who must have been terrified at the sight of their mother bleeding and moaning while lying on the floor? How could he describe that his father would demonstrate to him how to kick his mother and urge him and his brother to kick harder? How could Chris report that after taking him to another state without informing his mother, the father and his girlfriend would often have intercourse in his presence? What could he say about his father's drunken and drug-induced behaviors, the police raid in the middle of the night, his placement in foster care where he was accused of sexually assaulting another boy? He could not talk about that, but could only convey his hatred toward his mother for never searching for him when his father took him to another state. When he was finally reunited with her at the age of 15, whatever hopes and expectations he had were quickly dashed when he realized that his mother had sex with many men in the neighborhood in exchange for money and other gifts. Was that the reason why he tried, six months or so after he was reunited with his mother, to molest his 11-year-old half sister – which was the reason why he was admitted to the psychiatric facility – the sister he barely knew and with whom his mother was very close, her mere presence reminding him of the relationship he never had with his mother? That was his story, many details were missing, the tale was incomplete, but how can one convey and account for all the details of such a life?

In his sessions, Chris would take the same seat next to the window and would stare outside, with a blank expression, over the courtyard into the distance. The tendency to go blank, to empty oneself out entirely, may not only be a chronic coping mechanism to ward oneself from exposure, but also, as Eigen (1986) remarked, an attempt to anesthetize himself or herself from the pain and hatred he or she may be feeling. He would stare out the window in silence and I would not interrupt his silent moments, feeling that this was one of the few places in the psychiatric facility that was relatively quiet and afforded him a place to be. Gradually, I ceased

to experience his silences as hostile or belligerent, or as attempts to defend against my presence and to avoid me. Rather, they began to feel more like a reflection of the standstill he had found himself in, and conveyed to me the impression that he was pausing and surveying the state his life was in. His silent gazing into the distance evoked in me the image of staring, wishfully(?) at life outside – a life that felt so foreign, so out of reach. I did not interpret his silences nor did I try to interrupt them with my questions. He was just drifting away, as if carried by an undercurrent he could not name nor explain. I listened to his silences with the alert, sentient attention that Khan (1963), in his eloquent paper “silence as a communication,” describes. I listened through the experiences and associations they evoked in me. Like Khan, I would verbalize my associations every now and then, not to interrupt him or to nudge him, but to acknowledge him and to convey to him that I had been watching and participating in our silent exchanges. I wanted to convey to him – I felt that it was important to convey to him – that his silences were not threatening nor offensive, but could evoke meaning, stimulate me and make me a fellow participant in his solitary state. I had ceased perceiving him as an unlikable and potentially explosive individual, I had ceased being resentful at having him been assigned to my caseload. It was as if his silent gazing at the world outside, his silent yearnings, had enabled me to see him past my initial stereotypes and apprehensions and I had begun to experience him as the lonely, deeply alienated and rather frightened soul that he was.

The Lonely Rapper

The loose, crumpled sheets filled with the scribbles of the rap songs he aspired to write that he began carrying with him, two or three weeks into our sessions, provided me with an opening, an invitation to his inner world. He would walk into the room holding the folded sheets in his hand and after taking his seat he would carefully place them face down on the desk, as if they were precious icons. In the bare room of the bleak psychiatric ward, the repetitive lines, full of references to him being abused and mistreated did not feel trite, but genuine, and enabled me to move on and to find the words to connect with him, past the uncertainty that had characterized our sessions. He listened to rap because, for him, it was his world and captured the rage he felt. He wrote rap songs because it was fashionable and cool, yes, but also because he could, through the cadence and beat of rap, convey how he felt and how he experienced his life. Unlike the rap songs of the well-known rappers he liked to listen to, his rap songs were not violent, nor full of

expletives. They felt more like repetitive soliloquies, monologues to himself, that seemed to have a soothing effect on him through their repetitiveness.

