

# Blue Heaven



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family and community relationships**

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## ABSTRACT

Psychoanalytic understanding of the human predicament pays more attention to developmental experiences within families of origin, of whatever form, than to the communities in which they grow up. Recent critiques of attachment theory draw attention to cultural factors that question measures of attachment security based on WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) family assumptions, and emphasise instead the significance of trust for individual and community well-being. Music forms part of the communications web in all societies, and arguably precedes language in connecting and separating people. This exploratory contribution will consider the role music, and jazz in

particular, can play in communication, considering both its connective and disruptive potential within families and communities. Using clinical illustration, it will consider jazz as a metaphor for couple psychoanalysis.

Keywords: jazz, psychoanalysis, attachment, culture, couple and family psycho-therapy.

## Introduction

*My Blue Heaven*, a jazz standard composed in 1924 by Walter Donaldson, was first recorded by a hastily assembled trio of piano, whistler, and singer. It went on to sell millions of copies, and in 1978 entered the Grammy Hall of Fame. George Whiting's lyrics describe the domestic scene:

... a smilin' face, a fireplace, a cozy room,  
Little nest that nestles where the roses  
bloom.  
Molly and me, and the baby makes three,  
We're happy in my Blue Heaven.

Home is often presented as a haven in a heartless world, a place of shelter providing protection from the storms of life, a place where



family is, and where families can be started from. Never mind the disruptions babies bring into the lives of couples, or the nightmarish realities sometimes associated with growing up in families, the blissful image conjured up in this jazz standard is a chart buster. Ironically, the tougher the family reality, the more popular the image; such is the power of idealisation.

## **The head<sup>1</sup>**

A Caribbean woman, let's call her Molly<sup>2</sup>, conceived a son, let's call him Lee, who was born severely handicapped. He was not expected to live beyond infancy. Medics were of the view that he should remain in a hospital environment, and family and extended family agreed. Beyond that they saw adoption as the way forward. Molly refused, determined to look after Lee

herself. She met a man from a neighbouring family, let's call him Malik, who, in her eyes, had an extraordinary quality: unlike her family who ignored her little boy, thinking him incapable of communication, this man connected with him. The interest was reciprocated. Malik felt he had been chosen by Lee, "and that was it". Molly was happy. The couple married, sharing a commitment to giving their son the best chance in life they could.

Roll the clock forward thirty years. Molly and Malik consult me, a couple therapist. The timing of their approach is linked to them finding it increasingly difficult to care for Lee at home. The physical strain of managing hoists and all the other paraphernalia needed to provide a fully-grown man with the care needed by an infant is proving too much for them. Of this

Molly is sure, and thinks the time has come to find full-time residential care for him. Malik is quiet; the assent he gives is muted. They take up the offer of couple therapy to think about this potential area of conflict between them.

Talking together is often difficult. Molly speaks, while Malik remains quiet, parrying her and my attempts to draw him out. A pattern emerges in which Molly acts as the voice, memory, and biographer of her husband as well as herself. This frustrates her. She feels that in representing both of them she loses her relationship with him. Malik, however, appears content with the arrangement. For me, it is like listening to stereophonic sound when the connection to one of the speakers has been lost. I and Molly are connected with each other, but Malik's voice is barely audible.

At home the triangle operates differently. Malik is the self-appointed primary carer for their son. Lee is a feisty presence at home, and although he cannot speak, he communicates very effectively about his likes, dislikes, and the attention he needs. Both parents are well-attuned to these communications, but it is Malik who will be first to respond. Father and son have a close bond with each other and can communicate without words. One thing that connects them is their shared appreciation of jazz, a medium that for them transcends and replaces language. There is a rhythm and routine to the way they listen, and an implicit understanding between them about which musicians they want to hear. The jazz they listen to tends to be abstract, inaccessible to any outside a special coterie of connoisseurs. This

kind of “blue heaven” connection between them might be seen as an idealised relationship. While jazz connects Malik and Lee, it disrupts the relationship between Malik and Molly, often leaving her with feelings of being the excluded member of their trio.

