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Lost in The Echo: Understanding racial echoism within psychotherapy

Dwight Turner

SUMMARY: Viewed through the lens of a psychotherapy client, this paper considers how the adoption of the position of echo sits central to the post-colonial experience (Windrush) of the other in attempts to build and maintain a life in the UK. The paper then aids us in recognizing the adaptive nature of the other as it attempts to survive the colonizer's conscious and unconscious subjugation, with all its psychological costs, together with a possible route towards post-colonial psychological reintegration.

KEY WORDS: Echoism, difference, race, diversity, the Other

The Windrush (or those from the former English colonies who travelled to the 'motherland' during the early days of cultural independence) is often seen as a great cultural movement of peoples grateful for the chance to build a more rich and fruitful life in the United Kingdom. In his seminal work though, Fanon recognized the deep psychological wound carried by the other as a consequence of colonialism. His work rightly saw that colonialism acted as much upon the mind as upon the culture, and the external world.

A client presented me with a recent dilemma. Layla was a 35-year-old woman of colour. Her parents were originally from the Caribbean, who travelled to the UK as part of the Windrush generation of immigrants invited to

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the United Kingdom towards the end of colonial times for work and a proposed better life. Her parents left her in the Caribbean with her grandparents when Layla was three years old. She lived a happy life in Trinidad, a life that changed when her parents sent for her when she was ten. On arrival in the United Kingdom she discovered that her parents had had two more children in her absence, two younger sisters. At school, she was often lonely, ostracised by her peers because of her difference, with the other children regularly calling her racially offensive names, whilst the teachers rarely offered her any protection. Her parents though did not see much of this as they fought a lot, meaning she also found it difficult to connect with them, and often the only times when they did discuss anything with her, it was to advise her to be careful in a culture that was racist and did not want them there.

Overall, Layla found life in Leeds difficult, and very different to the happy one she left behind in the Caribbean. Over time, with the need to survive the abuse she endured, she adapted, becoming more and more lonely. At 18, she left and went to university, where she met a good number of people from across the UK. Although she was one of only a few women of colour, for Layla, her time at university helped to alleviate her loneliness. Layla recognised this was because she had found a family of sorts, where although she was from a different culture, she could fit in and find her own place within it. As she embraced this new sense of identity, she removed herself from her Afro-Caribbean roots, distancing herself from her family, especially her siblings, and denigrating her cultural heritage in comparison with that of her adopted homeland. This experience continued when she moved to London for work, where she worked in the City in finance. Later though, at the age of 35 she had a breakdown, an experience she did not foresee, and she has been questioning herself, and her identity ever since.

Although there are some obvious avenues of enquiry here in this story, such as separation and reunion, scapegoating, and exploring the systemic understanding of family, for this particular essay, the aspect that most interests me is one that has been very rarely researched; that of the echo position within psychotherapy. This article therefore considers what this position is, how it is formed, and the impact it has upon those who have been oppressed.

Creating echo

In the story of Narcissus, Ovid (2015) discusses the role of Echo as being one where out of a love for Narcissus she hides from him and mimics his actions, yet because of her nerves she is only able to repeat some of what he says. Narcissus, in his irritation with her, then sends her away, after which his repeated attempts to

achieve union with her are rejected (Shirock, 2013). This simplistic representation is relevant here as an opening for just how this rarely understood position has been considered for many years. Yet, its relevance is that it is a position which counters the normal dyad of subject and object, self and other, that has often been presented as the bedrock of formations of identity.

In the context of this article, the idea that the only means for the other to be appreciated is by them adopting a means of being that is alien to them becomes problematic. For example, using Bhabha's ideas post-colonially the position of the mimic is seen as being one where the colonised attempts to copy the behaviours of the coloniser, an aspect explored to greater depth by Ram (2014) who saw it as the colonised person's attempts to normalise the aggressive colonisation by the subject of themselves as the other and making sense of their experience (Huddart, 2006). Within the field of Whiteness theories Ahmed (2014) builds upon these ideas, recognising that mimicry also provides the conditions for the other to feel good about themselves in relation to the majority.

And yet, mimicry is not always seen as a negative. Within the world of psychotherapy mimicry is seen as a developmental stage for most children; the child copies the actions and behaviour of the closest caregiver, be they a parent or from their extended family (Weil & Piaget, 1951). The importance of this should not be understated. The idea here that there is a developmental aspect to mimicry, or echoism, although at a very different developmental stage to that proposed by post-colonial theorists, here speaking not just of the level of denigration of the other, but also of the infantilising of the abuse of colonialism. If this seems strong, then one way of seeing this at play is via the lens of colonial behaviours which sought to exorcise the indigenous aspects of the colonised to make them more westernised, with enforced mimicry being used to make the other dis-identify with their indigenous roots (Fanon, 2005).