Tustin (1984) has drawn attention to the self-soothing sensations infants generate through the rhythmicity of their acts, which serve to create for them a sense of cohesion and comfort. Ogden (1989) has extended this idea by proposing an earlier state in life before the consolidation of object relationships, the autistic contiguous position, where self and object relations are experienced in terms of the sensory stimulation that is generated by the infant/individual and his or her objects, and the sensory transformations that occur as a result of these interactions. According to Tustin (1984) and Ogden (1989), deprived and traumatized individuals often seek in the rhythmicity, physicality (edgedness) and sensory input of their acts, to create a sense of cohesion, that affirms their continuity of being in the world. I had the feeling that through his songs, through his repetitive lines, Chris was not simply narrating himself and his life, but also creating a soothing sensation that gave him a feeling of continuity and purpose and eased his agitation. Through his songs he was finding the words to describe aspects of his life without feeling haunted or enraged by the associations they evoked. Unbeknown to us, in the rhythm and cadence of his lines he was also creating the rhythm of our exchanges, a rhythm that allowed us to slowly start to recognize and attend to each other.

I have been used, used and abused, misused...

I have been to hell, there is no return...

Hell, is all I have...

Nigger, you are a nobody...

“Hell is all you have?”, “You have been used and misused?”, “There is no return?”, “Nigger?”, “You are a nobody?” I would ask him echoing his lines and, to my surprise, Chris would start to slowly narrate his life in brief monologues while staring out over the courtyard, into the distance. Fragments from a life in foster care, memories of his older brother who was still in foster care and he had not seen him since the age of 10, fragments from the beatings and the chaos of his life, glimpses from a life lived in different places, the sudden moves, the explosive violence, the multiple losses... The sheets containing the rap songs he was attempting to write were multiplying and he did seem to like the fact that I was interested in what he wrote. He never asked whether I liked his songs; they felt more like confessional poems to me. He never asked me if I liked the lines I was quoting back to him, although he must have sensed that

his lines moved me and offered me a glimpse into his internal world. These lines served as starting points for our conversations and marked, I felt, the emotional states he had experienced since our last session.

Poetic Exchanges

Why was I interested in his rap? he wondered after several days. Because to me, I replied, they sounded like poems about his life and his experiences. Did I like poetry? Yes. What kind of poetry? Any kind, any poem that moved me, spoke to me and made me contemplate life, I replied. Did I have a favorite poem? Many. Could I tell him a favorite poem of mine? We had been having our sessions outside, on nice days, sitting on the grass or on a bench underneath a gigantic oak tree. I mentioned Elytis and how his poems reminded me of my country, Greece, as I experienced it. Could I narrate a poem of his to Chris? I remember myself hesitating, wondering how could he possibly understand Elytis, I remember thinking that Elytis cannot be translated, his poetry is so full of images and metaphors Chris could never possibly understand or conjure in his mind. But he was interested in what moved *me*, he was interested in *my* world, and that realization *moved* me past my reservations and rationalizations. I attempted a translation of a verse from Elytis' poem "*Axion Esti*":

Eagle-shaped are its tall mountains
On volcano cliffs, rows of grape vines
And the houses forever white in the proximity of the blue...

It was a verse that evoked in me the sensation of the wind, I explained, the whiteness of the simple houses on the edge of barren cliffs, the blueness of the sky in the background. It was a poem that conveyed my sensations, my images, my background, my aesthetics. It conveyed, and still conveys, the simplicity that I aspire to reach in my life, the simplicity I try to reach as a psychologist. It also reminded me of the numerous times in my life when, as a child, I was standing on the deck of a ship next to my father watching, in silent reverie, the rows of white houses appear behind the rocks and cliffs as the ship eased into a harbor. I did not realize then, that I was quoting a poem to him that evoked in me the presence of my father, a man who had mostly been absent from my life as I was growing up. Now, almost fourteen years later, I am amazed at our shared yearning for a father figure, and I am moved by the fact that this troubled

youngster was able, with his persistence, to evoke in me my fondest images of my father, my own silent moments with him, my gazing into the distance in his presence.

Needless to say, I regret not being aware, at the time, that Chris was able to stir my father's presence in me. I regret not realizing the losses this poem still evokes in me, much like the losses his rap songs/poems evoked in him, and not sharing these experiences with him. Instead, I only focused on the distant properties of the poem, the landscape, the images it conjured in me about my country. I was only conscious of the fact that in elaborating on the images this poem stirred in me, I was describing another world, another sensory and interpersonal world that Chris could not imagine. He could not grasp the images I tried to convey to him, and had nothing to say. "You and I had very different lives", I would say to Chris, and Chris would nod but would dismiss any notion that this made him angry. He was genuinely pleased when I brought him a book full of pictures from the Greek isles, which he studied with surprising intensity. He knew so little of the world; only what he saw on TV and action movies. His images and sensations of the world consisted of barren rooms, dirty, unkempt apartments, the images and sounds of poverty and of a life lived as an outcast in the fringes of an affluent western society.