Jazz, thought to derive from the word “jass” or “jasm” —slang for orgasmic sex (Neate, 2002, p. 15), had not featured much in the couple’s recent relationship. On one occasion, years previously, Malik had invited Molly to a club to hear a band. She brought a friend, and the two women talked together during much of the performance. He didn’t like this, expecting them to pay attention to the music and not to each other. The invitation was not repeated.

## **Therapist improvisations**

My initial understanding of the “score”, the dynamic structure of their relationship from which I as their therapist might improvise, was that the prospective departure of their son from the family home left the couple facing an absence in their marriage. What would they have in common once they no longer had their time filled caring for their son? In important respects, their marriage had been based on coming together as parents; their partnership had taken second place. I thought the point of coming to see me, a couple therapist, was to help them prioritise their relationship now many of their parental responsibilities were likely to be coming to an end.

I thought their anxiety about being a couple had been heightened by recent losses for Malik, including the death of his mother and a painful family falling-out following from that, and his subsequent close involvement with another woman. This had been distressing for Molly, stirring up feelings of injustice, anger, and loss. I thought that maybe jazz for Malik provided a refuge from this conflict, and the basis of a compensatory idealised relationship with Lee—a “blue heaven” type of conflict-free zone. I also wondered if his behaviour had been a means of splitting ambivalent feelings towards his now dead mother between his wife, whom he had been avoiding, and the other woman, whom he had idealised.

I was curious about the role disability and difference played in their coming together as a

couple. I thought Molly originally had fiercely identified with Lee's vulnerability, a difference that played a role in helping her separate from a demanding family. For Malik, someone who had been considered electively mute as a child, I thought there may have been a sense of kinship with their language-less son, unconsciously resurrecting an aspect of the relationship he had with his mother in which only she was to know he was not mute. Jazz was an exemplar of that special, private relationship.

Molly and Malik were both children of the "Windrush"<sup>3</sup> generation, whose parents had left the West Indies after the Second World War to live in England.

Her family roots were deep and tightly knit, his were shallow and loosely connected. Perhaps, I thought, she was drawn to a man who



seemed self-contained and an outsider, providing her with a means of escaping the centrifugal forces in her own family. For him, I wondered if Molly and her tight-knit family offered the fantasy of home—perhaps a kind of “heaven” that was free of the “blueness” of loss. As a couple I thought each might be anxious about depending too much on the other: she for fear of being used; he for fear of being rejected.

From my experience of Molly and Malik I thought both partners might be more comfortable providing than receiving care. Malik was hard to engage, and I often felt redundant as a therapist with him. He was born in Barbados and separated from his mother at the age of four when she emigrated to England; his parents had separated before then, and father had disappeared from the scene. While his

mother occasionally returned to visit Barbados, she and Malik were only reunited when he came to England aged fourteen. He described separations from his mother in ways that made me wince, but seemed to leave him unaffected. In his world events “just happened”, they were things he had no control over and so were never thought about. He lived with his maternal grandmother who left him to his own devices, and she appeared to be relatively unconcerned about the amount of time he spent on his own and away from her. He gravitated towards his paternal grandmother and an aunt, who did take an interest in him. Essentially, though, he looked after himself, spoke little, and placed himself outside the orbit of others. When talking about his childhood he made light of the experiences he had been through, and signalled a “keep out”

message that made it hard for me to improvise around the starkness of his melody. It made me wonder about Molly's exclusion from the Malik–Lee couple, and whether, unconsciously, this elicited in her feelings of unimportance emanating from his own experience. In attachment terms I thought he responded to the strange situation of the consulting room in ways that suggested a dismissing state of mind, suppressing anything that might activate painful emotion. I also wondered if a history of trauma made it impossible for him to do what therapy might be asking of him—to engage with the “blues” from his past.