Moving to another example, stereotyping – the othering of the other where their identity is fixed and projected upon – also becomes a form of echoism. A consideration of this position emerges out of Shen's (2015) work with its consideration of how, if one adopts the stereotype, then one reflects the identity that the subject needs to see out of a need to remain safe under the oppressive gaze of the majority. Here, as per the role of the mimic, a factor of their oppression is the adoption of a position posited as acceptable, and yet also incomplete, by the majority.

The idea of the mimic, the stereotype, or the echo here sits central to Layla's movement out of the oppressive gaze of her home life, and into the equally oppressive world of the subject that she was brought in to. As she herself recognised in our sessions, after she left home the only times when she really felt she could be herself was when she was on her own or, interestingly, when she was abroad on holiday where nobody knew her. When she was with her friends at university,

or at work in the City, she always adopted a persona, a mask which she used to negotiate her world.

There is a difficulty in spotting the echo position within clients as Bromberg (1983) discusses given it is an adaptation or, I will argue, a cultural defence constructed out of a fear of the majority. Bromberg suggests that to study this defence psycho-dynamically one must do so together in conjunction with a consideration of its relationship with Narcissus. This is a point repeated by Campbell and Baumeister (2003) who suggest that Echo's desire to love, and be loved in turn, becomes a form of co-dependence whereby the echo is bound to the narcissist. What this also provides, is protection for the narcissist themselves. They are not observed, and they are not studied, whilst simultaneously people turn a blind eye to their abuses of power, and all because of the echoes strategically placed all around them. This then explains just how difficult it is to break the bound between Echo and Narcissus from a position of race or culture.

The process is important to recognize within groups, organisations and the wider cultures. For example, Kristeva (1982), writing about man's need to identify woman, I believe recognized how the abjection of the other was a form of gendered othering, where the female other in this case became the echo of men. Or, where the formation of race as a construct, an issue built out of the pseudo-science of the time, created a racial other, a racial echo that was in no way equal to the subject (Biewen, 2017).

These examples show how the identity of the other has been stolen by the majority. This has a distinct impact upon our understanding of othering. A concept utilised by many, Said (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 1999) saw cultural othering in this instance as a means for the subject to identify itself against that which it was not, an idea echoed within psychotherapy by Davids (2012) in his consideration of the object relations influenced formation of race and culture. Both perspectives are influenced by Global Northern dyadic thinking about identity; what both neglect is that the other is always there, that we all have experiences as the other. This is what makes the third position, that of the echo, so important. At its core the echo position is about the internalized oppressor. It is this which maintains a connection to the narcissism of the majority, a connection built upon the internalized powerlessness derived from the previous position when oppressed. So, in recognising the existence of the echo position, and seeing that this is separate to being the other, then we can offer a route towards cultural individuation, wherein the increased authenticity of the other, the acknowledgement and rejection of the position of the echo becomes a part of this process.

Being echo

During one session, Layla offered a dilemma where she wanted to be the person she was when she was away on holiday all of the time. We spent several sessions talking, and working creatively with this, exploring what the blocks were to her individuating out of the shadow of subject culture. This was difficult for Layla because, as she expressed, she was often afraid of the repercussions of being who she knew she was and was able to be.

In the wider culture, American President, Donald Trump's proposed punishment of sports protestors taking a knee during the American National Anthem is a modern-day version of the threat the echo is constantly under. Whilst its compliance and willingness to, in this case, perform for the subject led to a level of safety for many, what it did not do was guarantee it safety; abuses still happened. Then once the echo starts to assert itself then it is a danger and a disgrace, and the abuse of the echo begins. When seen through the lens of this particular myth, this form of othering is a means of forcing the echo back into submission where it belongs, much like Narcissus shouted at Echo and she ran away.