There was a shift in our sessions. He would no longer stare silently out of the window, he no longer had to be fetched from the recreation area for our sessions. He was waiting for me in the corridor, next to the main door, clutching his sheets with his rap songs, waiting for me to enter the ward and take him for our session. But it was still hard to respond to his monologues, it was still hard to disengage him from his spells of despair. He was a victim of life, a youngster who felt utterly alone, with no future, no prospects. I was aware of the paradox that our moments of connectedness emerged from the shadow of how disconnected, deprived and alone he had felt in life. I was also aware that our moments of intimacy, our forays into the subjective, were bound to stir a host of emotions in him, emotions that he had to face alone in the ward until our next session. Several times, after sessions that had felt particularly productive, he would come for his next session in a dejected mood, conveying through words and his posture that nothing mattered, that all was futile. In those moments, I found it hard not to share his sense of futility, not to feel that all this was a useless exercise, not to feel defeated, hopeless, powerless.

"There is no ship for you, there is no road," I quoted one day, first in Greek and then in English, a line from Cavafy's (1989) poem, "*The City*," in response to a long monologue of his

about feeling helpless or, as he put it, “condemned” in life. It is an allegorical poem, like all the poems of Cavafy, that alludes to the inability of individuals to free themselves from their past, to avoid feeling stranded or shipwrecked by the burdens they carry in life. He was taken aback by my quote and I narrated the meaning of the poem to him. Was this verse too direct, even insensitive, considering the state Chris was in? It certainly felt too direct, and undoubtedly reflected my impatience, my difficulty to tolerate his repetitive monologues of despair. Yet, paradoxically, the ripple this statement generated reversed the gloominess and hopelessness I was feeling just a moment before, as I had so often felt in similar moments in our previous sessions. It was as if speaking in the evocative voice of Cavafy’s poem, I later realized, enabled me to not feel hopeless, to not feel wordless, but instead, to comment directly on his despair and underlying fear without responding with false reassurances. Recently, Pizer (2005) wrote that she has found that the poems she occasionally recites in her sessions enable her, more so than her interpretations, “to interrupt a familiar ritual or provide by its surprise an unexpected opening, a play space” (p. 59). It becomes “an opening” that she and her patient(s) can expand on and play with. Cavafy’s poem captured how trapped and hopeless Chris must have felt in life, how alone he must have felt in the world. As Chris stared at me, waiting to elaborate on the verse I had just quoted, I pulled Cavafy’s book from the bookshelf and read him the first half of the poem.¹

You said, “I will go to another land, I will go to another sea.

Another city will be found, a better one than this.

Every effort of mine is a condemnation of fate;

and my heart is – like a corpse-buried.

How long will my mind remain in this wasteland.

Wherever I turn my eyes, wherever I may look

I see black ruins of my life here,

where I spent so many years destroying and wasting.”

There is no ship for you, there is no road.

¹ I did not read the second half of the poem; I only read the line I had quoted earlier: “There is no ship for you, there is no road.” The rest of the poem alludes to one’s contribution to the hopeless predicament he finds himself in and I did not feel that that was relevant for Chris. His experiences in life, his wasteland were not caused by his acts but by the acts of others. I, therefore, only read the part of the poem that spoke about the hopelessness he experienced.

I do not remember how long he stayed silent, nor whether he asked any other questions or uttered anything else. But I can still hear him to this day mumbling, without looking at me, that he, too, felt buried, that his life was and had been a wasteland. He had been in many wastelands, foster care, juvenile centers, where he remembered trying to soothe himself to sleep by whispering his name repeatedly in the dark as if, it seemed to me, he were trying to reassure himself that he was still present, that he could still hold on to himself.