Molly was very different. Born in England to parents from St Lucia she was accessible, sensible to her own emotional experience, able to read between the lines, and engaged in

making the therapy work—even if it was conceived to be more for him than for her. I felt able to riff off the experiences she described, and she would respond and react in ways that moved things along between us. This made me think that if once she had been ensconced in enmeshed family relationships, she had been able to retrieve herself from these and now had a securely attached perspective on her life and relationships. This wasn't necessarily making things easier for her as she weighed up whether their marriage had a future or not.

While my attention was focused on an interactive pattern in which Molly was drawn into a quasi-maternal role caring for Malik (which he silently seemed both to be requesting and resisting), and he was doing something similar with their son, the couple improvised

around their experience in some different and interesting ways.

## **Couple improvisations**

The first thing I learned was that their active family members included not only living relatives but also those who had died—their ancestry. Malik was more likely to turn to these figures than his living relatives for help and advice.

From the outside this looked like self-reliance, maybe culturally as well as psychologically driven by a belief that acknowledging need signalled vulnerability. But from his perspective he was not alone: these ancestral family members were as real as living people. There was no loss for him, because those who had died continued to be present and

available. Family problems were understood by Malik to be a misalignment of relationships about which the ancestors might act to restore balance. The family shrine symbolised a meeting point between the worlds of the living and the dead, and it was a mark of improvement in the marriage when Malik invited his wife to accompany him to his family shrine.

For Molly, the situation was a little different. She was regarded by family members as a healer, someone with special powers, and therefore much in demand by them. These powers were seen by them to have been inherited from her mother, and so in that sense she also was a point of connection between the living and the dead. In her family the elders, as well as the ancestors, would be consulted to resolve disputes, and her father was noted for his

ability to recall everyone in the family, past and present, and their relationship to each other, creating a sense of self as something firmly located within a community. In her own way, Molly also connected individuals with collective experience. She told me how family members might greet each other with the question: “how are you in your body?”, and of a relative saying to her that “her palms were sticky, her heart was racing, and her breathing shallow” as she boarded a plane. Molly gave emotional form to this experience by naming it as anxiety, thereby transforming an individual embodied experience into one that was collective and affective. Malik experienced stress as pains in his neck or chest, and would sometimes rest his head on Molly’s shoulder for a few minutes to “recharge” when he felt his energy level running low. Her

physical support and recognition of his emotional state restored his emotional equilibrium.

The second thing I learned was that their patterns of relating had been influenced by cultural history. Malik came from Barbados, which had been colonised by the Anglo-Scots. They had broken up community networks and tried to erase cultural traditions, engendering a deep sense of mistrust. This prepared the ground for a culture of self-reliance that perceived dependency as a form of personal vulnerability, if not weakness. He told me that Barbadians were generally passive by temperament, but with his relatives he avoided anger because the distinction between feeling angry and acting violently could be fragile. He thought it prudent to remove himself from potential conflict. Molly



added that a legacy of slavery had left men feeling depressed, disempowered, and absent. “Why do Barbadian women get angry?” she asked? “Because the men aren’t there,” she answered to her own question. In her home of St Lucia, the French and Spanish invaders had left local customs and practices undisturbed, preserving a community culture that sometimes made leaving the group and exercising individual choice hard. The significance of intergenerational trauma and culture for Molly and Malik will be of no surprise to those whose clinical practice with families is informed by link theory (Scharff & Palacios, 2017).

The cultural dimension of their history was uncomfortable for me. Being a white Englishman I wondered if I might embody an enslaving, colonising, and dispossessing

presence, potentially corralling their experience into something only to be understood from my perspective. My discomfort was added to by the racial prejudice and hostility towards immigrants being not only a historical phenomenon but also a very live and current concern in the UK. During the time we were meeting it became apparent that the Home Office had been dispossessing and deporting West Indians who had migrated to England during the Windrush years when they could not produce the required papers to justify their presence, irrespective of how long they had resided in the country. What might the implications of this be for them trusting me and risking protest in the consulting room, I wondered? And might I be inhibited from presenting a different perspective for fear that it would create distrust and division between

us? It was well into the therapy before the history of slavery surfaced in our discussions, and I believe it represented a developing trust between us. Indeed, I would evaluate the outcome of the therapy in terms of growing trust in the therapy and between the partners as much as any change in their attachment security.

