

## Blake, Race and Racism

The participants in this round table discussion live in Australia, Taiwan, Turkey, Tunisia, Portugal and the US. They are men and women, aged thirty and above, artists and academics with and without PhDs, working outside or inside academia. These members are of different sexual orientation; they have children, live alone or with family. They are at the end of their careers, starting out or thinking about leaving. All of them encountered Blake on their educational journeys in their various countries as well as in Britain. They share a passion for Blake because they see themselves, their values and lived experiences reflected in Blake. They were eager to communicate and educate about Blake.

The purpose of putting questions about Blake, race and racism to a small group was to consult members on their perception of how The Blake Society engages with matters pertaining to diversity and inclusion. The Trustees recognise the importance of articulating a robust response to some commentators' allegations of racism in Blake's art; in order to strengthen the open-gate policy for all who are interested in Blake and share in his ideas and values.

### 1. What is Racism?

'I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans  
I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create' (E153)

We live in a world where we are all too often trapped into comparisons. With regard to racisms, we need to recognise that a person who is considered 'black' in some contexts and areas, can be classified as 'white' in others:

'Racism in today's world entails not only discrimination or a biased behaviour against an individual or group because of their colour, but also other physical/biological characteristics that differentiates an individual from the dominant group. Some definitions also include ethnical, national, cultural and religious discrimination.' (Brazilian female, 35-years-old, academic, Blake Society Trustee)

In art as well as life, colour can be seen to work like a symbol; it has different meanings for different audiences; what it signifies depends on context. The 'colour' of a person, in other words, is essentially a contrast that is created through acts of comparison. The motivation to do this can be conscious or unconscious:

'Never underestimate the power of an ideology to conceal itself from ourselves.'  
(American female, 65-year-old retired religious studies academic, Blake Society member)

'For every thing that lives is Holy.' (E45)

**The Blake Society** supports the aims of the Blake Cottage Trust, the William Blake Fellowship and the William Blake Congregation.

The Blake Society invited six of its members, from different countries and time zones, to reflect upon the claim of Blake being racist: Blake was ‘clearly a racist by modern standards’ (review of ‘William Blake’s Universe’ published in *The Guardian* on 23 February 2024). In this review, one of the participants says, Jonathan Jones does not challenge ‘the traditional assumption of whiteness and blackness in the discussion of racism and race in our modern world’:

‘...he looks at the illustration of the poem and claims that Blake was a racist by modern standards. Like many commentators, however, Jones rejects the poem without actually reading it. By “actually reading it”, I mean examining the poem closely, focusing on the text itself.’ (Art/literary critic and artist; portraitist and Romanticist)

The consultation process was an attempt to have a conversation about shared values as well as to pin down what The Blake Society could do better. We don’t want silence; we want passionate debates within our membership. The Blake Society is taking on board all of these different views, allowing them to inform activities, to celebrate and to investigate Blake’s works.

‘If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is: infinite.’ (E39)

‘In every cry of every Man,  
In every Infants cry of fear,  
In every voice: in every ban,  
The mind-forg’d manacles I hear’ (E27)

‘The mind-forg’d manacles’ need to be shaken off; what is required to motivate human beings to change? To free and transform human consciousness and challenge and undo white perception we need to transform the way in which we see and hear.

Due to increasing public awareness and discussions of neurodiversity, it is becoming easier to disentangle this trap. What we need to keep acknowledging is that the lived experience of any one person cannot be mapped onto the experience of another. Our brains are different and hold a variety of strengths. Our pasts are different, and memories continue to disrupt and invade the present. This, too, needs to be acknowledged as we move forward. All development is influenced by life journeys, our strategies and coping mechanisms as well as capacity for story telling; each is shaped by a number of factors, including social environment and cultural biases. No two people are the same. We are all different.

‘For the Eye altering alters all’ (E485)

In our discussions we discovered that definitions of racism keep changing, depending on context and who the audience is. Participants held a range of different views but also had a common theme in their understanding of racism: all othering is de-humanising. The group agreed on the following definition:

‘Racism is a discriminatory attitude, whether conscious or unconscious, based on a social construct that enables us to treat those who are different from us for our own ideological (social, economic, political, religious, etc.) purposes.’