“Will I ever be able to have a life?” he asked me several days later as we sat on the ground, underneath the gigantic oak tree and he kept digging a hole with a little stick on the ground. Could he ever? At his request, we had increased our sessions to five days a week, which had made our sessions even more free-flowing, even more open to whatever reactions he had, whatever questions rose in his mind. He listened to my description of Cavafy’s (1989) allegorical poem “Expecting the Barbarians” in which the threat of the barbarians galvanizes the citizens of an ancient city into action, only to feel bereft and devoid of purpose when it turned out that the news was false and the barbarians were not coming. He did not reply but he kept digging holes with his stick. “Only if you manage to avoid getting carried away by hate, however angry or hateful you might feel,” I replied. For the first time since I had known him, I had the genuine feeling that there was a possibility that he would emerge to live a life if only he could find some stability in his life, a place to feel anchored, a few people he could count on. This hopeful thought was tempered, however, by my suspicion that in an era of cutbacks and managed-care policies he would never be provided with a real opportunity to find such stability, and, as a result, the rage at being forever cast as the wretched of the earth, would overwhelm him. He was surprised again and – did I imagine it? – touched, when in our next session I handed him several copies of Cavafy’s poems, which he began carrying with him wherever he went.

“Do you know this woman?” he asked me excitedly several days later in the corridor, showing me a book of poems by Adrienne Rich (1987). The book was given to him by his English teacher, a young woman who had been intrigued by the sight of Cavafy’s poems lying prominently on his desk and had conversed with him about poetry. Did he know that Adrienne Rich’s books were the first American poetry books I had bought soon after I had arrived in this country? Did he know that she was one of my favorite American poets? He opened the book to the poem, “Transcendental Etude,” a poem the English teacher had indicated was her favorite. It

was a poem that, although I must have read before, it had not registered in me until he brought it to my attention. He could not make much sense of the poem, but these lines, already underlined by the English teacher, caught his attention:

“No one ever told us we had to study our lives,
make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history
or music, that we should begin
with the simple exercises first
slowly go on trying... (1987)

“How does one study a life?” he wanted to know. He was not aware that he had already started to study his life through the songs and poems he wrote, through the poems he wanted to share with me. He was not aware that he had begun to study his life with the questions he was asking. Or perhaps, he did not have any faith in the process, because he had never had experiences in his life that would enable him to have faith in “slowly go on trying”, in starting “with the simple exercises first” and in going on revising and expanding the meaning of his life. As in almost every other instance when I offered an association that surprised him, he remained silent, avoiding my gaze, until he was ready to ask the next question. He had begun to study his life, yes, but then what? How could he persevere when there was nothing in his life that provided him with some sense of security, a safe house, a place that would enable him to slowly contemplate his future? Yet, we persevered and there were other poems that followed, some introduced by the English teacher, some by me; Maya Angelou, Sekou Sundiata, Auden, Lorca, even one or two of Neruda’s love poems. Sometimes we spoke at length about the sensations and associations these poems evoked in either of us, other times we just moved on. Many times I felt he could not fully grasp the content of the poems he read, and yet it seemed to me that these poems symbolized something for him, another mode of being and experiencing the world. They symbolized another world, a world in which individuals can dream and study their lives, a world of hope and connectedness, the one, I imagined, he kept looking at when he stared in silence into the distance.

Poetic Core and the Power of Words

What was my role? Was I avoiding the uncertainty that lay ahead, the violence in his past, the despair of his present, by escaping into the eloquent world of various poets? Was I trying to insulate myself from the impact and implication of race and class in our exchanges by emphasizing the poetic, and the subjective, and by relying on the personal, a typical practice among psychoanalysts, as Abel (1990) remarked? I never asked him about his scar, I never tried to get a detailed history of his exposure to sexual and physical abuse. I never confronted him nor fully explored his hatred toward his mother, a hatred that he never, not even once, expressed toward his father. Was he rageful at her for having been so passive, so quick to let go of him, unwilling and unable to protect him and seemingly unable to derive pleasure from him and to feel pride in him? Had he felt, in his disturbing relationship with his father, that his father at least had claimed him and had wanted him and that that was something he still had to hold on to? I never heard him say anything negative about his father even though I kept pointing out that his father had a major role in the predicament he had found himself in. Was he protecting the memory of his father or simply himself from having to face and acknowledge his experiences at the hands of his father? Had the fear, literally terror, he must have felt when witnessing his father's outbursts and destructive acts, and perhaps even his repressed guilt, obliterated his sense of agency, his ability to process and to think what had happened and why?