## **Trust and attachment security**

Attachment theory emphasises the significance of the mother–infant relationship for developmental outcomes later in life. It starts with the needs of the infant, and identifies maternal sensitivity as key to promoting infant attachment security (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969). Accessibility, acceptance, and co-operation are the behavioural hallmarks of maternal sensitivity; ignoring, rejecting, or

intruding upon infants are symptomatic of insensitive behaviour (Ainsworth et al., 1974).

A number of problems have been identified with this maternal sensitivity argument. First, meta-analyses of maternal behaviour suggest a lower association between maternal sensitivity and attachment security than Ainsworth had proposed (for example, De Wolff & Van IJzendoorn, 1997). Second, little account is taken of the maternal environment in accounting for variations in levels of maternal sensitivity. Domestic conflict, absence of support from family and social networks, material poverty, government policy, and social stigma can undermine the sensitivity of even the most caring parents, as Ken Loach's 2016 film *I, Daniel Blake*, vividly depicts. Third, defining attachment security as the outcome of a

monotropic, dyadically organised relationship fails to acknowledge the different kinds of care systems that contribute to developmental outcomes, and the variety of family forms from which they emanate. And then there is the question of culture. Maternal sensitivity is a cultural construct. The means by which it is measured are products of Western middle-class psychology, what has been termed WEIRD psychology (Henrich et al., 2010)—white, educated, industrialised, rich, democratic—because of its cultural bias towards promoting the autonomy of the individual, a bias that comes from studies representing just 12% of the world’s population. Use the Strange Situation procedure to assess the mental health of infants in Indonesia, the Cameroons, or Puerto Rico and you will come unstuck. Child-rearing practices

are adaptive to socio-cultural and economic factors in the environment, and while the prototypical image of infant attachment security depicts a mother and infant facing each other, there is another image in which the mother holds her infant as he faces outwards, sensitising him to external threats and learning whom he can trust in his social environment.

To be fair, Bowlby distinguished between three levels of adaptation. First, evolutionary adaptation is universal amongst humans, since the attachment and caregiving systems work in concert to protect infants against predators and optimise their chances of survival. Second, the ontogenetic level of adaptation—adapting to the unique family and environmental circumstances children find themselves in—will be significantly affected by the quality of parental

caregiving, which, in turn, may have consistent intergenerational patterns (since individuals can usually only give as parents what they received as children). In this context organised insecure patterns of attachment can be adaptive to the caregiving environment. Third, what constitutes healthy adaptation is influenced by socio-cultural factors that help define the nature of health in different ways for different communities. Since negative emotions are aroused in caregivers when their protective efforts are unsuccessful, the cultural definition of what is and is not successful caregiving is likely to form an important part of the environment to which parents and their offspring have to adapt.

The socio-cultural definition of adaptive behaviour focuses on how communities socialise children, and there are important variations in

who the key players in this process (biological, social, or allo parents) are likely to be, how sensitivity is conveyed, and what makes for healthy adaptation in different socio-cultural contexts. From a cultural perspective, the universal socialisation challenge might not be to promote secure attachment as defined by Western measures, but to learn whom to trust and what comprises appropriate social behaviour. Attachment forms but one of many “culturally acquired devices” (Konner, 2010) involved in the socialisation of trust and security, and the challenge is to understand how “these processes form a choir in each local cultural community and each family situation, a choir with many different songs and lyrics in many different and wonderful idioms” (Weisner, 2014, p. 267). Attachment theory (and other



theories that inform psychotherapeutic practice) may signify no more (and no less) than cultural ideology (Levine, 2014), although as the research base grows:

... available cross-cultural studies have not refuted the bold conjectures of attachment theory about the universality of attachment, the normativity of secure attachment, the link between sensitive caregiving and attachment security, and the competent child outcomes of secure attachment. (Mesman et al., 2016, p. 871)

Cosmopolitan societies encompass a range of socio-cultural contexts, resulting in normative differences within as well as between communities to which families are having to adapt. This may form a particular challenge for the WEIRD world. The wealth that generates and tolerates diverse family structures also brings migration and socio-economic

inequalities that affect the balance of risk and protective factors impacting on attachment security and trust. What has been termed epistemic trust—a conviction that “what the caregiver is trying to convey is relevant and significant and should be remembered” (Bateman & Fonagy, 2016, p. 24)—might be a more reliable marker of health than attachment security as measured by conventional Western means. The implication for community mental health is then to extend the range of our concerns to include competing internal and external systems of meaning in fashioning an environment that is ecologically sustainable, protects against the ravages of poverty and ill-health, and fosters safety through building trustworthy relationships (Carlson & Harwood, 2014).

## **Jazz as connector and disrupter**

The history of jazz provides a backdrop that would be very familiar to Molly and Malik. What is retold in St Lucia and silenced in Barbados has cultural as well as psychological roots. To explain in purely attachment terms Molly's connecting and Malik's disruptive roles in their marriage would discount intergenerational socio-cultural factors that affect assumptions about "normality" in the child-rearing patterns they experienced and the circumstances through which they had come about. To explain the disruptive role jazz played in Molly and Malik's marriage purely in terms of their couple relationship would also be to diminish other factors at play.

Jazz has a proud history of connecting the dispossessed and disadvantaged. Its Afro–

American roots result from the slave trade, which captured and transported black Africans away from their homeland to become the property of white Americans who used them as enforced labour. Congo Square in New Orleans is often referred to as the birthplace of jazz, the place where enslaved Africans would meet on their day off, sometimes with indigent Americans, for the annual Mardi Gras, connecting with each other through music and dance. Jazz provided a new language across the diaspora of black Americans, bridging linguistic differences through a spontaneous collective process that involved performers and audience alike in the act of composition. This language connected and empowered those whose survival and identity was vulnerable with others who

recognised, understood, and shared the experience.

There is an elemental demand for connection in the call-response nature of much jazz, especially the gospel tradition, which was and remains rooted in religion. It is an inclusive form of conversation, involving listening and responding both to oneself and others; it is an unscripted, impromptu means of connecting affectively. An analogous image from developmental psychology would be the interactive call–response sequence between a mother and her infant that repeats with different levels of intensity to build and moderate excitement and mutual enjoyment. Similar patterns are evident in the way couples interact, the statement of one partner inviting the other to respond. The absence of a response, a slow quiet

response to an animated invitation, or a rapid emphatic response to a carefully muted invitation, can be frustrating when it signals partners failing to find a mutually workable tempo in their conversation.

One of the distinguishing features of jazz is the emphasis it places on improvisation. It allows musicians to become composers in the very act of performance. Theirs is not the task of interpreting through tempo and expressiveness notes that have been scored by others, but to create notation and rhythm for themselves. Music-making in this context is at best a democratic process, with each player riffing off cues from others, including their audience. Typically, the starting point is to come together to render a well-known and identifiable melody that is recognised by, and engages, players and

audience. Each musician, either separately or together, improvises on the melody, constrained only by time sequence and chord structure, which provide a scaffolding for whatever improvisational direction players might be moved to take. The piece will conclude with them reuniting around the original melody. The twelve bar blues is the simplest example of this, requiring little more than the ability to move between three chords in 4/4 time, an economical but very effective form of musical expression (Clulow, 2003). Even the constraints of time signature and thematic melody have been dispensed with in avant-garde forms of this creative process: John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*, or Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*, represent departures from evolving traditional forms of jazz in that they disregarded key

signatures, conventional chording and rhythm in order to free the players simply to intuit pitch and time from themselves and each other. Sapen (2012) likens this to Bion's call to therapists to free themselves from memory and desire in order to engage with in-the-moment experiences in the consulting room.