Racism is violence; it exists in words as well as physical acts, because words and phrases can mean different things to the same audience. This means that language, because it is a product of culture, will always be a contested space. To move forward, we acknowledge the fears that drive our use of language:

‘The tone and humanity of our conversations about race ... are as important as our reasoned analysis, and I hope the literary conversations can follow that hope.’  
(Asia-Pacific male, independent artist and writer, 57, gay, Blake Society member)

Language, of course, has the dimension of accent and learning English as a second language. Non-native speakers or foreigners often get congratulated on how well they speak; the intention is to welcome them, and yet this nicety is also a reminder of being other – of being ‘simpler’ and ‘inferior’:

‘... internalised racism has been a constant reminder of my ‘non-English speaking’ origin in academia.’ (A 38-year-old Turkish academic and poet, male, Blake Society member)

It is the surprise that registers on someone’s face and gets articulated that is hurtful. Did you not expect me to be well-articulated? English for a native English speaker is an asset or ‘privilege’ that they assert whenever they ‘expose’ a non-native speaker. The asset of English as native tongue is fundamental in establishing the idea of ‘us’. One way to handle this could be: ‘De-colonise your ears.’

## **2. Experiences that make us look at ‘Race’ in a different way**

In our discussions we discovered that racism means the constant confrontation with one’s ethnicity; one moves in and out of that space all the time – one is reminded of being other or alien to a group or culture. It can also be based on how you sound (accent). You might want to change your name, or choose how you present yourself (clothes and hairstyle) so that you fit in. All this results in feelings of inferiority and marginalisation:

Racism is a type of discrimination that is directed not just against colour but also country of origin and social/academic class. People marginalise – you – to keep you out. They remind you that you are different and pick a reason. | prejudice in academia; tokenism (‘make yourself feel at home’) – bad experiences in academia or teaching environments: ‘I don’t belong here.’ It’s the class system that creates as well as perpetuates feelings of exclusions.

A key strategy for survival is performance: You need to be perceived as ‘understanding’ – that is the expected fall-back position. What is needed is empathy; kindness that originates from comparison of Art - not Life. From this we reached the question about art: can it help us to tackle the issue of race in a different way?

### 3. Responses to Blake’s ‘The Little Black Boy’?

The section offers a plurality of voices, each providing an interpretation of a poem that speaks closely to the kind of marginalisation that each of them has experienced at some point in their lives.

‘As an artist I always look at Black as the colour that doesn’t reflect light but absorbs light and thus all the colours of the spectrum. Black can absorb all colours and is filled with so much light but we can’t see it.’ (Asia-Pacific male, independent artist and writer, 57, gay, Blake Society member)

How does colour make you feel?

We discussed at great length the damaging if not devastating consequences of ‘stigmatisation at a very young age.’ Blake’s poem was published as part of *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and has no counterpart in *Songs of Experience* (1794). And yet, this poem gives rise to a number of important issues that Blake could have developed further:

‘The poem points out the differences: as long as he is black, he is not in the likeness of God.’ (Brazilian female, 35 year-old academic, Blake Society Trustee)

‘The wordplays on light, bearing, white, black are what strike me the most, every time I read the poem. He associates his blackness with having to bear the love of god, which turns god’s love into a torment, something harsh, which ironically again puts forward the assumption that the white boy had never had to bear anything. Suffering and love turn into confused concepts and sun and god turn into tormenting gods.’ (A 38-year-old Turkish academic and poet, male, Blake Society member)

‘Love is central. Mother to child. Human to human.’ (Asia-Pacific male, independent artist and writer, 57, gay, Blake Society member)

In our discussion of the poem (as well as the review), we discovered that each participant had a different entry point or angle on Blake.

‘... this poem is like a treasure trove that is intriguing and can be read from different perspectives which makes sense as I think- this is what Blake wanted!’ (A Tunisian academic and lover of poetry, female, member of The Blake Society)

While some took their lead from the plates and the framing images, others paid close attention to word choice, symbolism or turns of phrases (metaphors) to examine the speaker’s state of mind. In our discussions, different close readings and interpretations emerged; each was acknowledged as valid. It was fascinating to observe how the participants interacted, responded and engaged with each other’s ideas, which exposed the complexity of Blake’s views as well as his (visual) language. What might the correct emotional response to the plight of the little black boy be?

‘I believe ... that not only the discriminator but the discriminated even unconsciously continue the practices of this discrimination. This, in a way, is what the little black boy’s mother has taught him, and what he internalised in his naive way. He conceptualises his colour, whiteness and light naively, but this ironically shows a bitter internalised mechanism that equates blackness with bad, unwanted even when he knows it does not define him.’ (A 38-year-old Turkish academic and poet, male, Blake Society member)

Blake spoke to his contemporaries but what he says is still relevant to us today; he ‘is speaking to us’. Blake achieves this because he ‘steps into the voice of the little black boy’ (Asia-Pacific male, independent artist and writer, 57, gay, Blake Society member). It is the poem itself that leads us to a discussion of acceptance, freedom and tolerance. Blake, in other words, criticises but also offers hope.