I never explored these issues with him, and yet, I never had the feeling that I was cushioning my discomfort, that I was softening the institutional context within which our sessions took place by seeking refuge in the lyrical and the poetic. Rather, I felt that, with a person as traumatized and fragmented as Chris, what was important was not so much how effectively I was able to address these issues, but whether I was able to engage with him, to draw him out, to become a "live company" (Alvarez, 1992) for him. To paraphrase Alvarez, first we had to find a way to experience each other before we were able to delve deeper into the traumata and impasses of his life. With patients whose inner world is so splintered and persecutory, whose internal cohesion is so overloaded with rage, bitterness, sense of futility and resignation as Chris' was, the issue is not as much the exploration of past experiences and relational patterns as the creation of a space (Winnicott, 1971) where the otherness of each other would be expressed and contemplated, a space where the experiences of each participant would be shared in the presence of the other.

How could a youngster, so traumatized and impoverished in life, a youngster who had only been exposed to fragments of education in the various settings of his life, engage in such an evocative manner and participate so fully through the poetic symbols and metaphors? To this day, I do not know the answer; to this day I am astonished by his ability to engage through poems, to contemplate complex ideas, to connect threads and create links in a manner that defied expectations and stereotypes. But I suspect that, through our poetic exchanges, we made it possible not only to address each other in a manner that defied dichotomies, but more important, to find the language that enabled us to present ourselves to each other and to articulate a part of our inner world. In the powerlessness and hopelessness we both experienced initially, relying on the poetic, creating poetic moments, was the only act that transcended the bleak prospects that loomed ahead for him, while enabling us to connect with and to find each other. In a sense, we were able to create a language that common to both of us, full of images and analogies from each other's history, which we could not have otherwise experienced, and in the process, to create a bridge over the chasm that separated us. In the "polysemy" of our poetic exchanges, to use Quinodoz' (2002) expression, we were able to eventually decenter ourselves for a while from the frightening and confusing and instead, with the poems as a starting point, to find a common language, a "language that touches" (Quinodoz, p. 44), and engage in a manner that made our exchanges meaningful and personal. It was a language that, as Akhtar (2000) observed, did not deny the pain he had experienced but enabled him to begin to process the past and the present and to become more empathic and tolerant with his "own repudiated parts" (p. 229).

Many patients in psychoanalysis need the analyst to use a language that is not "the language of clear thought" writes Luquet (p. 542 cited in Quinodoz, p. 37), and prefer the language of fantasies and poetry, the language that is close to preconscious mechanisms, because such language is not linear but, synthesizing. But my reactions to Chris were not based on any such preconceived awareness of the use of language. I used poetry not because I wanted to avoid the language of clear thought, or because I sought in the countertransference to idealize our exchange, but because he evoked it in me, not only with the poems and songs he had conspicuously placed on the desk, but also with his whole presence, his silent anger, his loneliness, his quiet gazing out of the window into the distance, his scarred face that so vividly alluded to a scarred life.

I relied on the language of fantasy and poetry because that was the only language that enabled me to think, to bring my totality in the room. It enabled me to bypass the dichotomy of being a white therapist treating a black, antisocial adolescent, and instead, helped me to be a therapist who would not only explore with him his experiences and reactions, but also be transformed by his potential and his yearning to be. It enabled me to experience him not as a black, antisocial young man with a low IQ, but as a youngster full of untapped potential, truly a victim of life, and to see past the stereotypes that his life history and behavior evoked. It enabled me to tap into his poetic core, which every individual has; it enabled me to feel touched and fully surprised by his sensitivity and inner richness. More important, the poems enabled us to register each other's reactions, to begin to notice and to recognize each other without feeling pinned down (Pizer, 2005). They enabled us to locate "a space between experience and expectation" (Pizer, p. 73) and therefore, to be surprised, in a truly Winnicottian (1971) sense, by what we found in each other and in ourselves.

He would often point to a poem or read a verse or two and then, as if these poems and lines touched something in him, he would begin to talk about incidents in the ward; he would report a dream or a memory, he would ask about a movie he had seen on TV; he even wondered about the numerous dead cicadas which, with the summer coming to an end, were everywhere in the courtyard of the large hospital. "Where would I go?" he would ask, "How many days before I leave?" he would ask; to me these questions sounded like he was wondering what would happen to him. He was studying his life and the challenge for him was not to let the fear about what was going to happen overwhelm him and leave him with no alternative but hopeless rage and despair. He had changed quite a bit in the three months I had been seeing him. He would not stare with the same sexual ferocity at the adolescent girls in the ward, and I could talk directly to him about how his behavior could ostracize him and cause him to be seen as someone who needed to be incarcerated for a long time.