There are many ways that to be the echo though or to survive being othered by the subject, and a variety of theories follow this theme. For example, Bhabha (2004) recognised the cultural need to mimic the subject as a means of survival for the other, recognising that the other becomes similar, never the same as the white subject, a point echoed by Ahmed (2014) in her discourse around the formation of whiteness and the racism perpetrated against the racialised other as a consequence. Mimesis is also seen as an aspect of echoism, a point made by Butler in her writings around the idea of performativity as a means of racial survival (Salih, 2002). There is an aspect of stereotyping which could also be seen as a form of echoism. For example, the cultural need to adopt the stereotype becomes, often out of safety, the requirement to reflect the identity that the subject needs to see in order to remain comfortable (Shen, 2015). All of these explorations of forms of echoism do not mean that they are all the same. Echoism takes on varying cloaks, like echoes within echoes, but what they all have in common is the difficult relationship with the subject, and the contract built into remaining in direct or indirect relationship with the subject.

An interesting perspective arises out of Rousseau's (1984) work, where he discusses how when the oppressed are set free they are still open to seduction and manipulation by their previous oppressors. What he is discussing here is the difficulties of the echo position. It is insubstantial, it does not know itself, and it does not yet have the capacity to stand upon its own two feet. Like the client example presented above, the idea of the other being able to move from the

position of the oppressed, or in this case scapegoated, to one of total existential freedom to self-identify is a fallacy, as it misses unconscious love the echo has for their previous oppressors.

The most obvious examples of this were prevalent within the Windrush Generation. Often described as economic migrants who travelled to the United Kingdom post colonialism to seek out a better life for themselves and the children who were left behind, what is not often acknowledged is these were, especially in the earlier waves, the best qualified individuals of their generation. Doctors, lawyers, and others travelled north to Britain to end up working as cleaners, shop workers, bus drivers etc., totally negating their previous studies, qualifications and experiences. This was also a generation that in its arrival took up the mantle of Britishness or trying to fit in and be a part of a culture that was often oppressive and racist. This important example of echoism speaks of Rousseau's point that the other here in its emancipation struggles with the idea of its own autonomy. So, whilst this picture is apparent with the African Caribbean population, it will also be a part of the discourse within other minority struggles; for example, should one be more like a 'man' or not? The valorisation of the previous oppressors' position is like a form of internalized oppression; to be free of him I must be like him.

The abuse of the client by her parents meant that she often came back to see if things had changed, as well as out of a need to love her parents and in turn be loved by them. Given the narcissism of her parents, the danger was always going to be that she would have to conform to their way of being, to how they needed her to be, for the promise of this love to be met. Yet, the reality involved two things; firstly, there was no love, and secondly, she often was miserable for days after spending time with them.

At the same time the echo is also riddled with the same envy which led to its domination in the first place. Taking a Kleinian perspective, envy here involves the destruction of the projected other without, which also involves the destruction of their own internalized other (Mitchell, 1986). This self-destruction thereby maintains their connection with the oppressor, and is a self-destruction constructed out of a misplaced sense of loyalty or adoration.

Echo and shame

Layla's path through therapy led to her having to revisit her cultural background. She freely admitted to having chosen a 'therapist of colour' in order to facilitate this part of her process as she had felt a huge amount of shame over her Caribbean roots in the past, seeing her own judgements and distancing from these aspects of herself as part of the reason for her breakdown. Our work therefore involved

helping her to engage with the aspects of her cultural heritage she was ashamed of; namely her accent, her surname, and parts of her historical narrative, all of which she had tried to change in order to fit in with the subject culture.

Echoism and shame come together in the general theme of the story of Narcissus in that it is the unrecognised emotion expressed by Echo when she is dismissed by that which she desires. Seen here therefore as a metaphor for how the emotional experiences of the other in relation to the subject, the idea of shame as being a feature of echoism is a new one, but is also incredibly important. It highlights the difficulty that the echo has to go through in living with its inequality in comparison to the subject. It is also an aspect of the recognition of the historical oppression endured by the other at the hands of that often same subject. For example, as a stage of development, the idea is that cultural shame is a point a child has to go through once it recognises the oppression of its own group (Aboud, 1988).

One means of avoiding that experience is by distancing oneself from the shame of being the other by adopting a persona similar to that of the subject; in other words, by mimicking the subject fully. For a child, Winnicott (cited in Bowlby, 1988) saw this as a stage in the formation of a false self, a self that also led to a type of narcissistic wounding (Kristeva, 1982). This though was for children. My argument here is there is a similar type of wound built out of the avoidance of being the other through the adoption of the idealised persona of the subject.

Another means of avoiding the sense of shame that comes with being made the other, is by the acceptance of subordinate position one is forced into. This is a facet of echoism that Davis (2005) also recognises; that where in order to reflect the self-important love of Narcissus, the echo has to realise that it is not being heard, that it is not being seen, and that it is less human, less real, than the subject.