Malik wrote to me after the therapy about his existential reading of jazz and its relational significance:

The advantage of not relying on the spoken word is that you get attuned to energy and sound; they are your highs and lows. Dance is a by-product if you have the agility. Jazz does not follow rules, it is an attempt to connect with the higher self; there is a series of notes, linear at inception, and then there is that refraction. That refraction reflects the interconnection of everything. Again, you need to have the eyes and ears to experience this. Miles takes you on a



journey, the highs and lows of emotions. Sun Ra and Wayne Shorter take you to the cosmos, they produce those notes that reflect this refraction, but the frailty of the human body and technology make it difficult to maintain those notes. What are we seeking? There is an inner space rooted in nothingness that has its own sound that we are trying to reach. Often when musicians fall short of this, having embarked on the journey, Lee will laugh, so we have to try another one. Hence our exploration of improvisational/experimental jazz.

As well as connecting, jazz can disrupt, sometimes purposefully. The blues rely upon creating dissonant tensions in communicating the adversities of life—longing, loving, losing—from which resolution may sometimes provide comfort and release. The upbeat marches of bygone funeral processions challenged and confounded the pain of bereavement.

Communities might be bound together by segregation, identity being reinforced through driving a wedge between “us” and “them”—a process that can compensate for feeling cut off from the mainstream. The mainstream may be parents who don’t appreciate the musical taste of their offspring, political factions that consider free expression subversive to their cause (witness attempts to eradicate jazz in Nazi Germany), a dominant racism that fears cultural diversity and seeks to segregate, a classical establishment that considers jazz an inferior musical form, or even purists within the world of jazz turning their nose up about anything that departs from their understanding of this art form—for jazz can be an in-group disrupter too. The history of jazz is inscribed by those who were not to be constrained by convention, including

the conventions, such as they are, of jazz itself. Jazz has an anarchic, protestant aspect, refusing to be authenticated by anything other than the individuals who give it form.

## **Dancing to the music**

An analogy can be drawn between therapy sessions and the performance of jazz. Once the players are assembled it is for one of the parties to open the proceedings, to issue a call that cues in others to respond. The responses that follow will often have been played many times before, and there may be little creativity in the “music” of the session. The degree of connection between the players will vary between and within sessions, as will the interactive tempo and volume, reflecting changing affectional experience and states of mind. When feeling

secure, there will be an openness to attend and respond to the signals of others, and to improvise around emerging themes, so that the resulting experience becomes an affectively attuned creation of all the participants. Suboptimal security may restrict the acts of calling and responding, or encourage an over-reactive response to the calls of others, losing or exaggerating the distinctive voice of players and thereby reducing the polyphony and balance of the session. Traumatic associations might disrupt or remove the contributions of some, affecting their ability to play a coordinated part in the unfolding session. But in any of these scenarios there is potential for *moments of meeting* (Stern, 2004), where players connect with each other, resulting in new workings of familiar themes.

Therapists frequently depict interactions in couple and family relationships as a dance, and their role as helping to develop movement between the partners that improves the adaptations they have made to their own and each other's capacities (see, for example, Johnson, 2004). Perhaps the most described of these adaptations is the cha-cha pursuer–pursued movement, in which safety is sought through attempts to engage with or disconnect from others. There is no dance without music. While music and language share some similarities—both rely upon phrasing, tone, modulation, rhythm, and melody to communicate meaning—music expressly conveys emotion. In the performing arts, the words and actions of the actors are given added emotional punch by the

score. Without music the dance loses context and impact.