The Therapist as the "Mythifier" and Annotator

Cross cultural therapy, writes Davidson (1987), begins with a state of unfamiliarity, mistrust and confusion, a state in which each participant is seen as an enigma to the other. Working with culturally diverse clients requires each participant to acknowledge the differences that exist and how alien each participant seems to the other one. Given the vastness that

separated us, we were, in a sense, engaged in a cross cultural therapy and, in the process, were able to bypass the distance between us by attending to the poetic desire each of us would bring to the session. Altman (1995) proposes a three-person point of view in working with culturally deprived clients of different ethnic, racial and even religious, backgrounds. It is a perspective that not only takes into account the transference and countertransference dynamics of the therapeutic exchange, but also the context that each participant brings to the interaction: the alienation and dissociation such patients have often experienced in their lives by virtue of belonging to deprived, culturally disadvantaged groups. One has to not only be cognizant of the “hidden injuries of class” (p. 82), as Altman put it, but also of how these injuries have compromised their development and well being, their sense of belonging and intactness in the world. But there is more to merely looking at the hidden injuries of class when working with individuals like Chris. One has to also look for the youngster’s personal myths, as Ekstein (1983) pointed out in his work with borderline children, one has to become familiar with the individual’s inner yearnings, and to strive to annotate and expand their thoughts and acts. It is even more clear to me that underneath the chaos, despair and rage, Chris yearned to connect, to engage past stereotypes and canned interventions, to contemplate, like most adolescents, the parameters of life and to feel, as Likierman (1988) so eloquently described, that I was moved and stimulated by what he brought into the session and what he evoked in me.

Levenson (1995) has pointed out that the task of analysis is to understand what is enacted in the room, what is being omitted from the patient’s and analyst’s exchanges. In an earlier paper Levenson (1988) used the metaphor of photography to convey that the objective of therapy is not to change a person but to sharpen the contour of the images he or she projects, to bring one’s life more into focus. In my work with Chris, contrary to Levenson’s urging, I felt that it was not vital to sharpen Chris’ images of himself and to point to his or our omissions. What was vital, I felt, was to add color to his images, to point to the surroundings, to bring other pictures to his attention, to create other presences. The task was not to confront him but to “mythify” him, as Grotstein (2000) put it, to expand on his timid and inarticulate gestures, to expand on his rap monologues, and to treat his statements as beginnings for other thoughts and associations, as invitations to study his inner life.

It was within and because of our forays into the poetic, I now feel, that Chris was able to reconstruct experiences from his life that he had so far avoided, like his longing and concern for

his brother with whom he had lost touch. It was because of the common language that we created that Chris began to articulate, in brief monologues, how lonely he had felt and how much he had lived a life that did not make sense to him. It was because of our ability to create a “language that touches” that he was able to ask me one day how to proceed to contact his brother, a request that involved tracing and contacting the foster care agency, an act that reawakened memories of painful losses and disturbing events he had tried to dissociate himself from for so long. Following his expressed desire to contact his brother, he would become predictably distressed and would seek refuge into his rap poems/songs. He was beginning to reclaim bits of his life, the fragmented memories of past relationships and experiences he was beginning to link the bits and pieces of his life that had been so discarded, so unattainable. It is because of our common language that Chris found the presence of mind to ask me, fittingly in our last session, although we did not know that it was our last session together, how he could have a life, how he could avoid spending the rest of his life in and out of institutions. The answer is easy, the road would be hard, I replied: He had to continue writing songs and thinking, he had to avoid letting hate dictate his life, he had to have faith in himself and others, he had to have faith in what he could create in his life and what he could evoke in others, despite the obstacles, despite “the city”, the ghosts of his life, that followed him wherever he went. But could he maintain his faith? Would his faith survive the days when the memories of the past would overwhelm him, the moments when the bleakness of the present and the uncertainty of the future would despair and frighten him? Could he, on those days, maintain his faith to “slowly go on trying?”