Both of these together resonate within Layla's story. Ashamed of her background, yet unable to escape its depths, she was often seen as the token black woman in her peer group, would often appear in pictures at the very edge trying to get in, or was often left out of gathering from people she called her friends. Theoretically, this echoed Bhabha's (2004) idea that the echo knows it is not like the subject, even though it tries so incredibly hard to be so. When discussed in therapy, the emotional recognition that she was always the other was a key aspect of her recovery, leading to her actively seeking to reconnect with her cultural self in our work.

The power of shame is also important for the subject in that it is the ability to distance themselves from this emotion above others that helps them to maintain their position, meaning, by not acknowledging their own shame in being less than perfect they push this realisation into the unconscious, projecting it down onto the echoes beneath them. Shame therefore becomes a facet of narcissism,

of the idea that one is perfect, or one is able to create the perfect fantasy, or reality or that one is supreme. In building this wall, the narcissist therefore has to reject the notion that there is even the slightest possibility they are not the projected ideal they think they are. The echo therefore holds not only its own shame in comparison with the subject, but the projected shame of the narcissistic subject.

Shame projected downwards onto the other then aids the subject in winning its proxy war against itself. It avoids its own shame at being bad, being flawed, being less than its fantasy ideal, and this is why it is tied into a relationship with the echo. This makes shame a hugely important aspect of othering. The shame of the narcissist that it's not perfect has to be projected outwards into the other. The narcissist then has its own acolytes to reinforce its sense of superiority, separating it further from its sense of inferiority in relation to God. The Echo, basking in the reflected 'glory' of the narcissist, also distances itself from its own imperfections by projecting them on to the other. Therefore, the other often feels so ashamed at being the other and internalizes this experience in self-hatred. Its coping mechanisms then lead to seemingly self-mutilating behaviour to cope with the shame placed upon it.

The cliché of the other that works so hard to achieve, is also apparent here, and is driven by the desire to escape the position as the other and therefore the shame of being considered less than the echo position which it aspires to become, and which adds a layer of safety accordingly. The aspirations of the other are therefore also driven by an unconscious external force that craves acceptance by the subject, outcomes which ultimately it fails to achieve through no fault of its own. The means of coping with this therefore becomes by becoming echo, and shaming others into the other position.

What I am ultimately positing here, is that whereas Hegel (1976) saw the interaction of the master and the slave as being mutual, where both parties require each other for identity purposes, that actually this is a Narcissus to Echo dyad, with the other situated outside of this holding a lot of unconscious material for them both. Although recognising this dyad, the idea of the echo position is one Fanon (2005) does reach towards where he splits the colonised other into those who would act like the coloniser against those who would reject the impact of colonisation. His perspective situates the impact of colonisation, or otherisation, as being impossible to ignore or resist, suggesting that the draw towards echoism is therefore an irresistible facet of being colonised, or of being othered. Humility of the subject then brings the other closer. It doesn't mean the echo won't project its own needs to idolize someone or something, but it does mean that subject has a responsibility as to whether it accepts the projection or not. The other is free to exist in its own right. It is free!

Echo to authenticity

Lacan (2003) posited that we unconsciously create the other. His idea recognised that in order for the symbolic order to be established, the ego creates and suppresses its own unconscious other. This recognition that the unconscious is the other to the ego is an area that Jung saw as essential in understanding the shadow, seeing the shadow as an aspect of the self that we often project onto external groups and others (von Franz, 1980). This means that when we stereotype, or engage in a process of othering, what we are actually doing is grasping power over others in order to force our projected material onto them (Kirschner, 2012; Turner, 2016).

This egoic power struggle also has a huge impact upon the external other, often meaning that the other engages in a form of splitting between the echo and other positions, as they struggle to recognise the impact of being othered by the ego of a subject. A perfect, practical, example emerged out of Layla's story, where she discussed one of the problems of her workplace when during an altercation with a colleague she was accused of being 'just another angry black woman.' As we discussed this in our next session what became apparent was the double-bind held within the comment: should she express her anger at the colleague she might be labelled as an angry black woman. Equally, she had a right to be angry at what she perceived as an injustice perpetrated by the same colleague.

In our next session Layla then presented a dream where she was wandering through a Waitrose supermarket in Putney, South West London. In the dream she was smiling happily at all the white women in the store, most of whom were with their children calmly shopping, ignoring her as she smiled at them. She recognised a pang of sadness on seeing the women were not paying her any attention, but she chose to suppress this and carry on smiling. As she left the shop though, two people, both Asian ran up behind her and stabbed her in the back of the head. As she falls to the ground, she knows she is dying. She wakes up screaming.