Music, it is said, "... is likely to be the ancestor of language and it arose largely in the right hemisphere [of the brain], where one would expect a means of communication with others, promoting social cohesion, to arise" (McGilchrist, 2009, p. 105). Language requires brain capacity to house a lexicon of words, and a developed vocal apparatus to transmit them. Grunts, groans, and giggles have to be honed into symbols of what they represent, and then articulated as language. Unworded sound has a less evolved syntax than speech, but is a powerful means of conveying emotion—witness the shriek that can warn of predators, or the cackle that can signal shared enjoyment. But music, like language, is also a sophisticated way

of producing and modulating sound, and might be viewed as a kind of language, certainly a counterpart to it, that is particularly adept at conveying emotion.

Developmentally, infants are sensitive to sound and rhythm well before they acquire language. Even before birth they live in a:

pre-natal recording studio, where the mother's syncopated cardiac rhythm section continuously accompanies her archaic soprano. Because that experience cuts across all cultures, abiding in the womb, it haunts the entire space of world traditions in music, calling the adult back ... to that original sense of acoustic space. (Peck, 2012, p. xiv).

Much variation may be found in the reciprocal imitation of sound that forms the earliest form of communication between infants and parents—the prosody of speech—but in all cases these

proto-conversations have more to do with promoting an experience of connection and bonding than with the acquisition of words. The experience can travel into adulthood as people flock to concert halls, rock festivals, and jazz gigs to enhance the sense of connection with themselves and others. Music reaches parts language cannot touch. Its power to connect those suffering from dementia, to overcome the stigma of criminality, and to address the trauma of a community has been graphically conveyed in popular media and scientific journals. Sacks (2007) suggested something further might be occurring:

The primal role of music is to some extent lost today, when we have a special class of composers and performers, and the rest of us are reduced to passive listening. One has to go to a concert, or a church or a music festival, to recapture the collective



excitement and bonding of music. In such a situation there seems to be an actual binding of nervous systems .... (p. 47)

To what extent might we think of the psychoanalytic process as a kind of music-making or dance, a collective, non-utilitarian activity that promotes social connection and even the binding of nervous systems? Exploring this question Knoblauch (2000) quotes the founder of object relations theory depicting the traditional analytic process more in terms of a wrestling match than a dance, the patient trying to “press-gang his relationship with the analyst into the closed system of the inner world through the agency of transference, and ... the analyst to effect a breach in this closed system” (Fairbairn, 1958, p. 385). This essentially dyadic representation of the analytic process obscures the joint investment in and apprehension about

creating space in which something new can develop in relationships, and the context in which this occurs. Contemporary psychoanalytic approaches pay a lot of attention to this, moving the focus away from regarding the patient as an insular entity and towards seeing the patient–therapist couple in a specific context, where each party contributes to creating the particular dance that results from their interaction. As with some dances there will be prescribed steps that follow a written musical score, providing a degree of certainty and predictability about the relationship, and the terms of engagement between the parties involved. There will be room for variation within this framework, since the tempo and expression of the music is open to interpretation, and the dancers will have different degrees of imagination and agility in

transforming it into dance—the relationship scenario. The dance may be invigorating and lively, or repetitive and dull.

The meshing of subjectivities will play its part in shaping outcomes. Despite liking and being interested in Molly and Malik there were frequent occasions when I felt unusually tired in sessions and had to struggle to bring myself to life and be present. Molly would maintain the flow, and it was easy either to let her do the work or be drawn into an alliance with her to try and draw Malik out of what she saw as his shell. “Pulling teeth”, “drawing blood from a stone”, were phrases that sometimes captured this experience. When I thought about my countertransference I wondered if my sense of redundancy matched Molly’s when she queried what Malik needed her for. His disinclination to

mark birthdays or special events not only wrote himself out of the picture but her too, in that there seemed to be nothing he needed her for. Was my closing down a response to the exclusion and sense of unimportance he was defending against by unconsciously inviting me and his wife to experience this on his behalf? The more she invited him into her life the more she had the experience of feeling her world was being appropriated by him, whether through monopolising the kitchen and cooking or looking after their son. I entertained a range of questions about my sense of feeling killed off: did it reflect the struggle of having a relationship that didn't involve either appropriating or being appropriated by others? Did it conceal Malik's protest/hostility towards me as a symbol of colonialism, or as a potential carer, hostility that

was unconsciously avoided for fear of the damage it might do? Was it symptomatic of my fear of becoming a stimulant too far for someone easily dysregulated by the memory of past trauma? Did it indicate my giving up on asking Malik to do something therapy encouraged but he was unable to do? I have no definitive answers to these questions.