‘The black boy envisions a future where he and the white child will be free from racial distinctions, united under God’s love. This vision is not an endorsement of the status quo but a radical reimagining of society.’ (Art/literary critic and artist; portraitist and Romanticist)

In this poem Blake acknowledges what is unacknowledged (by the little black boy). Blake ‘unmasks but conceals himself’ (American female, 65-year-old retired religious studies academic, Blake Society member); it is up to the reader/viewer to find out:

‘... one’s obsession with skin colour is like a little prison of the heart that doesn’t set oneself free. I argue that Blake does not endorse but rather exposes and criticises the white supremacy narrative prevalent in his society. Had Blake wished to endorse white supremacy, he would have made the white child the hero of the poem

... Blake makes a black child the hero of the poem. The black boy has a voice of his own and he is not afraid to speak up. And that is a great start for racial equality. This shows that Blake cares about what is happening in his world including the suffering of African children and he wishes to advocate racial reconciliation.' (Art/literary critic and artist; portraitist and Romanticist)

'My art is my university. I still use some of my academic skills.' (Asia-Pacific male, independent artist and writer, 57, gay, Blake Society member)

In the image, Blake uses light and shadow to show and hide. He shows us what is invisible (like what is going on in the mind of the little black boy; he tells and shows how the state dominates and religion stigmatises:

'I think that it is almost impossible to understand Blake's works without paying close attention to his amalgamation of the sister arts and the way both modes are tightly connected although they seem otherwise on the first glance.' (A Tunisian academic and lover of poetry, female, member of The Blake Society)

'the pictorial and the poetical compliment each other, and the last plate shows the naive hopes of the little black boy, albeit ironically, because the father there is again white, which shows the internalised inferiority he feels due to his colour.' (A 38-year-old Turkish academic and poet, male, Blake Society member)

Reading Blake is a confrontation with one's own, unacknowledged biases. Blake uses 'double vision': The speaker doesn't know but the reader/viewer does. This means that the little black boy functions as a spiritual guide:

'The little Black boy in this poem has internalised his mother's teachings that is the subject of the painting that tops the first plate. His mother has taught him that being black is being of inferior position. Still, although he believes that being black entails being bereaved of light and hence care, he does not give up and endorses the religion of 'love' which is Blake's religion too.' (A Tunisian academic and lover of poetry, female, member of The Blake Society)

'Despite feeling marginalised, this little boy is hopeful in the future and this is the hope Blake wanted to impart through all his illuminated poems. He wanted people to believe in a future where cultural tyranny will disappear by means of hard work and love but also care for the other ... For the moment, it seems that everything is happening in the mind of the little black boy but we must bear in mind that there is light at the end of the tunnel.' (A Tunisian academic and lover of poetry, female, member of The Blake Society)

#### **4. Blake and his works through the lens of Intersectionality (Disciplines & Approaches)**

‘I will not cease from mental fight’ (E95)

‘Blake spent a lifetime creating a system. I don’t have the time but I can make small changes to the system from within.’ (Brazilian female, 35 year-old academic, Blake Society Trustee)

In our discussions we asked ourselves what should The Blake Society do? A consensus was that The Blake Society is an ‘escape to a safe haven’. It was said that The Blake Society showcases the creativity of its membership through its events and that through close reading events especially we can notice and practice diversity and inclusion. It is in events that we see diversity and inclusion working: events are an opportunity to listen and to ‘share stories’. It is through events, furthermore, that the Society builds a community that enables instant friendships.

As members, we are drawn to Blake, his art and the messages expressed therein as well as to approaching his art, words, images, and ideas from our unique perspectives, sharing these with each other and so contributing to everyone’s appreciation and understanding of Blake, each other, art in general, and life!

#### **Key Recommendations**

‘I met a plow on my first going out at my gate the first morning after my arrival & the Plowboy said to the Plowman. ‘Father The Gate is Open’ — I have begun to Work & find that I can work with greater pleasure than ever. Hope soon to give you a proof that Felpham is propitious to the Arts.’ (E711)

#### **VALA**

- Invite guest editor(s) to work on future issue on ‘Race’ (working title)
- Use more images that speak for themselves, with short introductions

#### **EVENTS**

- Introductions to recordings of events on website to acknowledge that different time zones hinder live attendance. This text should include the following: ‘We strive to plan events with a mix of time zones.’

## **Suggestions**

It was noted that there is no capacity to realise immediately:

- Membership: gather data; include on website to show the reach of The Blake Society; gather information about demographics: location, gender and background (academic, artist, etc.) of members/people joining
- Website: Short videos in Members' section (3 min); members introducing themselves (geography, gender, background)