The importance of these incidents, and their relevance when working with the echo's resistance towards its own unconscious other, should not be underestimated. There is a cost here for the echo in regaining its own authenticity. For example, for Layla expressing quite appropriate feelings at injustices comes with the potential cost that she will be labelled as difficult, that the projection placed upon her will be hammered home by a subject that does not want to see the person beyond said projections. This behaviour is not unheard of for women of colour, or for the other in general, with numerous examples of the other being labelled as difficult, problematic, aggressive and hysterical littering the discourse about otherness over the past century (Jamelia, 2016; Sartre & Kaufmann Mccall, 1979; von Raffay, 2000).

The second psychological cost emerges out of the inauthenticity of the echo, as expressed through the dream she presented. To begin with there is the obviousness of the echo position represented by her somewhat fake smile whilst wondering aloud what she stereotypically saw as a representation of white middle class culture. This inauthenticity then becomes a false self, an aspect of self that has to falter and die in order for authenticity to be achieved (Jung, 1997; Marlan, 2005). Then there is the cultural expression of the other, as per the Asian characters in the dream, an aspect that is hugely important as it shows the symbolic nature of the other in the dream attacking the mind, that egoic sense of self Layla had constructed around her echo position (Hamilton, 2014).

Our work also helped Layla recognise other costs to adopting this position as the echo. Firstly, in her altercation, and subsequent realisations of how she has positioned herself in order to get along with her colleagues, they did not really see her at all. What they saw was what they projected upon her, leaving her unseen and alone. This was repeated within her dream where the white women of Waitrose in Putney took no notice of her; they ignored her and went on their way, so although she craved their attention, she received none in return. The sense of loneliness in both scenarios therefore became a core aspect of our therapeutic work. The loneliness of Echo when Narcissus rejects her, the loneliness of Layla as the echo in her workplace surrounded by those she wanted to be a part of but never would be, the loneliness of the only woman of colour in a supermarket in Putney.

Following the thread of loneliness, the most important aspect of Layla's dream emerged at the point where she leaves the supermarket but before she was attacked by the Asian individuals. It was here that she felt most alone, but it was also here where she felt most authentic, most able to be herself, where the smile fell away to reveal something more real. This, we recognised in our work together, was what the Asian persons were trying to bring back into her consciousness; that beyond her echoism was a painful reminder of who she really was. Theoretically, the overriding point here is that for one to move beyond the echo position one must discover who they are now, when separate from the subject, or who they were before the period of oppression, together with the internalized aspects of them that still exist and drag them back into the echo position.

Culturally, we witness this struggle every day, the most obvious examples of are emerging out of the rights struggles of the past 50 years. For example, the continued debate over the attainment of rights equal to those of the subject, versus the valuation of rights and an identity which is totally separate to this same subject, presents the internalized struggle between the echo and the authentic other. These struggles also reveal the anxiety accompanying totally extricating oneself from the subject as the echo role is monothematic whereas the potential roles of the authentic other are innumerable. This is a hugely important point. There is a

freedom in being the other that means the authority and responsibility of one's existence returns home where it belongs, it is not still governed by the subject even in its supposed absence, thereby, for example, breaking Fanon's idea of the dialectic that often kept the colonised supplicant (Fanon, 2005).

Conclusion

As presented within this paper, the echo position is essential in understanding the adaptive nature of the other in its attempts to survive within the world. The exploration of the creation of echoism, with its psychological barrier against individuation, understanding the nature of what it actually is to be the echo, the shame of echoism, and the passage towards authenticity beyond the echo position, are all non-linear stages in this client's particular exploration of her inauthenticity in relation to the subject, her friends, colleagues and her family.

As seen in this paper, for Layla, being the echo meant adopting an inauthentic false self to survive within the world of the subject. The cost of this for the client was that it meant she later endured a psychological collapse driven by her innate need to individuate and reincorporate aspects of her sense of otherness that she had split off for this process of echoism, or mimicry, to occur. Working with her dreams, working with her fear of difference and her race whilst sat with a man of colour from a similar culture, together with recognising the unconscious processes in the work became routes towards more fully accessing these aspects, meaning that over time she became gradually more comfortable with who she actually was. This though was always going to be an ongoing process, and although not complete by any means, Layla soon found a means of being in the world that was more authentic within herself.

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