Yet there were times, increasing as time went on, that this tiredness left me, and I felt only empathy for and curiosity about the experiences he described and took for granted. I was encouraged by his optimism when he said “the chicks are laying” and brought me eggs to share in this sign of things getting better. Gradually he became a presence in the joint sessions, and was able to convey in his own way that Molly was important to him, and that when he did things

that made her feel redundant this was not his intention. And this brought me to life. Together they found a good home for their son, helped by his capacity to deal robustly with the change and manage without Lee. Family relationships were realigned, as Malik's ancestors had advised, allowing him and Molly to become a couple again. For me this was not the product of a change in attachment status, or a reconfiguration of a shared internal world of object relations, but of a growing sense of trust within the couple and in the therapy. In place of the idealised "blue heaven" fantasy of perfect non-verbal attunement, as pursued between Malik and his son, there developed a grounded couple relationship that was wordlessly accepting of its limitations and adapting to the big family change of an adult child leaving home.

## Reprise

Within the confines of the Western world, empathic and trustworthy relationships are culturally valued, despite these qualities sometimes being in conflict with other aspirations, such as the marketisation of relationships and the acquisition of political power, goals that value competition above co-operation. In the context of couple and family relationships most people seek a sense of emotional as well as cognitive connection. When communication breaks down there is often a disjunction between what is said and what is felt—or not felt. The brilliance of the Strange Situation Procedure (Ainsworth et al., 1978) and the Adult Attachment Interview (Main & Goldwyn, 1984) for the WEIRD world is their capacity to tap into the music of affect as well as

the unconscious message contained in behaviour and language. The confluence of emotion and cognition patterns interactions in relationships, the relationships themselves then enacting attempts to adapt to the hopes and fears associated with intimacy. They form a kind of dance in which partners can circle around each other, remain separate, connect in stylised formality, merge into free-flowing sensuousness, erupt in humour, confront in anger—the potential forms are endless.

As for Molly and Malik's dance, I thought how reassuringly and frustratingly different Malik's distance was from her emotionally demanding family. No doubt she was grateful that he had stood his ground with her against the view that her baby should be placed for adoption, and that she had an active co-parenting



partner to support her in bringing him up. For Malik there was the prospect—and fear—of becoming connected with others through Molly, modified by the knowledge that she was culturally aware of the reasons behind his mistrust of others and less prone than he to taking this personally, conflict frightening her less than it did him. Once Lee had left home she noticed and welcomed a change in which they occasionally listened to music together, a symbol of connection between them. I was touched by the implicit message in the “thank you” card they sent me when they ended. It depicted two goldfish facing each other, one with a stern and forbidding expression, the other receptive and exuding bubbles. The caption read: “She could deny it all she wanted, the bubbles don’t lie.” That, for me, was pictorial

improvised play. For Malik, the experience was contained in music. Responding to this paper he wrote: “Overall the situation reminds me of the image from one of Herbie Hancock’s albums, “Crossings”. It captures the inner journey at the time.”

### *Notes*

1. The “head” in jazz is used to denote the first chorus of a piece of music, usually containing the main melody from which subsequent improvisations will emanate.
2. I wish to acknowledge the generosity of “Molly” and “Malik” for allowing me to draw on my experience of their therapy in this article, and for the helpful comments they made on reading the text.
3. The Empire Windrush was the boat that left Kingston, Jamaica, in 1948 to bring migrants to England where they could exercise their rights as British citizens.

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