Where does one go from here? In a normal treatment, one continues, one keeps toiling on, and in the process, the patient becomes able to expand his experiences, to create meaning and hopefully, to become more present in life. But Chris was not afforded such an opportunity. The following morning at 8:30, three and a half months after we started our sessions, our journey came to an end. I could hardly catch a glimpse of him, as I approached the ward that morning, lying tied on a stretcher that was being lifted into the ambulance, looking petrified, his face a mask of humiliation and fear. There had been no notice, no preparation, he was just being whisked away, without him having any saying whatsoever, as it had happened so many times before in his life. The only thing that was left for me to do was to go inside and get him my book of Cavafy’s poems. I could almost feel the annoyance of the medic, who had to reach for the

plastic bag that contained Chris's few belongings to put the book inside. For him it was another routine transfer, like so many others before and so many since.

Epilogue

Where is he now? I do not know but I hope, against my fears, that he is in a better place. Twelve years later, last fall, as I was contemplating writing this paper, I came across a poem by Reinaldo Arenas² that seemed as though it could have been written by Chris or for Chris, a poem that made me wish I had known it before, when we had our sessions together, and shared it with him.

I am that angry and lonely child of always
 that throws you the insult of that angry child of always and warns you:
 if hypocritically you pat me on the head,
 I would take the opportunity to steal your wallet
 I am that child of always
 before the panorama of imminent terror,
 imminent leprosy, imminent fleas
 of offenses and the imminent crime
 I am that repulsive child that improvises a bed
 out of an old cardboard box and waits
 certain that you will accompany me

Arenas' poem vividly evokes the ostracism and rage he experienced as a homosexual poet in Castro's Cuba. But like Reinaldo Arenas who improvises a bed out of an old cardboard box, we were able, in the bleak psychiatric ward with the whitewashed walls and the beaten, bolted-to-the-floor furniture, to improvise our experiences out of his hastily scribbled rap songs, to create something out of the nothingness that surrounded us, and to become poets in the full sense of the word.

Was that enough? I have wondered many times. In his relationship with me Chris did seem changed, but the prospects in his life were still bleak, despite our evocative moments,

² Reinaldo Arenas' poem "My Lover the Sea" was read in *Before Night Falls* (2000), a movie directed by Julian Schnabel.

despite his vast potential. Clearly, our exchanges could not undo the ghosts of his life, the painful present, the horrible past, and the uncertain future. But through his rap songs, through the poems we shared, through the symbols and images that these poems evoked, he found himself constructing “a narrative of his own life” (Stern, 1985, p. 162) and creating a link between the past and the present. Words can touch after all, and even though they may not be enough, they can have a lasting power. His responsiveness to me, his ability to engage in our poetic exchanges point not only to his potential and my ability to create a meaningful exchange with him, but also to the presence of others, however brief, however fleeting, the presence of individuals who were able to touch him with their words, their commitment, their integrity. I had witnessed some of these presences myself: the English teacher who had shown an interest in him and who he had become smitten with, the gentle social worker, another young woman who did not feel intimidated by him, a male nurse with whom he had become progressively close, a female nurse. There must have been other people in the past, too, amidst the chaos, other professionals in the various sites he had been, perhaps even another relative. According to Anthony and Cohler (1987), children who display some resilience are children who have been exposed to the beneficial presence of at least one significant adult. Even though our poems could not undo Chris’ bleak reality, they enabled us to bypass the dichotomy that threatened our relationship and, I like to think, may have eventually contributed, in a small way, to his development of a sense of faith in life.

I find solace therefore in the thought that something remains, something stays, that the moments of connectedness he experienced in our sessions were not all lost, have not been rendered meaningless by the vortex in which his life had been swirling in for so long. I find some solace in the thought that maybe he has managed to remain a “child of always,” defiant but full of passion, still writing rap poems even though he probably never became a rap singer. For three and a half months, our poetic exchanges and associations, our willingness to listen, in Ogden’s (1999) words, to the “sound and feel” of “what’s going on” in our lives, to the “music of what happens” (p. 980), took us out of the psychiatric ward into the distance. It took us from our awkward and suspicious beginning, through his rap songs to the world of Tupak Sakur and other rap singers to the world of Elytis, Cavafy, Lorca, Rich, Maya Angelou and even, belatedly, Reinaldo Arenas. Despite the Kafkaesque context in which we met and despite the fragmented realities of a cost-driven mental health system, which precluded constancy and continuity, we

were able, in our exchanges, to become ourselves the “child[ren] of always,” improvising a world with the poems of always we shared and with what we evoked in each other.